

Merleau-Ponty and the Preconceptions of Objective Thinking

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Maurice Merleau-Ponty thinks that many classical theories of perception, especially reductionism, are influenced by the objective and the scientific form of thinking. Such influence is expressed in two preconceptions. The first preconception is that perception is reduced to units such as “impressions”. The meaning of these units is considered to be a representation of the world. The second preconception is that such perceptual meaning is caused by the world and the living being is passive in its relation to such constitution of meaning. In my view, the results of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of these two preconceptions constitute his two main concepts: the phenomenal body and the perceptual meaning determined by the structural relation with the world. Despite the fact that some traces of these preconceptions can be found in the introduction of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, there is no straight argument that shows how he approached these two results from the rejection of these two preconceptions. My thesis is to present Merleau-Ponty’s view on the phenomenal body based on his criticism of the two preconceptions described above. In my view, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of these preconceptions can be traced through his argument against Gestalt psychology, associationism, and behavioral associationism.

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I dedicate my thesis to those who believe in the peaceful dialogue between cultures in conflict.

Hanan

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Introduction:

Maurice Merleau-Ponty thinks that many classical and reductionism theories of perception are influenced by the objective and the scientific mode of thinking. They treat and explain our perceptual experience in the same way objects are viewed by science. Perception is considered to be constituted of distinct and isolated units or atoms, like objects in physics. In addition, these theories treat the qualities and characteristic of these atomic experiences to be determined only by the world.

Merleau-Ponty considers that classical theories of perception fall into the “experience error” when they apply objective and the scientific thinking to their explanation of perception. He says such error is “what we know to be in things themselves we immediately take as being in our consciousness of them. We make perception out of things perceived.” (PP¹, p. 5) In this “experience error” two “prejudices” or preconceptions are noticed. The first preconception is to consider perception as constituted by units such as “impressions”. (PP, p. 4) The second preconception is to consider the meaning of these impressions as “determinate” only by the influence of the world “which can at any moment throw its image on our retina.” (PP, p. 6) These two preconceptions imply that perception consists of registration or representational messages from the world. It also implies that the role of the body is to be a passive receiver.

Merleau-Ponty’s view of the embodiment of perception, especially, his concept of the phenomenal body and its structural relation with the world is based on his criticism of

¹ The abbreviation PP refers to Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*.

these preconceptions. The result of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of these two preconceptions constitutes his two main concepts of his explanation of human experience: First, that the bodily significance or the phenomenal body expresses perceptual meaning. Second, that the phenomenal body is determined by the structural relation with the world.

Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty states these two preconceptions of perception in his introduction of *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is not clear how he approached his view of the phenomenal body and its structural relation with the world based on the rejection of these two preconceptions. My presumption for such unclarity is explained by the fact that Merleau-Ponty has discussed these preconceptions in his earlier work; *The Structure of Behavior*.

In this book Merleau-Ponty presents his argument against several theories of behavior including reflex theory and Pavlov's theory. Also in this book, Merleau-Ponty is strongly influenced by Gestalt psychology, especially by the concept of phenomenal gestalt. He, however, considers that Gestalt psychology falls back into objective thinking with its attempt to explain scientifically such experience. Although Merleau-Ponty, in his *The Structure of Behavior*, shows the early development of his views on perception, this book did not gain much attention from the English speaking scholars.

From my reading Merleau-Ponty's above two texts, I have noticed that he did not explicitly show how he arrived at his view of the phenomenal body and its structural relation with the world from his criticism of the two preconceptions of the atomic-representational nature of experience and the causal-passive relation to the world. Hence, I intend in this thesis to show that the development of Merleau-Ponty's views of

perception are based on his criticism of preconceptions of objective thinking found in Gestalt psychology, perceptual associationism, and behavioral associationism. The result of such a thesis is to introduce Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception in a different perspective from previous English language explanatory books on Merleau-Ponty.

Before I develop my argument, I will demonstrate the importance and the need for more explanatory studies on Merleau-Ponty due to the ambiguous and difficult to understand the nature of his views. Merleau-Ponty's writings express concerns that are shared by scholars such as Remy Kwant and Samuel Mallin, who have studied his works in depth.

Kwant, in his *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, refers to Merleau-Ponty's writings as "vague and [...] difficult to determine exactly what he wants to say." (Kwant 1996, p. 8) He says "Anyone who reads Merleau-Ponty attentively will note the groping character of his thought". (Kwant 1963, p.8) Samuel Mallin, in his *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, shares with Kwant the above views. He refers to Merleau-Ponty's writings as "notoriously difficult to read and easy to misunderstand." (Mallin 1979, p. 5) Both Kwant and Mallin, with their different approaches, dedicated some of their studies to assist readers in understanding the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

The nature of Merleau-Ponty's writing, however, will always be disapproved of by those who consider that philosophical writing should be clear and distinct, in the manner that scientific concepts are expressed. Kwant refers to such thinkers as advocates of the "hygienic" thinking. These advocates, in Kwant's view, "do not permit a philosopher to use a concept until he has circumscribed it clearly and sharply". (Kwant

1963, p. 8) According to such manner of thinking, Merleau-Ponty's writing ought to be classified as a "literature" rather than a "philosophy". (Kwant 1963, p. 8)

Kwant, however, considers that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy should not be discredited because of those characters of ambiguity, unclarity, and indistinctness of his writing. In his view, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy deals with a level of reality that is different from the scientific realm of reality. In Kwant's view, it is not necessary that all realms of reality can be clearly constrained and described the way the realm of science. Such scientific concepts with their characters of clarity and distinctness represent certain realm of existence, a certain style of thinking, according to which concepts appear clear and distinct.

According to Merleau-Ponty, a realm of scientific thinking is based on an essential realm of existence where the essential significances of those scientific clear and distinct concepts lie. Such original realm of significances is not clear and distinct because "everything is interwoven with everything, and everything refers to everything, so that sharp demarcation lines would do violence to this interconnection." (Kwant 1963, p. 8) Kwant considers that most of Merleau-Ponty's views and concepts deal with this original realm of significances which, by the nature of such realm, is difficult to define "sharply." Kwant thinks that the "character of Merleau-Ponty's work must be respected and, therefore, we must abstain from ascribing to him definitive and sharply circumscribed concepts." (Kwant 1963, p. 8)

Due to the ambiguity of such a realm of existence and the ambiguity of concepts and ideas which describe it, Kwant says that Merleau-Ponty's "ideas are not, and cannot be, described with sufficient sharpness and definitiveness to become part of a system".

(Kwant 1963, p. 9) Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty's views lack "sharpness" and "definitiveness" his views cannot be described as "shallow" or without "coherence or synthesis." According to Kwant, Merleau-Ponty's writings show great depth and show a great knowledge of related views. Furthermore Kwant's view is that the concepts presented in these writing are related to each other and do not imply any contradiction.

In my view, due to this character of Merleau-Ponty's writings, there will always be a need to further studies that attempt to explore and understand Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. My thesis is dedicated to such a goal. My approach, however, is different from what has been written so far.

Most texts attempting to explicate Merleau-Ponty's view on perception have centered on presenting his concepts with no focus on where these concepts came from and how they were developed. This tendency is especially exhibited in those writing on Merleau-Ponty's early work, *The Structure of Behavior*, especially the writings of R. Kwant, M. Langer, M. Barral, S. Mallin, and S. Priest. Their studies do not present Merleau-Ponty's views in historic context. Furthermore, in these studies there is a lack of focus on his earlier works. Both J. Bannan, in his *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, and P. Hadreas, in his *In Place of the Flawed Diamond*, pay attention to *The Structure of Behavior*, however, they present the material simply in the order that is presented by Merleau-Ponty.

My contribution is to explain Merleau-Ponty's views of the phenomenal body based on his criticism of the preconception of the nature of experience as atomic representations, and the preconception of the passive attitude of the living being. Such an approach would show Merleau-Ponty's influence by some schools such as, Gestalt

psychology, perceptual associationism, and Behavioral associationism. In my view, Merleau-Ponty's view of the phenomenal body was constituted from his critique and discussion of some of the preconceptions of these schools. The preconceptions of objective thinking are described as follows:

		Schools of thought			
		Gestalt psychology	Associationism	Behavioural associationism	Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenal body
	Two preconceptions				
1	Nature of Experience: 1. Atomic 2. Representational	-Gestalt -"Behavioral environment" -phenomenon which is reduced to physical Gestalt (Isomorphism)	Atomic perception	Consecutive events of stimuli and motor actions	Phenomenal body as Gestalt (a sign and significance)
2	The source of meaning in such experience: 1. Causal 2. Body as passive	-Structural -Body is active	Determined and caused by the world	Determined and caused by the world	-Structural Body as active (influenced by gestalt psychology)
	Results of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the two preconception:	Primacy of phenomenal experience	Level of significance between empiricism (associationism) and intellectualism (judgment)	The Body's ability to constitute bodily significance	

As I mentioned earlier, my study focuses on Merleau-Ponty's two texts, *The Structure of Behavior and Phenomenology of Perception*. Many studies have avoided Merleau-Ponty's *The Structure of Behavior*. In my view, however, this text shows the early progress of Merleau-Ponty's view on perception which supports the understanding of his theory of perception described in his work, *the Phenomenology of Perception*.

