

## Merleau-Ponty's Transcendental Theory of Perception

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This paper is concerned with the status of Merleau-Ponty's account of perception. Since my primary aim is to determine the kind of theory that is offered by Merleau-Ponty, I will not provide detailed discussion of Merleau-Ponty's highly original treatments of particular topics in the theory of perception, such as sensation, spatial awareness, or the role of the body in perception. Instead I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's account of perception should not, in fact, be understood at all as a theory of perception in the familiar sense, namely as a theory formulated with a view to the solution of problems of epistemology and psychological explanation and constrained accordingly; rather it should be understood as belonging to transcendental philosophy, conceived as a form of idealist metaphysics. From this it follows that the evaluation of Merleau-Ponty's claims about perception need to be cast in terms remote from those that a philosopher of mind applies to a theory of perception. Though I will not attempt here a full evaluation, I will set out what I take to be the basic justification offered by Merleau-Ponty for his transcendental claims.

There is a general issue concerning the relation of writings in the phenomenological tradition to analytic philosophy of mind. On the one hand it would seem that, whatever else it may comprehend, phenomenology is concerned in the first instance with the same topic as philosophy of mind: the phenomenologist is interested, it would seem, in mental states or phenomena and is engaged, like the philosopher of mind, in making claims about their essential nature, necessary and sufficient or constitutive conditions, and so on. Accordingly it seems reasonable to expect that, allowing for differences of vocabulary and methodology, on matters of substance numerous points of convergence between phenomenology and philosophy of mind will be found, and indeed the recent literature has suggested a number of these.<sup>1</sup>

However, if what I argue below is correct, then this view, for all its apparent plausibility, is mistaken with reference to Merleau-Ponty. Though nothing follows directly from this about phenomenology in general, it does suggest a more general conclusion: namely that there is something essential to the phenomenological project which necessarily goes out of focus in the attempt to read Husserl, Sartre or Merleau-Ponty as if their writings address the same questions as the philosophy of mind.

The paper is organised as follows. In the first two sections I will describe two competing interpretations of Merleau-Ponty. Section I outlines what I call the Psychological Interpretation, which is the view that suggests itself from the perspective of seeking Merleau-Ponty's convergence with the philosophy of mind, and identifies the considerations which support this interpretation. Section II states briefly the Transcendental Interpretation, which views Merleau-Ponty in the light of the history of transcendental philosophy and claims to discover at the heart of his philosophical project an original form of idealism. The next two sections develop this interpretation. Section III considers how, on the Transcendental Interpretation, Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception is related to his metaphysics. This, it will be seen, requires consideration of Merleau-Ponty's transcendental turn. Section IV discusses in some detail Merleau-Ponty's use of the notion of perceptual ambiguity, since this, I argue, allows us simultaneously to identify a clear line of descent from Kant and to understand Merleau-Ponty's fundamental metaphysical thesis. Section V addresses certain objections to the claim that Merleau-Ponty belongs to the transcendental tradition. Section VI offers some concluding remarks on the relation of phenomenology and philosophy of mind.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Dreyfus and Hall eds., *Husserl, Intentionality, and Cognitive Science*, and McCulloch, *Using Sartre* (making the case for regarding Sartre as an externalist of the same stripe as John McDowell). Examples concerning Merleau-Ponty will be discussed in Section I.

I will concentrate throughout on the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and refer to earlier and later writings for supporting considerations.<sup>2</sup> Arguably the *Phenomenology of Perception* does not represent Merleau-Ponty's final, all-things-considered view of perception, but it does bring out sharply the contrast of the Psychological and Transcendental Interpretations. In any case, the position that Merleau-Ponty adopts in his later writings is not independent from that of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and it only strengthens the conclusion for which I shall be arguing.

### I. The Psychological Interpretation

On what I will call the Psychological Interpretation, the *Phenomenology of Perception* attempts to establish certain claims regarding the nature of perceptual experience independently of any metaphysical presuppositions.

The proponent of the Psychological Interpretation discovers in the *Phenomenology of Perception* a series of arguments for conclusions which are familiar from and formulated within analytic philosophy of mind: against the concept of sensation (or a certain version thereof), the identification of perception with judgement, and the characterisation of perceptual content as conceptual; and in favour of a rich and holistic theory of perceptual content which, in a highly original way, forges a deep, constitutive link of perception with bodily states and capacities. Merleau-Ponty is interpreted as arguing on the basis of a familiar mixture of considerations of explanatory adequacy, conceptual elucidation, fulfilment of epistemological desiderata, and phenomenological accuracy: his strategy is to measure philosophical theories of perception against what we take perception to be, our pre-philosophical concept of perception, and to ask if they are faithful to the character that perceptual experience, in its full range, has for us. And with regard to empirical psychological theories of perception, Merleau-Ponty's terms of evaluation are those of the empirical psychologist himself, namely explanatory scope and completeness (with special attention to abnormal cases), degree of empirical confirmation, and so forth. The constraints on his theorising are thus epistemological and psychological.

The Psychological Interpretation need not deny that the *Phenomenology of Perception* contains other, metaphysical claims. It will recommend that we attempt to understand these, in the first instance, as inferences from its prior, non-metaphysical claims about perception,<sup>3</sup> but it can allow consistently that Merleau-Ponty makes metaphysical claims of a sort, or strength, that an analysis of perception cannot logically support. The essential point for the Psychological Interpretation is the independence of the theory of perception, with respect to both the sense of its claims and the arguments given for them, from whatever metaphysics Merleau-Ponty may wish also to advance.

This way of interpreting Merleau-Ponty has several strengths, and there are a number of considerations that may be taken to support it.

The Psychological Interpretation is in the first place suggested by the text of the *Phenomenology of Perception* itself regarding the content and order of its four divisions, the first of which (the Introduction, 'Traditional Prejudices and the Return to the Phenomena') looks at theories of perception with close reference to a large quantity of empirical material, and the second of which (Part One, 'The Body') pursues the connection of perception with the body. Not until the concluding chapters (the final chapter in Part Two, 'Other Selves and the Human World', and the chapters that compose Part Three, 'Being-for-Itself and Being-in-the-World') does Merleau-Ponty turn to the metaphysical issues which are most obviously specific to human beings – freedom, self-

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<sup>2</sup> Page references to the English translation of the *Phenomenology of Perception* are prefaced 'PP'. Some quotations have been amended in light of the original. 'PrP' refers to 'The primacy of perception and its philosophical consequences', 'SB' to *The Structure of Behaviour*, and 'VI' to *The Visible and the Invisible*.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Eilan suggests that Merleau-Ponty's theory of perceptual content is such 'as to yield frank idealism' ('Consciousness and the self', p. 353).

consciousness and suchlike – and briefly to the general epistemological issues of truth and objectivity.

The Psychological Interpretation is supported also by the fact that the *Phenomenology of Perception* follows and is clearly continuous with Merleau-Ponty's earlier work, *The Structure of Behaviour*, which provides a close examination of neurophysiological and functional theories of the organism, and much of which reads as a study in the philosophy of psychology. The *Phenomenology of Perception* begins with an explicit commitment to the phenomenological method, but otherwise it seems to be a direct extension of the line of holist, anti-reductionist thought begun in *The Structure of Behaviour*. Even the commitment to the phenomenological method which distinguishes the *Phenomenology of Perception* from the earlier work need not be regarded as indicating a real change of direction: the alliance with Husserl announced in its Preface, it may be thought, should be interpreted as signifying the renunciation of any metaphysical premises for philosophical enquiry; and in any case it soon comes to seem that Merleau-Ponty's version of the phenomenological method is fairly loosely defined and incorporates little of Husserl's purism and conception of rigorous science.

There is, furthermore, the obvious difference of Merleau-Ponty from the other phenomenologists, that Merleau-Ponty pays close attention to psychological science, and to its detail, rather than just referring in wholly general, critical terms to the very idea of empirical psychology. It is true that Sartre's books on imagination are also informed by empirical psychology, but Sartre's use of it is for the greater part negative, and these are early works: in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre sets out with a statement of a set of supposed apodictic a priori truths about consciousness (concerning its necessary reflexivity, translucency and so on). The *Phenomenology of Perception* by contrast seems to start on a posteriori terrain: Merleau-Ponty seems willing to entertain, at least provisionally, the conceptual possibility that consciousness can be grasped in empirical-scientific, naturalistic terms.

The Psychological Interpretation holds the attraction of promising to discover in Merleau-Ponty a set of powerful and original arguments with the potential to mesh nicely with work in philosophy of mind: if Merleau-Ponty sets off by assuming nothing in particular about the nature of conscious experience, and yet manages to reach substantial, definite conclusions concerning, for example, constitutive links between perceptual content and motor capacities, then the Psychological Interpretation can claim exegetical success.

I will now give some examples from the secondary literature of discussions of Merleau-Ponty that take the argument of the *Phenomenology of Perception* to have the form just outlined.

Thomas Baldwin has suggested that Merleau-Ponty contributes to the contemporary debate concerning the relation of the personal to the sub-personal, by providing arguments for the dependence of personal level states on sub-personal ones,<sup>4</sup> and more detailed suggestions of the same sort are made in a book by Kathleen Wider. Wider takes Sartre to task for producing a philosophically inflated and psychologically unrealistic theory of consciousness, pitting against him Merleau-Ponty's stress on the necessary embodiment of consciousness. According to Wider, 'Merleau-Ponty anticipates [Adrian] Cussins by claiming that this level of [bodily consciousness prior to thought] is prior to any questions of truth or knowledge.'<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty's claims about the dependence of self-consciousness on the body are, Wider suggests, referring specifically to work by Edelman, Jeannerod and others, borne out by 'empirical evidence' that 'consciousness requires input from the body as well as from the world'.<sup>6</sup>

Michael Hammond, Jane Howarth and Russell Keat, confronting the anti-naturalism of Merleau-Ponty (and Husserl) with sophisticated naturalistic positions in analytic philosophy of mind, write as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> Baldwin, 'Merleau-Ponty'.

<sup>5</sup> Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness*, p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., pp. 139ff.

the crucial issue here is whether the intentional properties of the body can be given causal explanations – for example, in neurophysiological, or indeed psychological terms. Merleau-Ponty clearly believes this is not possible [...] there are difficulties for his strategy of argument here [...] since the time that Merleau-Ponty wrote the *Phenomenology of Perception*, there have been many attempts to provide such explanations, and of a more sophisticated kind than the ones considered there; and, in some of these, 'phenomenological' descriptions of what it is like to live with certain kinds of bodily pathology have been provided by writers who are nonetheless committed to the kind of scientific-explanatory project that Merleau-Ponty regarded as philosophically misconceived.<sup>7</sup>

In a later discussion of Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of objective thought, Hammond, Howarth and Keat add: 'Notice that there is a parallel here between Merleau-Ponty's criticisms and those which Thomas Nagel explicitly levels against modern materialist theories of the mind.'<sup>8</sup> And: 'Merleau-Ponty could take support [...] from the criticism of strong AI which Searle makes via his Chinese room test.'<sup>9</sup>

Dreyfus and Dreyfus also affirm the continuity of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy with cognitive science: 'Cognitive scientists have much to learn from Merleau-Ponty.'<sup>10</sup> They argue that Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'intentional arc' – that is, the 'tight connection' between acquired bodily skills and the perceptual 'solicitations of situations in the world' – agrees with the non-representationalist theory of neural networks: 'Merleau-Ponty's account of the relation of perception and action [...] allows him to criticize cognitivism'; it makes sense to try 'to implement Merleau-Ponty's understanding of skill acquisition in a neural network'.<sup>11</sup> The epistemic relation also runs in reverse: just as Merleau-Ponty lends his weight to the case for neural networks and against mental representations, so 'neural-network theory supports Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology'.<sup>12</sup> This means, however, that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical views are subject to empirical correction, and Dreyfus and Dreyfus conclude that 'we must supplement Merleau-Ponty's account of the "I can"' with a theory of how the body – conceived fully naturalistically, as an 'actual body-structure' – conditions competence and cognition.<sup>13</sup>

Shaun Gallagher describes Merleau-Ponty as concerned with 'bodily systems that operate on a subpersonal, automatic level', and interprets him as insisting, against Husserl, on 'a truth to be found in naturalism that is lost in a purely transcendental approach'. Merleau-Ponty's 'expanded model of intentionality', which 'includes a role for the prenoetic functions of the body schema', is limited by his phenomenological method: the role of the body schema 'is impenetrable to phenomenological reflection' and 'must be worked out with the help of the empirical sciences'.<sup>14</sup> Such investigation yields 'evidence to support' Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological studies.<sup>15</sup> Again, Merleau-Ponty is recruited to the task of 'the scientific explanation of cognition'.<sup>16</sup>

These instances serve to give an idea of how the project of integrating Merleau-Ponty with the philosophy of mind can be pursued, and of why Merleau-Ponty attracts the attention of philosophers of mind. Merleau-Ponty appears to argue for the non-autonomy of the personal level of psychological explanation, yet without any commitment to reduction to the physical. His philosophy of perception consequently appeals both to those who argue for the necessity and

<sup>7</sup> Hammond, Howarth and Keat, *Understanding Phenomenology*, p. 278.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 282.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., p. 286.

