PERCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS IN THE
PHILOSOPHY OF MERLEAU-PONTY

by

Wesley Morriston

University of Colorado
Abstract:

The chief purpose of this paper is to clarify and evaluate Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual synthesis. Since he develops his own view in the context of a critique of empiricism and idealism, I begin with a brief sketch of his reasons for rejecting their accounts of perception. What I then try to do is to show that Merleau-Ponty's own view, when fully and clearly stated, fails to escape all of the difficulties that he finds in those empiricist and idealist accounts that he rejects. In particular, I will suggest, his claim that the sensory content of experience must have a form and structure of its own tells as much against his own account of perceptual synthesis as against the empiricist notion of association or the idealist theory of judgment.
The chief purpose of this paper is to clarify and evaluate Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual synthesis. But since he develops his own position in the context of a critique of empiricism and idealism, it will be necessary to begin with a brief sketch of his reasons for rejecting their accounts of perception. Whether his treatment of empiricism and idealism is historically accurate is a question that I will not try to answer. What I will try to do instead is to show that Merleau-Ponty's own view, when fully and clearly stated, fails to escape all of the difficulties that he finds in those empiricist and idealist accounts that he rejects. In particular, I will suggest, his claim that the sensory content of experience must have a form and structure of its own tells as much against his own account of perceptual synthesis as against the empiricist notion of association or the idealist theory of judgment.

I. The Prejudice of the World

Despite their differences, Merleau-Ponty discerns an affinity between empiricism and idealism. Both are guilty of what he terms the "prejudice of the world." Both take for granted the idea of the world as a system of completely determinate objects. They take their point of departure from a "ready-made" world of causally interacting objects and events. But whereas the empiricist takes the subject of perception to be one object among others in the midst of a pre-existing world, the idealist sees the whole of the objective world, including the "subject" of empiricism (the individual man) as a phenomenon constituted by a "transcendental subject." And whereas the empiricist takes perception to be the outcome of an objective process whereby the organs of sight, hearing, touch, etc., are "affected" by stimuli, the idealist sees the objective world as the outcome of a synthesis accomplished by a thinking, judging subject. Hence, Merleau-Ponty frequently uses the term "intellectualist" to characterize the idealist position.

It is Merleau-Ponty's contention that both the empiricist and the idealist (or intellectualist) are engaged in a kind of "objective thinking" which obscures the phenomenon of perception as it is experienced. The first step toward an unbiased account of perception will therefore be to set aside the "prejudice of the world" and to describe the phenomenon of perception as it is lived by the perceiver,
rather than constructing theories about what it must be like, given our extra-perceptual beliefs about the "real world." This is why Merleau-Ponty uses the word "phenomenology" to describe his work on perception.

II. The Critique of Empiricism

Merleau-Ponty begins his critique of empiricism with an examination of the concept of sensation, a concept which in his view first arises directly from the prejudice of the world. What the empiricist believes to be in the real object, he supposes to be in the object as it is perceived. Since he believes the object to be made up of bits of matter spread out in a space whose points are external to one another, he supposes that our perception of the object must equally be made up of bits—this time bits of sensation. Similarly he supposes that what we perceive must be completely determinate because the "real object" is. And finally, he supposes that perception is made up of elements which correspond point by point to the objective stimuli which impinge upon our sense organs.

Merleau-Ponty believes that once we abandon all such prejudices and turn to the phenomenon of perception as it is lived in everyday experience, we will discover that experience is not made up of bits—sensations—which are only externally related to one another. " ... the most rudimentary factual perceptions that we are acquainted with, in creatures such as the ape and hen, have a bearing on relationships and not on any absolute terms." 1 Whatever is perceptible has a meaning, is bound up in some larger whole. It is not only that there are not as a matter of fact any such isolated data in perceptual experience. An isolated datum is inconceivable.