Furthermore, I intend to explicate several original texts of these schools that Merleau-Ponty criticizes, especially Gestalt psychology.

Such an attempt will clarify Merleau-Ponty's view, since, according to Monika Langer², Merleau-Ponty assumed the reader's knowledge of these schools. Langer says: "Merleau-Ponty's text³ poses considerable problems because [...] its style makes it difficult to distinguish the author's own position from those which he is criticizing. The text abounds in oblique references and assumes a thorough knowledge of the works" of other schools of thought. (Langer 1989, p. vii) Hence, in my attempt to clarify some of these schools, my work will provide the reader, hopefully, with a better vision of distinction between Merleau-Ponty's view and the other views that influence him in one way or another.

My thesis is divided into two parts. In part one of my thesis, I will present the preconceptions of objective thinking presented in schools of Gestalt psychology, perceptual associationism, and behavioral associationism. In this part I will present Merleau-Ponty's arguments against these preconceptions and the progress of his thinking based on these arguments.

Since the goal of my thesis is to construct an argument for Merleau-Ponty's main two topics of the phenomenal body and its structural relation with the world, my approach in the second part of my thesis, chapters five and six, is to show the progress of these topics. In chapter five, the progress of the above topics will take the shape of Merleau-Ponty's discussions of some of Descartes views. In chapter six, the progress of

² One of Merleau-Ponty's interpreters.

³ Langer here refers to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

the above two topics will take the shape of the influence of Merleau-Ponty's views on some of the contemporary schools of thought.

In chapter one I will explore the influence of Gestalt psychology on Merleau-Ponty's views. I will also explore Merleau-Ponty's departure from this influence, and his presentation of his genuine views about the phenomenal body. This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section of this chapter, I present the Gestaltist's concepts of "gestalt", "the laws of grouping", and the concept of "isomorphism". I also elaborate on the Gestaltist's concept of "behavioral environment" which shows Gestalt psychology's interest in the phenomenal description of human experience.

In section two of chapter one, I show the influence of Gestalt psychology on Merleau-Ponty. The phenomenal and non-representational domain of experience is the first point of influence. The second point of influence is the active role of the organism in constituting experience. In my view, Gestalt psychology has a role in Merleau-Ponty's argument against the two preconceptions of objective understanding, e.g. the representational nature of experience and the passive role of the living being. Merleau-Ponty, however, disagrees with Gestalt psychology on its reduction of phenomenal experience to a physical event explained by laws of grouping.

In section three of chapter one I present two arguments against the Gestaltist's preconception of physical nature of gestalt. The first argument rejects the reduction of both the vital and human orders to physical order. The reason for the failure of the reduction is that vital and human orders express a normative and dialectic relation with the world which cannot be reduced to physical orders. The second argument is against the individuality of the physical structure. Merleau-Ponty rejects the physical structure as

existing in-itself without a perceiver. In his view, physical structures are conceived only as objects of perception. In my view, such a criticism of the nature of the gestalt as physical reinforces Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of the phenomenal experience that cannot be reduced to the physical. With such result of my argument in chapter one, I will achieve the first step towards understanding Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception.

In chapter two, I will introduce associationism as a school of thought influenced by the two preconceptions of objective thinking. The first preconception is that perception is constituted of atomic units. The second preconception is to consider that the meaning of such units is determined by outside world only⁴. Although Merleau-Ponty did not clearly specify which school of thought represents objective thinking, it is obvious that his argument is against associationism in general and modern associationism⁵ in specifically. Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the first preconception is defined by his rejection of concepts of "association" and "memory". Merleau-Ponty challenges the determinacy of perception using the Gestaltist's arguments and examples. He also challenges the concepts of "attention" and "judgement" which are suggested by the advocates of the determinacy of perception as a way to save their views. Merleau-Ponty's argument against the two preconceptions provides an argument against both "empiricism" and "intellectualism". In Merleau-Ponty's view, perceptual significance escapes both the empirical and intellectual explanation. The important point of this chapter is to show that from Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the two preconceptions

⁴ Or the mind only if associationism refers to some intellectual theories of perception.

⁵ I would refer modern associationism to views that are challenged originally by Gestalt psychology.

described earlier there is a level of significance, which escapes both the explanations of empiricism and intellectualism.

In chapter three, I intend to identify two preconceptions of objective thinking in theories of behavioral associationism from which theories of perceptual associationism borrow their “constancy hypothesis”. (PP, p. 8) Merleau-Ponty specifies these two theories, reflex theory and Pavlov theory. In this chapter, the first preconception is the understanding of behavior as constituted of consecutive events of stimuli and action. The second preconception is the understanding of the meaning of experience of behavior as determined by the causal effect of atomic stimuli. Merleau-Ponty uses several of Gestalt psychology’s views to argue against these theories.

With regard to the first preconception, Merleau-Ponty argues that reflex theory fails to explain the influence of other stimuli given by the body. Such a result challenges reflex theory’s concept of the “constancy hypothesis”. Pavlov’s theory tries to overcome the weaknesses of reflex theory by giving stimuli the power to inhibit each other. Pavlov’s theory, however, fails to explain the qualitative modification of the body due to injuries or learning. Merleau-Ponty argues that injuries could lead to qualitative changes in perception, and learning can result in a body’s possession of attitude or talent.

With regard to the second preconception of the meaning of behavior as determined by the external stimuli, Merleau-Ponty argues that both reflex and Pavlov’s theory fail to understand that behavior is a response to a situation that has a value for a living being. Both reflex and Pavlov’s theories fail to see the body as active receiver and explain behavior as based on the causal effect of external stimuli. The result of Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of the two preconceptions leads to the understanding of behavior as the

structure of situation and aptitude. In such a structure behavior is the bodily acquisition of skills of responding to situations which have a meaning for the organism. Such a bodily acquisition of a skill, in my view, is the point that has led Merleau-Ponty to his embodied perception described in his *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

In chapter four, I present Merleau-Ponty's genuine contribution; the phenomenal body. In this chapter I will show that a living body, unlike any other object, holds phenomenological characters of "motor intentionality", "body image" and the body as the body's capability to constitute bodily significances or "gestures". Some evidences will be introduced to support Merleau-Ponty's views on the phenomenal body.

In this chapter I present several examples of perceptual bodily significances such as of "color", "space", and "things". The significances of depth, near, or far are constituted from the poor or maximum grip of the body's motor intentions on the object perceived. The significance of motion is constituted when the body chooses a point of fixing its gaze in the world. The significance of size is perceived in accordance with the "tension" of visual appearance on my gaze. The significance of shape is a result of the "deviation" of my gaze or the intentional body during its exploring movement. Finally, the embodied significance of a thing is perceived as a group or a structure of motor intentions of a phenomenal body. Such a structure is constituted through a body image where all sensations are open on each other.

In the second part of my thesis I present the progress of Merleau-Ponty's view but in a slightly different manner than the past four chapters. Since the previous chapters were dedicated to show Merleau-Ponty's arguments against empirical thinking, in chapter

five, I intend to introduce some of Merleau-Ponty's arguments against intellectual views such as those of Descartes.

In the first section, I will present the distinction between the Cartesian *cogito* and Merleau-Ponty's tacit *cogito*. Unlike the Cartesian *cogito*, related to the mental realm, the tacit *cogito* is historical and related to the world. In section two of this chapter, I will present the first implication of the Cartesian dualism, which is the understanding of essence and absolute knowledge. In this section I present Descartes' understanding of essences and absolute knowledge, which miss the social and cultural context of human experience. In section three I present another implication of the Cartesian dualism, the Cartesian doubt in the reality of world. Such a dualism detaches our being as a thinking being from the world and the body is treated as an object like any other object in the world with no subjective character. Merleau-Ponty considers, however, that the reality of the world is preserved by our existence as phenomenal bodies and by our structural relation with the world, as the world is the field for our motor intentions. In section Four, I will present the Cartesian view of the clarity and distinctness of perceptions. Such a view is based on considering perception as a form of thinking. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that, as perception is considered to be embodied significance, clarity and distinctness, as character of thinking, might not necessarily apply to perception.

In chapter six, I present the development of Merleau-Ponty's views adapted and carried over by several contemporary schools of thought. I present the influence of Merleau-Ponty's views on some of contemporary views of Frances Varela and his colleagues. The influence shows in Varela's adoption of the phenomenal domain of meaning. I show that the two phenomenal concepts of "micro world" and "micro

identity” are similar to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “situation” and “motor intentionality”. Varela also adopts the enactive approach of perception that shows the influence of Merleau-Ponty’s embodied view of perception.

The final point which I would like to present in this introduction is to show the main philosophical and psychological studies that influenced Merleau-Ponty’s views on perception. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is generally classified as existential phenomenology. Following such classification, the phenomenological part of his philosophy expresses the influence of Edmund Husserl and the existential part of his philosophy expresses the influence of Martin Heidegger⁶. In the following few paragraphs I describe briefly these influences.

