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The Review of Metaphysics

EXPLORATION

THE PRE-OBJECTIVE WORLD

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MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY'S concept of the "pre-objective" world is the key at once to his theory of perception and to his philosophical anthropology. His *Phénoménologie de la Perception*¹ might almost be interpreted as an attempt to introduce the concept into philosophy and into those sciences that have man for their subject matter. The phenomenology of perception is for Merleau-Ponty the discovery and exploration of the world not such as everyday and scientific discourse describe it, but of the "pre-objective" world which it presupposes. As such it implies an exploration of the phenomenal field or the "original" content of perception, which is supposed to set norms for, and limits to the kind of language psychologists, sociologists and laymen should use in talking about man. These two aspects of his work are closely linked, and are even held to stand or fall together. The link is made through the concept of the "pre-objective" world.² Other expressions are used by Merleau-Ponty such as "le monde vécu," "the phenomenal field," as near equivalents, but we shall generally use the terms "pre-objective" or "prepredicative."³

Merleau-Ponty's views are the fruit of the method of "phenomenological description," in part taken over from Husserl. This consists of describing our "original" experience of the world without assuming the truth or validity of any statements we may know about it. Unlike the Cartesian method it does not mean that we should suppose false those statements we know are true, but rather that we should "put these in brackets," or "suspend" their rel-

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris, 1945). Hereinafter quoted as "P. P."

² For uses of the term cf. P. P., pp. 19, 37, 279, 309, 318, etc.

³ For uses of the term cf. P. P., pp. 85, 150, 272, 372, 395, etc.

evance, consider them as void of ontological implications. For only if we succeed in doing so, the theory runs, will our description be "pure" or "presuppositionless," free of prejudice with respect to the nature of that which we are trying to describe. In doing the phenomenology of perception, then, we must deliberately discount all that we may chance to know about the "how" or the "why" of perception. In describing our "original" experience of the world, we must not let ourselves be influenced by any empirical or philosophical theory of perception, any hypotheses concerning its nature, causes, or physiological or other underlying processes involved. To cite a concrete example, in describing our perception of some visible scene we must discount anything we may chance to know about light rays impinging upon the retina, etc. Failure to do so might lead to a description not of that which we *do* see, but that which, given the retinal image, we *ought* to see, i.e., that portion of the visual scene, light rays from which, impinging upon our retina, (surfaces of things, etc.) and not the visual scene itself. Here, then, is one of the reasons for which we must go through a process of "phenomenological reduction" with respect to our knowledge of the world. But it is not the only reason. In fact the interdict goes further. We are not even entitled to use the usual categories of everyday or scientific descriptive discourse. Nor should we use the language of sense data, or that of the introspectionists. For both of these "presuppose" the validity of some at any rate of its categories. Both rest in the last resort on some theory regarding the nature of the "objective" world, or of our experience of it.

The reason for this interdict is that the "objective world," i.e., that to which our everyday and scientific descriptions refer (including derivative forms such as the language used by sense datum theorists and introspectionists) is regarded, by Merleau-Ponty at any rate, as something of a perceptual achievement.⁴ Merleau-Ponty frequently uses such expressions as "the constitution" of the world in our "original" experience of it, or its "genesis." Following this, it will not do to account for perception in terms of that which is perceived (light rays, the physiological

⁴ Cf. P. P., pp. 34, 35 et seq.

structure of our eyeballs, etc.) for to do so would be to presuppose as given from the start the very things whose "origin" or "genesis" in our perceptual experience phenomenology sets out to describe. Such a procedure would involve us in the fallacy of explaining a process by its products or its results.⁵ Merleau-Ponty entitles this fallacy the "*préjugé du monde*,"⁶ or more exactly the "*préjugé du monde objectif*,"⁷ or "*de la pensée objective*."⁸ It is that, which invalidates in his eyes non-phenomenological accounts of perception. We are perhaps in a better position to understand what both Husserl (in his late period) and Merleau-Ponty mean by saying that phenomenology should be "genetical phenomenology."⁹ It is an attempt to avoid the "*préjugé du monde*" by making appeal to the concept of the "pre-objective world." Genetical phenomenology sets itself the task of explaining our perception of the objective world by means of a pure and presuppositionless description of its "genesis" in the "pre-objective world" of our original experience. Or, to put it in other words, to describe the "original" experience upon which our universe of descriptive discourse is "founded." We shall attempt in the next few paragraphs to make the method and the possible justification of this enterprise clear.

Husserl characterised phenomenology as "a return to the things themselves."¹⁰ This watchword must not be misinterpreted. It does not mean a return to things in the objective world (i.e., such as they are described in everyday and scientific discourse): if it did, phenomenology would be superfluous. It means rather, a return to things such as they are, or appear to be in our "original" experience of them, before they have acquired the determinacy that everyday and scientific discourse presuppose them to have. Merleau-Ponty uses the expression "the return to phenomena" to make this clear.¹⁰ Phenomena are not tables and chairs, etc. Rather are they those percepts in which tables, chairs, etc., first

⁵ Cf. P. P., pp. 24, 38, 39, 49.

⁶ Cf. P. P., pp. 11, 31, and particularly pp. 66-69.

⁷ Cf. P. P., pp. 12, 71, 370, for which Merleau-Ponty uses also the Husserlian expression "natural attitude."

⁸ Cf. P. P., p. xiii.

⁹ Cf. P. P., p. ii.

