

MERLEAU-PONTY

A Guide for the Perplexed

Eric Matthews

**MERLEAU-PONTY: A GUIDE FOR
THE PERPLEXED**

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PREFACE

Merleau-Ponty is not an easy author to understand, but he more than repays the effort. The difficulty comes, not from any wilful obscurity, but from the sheer subtlety and complexity of his thought. This book is an attempt to guide readers through that complexity. It works by introducing some of Merleau-Ponty's main themes step by step. Its structure is meant to be something like a staircase: by the time readers reach the top stair, they should have a better grasp than when they first set foot on the bottom stair. What looks like the same theme may appear in more than one chapter, but each time it will be in a different context, which should hopefully add a fresh element to understanding. The only way to read the book, therefore, is linear – from the first page to the last page, not skipping anything in between.

Space does not allow me to cover *all* of Merleau-Ponty's concepts, nor would it be helpful to try to do so. What I have tried to do is to discuss the central core of his thought, in the hope that this will enable readers to explore further for themselves. The Bibliography at the end is meant to help with that exploration. In particular, I have said very little about the developments at the very end of Merleau-Ponty's short life, which were published only after his death. This is because they are necessarily unfinished work, and we cannot know where he would have taken these ideas if he had lived. Better to concentrate on the acknowledged texts published during his lifetime, which anyway contain his most original contribution to philosophy.

Finally, I must express my thanks to Hywel Evans, formerly of Continuum, who first encouraged me to submit a proposal for this book. I must also thank my wife Hellen for her patience with me while I wrote it; and my friend and former student Dr Martin Wylie who shares my enthusiasm for Merleau-Ponty and has contributed more to my thinking than he is aware.

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CHAPTER 1

PHENOMENOLOGY

INTRODUCING MERLEAU-PONTY

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) is much less well-known, especially in the English-speaking world, than his contemporary and sometime friend Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre is known even to many people who have not studied his philosophy because of his novels, plays, short stories and essays, and because he was a leading public figure in French society for many years in the mid-twentieth century. Merleau-Ponty wrote no novels or plays; and although, like most French intellectuals, he participated actively in general cultural life, he for the most part followed a typical French academic career. But his philosophy is not that of a cloistered professor, of interest only to other professionals. Many would say that he is at least as important and relevant a thinker as Sartre, and perhaps more original and profound. Like most philosophers (including Sartre) he went out of fashion after his death, though many psychologists continued to find stimulation in his ideas. There are signs now of a revival of interest in what he has to say about a range of philosophical questions. In particular, the debate about mind and consciousness seems to have caught up with him. There is no denying that his often dense prose, as well as the sheer subtlety of his thoughts, makes him a difficult philosopher to get to grips with; but I shall try in this book to provide a guide to at least the main outlines of his thought, in such a way as to show that it is worth making the effort.

A brief account of his life may help to put him in context. Like Sartre, he studied philosophy at the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), one of the most distinguished higher-education institutions in France, in the late 1920s. It was at the ENS that the two men first

met, though they were not particularly close at that time. Their teachers included some of the best-known French philosophers of the time, such as Léon Brunschvicg and Georges Gurvitch. As a result, Merleau-Ponty was well-grounded in the history of western philosophy, as interpreted by these men, but also in contemporary developments. In particular, he attended Gurvitch's lectures on Husserl's phenomenology, and probably heard Husserl himself lecturing in Paris in 1929 (the significance of this will be explained later).

After graduating from the ENS, Merleau-Ponty taught philosophy for a few years in lycées (secondary schools), did a year's research on perception and then, in 1935, took up a junior post in the ENS which he occupied until the outbreak of the Second World War. While there, he completed a doctoral thesis which was later to become his first book, published in 1942, whose English title is *The Structure of Behaviour*. The main influence on him in writing this book was the 'Gestalt' school of psychologists, who emphasized the organized nature of human experience: our perceptions were not, according to them, broken up into atomistic units called 'sensations', but were structured wholes in which the meaning of individual elements depended on their relation to the whole. Merleau-Ponty, however, thought that the Gestaltists were wrong to think of this as an empirical psychological hypothesis. It was, according to him, a philosophical thesis about the essential nature of human experience. But his interest in Gestalt ideas continued even in his later works.

Other influences on him in the first phase of his thinking in the 1930s were the new French interest in Hegel which developed after the First World War, and (connected with that) the 'western Marxism' which founded itself on the rediscovered early writings of Marx. Merleau-Ponty, like many young French intellectuals, was drawn to the lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* which were given by a Russian émigré called Alexandre Kojève in Paris in the late 1930s. Kojève's interpretation read Hegel from an essentially Marxist perspective, or, it could equally well be said, treated Marxism as an expression of Hegelianism. This 'Hegelianized' Marxism was similar to that of Marxist thinkers like the Hungarian Georg Lukàcs, whose version of Marxism was far less mechanistic than that of official Communism, and so far more acceptable to idealistic young western left-wingers like Merleau-Ponty. (For further discussion of Merleau-Ponty's Marxism, see Chapter 7).