Merleau-Ponty is influenced by Husserl’s later work on phenomenology, which focuses on the description of our common pre-predicative perceptual experience of the world. Husserl called such common world of experience “Lebenswelt” which also can be referred to as the “life world” or the “everyday” world. This world of experience is not the natural world that is described by objective studies in science and philosophy. It is rather the individual experience of each person, which implies his/her “socio-historical world, relative to certain milieu wherein conscious subjects live”. (Barral 1965, p.13) Husserl expresses these views in his *The Crisis of European Sciences*. He thinks that the scientific views described by scientists, are abstractions built upon this “life-world”. Merleau-Ponty was influenced with Husserl’s role of phenomenology which shows how scientific abstractions are rooted in our every-day lived experience.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty is also influenced by Hegel and Marx. Such influence, however, shows in Merleau-Ponty’s political writings.

Merleau-Ponty, however, rejects Husserl's ideal realm of essences in consciousness which "essentially characterizes any perceived object." (Bannan 1967, p. 9) To approach these essences, Husserl presents his method of "eidetic reduction" which starts from examining our individual "life-world" experiences and ruling out what is assumed in order to reach the general characteristics of all experiences, which in turn is the absolute experience, the absolute and transcendental consciousness. With such a reduction, Husserl's phenomenology became a form of idealism. Merleau-Ponty, however, rejects these reductions. In his view, these reductions cannot be complete because they always depend on our pre-reflective lived experience. In Merleau-Ponty's view the meaning or significance of our experience of world is essentially constituted within our concrete experience itself and not according to a world of essences⁷. Merleau-Ponty also rejected Husserl's "transcendental ego" which possesses its world of truth and which transcends the world in some degree. Instead Merleau-Ponty introduces the subjectivity of a lived body or a body-subject⁸.

Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Husserl recalls Heidegger's rejection of Husserl's both phenomenological reduction of experience and the "worldless" subjectivity. Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty has not explicitly mentioned Heidegger in his writings, the influence of Heidegger can be shown through Merleau-Ponty's adoption of Heidegger's main concept of "being-in-the-world". (Mathews 2002, p. 5) According to Heidegger, our experience is always an experience in the world, and subjectivity (or Dasein) is always engaged in and with the world⁹. (Mathews 2002, p.27)

⁷ I intend to expand on Merleau-Ponty's view on this topic in chapter five.

⁸ Check the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 484.

⁹ Check also Carmen and Hansen 2005, p. 10.

In this thesis I intend to focus on the influence of empirical studies on Merleau-Ponty's views of perception. In his early academic years he was introduced to Gestalt psychology through attending Aron Gurwitsch's lectures. (Carmen and Hansen 2005, p. 1). He was also introduced to some behavioral and biological studies such as reflex and Pavlov's theory. Furthermore, his views were influenced by some developmental psychology such as that of Jean Piaget. Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty was influenced by a variety of philosophical and psychological studies, the way he interpreted and extended these views directed him to present a genuine thinking.

Due to the sudden death of the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, we were left with unfinished work and hence unfinished thought. For the past four decades Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has remained for the most part unnoticed and limited to continental studies. However, recently the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is attracting the interest of many scholars and scientists. My thesis is a contribution towards this interest.

Chapter One: Gestalt Psychology:

Introduction:

Gestalt psychology was created by a group of German psychologists who immigrated to the United States during World War Two; Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler and Kurt Koffka¹⁰. Kohler says “Gestalt psychology is, [...], a psychology that takes as its basic subject matter this tendency to organization, to the development of specific units.” (Kohler 1971, p. 164) The word “Gestalt” is a German word which means “shape”, or “form”, or structure. The word normally indicates only visual shapes, however, the concept of Gestalt used by the Gestalt psychology extends to structural organization of perceptual experience and behavior.

In this chapter I intend to introduce first the principles of Gestalt psychology. In section one I intend to introduce a few important concepts of Gestalt. I intend to present the Gestaltist’s laws of grouping such as the law of “contiguity”, “resemblance”, and the “good form”. Furthermore, I intend to present the Gestaltist’s phenomenal domain, especially the concept of “behavioral environment”. Moreover, in this section I intend to present the concept of “isomorphism” which implies the reduction of psychological events to a physiological and a physical event.

In section two I intend to present Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of perception and Gestalt psychology’s influence on him. In achieving such a goal I will present two points of influence. The first point of influence is regarding the phenomenal domain. I

¹⁰ The three thinkers are the originators of Gestalt psychology. Although they worked independently, their views, however, show great similarity. Check: <http://cas-courses.buffalo.edu/classes/psy/segal/4212001/ugestalt.htm>.

intend to show that Merleau-Ponty's concept of "situation" is similar to the Gestaltist's concept of "behavioral environment". The second point of influence is regarding the active role of organisms in constituting experience.

In section three I intend to present Merleau-Ponty's rejection of Gestalt psychology. In this section I will present two arguments. The first argument is the argument against the concept of "isomorphism" which is also an argument against the reduction of the phenomenal domain to the physical. I also intend to present Merleau-Ponty's argument against physical gestalt as a reality that exists in itself. The two arguments set out Merleau-Ponty's view of the primacy of the phenomenal gestalt.

I. The principles of Gestalt psychology:

Gestalt psychology is well known for its contrast to "atomistic" or "associationist" psychology. The latter is accused of being "unrealistic", "meaningless" and, "senseless". (Katz 1951, p.3) The atomic understanding of sensation, "associationism", justifies itself on the basis of the atomic anatomy of physiology. A regular experience¹¹ of sensation is the sum of atomic isolated sensations that correspond to the sum of atomic isolated stimulus. In their view, sensation "arose in an additive manner from separate sensory elements." (Katz 1951 p. 5) It is the physiology of this "constancy hypothesis" and the "summative-aggregative" understanding of a perceptual experience that Gestalt psychology opposes.

¹¹ A regular experience here refers to an experience in a regular environment and not in a laboratory.

1. The concept of Gestalt:

Gestalt psychology considers that in a perceptual experience, the “whole is more than the sum of its separate parts, and not, [like the atomistic view],¹² the sum alone.” (Katz 1951, p. 6) In any regular perceptual experience we always experience as a unit and not as the sum of isolated units of sensation. The experience of a line is not the experience of the dots next to each other. There is a new meaning in the first which is the line that cannot be reduced to adjacent dots.

One might sense here the Gestalt psychologists’ dedication to the description of the phenomenon of experience. Koffka says: “For us phenomenology means as naïve and full a description of direct experience as possible.” (Koffka 1955, p. 73) They think that perceptual phenomena should be “allowed to speak for themselves, as it were” without introducing foreign elements such as divided atomic impressions or judgement. (Katz 1951, p. 18) Within such a phenomenological description, Gestalt psychologists were interested to know why things appear in perceptual experience as independent units; why we see things that confront our vision as units that are distinct from other things.

Gestalt psychology considers that although our past experience might help us to recognize units in our perceptual experience, our consciousness has the tendency to form them even without any past experience. For example, Kohler presents some cases of congenitally blind patients recovering from a corrective vision surgery. When those patients see things for the first time, they recognize immediately the existence of units in their visual field. Kohler says “[s]ensory units may have acquired names and may have become richly symbolic in the context of our knowledge, while existing, nevertheless, as

¹² My addition.

segregated units in the sensory field prior to such accretion.” (Kohler 29, p. 151) Hence, the recognition of a shape or a gestalt is spontaneous and does not require learning.

Such spontaneity is also applied in normal cases. For example, Kohler says when we are in a space that is not totally dark, we might ask ourselves “What is that dark thing over there?” (Kohler 69, p. 51) Although we do not recognize what that thing is, we can still recognize that thing as a “unitary object.”

Some times familiar shapes do not appear familiar if they are presented within different context. The following two shapes¹³ constitute a good example. It is obvious that shape B is hardly to be recognized when it is presented within shape A.



Shape A



Shape B

Our visual objects “appear in the visual field only if their boundaries are visually preserved” as “detached wholes.” (Kohler 69, p. 53) The recognition of a Gestalt in perceptual experience requires the Gestalt’s separation from a background. In this sense, the relation between the Gestalt and its background is essential for the constitution of the Gestalt. The consideration of the first cannot happen without the other. The distinction from the background is the main character of the constitution of gestalt or meaning in our perceptual experience. Accordingly, the recognition of a Gestalt does not require our previous knowledge or memory of that particular Gestalt.

¹³ The following two figures are taken from Kohler 1969, p. 51.

Gestalt psychology considers that the character of things in the world is given either by nature or by human production. In nature a thing stands out because its parts have similar color or texture different from the surroundings. A thing with similar surfaces has the tendency to stand out among the other things that surround it. Stimuli next to each other have the tendency to form groups. Gestalt psychology discovers some rules that govern such grouping. In the following I will present these laws or principles of “grouping”. It should be noticed that these principles, following the phenomenological approach, are “descriptive principles”. (Kohler 69, p. 56)

2. Principles of grouping:

The first principle of grouping is the law of “contiguity.” when some parts are nearer to one another than other parts, the former parts tend to constitute a form. This also causes them to become separated from other groups. The following figure represents such case.



Figure 1

The second law of grouping is the law “resemblance” of the parts.