¹⁰ Cf. P. P., p. 69 et seq.

arise in our perceptual experience. Phenomena are not things; nor are they strictly speaking perceptions of things.¹¹ They are not to be described therefore, as "perceptions of tables" or "perceptions of chairs." A return to the "pre-objective world" is not a mere re-description of the world prefixed with the experiential index "perception of" "Phenomenological reduction" is not a reduction of the objective world to our experience of it. For the description of our experience of it, would still involve fundamentally the same category-presuppositions as ordinary description. Rather is it an attempt to return to those "phenomena" in which these categories had their "genesis."

Merleau-Ponty tries to work out some of the implications of the Husserlian idea that "phenomenology" qua "genetic" should be concerned with the "origin" of such basic categories as that of material object, process, and number, in our "perceptual life," or as Husserl would have phrased it "in the 'Lebenswelt' of the subject."¹² The idea is not an absurd one. For, in trying to give a genetical *explanation* of the categories of thing, process, number, etc.—in short, the categories of our descriptive language—we cannot use these categories themselves. To do so involves us in the circularity of presupposing the validity of what we are to explain. Successive attempts by Hume and Michotte are a case in point. Both Hume and Michotte have attempted to show under what psychological conditions (Hume) we make judgments of cause and effect, or under what conditions in the stimulus, impressions of causation occur (Michotte).¹³ In so doing, both have contributed to our knowledge of the criteria for saying two events are causally related; but neither has succeeded in showing why there should be such a thing as causation at all as opposed, say, to mere succession. On the contrary, far from doing so, both have in the end produced more or less satisfactory *causal* explanations of causation, in terms of its mental or stimulus antecedents. The very important differences between Hume's and Michotte's accounts are for present purposes irrelevant. What does matter is that neither avoided the circularity of presupposing the very cate-

¹¹ Cf. P. P., p. 71 et seq.

¹² Cf. P. P., p. 40.

¹³ Cf. A. Michotte, *La Perception de la Causalité* (Paris, 1946).

gory they were trying to explain. Neither succeeded in “explaining” causation in purely a-causal terms.

A similar vice permeates all attempts to “explain” perception, be it in scientific or everyday discourse. This might be a reason for not calling it a vice. The “*préjugé du monde*” may be inescapable. But it is also a possible reason for saying with Merleau-Ponty that perception cannot be *explained*, it can only be *described*.¹⁴ If however a new set of categories have to be used to describe perception, such description is in a sense an explanation. We shall see later how both “empiricism” and “intellectualism” as theories of perception assumed from the start the validity of certain ways of describing the world, and were therefore incapable of either explaining the origin, or making a critique of those categories which they presupposed. And for Merleau-Ponty, a theory of perception has philosophical significance only if it succeeds in doing both these things.

It is clear from this and from all the foregoing, that for Merleau-Ponty a theory of perception must involve much more than a solution of epistemological problems. It must deal with “perception” in a much broader sense, the whole of our experience of the world on the basis of which we have built our languages, our works of art, our scientific systems. In this sense, genetic phenomenology is closer to Hume than, say, to Descartes—a fact mentioned by Husserl. For the original experience of Descartes was simply the world of our everyday and scientific experience, with the index “I believe that . . .” removed from it. Whereas for Hume, original experience was very different, and it was at least an open question whether, properly understood, it would permit us to use the categories of our ordinary and scientific language in talking of it. The difference was, to some extent, expressed in the language of the time by saying that while Descartes held to “innate ideas,” Hume did not.

The modern counterpart of this controversy between phenomenologists and their opponents centres around the question: are our categories a priori or do they arise in experience? In speak-

¹⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, *La Structure du Comportement*, 2^{me} ed. (Paris, 1949), pp. 207, 217, 222, also pp. 23-4. Hereinafter referred to as S. C.

ing of "genetic phenomenology," Merleau-Ponty obviously opts for the second alternative. But there is no way of proving a priori that a phenomenological description of perception will provide an account of the genesis of experience. Those who refuse to undertake the experiment will remain forever unconvinced. This Merleau-Ponty readily admits. "In this sense (phenomenological) reflexion is a system of thought as self-enclosed as madness."¹⁵ "But," he maintains, "this change of standpoint is justified in the outcome by the abundance of phenomena which it makes comprehensible."¹⁵

But it is impossible to stifle any longer a decisive objection to this procedure. If "pure presuppositionless description" is description of the world without assuming the validity of the categories involved in our everyday or scientific descriptions, how can we possibly undertake it? We seem to be set the task of describing the world prior to all discourse. Doubtless there was perception of a world before the invention of language, just as there was a world for each of us before we had learnt to speak. But what we, who have learnt to speak and whose perception is linguistically permeated can say about such a "pre-predicative" world seems to present a grave problem. And if we can say nothing, how are we to escape from the circularity implicit in what Merleau-Ponty calls the "*préjugé du monde*?"

At first hand it seems as senseless to ask us to return to the "pre-objective world" as it is to ask a man to remember his birth. For if he could remember his birth, what happened before and what after, we could not call it his "birth." Likewise what is describable or described in language whose logic is predicative, is no longer correctly described as the pre-predicative. The very attempt to describe the pre-predicative seems to destroy it.

This confusion in method is nowhere clarified by Merleau-Ponty. His implicit answer to this objection seems to ignore the contradiction while still speaking of the realm of original experience—the perception and perceptual behaviour of the human subject—as the "pre-objective" or "the pre-predicative." He goes on to describe it, in terms which, though not borrowed from

¹⁵ P. P., p. 31.

the description of what he calls the objective world, are not exactly pre-predicative, nor are they presuppositionless. Merleau-Ponty even succeeds in producing what he calls a description of the genesis of the categories, but we should rather call this an explanation, for it explains the genesis of scientific categories in terms of other categories, notably those of Meaning and Gestalt, whose validity Merleau-Ponty takes for granted, and never once accuses himself of presupposing.