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With the outbreak of war, Merleau-Ponty was called up as an infantry officer, but was demobilized when the French army was defeated by the invading German forces, and went back to teaching philosophy in lycées in Paris. He met Sartre again, and this time became much closer to him, when the two men helped to form a small, and not very effective (by Sartre's own admission), Resistance group called *Socialisme et Liberté* (Socialism and Liberty) which tried to make its own small contribution to opposing the German Occupation of France. The group broke up after a year's existence, but Merleau-Ponty and Sartre remained friends and colleagues. They shared the same general left-wing outlook on politics and society, and in 1945 jointly founded the leading French literary and political periodical *Les Temps modernes* (*Modern Times*). Both were editors and directors of the journal, though Merleau-Ponty wrote most of the editorials (which he did not sign) and took overall control of the magazine's political line. In 1948, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre founded a new socialist political party, non-Communist though not anti-Communist, called the *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire* (RDR), whose name means the Revolutionary Democratic Grouping. The party, however, was something of a failure: it did not last very long, and did not attract enough support on the Left to act as a serious rival to the huge French Communist Party (PCF).

In 1945, Merleau-Ponty published what many would regard as his most important book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, which again was originally a doctoral thesis. (We shall return to this work later in the chapter, and in much of the rest of the book, since it considers virtually all of the major themes of his thought.) It was also in 1945 that Merleau-Ponty made the move from teaching philosophy in lycées to university teaching, when he became a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Lyon. In 1949, he moved to become Professor of Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne, in Paris; and finally, in 1952 he was appointed to a Chair in Philosophy at the Collège de France, also in Paris, a post which he held for the rest of his life.

All this time, he was writing and speaking; about philosophy, of course, but also about a range of other subjects including politics, art, literature and the cinema. In 1947, he published a political work, *Humanism and Terror*, which reveals him struggling to come to terms with the revelations of Soviet repression which were increasingly

reaching the West, while holding on to a belief in Marxist socialism. These misgivings about Soviet Communism increased in the next few years, and were one of the primary causes of the quarrel between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in 1953. (Sartre, in strong disagreement with Merleau-Ponty, continued to hold to the view that support for the Soviet Union was necessary if one were to avoid betraying the French working class, most of whom supported the pro-Soviet French Communist Party.) Merleau-Ponty resigned as editor of *Les Temps modernes*, and thereafter took little active part in politics, though he retained an essentially left-wing stance. His book *Adventures of the Dialectic*, published in 1955, expresses his later attitudes to politics, as well as containing a long attack on Sartre's political position. (The two men were reconciled to some extent before Merleau-Ponty's death.)

In 1948, he gave a series of radio talks on his own approach to philosophy, the text of which has now been published, both in French and English (the title of the English translation is *The World of Perception*). He wrote numerous articles about politics and general cultural topics: some of these were published in book form in his collections *Sense and Non-Sense* and *Signs*. His inaugural lecture at the Collège de France was published, along with other essays, as *In Praise of Philosophy*. And, very importantly, towards the end of his life, he was working on two books, both uncompleted at the time of his death, and published only posthumously, in which his thinking took a distinctive new turn. These books are known in English as *The Prose of the World* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. (For full details of all the works mentioned, and of other works by Merleau-Ponty, see the Bibliography at the end of this book.) On 3 May 1961, at the tragically early age of 53 and (as the uncompleted works show) with much still to say, Merleau-Ponty died of a heart attack.

THE TURN TO PHENOMENOLOGY

Some of the influences on Merleau-Ponty's thinking have been mentioned already: Hegel and a Hegelianized version of Marxism and Gestalt psychology in particular. Other influences came from contemporary French philosophers, such as Henri Bergson and Gabriel Marcel, and from the general tradition of western philosophy, above all Descartes and Kant. But by far the most significant influence on his development was the 'phenomenological' movement initiated by

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Edmund Husserl. It has already been mentioned that Merleau-Ponty heard lectures by Georges Gurwitsch on phenomenology while he was still a student at the ENS, and that he was probably present at the lecture Husserl himself gave in Paris in 1929. But what really ‘converted’ him to phenomenology seems to have been his discovery of Husserl’s later thought towards the end of the 1930s. In 1939, an article appeared in the journal *Revue internationale de philosophie* on fresh developments in Husserl’s thinking at the end of his life (Husserl had died in 1938). When Merleau-Ponty read this article, he was so impressed that he immediately made arrangements to visit the newly established Husserl Archive at the Catholic University of Louvain (now Leuven) in Belgium. A Catholic priest from Louvain, Father von Breda, had managed to rescue Husserl’s manuscripts from Nazi Germany, where Husserl had in the last years of his life faced the same persecution as other Jews, and where his work was consequently in danger. In Louvain, Merleau-Ponty made a deep study of these writings, most of which were at that time still unpublished, though some of the most important of them had been published in 1936 as *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. His work from then on was deeply marked by his understanding of phenomenology, even though in his posthumously published writings he claimed to repudiate the phenomenological standpoint.