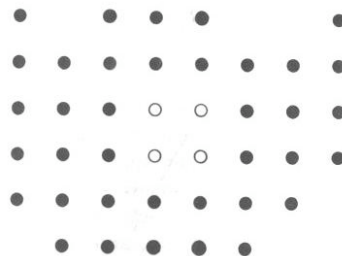


Figure 2

Figure 2¹⁴ shows a gestalt that is constituted according to the resemblance of colour between some members of a group of dots. The resemblance between the dots of this group also causes them to “split” from the rest forming a “sub-group.” (Kohler 96, p. 57)¹⁵

The Third law of grouping is the law of “good form” or “simplicity”¹⁶, which describes the tendency of the gestalt toward certain “symmetry” and “regularity”. The following shape describes such form:



Such form has the tendency to be seen as a square intersecting with a triangle and not as a complicated form of connected and intersected lines.

3. The phenomenal domain:

Not only is Gestalt psychology¹⁸ interested in understanding perception, but also is interested with a perceiver’s behavior in the world. “Although psychology was reared as the science of consciousness or mind, we shall choose behavior as our keystone.” (Koffka 1955, p. 25) Koffka made a distinction between two kinds of behavior; a “molar behavior” and “molecular behavior”. A molar behavior is a description of behavior as it appears to an observer such as attending a class, delivering a lecture, cheering for a team

¹⁴ Kohler, 69, p. 57.

¹⁵ In my view, this shows how the relation between things in environment provides the structure of the perceptual field.

¹⁶ Check Gestalt Framework theory: http://valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_gestalt.html.

¹⁷ Check <http://homepages.ius.edu/RALLMAN/pragnanz.html>.

¹⁸ Especially Kurt Koffka.

etc. Molecular behavior, on the other hand, is a description of “the process which starts with an excitation on the sensory surface of an animal, [translated]¹⁹ by nerve fibers to the nerve centers, switched over to new, efferent nerves, and ends in a muscle contraction or a gland section.” (Koffka 1955, p. 26)

Koffka considers that some psychologists²⁰ consider that “molar behavior” requires “molecular behavior” in a sense that any “molar behavior” “implies muscle contractions which in turn set our limbs.” (Koffka 1955, p. 26) Therefore, any behavior is “reduced to stimulus- response schema.” (Koffka 1955, p. 26) Koffka’s intentions were to “find a place for molecular behavior in a system that begins and ends with molar.” (Koffka 1955, p. 27) That is because behavior, molecular or molar, “takes place in an environment” (Koffka 1955, p. 27)

Koffka’s view here emphasizes the importance of the organism’s engagement with its environment in constituting the meaning of behavior. (Koffka 1955, p. 27) In my view, the importance of understanding experience within environment will have a great influence later on Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of experience, especially on his view of the structural relation between a living being and the world.

The distinction between “molecular” and “molar” behavior parallels another distinction, that of “geographical environment” and “behavioral environment,” which shows Gestalt psychology’s aim at giving phenomenological explanations. The “geographical environment” is our environment as it described by physics. It is the

¹⁹ My addition.

²⁰ Such as reflex theory and Pavlov’s theory which support the constancy hypothesis, will be discussed in chapter two.

“physical environment”²¹. It constitutes things that surround us such as ground, building, streets, lakes, people, etc. Such an environment is the source of stimuli. A “behavioral environment”, however, is our environment as it appears to us in our experience. In other words, a “behavioral environment” is our “phenomenal experience”²². For example, an apple is not a thing with red color and round shape but an object that solicits an eating behavior. A tool is an object that solicits our behavior to use it as a tool.

It is obvious that the “behavioral environment” regulates our behavior more than the “geographical” environment. A person would not hesitate to walk on a thin ice of a lake if such surface appears to him as a solid ground covered with snow. The same person, however, would not initiate the walking if he was told ahead that the solid ground is just a thin ice covered with snow. He would now see or perceive the solid ground as hazardous thin ground. Here, the “behavioral environment” or what appears to us regulates our behavior and not the “geographical environment”.

With such a distinction between “behavioral” and “geographical” environment, Gestalt psychology emphasizes that our behavior is a response to stimuli that constitute a value for a living being, and not a response to stimuli that holds objective qualities such as white or solid surface. Valuing stimuli, in this manner, is paramount to the survival of a living being. Through the concept of “behavioral environment”, Gestalt psychology sets its understanding of perception as the perceptual phenomenon that has a meaning for a living being.

²¹ Check J.J. Gibson, Notes on Behavior and Koffka’s Behavioral Environment, unpublished manuscripts, <http://www.huwi.org/gibson/koffka.php>

²² Ibid.

Here, I would like to stop for a moment to connect the concept of “behavioral environment” with the overall approach of my thesis. In my view, such a concept implies the Gestaltist’s rejection of the preconception of objective understanding of perception as the representation or registration of the messages given by the world. This point, as I will elaborate on later, will be adopted by Merleau-Ponty and constitutes his concept of situation.

Also, I would like to emphasise another point which shows the Gestaltist’s counter with the objective thinking. Gestalt psychology maintains that in order for a movement to be defined as behavior, such movement must express the activity of the organism. For example Koffka considers that involuntary movement is not behavior. If a person falls accidentally from a cliff, the falling movement of the person’s body is not considered to be a behavior. (Koffka, p. 32) Their explanation is that behavior is a movement that carried out in relation to the “behavioral environment” and not in relation to the “geographical environment”. A movement of the body which is executed in the “geographical environment” and which have lead to a certain result is not a behavior but an accomplishment. For example, if we walked away from a danger, without knowing first that we are in danger, such movement is not a behavior but an “accomplishment.” (Kaffka 1955, p. 37)

Despite this recognition of the phenomenal aspect of experience, Gestalt psychology, however, has always expressed an interest in science. They even convert some scientific concepts into phenomenal concepts. For example, Koffka includes the concept of “field” within his explanation of behavior. The concept of field comes from the Newtonian explanation of the motion of bodies according to a field of forces that

exist in an environment. Koffka introduces the concept of a “field” into his explanation of behavior. He defines “field” as a “system of stresses and strains which will determine real behavior.” (Koffka, p. 42) Such “stresses” and “strains” are the forces that lead to a change in our behavior.

Suppose we were sitting in the sun, relaxed and enjoying the weather. Nothing in the surrounding environment requires an action on our behalf. In such environmental conditions our surroundings are constituted by a field of “homogeneous” forces and we are in an “equilibrium” state with them. If all of the sudden we hear a scream for help, a tension builds up in our lived environment and the state of equilibrium is lost. To get over such a tension an action is required on our behalf to bring back the state of equilibrium to our living environment. (Koffka 1955, p. 43) Hence, our environment is a field that is occupied by “lines of force” that requires our motor movements. Such a description of a field implies a structural relation with the things in our environment. Such a relation changes according to our action toward these things.

From my reading on Koffka’s explanation of behavior, I noticed that Gestalt psychology has seen the importance of introducing a phenomenological concept, such as the “behavioral” environment to the explanation of behavior. Gestalt psychology’s final goal of explaining behavior, however, was always to provide scientific explanation. Koffka says, “[o]ne of the postulates of our psychology was that it be *scientific*.” (Koffka, p. 41) By seeking such scientific explanations, Gestalt faces a challenge of keeping the phenomenal domain and also sticking with a scientific explanation.

The Gestalt psychologist Wertheimer, however, has provided the concept of “isomorphism” as a way to bring a compromise between the phenomenal and the

scientific explanation. Such a concept explains a “relation between consciousness and the underlying physiological processes.” (Koffka 1955, p. 53) In the following I will present such a concept. The “concept of isomorphism”, however, will be challenged by Merleau-Ponty. I will present his argument later in this chapter. But first I intend to present the concept of “isomorphism”.

4. The concept of isomorphism:

Gestalt psychology has noticed that the laws of grouping described earlier, which govern the constitution of structures and which are discovered in our perceptual experience, also can be discovered in physiological systems such as human brains and the nervous system²³. Gestalt psychology, also, has noticed that “all biological facts and events can be understood in terms of the laws which hold for facts and events in the inanimate world.” (Kohler, p. 83) These laws are the laws of grouping described earlier in this chapter. For example, the law of “good form” is found in physical systems especially those described by Ernest Mach. In these systems “[w]hen such regular distributions are being established, more and more components of the acting forces are likely to balance each other, which means that under these circumstances the equilibrium or a steady state is quickly or gradually approached.” (Kohler 69, p. 59) When a physical system²⁴ approaches a state of steadiness or equilibrium, the involved parts or forces tend toward a “regular” and “symmetrical” relationship among the whole group.²⁵

²³ Check <http://psycprints.ecs.soton.ac.uk/archive/0000065/>

²⁴ A system is defined as a regular and interdependent interaction of forces between physical bodies. They constitute a whole.

