

THE CRITIQUE OF OBJECTIVE THOUGHT*

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1. Merleau-Ponty's Critical Strategy

A work of existential phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* shares with Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* a number of features which set both of them apart from the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*: a rejection of the transcendental ego, and of the account of objects as what are 'meant' by this ego; an insistence upon the character of human 'being-in-the-world' as the primary focus of phenomenological enquiry; and an attempt, in general terms, to steer a course between realism and idealism. (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes, Methuen 1958; Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D. Cairns, Martinus Nijhoff, 1977). But there are also a number of important disagreements between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. In Particular, Merleau-Ponty objects to the radical dichotomy between the for-itself and the in-itself articulated by Sartre, and argues that no satisfactory account of human existence can be given which relies upon this dichotomy (see Chapter Nine, section 3).

A striking feature of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is that its philosophical arguments are conducted largely through the detailed examination of substantive theories about human action and perception; and that consequently the writings of psychologists and physiologists are given equal prominence to those of philosophers. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty engages in a sustained critique of two distinctive approaches to the understanding of human beings, which he terms empiricism and intellectualism. In this chapter we shall explore what he means by these, and how his objections to them function in his overall critical strategy. To do so we shall start by looking briefly at the Preface which is more obviously and exclusively philosophical in character than much of the text

* [2013] Published as Chapter 5 of *Understanding Phenomenology* (co-authored with Michael Hammond and Jane Howarth), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991, pp. 127-152; citations should be to this. No changes have been made to the text, apart from typographical corrections and the addition of bibliographical information. This chapter focuses on the critique of objective thought in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (first published 1948; trans. C. Smith, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1962, revised 1981). This critique is applied and developed in his account of the human body, examined in Chapter 6 of *Understanding Phenomenology* ('The Body as Subject'); some critical responses are presented in section 2 of its Conclusion ('Phenomenology and Scientific Realism'). These are also available at www.russellkeat.net

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which follows it.

Merleau-Ponty begins by addressing the question ‘What is phenomenology?’. His answer to this proceeds in two main stages. First, he puts forward his own view of what is fundamental to phenomenology, by means of a contrast between description, on the one hand, and both explanation and analysis, on the other. Second, he goes on to propose certain interpretations for the concepts of ‘reduction’, ‘essence’ and ‘intentionality’ which, as we saw in earlier chapters, figure centrally in Husserl’s phenomenology. We shall for the moment leave aside this second stage and concentrate upon the first.¹

The hallmark of a genuinely phenomenological enquiry, says Merleau-Ponty, is that it regards its task as ‘a matter of describing, not explaining or analysing’ (*PP*, p. viii). Let us consider each of the latter pair in turn. The kind of explanation to which he is referring is scientific: the causal explanations which the various empirical sciences, such as physics, biology, psychology and sociology, attempt to provide. Phenomenology, then, involves describing things rather than explaining them; and Merleau-Ponty here, as often, cites Husserl in support of this view:

Husserl’s first directive to phenomenology ... to return to the ‘things themselves’, is from the start a forswearing of science. (*PP*, p. viii)

It may at first seem strange to contrast phenomenology with other philosophical standpoints in this particular way after all, few if any conceptions of philosophy straightforwardly identify it with the empirical sciences, or characterize its basic aim or method as that of scientific explanation. But what Merleau-Ponty has in mind is a distinction between phenomenology and those philosophical positions which depend upon the possibility of such scientific explanations. More specifically, although he does not use the term at this point, he is counter-posing phenomenology to a certain kind of realism.

We have, so far, talked of realism mainly in a fairly general form, as the view that the nature and existence of the world is independent of one’s knowledge of it, and that human beings are just as much part of that world as anything else. We can now add to this the claim that it is by means of the empirical sciences that this knowledge of the world can be obtained. Hence human beings, along with the rest of the world, are legitimate ‘objects’ of scientific investigation and explanation. In particular, it should be possible to provide scientific explanations of how it is that humans perceive things, by investigating the causal processes through which external physical stimuli affect their sense-organs and give rise to perceptual experience. Similarly for human action: the behaviour of human beings, like any other events taking place in the world, has causal determinants which can be discovered by

the normal methods of empirical science.

This ‘scientific’ realism, then, shares in realism’s denial of any radical distinction between the ‘subject’ and ‘object’ of knowledge, whilst also ascribing to the empirical sciences a privileged position with respect to such knowledge. Hence the sciences of physiology, psychology, and so on, can explain both how humans perceive the world (including, of course, one another) and how they behave in it. Merleau–Ponty is thoroughly opposed to this view. In the Preface he briefly makes two objections. The first is directed against its misunderstanding of the nature of scientific concepts and their relationship to the world one experiences in everyday life. We shall return to this in the next chapter. The second concerns its view of the human subject as an object of scientific knowledge. ‘I am not’, he declares,

the outcome or the meeting–point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological, or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. (*PP*, p. viii)

And likewise:

Scientific points of view, according to which my existence is a moment of the world’s, are always both naive and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me. (*PP*, p. ix)

But Merleau–Ponty is eager to correct a misunderstanding that might otherwise be generated by these claims. To oppose the ‘scientific point of view’ in such terms may seem to commit him to some form of transcendental idealism, according to which the world investigated by the empirical sciences is itself constituted, at least in its basic characteristics, by a conscious subject which is not itself a part of that world, but rather is presupposed by it. Yet this, says Merleau–Ponty, is not his position, nor that of a genuine phenomenology. Such idealism, he claims – and it is mainly Kant’s that he has in mind, though his comments here might also be applicable to Husserl’s position in the *Cartesian Meditations* – depends upon the procedure of analysis, or, as he often calls it, ‘analytical reflection’: and the descriptive procedure of phenomenology is as much at odds with this as it is with scientific explanation. Phenomenology’s adoption of the ‘point of view of consciousness’, he declares,

is absolutely distinct from the idealist return to consciousness, and the demand for a pure description excludes equally the procedure of analytical reflection on the one hand, and that

of scientific explanation on the other. (*PP*, p. ix)

The procedure of analytical reflection consists in identifying the basic rules or concepts which supposedly underlie the way that the world is experienced, and which hence can be said to make this possible: for instance, the Kantian categories of substance, causality, and so on (see Chapter Three, section 5). The idealist then ascribes these rules and concepts to a transcendental subject which is, as it were, blessed with world-constitutive cognitive powers:

Analytical reflection starts from our experience of the world and goes back to the subject as to a condition of possibility distinct from that experience, revealing the all-embracing synthesis [in which the subject's cognitive powers are exercised] as that without which there would be no world. To this extent it ceases to remain part of our experience and offers, in place of an account [i.e. a phenomenological 'description'], a reconstruction. (*PP*, pp ix-x)

Merleau-Ponty rejects this idealist conception of the subject, just as he also rejects the kind of realism to which he has counterposed it: the *Phenomenology of Perception* is devoted to showing what is wrong with both. However, he does not engage in a head-on confrontation with either: he does not 'trade philosophical arguments' with the proponents of realism and idealism. Instead, he tries to show that the specific procedures upon which each of them depends, namely scientific explanation and analytical reconstruction, cannot in fact succeed. It is here that the concepts of empiricism and intellectualism come into play. For these two distinctive approaches to the understanding of human perception and action are defined, in effect, by their respective employment of the two procedures just noted. The programme of empiricism is to provide scientifically validated causal explanations for these phenomena; whilst that of intellectualism is to provide analytical reconstructions, by identifying the rules which make them possible.

What Merleau-Ponty argues is that, in practice, neither of these programmes can actually achieve the goals set for them; and that, consequently, neither realism nor idealism is defensible. It is because of this overall strategy that so much of the *Phenomenology of Perception* consists in the detailed criticism of specific causal and reconstructive accounts that have been proposed by empiricists and intellectualists. But, as we shall now see, there is an additional and important element to this strategy, which involves the introduction of a further central concept, that of objective thought.