When Gestalt theory informs us that a figure on a background is the simplest sense-datum available to us, we reply that this is not a contingent characteristic of factual perception, which leaves us free, in an ideal analysis to bring in the notion of impressions. It is the very definition of the phenomenon of perception, that without which a phenomenon cannot be said to be a perception at all. The perceptual "something"

---

is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a "field." A really homogenous area offering nothing to perception cannot be given to any perception.\(^\text{2}\)

But this is not all. There is yet another way in which whatever we perceive is context-dependent. The type of context in which the object appears partially determines the intrinsic structure of the object as it is perceived. The lesson of the "Müller-Lyer illusion," for example, is that an isolated, objective line and the same line taken in a figure, cease to be, for perception, "the same."\(^\text{3}\) The additional lines change the entire perceptual Gestalt. They do not merely add to the picture before us. They change the intrinsic appearance of the initial lines. Of course it is possible by careful attention mentally to extract the original line from the new Gestalt. But such an "analytic perception" destroys the original phenomenon. The line is not the same for perception. It is the same only for a thought which identifies the perceived figure and the figure as it really is, "in itself," with its objective properties and relations. But for perception, the figure is a whole whose parts are self-identical only within that whole. Or, to put the matter in another way, the phenomenal parts of the phenomenal whole are intrinsically related to one another: they are what they are only in and through their relation to all of the other parts making up that whole.

Another point on which Merleau-Ponty disagrees with empiricism is its failure to recognize the vague and the ambiguous as "positive phenomena."\(^\text{4}\) In the objective world, an object either is or is not, it either has a certain property or it does not have it. This has led empiricists to suppose that perceptual experience is equally unambiguous, that objects are either present or absent, that they are either perceived as having a certain property or as not having it. But close attention to the phenomenon of perception, unimpeded by the objectivist prejudice, reveals its essential ambiguity. To revert once again to the Müller-Lyer illusion, the two lines are

---

2. PP, p. 6.
3. PP, p. 6.
4. PP, p. 6.
not for perception either equal or unequal in length; "it is only in the objective world that this question arises." Two lines, when abstracted from their perceptual context and measured may be objectively equal. But it does not follow that they are perceived as either equal or unequal.

A similar point may be made regarding the visual field. We do not see a precisely delimited segment of the world surrounded by a zone of blackness, even though that is what "objective" thinking leads us to believe that we ought to see. On the contrary, even "what is behind my back is not without some element of visual presence."

Finally—to take yet another example—for objective thinking the crystal that we see has a definite number of sides. But this does not mean that we see it as having any particular number of sides. On the contrary, an unfamiliar object will normally be perceived only as "many-sided." If we are interested in describing the crystal as it is for perception, it would be useless and misleading to take an inventory of its "real" properties.

This much, then, is to be learned from the initial critique of the concept of sensation. (1) The world as perceived has not the completely determinate character of the objective world of scientific thought. (2) The world as perceived cannot truly be described or understood by analyzing it into bits of sensation. Perception is not the sensing of the individual sense data that are supposed to correspond to objective stimuli. For those very "bits" turn out to be essentially context-dependent, intrinsically related to one another.

Even the empiricist, of course, does not deny that what we perceive consists of more than a single sensation or even the cluster of sensations which are actually present to our senses at any one time. I am, for example, aware of the back side of the table even though the light waves reflected from its surface are not at present stimulating my retina, even though I have, properly speaking, no sensation of it. Yet, he will insist, the concept of sensation does correspond to something in perceptual experience. If we seem to perceive more than the sum of presently given sensations, this is because they are augmented by an "association of ideas" which brings into

play a memory which pairs them with former sensations. In this way the empiricist seeks to restore the link between sensations not simultaneously given, and thereby to make up what the present sensation lacks in order to be perception.