²⁵ For more information read Kohler 69, p.95 under psychological isomorphism. This shows that both psychological facts and the human brain are similar in its structural characteristics. Both perceptual processes and their corresponding processes in the brain tend toward simplicity and regularity. This follows the principle of physics which says that “the distribution of materials and processes in physical systems

As a result, Gestalt psychology considers that the psychological event can be reduced to a physiological event that can be reduced to a physical event. They call such a relation “isomorphic.” The word “isomorphism” is constituted from two parts (iso) which means equality or sameness and (morphism) which means form or structure. The mathematical meaning of the word is that each part of one structure corresponds to one part in the other system. Each structure is mapped to the other.²⁶

Kohler describes the principle of isomorphism as follows, “Our working hypothesis states that the specific arrangement of actual experience is an accurate reproduction of a dynamically functioning arrangement of the corresponding physiological brain processes” (qtd. in Katz 1951, p. 56)²⁷. He also says: “the phenomenal world is literally the expression of circumstances in the brain.” (qtd. in Katz 1951, p. 56) In that sense, the nervous system and the brain are considered to be a “physical Gestalt”. In the Gestaltist’s view, the discovery of both the concept of isomorphism and the physical gestalt would extend our understanding of perception. We can understand our perceptual experience by studying its corresponding physiological form in the brain and nervous system. (Katz, p. 55)

It should be noticed here that the isomorphic relation between the psychological events and the physical events is not a resemblance of qualities but rather a resemblance of “structural properties.” Gestalt psychology considers that perceptual qualities themselves do not have their similar character in the physical world but somehow the two systems have the same structure. For example, the sensation quality of a color, such as

tends to become, regular, simple and often, symmetrical when the systems approach a state of equilibrium or a steady state.” (Kohler 69, p. 65)

²⁶ Check http://gestalttheory.net/archive/luch_iso1.html

²⁷ Psychological Problem.

yellow, does not have any similar quality in the corresponding physiological and visual system in the brain but the phenomenal event and the physical event share the same structure. (Kohler 69, p.56)

II. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception and the influence of Gestalt psychology:

Gestalt psychology had a great influence on developing Merleau-Ponty's views on human experience especially perception. Merleau-Ponty seemed to be aware of the gestaltist's two concepts of the "geographical environment" and the "behavioral environment". In his *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty says:

On analysis, the equivocal notion of stimulus separates into two: it includes and confuses the physical event as it is in itself, on one hand, and the situation as it is "for the organism," on the other, with only the latter being decisive in the reactions of the animal [...] the "geographical environment" and the "behavioral environment" cannot be identical." (SB, p. 129)

Being familiar with the Gestaltist's text, I intend to explore the main points of similarity especially with regard the two points of preconceptions of objective thinking: the representational understanding of experience, and the role of an organism in constituting such experience. If I managed to prove such an influence with reference to these two specific points this would mean that Gestalt psychology has a major role in supporting Merleau-Ponty's argument against the objective understanding of experience.

1. The first point of influence: The phenomenal domain of experience:

Like Gestalt psychology, and unlike the representational approach, Merleau-Ponty understands human experience as phenomenal. Like Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty considers that objects of perception are “lived realities”, as objects with which we are confronted, rather than objects to be known. He says “perception opens on a reality which solicits our action rather than on a truth, an object for knowledge.” (SB, p. 169) Merleau-Ponty thinks that perception presents human intention rather than pure qualities that are related to objects. He says:

Nascent perception has the double character of being directed toward human intentions rather than toward objects of nature or the pure qualities (hot, cold, white, black) of which they are supports, and of grasping them as experienced realities rather than as true objects. The representation of the objects of nature and of their qualities, the consciousness of truth, belong to a higher dialectic; (SB, p.166)

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, there are several modes in which our consciousness is directed toward the world. One mode is to “represent” the qualities that are received from the world. Such a mode, however, is limited and cannot describe the function of consciousness.

This representational level is based on a primary level, the level of “primitive perception”, “nascent perception”²⁸. In such a “nascent” level of meaning “a person can be “given” to a child as the pole of his desires and fears before the long work of interpretation which would arrive at the person as a conclusion from a universe of representations.” (SB, p. 173) The relation of the representing mode to nascent perception is described by Merleau-Ponty “as a translation applies to a text.” It means that perceiving is more original than representing because the second borrows its material

²⁸ I will explain such concept in more detail in the next chapters.

from the first. Here the concept “desire” is related to “object desired” and “fear” to the “object feared”. (SB, p. 172)

On such phenomenal level I noticed that Merleau-Ponty has presented a phenomenal concept of “situation” that is similar in meaning to the Gestaltist’s concept of “behavioral environment”. Similar to the concept of “behavioral environment”, the concept of situation is what we perceive and interpret of this world. Merleau-Ponty says: “it is this global presence of the situation which gives a meaning to the partial stimuli and causes them to acquire importance, value or existence for the organism.” (PP, p.91) Since our birth we are always in face-to-face with the environment as nature and culture. In every day experience, we do not deal with objective sense-data but rather with a “situation” that has a meaning for our survival or needs. Such understanding of “situation” is essential for our being.

The concept of “situation” is usually referred to as “experience” or “perception” by most of Merleau-Ponty’s scholars. In my view, the word “situation” would probably imply the understanding of perception within the environment better than the two words “experience” or “perception”. Therefore, it should be used more often by Merleau-Ponty’s scholars similar to Samuel Mallin in his *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*.

Samuel Mallin considers that a situation holds a “subjective side” and an “objective side”. The “subjective side” can be related to our general interest in overcoming obstacles that exist in the surrounding environment. (Mallin 79, p. 12) The subjective side can also be related to the subject’s past experience in dealing with the world. Furthermore, culture plays a role in constituting the “subjective side”.

Accordingly, “subjective side” of the situation is related to the existential domain of our experience.

“The objective side” of a situation, however, is related to the given sense-data or “entities” that are considered to be external to us. Those entities, such as things, are considered to hold independent existence from the subject. (Mallin, p. 17) The concept of “situation” escapes the scientific and objective understanding of perception, because “situation” does not express a representation of stimuli that is given by the world but rather stimuli that has a meaning for a living being.

So far I have shown the point of influence of Gestalt psychology on Merleau-Ponty’s view of perception as non atomic and representational message given by the world. Rather, perception is considered to be a phenomenon that is significant for the living being. Gestalt psychology, with their concept of “behavioral environment”, has discovered the domain of the phenomenon in perception and its important role in explaining behavior. Merleau-Ponty has realized this importance by adopting such concept through his concept of “situation”.

2. The second point of influence: the active role of the organism in constituting experience.

Earlier in this chapter I have shown that Gestalt psychology has emphasized the active role of an organism in constituting its experience. For example Koffka maintains that an organism’s movement in its environment is considered to be behavior only under the condition that organism is voluntarily making the movement.

Gestalt psychology, also, maintains that an explanation of behavior should be understood in relation to “behavioral environment” that has a meaning for the organism and not as a causal effect of the “geographical environment”. In their view, the movement that is caused by the “geographical environment” is not considered to be behavior.

Furthermore, as explained earlier, Gestalt psychology introduces the concept of phenomenal field. Koffka describes such “field” forces of “stresses” and “strains” that solicits the organism’s behavior. By being active towards these forces of tensions, the organism is capable of controlling the field and bringing it to a state of “equilibrium”.

Like Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty considers that the body is active in constituting its experience. Merleau-Ponty says:

When the eye and the ear follow an animal in flight, it is impossible to say “which started first” in the exchange of stimuli and responses. Since all the movements of the organism are always conditioned by external influences, one can, if one wishes, readily treat behavior as an effect of the milieu. But in the same way, since all the stimulations which the organism receives have in turn been possible only by its preceding movements which have culminated in exposing the receptor organ to external influences, one could also say that behavior is the first cause of all the stimulations. Thus the form of excitation is created by the organism itself, by its proper manner of offering itself to actions from the outside. Doubtless, in order to be able to subsist, it must encounter a certain number of physical and chemical agents in its surroundings. But it is the organism itself- according to the proper nature of its receptors, the thresholds of its nerve centres and the movements of the organs- which chooses the stimuli in the physical world to which it will be sensitive [...] This would be the keyboard which moves itself in such a way as to offer- and according to variable rhythms-such or such of its keys to the in itself monotonous action of an external hammer.²⁹ (SB, p. 13)

The organism is active in perceiving certain sense-data and leaving out others. It is not only that the sense-apparatus and the nervous system are responsible for the kind of sense received from the world but also the way the organism focuses and offers some of its sensors to receive certain sense-data that have a certain interest for the organism. (SB, p. 13) With such an interest, the organism is not like a keyboard that is waiting for external

²⁹ My highlighting

forces to have their effect on certain keys and produce a representation of that stimulus. Such activity of the organism has a role in constituting its “situation”

Merleau-Ponty was also influenced by the Gestalt psychology’s idea of a phenomenal field. He described the phenomenal field as crowded with “lines of force”. (SB, p.168) For example in case of playing football, a football player does not perceive things as things to be known such as a white line or green grass. The player would rather perceives “lines of force (the “yard lines”; those which demarcate the “penalty area”) and articulated in sectors (for example, the “openings” between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action.” (SB, p.168) The spots in a field are not spots to be known but are spots that “solicit” the player’s motor intentions.