So far empiricism and intellectualism, and their related philosophical standpoints of realism and idealism, have been presented as entirely at odds with one another. But Merleau-Ponty claims also that there is something very important which they have in common, namely a certain view of what the world is like – what kinds of items it contains, and what kinds of relationships obtain between them. It

is this view which he calls ‘objective thought’ (e.g. *PP*, p. 71). According to this, the world consists of clearly identifiable objects – such as houses, trees, stones, etc. each of which has a definite location at any given time in a single spatial framework. Every object has a set of determinately specifiable properties for example, a particular size, shape, weight, colour, and so on – which can be described independently of one another. These objects can interact causally with each other; and all their properties are open, in principle, to a complete description and causal explanation. The world conceived in this way Merleau-Ponty often calls ‘the universe’ (e.g. *PP*, p. 71).

Broadly speaking, then, objective thought characterizes the world in a way that makes it a suitable candidate for scientific treatment. But objective thought is indifferent, as such, to the rival philosophical claims of realists and idealists as to whether this world exists ‘in its own right’, or is somehow constituted by a transcendental subject. It is a view of what the world is like, and not of its ontological status. (Hence, Merleau-Ponty would regard Kant’s combination of ‘empirical realism’ with ‘transcendental idealism’ – see Chapter Three, section 5 – as nonetheless displaying objective thought.) Further, says Merleau-Ponty, objective thought is assumed not only in the various empirical sciences, but also in what he often calls ‘dogmatic common sense’, or sometimes just ‘common sense’ (e.g. *PP*, pp. xi, 71).

The fact that both empiricists and intellectualists share this objectivist view of the world has important consequences for their respective attempts to understand perception and action, he argues. For example, in the case of perception, the empiricist tries to provide causal explanations for what is perceived, whilst the intellectualist tries to reconstruct what is perceived by reference to the subject’s exercise of its cognitive powers. But both take it for granted that their task is to understand how humans manage to perceive the world as characterized by objective thought, and in doing so, he argues, they make a fundamental error.

For the world which humans actually perceive is not like this: it is not ‘objective’. Instead it consists of ‘objects’ whose properties are not fully specifiable or determinate, but inherently non-determinate and even ambiguous; between these objects there obtain relationships of meaning and reciprocal expression, not of causal determination; they are not uniquely located in a single spatial framework, but varyingly situated in relation to the human agent’s specific field of action; and so on. Merleau-Ponty sometimes refers to this world of everyday experience as ‘the lived-through world’ (e.g. *PP*, p. 71): for convenience we shall term it ‘the lived world’.

‘Nothing’, says Merleau-Ponty, ‘is more difficult to know than precisely what we see’ (*PP*, p. 58). Both empiricists and intellectualists misdescribe the lived world: their descriptions are systematically distorted by the ‘prejudice’ of objective thought. So, however successfully they account for perception

of an objective 'universe' – and Merleau-Ponty thinks intellectualism fares better than empiricism in this respect -- they will have failed to understand what is in fact perceived. Furthermore, he argues, once one has arrived at a correct description of the lived world, one can show that its character is such as to defy both scientific explanation and analytical reconstruction.

Thus the prejudice of objective thought vitiates both empiricism and intellectualism, despite the radical divergence between realist and idealist views about the ontological status of this objective universe. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

Empiricism retained an absolute [realist] belief in the world as the totality of spatio-temporal events, and treated consciousness as a province of this world. Analytical reflection, it is true, breaks with the world in itself, since it constitutes it through the working of consciousness, but this constituting consciousness ...is built up in such a way as to make possible the idea of an absolute determinate being. It [the constituting consciousness] is the correlative of a universe. (*PP*, p. 40)

But in other respects this divergence between the two is of major importance. For the realist, everything belongs to the universe of objective thought, including human consciousness. For the idealist, this universe is itself made possible by a constituting subject, which does not conform to objective thought. Correspondingly, therefore, intellectualism differs from empiricism in regarding human action and perception as the exercise of their subjects' distinctive, and non-objective, cognitive powers. Thus 'reasoning', 'judgement', 'decision' and other such acts of the subject are constantly invoked by intellectualists in carrying out their programme of analytical reconstruction.

Merleau-Ponty regards intellectualism as clearly superior to empiricism in recognizing the special status of the human subject. But he does not accept its specific characterization of this subject. The intellectualist, he argues, misdescribes what is actually involved in perceiving the world and in performing actions, and hence also misrepresents the nature of this subject and its relationship to the world. Amongst other things, he rejects the 'disembodied', purely 'mentalist' character of the intellectualists' subject: and he proposes instead that the true subject of action and perception is an essentially 'bodily' one.

Returning now to Merleau-Ponty's espousal of the method or procedure of description, as against those of explanation and analysis, it can be seen that this method is not merely what distinguishes phenomenology from the competing philosophical standpoints of realism and idealism, but is also the crucial means by which their respective failings are to be demonstrated. It is not just a preferred alternative to the procedures they rely upon, but the basis for their criticism. Furthermore, he

maintains, what is revealed by unprejudiced description is the distinctive character of human existence as ‘being-in-the-world’ (*PP*, p. xiv); and he goes on to argue that phenomenology should employ a method which consists in ‘correctly reading phenomena, in grasping their meaning, that is, in treating them as modalities and variations of the subject’s total being’ (*PP*, p. 108).

In the final section of this chapter we shall develop further this initial account of Merleau–Ponty’s overall critical strategy in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and of the positive views for which he argues.² But first we shall look more closely, in the following two sections, at his conception of objective thought, and of empiricism and intellectualism.

2. Objective Thought vs. the Lived World

Objective thought, as we have noted, is a view of what the world is like: what sorts of entities it contains, and what sorts of relationships hold between them. Merleau–Ponty’s main objection to it is that it misrepresents the nature of the world one actually experiences; and since both empiricists and intellectualists accept this view, they are guilty of prejudiced description. To support these claims, Merleau–Ponty frequently invokes two central contrasts: between the determinate and the non-determinate character of ‘objects’ in, respectively, the objectivist’s universe and the lived world; and between the externality and the internality of the relationships which obtain within them. We shall examine each of these in some detail, and then consider more briefly some further aspects of objective thought.

According to the objectivist, says Merleau–Ponty, every object is fully determinate (French ‘determine’). This term comes from the Latin ‘determinare’, meaning literally ‘to put boundaries upon’, ‘to set limits to’, and, somewhat more generally, ‘to fix, to make precise or distinct’. So something is determinate if it has fixed or precise limits or boundaries -- if, as it were, it starts ‘just here’ and stops ‘just there’, and is thus distinct from everything else.

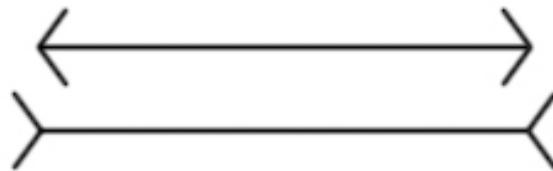
In denying that what one actually perceives is determinate, Merleau–Ponty sometimes means, in a relatively straightforward way, that it has no clear-cut boundaries. For instance, he says that one’s visual field the full extent of what one can see at any particular time – can never be precisely specified. There is always an imprecise area at the perimeter, where various items are at best only indistinctly perceived: there occurs here ‘an indeterminate vision, a vision of something or other’ (*PP*, p. 6). However, more often and more significantly, his claims about the non-determinacy of objects in the lived world concern the character of their properties. We can identify three separate points here, though Merleau–Ponty himself tends not to distinguish them.

The first is this. Objective thought maintains that one can in principle give a complete description of objects – comprising, in effect, a fully specified list of the properties which each object possesses. Merleau-Ponty denies that this is possible. The objects one actually encounters in the lived world have a richness and complexity which inevitably defies any such finite enumeration of their properties. They are therefore not, in this sense, determinate.