Whether, and in what way, such a description can be justified at all, and whether it is not in contradiction with the rest of his theory, these are questions which will have to await further discussion. But for the moment we will go on the assumption that these descriptions, whatever their validity, are not of the "pre-objective world," which remains essentially undescrivable. A good part of Merleau-Ponty's argument consists not of such "descriptions," but of the use of this concept in the examination of traditional theories of perception. And so, rather than embark straight away on a destructive analysis of this notion we have thought better to investigate the possible utility of an indescribable "pre-objective" world, by examining some of the uses to which Merleau-Ponty puts it. By way of logical defence of our procedure, suffice it to say that things (e.g., numbers, the category of material object) do not have to be "describable" in any strict sense in order to be talked about or fulfil a function in discourse.

Merleau-Ponty begins his *Phénoménologie de la Perception* with a critique of what he calls "empiricist" theories of perception. The empiricism he has in mind is not merely that of Berkeley and Hume; it is also that of psychological accounts of perception, particularly those attacked by the Gestaltists. (Some, though by no means all, the points which Merleau-Ponty makes against "empiricist" theories of perception are in fact taken over from Koffka.) His criticism also applies to believers in the sense datum theory, or theories.

"Empiricist" theories of perception, generally speaking, hold that "impressions" (or in psychological versions "sensations") are the basic element in perception, and postulate some kind of psychological process, involving learning, memory, or association, to supplement impressions or sensations, to account for the percep-

tion we have on the basis of the latter. It is interesting to note that such theories have recently been attacked by the Gibsons,¹⁶ though from a somewhat different standpoint.

The theory that we "really" perceive impressions, or on the basis of "sensations," arises as an answer to the question "what is it that we directly perceive" or more exactly "what is it that, on the basis of our physiological knowledge, we are entitled to perceive?"¹⁷ The question, showing as it does a concern for the basic evidence for our beliefs about the world seems to imply that we can distinguish the limits of our "immediate" or "direct" perception. Merleau-Ponty claims that this question is totally misguided. There is nothing more difficult he says than to discover the exact limits of what we here and now perceive.¹⁸ If we can discover the exact limits of our visual field, it is only "from without," or "in the third person," by working out those surfaces from which light rays can reach the retina. From the first person standpoint of the percipient, the perceived object is always part of a "field," a surrounding background which shades off into "horizons" of increasing indefiniteness and indeterminacy. Similarly objects in the center of our perceptual field are themselves not fully determinate, but in so far as real are perceived as open to an indefinite process of perceptual exploration. It is misleading therefore to take sense impressions, or for that matter "sense data," as the basic elements of perception whether we consider them as states of ourselves or as qualia—discrete atoms of perception out of which we psychologically or logically construct the world. Or as Merleau-Ponty puts it "there are two ways of misunderstanding the quale; one is to make it an element of consciousness when it is always an object before consciousness, to treat it as a mute impression when it always has a meaning; the other is to believe this meaning and this object . . . are always fully determinate."¹⁹

Here then is a new argument against the sense datum theory. Our "sense data," at any given moment, in so far as it makes sense

¹⁶ James J. and E. J. Gibson, "Perceptual Learning: Differentiation or Enrichment?" *Psychological Review*, LXII (1955), 32-41.

¹⁷ P. P., pp. 33, 39.

¹⁸ P. P., pp. 71.

¹⁹ P. P., p. 11.

to speak about them, are not a finite series of determinate facts adequately describable in a finite series of "experience statements." Experience statements of anything should have a looser rather than a stricter truth and logic than statements about the world. It makes no sense to say "I saw a tree of indeterminate height" but we can say "I saw a tree but I did not see how tall it was." Two railway lines cannot be both convergent and parallel; but logically and factually they can look both. The logic of descriptive discourse about the world, is not that of discourse about our perception of the world. Merleau-Ponty makes something like the same point differently, by saying that "empiricist" theories are vitiated by the fallacy of considering our perception of the world the same kind of predicable as objects in the world. But he goes further than this. He says that our perception has "meaning." Parts of the phenomenal field do not just coexist as they would if brought together by Humean association, but they "imply each other," and "refer" to things beyond them, in the sense in which a perceived front of chair refers us to its unperceived back. What we perceive "implies" and "refers" us to other things we could perceive. "Each part of the perceptual field announces more than it contains, and so . . . has already a meaning."²⁰

The perception on the basis of which we perceive a world of determinate objects, is itself no part of the world of determinate objects. It can be described in terms borrowed from the description of the objective world (we could use for this the abbreviations "O-language," "O-predicates") and in terms borrowed from the philosopher's second order vocabulary for the characterisation of the language we use about things, and the relation of language to what is being talked about (for this we shall use "L-language," "L-predicates"). The use of O- and L-languages in describing the "pre-predicative" is warranted on one condition; it is that we realise this use is a "borrowed" or what Mr. Hare has called an "inverted commas" use, that is to say that it has a logic different to the normal primary or proper use. Let us note here that Merleau-Ponty is not at all keen to describe the "pre-objective" world in the non-committal language of "looks" and "seems," oft

²⁰ P. P., pp. 9, 81-85.

considered proper for the description of the indeterminate aspects of experience. Phenomenology is not concerned with the person's experience of the objective world but with the "pre-objective" world and its "significance" to our perception of the objective world.