Who was Edmund Husserl, and what did he mean by ‘phenomenology’? He was born in 1859 in Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic, then a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). He studied mathematics and philosophy in Berlin, Vienna and Halle, and then taught philosophy at Halle, Göttingen and Freiburg, until his retirement in 1929. His greatest philosophical achievement in these years was to found the phenomenological movement, one of the central strands of twentieth-century philosophy. Phenomenology claimed to offer a new beginning in western philosophy, though one that incorporated all that was best in earlier traditions, especially the intellectual revolutions carried out by Descartes and by Kant. Like all living schools of thought, it developed over time, but some elements in phenomenology remained constant through these changes. One is the emphasis on human subjectivity. Knowledge and awareness of the world are always *someone’s* knowledge and awareness, as both Descartes and Kant had reminded us. Descartes had argued that all sound conceptions of the world must be grounded in our

knowledge of our own existence as thinking beings, or subjects (the Cartesian *cogito*: 'I think, therefore I am'). Kant had stressed similarly that the 'I think' must accompany all our representations – that a representation of things must be a representation *to someone*.

Husserl saw the function of phenomenology as that of clarifying the essences of the concepts used in the various forms of our awareness of the world about us, including the natural sciences. In his original formulation of phenomenology, he describes both science, and pre-scientific common sense, as part of what he called the 'natural attitude': we naturally take for granted the objective existence of the things of which we are aware, and seek to know more about them. But if we are to pursue such scientific investigations fruitfully, we need to understand what exactly it is that we are seeking to investigate: what do we *mean* by our talk, in psychology for example, of 'consciousness' or 'perception' or, in physics, by our conceptions of 'matter'? To discover that, Husserl argued, we need to set aside the objectivist assumptions of the natural attitude, and concentrate on our own subjective consciousness of how the things referred to *appear* to us (hence 'phenomenology', from the Greek word 'phenomena', meaning 'appearances'). We must get back 'to the things themselves', forgetting any scientific or other theories about the things in question, and sticking to describing our concrete human experience of them, on which any such theories must, after all, be based. This ranking of concrete experience as more important than abstract theorizing makes phenomenology, as Merleau-Ponty says, part of 'the general effort of modern thought' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: xxiv).

This emphasis on subjectivity might suggest that phenomenology was simply a form of introspective psychology, retreating from the objective world into our 'inner selves'. But that is not how Husserl and his followers saw subjectivity. The 'subjective' is not a separate inner world, but is necessarily related to the world we are conscious of. To make this point, Husserl took over a concept from the nineteenth-century Austrian philosopher Franz Brentano (1837–1917): the concept of the 'intentionality' of consciousness. Brentano had found this term in the writings of mediaeval logicians, and had thought it neatly expressed what distinguished the 'psychic' (mental) from the 'physical'. To say that consciousness is 'intentional' is to say that it is always *directed towards* or *refers to* some object: this can be expressed in the slogan 'consciousness is always consciousness *of* something'. For example, thinking is always thinking *about* or of someone or

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something; being afraid is always being afraid *of* something; hoping is always hoping *for* something. It is impossible just to think without thinking about an object, or to be afraid without being afraid of something, and so on.

The object that we are conscious of can be called the 'intentional' object. There are several interesting things to be said about the intentional objects of consciousness. First, something can be an intentional object without actually existing, and we can say that something is an intentional object without knowing whether it exists or not. For instance, we can be afraid of something which doesn't really exist, as in a child's fear of the bogey-man. And to say that some people are afraid of ghosts implies nothing about whether ghosts really exist or not. This means that to say that something is the intentional object of our consciousness is not the same as saying that it *causes* our consciousness of it, since only things which really exist can be causes. Thus, the relation of our consciousness to its intentional objects is not a causal one, and the study of how intentional objects appear to consciousness (phenomenology) is not the same as the study of the causes of our consciousness of objects (empirical psychology or physiology).

Secondly, we are conscious of an intentional object *under some particular description* and not under others. For instance, I might be thinking about Tony Blair without knowing that he is the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. If someone asked me whether I was thinking about the British Prime Minister, I should then reply, 'No, I'm thinking about Tony Blair', and that would be a true statement about my present thoughts, even though, looked at from the outside, to think about Tony Blair in 2005 is to think about the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. So we can say what I am thinking about without reference to what is in fact the case. In this sense, the phenomenological study of how things appear to our consciousness is distinct from the study of how things are 'objectively', in the outside world, and can be carried on independently of any such objective study.