Merleau-Ponty objects to the associationist hypothesis in such a way as to strengthen his critique of the concept of sensation generally. We have already seen that for him there is not and cannot be in experience anything corresponding to the empiricist notion of sensation. But if, per impossible, a multiplicity of sensations did constitute the bottom layer of perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty argues that the mechanism of association would not restore their connecting links. The difficulty is this: in order for the present sensation to lead us to associate with it the correct image, it must have an appearance or a "physiognomy" which suggests just that image; it must contain just that image within the horizon of its significance, which is to say that it must already be intrinsically related to the image it recalls. But in that case the entire mechanism is superfluous. Before any contribution of association or memory:

... what is seen must at the present moment so organize itself as to present a picture to me in which I can recognize my former experience. Thus the appeal to memory presupposes what it is supposed to explain: the patterning of data, the imposition of meaning on a chaos of sense-data. No sooner is the recollection of memories made possible than it becomes superfluous since the work it is being asked to do is already done.\(^7\)

The question is--to put the matter schematically--why associate x with y rather than z or w if x does not already have y on its horizon of significance, if, in other words, y is not already constitutive for the appearance of x? The critique of associationism reinforces the rejection of isolated, meaningless sensations as the elements of perceptual experience. Sensations, Merleau-Ponty insists, are "always already" meaningfully structured or patterned, "always already" related to one another.

---

7. PP, p. 19.
III. The Critique of Idealism

So far our remarks have been directed against empiricism. But idealism also takes as its starting point the objective world and the notion of sensation. It has, however, a different way of supplementing sensation so as to account for perception. It introduces the notion of judgment as "what sensation lacks in order to make perception possible." I seem to perceive men walking in the street below. But in fact only their hats and coats are visible . . . I must therefore judge them to be men. Or again, I should perceive double since I have two eyes and two retinas. It must therefore be that "I construct by means of two images the idea of one object a distance away." Perception is thus understood as an intellectual interpretation of signs produced by stimuli impinging upon my organs of sense. Beginning with the concept of sensation, the intellectualist thus seeks to construct perception instead of describing it as it is for the perceiver. He looks for the conditions which make perception possible instead of "uncovering the operation which makes it real."

Merleau-Ponty objects to this analysis of perception on two grounds. First, he notes that perception is sometimes at odds with the most well-founded judgments. We continue to see the sun rise and set despite our knowledge that it is stationary. The moon persists in looking larger when on the horizon even though we know its size to be constant. In the illustration below, we know that the cube can be seen in two ways:

---

8. PP, p. 32.


10. PP, p. 33.

11. PP, p. 38, translation slightly revised.
from the bottom or from the top. But the figure "in fact refuses to change its structure and my knowledge must await its intuitive realization."12

It is not enough, in other words, merely to think of the figure in one way rather than the other. We must actually focus our eyes either on the lines connecting a, b, c, and d or on the lines connecting e, f, g, and h, and take them as the starting point of visual exploration in order to see the cube in one perspective rather than the other.

Secondly, Merleau-Ponty asks: if we perceive as we judge, what will be the ground of our judgment? What should we make one perceptual judgment rather than another? The motive, if there is one, must be in what is sensibly given prior to judgment. But if we apprehend a sense immanent in the sensible text, this is already to perceive, prior to judgment. "The phenomenon of true perception offers, therefore, a meaning inherent in the signs, of which judgment is merely the optional expression."13

Thus we arrive once again at the conclusion that sensations must be formed, structured, related to one another before the proposed structuring activity can take place. We are not then confronted with a chaotic manifold of intrinsically unrelated sensations which we must subsequently run through and hold together, a meaningless sequence of sensuous contents which we must synthesize in accordance with explicit rules laid down by the understanding. The Kantian dualism of content and form, sensibility and understanding is abandoned in favor of the view that sense experience has its own structure, its own form.14

This might lead us to suppose that Merleau-Ponty sees perception as a completely transparent awareness which grasps its object without contributing anything to its internal structure. But as we shall see, this is not

12. PP, p. 34.
13. PP, p. 35.
14. To put it in Heideggerian terms, the data of sense are "always already" structured by the "reference-complex" to which they belong, and inasmuch as the "world" is the ultimate horizon of references, they are always already given within the world. cc. PP, pp. 243, 292.
his view. Sensation, for Merleau-Ponty, does have its own structure, but this is only because it has its own synthesis. But before we can explicate Merleau-Ponty's view of the perceptual synthesis, we must introduce his concept of the "subject-body" and explain the role of the body in the organization of the perceptual field. As might be expected, this will lead us to develop Merleau-Ponty's objections to another aspect of one of the positions he rejects: viz., the idealist's insistence upon the "transcendental," unworldly character of consciousness.