The second point concerns the ‘determinacy’ or ‘definiteness’ with which any particular property is possessed by an object. For the objectivist, says Merleau-Ponty, every property must be such that, for any object, there is always a definite answer to the question whether the object possesses that property or not. In other words, for any object ‘O’, and any property ‘P’, the question ‘does O possess P?’ can always be answered either ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

Merleau-Ponty claims that this is not so in the world one actually experiences. Instead one often finds that an object neither quite has, nor does not have, a particular property. An example he gives is this:

“The two straight lines in Muller-Lyer’s optical illusion ...[see diagram below]... are neither of equal nor unequal length, it is only in the objective world that this question arises”.



Merleau-Ponty thus denies a basic assumption of psychologists’ discussions of this phenomenon: that the lines are really equal but are perceived as unequal.³ Rather, he claims, the perceived lines are neither equal nor unequal; and he also rejects the objectivist’s belief that ‘at least in reality’ they must be one or the other.

It may be helpful to compare Merleau-Ponty’s disagreement with objective thought on this score with a partly analogous issue in the philosophy of language, about what sorts of definitions can or should be given to descriptive terms – the terms by which one ascribes properties to things. Two opposing views about this issue may be adopted. The first is that, ideally, every descriptive term should be given a definition which identifies the (jointly) necessary and sufficient conditions for its correct application. In this way, the meanings of all such terms are to be fully specified, so that one knows precisely what is meant in applying them, and hence exactly what would count as a correct or

incorrect application.

But according to the second, opposing, view, such clear-cut definitions are not possible -- or, at least, there is no good reason to regard them as especially desirable. Rather, it is said, most or all descriptive concepts are inherently 'open-ended'. One cannot fully specify their meanings: they are always somewhat imprecise, though not in an objectionable way. So although there will be many cases in which the applicability of a certain term is clear enough, there will be others in which it is not. As a result of this, there will often be situations in which there is no definite answer to the question whether or not an object possesses a particular property: one will be unable to say either that it does or that it does not. (It may be conceded that in the sciences, unlike ordinary language, precise definitions are required; but this, it is maintained, does not show the superiority of the former over the latter, only a difference in what is appropriate to each kind of language.)⁴

Drawing upon this analogy, one could say that, for Merleau-Ponty, the nature of the lived world is such that it cannot be adequately described by the 'determinate' concepts of the first of these views, but only by the 'non-determinate' concepts of the second. But it must be emphasized that, for him, non-determinacy is primarily a characteristic of what is actually experienced in the world, and only derivatively of the concepts employed to describe this. As a phenomenologist, he is concerned not with the analysis of concepts but with the description of experience; and, to the extent that the *Phenomenology of Perception* contains any clear view about the relationship between language and experience, it seems often to involve the tacit assumption that the former must properly 'represent' the latter. Hence, in particular, a language with determinately defined concepts will be unsuitable for the description of an actually non-determinate experienced world.

The final point about determinacy is the following. Merleau-Ponty often says that objects in the lived world, far from being determinate, are instead 'ambiguous', or 'equivocal' (e.g. *PP*, p. 6). Sometimes he means by this only that they have the kind of non-determinacy we have just considered. But at other times something more than this is being claimed, namely that they have two or more mutually conflicting or contradictory properties. So if something is ambiguous, in this sense, it is not so much that it neither has nor does not have a particular property; rather, there are positive grounds for saying both that it has that property and, either that it does not have that property, or that it has another which is incompatible with it.⁵

Ambiguity, then, is not for Merleau-Ponty a feature of words -- namely their being used, or being able to be used, in a number of distinct (and sometimes quite unrelated) senses. Instead it is a feature of the lived world itself -- that its objects often display mutually incompatible properties. In claiming this, what he has in mind is quite close to the way in which one commonly talks of certain human

situations or relationships as ‘ambiguous’. For example (ours, not his), a personal relationship between two people might be described as ‘sexually ambiguous’, in that it could equally well be interpreted as sexual or as non–sexual. The point here would be, not that it was somehow on the borderline between one and the other, but rather that it displayed characteristics typical of both. It would be ‘open to both interpretations’, not because one had failed to discover which was the correct one, but because of the coexistence of (and indeed the tension between) both ‘meanings’. But Merleau–

Ponty departs from this relatively familiar use of the concept by extending its potential application to everything that one experiences in the lived world: not just to human and social situations, but also to both organic and inorganic nature (e.g. *PP*, p. 24). As he puts it at one point: ‘The visual world is that strange zone in which contradictory notions jostle each other’ (*PP*, p. 6).

The determinacy of the objectivist’s universe, then, is in all these respects at odds with the non–determinacy of the lived world; and if objective thought is taken straightforwardly to describe what one actually experiences, it is thus guilty of misdescription. But Merleau–Ponty recognizes that the advocate of objective thought may respond to this by trying to distinguish between ‘the world as it really is’ and ‘the world as it appears’, in one’s perception or knowledge of it; and by then claiming that non–determinacy applies only to the latter and not to the former. For instance, in the case of perception, the objectivist may claim that

In the world taken in itself, everything is determinate. There are many unclear sights, as for example a landscape on a misty day, but then we [as objectivists] always say that no real landscape is in itself unclear. It is so only for us. The object, psychologists would assert, is never ambiguous, but becomes so only through our inattention. (*PP*, p. 6 trans. adjusted)

And likewise in the case of knowledge:

what is not determinate for me could become determinate for a more complete knowledge, which is as it were realized in advance in the [determinate] thing, or rather which is the thing itself. (*PP*, p. 54)

Merleau–Ponty will not accept these kinds of response, nor the radical distinction between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ which they necessarily rely upon. But his reasons for not doing so emerge mainly in the course of his more specific objections to empiricism and intellectualism which, because of their commitment to objective thought, are forced either directly to misrepresent what is experienced, or to try somehow to account for its non–determinate character by reference to the determinate concepts used in their explanatory or reconstructive procedures. As we shall see later, he

argues that neither can succeed.

We turn now to the second main contrast noted earlier, between the externality of relationships in the universe and the internality of those in the lived world. A relationship is external if the related items can be identified without reference to one another. Conversely, items are internally related if they cannot thus be independently identified (of Chapter Two, section 1, above). One kind of relationship with which Merleau-Ponty is concerned is that which obtains between the various properties possessed by particular objects their size, shape, colour, texture, and suchlike. For the objectivist, such relationships are external. Merleau-Ponty denies that this is so. For example, he says about the red colour of a carpet that 'this red would literally not be the same if it were not the "woolly red" of a carpet' (*PP*, pp. 4–5). Its colour and texture cannot altogether be distinguished from each other: they are not separately identifiable properties, externally related.

But his main interest, in discussing externality, is in causal relationships, or, somewhat more generally, in the relationships involved in the laws that are postulated by the empirical sciences. Objective thought, says Merleau-Ponty, recognizes between objects

only external and mechanical relationships, whether in the narrow sense of motion received and transmitted [e.g. in classical mechanics] or in the wider sense of the relation of function and variable. (*PP*. p. 73)

Let us take as an example the ideal gas law, $PV = kT$. Here the variables are the pressure, volume and temperature of a gas, denoted by 'P', 'V' and 'T' ('k' denotes a constant, which can be ignored here). The law specifies a functional relationship between these variables, so that the values of any two determine that of the third. Thus one can calculate the temperature of any gas by multiplying its pressure by its volume; its pressure, by dividing its temperature by its volume; and so on. One may also regard this equation as representing various causal relationships: for example, an increase in the temperature of a given volume of gas may be said to cause an increase in its pressure.

The externality of such relationships can best be seen by considering how the truth or falsity of claims about them can be assessed. For instance, to test empirically the ideal gas law, it must be possible to measure independently the pressure, volume and temperature of a gas: and this requires that each variable be definable without reference to the others. Likewise, and more generally, to test any claim that one item or event is the cause of another, one must be able to identify the presence or absence of each independently of the other – otherwise, for instance, one would not be able to devise experimental procedures to discover whether or not they regularly accompany each other.