Thirdly, the different forms of our consciousness obviously relate to their intentional objects in different ways. To believe in ghosts and to be afraid of ghosts, for instance, have the same intentional object, but they relate to that intentional object differently. A belief in ghosts, as such, is simply the acceptance of a certain proposition ('There are such things as ghosts'). A fear of ghosts, on the other

hand, necessarily involves certain kinds of behaviour – shivers down the spine in places which are believed to be haunted, avoidance of such places, and so on. A love of ghosts would also involve behaviour and responses to the experience of ghosts, but behaviour and responses which are of a different kind from those involved in fear. In some individuals' experience, belief in ghosts and fear of ghosts may be inextricably entangled, but it does not follow that belief and fear are *conceptually* indistinguishable. An important part of phenomenology, as the study of how things appear to consciousness, is thus the study of the different ways in which the same things appear to different modes of consciousness, such as thought, perception, fear, love, imagination, and so on. To put it another way, we need to understand, not only what ghosts are or what we mean by 'ghosts', but also what we mean by 'thinking', 'perceiving', 'imagining', 'loving', and how the essence of one of these modes of consciousness differs from that of the others. Indeed, it might be argued that study of the different modes of consciousness of objects and their essential differences must come before study of the essences of what we are conscious of, and much of phenomenological literature is in fact concerned more with the essences of different modes of consciousness than with those of the different objects of consciousness. (Merleau-Ponty's own studies of the phenomenology of perception are a case in point.)

A phenomenology based on the acceptance of the intentionality of consciousness is thus different from an empirical introspective psychology in a number of important ways. First of all, it is not empirical. It is not concerned with what the world is objectively like, which would need empirical data provided by observation and experiment, but with what the objects that we believe ourselves to experience in the world *mean to us*, or with what our belief in them means. We can establish that without the need for empirical data about the outside world (and so a priori), just by reflecting on our own experience. Secondly, it is not introspective. Consciousness, if it is intentional, cannot be studied separately from its objects, which are outside us (even, paradoxically, if they don't exist!). One way in which Husserl differed from Brentano was that Brentano thought of intentional objects as existing 'in' consciousness, whereas Husserl saw that that could not be correct, since it is contrary to what 'intentionality' means. Someone who believes in ghosts does not just believe that the *idea* of ghosts exists (something which could be accepted by the most

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dedicated sceptic about the supernatural), but that *actual* ghosts exist ‘out there’, waiting to be encountered on dark nights. What the sceptic doubts, similarly, is that there are such actual ghosts. So to study our consciousness of ghosts (or anything else) is not to look inside our minds to study our ideas of ghosts, but to study what both the believer and the sceptic mean by ‘ghosts’, what part that concept plays in our shared human experience, as a potential inhabitant of the world outside our minds.

Thirdly, phenomenology is not (scientific) psychology, both because, as has just been said, it is not reliant on empirical data, and also because it is *descriptive* rather than *explanatory*. Scientific psychology (like all sciences) does not only seek to establish the facts about its particular domain, but to give a *causal explanation* of how those facts come to be so: what causes what to happen. For instance, a psychological study of perception would have to try to explain how it comes about that we see things: light reflected from the object seen impinges on our retinas, which in turn causes certain responses in the optic nerve, and so on. But phenomenology is not concerned with such explanations, only with describing what is essential to our perception of such objects – what it means to us to ‘perceive’ such an object. The answer to such questions certainly has a bearing on empirical psychology (and on other relevant sciences), since it helps in trying to give a scientific explanation of, say, perception to have a clear idea of what it is exactly that one is trying to explain. And Merleau-Ponty thought, as we shall see, that in a sense a knowledge of empirical scientific findings could be relevant to phenomenology. A reading of the psychological literature might suggest, for example, that some of the explanations offered were unsatisfactory, not because they were refuted by empirical observations, but because they were based on confused *philosophical* assumptions. This would then give us a motive to try to undermine these assumptions, and so clarify the concepts used in the explanation, by means of phenomenological analysis. But this, of course, still makes phenomenology a distinct activity from any empirical science.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

We can now understand better a central feature of phenomenological method which was briefly mentioned earlier. To pursue phenomenology as a distinct activity, we need to separate the consideration of

‘phenomena’, as things which appear to us subjectively, from considering them as things actually existing in the objective world and studied by empirical science. The way to do this, according to Husserl in his early thought, is what he calls the ‘phenomenological reduction’, which he compares in some respects to Descartes’s method of doubt. Descartes had tried to arrive at absolutely certain foundations for knowledge by doubting any beliefs that it was possible to doubt, which included, as he saw it, even our basic confidence in the existence of a world outside our own thoughts. The hope was that eventually he would come to at least one belief that it was completely impossible to doubt, and this would then provide the basis for certainty he was looking for. That foundation was found, in Descartes’s eyes, in the existence of our own thoughts, and in our own existence as thinking beings. The ‘doubt’, of course, was a kind of pretence (or, to put it in more flattering terms, it was ‘methodological’): Descartes never *really* doubted that the outside world existed, he just treated the existence of the world *as if* it were doubtful, for the purposes of his method.