IV. The "Subject-Body"

What we said above concerning sensation and judgment applies only to the first stages of the intellectualist analysis. The empiricist's belief in sensation as the product of external stimulation of bodily organs is ultimately surmounted; it is only one stage in the idealist dialectic. The self-transcendence of consciousness—sc. my knowledge of my inherence in a body—is found to be incompatible with its genuine embodiment. The paradox of embodiment is resolved by distinguishing two selves: one a constituted object among other objects, the other a constituting, unworldly subject before whom the entire objective world is spread out as a mere phenomenon. The body and its objective causal relations with other bodies are thus understood as phenomena for transcendental, constituting consciousness, and sensation is understood, not as the starting point of knowledge, but as its "last effect," the misleading way in which consciousness sees its own history.  

But, Merleau-Ponty points out, such an analysis fails to understand itself as reflection. If I truly constitute the entire objective world, how can it hold any secrets from me? Why do I find myself only at the end of a long chain of argumentation which takes the world as its starting point? Why need I find myself only as a "condition of possibility" and not as an immediately experienced reality? How is this ignorance of myself possible? It is possible, Merleau-Ponty will insist, only if I am a finite being in the world, only if I am irremediably thrown into a situation not of my own making, only if—in Heideggerian terms—I am characterized by facticity as well as transcendence. And for Merleau-Ponty this is possible only if

---

15, PP, p. 37.
the subject of perception is a body. That is not to say, of course, that the subject is an "object-body" connected by external, causal relations to other mundane objects. We are here concerned only with a body which is on the hither side of perceptual awareness: not the body that the physiologist "observes" in the laboratory, but the body that we "live by" in our everyday experience of the world.

But if the "subject-body" is not an object, neither is it a "transcendental," unworldly subject. To be a body is to be situated in the world, and what is perhaps most important, to be situated in time. The body is not present to all times in the manner of a transcendental ego. It is open to a past and a future which are not fully within its grasp. But neither are past and future merely a series of present moments which are "no longer" or "not yet"; they are constitutive for the body's very being in the living present. My body's future is a future of possible actions. And its past is a past of repeatable actions. Merleau-Ponty's notion of "habit" nicely illustrates the relation between past, present, and future as they function in his conception of the body. To have a bodily habit or skill is to be able to move in certain ways. But it is also to have acquired that ability in a past which is retained on the horizon of the present. If my body's past were simply gone by, a series of presents which are no longer, it would be impossible to learn from practice and experience. Similarly, if my body's future were not intrinsically related to its present being, the man who can drive a car or ride a bicycle, or play the violin, would not differ in any way from the man who can do none of these things. We thus find that the subject-body is temporal in such a way that is past, present, and future are not externally spread out one after the other, but are internally related to one another. The future is the future of this bodily present, the past is the past of this bodily present and future, etc.

One final point must be made concerning the subject-body before we can examine Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual synthesis. The body's relatedness to its past and future is a species of awareness. It is sustained by an "intentional arc" whereby the body is aware of its own

17. cf. PP, p. 136.
acquisitions and abilities. My body does not merely have certain characteristics and certain capabilities for some external observer—it has them for itself. And this awareness is what constitutes the unity of the body's parts in such a way as to make possible coordinated movement. This is why Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "body-image":

The normal subject has his body not only as a system of present positions, but besides, and thereby, as an open system of an infinite number of equivalent positions in other orientations. What we have called the body image is precisely this system of equivalents, this immediately given invariant whereby the different motor tasks are instantaneously transposable.18

Thus the body is said to be aware of its own possibilities as well as of its actual situation. But this must not be taken to mean that it has an explicit or cognitive awareness of itself. The dancer does not know the formula of his movements, but he "knows how" to dance all the same; his body tacitly understands at every instant what is required of it, and its next movement is already on the horizon of the present one and constitutes its living significance. The body does not therefore move itself in accordance with any explicit conception of the immediate or remote future. It does what is required of it "automatically," without any explicit "taking into account." Similarly, it does not expressly will to perform each of the movements which go to make up the dancing of the dance or the playing of a fugue or the typing of a sentence. To be sure, I may desire to write the sentence, but I do not decide to make each of the movements required to accomplish my chosen task. Beneath the level of my personal acts, Merleau-Ponty points to a pre-personal temporality which is the life of my body.19

V. The "Synthesis of Transition"

Now we can turn to Merleau-Ponty's account of the perceptual synthesis. If the subject of perception is understood to be a body, and a body of the sort described above, a number of implications will be immediately obvious.