<sup>10</sup> Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 'The challenge of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment for cognitive science', p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., pp. 103-5.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> Gallagher, 'Body schema and intentionality', pp. 232-3.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., p. 237.

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit., p. 226. Similarly, S. D. Kelly, in 'Merleau-Ponty on the body', ascribes to Merleau-Ponty a conception of 'motor intentionality' – our mode of understanding visually located objects *qua* objects of grasping – which, he argues, is supported by empirical psychology.

integrity of the sub-personal domain opened up by cognitive science, and to those who favour a soft naturalism, who see in Merleau-Ponty a view of the mind which is non-materialist and non-reductionist yet also firmly anti-dualist.<sup>17</sup> Now I want to point out an important implication of the Psychological Interpretation.

The *Phenomenology of Perception* does not stop with a discussion of the nature of consciousness, experience or mental content. First, as noted earlier, the concluding chapters of the work, in their detailed treatments of temporality, freedom, self-consciousness, and other minds, set out a general metaphysics of human being. Second, the *Phenomenology of Perception* advances from its account of perception to a general metaphysical position, one which Merleau-Ponty wants to locate between idealism and realism, but which it is not misleading to describe as idealist.<sup>18</sup> In this context it is quite clear that Merleau-Ponty's talk of perceptual experience as comprising 'pre-objective being', and his critique of classical philosophical and psychological theories of perception as instances of 'objective thought', is in intention fully metaphysical. That is to say, talk of pre-objective being is not just talk of *experience* prior to the involvement of objectivity concepts in experience: it is talk of *being* which is in itself pre-objective.<sup>19</sup> And the critique of 'objective thought' is not equivalent to a critique of theories which deny the existence of experience independent of objectivity-concepts, or which mis-assimilate such experience to objective experience: it is a critique of the *metaphysical* claim that objective representation is adequate to the representation of reality, or, put the other way round, of the claim that reality is in itself as objectivity-concepts represent it as being. Pre-objective being and objective thought are thus terms of art which belong to metaphysics and not to philosophical reflection on psychological explanation.

In view of this, the Psychological Interpretation needs to be restated: it is forced to say of the *Phenomenology of Perception* that it contains a solid first argumentative half which establishes plausible conclusions regarding the nature of perception and body, and a second argumentative half which, whatever its worth, lacks logical connection with the first. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy divides into two.

Could this be the correct view to take? In some sense, it could. As all readers of Merleau-Ponty will acknowledge, there is no shortage of points, between adjacent sentences or within single sentences, where Merleau-Ponty can seem to be making without further argument a transition from philosophy of psychology to metaphysics, and where, if one tries to interpolate a direct logical inference, the upshot can appear highly contestable. To give an example: Merleau-Ponty draws the conclusion regarding the body, from its possession of intentional properties and the asymmetry between how it is present to itself and how its objects are present to it, that the body is not in fact 'in' space at all, but rather 'inhabits' space (PP 139), and that an absolute, non-epistemological distinction must be drawn between the body *qua* object of science, the objective body, and the phenomenal body, the *corps propre* or *corps vécu*. It seems entirely possible to determine the points where Merleau-Ponty confuses psychology-cum-epistemology with metaphysics, or modes of presentation with objects.

Another example from the literature of how Merleau-Ponty's argument looks under the Psychological Interpretation, relevant to the present point, is provided by Baldwin. Baldwin refers to the 'thesis which is fundamental to his [Merleau-Ponty's] phenomenology, namely that perception is "transcendental" in the sense that it cannot be adequately understood from within a fully objective, scientific conception of human life [...] Merleau-Ponty argues that because perceptual experience is epistemologically fundamental it cannot be the case that perception itself is fully

<sup>17</sup> See Gallagher, 'Body schema and intentionality', p. 233, and Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, pp. 3-4; Priest describes *The Structure of Behaviour* as a 'partial anticipation' of Strawson's *Individuals*.

<sup>18</sup> Though Merleau-Ponty rejects the label, I explain in Section IV why I think it appropriate.

<sup>19</sup> Just as Merleau-Ponty's phrase 'the perceived world', 'le monde perçu', is not to be understood as equivalent to 'the world, as we happen to perceive it', in the sense that one might talk about a mountain 'as seen from the south', implying that the world is one thing and our perceptual perspective on it another. The perceived world is an indissoluble unity, as if 'perceived' and 'world' composed one, hyphenated word.

comprehended within the explanatory perspective of natural science.<sup>20</sup> But, as Baldwin then points out, the naturalist will immediately respond that this rests on a confusion of epistemological with metaphysical priority; and instantly the whole anti-naturalistic, metaphysical aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy seems the result of a basic mistake.<sup>21</sup>

The proponent of the Psychological Interpretation may now offer the following assessment of the situation: Merleau-Ponty sought a theory of perceptual content that does not reduce it to either sensation or judgement, and what he is right about, or at least offers a plausible defence of, is the idea that perceptual content is in a number of respects irreducible. We should therefore translate his talk of the 'pre-objectivity' of perception into talk of the irreducible complex nature of perceptual content. Merleau-Ponty's mistake was to think that just because certain sorts of bad naturalistic theories of perception fail to do justice to the phenomena, naturalism itself must be rejected: he mistook the failure of narrowly empiricist theories of perception for the idea that perceptual experience cannot be a content of the natural world. Or again, it may be said that Merleau-Ponty mistook the fact that perceptual experience lacks a certain, very narrow sort of objectivity, for its not possessing any sort of objectivity, its non-objectivity *tout court*. And to this one may add, amplifying the suggestion of Hammond, Howarth and Keat, that, had Merleau-Ponty been acquainted with the more sophisticated empirical psychological science of our present day, then he would not have made this mistake.

The Psychological Interpretation can, therefore, be pressed: at the cost of entailing that a large portion of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is based on, to borrow a phrase of Strawson's from another context, a *non sequitur* of numbing grossness.

The objection that the *Phenomenology of Perception* fails to hold together its philosophy of psychology with its metaphysics was put to Merleau-Ponty by Jean Hyppolite:<sup>22</sup>

I would say simply that I do not see the necessary connection between the two parts of your paper [which provided a summary of the *Phenomenology of Perception*] – between the description of perception, which presupposes no ontology, and the philosophical conclusions which you draw, which do presuppose an ontology, namely, an ontology of meaning. In the first part of your paper you show that perception has a meaning, and in the second part you arrive at the very being of this meaning, which constitutes the essence of man. And the two parts do not seem to be completely interdependent. Your description of perception does not necessarily involve the philosophical conclusions of the second part of your paper. Would you accept such a separation? (PrP 39)

Merleau-Ponty's reply to Hyppolite's question was: 'Obviously not.' But his immediately following statement was perhaps not sufficiently full or clear to entirely silence Hyppolite's doubts: 'I have not, of course, said everything which it would be necessary to say on this subject. For example, I have not spoken of time or its role as foundation and basis' (PrP 39). One can see how Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that temporality is the key to the link of the two parts might be developed – particularly if one interpolates in the *Phenomenology of Perception* the role played by temporality in Heidegger's *Being and Time* – but it should be noted, first, that only traces of such an idea can be found in the *Phenomenology of Perception* itself,<sup>23</sup> and second, that it is in any case hard to see how this would repair the lacuna alleged Hyppolite, between conclusions in the philosophy of psychology and in metaphysics, since temporality does not seem to be what is involved in Merleau-Ponty's transitions from the former to the latter. It remains to be shown, therefore, that the work is unified philosophically in the way that Merleau-Ponty claims it to be.

<sup>20</sup> Baldwin, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> See also Lacan's criticism in 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> That Hyppolite was not a philosopher of psychology but a Hegelian indicates that doubts about the unity of the *Phenomenology of Perception* are not just a function of viewing the work in an analytic perspective. I suggest below, however, that the non-analytic interpretation is able to account for the unity of the work, by attributing to Merleau-Ponty an original – non-Hegelian – transcendental position.

<sup>23</sup> Relevant remarks are scattered over PP 410-11, 425-6, 428-33.

## II. The Transcendental Interpretation

Now I want to describe a different reading Merleau-Ponty's argument in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which I will call the Transcendental Interpretation. This denies that the *Phenomenology of Perception* undertakes an enquiry into the nature of perceptual experience for its own sake or independently of metaphysics. According to the Transcendental Interpretation, the purpose of the enquiry into perception lies entirely in its contribution to a transcendental metaphysics.<sup>24</sup>

Merleau-Ponty provides many clear statements of how the conditions that his phenomenology uncovers are intended to be in the true and genuine sense transcendental, i.e. a priori and necessary, and non-identical with empirical, contingent or mundane states of affairs, in his discussions of vision and of the body early in Part One. He denies that the structure of vision, its perspectival articulation and figure/ground form, is due to 'the contingent aspects of my bodily make-up, for example the retinal structure' (PP 67-8). Similarly the permanent and ineliminable presence of the body – along with other of its features, including its affectivity – is described as a necessity that is not 'merely physical' but rather 'metaphysical' (PP 91). Kant's Copernican form of explanation is affirmed in the argument that Merleau-Ponty gives for this thesis, which corresponds closely to Kant's argument regarding space and time in the metaphysical expositions of the Transcendental Aesthetic: the body's permanence cannot be 'a necessity of fact, since such necessity presupposes' it, and 'factual situations can only impact upon me if my nature is already such that there are factual situations for me' (PP 91). Merleau-Ponty follows, therefore, Kant's distinction of transcendental from empirical necessity, and agrees with Kant's claim that the subject's mode of cognition has explanatory priority over the objects of cognition.

The metaphysical positions under attack in the *Phenomenology of Perception* are grouped under the general heading of 'objective thought', and fall into two specific kinds, each of which is identified with a different form of philosophical explanation.<sup>25</sup> The first kind, labelled 'empiricism', seeks to explain the objectual character of experience in terms of relations between an independent natural reality and human subjects conceived as items located within that reality. The second, labelled 'intellectualism', seeks to explain the objectual character of experience in terms of the performance of conceptually guided operations on the part of the subject.<sup>26</sup> Thus Empiricism encompasses various forms of classical empiricist philosophy, realism and naturalism, while Intellectualism encompasses various forms of seventeenth-century rationalism, Kant, and Husserlian phenomenology. Both forms of philosophical explanation are, therefore, defined with reference to a particular, highly abstract, transcendental explanandum, namely the *objectual character* of experience, its articulation into objects and its character *as* experience, i.e. as involving a relation of subject to objects. Empiricism deserves the label 'objective thought' because it takes as given the thought of a pre-articulated realm of *objects* (in which human subjects are included); Intellectualism qualifies as objective thought because its explanatory bottom-line is provided by *thoughts* of objects.