In somewhat the same way, though for different purposes, Husserl tried to separate consideration of our experience of objects, just as an experience, from consideration of all questions to do with their actual existence. He proposed that we should, as it were, ‘put in brackets’ what he called our ‘natural attitude’. The ‘natural attitude’ is the one we adopt most of the time when we are not engaged in phenomenology: it is the attitude both of ordinary common sense and, at a more sophisticated level, of science. We take for granted the existence of the objects we think about and deal with practically, and try to understand how one such object relates to others. We *must* do this if we are to live at all. But in the phenomenological reduction, we ‘bracket’ these assumptions, because as phenomenologists we are not concerned with the demands of practical living but with a more detached attempt at a purely theoretical understanding of what we mean by certain concepts. Husserl often uses as an alternative to ‘bracketing’ the Greek word *epoche* (meaning literally ‘holding back’): we as it were step back in the reduction from our everyday practical involvement with the world in order to study phenomena *just as* phenomena, without regard to their actual existence. Having done this, we can more effectively consider the ‘essences’, the distinctive meaning of each concept, without the distraction of questions concerning the existence of things corresponding to that

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concept. Thus, phenomenology is a ‘transcendental’ study, one which investigates thoughts just as thoughts, without reference to the objects that these thoughts are about.

There are, however, serious doubts about the validity of this notion of transcendental phenomenology. It seems to be inconsistent with the implications of the very idea of the intentionality of consciousness which Husserl himself had made so central to phenomenology, and to be in serious danger of sliding into philosophical idealism, the view that only thoughts exist, and that what we call the objective world is just a kind of construction out of thoughts. The idea of intentionality implies, as we have seen, that consciousness cannot be considered separately from its intentional objects – that we cannot, for instance, think without thinking *about* something, something which is not part of our consciousness. The thing we think about on any particular occasion need not actually exist, but it does not follow that we could investigate our thoughts about that thing in isolation from all considerations of its existence. To say that it is an intentional object is to say that it *could* exist, and that means independently of our minds. We cannot consider our consciousness, therefore, without thinking of the relation of that consciousness to a world independent of it, so that complete ‘bracketing’ is impossible. We ourselves, as conscious subjects of experience, cannot think of ourselves in isolation from a world to which our experiences refer – even our imaginary experiences presuppose a world in which the imaginary objects *could* feature. We are not ‘transcendental subjects’, as Husserl argued, pure subjects of thought who do not exist at any particular time or place, but concrete human beings, living in a particular time and place, and finding meaning in objects by virtue of our actual dealings with them in that time and place.

One of Husserl’s greatest students was Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Heidegger says in his work *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962) that what he initially found puzzling about phenomenology was that it was supposed to be neither logic nor psychology. That is, it neither studied the a priori laws of logic, which hold whether or not anyone thinks of them, nor the empirical facts about what goes on in real human beings when they think. It is supposed to be a study which combines elements from both logic and psychology: it is about consciousness, but not that of any particular person, just consciousness as such. After meeting Husserl in 1916, Heidegger says, his puzzlement decreased, though only slowly. He came to think that

phenomenology was not best seen as a metaphysical theory, like idealism, about what exists or does not exist, but a certain way of thinking. In *Being and Time*, he describes phenomenology as primarily a ‘methodological conception’ (Heidegger 1962: 50), a way of inquiring into objects, not something to be defined in terms of the kind of objects investigated.

Heidegger also had his own definition of ‘phenomenology’, based on what he claimed to be the meaning of the Greek words from which the term is derived (*phainomenon* and *logos*). This definition is rather tortuously expressed as ‘letting that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself’ (Heidegger 1962: 58). More simply expressed, it is a return, in Husserl’s slogan, ‘to the things themselves’, the effort to think of the world of our experience without preconceptions – to let the world, or Being, speak for itself. (Heidegger’s translators always use a capital ‘B’ when referring to ‘Being’ in this sense.) ‘Ontology’ is the traditional philosophical term for the study of Being as Being, of what it means for anything to be. Heidegger is fundamentally concerned in his philosophy with ontology in this sense, but in *Being and Time* he says that ‘the question of the meaning of Being’ must be treated phenomenologically (Heidegger 1962: 50).

To treat the meaning of Being phenomenologically is to start from our own experience of Being: but that does not mean to look inside our own minds at our inner experiences, nor to separate (as Husserl tended to do in his early thinking) our consciousness from its objects. Our own Being, Heidegger argued (and in this he was followed by Merleau-Ponty), is Being-in-the-world. (The German term is a single word, *Inderweltsein*: this expresses the unity of the concept, which we have to express in English by the hyphens.) We do not exist apart from the world we experience, but are part of it. We are, however, a peculiar part of the world, by virtue of the fact that we are *conscious* of it. This human mode of Being Heidegger called *Dasein* (the German word for ‘existence’, which literally means ‘being there’). We experience the world, in other words, not as detached subjects or pure reason, but as actual human beings who exist at a particular time and place, and who interact with their surrounding world from that position in space and time. Phenomenology, therefore, must be, not the analysis of some detached pure consciousness, but ‘the analytic of *Dasein*’, as Heidegger called it: the analysis of how things appear to us in the course of our ordinary human interactions with the world.