The perceptual synthesis will have to be distinguished sharply from any "intellectual" synthesis. It will not be a personal act ranging over a multiplicity of sensuous contents and judging each to be a representation of some one invariant object. It will not consist in the application of concepts to a series of discrete sensations. On the contrary, we have seen that for Merleau-Ponty there is no pre-given multiplicity of sensuous contents. Yet there is a synthesis in which they are united. It is the pre-personal unfolding of the body's temporality. This is why Merleau-Ponty speaks of a "synthesis of transition." The synthesized elements literally flow or merge into one another. They are not independent of one another just because they are caught up in the body's temporality. Just as the parts of time (past, present, future) mutually implicate one another, so too are the successive or simultaneous appearances of the perceptual object intrinsically related to one another. The red of the carpet, for example, is a "woolly" red. I see it and then I touch it; the redness and the woolliness are indissolubly linked in the anonymous flow of my body's temporality.

Naturally perception has its point of view. The thing perceived cannot be wholly grasped for it always has "other sides" and each of these is in turn subject to infinite exploration. But, thanks to the body's temporality, "my point of view is for me not so much a limitation of my experience as a way of infiltrating the world in its entirety." The understanding of time outlined above thus enables us to escape both the empiricist and the intellectualist positions. For the empiricist, time is a linear succession of discrete instants, with the result that a perception taking place in one instant would have no access to any other instant. Hume's difficulties with memory are a case in point. If memory is only a faded copy of an original now past then we have no true access to the original because it simply is no longer, and it is impossible to see how we could have any conception, much less knowledge of, the past. The intellectualist seeks to resolve this difficulty by spreading out the succession of discrete instants before a transcendental consciousness which is not situated in any one of them and is explicitly conscious of all. What intellectualism cannot explain is the inescapable fact of finitude and error. If I am transcendental consciousness through and through, how can I be


ignorant of what I transcendentally know? And if, on the other hand, I begin with my finitude and the ever-present possibility or error, how can I hope to arrive at the transcendental standpoint? But if we understand temporality in the way outlined above, Merleau-Ponty thinks that these difficulties disappear. Subjectivity can be understood both as finite and essentially transcendent, i.e., open to its past and future. And correlative, the object of perception can be both present in bodily-self-givenness and presented only "one-sidedly." The synthesis of transition thus preserves both the unity and the manifold character of experience, both its incompleteness and its (presumptive) grasp of the object as a whole.

VI. Motivation and Synthesis

If this were all that Merleau-Ponty had to say about synthesis (viz., that it is a synthesis of transition), one might be tempted to ask why everything isn't synthesized with everything else. Why doesn't one object simply "flow into" another? Of course there is a sense in which this is what does happen: every object belongs to the world, and the world is the complete correlate of perception present, past, and possible. And yet the fact remains that the world is articulated; it does include distinguishable objects. When I reach out and touch the lamp, for example, the tactile impressions which I experience are immediately synthesized with my visual impressions of the lamp, but if I touch the desk instead, this does not happen, or at least it does not happen in quite the same way. But why not? The synthesis of transition, understood merely as the flowing into one another of past, present, and future does not seem to give us any answer. It does not explain why experienced contents bearing the same temporal relations to one another are not synthesized with the same degree of "intimacy," why, in other words, they go to make up a single object in one case, and not in another.