A fundamental reason for ascribing L-predicates of perception is that it enables us to consider our perception as more than a psychological fact about ourselves. If perceptions are but states of mind they cannot be said to be veridical or unveridical, adequate or inadequate. Nor can they tell us anything about the world outside. Logically speaking a consistent Humean could not possibly say anything about the world at all on the basis of his impressions and ideas, for he is as it were locked within his mental contents. Nor is it clear, how on the basis of the kind of perception Hume endows minds with, there can be said to be consciousness at all. If the mind is a string of determinate impressions and ideas, whether these be considered as things or events, there must be a "ghost in the machine" or an "inner man,"²¹ "within" the mind for there to be consciousness. Merleau-Ponty thinks he has managed to avoid this objection by endowing his "pre-objective world" with referential meaning.²² In doing so he has given recognition to the principle of the "intentionality of consciousness," the idea that consciousness is essentially "consciousness of . . .," that mental phenomena are characterised by having an "intentional object." This Merleau-Ponty took over from Husserl, Husserl from Brentano, and Brentano from the scholastics. In accepting the notion that ideas "intend" extramental objects, we have agreed to speak of "ideas," i.e., perception, not merely as objects, but also as a form of assertion, at least in the minimal sense of "pointing to" or "intending." Such is the meaning Merleau-Ponty gives to the slogan "all consciousness is consciousness of . . ." and it is this feature of the phenomenal field which he refers to when he says that it has "meaning,"²³ thus, ascribing "truth" and presumably falsity or at any rate misleadingness of perception,²⁴ he

²¹ P. P., p. v

²² P. P., p. 11.

²³ Cf. P. P., pp. 29, 44, 46, 66.

²⁴ Cf. P. P., pp. 40, 50, 53.

has made it partake of the distinguishing characteristics of statements as well as words. By ascribing L-predicates to the "pre-objective world," then, Merleau-Ponty has used the thesis of the intentionality of consciousness to accomplish something of a philosophical "tour de force"; he has made the "pre-objective" both experience and "of the world." Though he speaks of phenomenological reflection as having to discover the "pre-objective world" in us,²⁵ it is not something "about ourselves" but has "transcendental implications." And in this it differs from what Humeans and psychologists may tell us about perception in that studying it reveals not what is supposed to happen in us when we perceive things, but what it is about us that makes us capable of having a world. If Kant's critique of pure Reason, in virtue of its factual presuppositions be considered an essay in Transcendental Psychology then Merleau-Ponty's is also. It claims however to be free from factual presuppositions. Our next task therefore will be to say something of the use Merleau-Ponty makes of the notion of the "pre-objective" world in criticising what he terms "intellectualist" theories of perception.

Whereas "empiricism" consisted of supplementing "impressions" or "sensations" with learning, memory, or association, "intellectualism" explains perception by knowledge or judgment. That which we cannot (in the last resort for physiological reasons²⁶) be said to "see" we judge to be there. Both theories are open to the same objection. If we cannot "see" that tree out there, how can we judge that it is a tree? The empiricist answer consists of saying that what we "see" recalls memory images, or ideas, etc., which lead us to think we see more than we in fact see. But in order for us to be able to see a tree on the basis, say, of a "tree-like impression" we must first of all have recognised the impression as the impression of a tree.²⁷ The same objection can be made against the intellectualist theory. "How," we might ask, "can we judge it is a tree if we do not perceive it as a tree?" The

²⁵ Cf. P. P., pp. 19, 75-77.

²⁶ Empiricism and intellectualism share the same presupposition regarding the nature of the given or directly perceived. They both start with a physiological definition of sensation. Cf. P. P., pp. 29, 33, 40.

²⁷ P. P., p. 28.

Cartesian answer that our minds perceive what our eyes do not, or cannot, is obviously unsatisfactory, "Tree" is not an innate concept. The point Merleau-Ponty makes against the intellectualist is that there can be no "meta-perceptual" basis for judgments made on the basis of perception.²⁸ Perception must contain more, not less information than that which is expressed in and conveyed by judgments made on the basis of it. To consider it as the outcome of a process of interpretation leaves us with the problem of explaining the origin of the knowledge in virtue of which we manage to interpret it.²⁹ If perception is "perceiving as" and cannot be explained on the basis of "raw feels," "mute impressions," and "brute sensation," what we perceive *as* must also be contained in perception. Intellectualism is correct in assigning a meaning to perception, but it errs in considering this "meaning" as having an *a priori* origin. The reasons we have for making a statement on the basis of perception, are perceptual reasons not logical reasons. Perceptual statements are not deductions from *a priori* premises.

Merleau-Ponty brings out his own view on the relation of descriptive statements and their perceptual basis by accepting the "intellectualist" antithesis to "empiricism," and criticising both in turn.³⁰ Perceptions are not propositions.³¹ Perceptions cannot be assimilated to statements. Nor can the language we use about perception be simply assimilated to the language we use about statements. Not only do we often "perceive as" without speech, but our phenomenal field has always a richness that no finite series of statements can do justice to.³² And it is precisely this quality of inexhaustibility that gives us the assurance of perceiving

²⁸ P. P., p. 424.

²⁹ Far from perception having to be explained by knowledge, it is itself original knowledge. Cf. P. P., p. 53-54 (particularly p. 54, where perception is described as the birth of intelligence).

³⁰ Cf. P. P., pp. 29, 30, 33.

³¹ Cf. P. P., pp. 40-55.