Thus in denying that relationships in the lived world are external, Merleau-Ponty is denying that they are causal or functional. Rather, he says, they are internal relationships of a 'meaningful' or 'expressive' nature, in which the related items cannot be specified independently of one another. To see what he means by this, consider a particular example which he provides in the following passage:

In ordinary experience we find a fittingness and a meaningful relationship between the gesture, the smile, and the tone of a speaker. But this reciprocal relationship of expression which the human body as the outward manifestation of a certain manner of being-in-the-world, had, for mechanistic physiology, to be resolved into a series of causal relationships. (PP, p 55)

Suppose, for instance, that someone is greeting a friend. There will be, one may imagine, a smile on their face, a warmth to their tone of voice and a welcoming gesture -- say, a wave of the arm. What will be experienced, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a meaningful configuration of facial expression, sound and movement, in which each element is perceived as 'appropriate' to the others, as 'suitably' conjoined, and indeed as not altogether distinguishable from them. Further, he says, each element is itself an expression of 'a certain manner of being-in-the-world'. Leaving aside the philosophical niceties of this concept, let us say that it consists here of a certain 'attitude', a 'friendly' one. Then the smile, gesture and tone of voice can all be said to be experienced as expressions of this attitude.

But, says Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between an expression and what is expressed is not external, and hence not causal. Being friendly cannot be specified independently of its expressions, such as these; nor can they be identified independently of 'it'. Further, each of these expressions is internally related to the others, partly at least by virtue of their 'sharing' the attitude which they express. It might also be noted (though Merleau-Ponty does not do so here) that similarly 'meaningful' relationships would obtain even if no single or consistent attitude were being expressed. Suppose, for example, that one saw a smile and a welcoming gesture, but heard a cold or hostile tone of voice. There would then be a tension or dissonance within the overall configuration: and one might experience the person concerned as ambivalent, as expressing two conflicting attitudes. The smile and the hostile tone would be experienced as inappropriate to one another -- but this is just as 'meaningful' a relationship as appropriateness is.

By contrast, says Merleau-Ponty, the proponent of objective thought -- in this case, an empiricist -- will try to provide a causal explanation for the person's gesture, smile and tone of voice: for example, by claiming that these are the effects of various physiological processes. Thus the meaningful configuration that is actually experienced will have to be decomposed into supposedly discrete, independently identifiable (and determinately describable) elements, to each of which a physiological

cause is ascribed. The only relationship which could then he said to obtain between these elements would be that of co-occurrence, itself possibly to be explained by further external, causal relationships between the various physiological processes that have been postulated in each case. But, claims Merleau-Ponty, in adopting this approach the objectivist effectively destroys the phenomenon: what is actually experienced is necessarily misrepresented when forced into the framework of objective thought.

It should also be noted that nothing would be gained, in Merleau-Ponty's view, were the physiological explanation to be replaced or supplemented by a psychological one which referred, say, to a desire to be welcoming, or to a feeling of warmth or friendliness, as possible causes. For this would still require one to conceive of the various relationships as external, and thereby to misrepresent the meaningful, reciprocally expressive nature of what is in fact perceived. Thus objective thought is not, for Merleau-Ponty, exclusively materialist or physicalist in character; and, as we shall see, he regards the implicit acceptance by many empiricist psychologists of some version of Cartesian dualism -- of supposedly interacting psycho-physical processes -- as itself an influential form of objective thought.

One further point must be emphasized here. Although the example we have been considering is one involving the attitudes of humans to one another, Merleau-Ponty does not restrict his view of the internality of relationships to this domain: much the same is true of all relationships in the lived world, including those involving both organic and inorganic entities. There are, admittedly, important differences between human being-in-the-world and the (non-human) world in which humans 'exist'. But the latter is not the universe of objective thought; for the relationships which hold within it, too, are internal and meaningful.

Thus Merleau-Ponty's position here differs significantly from that of certain analytical philosophers, who have likewise denied that causal explanations can be given for human action and asserted that what are instead involved are internal relations of meaning.⁶ For in claiming this they have typically contrasted human action with the causal character of non-human phenomena. Furthermore, their 'internal relations of meaning' have been regarded as primarily linguistic or conceptual in nature, holding between the concepts employed in describing actions, desires, beliefs, and so on. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, any such conceptual relations in the language of action could only be secondary: due, as it were, to the relations of non-linguistic meaning experienced in the lived world itself (cf. Chapter Two, section 4, above).

The contrasts which we have been exploring between objective thought and the lived world are encapsulated in the following passage, where Merleau-Ponty declares that

the notion of a universe, that is to say, a completed and explicit totality, in which the relationships are those of reciprocal determination, exceeds [i.e. illicitly 'goes beyond'] that of a world, or an open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships which are of reciprocal implication. (*PP*, p. 71)

Indeed, as his use of the phrase 'reciprocal determination' suggests, there is an important connection between the concepts of externality and determinacy. It is no accident that the terms often used to denote causal relationships – 'determine', 'determination', and so on — are so closely related to 'determinacy' and 'determinate'. For it might well be argued that relationships of causal determination can hold only between items which are themselves determinate. This, at least, seems to be Merleau-Ponty's view; and hence his claims about the non-determinacy of the lived world may be seen as giving additional weight to his rejection of objectivism's external relationships.

To conclude this account of objective thought we shall consider briefly two further characteristics which Merleau-Ponty ascribes to it. The first concerns its conception of spatiality. According to this, every object has, at any given time, a determinate location in a unified spatial framework which is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, 'indifferent to its contents' (*PP*, p. 54). The basic idea here is that the nature of an object is taken to be in no way affected by its position in space, including its position relative both to observers and to other objects. One implication of this view is that an object remains exactly the same whatever its spatial 'orientation' whether it is, for example, 'upright', or 'on its side', or 'upside down'.

But, claims Merleau-Ponty, this is not true of one's actual experience of things in the lived world. Rather, he says,

I have only to look at a landscape upside down to recognize nothing in it. Now 'top' and 'bottom' have only a relative meaning for the understanding [i.e. for a Kantian version of objective thought], which can hardly regard the orientation of a landscape as an absolute obstacle to its recognition]. For the understanding a square is always a square, whether it stands on its side or at an angle. For perception it is in the second case hardly recognizable. (*PP*, p. 46)

Furthermore, he argues, neither does one's perception of the spatial relationships which obtain between different objects conform to objective thought. For example, in everyday experience one

discriminates between the relationships denoted by the terms 'on', 'under' and 'beside', despite the fact that the relative positions of the objects concerned may well be exactly the same in 'objective' space (*PP*, pp. 100–1). What must be recognized, then, is that in the lived world one is dealing not with 'a spatiality' of position, but a spatiality of situation' (*PP*, p. 101) – and hence with objects that are 'situated', always in relation to specific human actions, whether actual or projected.⁷

The final aspect of objective thought to be considered here is rather more difficult to specify. It concerns the objectivist's tendency to make a radical distinction between the kinds of properties which objects genuinely possess, and those which they only appear to the perceiver as possessing. Just where this distinction is drawn varies between different versions of objective thought. But Merleau-Ponty is especially concerned with those which use such a distinction to criticize a supposed human tendency to anthropomorphize nature – wrongly to ascribe to it characteristics which belong, if at all, only to humans themselves, and even then perhaps only to their 'inner experiences'.

For example, he says, according to one such view:

There is nothing in the appearance of a landscape, an object, or a body where by it is predestined to look 'gay' or 'sad', 'lively' or 'dreary', 'elegant' or 'coarse'. (*PP*, p. 23)

Instead, it is argued, such ascriptions should be regarded as projections onto the world of what are in fact only the effects of its real characteristics upon the perceiver: the genuine, non-human properties of things in the natural world give rise to various human experiences, the characteristics of which are then mistakenly attributed by the perceiver to their external causal origins (*PP*, p. 24).