Merleau-Ponty never explicitly addresses himself to this question, but I think an answer to it is implicit in his discussion of the concept of "motivation." My perception of (relatively) discrete objects is demanded or "motivated" by the meaningful structure of the visual and auditory and tactile contents as they are given to me in sense experience. I see the lamp as hard and cool because my visual impressions already implicate the tactile impressions I would have were I to reach out and grasp it with my hand. Once again, we see that for Merleau-Ponty
there are no isolated sense-impressions in experience. Each is essentially related both to other sensations and to the bodily attitude in which it would be given. Hence Merleau-Ponty speaks of a subject/object dialogue. To perceive is not passively to receive an object into oneself. It is actively to grasp, to trace out an object with eye and hand. "But this grasp and this delineation are not arbitrary. They are indicated or recommended by phenomena." Similarly, my body's own movements—when, for example, I step to one side or focus my eyes or reach out and grasp something—are taken into account of my perception. They function as "motives" for the spectacle that I perceive. In oculo-motor paralysis, for example, the subject sees stationary objects moving to one side or the other when he thinks his eyes are moving. The illusion of movement in the patient's body directly motivates the illusion of movement in the objects perceived. This can happen only because:

. . . the movements of his body are naturally invested with a certain perceptual significance, and form with the external phenomena, such a well-articulated system that external perception "takes account" of the movement of the organs of perception, finding in them, if not the express explanation, at least the motive for the changes brought about in the spectacle, and thus being able to understand them instantly.23

The apparent movements of my body do not provide reasons for judging that the object of perception has this or that property or relation. I am not even explicitly (thetically, positionally) aware of them. But they are operative in my perception, and they do have a certain significance which perception implicitly takes into account, a significance in virtue of which they motivate certain changes in the flow of experience.

What light does this concept of motivation throw on the nature of the perceptual synthesis? We have already seen that it is not an explicit synthesis of discrete data. The data are not expressly posited at all; and they are not given independently of one another. Consequently there is no need to link them in an explicit synthesis. "If we want to talk about synthesis, it will be . . . a

---

22. PP, p. 263.

23. PP, p. 48.
'transitional synthesis,' which does not link disparate perspectives, but brings about the "passage" from one to the other."24 But now we have seen that there is another sense in which they "pass over into one another." One content can "motivate" another insofar as it has the latter on its horizon of significance. Perception is not therefore an arbitrary projection of meaning onto essentially meaningless data. It is a motivated response to an invitation emanating from the data themselves. Hence Merleau-Ponty can speak of sensation as a "communion" of the sentient and the sensible25 and of perception as a dialogue between subject and object.26 The sensible content makes its demand on me and I respond by perceiving it in just the way that it "asked" me to.

At this point, one may well ask what enables the sensory content to make its demand? How is it possible for it to motivate perceptual experience? Merleau-Ponty holds that it is constituted as a motive only by an "implicit or sedimentary body of knowledge"27 which is always operative in my anonymously flowing perceptual life. It is only thanks to a framework of relationships (between phenomena and my bodily attitudes present and possible) which my body brings to bear on the situation that my sensations are able to motivate my perceptual response. It is only insofar as they are automatically bound up in a world, the essential structures of which I carry with me, that they can make such "demands" on me. To be sure, my perception does not at the present moment explicitly constitute the object in its entirety. If it did, the object would lose its characteristic "transcendence and opacity," and perception would cease to be "inherent as an individual subject and a point of view."28 It would be better to call perception a "reconstitution," since it "takes advantage of work already done, a general synthesis constituted once and for all."29

24. PP, p. 265.
28. PP, p. 325.
29. PP, p. 238.
It is in this connection that Merleau-Ponty explicate his conception of the "body-image." The body, we said, has an implicit sense of its own powers of sensory exploration. But as the correlate of those powers, it also possesses a "universal setting, a scheme of all types of perceptual unfolding and of all those inter-sensory correspondences which lie beyond the segment of the world which we are actually perceiving." 30 Hence there is "an immediate equivalence" between the orientation of our sensory fields and the awareness of our own body as the potentiality of those fields. 31 And inasmuch as the world is the ultimate field or horizon of possible experience, in which each element is meaningfully related to the rest, 32 we can now say that to have a body is to "be in a world" in the Heideggerian sense of that phrase. It is to "understand" whatever we encounter in perceptual experience in terms of a world whose definitive relational structures are determined by our body's latent knowledge.