³² The thesis here is that if what we perceive and our perception did not have a minimum of complexity, we could not be said to perceive anything at all. For arguments in support of this cf. J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World* (Boston, 1950), and K. Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (New York, 1935), pp. 110 ff.

a reality that transcends our knowledge of its nature.”³³ Our perception of the “predicative” world of things and processes with descriptive and describable properties is based upon the experience of a “predicative world” which no amount of predication or description can exhaust. The logical indescribability of the “pre-predicative world” gains a certain plausibility in this context. Those firmly committed to the principle that “the World is everything that is the case,” taken to mean the sum total of those states of affairs described by true statements, would however refuse to call the “pre-predicative” a world.

The gist of Merleau-Ponty’s argument against “intellectualism” amounts to a refutation of Brunschvigg’s assertion (quoted by Merleau-Ponty): “The universe of immediate experience contains not *more* than that which is required by science, but *less*; it is a superficial and truncated world, it is as Spinoza puts it a world of *consequences without premises*.”³⁴ The theory implied in such a quotation amounts to an a priori impoverishment³⁵ and limitation of the indeterminate and indefinite wealth and variety of perceptual experience, all of which is at no time completely explicit, to what can be fitted into a certain (historically conditioned) explanatory mould. It is very much like saying that there cannot really be anything other than that which is in principle explainable in terms of the type of scientific explanation dominant at such or other date. It fixes the categories of the world once and forever, as Kant in a sense attempted to, and precludes the development, discovery, and invention of new modes of “expliciting” and predicating that which is encountered in the pre-predicative “flux” of experience. Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the “pre-predicative” can be seen in this connection as an attempt at “radical empiricism,”³⁶ at explaining both language and perception in terms of a view of perception not vitiated by any preconception as to that which we do in fact, or ought in theory to “directly perceive.”

Our next task is to examine Merleau-Ponty’s view of the

³³ S. C., p. 201.

³⁴ S. C., p. 217.

³⁵ P. P., pp. 31 and 32.

³⁶ Cf. P. P., p. 46.

relation between the "pre-objective world" and description on the basis of perception by contrasting it with that of "intellectualism." For intellectualism, perception is a form of judgment. As Kant put it "intuitions without concepts are blind." It follows from this that whatever we perceive, as opposed to imagine we perceive, must already have the form of a proposition. Not in vain are the categories of the understanding also the rules governing the operation of our "Transcendental Imagination," which in Kant's theory is our faculty of perception. What we perceive then are what Wittgenstein was later to call facts. The kinds of facts we can perceive according to Kant are determined a priori by the Categories of the Understanding, of which Kant thought he had given us an exhaustive list. For Merleau-Ponty "intuitions without concepts" are not blind. They are already "laden with meaning." And it is the task of descriptive discourse to explicit this meaning. Merleau-Ponty even speaks of "perception parlée"³⁷ to bring out the manner in which, to him, judgments are *expressive* of perception, and of its meaning.³⁸ Perceptual statements may be "true" because made on the basis of a perception that was itself "true." This must not however be taken to mean that perceptions are already statements. The "pre-predicative" always contains more than any explicitation of it in the form of statements.

There is however another reason for which perception cannot be viewed as "judgment." Perception is always from a certain point of view in space, and from a certain point of view in time,³⁹ in a sense in which statements can never be. The referential meaning of statements may of course be dependent on context. But statements are not "perspectival" in the sense in which perception is. In so far however as they are about particulars, their truth or falsity depends on the possibility of identifying that which they are about. And the possibility of the unambiguous identification of particulars depends in the last resort on the use of "deictic," "context dependent" expressions in contexts in which both speaker and hearer can *perceive* what the deictic expressions refer to. "Intellectualist" theories half recognise this con-

³⁷ Cf. S. C., p. 200.

³⁸ Cf. P. P., p. x.

dition, which is the *sine qua non* of language having reference to the world, by retaining sensations as the "occasions of judgments." Concepts without intuitions are empty indeed! Judgments *per se* describe the nature of things, but there is little sense in making them if there is no way of relating them to what they are about, or if there is nothing they are about. For if perceptions are judgments, and are thus perceptions of "Sachverhalten" (or "facts" adequately and exhaustively describable in judgments),³⁹ judgments cannot refer to anything but themselves. We are faced here with a circularity of reference that results in a far worse tangle than that already involved in the coherence theory of truth. Not only is the truth of judgments a function of the truth of other judgments and so on *ad infinitum*, but judgments are condemned to refer only to judgments, the subject matter of judgments being inaccessible prior to judgment. It becomes necessary therefore to posit a Transcendental "X" about which judgments or perceptions, themselves judgments, are supposed to be. This Transcendental X is none other than the "pre-objective" world. Intellectualism cannot account for our perception because there are no logically proper names, whose use could be entirely independent of context and so of perception, and any attempt to circumvent their use by clocks, compasses, and maps, will always end up with the problem of finding an answer to the question "what are you talking about?" to which an answer can only be given in those contexts in which there is both deictic language and perception whose function no judgment *per se* can fulfil.⁴⁰

The phenomenal field cannot be "reduced" to a set of statements. For a set of statements to have any use or relevance they must refer to something other than themselves, and this something other must somehow or other be perceived. It is a transcendental as opposed to purely formal logical condition of our use of descriptive discourse that there should be perception over and above language. Here then is another point that can be made

³⁹ Cf. P. P., pp. 81-86.