The overall argument of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is designed accordingly to do two things: first, to criticise the various theories of empiricists, philosophical naturalists and scientific realists, and of Intellectualists such as Kant, Husserl and their successors, in a *unified* way which leads to the notion that their philosophies are all based on a common error; and second, to set out an alternative theory of the objectual character of experience. The two aims of the

<sup>24</sup> The Transcendental Interpretation is reflected in the estimation of Merleau-Ponty in the concluding chapter of Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's 'Phenomenology of Perception'*. See also Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, ch. 2, and Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, pp. 224-5. Priest's broadly Kantian interpretation of Merleau-Ponty differs from mine by ascribing to him a non-idealistic, minimalist conception of the transcendental (see pp. 80, 99, 254 n3); in consequence Priest locates inconsistencies and limitations in Merleau-Ponty (see pp. 235, 238, 255 n11) that an idealistic interpretation avoids.

<sup>25</sup> The Psychological Interpretation, by contrast, would distinguish these more narrowly, as different forms of *psychological* explanation.

<sup>26</sup> Henceforth I capitalise Empiricism and Intellectualism to indicate that Merleau-Ponty's technical senses of the terms are intended.

*Phenomenology of Perception* – the negative, critical-diagnostic work, and the provision of a positive alternative – are of course not independent: the common error which is uncovered is the assumption of objective thought, to which Merleau-Ponty's own theory of transcendental conditions is meant to provide the only possible alternative. Merleau-Ponty's theory of transcendental conditions needs, therefore, to be free from the criticisms made of other philosophical theories, and to supply the basis for an explanation of their specific errors. In the briefest statement, his theory is that the fundamental ground and explanation of the objectual character of experience lies in perception conceived as pre-objective: the pre-objective being of perception is, he argues, what makes it possible for a subject to be presented with an articulated realm of objects, and it also allows us to understand how reflection can be led astray into thinking that what makes this realm possible is instead either the objects themselves or our thoughts of them.

### III. Theory of perception and transcendental metaphysics

That, then, is how the aims of the *Phenomenology of Perception* are understood on the Transcendental Interpretation. Moving on now to the question of how its argument is structured, the key question for the Transcendental Interpretation is how the arguments in the theory of perception and the transcendental metaphysics are related logically. There are three possibilities:

- (A) That the metaphysics *follows from* the discussion of perception.
- (B) That the metaphysics is assumed at the outset but merely *provisionally*, as a hypothesis to be tested and *confirmed* by the discussion of perception.
- (C) That the metaphysics is *assumed* from the outset by the discussion of perception.

I will argue that, although there is, I grant, some room for doubt that Merleau-Ponty is himself entirely clear on this matter, his considered view is the third.

Let us begin with (A). If Merleau-Ponty's intention were to present in the *Phenomenology of Perception* a series of discrete and sequential arguments – first a refutation of naturalism, then of Kantian and Husserlian metaphysics, followed by an argument for their common error, concluding with an argument for the correct theory of transcendental conditions – then the work as a whole could be regarded as avoiding any metaphysical presuppositions, and so as arguing from scratch, and in a linear manner, for a particular metaphysical position.

This possibility is consistent with the interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception as belonging to transcendental philosophy, since the idea of an argument that begins with the problem of perception and proceeds to show how transcendental philosophy is required for its solution is coherent. This reading is attractive for an obvious reason. It would be reasonable to expect the *Phenomenology of Perception* to provide an argument for transcendental philosophy: i.e., that it proceeds via a refutation of naturalism – an internal critique of naturalism, or a critique on grounds that at least avoids presupposing transcendental notions – to establish the general need for transcendental philosophy, before undertaking the task of determining its correct form. If this were so, then the earlier chapters of the *Phenomenology of Perception* would comprise an argument for the transcendental turn.

What I wish now to argue is that this expectation is not fulfilled by the *Phenomenology of Perception*, first by examining its arguments against Empiricism, and second by looking at corroborating passages in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Merleau-Ponty assembles numerous instances where Empiricist explanations are revealed to have gaps. This does not, however, as Hammond, Howarth and Keat observed earlier, spell an end to Empiricism, and indeed it is hard to see how it could do so: every point of incompleteness in Empiricist explanation simply provides – in the eyes of the Empiricist – a new *empirical* explanandum that stimulates the development of an improved empirical theory. For example, if 'sensation', as classically conceived, does not exist, then scientific psychology must learn to dispense with it. Merleau-Ponty could discredit this movement of increasing sophistication in



Empiricism only if he could show (i) that the gaps in extant empirical explanations are *in themselves not empirical*, or (ii) that empirical explanations of perception are intrinsically faulty. But since he does not seem to argue that the *very idea* of empirical explanation or efficient causality is problematic, the only route that he has to (ii) would seem to be via (i), and it is hard to see what could *compel* the Empiricist to accept that an empirical gap is in truth a manifestation of non-empirical being. Merleau-Ponty himself is fully aware of this point:

empiricism cannot be refuted [...] Generally speaking, the description of phenomena does not enable one to refute thought which fails to grasp itself and takes up residence in things [i.e. objective thought]. The physicist's atoms will always appear more real [...] The conversion of point of view must be undertaken by each one for himself, whereupon it will be seen to be justified by the abundance of phenomena which it elucidates. Before its discovery, these phenomena were inaccessible, and to the description of them which we offer empiricism can always retort that it *does not understand*. (PP 23)

If we look at the text of the Introduction and Part One, we find that at the crucial points where an argument for the transcendental turn could be expected, Merleau-Ponty simply jumps from the identification of a gap in empirical explanation to an assertion from the transcendental standpoint. Some examples were given in the previous section – of the body's not being 'in' space, and of the distinction between the objective and the phenomenal body. Many others can be found in the discussion of perception: having argued in the chapter on sensation that no such unit of experience exists, Merleau-Ponty concludes that the concept of perception 'indicates a *direction* rather than a primitive function' (PP 12); and in the chapter on association, having argued that association is unable to yield an analysis of memory, he asserts that one must therefore admit 'an original text which carries its meaning within itself [...] this original text is perception itself' (PP 21). Much of what Merleau-Ponty has to say in these places against Empiricism – naturalism or scientific realism – simply invokes, with some modification of terminology or emphasis, Kantian or Husserlian lines of thought, as if he were regarding the transcendental turn as a *fait accompli*, as having been executed already and decisively earlier in the history of philosophy. But if this is so, then Merleau-Ponty is taking transcendental anti-naturalism for granted: the argument for it is offstage in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and the Introduction's critique of Empiricist theories of perception must be regarded as merely an illustration or a new application of an argument already given by Kant or Husserl.<sup>27</sup>

It is fairly plain from other quarters that Merleau-Ponty does not intend to argue from scratch to the transcendental position. To a large extent it can be gleaned from the Preface that his approach is circumscribed by a prior acceptance of the transcendental turn: 'Phenomenology is a study of essences [...] It is a transcendental philosophy [...] It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analysing [...] It is from the start a rejection of science' (PP vii-viii). Admittedly, this does not prove directly that Merleau-Ponty intends to assume the transcendental outlook, since the Preface may be anticipating a conclusion that will be established later rather than articulating a presupposition. The question is whether in the Introduction and Part One Merleau-Ponty does in fact draw on assumptions of transcendental philosophy and whether he has an argument that can

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<sup>27</sup> It might be conjectured that the transcendental turn which is 'offstage' in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is regarded by Merleau-Ponty as having been effected in his earlier *The Structure of Behaviour*, and that this is supported by Merleau-Ponty's claim at SB 206 that what issues from the foregoing examination of scientific thought is a transcendental idealism, as noted in Kockelmann, 'On the function of psychology in Merleau-Ponty's early works', p. 128. The problems with this view are, first, that *The Structure of Behaviour* does not contain a convincing argument for the transcendental position (Kockelmann's statement of its argument exhibits the fallacy noted earlier: 'Merleau-Ponty claims that consciousness indeed experiences its inherence in an organism [...] yet this body is not experienced as a material apparatus [...] Thus the body cannot be conceived [materialistically]'); and second, that Merleau-Ponty gives no sign of thinking that he relies in the *Phenomenology of Perception* on the argument of *The Structure of Behaviour*, an outlook that would make little sense in view of the philosophical differences between the two works noted by Kockelmann and of the claim of the former to being more philosophically fundamental.

succeed without doing so, and reason has just been given for thinking that he does draw on transcendental assumptions, and cannot be ascribed a successful argument that avoids doing so.

A textual example which suggests that, while Merleau-Ponty's argumentative intentions are not fully clear, he should not be regarded as intending to assume the burden of showing transcendental philosophy to be necessitated by the prior and independent failure of naturalism/realism, is provided by the account that he gives of the 'reduction to the pre-objective' in *The Visible and the Invisible*.<sup>28</sup>

Here Merleau-Ponty appears to want to introduce and justify the phenomenological method which will take us to his transcendental conclusions on the ground that it (alone) is presuppositionless. The notion that philosophy should proceed if possible from a starting point that is presuppositionless is unobjectionable, and recalls a string of modern philosophers from Descartes to Husserl, but a serious difficulty confronts the supposition that Merleau-Ponty satisfies this requirement.

The problem is simply that what Merleau-Ponty claims we discover when we discard our presuppositions is nothing less than the 'inverse' of common sense (VI 157): common sense attempts to 'construct perception out of the perceived', it theorises 'causes' of perception which act on us (VI 156), and thereby presupposes 'correlatives or counterparts of the *objective* world' (VI 157).<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty's presupposition-free realm of phenomena is thus *inaccessible* on the basis of a mere suspension of judgement: access to the phenomena obscured by common sense requires a *positive*, purgative operation. Waiving the problem that on the face of it something, some conceptual apparatus, is surely required, i.e. must be presupposed, in order for this operation to be performed, it must in any case have been shown to us beforehand that the common sense 'given' is contaminated with presuppositions, i.e. that what is given to common sense not merely *has* presuppositions but that its presuppositions are cognitively *defective*; otherwise, the call to avoid presuppositions will merely lead us to Scottish direct realism. How can this have been shown? It is not an epistemological motive that has led us to this conclusion, since Merleau-Ponty shows no interest in retracing the skeptical, certainty-orientated route of Descartes' *Meditations*.<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty in fact prefaces his call to avoid presuppositions with the statement, 'Since the enigma of the brute world is finally left intact by science and by reflection [...]' (VI 156). This of course suggests (A), since it implies that a presumably independent critique of Empiricism precedes and motivates our adoption of the phenomenological-transcendental standpoint. If this critique were effective, then perhaps we would have reason to entertain Merleau-Ponty's alternative version of the given. However, I argued that it is impossible to see how this critique can be supposed to have succeeded. The *relevant sense* in which science and reflection leave the enigma of the brute world 'intact', i.e.

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<sup>28</sup> VI 156-60.

<sup>29</sup> See PrP 19ff; and SB 219: 'it is natural for consciousness to misunderstand itself precisely because it is a consciousness of things'. Merleau-Ponty's distinction between pre-objective perception, and perception mediated by objective thought, parallels Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic temporality, and Sartre's distinction between consciousness and the 'psyche' posited by degraded reflection, as well as Husserl's original distinction between consciousness purified by the phenomenological *epoché* and consciousness interpreted according to the natural attitude. It may be noted that there are differences of emphasis in Merleau-Ponty's accounts of the formation of objective thought. In his discussion of the body at PP 94-5, where Merleau-Ponty tries to determine what has led to objective thought's conception of the body – and thus, since the body is a central transcendental condition, to the general metaphysics of objective thought – the factors that he cites have all to do with the scientisation of common sense ways of thinking. In other passages, such as the extremely clear account on PP 70-1, objective thought is ascribed to both science and common sense, but science plays no role at all in its formation, this being attributed entirely to the simple attainment of objectivity in perception, in the sense of taking things to have a subject-independent, non-perspectival existence and constitution: the 'positing of the object [...] makes us go beyond the limits of our actual experience' (PP 70), and leads to 'absolute positing' of the object, which is 'the death of consciousness, since it congeals the whole of existence' (PP 71). I take it, as Section IV of the paper should make clear, that the second view is Merleau-Ponty's true position.