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In the works which he wrote in the last years of his life, Husserl seems to have recognized the force of Heidegger's criticisms of his early 'transcendental' phenomenology, and to have developed a version of phenomenology which, while retaining as much as possible of his earlier thought, attempted to take account of these objections. Central to this later version is the idea of the *Lebenswelt*, or 'life-world': the starting-point of phenomenology is no longer the act of 'stepping-back' from our ordinary involvement with the world. Instead, we have to accept that, before all theorizing, we are already involved in a world, and that the test of all our theoretical opinions is to be found in that involvement with a world. 'Is it not in the end', Husserl asks, 'our human being, and the life of consciousness belonging to it, . . . which is the place where all problems of living inner being and external exhibition are to be decided?' (Husserl 1970: 114). Science and philosophy are human activities which arise within this life-world, and so are secondary to it. If we are to return to basics, then, the presuppositions which we have to set aside are those derived from scientific and philosophical theorizing. The crisis which Husserl came to see as affecting western civilization as a whole arose, in his view, as soon as the Greeks misguidedly saw the idea of 'objective truth', as sought in the sciences, as required in all knowledge worthy of the name. Rather, Husserl came to think, we should see science and its values as deriving what force they had from their part in a wider human engagement with the world. The task of phenomenology was now to get back to that underlying foundation of ordinary human experience which is the source of science and all other theoretical activities. Husserl still speaks of an *epoche*, but now it is a holding back from all *theoretical* preconceptions, which will make possible 'a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion' (Husserl 1970: 137).

WHAT MERLEAU-PONTY MEANS BY 'PHENOMENOLOGY'

Merleau-Ponty, as was said earlier, was particularly taken by this later, more Heideggerian, form of phenomenology. Like Heidegger, he saw phenomenology as 'a manner or style of thinking' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: viii) rather than a system of philosophy. Furthermore, this manner or style of thinking had been practised, he thought, before Husserl made it explicit as a method for doing philosophy: it can be

found, he said, in such thinkers as Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. All of these philosophers had been suspicious of the western tradition in philosophy, which originated with the Greeks, especially Plato. According to this tradition, the highest human attribute was pure, impersonal reason. We were at our most human when we set aside our merely individual and local perspectives on the world, infected as they are by our emotional and practical needs, and ascend to a more detached, or 'objective', view of things. That is, we needed to give an account of things, not as they appear to us from where we happen to be, but as they really are in themselves: the kind of account which would be given by a being who did not have any particular position in space or time (this is therefore what the modern American philosopher Thomas Nagel calls 'The View from Nowhere').

This 'objectivist' view runs through most of traditional western philosophy, and gave rise eventually to the acceptance in modern western culture of the mathematical natural sciences as providing the most reliable account of what reality is fundamentally like. For it has been recognized since Plato that mathematical propositions are the clearest example of truths of reason: propositions which are impersonally and timelessly true. '2 + 2 = 4', to take the simplest example imaginable of a mathematical proposition, is not true only for me or only for you, not true only in 2005 or only in Ancient Greece, but is simply *true*, whoever utters it and whenever it is uttered. To the extent that empirical sciences like physics and chemistry (and biology, considered as a derivative of physics and chemistry) can express their discoveries in the language of mathematics – as equations, proportions, ratios and so on – they too acquire the impersonality and timelessness of mathematics. Newton's law of gravitation, for example, which expresses the attraction between two bodies in terms of the mathematical relations of their masses and of the distance between them, is, if true, timelessly and impersonally so. Hence Galileo expressed the essence of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when he said that the book of nature was written in the language of geometry, and could be understood only by those who had mastered that language.

When applied to such things as planetary motion, or the workings of machines, or the effect of chemicals on the functioning of animal bodies, this approach has proved incredibly fruitful. But does it follow that this is the only sensible way to understand everything we

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want to understand? When we want to understand human behaviour, for instance, must we adopt a similarly impersonal attitude? Must we see human actions as like the motions of machines, to be explained, like them, in terms of physico-chemical laws? Or does the study of human history or society, or of our experience of poetry or art, or of personal relationships, have to be treated as a branch of physics before it can truly be regarded as respectable? Some philosophers, and many scientists, have thought so. The philosophers known as 'eliminative materialists', for example, want to replace our ordinary understanding of human behaviour in terms of feelings, motives, reasons and purposes, which they dismiss as mere 'folk psychology', by a 'completed neuroscience'. Suppose, for instance, that someone enrolls for a course in conversational Italian. In ordinary, non-scientific, thinking we might understand this in terms of her reasons for doing so – maybe she wants to get more out of her forthcoming holiday in Italy. But this, according to an eliminative materialist, is a primitive and unsatisfactory way of making sense of her behaviour – rather like the mediaeval way of understanding why the flames of a fire move upwards while a lump of soil falls to the ground: in terms of the natural striving of each type of matter, up or down respectively. Science, for these philosophers, offers us a better way of understanding, both in the case of the movement of flames and in that of human behaviour. In the latter case, a fuller knowledge of the workings of the brain and nervous system would, they claim, enable us to give a properly based explanation of, say, this person's enrolment in the Italian class.