But this philosophical view, says Merleau-Ponty, is quite wrong. There is no more reason for denying the reality of these kinds of perceived properties than there is for any others. Nor will he accept the closely related view that such statements as 'the landscape is dreary', 'the sea boiled angrily' or 'the clouds are threatening' (the latter examples ours) are at best to be regarded as purely metaphorical – that taken literally they are strictly false, and based merely on various associations and projections on the part of the perceiver. Rather, says Merleau-Ponty,

[once] we admit that all these 'projections', all these 'associations', all these 'transferences' are based on some intrinsic characteristic of the object, the 'human world' ceases to be a metaphor and becomes once more what it really is, the seat and as it were the homeland of our thoughts. (*PP*, p. 24)

Here, as elsewhere, Merleau–Ponty is inclined to insist that what objective thought regards as metaphorical should instead be taken as literally true of the lived world; and to deny that it is only what the objectivist deems literal that can be truly ascribed to it. Indeed the reader of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is bound to be struck by the frequency with which, as in the passage just quoted, crucial philosophical claims are themselves presented by Merleau–Ponty in what would generally be seen as metaphorical language. His defence of this practice might be that it is the only way in which they can be appropriately expressed.

However, objective thought’s willingness to deny the reality of various kinds of (merely) apparent properties may itself seem to pose a problem for Merleau–Ponty. His main aim, in criticizing objective thought, is to demonstrate how it systematically misrepresents the character of the lived world. But the advocate of objective thought might reply to this in the following way. To the extent that the character of the experienced world differs from that of the universe, this should be taken to indicate the inadequacy of perceptual experience as a straightforward guide to the nature of the real world. The ‘lived’ world is, after all, only the world as experienced; and one should not assume that human perception, taken ‘at face value’, gives one direct and unchallengeable access to reality. Rather, one must be aware of the possibility of systematic misperception, as displayed in the tendency towards various kinds of anthropomorphism, projection, and so on. In other words, objective thought need not present itself as providing a description of how one in fact experiences the world, but ‘only’ of what its character actually is; and hence it cannot be directly criticized in the way that Merleau–Ponty apparently thinks legitimate.

Merleau–Ponty does not explicitly address this possible response. But he would no doubt argue that the objectivist, in thus relying upon a distinction between the world as perceived and the world as it is, is thereby obliged to provide some (explanatory or reconstructive) account of the former, and of how it is that this supposedly distorted perception of the world occurs. But no such account can, in Merleau–Ponty’s view, be given; and one may regard his criticisms of empiricist and intellectualist approaches to perception as, at least implicitly, intended also to meet this objectivist response.⁸

3. Empiricism and Intellectualism

The account we have given of Merleau–Ponty’s conception of objective thought draws mainly on the substantial Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, ‘Traditional Prejudices and the Return to the Phenomena’. Here Merleau–Ponty criticizes empiricist and intellectualist approaches to perception, both because of their shared acceptance of objective thought, and for reasons peculiar to each of them. He returns to this critical task more extensively in Part Two, ‘The World as Perceived’; and we shall discuss this in Chapter Seven below. But we shall now look briefly at his specific criticisms of empiricism and intellectualism in the Introduction, to provide a fuller sense than has so

far been given of how he conceives of these two approaches.

The empiricist account of perception, says Merleau-Ponty, has two main elements. First, it takes as the basic unit of perceptual experience what it calls the 'sensation'.⁹ Second, it identifies various mechanisms through which these sensations are combined so as to generate one's actual perception of the world. In the opening two chapters of the Introduction, he criticizes each in turn. Noting that several different definitions of 'sensation' have been employed by empiricists, he focuses mainly on those according to which the experience of particular colours, shapes and sounds are typical cases. Each such sensation is regarded as corresponding to, and indeed as being produced by, the specific physical stimuli or sets of stimuli through which external objects impinge upon the sense-organs. For example, the pattern of retinal stimulation caused by light of a certain wave-length being reflected from an object might be said to produce the 'sensation' of redness. That there is always some such regular causal relationship between external stimuli and sensations Merleau-Ponty calls 'the constancy hypothesis' (*PP*, pp. 7–8).

Merleau-Ponty's main objection to this concept of sensation is that, if one examines one's actual experience, it will be found that one never in fact encounters anything that could be correctly described in this way. For example (*PP*, pp. 4–5) one might see a red patch on the carpet; but this does not involve the experiencing of any pure sensation of redness. Rather, the colour is seen as a feature of (that part of) the carpet, as one aspect of a total configuration which includes the play of light and shadows, the size and shape of the patch, the texture of the carpet, and so on.

Furthermore, says Merleau-Ponty, the empiricist cannot reply to this by saying that what is going on here is the simultaneous experiencing of a number of distinct sensations, including the colour amongst others. For what is perceived is a 'whole' which is not thus decomposable into discrete parts. Instead, he claims, these parts are not fully separable from one another. The specific character of each is influenced at least to some extent by its relations with the others in constituting this particular whole. So, for example, 'this red would literally not be the same if it were not the "woolly red" of the carpet' (*PP*, p. 5): its colour and texture are not altogether distinguishable from one other.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to argue that the empiricist cannot explain how it is that, in perceiving a particular object – such as a tree or a bicycle – one sees its various features as 'belonging together', as forming a unity which makes the object distinct from its background, including other objects (*PP*, pp. 15–16). This cannot be due to any corresponding 'grouping' of the various external stimuli supposedly operating at the time one is perceiving the object – i.e. the relative physical proximity to one another of those stimuli (or their sources) responsible for seeing the objects, as distinct from those responsible for seeing its background. For there will often be features of an object which are less close

to one another than they are to features of its background – of what is not seen as ‘belonging’ to it.

The empiricist, according to Merleau–Ponty, must try to deal with this problem by invoking, in addition, the effects of one’s past experience. This introduces the second main element of the empiricist account, its theory of ‘associations’ between sensations, and of the ‘projection of memories’. For example, says Merleau–Ponty, the empiricist may try to explain the perceived unity of an object’s features by claiming that this object, or another of the same kind, has often in the past been seen in motion. Whilst moving, its various features ‘kept together’, unlike its non-moving background, and thereby became associated with one another. When the object is now perceived stationary, the memory of this past association is recalled, and ‘projected’ onto the present situation.

But, argues Merleau–Ponty, such explanations inevitably beg the question. For how is the perceiver to ‘know’ which are the relevant memories or associations to rely upon? To perceive, for example, the unity of a mountain

– an object which is, in any case, itself always stationary – it must somehow remind one of similar objects whose features were previously seen to stay together. This would require one to recognize the mountain as the same (kind of) thing as that which displayed such unity in the past. However, if such recognition is possible, the recourse to past associations is redundant; for one must already be able to perceive those features as belonging to an object of that kind. If, on the other hand, such recognition is not possible, then there is no guarantee that the past associations would be the ‘right’ ones, that is, ones whose projected memory will cause one to see the object’s unity: to summon up the appropriate memory would be quite fortuitous.

As Merleau–Ponty acknowledges, these kinds of objections to empiricism have often been made by intellectualists. Having implicitly endorsed these objections, however, he goes on in the second two chapters of the Introduction to criticize the intellectualists’ positive account of perception. Like its empiricist rival, this has two main elements. The first is the concept of sensation; but the intellectualist claims, in opposition to empiricism, that sensations are never themselves directly experienced. Instead, it is argued, what is actually perceived is always the outcome of an interpretive process, in which various rules or principles are applied to the raw material provided by sensations. More specifically, perception is said necessarily to involve some act of judgement on the part of the perceiving subject; and it is this idea of judgement which forms the second main element of the intellectualist account of perception.

By ‘judgement’, says Merleau–Ponty, the intellectualist means something akin to a process of reasoning. As such it requires both premisses, which are provided by the sensations, and rules or principles of inference, which are provided by the cognitive equipment of the perceiving subject. The

conclusion of this process of reasoning is the act of perception itself. Hence, for example, the intellectualist will account for one's perception of a (unitary) object, with its properties 'belonging' to it, as the outcome of an exercise of judgement, in which various pre-established rules or conceptual schemata defining the unity of objects are applied to the interpretation of these sensations.