<sup>30</sup> See VI 5-7, where Merleau-Ponty explicitly distinguishes the (non-transcendental) outlook that *accepts* the challenge of skepticism, from the deeper and correct (transcendental) approach that starts with 'the *problem of the world* [...] to know precisely what the being of the world means' (VI 6). The latter may be said to 'reformulate the skeptical arguments outside of every ontological preconception' (VI 6).

unexplained, and in which the bruteness of the world can be designated an 'enigma', i.e. an explanandum, cannot be grasped unless transcendental philosophy is already in view. Some prior conception of philosophical explanation is needed, i.e. must be presupposed, if Empiricism is to be apprehended as having explanatory limitations.<sup>31</sup>

There is, it must be concluded, no logical gap between Merleau-Ponty's call to avoid 'presuppositions' and his commitment to transcendental explanation: by saying that philosophy must be presuppositionless he in effect *means* that it must be transcendental. That this tracks correctly Merleau-Ponty's outlook is confirmed by the fact that he inserts the following remarks into his description of Empiricism:

It [objective thought] presupposes about us this world in itself; between this world and ourselves it presupposes relations of simultaneity and succession that enclose us in the same objective time with this world; it presupposes a mind capable of knowing this true universe [...] (VI 157)

This statement suggests two things. First, for Merleau-Ponty to think that Empiricism has these presuppositions at all just *is* for him to hold that transcendental philosophy is necessary: if it is an embarrassment for Empiricism that it takes for granted the notion of 'a mind capable of knowing' reality, then Empiricism is philosophically defective in a way that only transcendental philosophy can remedy. Second, it follows that the transcendental turn is after all for Merleau-Ponty a logical and historical *fait accompli*: the relevant argument against the legitimacy of presupposing 'a mind capable of knowing' the true universe lies already in Kant,<sup>32</sup> and is restated more explicitly by Husserl.

It follows that Merleau-Ponty's argument in the *Phenomenology of Perception* should be regarded as pursuing its logically connected aims of criticising non-transcendental positions and defending transcendental philosophy *in tandem*. Indeed, at the level of his text, Merleau-Ponty does not differentiate between the task of criticising Empiricism, Kant, etc., and the task of formulating his own transcendental theory: the relevant arguments are presented alongside one another rather than serially, so that the hegemony of objective thought and the existence of pre-objective being are intended to come into view simultaneously.

However, before jumping to affirm (C), we should briefly consider (B), which might seem to accommodate the foregoing points, without surrendering Merleau-Ponty to the argumentative circularity that may seem to be implied by (C).

It might be thought that the *Phenomenology of Perception* can avoid strict commitment at the outset to the transcendental framework – rather in the way that Kant describes his Copernican notion that objects conform to our mode of knowledge as a 'hypothesis' to be tested and proven – if its argument is read as a dialectic between, on the one side, Empiricism and the other species of objective thought, and on the other, Merleau-Ponty's transcendental metaphysics of pre-objectivity, a dialectic which is concluded ultimately in the latter's favour.

I do not think this avoids the problems indicated above. There is a double difficulty. First, if Merleau-Ponty's starting point consists of two equally weighted hypotheses, a justification is wanted for the parity of the initial weightings. Why should the Empiricist, who enjoys, as Merleau-Ponty himself concedes, *prima facie* agreement with the common sense given, accept it? Second,

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<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty shows himself to be aware of the difficulties I have cited (as shown also by the passage quoted above from PP 23): he affirms that '[p]erception as an encounter with natural things is at the foreground of our research' (VI 158), and highlights the obliqueness of our access to pre-objective phenomena, speaking of it as a matter of responding to the 'interrogation' elicited by 'these margins of presence' or 'references' (VI 159). My point is not that there is anything wrong with this approach, but that something philosophically weighty is required to redirect our attention from the 'foreground' of experience to its 'margins'. Merleau-Ponty seems aware of this in so far as he says that the universe of objective thought 'can tell us nothing' about pre-objectivity 'except indirectly, by its lacunae and by the aporias in which it throws us' (VI 157). The point to be emphasised is that something philosophical is required for these 'lacunae' and 'aporias' to be apprehended.

<sup>32</sup> I argue this in *Kant and the 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, ch. 2.

even if this difficulty is removed, we are no better off in understanding how the dialectic can be conducted to the satisfaction of the Empiricist. (The case is different, I am about to argue, with respect to the Intellectualist.) As said earlier, each point claimed by Merleau-Ponty as an opening to the pre-objective will be regarded by the Empiricist as just a cue for the revision of scientific theory. The theory of perception on its own will provide no resources for showing either inference, that of the Empiricist or that of Merleau-Ponty, to be the more rational.

I conclude therefore that (C) is correct: the *Phenomenology of Perception* is committed from its very first page to a transcendental metaphysical framework which is presupposed in its discussion of the theory of perception. Does the absence from the *Phenomenology of Perception* of an independent rebuttal of realist or naturalistic positions constitute a weakness in its argument? It does not, if the *context* of its argument is one where it is already accepted that the proper form of philosophical explanation consists in the provision of transcendental conditions understood idealistically. In that case, the *Phenomenology of Perception* should be regarded as simply not addressed to the naturalist or scientific realist: it is not intended to persuade anyone who is not already of a transcendental persuasion. Though this does mean that in one respect Merleau-Ponty is merely preaching to the converted, it by no means renders his argument pointless. The *Phenomenology of Perception* is targeted at those who *accept* the need for transcendental explanation but *identify* transcendental conditions in objectivistic-conceptual terms – an audience which includes Merleau-Ponty's predecessor phenomenologists – and it is with respect to these positions that it is supposed to do its work. The reason why *non-transcendental* philosophy – naturalism, scientific realism – figures centrally onstage among Merleau-Ponty's targets, is that he wishes to demonstrate *to* the transcendental philosophers of objective thought – Kant, Husserl, Sartre – that their own positions are unwittingly continuous with the non-transcendental positions that they reject: Merleau-Ponty wants to demonstrate that the attempts of Kant and Husserl/Sartre to define their own positions in opposition to respectively transcendental realism and the philosophical prejudices of the natural attitude, are only partially successful; Kant has not, Merleau-Ponty wishes to show, eradicated from his position all that the Copernican revolution was (or ought to have been) intended to overcome, and Husserl and Sartre have failed to exclude elements of the natural attitude that their phenomenologies were intended to purify consciousness of.<sup>33</sup>

I want to give now one final representative textual illustration, to make good this point about the scope and assumptions of Merleau-Ponty's argument. In 'The primacy of perception and its philosophical consequences', a paper published shortly after the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty offers a defence of the book's main theses. In order to give an idea of his view of perception, Merleau-Ponty summarises his view of the problem set by 'an object which we perceive but one of whose sides we do not see' (PrP 13). Merleau-Ponty rejects in turn three philosophical analyses of this perceptual situation:

1. 'I *represent* to myself the sides of this lamp which are not seen.'
2. 'The unseen sides are *anticipated* by me.'
3. 'The unseen sides are simply *possible perceptions*.'

Merleau-Ponty rejects these analyses because they imply that the unseen sides are *not present* for me: either by suggesting that the existence of the unseen sides is merely probable, or by suggesting that my relation to them is one of belief, i.e. mediated by a truth which has been grasped, like a truth of geometry, in place of a direct relation to an object perceived.

What analysis does Merleau-Ponty offer in their place? What he says is this:

The unseen side is present in its own way. It is in my vicinity [... When] I consider the whole setting [l'entourage; i.e. the relation to touch, etc.] of my perception, it reveals another modality which is neither the ideal and necessary being of geometry nor the simple sensory event. (PrP 14)

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<sup>33</sup> These claims are supported further by the passage from PP 63 quoted and discussed below.

What is the nature of this other modality? Here all that Merleau-Ponty does is refer us to the further detail of his discussions of perception and the body in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Now to say that the unseen sides are 'present in their own way' obviously does not amount to an *analysis* at all, in the same sense as those that he wishes to challenge. Merleau-Ponty does not have a *rival* explanation of the cognitive achievement in question: he is simply refusing the question. Consequently the naturalist will regard Merleau-Ponty's argument – quite justifiably, in the naturalist's own terms – as making no impact at all. But what this fact should really be taken to show is that Merleau-Ponty is inviting us to regard the content of perception as *not requiring* explanation or permitting analysis: he is suggesting that we relocate it on the side of the primitive terms of philosophical explanation, and he is indicating an assumption under which this can be done. This makes full sense on the Transcendental Interpretation, since if perception *is* a fundamental transcendental condition, then it *could not* receive any explanation.

The only alternative to this construal is to view Merleau-Ponty's argument here, and a great many others in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, as missing their target and entirely beside the point. The Transcendental Interpretation may not give Merleau-Ponty an argument against the *naturalist*, but it does give him an *argument* – an argument addressed to his transcendental predecessors.

This gives some idea of how the *Phenomenology of Perception* may be regarded as operating within a transcendental framework. Although I have suggested that its argument cannot be divided into discrete steps that provide a linear argument for the transcendental turn, it can of course still be considered how, with the transcendental framework presupposed, it may be intended to run. There are no doubt various possible reconstructions, but the following is a plausible rough sketch of the argument of its earlier chapters (the Introduction and Part One):

- (1) Perception is unanalysable. [This phenomenological datum is exhibited – in Merleau-Ponty's sense of being disclosed to phenomenological intuition – in the course of the Introduction and Part One.]
- (2) Perception *qua* unanalysable may play a transcendental role: it is a candidate for the explanans in transcendental explanation. [Here the presupposed transcendental framework enters: Merleau-Ponty assumes an independent and prior conception of philosophical explanation, in terms of the need to locate transcendental conditions. The task is to identify *occupants* of transcendental roles: it is already known that occupants need to be located, since the roles are taken to exist, and the only question is where specifically the occupants are to be found.]
- (3) Empiricism fails to offer transcendental explanation.
- (4) Intellectualism does offer a transcendental theory, but of a kind which misrepresents the nature of perception. [Again, a phenomenological datum, exhibited in the course of the Introduction and Part One.]
- (5) Empiricism and Intellectualism are led to affirm the analysability of perception and thus (contrary to Intellectualism's intention) to deny its transcendental character, on account of their shared commitment to objective thought.
- (6) Transcendental explanation cannot take the form of – it is incompatible with – objective thought.
- (7) Transcendental explanation must lie in perception conceived pre-objectively.

On this reconstruction, the key connections hold between the notions of unanalysability, transcendental role, and pre-objectivity.

What should be emphasised next is that this reconstruction is not for Merleau-Ponty the whole story. There are two points to be made here.