This idea that scientific explanations are always to be preferred to non-scientific is not confined to philosophers such as the eliminative materialists, but is widespread in our culture, because of the enormous prestige which especially the natural sciences enjoy in the modern world. A description of a situation in 'objective' or 'scientific' terms is regarded as more respectable, as coming closer to representing the reality of the situation, than one which uses purely qualitative language. For instance, talking of wavelengths of light is thought to be better than talking of colours, or talking of brain-processes as better than talking of thoughts or feelings. Human beings come to be seen as just one more kind of object in the world, as nothing but members of a particular animal species or type of biological system, the workings of which have in turn to be explained in terms of physico-chemical processes.

The phenomenological manner of thinking, as understood by Merleau-Ponty, would say that this only leads to confusion, because it gets things the wrong way round. The sciences themselves are, he contends (as Husserl had done), human accomplishments, particular forms of human activity engaged in for particular human purposes: there is no reason for thinking that the theoretical way of understanding required by the purposes of science is the only, or the most fundamental, way of understanding the world and ourselves. Science needs to be understood in terms of its basis in direct human experience, so that it cannot supersede that direct experience. The most fundamental way of understanding ourselves cannot be the 'objective' way of science: as a particular type of object in the world to be explained from the outside. This is because we ourselves give meaning to the concepts used in the sciences, including the concept of objectivity itself, as abstractions from our concrete experience of ourselves and of other human beings. To use his example, we can understand geography only because we know what it is to experience a landscape. In that sense, we are what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the absolute source' (2002: ix).

None of this means that scientific ways of describing the world are somehow invalid. They are inescapable if we want, as human beings do for various purposes, to talk about the world from a more universal point of view, in ways which are not the expression of personal feelings. But we can talk in this more universal way only by starting from our personal engagement with the world. Science is empirical, based on human experience, and human experience is always that of particular human beings who engage with the world in the course of *living in* it, rather than *theorizing about* it. We must get back to that lived experience, back 'to the things themselves', if we are even to understand the role which science plays in our lives. Phenomenology, from this point of view, consists in getting back to bedrock, to direct human experience, setting aside any preconceived ideas derived from our scientific theories, or from philosophies which are based on such scientific theories and attempt to give them a metaphysical status.

This stepping back from theoretical preconceptions is obviously a form of what Husserl called *epoche* or the phenomenological reduction. Merleau-Ponty accepts the idea of the reduction, but insists that we must understand this idea correctly. It must not, he argues, be thought of as a total withdrawal from all engagement with the

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world into some kind of absolute subjectivity, since that is impossible and is anyway inconsistent with other things that Husserl says. Husserl recognizes, for example, that there are *different* subjects, that I am a different subject and have different experiences of the world from you, or him or her. But even to recognize this implies that I cannot be aware of myself as a subject without also being aware of other subjects – ‘I’ has meaning only if it can be contrasted with ‘you’ and other personal pronouns. To accept the existence of other subjects as well as oneself is also to accept that there is a world which all these different subjects experience, each from his or her perspective, and which provides the common ‘horizon’ for all our experiences. Hence, I cannot withdraw totally into my own subjectivity and sever all ties with the world I am conscious of. I am not, as a subject, outside time and space: I am necessarily ‘incarnate’ or ‘embodied’ in a certain historical situation (this idea of human subjectivity as necessarily embodied is of crucial importance in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, as we shall see later). My experiences are experiences of the world, and the world is what gives meaning to the experiences I have. So I can’t separate out the world itself from the world as meaningful to me: human being is, in Heidegger’s phrase, ‘being-in-the-world’.

In view of this, what does the phenomenological reduction amount to? Merleau-Ponty (2002: xv) cites with approval the formulation of Husserl’s assistant, Eugen Fink: the reduction consists in an attitude of ‘wonder’ towards the world. We cannot withdraw totally from the world – a complete reduction, Merleau-Ponty says, is impossible (*ibid.*). But we can relax the ties which bind us to things in our practical dealings with them, so that the sheer strangeness of the world becomes more apparent. By abandoning, temporarily at least, the theoretical structures which we have built up to make our practical and social life manageable, and getting back to our immediate, pre-theoretical, experience of the world, we can understand better the meanings of those theoretical structures themselves. ‘True philosophy’, Merleau-Ponty (2002: xxiii) says, ‘consists in relearning to look at the world’. Thus, the phenomenological reduction, in his interpretation of it, is a matter of changing our way of seeing the world. When we practise the reduction, we no longer see the world as the comfortable place we have made it by the scientific and other concepts which we have built up, precisely in order to make it easier to handle intellectually and practically. Instead, we must train ourselves

to see it as the strange and ambiguous existence we encounter when we do not interpose these concepts between ourselves and objects. It is the opposite of another sense of ‘reduction’, as when we speak of ‘reductionism’, the view that one particular set of concepts (those of a science like physics, for example) can capture the whole reality of things. Merleau-Ponty compares it to art: like art, it does not simply represent a pre-existing truth, but forces us to see the world differently, and in that sense creates a new truth.