⁴⁰ We should refer the reader to recent criticisms of Russell's (and to Quine's) views regarding the eliminability of particulars—particularly P. F. Strawson, "On Referring," *Mind*, LIX (1950).

by appeal to the notion of a pre-predicative world. There must be more to perception than can be put into descriptive statements if these are to refer to anything (and so be true or false, and so statements) at all. Perception then is neither a set of statements nor a set of events and processes in our minds. If it were a set of objects or processes in our minds, we could not know it, and we could not say anything about the world. If it were a set of statements, these statements could not be about the world, or about things and processes in it. For there to be a world, and for there to be language about the world there must be a "third something," which is neither processes or things, nor statements about them, and this is what Merleau-Ponty calls the pre-objective world.

This view Merleau-Ponty believes to be a way of solving certain traditional dilemmas of the theory of perception. The classical "arguments from illusion" in particular need to be reconsidered. The "perspectivism" of perception is sufficient to deal a death blow to one form of the argument at any rate. It has been argued that we cannot trust our senses because large things at a distance look small, and round pennies from an angle elliptical. If the appearance of a penny or of a large object did not change as we changed our position in relation to it, only then would we have to distrust our perception. The argument is based therefore on a confusion between perception and "perspectival appearance." Precisely because perception is necessarily perception from somewhere, percepts must vary in such a way as to convey two kinds of information, information about what it is we are perceiving, and information about where we are in relation to that which we are perceiving. We see things perspectivally, but we do not see perspectives. The "perspectival appearances" that are supposedly the basic data of perception, are in fact the sophisticated product of reflection upon that which, given the retinal image, we should, as opposed to do in fact, see. We have to *learn* to see things as a draughtsman sees them. *Introspection* is an acquired skill. There is no need therefore to supplement our so called "misleading" percepts of the penny, with judgment, or to posit a process of "unconscious inference" underlying perception; to explain how we can see or know Reality despite misleading Appearance.

The second form of the argument from illusion is often asso-

ciated with the stick that half-immersed in water looks bent but is not. Merleau-Ponty's alternative to saying that the stick is perceived as crooked, but judged to be straight, is to point out that objects could not be perceived as real if they could not also get in each other's way.⁴¹ And making a stick look bent is water's way of getting in the way of perception of the immersed portion of the stick. It is incidentally one of the things that enables us to see water. Here again we must not make the conditions of perception pass as objects of perception. Far from being something that requires explanation by the "critical work of the understanding" the non-identity of "looks" and what is seen through them, is a necessary condition of the possibility of material objects being perceived by an incarnate and bodily being such as ourselves.

Only if we tacitly assume from the start that the percipient of things, need not himself have a place in and amongst them, do facts such as that round pennies from an angle look elliptical, or straight sticks half in water look bent assume a paradoxical character. But the arguments from illusion pose a more general problem: that of the difference between veridical and illusory perception. This cannot be answered by pointing to some intrinsic difference between veridical and non-veridical percepts, for then perceptual error would be unexplainable. And yet to say that perception has a truth or a falsity seems to commit us to giving criteria. But as with statements made on the basis of perception, the only cure for error or misperception is more perception.⁴² If we saw something, and then discovered that we were wrong, we should say that we thought we saw It seems tempting at this stage to say that percepts are not true or false, only judgments are; that all illusion comes from judging on an insufficient perceptual basis, making up what we have not in fact perceived with imagination, or judgment. Perceptual error, in short, is a result of absence of mind, inattention to the evidence in drawing conclusions. This however does not advance us one step, or rather it advances us too far. If perceptual error is to be explained by error in judgment, then veridical perception must

⁴¹ Cf. P. P., p. 82.

⁴² Cf. P. P., pp. 343-344.

be similarly explained. This however will not do; for it makes utter nonsense of the empirical verification of statements. So we are forced to the alternative of considering our perceptions, taken as "simple data," as indubitable. In this case we are left in ignorance of a crucial piece of evidence: the relation of our percepts to the "real world." We have either to call on God's bounty (with Descartes) to ensure the resemblance between ideas and things, or assume the validity of a law of psychophysical correspondence, relating sensations to objective stimulus conditions. By doing the former we gain too much; divinely guaranteed perception should be infallible. Perceptual error would have to be explained like mistakes in arithmetic by sheer carelessness and inattention. By doing the latter, we are put in the predicament of Hume, for we cannot, *ex hypothesi*, perceive both the percept that is the effect, and the objective stimulus conditions that are its causes at the other end of the physiological process. If percepts or impressions exist only in the mind, the problem of perceptual error is solved by the radical expedient of suppressing the world, which is obviously no solution at all.

We must in short admit that there are criteria of veridical perception. But we cannot also say that they are applied or misapplied constantly by the perceiving subject, or that they must be applied if perception is to be veridical. For it is difficult to see how these criteria could arise, save from perception itself. This seems to presuppose an experience of veridical and misleading perception prior to the formulation of criteria. We could call these criteria *a priori*, but we could do so only at the expense of an incurable agnosticism about "things in themselves" and their relation to our phenomena. If on the contrary they are empirical, they cannot in any sense be prior to perception. We have therefore to admit a kind of perception, prior to criteria of truth or error, one that is not as yet self-critical. We have, in other words, to admit a perceptual know-how which precedes and is presupposed by the "knowing that" of critical and fully explicit perception.⁴³

To say that we acquire the criteria of veridical perception as

⁴³ Cf. G. Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, (London, 1949), in particular p. 30.