First, the Introduction and Part One cannot be taken independently of the concluding chapters, in the context of which a much broader argument comes into view. Here is a rough reconstruction of that broader argument:

- (1) Human existence is characterised by specific forms of intersubjectivity, temporality and freedom. [This specific character is described in the concluding chapters, mainly on a negative basis, i.e. through criticism of naturalistic, Husserlian, Sartrean, etc. accounts of these topics.]
- (2) The specific character of the intersubjectivity etc. of human existence cannot be grasped by means of objective thought. [Merleau-Ponty tries to show that objective thought necessitates various alternatives regarding each of the topics, each of which is unacceptable. For example, it implies either that we have no freedom, or that we have absolute, unqualified freedom, à la Sartre.]
- (3) The world in general must be interpreted in a way that explains how it is possible for human existence to be such that it cannot be grasped in objective thought. [In other words, it is not coherent to affirm that *human existence* has the specific character assigned to it, unless it is also affirmed that the *world* inhabited by human subjects has an appropriate correlative metaphysical character. Therefore:]
- (4) The world in general must be interpreted as being such that it cannot be grasped in objective thought.
- (5) The world in general must repose upon pre-objective being.

There are various ways in which this argument may be regarded as related to that of the Introduction and Part One. The concluding chapters, and the Introduction and Part One, can be regarded as two *parallel*, mutually supporting and mutually illuminating, arguments for the same conclusion. Or the argument of the Introduction and Part One can be regarded as *embedded within* the argument of the concluding chapters – as elaborating its line (3). Or again, one could shift the whole centre of gravity to the concluding chapters and reduce the Introduction and Part One to a mere preamble.

The second point to be emphasised concerns Merleau-Ponty's view of the nature and limits of philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's writings are full of remarks about how philosophy can ultimately only bring us to *see* how things are at the pre-objective level. Merleau-Ponty talks of phenomenology as 'restor[ing] the world of perception' (PrP 3), 'a method of getting closer to present and living reality' (PrP 25): 'True philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world' (PP xx). Philosophy must 'conform itself with the vision we have in fact', 'adjust itself to those figured enigmas, the thing and the world' (VI 4). 'Phenomenology, as a disclosure of the world, rests on itself, or rather provides its own foundation' (PP xx-xxi): it 'wishes to bring to expression' 'the things themselves, from the depths of their silence' (VI 4).

The suggestion that philosophical knowledge involves something extra-propositional cannot be missed. The further, key point is that this non-propositional something is regarded by Merleau-Ponty not merely as a necessary accompaniment of philosophical cognition, but as what philosophical cognition *consists in*. Having put 'the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things' 'out of play', suspending 'for a moment our recognition of them', we experience "'wonder" in the face of the world', and 'from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world': we do no more than 'watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire' (PP xiii-xiv). Such apprehension marks the limit of philosophy: 'All that has to be done is to recognize these phenomena which are the ground of all our certainties'; belief in 'an absolute mind' or in 'a world in itself detached from us' is nothing more than 'a rationalization of this primordial faith' (PP 409). The rationality of our common sense certainties 'is not a *problem*': there is nothing 'behind it' for us to determine (PP xx). We may call it a 'miracle' or 'mystery', but it is not one that leaves matters 'problematical': since 'we are ourselves' the 'network of relationships' which it establishes, 'nobody knows better than we do how this miracle is worked'; the mystery 'defines'

the world and reason, so 'there can be no question of dispelling it by some "solution"' (PP xx). To 'establish this wonder' is 'metaphysics itself' (PrP 11).

Merleau-Ponty thus belongs to a philosophical tradition according to which philosophical knowledge consists in the attainment of privileged states of mind, states which consist in something other than, or more than, attitudes to philosophical propositions. These special cognitive states of mind are in a limited sense ineffable: they can be expressed linguistically, but their propositional expressions function only as indirect indices of them. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty can claim, as we have seen him do earlier in this section, the discursive non-provability of his philosophical conclusions, and the view is also crucial for his idea that painting (Cézanne) may communicate the same content as phenomenological philosophy.<sup>34</sup>

A partial historical comparison is with the notion in Fichte and Schelling that philosophical thought terminates ultimately (and begins logically) with intellectual intuition.<sup>35</sup> The differences are that Merleau-Ponty substitutes an intuition of the transcendental, pre-objective character of perception for the Fichte-Schelling intellectual intuition of the self or Absolute, and that Merleau-Ponty denies, whereas Fichte and Schelling affirm, that philosophical intuition can be re-presented in the form of a philosophical system.

Merleau-Ponty's view of the intuitive nature of philosophical cognition evidently makes a crucial difference as to how the Introduction and Part One should be understood: if the Psychological Interpretation were correct, then the phenomenologist's experience of perception's pre-objectivity would be mere data, *evidence* for a philosophical proposition, whereas Merleau-Ponty's claim is the reverse – the experience is the content and terminus of philosophical activity. His statement that phenomenology 'restores the world of perception' means, therefore, not just that phenomenology shows the significance of perception for philosophy, but that its practice generates in the philosopher an actual perceptual experience which, the philosopher grasps in undergoing the experience, completes the task of philosophy.

#### IV. Antinomy, transcendental ambiguity, and idealism

Merleau-Ponty's conception of philosophical knowledge as intuitive is bound up with his strategy of moving philosophy beyond the attempted solution of discursively formulated problems, by reinterpreting the perennial problems of philosophy as manifestations of the inherent limitations of thought. Because this strategy is essential for the understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole, as well as providing powerful support for the Transcendental Interpretation, I will discuss it now in some detail.

The strategy is best understood as a novel development of Kant's argument that transcendental idealism is uniquely capable of resolving philosophical problems which are otherwise insoluble. In the Antinomy of Pure Reason Kant takes four topics in traditional metaphysics and in each case argues that a contradiction – e.g. both affirmation and denial that the world is finite in space and time – can be derived through valid arguments. The four antinomies are said by Kant to exhibit a single general form of conflict in metaphysics, namely that between dogmatic rationalism and skeptical empiricism. The rational response to this paradoxical situation, Kant then argues, is to identify in each case some proposition which is presupposed by both sides but which can be denied, and the denial of which eliminates the contradiction. The presuppositions of the four antinomies, Kant argues, revolve around reason's idea of the world as a determinate totality, but ultimately, he suggests, there is one unarticulated claim which lies behind them all. This is the claim that the objects of our knowledge are things in themselves, the defining claim of 'transcendental realism', Kant's term for the general type of position in theoretical philosophy which on his account is the only alternative to transcendental idealism. On the basis that transcendental

<sup>34</sup> See 'Eye and mind', esp. pp. 161, 166, 178-80, and 'Cézanne's doubt', esp. pp. 14-16.

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty himself interprets Schelling's conception of intellectual intuition in terms of pre-objective perception: 'l' "intuition intellectuelle", qui n'est pas une faculté occulte, mais la perception même avant qu'elle ait été réduit en idées', *Résumés de cours*, p. 107.

realism is sufficient as well as necessary to generate the antinomies, Kant may claim to have provided an indirect proof of transcendental idealism: he has shown the truth of transcendental idealism, through showing that transcendental realism entails contradictions.

In the following passage, Merleau-Ponty indicates the relation between the *Phenomenology of Perception* and Kant's Antinomy of Pure Reason:

It is true that we arrive at contradictions when we describe the perceived world. And it is also true that if there were such a thing as a non-contradictory thought, it would exclude the whole of perception as simple appearance. But the question is precisely to know whether there is such a thing as logically coherent thought or thought in the pure state. This is the question Kant asked himself [...] One of Kant's discoveries, whose consequences we have not yet fully grasped, is that all our experience of the world is throughout a tissue of concepts which lead to irreducible contradictions if we attempt to take them in an absolute sense or transfer them into pure being. (PrP 18)

The chief contradiction which Merleau-Ponty has in mind here as arising when we describe the perceived world, concerns the 'relation of the perceiving subject and the world': this, he says 'involves, in principle, the contradiction of immanence and transcendence', i.e. the contradiction that the objects of perception must be conceived as both immanent to acts of perception and transcendent of them (PrP 13). In this sense, 'the perceived world is paradoxical', the 'perceived thing itself is paradoxical' (PrP 16).<sup>36</sup>

Now there is no explicitly articulated argument in Merleau-Ponty which matches the formality and rigour of Kant's Antinomy. Even in the concluding chapters of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty's antinomy-strategy is most clearly visible – as said above, opposing conceptualisations of freedom, temporality, intersubjectivity and so forth are argued in the concluding chapters to exhaust the possibilities of objective thought, leaving the field clear for Merleau-Ponty's thesis of pre-objective being – there is no strict attempt at a *reductio ad absurdum*: rather, as throughout the Introduction and Part One, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis is on the unsatisfactory character of the individual options presented by objective thought, rather than on their jointly comprising a strict contradiction. Nevertheless, in the passage quoted above Merleau-Ponty may be interpreted as claiming that, just as Kant shows in the Antinomy that contradictions can be avoided only if we deny identity between the given empirical world and the world *qua* an object of reason, so the *Phenomenology of Perception* shows that we must similarly deny identity between the perceived world and the world as conceived in objective thought. Kant's argument is meant to establish that the given empirical world is a realm of mere appearances; in Merleau-Ponty, what is supposed to be shown is, by contrast, that the perceived world is a realm of pre-objective being. Though the conclusions drawn are opposed – because pre-objective being specifically lacks the conceptual constitution of Kantian appearance – the form and idealistic trajectory of the two arguments are the same. In both cases there is an attempt to demonstrate a lack of fit between what is given in experience and what is represented by our concepts, which is then argued to have two implications. First, it is taken to show that the objects of our experience lack the subject-independence which our concepts represent them as possessing, i.e. to show idealism. Second, and correlatively, it is taken to entail a limitation or demotion of the power of thought: in Kant, the conclusion drawn is that pure reason cannot grasp nature, and in Merleau-Ponty, that the perceived world eludes the objectification of thought.

It is therefore as if Merleau-Ponty had applied to the faculty of *understanding* the strategy of argument which Kant applies to the faculty of reason, and subjected Kant's idealism to the sort of critique to which Kant subjects transcendental realism. The result is a new kind of transcendental idealism, as it were a transcendental idealism of the second degree, which not only denies that empirical reality can be grasped by concepts independent of intuition, but also affirms that the

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<sup>36</sup> See also PP xiv: 'in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it'; and SB 215.



perceived world owes its reality exclusively to the intuitive component of cognition. Merleau-Ponty's concept of pre-objective being can be regarded as a development of the Kantian concept of appearance.

Of equal importance is the parallelism between Kant and Merleau-Ponty regarding the mode of solution of philosophical problems. In both cases, venerable philosophical problems are held to have been solved, or dissolved, through being referred back from the *objects* of experience, where earlier philosophers had supposed their solution must lie, to the *subject's* power of thought, which is made to take the blame for producing contradictions. In Kant's Antinomy the relevant problems are the 'cosmological' problems of traditional metaphysics, including the key opposition of freedom and nature. Merleau-Ponty – again as it were taking Kant a step further, and applying Kant's own strategy to Kant himself – argues that *all* of the problems of epistemology and metaphysics, including those that the *Critique of Pure Reason* claims to solve, disappear in the light of the discovery of pre-objective being, as the following shows. The problem of the external world is dissolved with the recognition that the perceived world is 'strange and paradoxical' (PP xiii). The proper 'remedy to skepticism' in general (PrP 26) consists in accepting the perceived world as the foundation for 'all rationality', and allowing that it 'comprises relations and a type of organisation' that the supervening 'world of ideas' can reflect only in the form of paradox, for which reason it is possible for knowledge to appear problematic: the paradoxes in question, which must be acknowledged as '*the very condition of consciousness*' comprise 'the justified contradictions of transcendental logic' (PrP 13, 16, 18-19). The given opposition (on which Sartre erects his metaphysics) of our mode of being, being-for-itself, and that of the objects of thought, being-in-itself, is to be treated as a function of a 'contact with being' that 'really is ambivalent' (VI 75). Concerning the nature of time, its 'ambiguity cannot be resolved, but it can be understood as ultimate, if we recapture the intuition of real time which preserves everything, and which is at the core of both proof and expression' (PP 394). The problem of other minds too is, from the phenomenological standpoint, relegated to a construct of objective thought: 'Under these conditions' – our pre-objective bodily and perceptual being, and correlative pre-personal selfhood – 'the antinomies of objective thought vanish [les antinomies de la pensée objective disparaissent]' (PP 351). In place of a discursively formulated philosophical solution to the problem of other minds, 'we live through [nous vivons]' our intersubjective situation (PP 359).<sup>37</sup> The opposition of realism and idealism itself is an antinomy of objective thought (PP 317-34, 430-3, SB 219): we 'leave behind the dilemma of realism and idealism' (PP 430), because 'the solution of all problems of transcendence' is available 'in the thickness of the pre-objective present' (PP 433).<sup>38</sup>

Expressed in general terms, Merleau-Ponty's mode of solution to philosophical problems is, therefore, to reduce them to representations (albeit necessary ones) produced by objective thought in its confrontation with pre-objective being. All that remains of those problems, after this fact has been grasped, is the recognition that there is in reality, i.e. in pre-objective being, an irresolvable 'ambiguity'.