So far I have presented the Gestalt psychology’s two points of influence on Merleau-Ponty. The first point of influence is the phenomenal and non-representational domain of experience. The second point of influence is the active role of the organism in constituting experience. It is clear now that Gestalt psychology has played a role in Merleau-Ponty’s argument against the objective understanding of experience. By showing the influence of the Gestalt psychology on Merleau-Ponty I have achieved the first step towards my thesis which is to present the constitution of Merleau-Ponty’s view on the phenomenal body and its structural relation with the world based on his criticism of the two preconceptions of the representational nature of experience and the passive role of the living being. I have shown that Gestalt psychology played a role of influencing and supporting Merleau-Ponty. Gestalt psychology influences Merleau-Ponty, as I will show latter, to argue against objective theories of perception, such as associationism.

Merleau-Ponty, however, disagrees with Gestalt psychology on its reduction of phenomenal experience to a physical event explained by laws of grouping. Although Gestalt psychology was committed to phenomenological description, it was also committed to the scientific approach to explain the nature of perceptual phenomenon. Koffka says: “I admit that in our ultimate explanations, we can have but one universe of discourse and that it must be the one about which physics has taught us so much.” (Koffka, 1955, p. 48) In an attempt to stick to a scientific explanation, Gestalt psychology reduces human experience, through the concept of isomorphism, to a bodily and physical event. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, such a reduction would negate all the progress which Gestalt psychology made over objective theories of perception. In the following, I will present Merleau-Ponty’s argument.

III. Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of Gestalt psychology: The Preconception of the physical explanation of the phenomenon:

In his *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty provides two arguments against the physical explanation of gestalt. The first argument is focused on the rejection of the concept of “isomorphism”. The second argument is focused on the primacy of phenomenal gestalt. In the following I will present Merleau-Ponty’s argument against the concept of “isomorphism”.

1. The argument against “isomorphism”: The failure of reducing the vital and human behavior to a physical behavior:

The first argument of Merleau-Ponty against Gestalt psychology is presented in section three of his *The Structure of Behavior*. The argument shows that the relation of human behavior in its environment (human order) cannot be reduced to a physical relation of an object to its surrounding (physical order). In this argument Merleau-Ponty is targeting the Gestaltist’s concept of “isomorphism”.

In his introduction of section three of *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty gave a hint that the target is the gestaltist’s “isomorphism”. Merleau-Ponty says “if the structures of consciousness are useless in explanation, it is because they have their physical or physiological equivalent; and this “isomorphism” in a philosophy of form is an identity.” (SB, p. 136) He says earlier: “we see Koffka defining consciousness, following the tradition of materialism, as that property “which certain events in nature have of revealing themselves,” as if consciousness always had as objects the physiological process which accompany it.” (SB, p. 136) Earlier in the same page, Merleau-Ponty asks: “But can the originality of biological and mental structures be really conserved, as Gestalt theory tries to do, while at the same time founding them on the physical structures?” (SB, p. 136) In this way, one can say that Merleau-Ponty, with his rejection of the reduction of orders of behavior is essentially targeting the gestaltist’s concept of “isomorphism.” Merleau-Ponty, however, in his argument did not target directly the concept of “isomorphism” as the reduction of the mental (as a state of mind), to the physical (as a physical operation in the body). He presented an argument against the reduction of physical and vital order to the human order.

In his *Structure*, Merleau-Ponty presents three orders: the physical order, the vital order, and the human order. Merleau-Ponty's thinks that "the "physical," the "vital" and the "mental" do not represent three powers of being, but three dialectics" (SB, p. 184) Bannan understands the above three orders as three "levels of reality". (Bannan 1967, p. 43) I understand Merleau-Ponty's three orders, however, as three kinds of relations to the world. In Merleau-Ponty's view, the concept of "physical order" refers to an object in its relation to the surrounding environment and is restricted by physical laws. The "vital order" refers to an organism in its relation to its environment. The "human order" refers to human experience in its relation to its environment. The three orders describe three kinds of behavior.

One might ask here how Merleau-Ponty's argument of the reduction of behavior is an argument towards the rejection of the concept of isomorphism which is, according to Gestalt, the reduction of the mental to a physical activity in the brain. Not many secondary sources, that explain chapter three of Merleau-Ponty's *Structure*, or that explain Merleau-Ponty's argument against Gestalt psychology, have elaborated on Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the concept of "isomorphism"³⁰. The only text that mentions this concept is John F. Bannan. In his *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, he implicitly points the relation between Merleau-Ponty's argument of the reduction of orders and the concept of isomorphism. Bannan, however, does not elaborate on such a relation.

Bannan also mentions an interesting point that links the concept of "isomorphism" with a representational theory of perception. He says that: "This famous

³⁰ These references include Dillon in his *Merleau-Ponty's ontology*; Peter Hadreas in his *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*; Lester Embree in his *Merleau-Ponty's examination of Gestalt psychology*.

isomorphism is actually a representational theory of consciousness.” (Bannan 1967, p. 43) Bannan, however, does not explain how Gestalt psychology, with its concept of “isomorphism”, becomes a representational theory. In the following I intend to provide answers to these questions that I have just raised, but first I intend to present Merleau-Ponty’s argument for the failure of reducing both the vital and human order to the physical order.

The failure of the reduction of the human and the vital orders to the physical order:

Merleau-Ponty thinks that the vital order (an organism) cannot be reduced to the physical order. (SB, p.150) The difference between the two orders or systems is related to a difference between their behaviors and their relations with the surrounding environment. In the physical system, the relation between the physical object and its environment is “mechanical”. Merleau-Ponty defines such a relation as a relation of a cause to an effect. Physical stimuli cause and affect the physical system. This implies a dependency of the effect on the cause. Merleau-Ponty says “the cause is the [only]³¹ necessary and sufficient condition of the effect considered in its existence and its nature.” (SB, p. 161)

In the vital system, however, the relation between the organism and its environment is dialectic. (SB, p. 148) Merleau-Ponty says “physical stimuli act upon the organism only by eliciting a global response [requested by the organism]”³². (SB, p. 161) The physical stimuli are not considered here as “causes” but rather as “occasions”. The organism lets itself correspond to only those stimuli which have vital significance for the

³¹ My addition

³² My addition

organism. Merleau-Ponty says “One cannot assign a moment in which the world acts on the organism, since the very effect of this “action” expresses the internal law of the organism.” (SB, p. 161) As explained earlier in this chapter, Gestalt psychology recognizes such structural relations.

Now if we look closer at both systems with regard to the conditions of equilibrium³³ that we find in any physical system, such as a foam bubble, the condition that releases the tension of the system and leads the system towards its equilibrium state is usually external to the system. The system does not have control over such conditions. For example, the stability of the size of a foam bubble is controlled by the outside pressure on its surface. If the outside pressure changes, the size of the foam bubble would respectively change.

In the vital order, however, the condition of the equilibrium is obtained by the organism itself. The relation between the involved forces has a meaning for the organism. The equilibrium is achieved according to conditions given by the organism itself. (SB, p. 145) For example, the equilibrium state of any organism regarding getting its supplies of oxygen happens not only through breathing, but also through finding a good environment that supplies oxygen. Here, the condition that releases the tension is within the system itself. Merleau-Ponty says “the organism itself measures the action of things upon it and itself delimits its milieu by a circular process which is without analogy in the physical world.” (SB, p.148) A vital system “constitutes a proper milieu for itself.” (SB, p.146) Such a difference in the condition of equilibrium entails an essential difference between the structural characters of the two systems.

³³ Merleau-Ponty here shows an influence by the Gestaltist’s concept of “field” described earlier in this chapter.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the vital order should not be explained according to the physical law that constrains its behavior but according to a norm that considers the individuality of the vital order. If two people are asked to draw a circle, they would not necessarily follow the same method. Each painting would express individuality or a special manner of doing things. Also, in the process of sleeping, each person has his own way of positioning the body. (SB, p. 146) The norm is set by the vital order itself as a “preferred attitude.” (SB, 159) According to such norm, “the organism itself measures the action of things upon it [the organism]³⁴ and itself delimits its milieu by a circular process.” (SB, p.148) Here a vital system is not the physical body but the “phenomenal body” that expresses a normative and a dialectical relation with the surrounding environment. (SB, p.156)

Merleau-Ponty not only rejects the reduction of the physical order to a vital order, he also rejects the reduction of the psychological order to the physical order. Earlier I have explained that a physical system reaches its state of equilibrium by being effected by surrounding stimuli over which it has no control. In a vital system the organism approaches its state of equilibrium through selecting the specific stimulus or environment that causes the required effect which is usually an instinctual need. Similar to vital systems, human behavior also expresses a dialectical relationship with the environment. Such a dialectic relationship not only satisfies instinctual needs but also social and cultural needs. The physical stimuli are perceived by a person as “use objects” such as

³⁴ My addition.

desk, computer, phone, etc. Some are also perceived as “cultural objects” such as language. These objects stimulate the required work or behavior. (SB, p.162)³⁵

Human behavior cannot be reduced to a physical order simply because it involves the intentionality of the subject which cannot be reduced to physical order. For example, two persons may have two different behaviors towards an object. One person might grasp an apple with an intention to eat it. Another person might grasp an apple with an intention to use it as a decorative object. In this case, the meaning of the two experiences cannot be reduced to the physical order which is the representation of sensory qualities such as color, shape, and motor movement of some parts of the body.