a result of perceptual experience, is not to say that these criteria are at any moment sufficient. We cannot exhaust all the jointly sufficient conditions of veridical perception that would make it indubitable. We are not returning to the dilemma of which one horn is the untenable optimism of a Descartes, and the other the radical scepticism of a Hume. Once we have admitted that statements about the world can be true or false without being incorrigible, without, that is, having satisfied all the criteria for their being true, there is no reason to refuse to the perceptual basis of these statements the right to be called "veridical," "false," or "misleading," even when we perceive without the explicit use of criteria. We must accept perception as a kind of "pre-predicative" knowledge of pennies, sticks in water, and so on, prior to any critical reflection.⁴⁴ Criteria come afterwards, when we think we know what it is we are perceiving, and know what it is like to perceive a so-and-so. Only then can we apply such knowledge to our perception so as to find an answer to the question: are we really perceiving a so-and-so? Perception can be veridical before that. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: "If we believe what we see, it is prior to all verification, and the mistake of classical theories was to introduce into perception itself intellectual operations and a critique of the evidence of the senses, to which we have recourse only where direct perception fails us through ambiguity."⁴⁵ Perception then is a kind of knowing that precedes language, a kind of thinking that is "pre-categorical."

The relation between perception and statements about the world made on the basis of perception is not therefore that of inductive reasons to conclusions, as "intellectualists" (including certain believers in the sense-datum theory) thought. It is rather that of "explicitation." The difference between a true perception and an erroneous one is not, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "in the form of judgment but in the sensible text that it formulates; to perceive in the full sense of the word, as opposed to imagine, is not to judge, it is to seize upon a meaning immanent to the sensible before all judgment."⁴⁵ And Merleau-Ponty goes on: "The phenomenon of true perception brings us a meaning . . . of

⁴⁴ Cf. P. P., p. 275-6.

⁴⁵ P. P., p. 44.

which judgment is but an optional expression." If perception cannot be reduced to sensation plus memory, learning, or association, or considered as judgment on the basis of sensation, there is no character of the indubitably given which must necessarily correspond to the stimulus. Nor is there anything about perception that remains constant when we pass from "illusion" or perceptual error, to veridical perception or truth.

Our perceptual statements, moreover, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's conception of original perception as access to a "pre-objective world," cannot stand in a relation of one to one correspondence to our perceptions. The latter are necessarily richer than any statement made on the basis of them. We may perceive that so-and-so is the case. We may perceive facts. But our perception is originally and essentially of something more than just what can be put in words. And when we say that we perceived that so-and-so was the case, we are using perception in a second and derivative sense. We refer in such cases to a "*perception empirique ou seconde*."⁴⁶ In its primary sense perception implies neither judgment, nor the determinacy that predicative descriptions of what we perceive confer on our perceptions. Original pre-predicative experience—a point we have made earlier—cannot be described in terms of descriptions of things perceived, prefixed by the experimental index "perception of." Admittedly, the indeterminacy can be brought out by the non-committal nature of the language of "looks" and "seems." But such language cannot account for the inexhaustible richness of the pre-objective world, nor, entirely, for its "meaning." For this "meaning" is best brought out by descriptions of things perceived, which descriptions are necessarily inadequate to our perception in its original sense.

Having said something of the use Merleau-Ponty makes of the "pre-objective world" in countering "empiricist" and "intellectualist" theories, and having also attempted to situate his concept relative to present day analyses of language about perception, we shall turn, by way of conclusion, to a brief discussion of some of the broader aspects of his doctrine and, in particular, of his

⁴⁶ P. P., p. 53-4.

philosophical anthropology. We have already hinted at the fact that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception is an attempt at a "radical empiricism." It is an attempt to provide a description of perceptual consciousness which makes it neither a set of contingent facts about man, nor an activity of a meta-empirical Transcendental Ego. Perception is neither to be reduced to a set of "impressions" and "ideas" in the Humean sense, nor is it the constructive achievement of an unconditioned "I think," which succeeds by imposing the a priori Categories of its Understanding in forming, by judgment and interpretation, a coherent universe out of the meaningless rhapsody of sensible impressions. Rather is it an attempt to derive the Form, to use Kantian terminology, as well as the Matter of knowledge from a kind of perception that is itself meaningful, that has a "logic" and a "syntax"⁴⁷ of its own prior to all explicit predication.⁴⁸ Seen in this light, it is an endeavour to found Reason on a particular kind of "privileged" fact, which is that we have experience of a "pre-objective world."⁴⁹ This fact is "privileged" in that it is *presupposed*⁵⁰ by all other facts. The argument involved goes roughly as follows: We could not perceive the kind of world we do in fact perceive if our experience was not "originally," first and foremost, access to a "pro-objective world." The "pre-objective world" is thus a material pre-condition of the world. Amongst the things we perceive however is written and spoken language. If we did not have the kind of perceptual know-how we do in fact have we could neither understand nor use language. The use of, and the understanding of language having their origins in perception, also presuppose the existence of a "pre-objective," or in this context a "pre-predicative" or "pre-linguistic" perception of the world. Language being the condition of the possibility of having a logical universe of discourse, the "pre-objective" becomes, in this context, a logical presupposition of our universe of discourse. The "pre-objective world" is then what might be called a "transcendental

⁴⁷ For uses of such expressions, cf. P. P., pp. 29, 44-5, 48, 60-1, 66.

⁴⁸ Cf. P. P., pp. 45, 48, 61.

⁴⁹ Cf. P. P., p. xvi.

⁵⁰ Cf. P. P., pp. 157, 451, where Merleau-Ponty uses the term "Fundierung" borrowed from Husserl, to refer to what we call "presupposition."

implicate" of all our statements. To put it in another way, Merleau-Ponty claims that as a matter of historical fact, our *Weltanschauung*, our universe of discourse, its categories, had to arise from a "pre-predicative" view of the world which, though "pre-categorical," was nevertheless "consciousness of" He also claims that this necessity is not only factual, (any other "explanation" being necessarily circular as we have seen at the beginning of this article), but logical. For the statements we make could not have meaning, if there were not perception prior to language, through which the meaning of language could be acquired.