What does it mean to say that ambiguity resides in reality, such that it is a mistake to seek to 'purge' objects 'of all ambiguity' (PP 11) – or, as Merleau-Ponty also puts it, that a 'positive indeterminate [un indéterminé positif]' is present in perception (PP 12), that 'we must recognise the

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<sup>37</sup> In fact Merleau-Ponty's view of the problem of solipsism is more complicated, for he holds that the 'difficulties inherent in considering the perception of other people did not all stem from objective thought, nor do they all disappear with the discovery of' the pre-objective (PP 356). This does not affect the present point, however, for he does hold that the problem is *partly* solved in this way, and in any case uses its *total* insolubility from the standpoint of objective thought as an argument against the latter.

<sup>38</sup> Whether Merleau-Ponty is entitled to claim that his position is in *no* sense an idealism and is in *all* senses beyond realism and idealism – or whether it only subsumes the realism/idealism opposition in a restricted sense, recreating idealism at a higher level – depends upon how he conceives the transcendental that underlies his antinomy-strategy. Since, as I claim below, Merleau-Ponty conceives the transcendental perspectively, his position amounts, as said above, to a 'higher transcendental idealism': a transcendental idealism of pre-objectivity, which, he can rightfully claim, stands above the opposition of a transcendental idealism-of-objective-thought and a transcendental realism-of-objective-thought.

indeterminate as a positive phenomenon [Il nous faut reconnaître l'indéterminé comme un phénomène positif] (PP 6)? This claim is not to be found in Kant: it marks the point where Merleau-Ponty's antinomy-strategy extends beyond that of Kant, and it requires some interpretation.

We may begin to understand Merleau-Ponty's concept of real ambiguity by considering the famous Müller-Lyer lines, of which Merleau-Ponty says that they are neither of the same length nor of unequal length (PP 6, 11). What does he mean by this? It is not simply a statement of the psychological explanandum, i.e. of the fact that we read the diagram as ambiguous, nor should it be interpreted as describing a feature of sub-personal information processing, of the sort that an empirical psychologist might hypothesise: the thesis that indeterminacy is a positive phenomenon does not refer to the idea that perceptual data goes through a point at which values of relative length are not yet assigned. Nor can it mean merely that there is some context in which it serves no purpose to raise the question of the lines' relative lengths. This would be compatible with there being nothing which distinguishes this case of perception from that of perception in general; it does not touch what is special about the diagram. Nor can his claim be that the very concept of sameness of length, or of length itself, is categorially inapplicable to the lines in the diagram, in the way that numbers cannot have colour. Nor can he *merely* be asserting that questions of length come into play only when the categories that are constitutive of objectivity have been applied; for this on its own would lead simply to the Kantian position that intuitions without concepts are 'nothing' (to us) – i.e. the conclusion to draw would be that there is no philosophical access to the lines prior to the application of concepts, in direct contradiction with what Merleau-Ponty wishes to claim, viz. that indeterminacy or ambiguity is *actually perceived*.

These unsuccessful attempts to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty's paradoxical description of the Müller-Lyer diagram compose a *via negativa*, which helps to narrow down the possible meaning of his concept of real ambiguity, but at the end of which we must recognise that beyond a certain point this concept is unanalysable, a philosophically primitive notion,<sup>39</sup> and that the only ways of grasping its meaning are (first) by seeing what Merleau-Ponty does with the idea, and (second) by drawing relevant comparisons and contrasts with other transcendental philosophers.

On the latter front, it proves helpful to pursue the comparison with Kant. For Kant, the conditions of experience leave no room for real indeterminacy. The a priori conditions of experience are not indeterminate, because they are purely formal: there is nothing that they consist of, beyond the power to determine the form of some matter; *qua* determining powers, they are fully determinate. And while the empirical-intuitive condition for experience – the manifold of sensation, the 'matter' of experience – is for Kant indeterminate in the sense of being a pure susceptibility to determination, it is also, on account of its total lack of form, in one good sense determinate: namely it is determinately 'blank' or *formless*.<sup>40</sup> For Kant, therefore, the conditions for experience divide into the determining and the determinable; no space remains for real indeterminacy, as opposed to indeterminacy as a function of as-yet-uncompleted determination (of the sort that Kant admits in the third *Critique*, as giving occasion for reflective judgement).

For Merleau-Ponty, in the first place, the conditions of experience cannot be analysed in terms of form and matter or content.<sup>41</sup> The only Kantian duality that Merleau-Ponty allows to have application is that of concept and intuition: pre-objective perception is intuitive, and it is intuitive without being, like Kant's matter of experience, determinately formless; it is a formed-content. Next comes the claim which contradicts the conclusion of Kant's Transcendental Deduction. What is the

<sup>39</sup> This explains the close connection – which is otherwise puzzling – that Merleau-Ponty draws between the theme of indeterminacy and the transcendental form of explanation. In one place he says that if classical psychology had understood the body correctly – namely, recognised its transcendental status – then it would have been led to 'the world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects' and instead to the world as 'anterior to every determining thought' (PP 92).

<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, one might say: the opposition determinate/indeterminate has no application to the matter of experience. This reading of Kant is disputed, but the dispute is not relevant to the point here at issue.

<sup>41</sup> As an indication that this is really Merleau-Ponty's view, note his repudiation of even the most basic elements of traditional metaphysical vocabulary in grasping the pre-objective: 'We must, at the beginning, eschew notions such as "acts of consciousness", "states of consciousness", "matter", "form", and even "perception".' (VI 157-8).

nature of the form of pre-objective perception? On the one hand, it can be said that it is not conceptual form, and that it is lost in the transition to conceptual form: if it were conceptual, then the standpoint of objective thought defended in the Transcendental Deduction would be correct. On the other hand, the form cannot be *totally* alien to conceptuality: if it were, then Merleau-Ponty's account of the formation of objective thought would be false, and his position would be the epistemologically nihilistic one of Nietzsche's 'On truth and lies in the extra-moral sense' essay, viz. that thought has no species of real, non-metaphorical relation to reality whatever. Thus, the form of pre-objective perception must have a double aspect: a proto-conceptual aspect, and a (more fundamental) aspect which is alien to conceptuality. One could put it like this: the form of pre-objectivity, in so far as it is one with content, is not conceptual; it is conceptual only in so far as it separated from content; and the former is ontologically the more fundamental, i.e. 'true' form.

Merleau-Ponty therefore rejects the claim of Kant's Transcendental Deduction that the pre-intellectual syntheses of experience (figurative synthesis, synthesis in apprehension, synthesis in imagination) are subordinate to and aligned with the synthesis of understanding, so as to ensure that conceptual form percolates all the way down.

The comparison with Kant brings out the way in which Merleau-Ponty's transcendental theory of experience makes indeterminacy possible 'as a positive phenomenon': the notion of form which applies to the Müller-Lyer lines considered pre-objectively (i) contains *both* the concepts (judgements) of equality and inequality of length, and so (ii) contains *neither* in the way that appearances according to Kant's Transcendental Deduction contain conceptual form.

Perceptual ambiguity or indeterminacy provides Merleau-Ponty with a general model for metaphysics. The metaphysical ambiguity in things which generates the problems of philosophy and opposing philosophical positions is therefore, like the length of the Müller-Lyer lines conceived in Merleau-Ponty's fashion, something conceptually indeterminate that can only be intuited – in so far as we seek to take the ambiguity up in judgement, we find ourselves in contradiction. This ultimately real, unanalysable ambiguity is brute but not unintelligible, for we can make it intelligible either by recapturing the relevant pre-objective intuition, or by 'living' the ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty's view of Empiricism and Intellectualism may be understood on the analogy with the two judgements of the Müller-Lyer lines – Empiricism interprets the lines as having different lengths, and Intellectualism as having the same length – while Merleau-Ponty's own metaphysical view corresponds to the interpretation of the diagram as exhibiting indeterminacy 'as a positive phenomenon', and his conception of the method of philosophy to that of perceiving the lines' indeterminacy. Merleau-Ponty affirms that pre-objective experience is such as to invite, or even compel, the two interpretations of it supplied by Empiricism and Intellectualism, so these two philosophical positions are not merely philosophical 'mistakes': the phenomena of objective thought are 'not fictions, but firmly grounded' (PP 356). Intellectualism and Empiricism are therefore non-arbitrary, and possess a priori necessity: in one respect they are like Kant's dialectical illusions, and in another – in so far as they are conditions for cognition of an objective, empirically real world – like the conditions of experience in the *Analytic*.<sup>42</sup>

In extending Kant's antinomy-strategy, Merleau-Ponty incorporates an element of Hegel. Hegel criticises Kant, first, for failing to realise that antinomial structure is ubiquitous in thought, and second, for taking the moral of the Antinomy to be that the relevant contradictions should be regarded as a function of the subject's mode of cognition. Hegel proposes that, instead of subjectivising the antinomies, we should lay the blame for contradiction on the objects, for failing to cohere with thought.<sup>43</sup> The locus assigned by Merleau-Ponty to the antinomies is mid-way between that of Kant and that of Hegel: he analyses antinomy as a function of the *relation* between (on the side of the subject) objective thought and (on the side of the object) real ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty holds, with Hegel, that we should reject the 'reproach of ambivalence', i.e. that we should regard antinomy as a philosophical discovery, and not as a failure of philosophical thought showing the need to withdraw our logically contradictory description of the world. But Merleau-

<sup>42</sup> See the reference to 'empirical realism founded upon transcendental idealism' in VI 162.

<sup>43</sup> See Hegel, (*Encyclopaedia*) *Logic*, §48.

Ponty also affirms that 'if this contact [with being] really is ambivalent, it is for us to accommodate ourselves to it' (VI 75), i.e. we must also accept, with Kant, that conceptuality is in some sense impugned by antinomy. The upshot is therefore, so to speak, the supremacy of Intuition in place of the Concept.

Whatever one makes of this far-reaching development of Kant's antinomy-argument, its importance for Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project is beyond doubt: without it, Merleau-Ponty has no philosophical position worth the name, and that his claim to have moved philosophy beyond the solution of its traditional problems is hollow.

To conclude this section, I would like to mention (though they deserve more systematic exploration than space allows here) some further important aspects of Merleau-Ponty's relation with Kant and post-Kantian idealism.