Merleau-Ponty regards this intellectualist approach as in many respects superior to empiricism. It rightly emphasizes the active role of the perceiving subject; and it succeeds, at least in its own terms, in accounting for the unitary character of perceived objects, which empiricism was unable to do. But intellectualism is nonetheless unsatisfactory. Its view of the part played by judgement misrepresents what it is actually like to perceive something. And it shares with empiricism the objectivist misdescription of the perceived world, an error which also affects adversely its conception of the subject. Let us consider these criticisms in more detail.

Merleau-Ponty begins by noting how the function ascribed by intellectualism to judgement is essentially defined by its complementary relationship to sensation. 'Judgement', as he puts it, 'is often introduced as what sensation lacks to make perception possible' (*PP*, P.32). But since the concept of sensation is itself, in Merleau-Ponty's view, entirely without foundation, there is no such 'gap' between sensation and perception needing to be filled by judgement. Thus, although intellectualism is to be applauded for recognizing that perception is never a matter of pure sensation, it remains 'haunted' by this empiricist concept a prejudice that should be removed altogether, and not merely compensated by the introduction of another.

By assimilating perception to judgement, says Merleau-Ponty, the intellectualist conflates what are, in fact, two quite distinct activities:

ordinary experience draws a clear distinction between sense experience [i.e. perception] and judgment. It sees judgment as the taking of a stand, as an effort to know something which shall be valid for every moment of my life, and equally for other actual or potential minds; sense experience on the contrary, is taking appearance at its face value, without trying to possess it and learn its truth. This distinction disappears in intellectualism, because judgment is everywhere where pure sensation is not – that is, absolutely everywhere. (*PP*, p. 34)

Perception and judgement, says *Merleau-Ponty*, are clearly distinguishable kinds of activity: to see something in front of one, for example, is quite different from making the judgement that it is there. In the latter case, one is making a claim about the object's existence and location, at least potentially supportable by reasons that will justify its validity to others. In the former case, one simply experiences the object as there, as visually present: one 'takes its appearance at face value'. Thus the

intellectualist misrepresents what it is like to perceive something.

However, Merleau-Ponty concedes that this objection may hold only against a philosophically unsophisticated form of intellectualism, which conceives of judgement as an actual mental operation performed by the human perceiver (*PP*, pp. 36–8).¹⁰ But intellectualism need not take this ‘psychologistic’ form. Instead it may regard its primary task as the identification of a set of formally specifiable rules which ‘make perception possible’ in that they enable one to reconstruct the basic character of the objects perceived. These rules, or knowledge of them, are then ascribed to a transcendental consciousness which can thus be thought of as possessing object-constitutive powers. There is no implication here that human perceivers literally apply such rules, and make judgements, either consciously or unconsciously: no attempt is being made to provide a psychological description of what is involved in the experience of perceiving something.

But, says Merleau-Ponty, this form of intellectualism suffers from the fact that, like empiricism, it accepts an objectivist view of what the world is like; and this, as we have already seen, in his view misrepresents the nature of what is actually experienced. Thus intellectualism succeeds only in reconstructing the ‘wrong’ world, the universe of objective thought. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, commenting on the transition from empiricist to intellectualist accounts of perception,

We started from a world in itself which acted upon our eyes so as to cause us to see it, and we now have consciousness of or thought about the world, but the nature of this world remains unchanged: it is still defined by the absolute mutual exteriority of its parts, and is merely duplicated throughout its extent by a thought which sustains it. We pass from absolute objectivity to absolute subjectivity, but this second idea is no better than the first, and is upheld only against it, which means by it. (*PP*, p. 39)

Furthermore, he argues, this prejudice of objective thought also affects adversely intellectualism’s conception of the subject. For the nature of the perceived world is such that it cannot be fully and explicitly articulated. Analytical reconstruction of this world is impossible: its character cannot be understood by reference to any formally specifiable set of rules. Correspondingly, therefore, any account of the subject which defines it in terms of such rules - and attempts thereby to explain how knowledge or consciousness of ‘the world’ is possible - must be seriously flawed (*PP*, p. 60).

We can now go on to consider in more general terms how Merleau-Ponty conceives of empiricism and intellectualism. Let us start with the former. In the opening section of this chapter we initially defined the empiricist approach as one that sought to discover scientific, causal explanations for human action and perception. But it can now be seen that, at least in the case of perception, Merleau-

Ponty's conception of empiricism is more restricted than this might lead one to expect, since it involves a quite limited range of possible explanations which refer only to external (physical) stimuli, their effects upon the sense-organs, sensations, the mechanisms of association and memory, and suchlike.

The empiricist account of perception, then, presents it as a relatively passive and mechanical affair, in which the mental processes involved are of a somewhat primitive variety. It is, perhaps, most obviously recognizable as the kind of account provided by philosophers who have traditionally been called 'empiricists', such as Locke, Hume and Mill. But Merleau-Ponty does not primarily mean by 'empiricism' the epistemological thesis that all human knowledge is based upon, or derived from, sensory perception. Rather he uses this term to refer to the account of perception which has, on the whole, been espoused by these philosophers, and which has also been a major influence in the history of psychology. Indeed, most of the 'empiricist' writers cited in the *Phenomenology of Perception* are psychologists or physiologists, not philosophers; nor are they committed, at least explicitly, to specific philosophical standpoints, epistemological or otherwise.¹¹

But empiricism is not confined in scope to the explanation of human perception. It also, for Merleau-Ponty, involves an analogous approach to the understanding of human action. Here the paradigmatic examples of empiricism are the various forms of behaviourist psychology – with their theories of learning based on the concepts of stimulus, response, conditioning, and so on – together with the correspondingly 'mechanistic' traditions of physiology and neurophysiology. Empiricist explanations of human action are not, however, exclusively materialist in character: some role may often be ascribed to distinctively 'mental' events and processes. But, as with the empiricist approach to perception, these psychological items will typically be of a fairly simple kind: sensations of heat or cold, feelings of pain or pleasure, desires for food or sexual gratification, emotions of fear or anger, and the like.¹²

By contrast with empiricism, the intellectualist regards both perception and action as the work of a human subject endowed with a wide range of cognitive powers. We have already noted how the intellectualist ascribes to the perceiver various rules or principles which enable bare sensations to be transformed into the perception of unitary objects through the exercise of judgement. Analogously, in the case of action, the intellectualist will try to identify the various plans, rules and purposes of the human agent. Thus reference will be made to processes of planning and deliberation, to the following of various rules and principles, to the adoption of specific aims and goals, to acts of choice and decision, and so on. Human action is above all 'intelligent' action; and intelligent action, like perception, is an achievement involving the exercise of sophisticated cognitive abilities. Correspondingly, therefore, the aim of an intellectualist analysis is to reconstruct these achievements,

to show how they are possible, by identifying the conceptual resources of the subject and their specific modes of employment.

It may also be helpful to note, in explicating what Merleau-Ponty means by 'intellectualism', that he sometimes uses instead the term 'rationalism', and draws upon the work of philosophers traditionally described as rationalists – such as Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza, as well as Kant – to provide examples of intellectualist analyses. However, as with empiricism, his primary interest in rationalism is not in its epistemological thesis that there is a priori, non-empirical knowledge of the world, but rather in the ways that rationalist philosophers have characterized the various cognitive processes supposedly involved in human activity. Relatedly, many of the writers he cites as intellectualists are not philosophers, but psychologists of a broadly 'cognitivist' orientation – including Piaget – whose work has been directly or indirectly influenced by the rationalist tradition in philosophy.¹³

To conclude this discussion of Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of empiricism and intellectualism we shall note certain problems about the distinctions between them, and about their respective relationships to realism and idealism. The first such problem is raised by the rather limited and simplistic character of the kinds of explanations which he attributes to empiricism. For it might be argued that, even if Merleau-Ponty succeeds in showing that 'the empiricist' cannot satisfactorily explain human action and perception, it would not follow that no kind of scientific, causal explanation can be provided for these. Perhaps there are others, of a more sophisticated theoretical nature than those he allows to the empiricist? Such possibilities are presumably important if Merleau-Ponty's aim, in criticizing empiricism, is to demonstrate what is wrong with any 'scientific' form of realism.