"Presupposition," whose logic we have sketched above provides a key to the understanding of Merleau-Ponty's "philosophical anthropology." His theory of the human subject or "*être au monde*" can be considered as a description of those "privileged facts," presupposed by all other facts. This seems a far cry indeed from a description of "the world as lived prior to the objective world," or the system "myself-other selves-things" at the moment of its birth, let alone the "genesis" of our categories. It is difficult to see quite how Merleau-Ponty's practice of phenomenological description concords with his theory of its subject-matter. He seems to show that such a "genesis" is necessarily presupposed. But when it comes to describing it, we seem to be irretrievably condemned to discourse on the predicative side of the "predicative"-*"pre-predicative"* boundary line.

This methodological confusion which we attempted to sketch in the first part of this article, would perhaps have little importance if it did not have any effect on its results. Unfortunately, however, it has important repercussions when Merleau-Ponty turns to considering the scope and importance of his philosophical anthropology—what it permits us, or forbids us to say about man, whether it be as behavior scientists, historians, or as laymen. For in so far as Merleau-Ponty holds that he has succeeded, by avoiding the "*préjugé du monde*," in producing a "pure description" of the human subject, (i.e., one that is free from all presuppositions regarding the categories we should use), he is also committed to holding that he has discovered man's real nature, i.e., the authentic categories of discourse about man. Phenomenological description can then be thought of as taking the place of science.

Or as Husserl thought, the essence of "mind" having been discovered by phenomenological description, experimental psychology is left with the task of filling in the gaps. It can of course be argued that Merleau-Ponty makes ample use of empirical data, and so that his "philosophical anthropology" has the merit of not proceeding by a priori definition. Nevertheless the objection remains that phenomenology, in its pretence of being free of the category-presuppositions of the scientist, claims for its discoveries a superior philosophical status. Perhaps what Merleau-Ponty failed to realise was that the fact that the "pre-objective world" is a necessary presupposition does *not* confer any such "philosophical necessity" upon statements offered as its description.

We cannot in the scope of this article discuss the theory of the human subject as "être au monde" itself. But we have thought it necessary, to conclude with a few remarks about the method on which it is based, since the theory of "être au monde" emerges as a result of the phenomenological description of the "pre-objective world."⁵¹ Presuppositionless description is in Merleau-Ponty's own terms impossible. Any description is bound to presuppose the validity of the categories of the language in which it is made. It remains therefore always and necessarily corrigible. As Merleau-Ponty himself puts it, no phenomenological reduction is ever complete.⁵² No description of "phenomena" therefore can ever yield us a set of statements which are the logical and factual preconditions of our universe of discourse. Hume has as much right to say that he is "describing phenomena" as Husserl. Once we have "suspended" one set of categories in order to describe the "original experience" upon which they are founded, there is no reason why we should not start all over again so as to describe the "original experience" upon which our categories of phenomenological description are founded in turn. Applied to itself, and taken to its logical conclusion, the theory of "phenomenological reduction" underlying the claim that description can be "pure" leads to a vicious regress. Had we not better accept the "préjugé du monde," whose elimination leads us merely to a "préjugé des

⁵¹ Cf. P. P., pp. 93-95, et passim.

⁵² Cf. P. P., p. viii.

phénomènes" from the start? Perhaps not, if it serves to make us at all conscious of our logical predicament.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical anthropology cannot then be considered as a final and pure description of man, made in the authentically true categories. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty never intended it as such, but he did criticize the work of others for falling short of it. Had not Husserl himself said that the phenomenologist is a perpetual beginner?⁵³ It can still be claimed, however, that certain concepts such as that of the "pre-objective world" are uneliminable because presupposed by all others. And that it follows from this that any description or explanation of the human mind that deliberately attempts to do without them is necessarily inadequate.

To put the matter in another way: Merleau-Ponty's descriptions like all descriptions commit him to a certain ontology. If so, what status should we give to his ontology? If we give it the same status as we do to that implied in psychology books, if, that is, the "pre-objective" world is something on the same level as the Freudian sub-conscious, then Merleau-Ponty is propounding a psychology like others, only meant to replace others. If this is what he is doing, there is no philosophical reason why we should accept his descriptions and his ontology, as opposed to that of Tolman or Freud. If on the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's theory of "Etre au Monde" is an interrelated set of concepts which are ineliminable, because presupposed by all others, including those in favour of which we attempt to eliminate them, there is no a priori reason why we should not accept it. There is no reason of course why such an anthropology should replace that which scientists are working towards, although it would certainly have some relevance to their work.

The phenomenology of perception, therefore, contains a crucial ambiguity. As a radical empiricism it claims the origin of our categories to be found in perception, and that these categories are contingent and inescapably so. As a "pure description" it claims to overcome these defects by founding once and for all the authentic categories of a correct anthropology, for it claims to

⁵³ Cf. P. P., p. ix.

have discovered the authentic nature of the experience that “founds” and is presupposed by our categories. We have tried here to give some idea of the part played by the concept of the “pre-objective world,” both in the theory (or description) of perception and in the theory of the nature of the human subject. But a full discussion of the ambiguity contained in the theory of “Etre au Monde” would involve us in examining the whole of phenomenology—a field too complex to be treated here.

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