Just as Merleau-Ponty's antinomy-strategy distinguishes itself from, and in a sense synthesises, those of Kant and Hegel, so also is it notable that Merleau-Ponty straddles the divide between Kant's limited, 'subjective' idealism and post-Kantian absolute idealism. In so far as Merleau-Ponty rejects things in themselves, affirms subject-object identity in his conception of pre-objectivity, and aims to transcend the opposition of realism and idealism, Merleau-Ponty's idealism appears to be of the absolute sort.<sup>44</sup> Yet, in another respect, Merleau-Ponty's conception of transcendental explanation is Kantian, for he conceives transcendental conditions as inherently *perspectival*.<sup>45</sup> For example, he says that what we must try to understand in the case of visual perception – the fundamental philosophical problem that it sets – is 'how vision can be brought into being from somewhere without being enclosed in its perspective' (PP 67): vision must be relativised to something that is not a point *in the world*, that could itself become an object of vision or be located in objective, geometrically determined space, but that is nevertheless 'somewhere', i.e. that has the perspectival character of a *point*. The subjectivity which Merleau-Ponty envisages as revealed by phenomenology, this shows, is not absolute in the manner of German idealism – an intellectual intuition which is total and purely self-comprehending – but limited and finite in the manner of Kant. The perspectival character of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the transcendental is what marks his difference from conceptions of the transcendental in objective thought: Kant's 'eternal', a priori subjectivity is, in Merleau-Ponty's view, not rigorously perspectival, and Sartre's phenomenological ontology is guilty of reifying – of attributing ontological, trans-perspectival status to – transcendental structures such as the body and intersubjectivity.

There are further thematic continuities with German idealism. Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment as playing a transcendental role (albeit differently conceived) is found in the theory of intersubjectivity that Fichte integrates into the (second, or first revised, presentation of the) *Wissenschaftslehre*, while Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the incapacity of thought ('reflection') to grasp reality is continuous with themes in German romanticism and in Schelling's later, anti-Hegelian position. Most important, however, is the manner in which Merleau-Ponty's claim that antinomy is in some sense 'true' appears to call for the Schelling-Hegel apparatus of speculative identity,<sup>46</sup> a point which he effectively acknowledges when he introduces in his last, posthumously published writings, the notion of 'chiasmus': 'the self and the non-self are like the obverse and the reverse [...] by a sort of *chiasm*, we become the others and we become world' (VI 160).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> While Merleau-Ponty shares with German idealism the general aim of overcoming subject/object duality, there is an important difference: Merleau-Ponty gives the point at which the duality is overcome a phenomenological locus, viz. in pre-objective perception, and since on his account phenomenology bounds philosophical reflection, it follows, just as he claims, that subject-object unity is absolutely beyond explanation or elucidation. In German idealism, by contrast, subject-object unity transcends the phenomenological field, making it possible for the phenomenological field to receive philosophical explanation.

<sup>45</sup> See for example PP 70-1, and the several places where the perspectival 'point of view of time' is privileged above the aperspectival 'point of view of being', e.g. PP 330, 374.

<sup>46</sup> As Burch also observes: see 'On the topic of art and truth', p. 364.

<sup>47</sup> See also the 'Working Notes', which talk of a 'return to ontology' which would address 'the subject-object question' and elaborate 'notions that have to replace' those of subject and object (VI 165-7).

## V. The transcendental tradition

Some remarks are due on the term 'transcendental tradition'. As will be clear from the foregoing, I take this to be something broader than Kant's own philosophy and its nineteenth-century German and twentieth-century English developments. Merleau-Ponty himself, following Husserl, takes this view.<sup>48</sup> This allows the claim that Merleau-Ponty belongs to the transcendental tradition to be squared with the fact that Kant is one of the principal targets of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and that Merleau-Ponty is opposed on many fronts to German idealism and neo-Kantianism.

Two objections may nonetheless be raised to the claim that Merleau-Ponty belongs to the transcendental tradition.

One potential obstacle to setting Merleau-Ponty in the transcendental tradition is provided by his denial that self-consciousness – 'reflexive philosophy', with its assumption of an 'eternally given' (PP 63) – is the fundamental principle of philosophical explanation which it is for Kant and the absolute idealists: he does not employ the transcendental unity of apperception or the form of self-consciousness as a philosophical ground, and he considers that the cogito is secondary to perceptual consciousness.<sup>49</sup>

A short answer is that the transcendental tradition comprehends a number of central themes, not all of which need be present in each of its members. But there is a deeper point to be made. Despite his view of self-consciousness as a secondary phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty's position and arguments are intelligible only in terms of the transcendental self-consciousness tradition against which he is reacting and to which he proposes a radical revision: his position is not independent of the self-consciousness tradition in philosophy in the way that others, for example the naturalist's, are, since he takes from it the basic idea of transcendental conditions and transcendental explanation. What distinguishes Merleau-Ponty's place in the history of transcendental philosophy is the originality of his proposal regarding the locus and nature of transcendental conditions: according to Merleau-Ponty, the occupant of the most fundamental transcendental role is without any intrinsic conceptual character, *contra* both Kant and Hegel. It is located not, therefore, in the objectivity of conceptuality, as per Hegel, but nor is it located in subjectivity, as per Kant: it lies in something non-conceptual with regard to which the subjective/objective distinction cannot be made intelligibly, viz. perception conceived pre-objectively. In this respect Merleau-Ponty can be regarded as pursuing the post-Kantian search for subject-object identity, and as proposing that the relation of subject to object is grounded, not in an all-encompassing conceptually graspable whole, but in the non-conceptual being which mediates the relation of the thinking subject to the objects of thought. Abstracted from the transcendental context, this might look like Berkeleyan idealism or even neutral monism (perhaps something similar to William James' radical empiricism), but these positions are not ones that Merleau-Ponty wants to take.<sup>50</sup> Keeping in focus his historical relations to earlier transcendental thinkers is thus important for a correct understanding of Merleau-Ponty's position.

The second count on which it might be doubted that Merleau-Ponty is a transcendental philosopher concerns value. A staple ingredient of transcendental thought – at least in its central instances, of Kant and German idealism – is the search for an internal connection between theoretical and practical philosophy or between metaphysics and the theory of value. But there appears to be nothing much by way of a moral theory or theory of value in the *Phenomenology of Perception*:<sup>51</sup> the work seems to lack the direct attunement of metaphysics to questions of human

<sup>48</sup> See the use made of 'transcendental' at PP vii, xiii, and SB 201, 206. It should be noted, however, that Merleau-Ponty's terminology is not consistent, for on occasion he uses 'transcendental' to mean simply Intellectualist (e.g. VI 157).

<sup>49</sup> See PP, Part Three, ch. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Though Merleau-Ponty's idealism is not Berkeley's, there are parallels between their negative and methodological claims, above all between Merleau-Ponty's account of reflection and Berkeley's critique of abstraction.

<sup>51</sup> See Merleau-Ponty's cryptic remarks at PP 456, where he seems to affirm the necessity of both 'willing freedom *for all*' and 'silence' on matters of ethical theory, and also PrP 25-6.

action and value which is found in *Being and Time* and *Being and Nothingness*, and which (along with other considerations) allows a good case to be made for setting Heidegger and Sartre in a broadly conceived transcendental tradition.<sup>52</sup>

The metaphysics of the *Phenomenology of Perception* can in fact be seen to be connected with value in several ways.<sup>53</sup> (i) An immediate axiological gain is made (in a way that mirrors Fichte and Sartre) through the affirmation of a metaphysics that is non-naturalistic and that sets human existence at the absolute centre of reality, with a responsibility for the very being of the world at large. This disposes of the nihilism threatened by scientific naturalism. Moreover, (ii) Merleau-Ponty's metaphysics ensures that the human subject is fundamentally at home, *bei sich*, in the world: for Merleau-Ponty our being is not inherently problematic in the way that it is for Heidegger or Sartre; Merleau-Ponty claims to solve the problem of the mode of being of the for-itself that Sartre identifies as its very constitution, and he introduces no analogue of Heidegger's fallen-ness.<sup>54</sup>

(iii) Axiological conclusions can be derived from the specific forms of intersubjectivity and freedom described in the concluding chapters of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Whether or not fully determinate concrete practical implications can be got to follow from the metaphysics of the concluding chapters – something which Merleau-Ponty seems to deny (PP 456) – it at least carries certain broad implications for moral thought (PrP 25-6). It opposes, for example, Kantian formalism, and the sort of voluntaristic subjectivism associated, rightly or wrongly, with Sartre, and it appears to imply that consciousness cannot rid itself – neither for theoretical nor for practical purposes – of the shared intersubjective perspective, thereby removing metaphysical grounds for egoism. Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity also undermines Sartre's conflictual account of human relationships: on Merleau-Ponty's account, before the Sartreian gaze can begin the dialectic of mutual objectification, it is necessary that self and other perceive one another as *sharing* a world in which each, as embodied, is intersubjectively accessible to the other; self and other may choose to negate one another, but it is not, as Sartre believes, metaphysically necessary that they do so (PP 448). Merleau-Ponty can also claim to have made freedom and responsibility inescapable in a way that Sartre fails to do: if human freedom is what Merleau-Ponty says it is, then it becomes impossible for us to 'miss being free' (PP 456); this I could do only if I supposed either (as per Empiricism) that my being is that of a mere 'thing', or (in Sartre's Intellectualist fashion) that I have an option on whether or not to 'take up' my natural and social facticity.

(iv) Although Merleau-Ponty does no more than hint at the idea (PrP 25), the *Phenomenology of Perception's* conception of pre-objectivity makes room for the idea of a given, primordial unity of fact and value, similar to what is found in aesthetic consciousness. Since perceptual pre-objectivity is not comprised of bare sensory qualities but rather contains meaning, there is no reason to think that it does not contain value, or at any rate the sources of what will come to be recognised by reflecting subjects as values. This background value-permeation for human existence would provide a foundation for moral realism. Again this points away from the Psychological Interpretation: if Merleau-Ponty's conception of pre-objectivity incorporates value, then it cannot be identified simply with a richer conception of perceptual content.

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<sup>52</sup> Looked at this way, it may seem that Merleau-Ponty's attempt to purge existential phenomenology of its extreme Sartreian elements – Sartre's uncompromising dualism and his doctrine of absolute freedom – reflects a failure to grasp their underlying practical-axiological motivation, and the contrasting, narrowly theoretical character of Merleau-Ponty's project. This Sartreian criticism would be inaccurate, however, for the reasons given below: there is a practical-axiological significance to Merleau-Ponty's metaphysics, even though it is not as explicit as in Sartre.

<sup>53</sup> SB 223-4 shows Merleau-Ponty viewing the phenomenology of perception as an essential propaedeutic to moral theory.

<sup>54</sup> This is the explanation for why no imperatives should fall out from the *Phenomenology of Perception* as they are claimed to do from *Being and Time* and *Being and Nothingness*: Merleau-Ponty discovers, as it were, nothing fundamentally 'wrong' – nothing metaphysically amiss that we must strive to fix – at the heart of human existence. It is also relevant that the *Phenomenology of Perception* does not suggest, as Heidegger and Sartre's works do, any teleological dimension to its ontology.

I conclude that there is a defensible and exegetically significant sense in which Merleau-Ponty can be said to belong to the transcendental tradition. I now want to consider a different question that this claim raises, concerning what I may seem to have assumed regarding the mutual exclusivity of naturalism and transcendental philosophy.

It may be thought, first, that transcendental philosophy is far from necessarily excluding the naturalistic standpoint, as the example of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* (which Merleau-Ponty knew and approved<sup>55</sup>) shows; and second, that a better, more comprehensive interpretation of Merleau-Ponty will result from taking him to be aiming at a rapprochement or synthesis of transcendental philosophy with scientific psychology. It may be supposed, in addition, that Merleau-Ponty has a good motive for his doing this: Merleau-Ponty turns to empirical psychology as a kind of objective *anchor* for philosophical reflection in response to the sectarian incoherence that the phenomenological tradition has fallen into and which, he admits in the first two pages of the Preface, appears on the face of it to discredit the project of a 'return to the appearances'.<sup>56</sup>

That this train of thought, whatever it may have to recommend it, is not Merleau-Ponty's, can be seen from the two paragraphs with which he concludes the Introduction, in which he has set out the alternatives of objective thought and pre-objective phenomenology, and thereby defined the task of the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

A philosophy becomes transcendental, that is to say radical, not by installing itself in absolute consciousness without mentioning the ways in which this is reached, but by considering itself as a problem; not by postulating a total making explicit of knowledge, but by recognizing as the fundamental philosophic problem this *presumption* on reason's part.