Merleau-Ponty might respond to this by saying that these supposedly more sophisticated 'explanations' would probably involve reference to the kinds of mental processes identified by those whom he as intellectualists; and that his criticisms of intellectualist 'reconstructions' would still apply, even if they were instead regarded as belonging to a more sophisticated form of 'scientific' empiricism. (Indeed, many of the intellectualist psychologists he discusses may well have seen their work as strictly scientific, as attempting to provide genuinely causal explanations for human perception and action.)

However, this response may indicate a further problem. If intellectualist psychology is 'scientific', how can Merleau-Ponty make use of its supposed failings so as to demonstrate the untenability of transcendental idealism, as he apparently wishes to do (see section 1, above)? For, according to the idealist, the mental processes of human beings are themselves part of the world which is constituted as such by a non-worldly transcendental subject. And it might seem odd to believe that a philosophical theory about the transcendental subject can be defeated by revealing the shortcomings of merely

psychological theories about (worldly) human subjects. But Merleau-Ponty clearly does not think so. In his view, any deficiencies in a psychological theory of the human subject 'carry over' to its transcendental counterpart; and hence the critique of intellectualist psychology would indeed entail a corresponding critique of transcendental idealism.¹⁴

4. The Dialectical Critique of Realism and Idealism

In the opening section of this chapter we described how the concepts of empiricism, intellectualism and objective thought function in Merleau-Ponty's overall critical strategy. Having examined these concepts in more detail, we can now elaborate our initial account of this. We will begin by noting a basic pattern to which most of the *Phenomenology of Perception*'s individual chapters, or sequence of chapters, conform. This pattern, as will be seen, is by no means a matter of mere presentation. It also indicates the 'dialectical' character of Merleau-Ponty's mode of argument; and by attending to this we can identify in outline the existential phenomenological position for which he is arguing.

Merleau-Ponty typically starts by presenting a possible empiricist explanation for some phenomenon involving human perception or action, often taken from the work of psychologists or physiologists. He then argues that this scientific hypothesis fails to meet the empiricist's own criteria for explanatory adequacy; and in doing so he sometimes makes use of objections which have been advanced by intellectualist critics of empiricism. Next, he outlines an intellectualist alternative, which is in turn criticized on the grounds that the proposed reconstruction does not deal with the actual character of the phenomenon, and that it misrepresents the role of the human subject. He concludes by proposing his own, existential-phenomenological analysis of the phenomenon, which is informed by the nature of his objections to the empiricist's and intellectualist's rival accounts.

This basic pattern also displays a number of additional features. The first concerns objective thought. Both empiricism and intellectualism are criticized for their objectivist misdescriptions of the phenomena. But Merleau-Ponty is inclined to argue that, whilst empiricist explanations would fail even for an objective universe, intellectualist reconstructions might well succeed. The victory is, of course, a hollow one; and he maintains that neither can account for the phenomena correctly described. Further, he often suggests that the difficulties actually encountered by the empiricist in attempting to explain the phenomena are due precisely to their non-objective character which, whilst not acknowledged because of the prejudice of objective thought, nonetheless makes its presence felt to the empiricist in this unwelcome manner.

Second, Merleau-Ponty rarely if ever claims to have provided a strictly conclusive refutation of either empiricist or intellectualist accounts of any phenomenon. Indeed at times he implies that this would not be possible (e.g. pp, p. 8, note 5). Instead he tries to show the difficulties which every particular

application of either approach seems constantly to encounter; and how each attempt to modify these to deal with a specific problem seems always to generate yet more problems of its own. It is partly for this reason that Merleau-Ponty's arguments in the *Phenomenology of Perception* may often appear to be repetitive – similar objections and criticisms are made time and again. But this is because such 'repetition' is, in his view, the only way in which the failure of empiricism and intellectualism can be shown. Thus, borrowing the terminology more recently introduced in the philosophy of science by Imre Lakatos, one could say that, for Merleau-Ponty, empiricism and intellectualism are two competing 'research programmes' for understanding human perception and action; and whilst neither can be conclusively refuted, both are clearly 'degenerating' rather than 'progressing'. To retain their respective 'hard cores' in the face of counter-evidence, they become increasingly complex and unwieldy, and thereby unpersuasive.¹⁵

The third feature is this. Whilst Merleau-Ponty is critical of both empiricism and intellectualism, he does not wish to reject either of them altogether. Each has something positive to offer, which is therefore to be preserved, albeit in a significantly modified form, by existential phenomenology. This is more obviously so in the case of intellectualism. For example, Merleau-Ponty is sympathetic to its emphasis upon the active role of the human subject in perception, though not to the kind of consciousness ascribed to it; and he likewise agrees with the intellectualist's view of the purposive, intentional nature of human action, whilst rejecting its unduly cognitive, deliberative characterization. But it is also true, though to a lesser extent, in the case of empiricism. For example, he regards it as a virtue of empiricist approaches to perception that they emphasize the distinctive contributions made by each of the human senses, despite their objectivist prejudices concerning these; and he argues that empiricist explanations of action at least have the merit of recognizing its dependence on the agent's bodily organization, despite misinterpreting the nature of this dependence.

Thus Merleau-Ponty's attitude towards the mutually opposing programmes of empiricism and intellectualism is by no means wholly negative. Rather, he might be said to proceed in a manner that resembles the 'dialectical' character of a Hegelian critique.¹⁶ Existential phenomenology 'overcomes' (or 'transcends') the opposition between the two. In doing so it rejects certain elements of each, whilst preserving others which are then reintegrated in a way that partly alters their previous nature. Admittedly, Merleau-Ponty never declares his allegiance to this mode of critique. But we shall implicitly take it as a model in now outlining some of the main elements in the positive position for which he argues.

Merleau-Ponty's strategy, we have claimed, is to show that neither realism nor idealism are defensible, by demonstrating the inadequacies of both empiricist explanations and intellectualist reconstructions. So let us now focus more specifically on the competing philosophical standpoints of

realism and idealism themselves. The fundamental disagreement between them concerns the ontological status of 'the real world'. The idealist claims that this is somehow constituted as such by a transcendental subject; whilst the realist denies this, maintaining instead that this world exists in its own right, independently of one's knowledge of it, and including within it those beings who are able to acquire such knowledge. This disagreement may be represented, as it often has been, by saying that, whereas for the idealist there is a radical dichotomy between the 'subject' and 'object' of knowledge, no such dichotomy is accepted by the realist, for whom, as it were, everything belongs to the category of 'object'.

In the terms of this admittedly crude formulation, we can express Merleau-Ponty's own position in the following way. He accepts that there is some significant differentiation between subject and object between, as he sometimes puts it, the 'for-itself' and the 'in-itself'; but he rejects the idealist understanding of the distinction. This is partly because the world, for Merleau-Ponty, is less 'object-like' than either realists or idealists maintain: it is not the universe of objective thought. But it is also because he denies the transcendental status of the idealist's subject. The 'true' subject is a human subject; and whilst this subject cannot be regarded simply as belonging to the world along with other objects, as realism claims, neither can it be seen as wholly prior to, as somehow the source or origin of, the world of objects.¹⁷ The human subject cannot be conceived of independently of its relationships to the world, nor vice versa: it is, in that much used existentialist phrase, a 'being-in-the-world'. Furthermore, for Merleau-Ponty the primary mode of such 'being-in' is a practical one: it is not a cognitive relationship of 'thinking of' or 'being conscious of' the world.