So far I have presented Merleau-Ponty’s argument of the failure of reducing both the vital and the human order to the physical order. Gestalt psychology fails to see that human order implies a relation with the world that cannot be reduced to physical order. Earlier in this section I have raised two questions: the first question was how Merleau-Ponty’s argument against the reduction of orders or relations can be an argument against “isomorphism” which is the reduction of the mental phenomenon to physical body. The second question was how, Gestalt psychology, through reducing the domain of phenomenon to the physical, becomes a representational theory as Bannan claims.

The two questions are related in a sense that they lead to the same answer. My elaboration on Gestalt psychology’s concepts of the “geographical environment” and the “behavioral environment” in this chapter would assist in providing the answer. The “geographical environment” is the meaning, as caused by the physical effect of the environment and which results in physical operations in the brain. The “behavioral

³⁵ I intend to expand on the human order in the next chapter.

environment” is the phenomenal experience of environment as it appears to us. In that sense, the organism has a role in constituting its experience. That is, the experience of behavior implies a structural relation with environment. As I have presented earlier, Gestalt psychology has insisted on behavior with organism’s being active within its environment. According to this, the “behavioral environment” implies a “structural relation” and the “geographical environment” implies a “causal relation”. In my view, Merleau-Ponty has understood such an implication and accordingly presents an argument against the reduction of the orders, or relations with the world, rather than attacking directly the reduction of the phenomenal experience to physical activities in the body. This answers the question of why Merleau-Ponty’s argument against the reductions of orders is an argument against the reduction of the phenomenal experience to the physical activity in the body.

With regard to the second question of how the gestaltist’s approval of the concept of “isomorphism” would turn the gestaltist’s into a representational theory, the answer is as follows: If our phenomenal experience is reduced, according to the isomorphism, to an activity in the brain, behavior would be determined only by the representation of stimuli in the brain, caused by the effect of the environment on the body. By applying the concept of “isomorphism”, Gestalt psychology turns into a representational theory as Bannan described. In addition to his argument against the concept of “isomorphism”, Merleau-Ponty also argues against the nature of gestalt as described by science.

2. The Rejection of the Physical Gestalt and the Primacy of Phenomenal Gestalt:

As I explained earlier, although Gestalt psychology includes the phenomenological description in their explanation of behavior, they insist on reducing experience as phenomenal gestalt to physical gestalt. Gestalt psychology considers that the physical gestalts are real entities that exist in themselves. They consider that “structures” or “physical forms” are “found *in* a nature taken in-itself (*en soi*) and that the mind can be constituted from them.” (SB, p. 140) Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that “[in] reality, matter, life and mind must be understood as three orders of significance.” (SB, p. 137) In his view, physical gestalts are not realities that exist in themselves. In the following I will present his argument.

Merleau-Ponty thinks the mistake that Gestalt psychology made is it treats physical gestalt as entities that exist in themselves, as real things, as “individuals” (P. 137) In his view reality and individuality are encouraged by the characters of gestalt as “[p]ossessing internal unity inscribed in a segment of space and resisting deformation from external influences by its circular causality.” (SB, p. 137) Any change or influence from the outside will lead to a redistribution of its inner forces without losing its individuality. Such a change and redistribution of its forces express an inner law “which has no meaning outside the limits of the dynamic structure considered, and which on the other hand assigns its properties to each internal point so much so that they never be absolute properties, properties of this point”, but a property for the whole structure. (SB, p. 138)

With regard to the individuality of the gestalt, Merleau-Ponty thinks that Gestalt psychology made the same mistake that is made by atomistic views of associationism.

Although Gestalt psychology has argued against associationism which assigns “absolute properties” to atoms, “elements”, or “particles”, Gestalt psychology has restored such individuality to their forms. In Merleau-Ponty view, the distinction between the two kinds of individuality is that the first is atomic and the second is “molar.” (SB, p. 138)

If we take a close look at the physical laws that describe such physical structures, we notice that these laws describe only few stable forces or elements that are involved in constituting the structure. For example, the law of gravity on earth includes the stability of rotation of earth. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that structure “will remain valid only as long as the cosmological structure on which it is founded endures.” (SB, p. 138) In other words, the law would be true only when all other forces in the universe, which are not counted within such law, are stable. Merleau-Ponty says: “the law of the falling bodies expresses the constitution of a field of relatively stable forces in the neighbourhood of the earth and will remain valid only as long as the cosmological structure on which it is founded endures.” (SB, p. 138) This means that a real law that describes a real physical phenomenon should include all the unlimited number of forces in the universe that are involved³⁶. Physical laws, however, express only limited forces that are involved. If this is the case, Gestalt psychology would face a challenge of considering the physical or scientific “discourse” as an expression of a reality that exists in itself without a perceiver.

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, these laws do not express any inherited character that describes the anatomy of the world or that can be described as an original model

³⁶ Peter Hadreas says: “if the full picture is admitted, require a model involving a dialectical arrangement between a great variety of forces. The full list of these forces is, in principle, indeterminate. (In the case of gravity, for example, we cannot specify all gravitational forces brought about by the multitude of galaxies)”. (Hadreas 1986)

“according to which the physical world would be made and which would govern it, but only the properties of certain relatively stable wholes.” (SB, p. 139) Merleau-Ponty thinks that although it is possible to discover through Egyptology economical, political, and social structures which describes the old civilization of Egypt, it is not possible to consider that such structures are “real forces which would direct the course of history.” (SB, p. 134) Those structures are different than the “multiple facts which have constituted it [the real civilization]³⁷ and brought it into existence.” (SB, p. 143)

Merleau-Ponty considers that these structures are “ideas” or “significations” or “conceptualizing” of things that are perceived by us. (SB, p. 143) He says “Form is not an element of the world but a limit toward which physical knowledge tends and which it itself defines.” (SB, p. 142) Merleau-Ponty thinks that structure or form “is not a physical reality, but an object of perception; without it physical science would have no meaning.” (SB, p. 143) The unity that is described in structures is not real unity but a “unity of perceived objects”. For example, if we consider that physical gestalt possesses physical reality and exists in space and is constrained by a law then, such a gestalt would be divided in several places and several events. To argue against such a division is equivalent to saying that such a physical gestalt “is not spread out in space, that it does not exist in the same manner as a thing.” (SB, p. 144) Since Merleau-Ponty, did not provide a good example to support his view in this argument, I intend to present an example that clarify Merleau-Ponty’s argument. I will choose the physical phenomenon of gravitation or gravity.

³⁷ My addition.

According to Newtonian physics, gravitation “is the tendency of objects with mass to accelerate toward each other”³⁸. The law that describe such phenomenon is as follow

$$F = G \frac{m_1 m_2}{r^2} \quad ^{39}$$

F refers to the gravitational force, G refers to the gravitational constant, m refers to the included masses, and r refers to the distance between the two masses. The structure of the law of the event of gravitation, which describes a multiplication of two masses and division by the distance between the two masses, does not exist in space as something that exists in itself and in the same “manner” as things exist in space. These masses are abstracts and do not refer to a specific mass or distance. Such structure, such “physical reality” is not a reality that exists in-itself detached from a perceiving subject. Such structure is the structure of perceived object.

We might wonder how such an argument fits within the Merleau-Ponty’s argument against Gestalt psychology. According to Merleau-Ponty’s argument, if it is proven that such physical structures are structures of perceived things, this means that Gestalt psychology cannot claim the reduction of experience to physiological activity that happen in the brain and which can be explained according to some laws of grouping described earlier in this chapter.

For example consider the fact that we see points constituting a shape of circle. According to Gestalt psychology such an experience of shape is caused by physiological activity that happens in the brain that is constituted according to laws of grouping. The

³⁸ From Wikipedia: The free encyclopedia, Gravitation, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gravity>

³⁹ Ibid.

fact that we see a shape of “an imperfect circle” is not because some laws of grouping caused them but because we perceive a significance of “imperfect circle” that we can recognize some laws of grouping in it. Merleau-Ponty says “far from the “physical form” being able to be the real foundation of the structure of behavior and in particular of its perceptual structure, it is itself conceivable as an object of perception.” (SB, p. 144) In this way, form, structure or gestalt, “cannot be defined in terms of reality but in terms of knowledge, not as a thing of the physical world but as a perceived whole,” (SB, p. 143)

Merleau-Ponty thinks that the reality of physical structures is based on perceptual structures. He says “It is from the universe of perceived things that Gestalt theory borrows its notion of form.” (SB, p. 144) And that physical structure “is itself conceivable only as an object of perception.” (SB, p. 144) It is through the perception of the physicist that the physical law can be discovered. He says: “The truth is that science, on the basis of certain privileged perceptual structures, has sought to construct the image of an absolute physical world, of a physical *reality*.” (SB, p. 144) In his rejection of the physical gestalt as a reality that exists in-itself, Merleau-Ponty presents his thesis of the primacy of our perceptual experience⁴⁰.