Phenomenology, seen in this way, is not the study of some purely abstract essences, like Plato’s Forms. The ‘essences’ which phenomenology studies are rather tools in our attempt to understand our own lives in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2002: xvi). To understand the concepts we use is to grasp the role they play in our lives in the world: so, for instance, to grasp the ‘essence’ of perception phenomenologically is to understand how perception actually functions in our relations with the world around us and with other people. In this sense, ‘essence’ cannot be separated from ‘existence’, the understanding of concepts from the understanding of the world the concepts refer to.

Merleau-Ponty contrasts the phenomenological approach to meaning with that of the Vienna Circle, the ‘Logical Positivists’ who flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, whose views were communicated to the English-speaking philosophical world above all in Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* (first published in 1936). The Logical Positivists saw the task of philosophy as that of the logical analysis of the language of science: questions of meaning (the domain of philosophy) were distinguished from questions of fact (the domain of science). ‘Meaning’, for them, was the meaning of *words*, and could be studied therefore by studying language, in isolation from the facts that words and sentences in language were supposed to represent. The question of *how* language represented reality was neither a question to be resolved by the analysis of language, nor a factual question to be settled by science: so it was an empty or meaningless question. This is, however, the very opposite, Merleau-Ponty contends, of a phenomenological approach. Language gets its meaning from our experience of and involvement with the world: we need to have contact with the world in a *pre-reflective* or unconscious way before we can start to talk about it explicitly in language. So to understand meanings is not primarily to understand what words mean, but what *things* mean – to understand the roots of our language in what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘the ante-predicative life of consciousness’ (2002: xvii).

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There is an interesting comparison to be made here to the way in which Wittgenstein's thought developed, and the influence which that development had on the analytic tradition in philosophy. Wittgenstein started from a position which had much in common with Logical Positivism (though it was not identical with it). In his early work language is presented as offering a straightforward 'picture' of the facts it represents. But as Wittgenstein reflected on this, he came to see that it was too simple: 'picturing' or 'representing' reality itself needed to be understood in different ways in different contexts. Our words (concepts) represent reality by virtue of our *use* of them in different ways, so that their meaning can be grasped only by grasping the variety of ways in which we use them in our lives. Like Merleau-Ponty, the later Wittgenstein rejected the idea of 'language' as an abstract system which relates to another abstract system called 'the world', and focused more on our words and concepts as things we use as part of our ordinary involvement with our environment.

This gives the idea of 'consciousness' and its 'intentionality' a different significance. The 'intentional objects' of consciousness, it has already been said, are always experienced *under a certain description*. This 'description' is naturally identified with a certain form of words: to use the example already given, I could identify the object of my present thought by the words 'Tony Blair' or 'the current (2005) Prime Minister of the United Kingdom'. In a case like this, it is hard to see how one *could* identify the intentional object of thought in any other way. But perhaps that is because we are talking about *thoughts*, and of a relatively intellectual and sophisticated kind. But our experience of the world in this intellectual way is possible only because we have much less intellectual or reflective forms of contact with the world, which have their own sorts of intentional object, of a kind which we may not normally identify explicitly in words. When I am driving my car, I am not normally explicitly saying to myself, 'Now change gear' or 'Now apply the brakes'. Nevertheless, I do genuinely recognize the need to change gear in certain situations, and this recognition determines how I act. In other words, my consciousness is directed towards 'gear-change', even though I do not explicitly identify that in words as my intentional object. Reflective, verbalized, explicit, consciousness of the world is rooted in such pre-reflective, non-verbal, implicit consciousness, and intentionality applies as much in the former as in the latter case. So a phenomenology of

consciousness is not merely a matter of 'linguistic analysis', in the Logical Positivist sense, but an attempt to bring into reflective awareness the whole mode of our 'being-in-the-world' which is involved in the relevant case.

Phenomenology, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, thus combines a form of subjectivism with a form of objectivism. It is subjectivist in that it recognizes that all experience is *someone's* experience, that 'how things appear' means 'how they appear to a particular *'subject'*'. A description of phenomena, that is, of how things appear, must thus necessarily be a description of *subjective experience*. But, since the being of subjects is being-in-the-world, that is, since experience consists in being involved with the world, a description of subjective experience is not a description of something purely 'inner', but of our involvement with a world which exists independently of our experience of it. The world, Merleau-Ponty says, is not something we merely think about, but the place in which we live our lives, the world we act in, have feelings and hopes about, as well as the world we try to know about. Phenomenology, in his sense, is thus a kind of anti-philosophical philosophy. It seeks not to rise above our practical and emotional involvement with the world in order to offer an explanation or justification of why the world is the way it is, but to describe our existence in the world, our various modes of being-in-the-world, which comes before conscious reflection and theorizing.