Merleau-Ponty indicates his commitment to a position of this kind at several points in the Preface. For example, in the following passage he refers to Augustine's famous dictum (which had been quoted approvingly by Husserl at the very end of the *Cartesian Meditations*) --- 'Go back into yourself; truth inhabits ['dwells in'] the inner man' -- and claims that this is not the correct alternative to realism:

Truth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man', or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself. When I return to myself from an excursion into the realm of dogmatic common sense or of science, I find, not a source of intrinsic truth, but a subject destined to the world [*voué au monde*]. (PP, p xi)

And a little later on, discussing Husserl's view of philosophical reflection (the '*Cogito*') and its relationship to Descartes' concept of 'meditation', he rejects the idea that this leads one to recognize a transcendental, conscious subject:

The true *Cogito* does not define the subject's existence in terms of the thought he has of existing, and furthermore does not convert the indubitability of the world into the indubitability of thought about the world, nor finally does it replace the world itself by the world as meaning. On the contrary it recognizes my thought itself as an inalienable fact, and does away with any kind of idealism in revealing me as 'being-in-the world' [*être au monde*]. (*PP*, xiii)

Both these passages raise, amongst others, important questions about Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Husserl. But before commenting on this, some further content can be given to this rather bare description of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology by introducing what is arguably its central and philosophically most striking component, its conception of the human body. In Part One of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, 'The Body', he argues not only that this is not an 'object' (as defined by objective thought, and as both empiricists and intellectualists assume), but that it should instead be understood as a 'subject': more specifically, as the subject of action ('in-the-world'). But its subjectivity is not of the kind envisaged by intellectualists or idealists. In particular, although like the intellectualist's subject it possesses both knowledge and intentionality, it does so in an essentially practical and 'pre-conscious' form.¹⁸

We shall discuss these claims in the following chapter. In Chapter Seven we go on to consider Part Two of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, 'The World as Perceived', in which Merleau-Ponty returns to the question of perception, initially addressed in the Introduction. He attends both to the nature of what is perceived, insisting upon its non-objective character, and also to that of the perceiving subject. Here too the body is ascribed a central role; and intellectualism is criticized for being unable, amongst other things, to account for the 'fact' that one perceives with one's eyes, ears and other sense-organs. Further, Merleau-Ponty develops here a view of the 'strictly bilateral' character of the relationship between the subject and object of perception, as an alternative both to realism and to idealism.

Thus one can begin to see how the concept of the 'body-subject' operates in the *Phenomenology of Perception* as the means by which, as we put it earlier, the opposition between realism and idealism can be 'overcome' – 'transcended', in the Hegelian sense. And, on the face of it, this view of the subject involves a major departure from Husserl's conception of phenomenology, at least in the *Cartesian Meditations*. But Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Husserl is more complex than this would suggest, for at least two reasons. First, there is Merleau-Ponty's tendency always to present himself as a 'true Husserlian', as working within the 'spirit' of Husserl's phenomenology. This is expressed, amongst other ways, in his attempt to interpret the key concepts of reduction, essence and intentionality in a manner that minimizes any apparent disagreement with Husserl.

Second, and more importantly, there is the fact that Merleau-Ponty's view of Husserl's phenomenology was strongly influenced by his reading of the material later published as *The Crisis*, where a number of significantly new elements were introduced into Husserl's work (Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1931), trans. D. Carr, Northwestern University Press 1970). Amongst these was the rejection of 'scientific', objectivist, conceptions of the human body. So in the next chapter (chapter 6, 'The Body as Subject'), before examining Merleau-Ponty's own account of the body, we shall look first at *The Crisis* and at its philosophical relationship to the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Notes and references

1 We discuss Merleau-Ponty's view of intentionality in Chapter Six, section 5; and his interpretations of transcendental reduction, and essences, in section 1 of the Conclusion.

2 This account of Merleau-Ponty's overall strategy of argument involves a good deal of extrapolation from the text. One difficulty is an apparent lack of consistency in his use of various key terms: for example, 'objectivism' is sometimes used with specifically empiricist and/or realist implications, at odds with his claim that this is a view shared by intellectualists anti empiricists. Another is that, although he occasionally talks explicitly of 'realism' (e.g. *PP*, p. 31), he also uses other terms to refer to this position, including 'naturalism' (e.g. *PP*, p. 47). For a helpful overview of Merleau-Ponty's arguments in both *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Structure of Behaviour* (1941; trans. A. Fisher, Methuen 1965), see L. Spurling, *Phenomenology and the Social World*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1977, Chapter 1.

3 See R. Gregory, *Eye and Brain* (3rd edn, Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1977), Chapter 9, for a discussion (in Merleau-Ponty's terms, intellectualist) of this and other well-known visual illusions; and his *The Intelligent Eye* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1977), Chapter 3, for a (similarly intellectualist) explanation of perceptual ambiguities and paradoxes.

4 E. Nagel, in *The Structure of Science* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1961), Chapter 1, argues that the determinacy of scientific concepts is one of several related features which make science different from, and in many respects superior to, common-sense. Cf. Hospers's more sympathetic discussion of 'vagueness' in J. Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, 2nd edn, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1967, Chapter 3; and Waismann's argument that all descriptive concepts are inevitably 'open-textured', in F. Waismann, 'Verifiability', in G. H. Parkinson ed., *The Theory of Meaning*, Oxford University Press 1968.

5 It is unclear whether Merleau-Ponty's claim here implies rejection of the Law of Non-Contradiction, and likewise, for his preceding claim, rejection of the Law of Excluded Middle. For discussion of the meaning and status of these 'Laws', see Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, Chapter 11.

6 For an influential statement of the 'internal relations' view of human (and hence social) action, see P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1958, especially Chapters II and V; for an equally influential statement of the opposing view, D. Davidson, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press 1980, 3-20.

7 For a similar contrast between 'objective' and 'lived' spatiality, see E. W. Straus, *Selected Papers: Phenomenological Psychology* (trans. in part by E. Tang, Tavistock Publications 1966), Chapter 1, and for more recent phenomenological explorations of spatiality, see J. Pickles, *Phenomenology, Science and Geography* (Cambridge University Press 1985), and E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion.

8 We return to the issues raised here in Section 2 of the Conclusion.

9 See A. Plomer, 'Merleau-Ponty on Sensations', *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, 21 (2), 1990, 153-163.

10 Merleau-Ponty's argument here seems to rely on the intellectualist's regarding such judgements as being made consciously; and it is unclear why this should be assumed.

11 On empiricist philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see R. Woolhouse, *The Empiricists*, Oxford University Press 1988, and on their influence in the history of psychology, R. Peters and C. A. Mace, 'Psychology', in P. Edwards ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, Macmillan 1967, 1-27.

12 See B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behaviour* (Collier-Macmillan 1965) for a defence of radical behaviourism in psychology; and R. L. Atkinson et al., *Introduction to Psychology* (8th edn, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1983), Chapters 10 and 11, for a discussion of what Merleau-Ponty would regard as typically empiricist theories of motivation and the emotions.

13 See J. Cottingham *Rationalism*, Paladin Books 1984, on the history of rationalist philosophy and its influence on twentieth-century linguistics and psychology. R. Gregory *The Intelligent Eye* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1977), and G. A. Miller et al., *Plans and the Structure of Behaviour* (Holt Rinehart 1960) could be seen as examples of intellectualist approaches to perception and action, as could more recent developments in artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology: see M. Boden, *Artificial Intelligence and Natural Man*, 2nd edn, M.I.T. Press 1987, and section 3 of the Conclusion.

14 Hence Merleau-Ponty gives a good deal of attention to the French neo-Kantians, such as Alain, Brunschvicg and Lachelier, who might be seen by some as providing an improperly 'psychologised' version of Kantian philosophy.

15 See I. Lakatos, 'Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes', in I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave eds, *Criticism and the Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, Cambridge University Press, 1974: for critical discussion of Lakatos's position, see A. Chalmers, *What is this Thing Called Science?*, 2nd edn, Open University Press, 1982, Chapters 7 and 9, and P. K. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, New Left Books 1975, Chapter 16.

16 See R. Norman, *Hegel's Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction*, Harvester Press 1976, Chapter 1, for a discussion of Hegel's conception of dialectical critique and of the 'phenomenological' character of Hegel's philosophy.

17 Cf. the discussion in section 1, Chapter Four, of Sartre's attempt to 'steer a course between realism and idealism'.

18 The centrality of this concept of the body-subject is rightly emphasized by R. Kwant, in *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. Duquesne University Press 1963.