VII. The Ambiguity of Merleau-Ponty's Position

Despite the novelty of his thesis regarding the subject-body, Merleau-Ponty's stance is thus fundamentally subjectivist in character. Experience is structured by the subject-body's latent knowledge. The obvious question, of course, is: just what is being grasped in terms of that latent knowledge? But it is a question to which Merleau-Ponty gives no very clear answer. In our exposition, to be sure, we have frequently found it necessary to speak of "sensations," as indeed does Merleau-Ponty. Yet he is quite emphatic in his insistence that there is no "sensory stratum" of data which undergo perceptual interpretation. This analysis, he says, in a passage clearly aimed at Husserl, "conceals the organic relationship between subject and world." 33 On the other hand, he concedes in another passage that "the flow of perspective appearances" (sc. the Abschattungen or "hyletic data" of Husserl) is "given in non-positing consciousness to precisely the

30. PP, p. 326.
32. PP, p. 292.
33. PP, p. 152. cf. also p. 243.
extent necessary for me to be able to escape them into the thing." This suggests that Merleau-Ponty objects only to the view that perception consists in an explicit synthesis of explicitly given data. One might be justified at this point in asking whether any idealist ever held the contrary view. Husserl, for example, never held that sensory data were explicitly posited in perceptual experience. On the contrary, he held that they are first posited (i.e., first made the objects of consciousness) by reflection, but that at the level of first-order external perception, they are only "lived through" (erlebt).

... we have no intention of saying that the material contents, it might be the perspectively varying color-contents, are present in the perceptual experience precisely as they are in the analysing experience. There... they were contained as real (reelle) phases, but they were not perceived therein, nor objectively apprehended, as they are in the analysing experience, where they figure as the termini of noetic functions which were not previously present.

It seems, then, that there is an ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty's position. On the one hand, he seems to hold—not just that perception is never an explicit awareness of a layer of sensory data in abstraction from their meaning in the context of our body's "world"—but that there is no such layer of data. On the other hand, he seems to say that we are implicitly aware of just such data insofar as we perceive things: "to precisely the extent necessary for me to be able to escape them into the thing."

But this ambiguity stems from a deeper tension in Merleau-Ponty's thought. He wishes both to undercut the Kantian dichotomy of form and content and to say that form, i.e., the relational complex which Merleau-Ponty, following Heidegger, calls a "world," is the contribution of the subject (i.e., of our body) to perceptual experience. On the one hand, he insists, in opposition to both empiricism and to intellectualism, that our perceptual response is motivated by a given which is always already so structured that it can motivate the organization of the perceptual

34. PP, p. 326.

field. On the other hand, when we ask what makes the motive a motive, what accounts for the meaning in virtue of which it motivates a particular perceptual response, Merleau-Ponty refers us to a "latent body of knowledge" which the perceiving subject brings to bear on the perceptual situation.

At this point, a difficulty which Merleau-Ponty discovers in empiricism and intellectualism reappears. Just what is it that the perceiving subject grasps in the light of its "latent knowledge"? Either it has a form and structure of its own, in which case it is meaningfully organized independently of its relation to subjectivity; or it does not, in which case the way in which it is taken up by the perceiving subject is wholly arbitrary. To respond to this objection, it is not sufficient to appeal to "a general synthesis constituted once and for all," to "work already done." No matter how anonymous the perceptual process and tacit our knowledge of the network of relations in terms of which sensations are "automatically" experienced, we cannot regard it as the contribution of the subject to experience without being prepared to distinguish it from what is not the contribution of the subject—unless, of course, we are prepared to say that everything is contributed by the subject. But that would make Merleau-Ponty's position indistinguishable from the "transcendental idealism" that he rejects; and it would make it difficult, if not impossible, for him to account for two of the most obvious facts about human life--ignorance and error.

Wesley Morriston

Department of Philosophy
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309