That is why we had to begin our examination of perception with psychological considerations. If we had not done so, we would not have understood the whole meaning of the transcendental problem, since we would not, starting from the natural attitude, have methodically followed the procedures which lead to it. We had to frequent the phenomenal field and become acquainted, through psychological descriptions, with the subject of phenomena, if we were to avoid placing ourselves from the start, as does reflexive philosophy, in a transcendental dimension assumed to be eternally given, missing the true problem of constitution. We could not begin, however, our psychological description without suggesting that once purged of all psychologism it can become a philosophical method. In order to revive perceptual experience buried under its own results, it would not have been enough to present descriptions of them which might possibly not have been understood, we had to establish by philosophical references and anticipations the point of view from which they might appear true. Thus we could begin neither without psychology nor with psychology alone [...] But now that the phenomenal field has been sufficiently circumscribed, let us enter this ambiguous domain [ce domaine ambigu], with the expectation that the psychologist's self-scrutiny will lead us, by way of a second-order reflection, to the phenomenon of the phenomenon, and decisively transform the phenomenal field into a transcendental one. (PP 63)

This passage does speak of a rapprochement of philosophy and psychology – transcendental philosophy is to be corrected through attention to 'psychological considerations'; psychology is to be purged of 'psychologism' by means of second-order, i.e. philosophical, reflection. But it is quite clear that what is envisaged is not a joint partnership, let alone the philosophical naturalist's fusion of philosophy with empirical science, and nor is it a call for psychology to relate itself to phenomenological philosophy in any of the ways that Schelling and Hegel relate *Naturphilosophie*

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<sup>55</sup> See *Résumés de cours*, pp. 102ff and 125ff. Merleau-Ponty regards Schelling as a precursor. Though his reading of Schelling is tendentious at several points, Merleau-Ponty is right that their philosophical interests in Nature share some motivation.

<sup>56</sup> Some such interpretation of Merleau-Ponty – an 'intertwining' of science and philosophy, which rejects their dichotomy – is proposed in Hoeller, in 'Phenomenology, psychology, and science, II'.

to absolute idealism. The value of psychology – more precisely: of philosophical attention to 'psychological considerations' – is, as argued earlier, to *reform transcendental philosophy*, by allowing it to be grasped explicitly what moves are necessary in order to ascend from the natural attitude to the transcendental standpoint, thereby transforming our conception of that standpoint from its Intellectualist misconception. The value of psychology for philosophy is thus merely and *negatively* methodological or heuristic, and does not reflect a positive estimate of scientific psychology as an independent source of knowledge that philosophy ought to accommodate.<sup>57</sup> The conclusions of phenomenology do not depend for their truth on the facts described in scientific psychology, and nor does our knowledge of them do so ultimately:<sup>58</sup> the value of scientific psychology is to get us to a position where we may grasp phenomenological truth independently of the scientific method, on the basis of an apodictic relation to the pre-objective. Engagement with scientific psychology is therefore only a preliminary to the philosophical method proper. If it is asked what necessity there is then to the phenomenologist's attending to empirical psychology – whether it is not an unnecessary detour – Merleau-Ponty's answer, I take it, is that in principle one can go directly to the correctly formulated transcendental standpoint – indeed, his essays on art suggest that this can be done by looking at Cézanne's paintings – but that our commitment to objective thought cannot be corrected enduringly by isolated flashes of experience: in order for the rationality of Merleau-Ponty's position to be established permanently, the labour of working through the more robust material of empirical psychology is required.

The large quantity of empirical psychology in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is, then, not a sign that Merleau-Ponty respects its epistemological authority and wishes to leave it intact. What he wants to see, rather, is a transformation of psychology – of that limited portion of psychology worth saving – *into* phenomenology.<sup>59</sup> Merleau-Ponty tries to play down the philosophically imperialist character of his view ('Psychology as a science has nothing to fear from a return to the perceived world', PrP 24) by talking of freeing psychology – Gestalt psychology – from its scientific misconception of itself, but in truth what he proposes is an assimilation of the recuperable part of psychology to philosophy. It goes in the opposite direction from the reunion of psychology with philosophy advocated by philosophical naturalism.<sup>60</sup>

## VI. Phenomenology and philosophy of mind

According to the Transcendental Interpretation, the critique of Empiricism in the *Phenomenology of Perception* should be read in the light of a general commitment to transcendental explanation, and of its concluding chapters: the criticisms of psychological and philosophical theories of perception in the Introduction and Part One should be read not as arguments for a theory of perception in the sense of philosophy of mind, but in terms of Merleau-Ponty's conception of phenomenology as eliciting intuition; holding up the false images of perception provided by Empiricism and Intellectualism assists us in focussing on its true character. The Transcendental Interpretation thereby restores unity to the *Phenomenology of Perception*,<sup>61</sup> and explains why for Merleau-Ponty

<sup>57</sup> See *Résumés de cours*, pp. 117-20, where Merleau-Ponty rejects Heidegger's dismissal of science but circumscribes its philosophical contribution negatively, and p. 132.

<sup>58</sup> de Waelhens, in an introductory essay to the second edition of *Le structure du comportement* authorised by Merleau-Ponty, describes this as 'an absolute misreading' ('A philosophy of the ambiguous', pp. xxvi-xxvii).

<sup>59</sup> See for example PrP 23-4, and also Merleau-Ponty's (avowedly tendentious) account of Husserl's relation to psychology in 'Phenomenology and the sciences of man'.

<sup>60</sup> Kockelmann, in 'On the function of psychology in Merleau-Ponty's early works', addresses several of the questions pursued in this paper, and takes a similar view to mine of the argument-structure of the *Phenomenology of Perception* and of the relation between philosophy and psychology intended in it, though not stressing, as I have, the degree to which its position is idealistic.

<sup>61</sup> The Transcendental Interpretation does entail a discontinuity between *The Structure of Behaviour* and the *Phenomenology of Perception*, in so far as the former can indeed be read as attempting to argue its way up to a philosophical position from a metaphysically neutral critique of psychology (see SB 201-22), i.e. it can be read (more or less) in the terms that the Psychological Interpretation applies to the *Phenomenology of Perception*; but a difference of



there is no question of simply advancing, from the deficiencies of their extant forms, to improved versions of Empiricist and Intellectualist theories of perceptual content. If the Transcendental Interpretation is right, then it is incorrect to say (with Wider) that Merleau-Ponty anticipates Cussins, or that Merleau-Ponty's claims about perceptual content are open to receiving support from branches of empirical psychology, such as (as Dreyfus and Dreyfus propose) neural net theory. Nor can it be correct to describe Merleau-Ponty as having a theory of the sub-personal, if sub-personal means more than simply lying outside the bounds of reflective self-consciousness. Also, the view of Merleau-Ponty's argument suggested by Baldwin, which for the reason given earlier jeopardises the transcendental aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, may be rejected.

The Psychological Interpretation is not arbitrary, however, and the Transcendental Interpretation can explain how it arises. The *Phenomenology of Perception* encompasses three sorts of claims: first, negative critical claims about philosophical and psychological theories of perception; second, positive metaphysical claims about perception; third, sandwiched between them – where one would expect to find a theory of perception in the familiar sense – there is an extensive web of quasi-metaphorical descriptions of perceptual experience, which are designed to elicit intuition, and which provide a two-way bridge linking the work's critical and its positive metaphysical claims – descriptions like that of the unseen sides of the lamp as being 'in my vicinity'. The Psychological Interpretation is generated by interpolating in this third, intermediate domain, positive theses about perceptual content of the sort found in the philosophy of mind – about its internal/external, sensational/representational, conceptual/nonconceptual, etc. character. There are of course statements – 'Perception is nonconceptual' – which *seem* to be affirmed both by Merleau-Ponty and by philosophers of mind. But they do not carry the same meaning in the two contexts: not because they have been concluded on different grounds, but because they express incompatible philosophical theses. Perception as commonsensically conceived is equivalent to empirical knowledge, Kant's *Erfahrung*, and, on Merleau-Ponty's account, it is contaminated by objective thought (as said earlier, objective thought is not confined to the context of philosophical or psychological theory: it is a dimension of our ordinary being in the world). It follows that for Merleau-Ponty, properly speaking, perception as ordinarily conceived *does not exist*. For this reason Merleau-Ponty talks of eschewing, at the beginning of philosophical enquiry, the very concept of 'perception': 'We exclude the term perception to the whole extent that it already implies a cutting up of what is lived into discontinuous acts' (VI 158). What does exist – and this is what phenomenology shows to be the true referent of our ordinary ascriptions of perceptual states – is the unmediated, pre-objective phenomenon of perception. The point, then, is not merely that Merleau-Ponty is not concerned with perception as the philosopher of mind attempts to theorise it: rather, Merleau-Ponty disputes this endeavour; he understands the statement 'Perception is nonconceptual' in a way that implies that there *cannot be* a theory of perception, or positive theses about perceptual content, of the sort that the philosopher of mind attempts to provide.

I have tried to argue that what Merleau-Ponty says about perception belongs to the transcendental framework. I have not tried here to defend that framework, nor have I offered a comprehensive defence of Merleau-Ponty's transformation of it.<sup>62</sup> If the notion of a transcendental condition understood idealistically does not make sense, then the Psychological Interpretation is the more charitable, in the sense of attributing to Merleau-Ponty views which are at least candidates for truth: if transcendental philosophy fails to offer coherent philosophical explanation, then the best

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argument strategy between an early and a later work is not exegetically problematic in the way that a non sequitur *within* the later work would be.

<sup>62</sup> For what it is worth, my view is that the argument in Part Three is weaker than that of the previous parts, and that this is extremely important in terms of Merleau-Ponty's general argument against objective thought. Because it is so unclear that Merleau-Ponty succeeds in accommodating the 'higher', 'Kantian' phenomena addressed in Part Three – self-consciousness, freedom, rationality – these remain as a possible starting point for objective thought: it may be held that even if Merleau-Ponty is right about perception and all the other matters treated in Parts One and Two, he fails to show that Intellectualism is ruled out with respect to the 'Kantian' phenomena, and so fails to devalidate objective thought in so far as it bases itself on these. In general, Merleau-Ponty's arguments consistently appear more effective against Empiricism/realism than against Intellectualism/idealism.

that can be done is to sift out the metaphysics and reconstruct a theory of perceptual content in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. What I have tried to establish is only that a non-metaphysical philosophy of psychology culled from the *Phenomenology of Perception* would have an oblique relation to what Merleau-Ponty actually argues.<sup>63</sup>

That the same is true of attempts to draw other phenomenologists into the orbit of philosophy of mind would, of course, require further argument,<sup>64</sup> but the case of Merleau-Ponty should make it seem likely. To the extent that one does generalise from Merleau-Ponty, the conclusion which must be drawn is that there is no systematic and principled basis on which phenomenology and philosophy of mind can contribute to one another's debates: the extent to which the two schools can speak to one another is limited by the fact that 'the mind' or 'the mental' is not straightforwardly a common topic across the distinction of phenomenology and philosophy of mind.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> The interpretative situation here regarding Merleau-Ponty is, non-coincidentally, familiar from the interpretation of Kant: the sort of complaint against the Transcendental Interpretation of Merleau-Ponty just described is the same as that made by those, such as P. F. Strawson and Paul Guyer, who seek to rescue Kant's transcendental argumentation from his allegedly incoherent idealism.

<sup>64</sup> I argue to this effect in 'Psychoanalysis and the personal/sub-personal distinction', Sect. 3, and, regarding Sartre, in 'Sartre, intersubjectivity, and German idealism'.

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