In his view, science is a point of view that can be traced to the scientist’s experiences of the world. Science always aims towards clarifying certain aspects in our perceptual field. It expresses a certain point of the view toward the world. For example, the physicist focuses on the movement of bodies and the biologist focuses on vital beings, etc. Merleau-Ponty relates the development of science to our perspectival experience. It is because of such perspectival experience, “the perceived possesses in itself a hidden and

⁴⁰ The thesis of the primacy of perception does not only reduce objective thinking to perceptual experience but also it reduces natural sciences to “our lived relationship *in and with the world*.” (Compton 89, p.143)

inexhaustible richness.” (SB, p. 186) With such perspectival views scientists are always open to further perspectives of exploration, development, and reconstruction.

Objective scientific views are abstractions that can be reduced to individual perceptual experiences. All scientific views are originally related to the pre-scientific phenomenal point of view. Our perceptual experience is our primordial openness to the world and this openness is essentially perspectival.

Conclusion:

This chapter represents one step towards achieving my aim of this thesis, which is to show that Merleau-Ponty’s constitution of the phenomenal body is based on his argument about the two preconceptions of objective thinking: the nature of experience as representational and the passive role of the body towards forming its experience. The first focus of this chapter was to explore the influence of Gestalt psychology on Merleau-Ponty’s views. The second focus of this chapter was to show Merleau-Ponty’s departure from such an influence to present his genuine views. This chapter is divided into three sections.

In the first section of this chapter, I presented some of the Gestaltist’s concepts which are important to my argument in this chapter and in further chapters. Some of the important concepts that I have introduced in this chapter are the concept of “gestalt”, “the laws of grouping”, and the concept of “isomorphism”. In this section I have also paid close attention to the concept of “behavioral environment” which shows Gestalt psychology’s interest in the phenomenal description of human experience.

In section two of this chapter I have shown the influence of Gestalt psychology on Merleau-Ponty. The first point of influence is the phenomenal and non-representational domain of experience. The second point of influence is the active role of the organism in constituting experience. In my view, Gestalt psychology had a role in Merleau-Ponty's argument against the two preconceptions of the representational nature of experience and the passive role of the living being. Merleau-Ponty, however, disagrees with Gestalt psychology on its reduction of phenomenal experience to a physical event as explained by laws of grouping

In section three of this chapter I have presented two arguments that represent Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the gestaltist's views of the nature of gestalt. The first argument that he argues against is the reduction of both the vital and human orders to the physical order. The reason for the failure of the reduction is that vital and the human orders express a normative and dialectic relation with the world which cannot be reduced to physical orders. Merleau-Ponty, also, argues against individuality and the physical structure as existing in-itself without a perceiver. In his view, physical structures are conceived only as objects of perception. In my view, such criticism of the nature of gestalt as physical has set the stage for Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of the phenomenal experience. Such result is the first characteristic of the phenomenal body.

Chapter Two: Associationism:

Introduction:

In the introduction of my thesis I have said that many classical theories of perception are influenced by objective and scientific thinking. Like physical objects human experience is considered to be constituted of distinct and isolated units or atoms. Furthermore, the qualities and characteristic of these atoms are determined by the world. Hence, according to Merleau-Ponty, classical theories of perception fall into the “experience error” when they apply objective and scientific thinking to their explanation of perception. Merleau-Ponty noticed two preconceptions in such theories of perception. The first preconception is to consider that perception is constituted of units or impressions. The second preconception is to consider that the meaning of and the relations between these impressions are determined by the world. In this chapter I will present Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of these two preconceptions in classical theories of perception. I will refer to these theories as associationism.

Before presenting these views, however, I would like first to mention that my approach in presenting these two preconceptions does not follow Merleau-Ponty’s approach in his introduction of the *Phenomenology*. The reason for this is that I would like to emphasis how associationist modern psychology follows these preconceptions and how Gestalt psychology criticizes such a view. In my opinion, such criticism has provided Merleau-Ponty with good material to set his argument against advocates of these two preconceptions.

The other reason for not taking the same approach as Merleau-Ponty, in the introduction of the *Phenomenology*, in presenting these preconceptions is that the structure of his argument is confusing. In his introduction, Merleau-Ponty seemed to be developing two arguments at the same time. On one hand the reader can identify Merleau-Ponty's argument against two groups of concepts: the concepts of association and memory, and the concepts of attention and judgement. On the other hand, one can identify an argument against empiricism and intellectualism. One might find it, however, difficult to map the first argument to the second. Also, Merleau-Ponty did not draw strict lines distinguishing the schools of empiricism and intellectualism and their related concepts. For example, the third section was dedicated to present two intellectual concepts, attention and judgement, yet at the beginning of the section, Merleau-Ponty discusses the concept of attention to empiricism as well. (PP, p. 31) Due to such confusion, I intend not to follow the exact structure of Merleau-Ponty's argument. Rather, I am going to use some material from his an argument in addition to other material to present my argument which traces the two preconceptions of an objective understanding of perception.

I. The preconception of the atomic perception:

In section one of the introduction of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty did not specify any school of thought as representing the atomic understanding of perception. Furthermore, in section two of the introduction of *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty wrote about the "associationist's objective contiguity and resemblance." (PP, p. 19) Merleau-Ponty did not provide an explicit definition of these associationists, but from his

writing, one can assume that associationism is an atomic theory of perception. Also, one might assume from his writing that associationism is an empirical theory of perception. Since he does not say much about associationism I would like to explore this school of thought.

Associationism:

Associationism is a name for a theory of mind that considers the mind as constituted of simple “elements”, “atoms”, “impressions”, or “ideas”. These elements are organized in the mind according to rules of association. Association is an old theory of mind that can be traced back to Greek philosophy. For example, the label associationism can be applied to Aristotle’s philosophy since he presents the four rules of association⁴¹.

Also, associationism can be applied to British empiricism especially to David Hume’s theory of perception. Hume considers that perception is constituted from atomic elements called “impressions”. He presents an experiment that shows how to reach such impression. He suggests focusing our vision on a point placed on a piece of paper while walking away from it. He says: “[T]he moment before [the point]⁴² vanished the image or impression was perfectly indivisible.” (Hume, p.27)

Hume also considers that the mind is directed by a “gentle force” to combine simple ideas according to their “resemblance”, “contiguity” and “cause and effect.” When the mind notices a relation between simple impressions it finds itself “pushed by a gentle force” to combine them. (Hume 1978, p. 10) It seems here that the mind discovers relations among the sense impression involved. In general, empiricism or associationism

⁴¹ <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/psychbeginnings.html>

⁴² My addition.

requires a process of association that is neither essential to the physical stimuli nor to impressions that explain the meaning or significance initiated in our experience of things.

Gestalt psychology considers that in modern psychology, associationism continues to explain sensation as a sum of single isolated sensation caused by isolated “sense spots” located on the body. The gestaltist David Katz considers the associationism view gets its support from the “anatomy of the sense organs” which connect a sense spot on the skin with an atomic sense experience. “Individual cutaneous sense spots were realities to which one could cling; their isolated stimulation corresponded to the [...] “atoms” of sensory experience.” (Katz 1951⁴³, p. 5)

According to association, sensation is an “additive” process. (Katz 1951 p. 5) For example, associationism considers that the sensation of vanilla ice cream is reduced to a sum of sensation of coldness, sweetness, vanilla aroma, softness, and yellow. Such summative view, however, is countered by Gestalt psychology⁴⁴ which considers that the “whole is more than the sum of its separate parts.” (Katz, p. 6)

II. Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of the preconception of atomic perception: The rejection of concepts of “association” and “projection of memories”:

Following Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty thinks that in our real perceptual experience, we do not experience any “dotlike” impressions. Our experience of a specific sensation is always accompanied by another sensation that operates as a background for the attended sensation. Merleau-Ponty says “a really homogenous area offering *nothing*

⁴³ David Katz, presents the history of associationism and Gestalt psychology in his book, *Gestalt psychology: its Nature and Significance*.

⁴⁴ I will expand on Gestalt psychology views on perception latter in this chapter.

to be cannot be given to *any perception*.” (PP, p. 4) When we experience a visual dot, we always experience it against a background. A white dot on a white background cannot be experienced. In this sense an “impression” cannot be the basic unit of our perceptual experience.

Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty considers that a Gestalt or “a figure on a background is the simplest sense-given available to us.” (PP, p. 4) He thinks that this characteristic of a Gestalt is essential to perception. Our perceptual experience is pregnant with significance. He says: “The elementary event is already invested with meaning, and the higher function will bring into being only a more integrated mode of existence or a more valid adaptation, by using and sublimating the subordinate operations.” (PP, p. 11) The atomic understanding of perception is only a way of being influenced by the objective and the scientific understanding of the world as constituted of small and atomic pieces of matter⁴⁵.

It is obvious here that Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of atomic understanding of perception is inspired by Gestalt psychology. Like Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty considers perceptual experience as a whole, a figure on a background, is the simplest sensation that we perceive. In the following I will present Merleau-Ponty’s argument against associationism.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of atomic view of perception here paves the way for understanding of our perceptual experience as Gestalt.

The rejection of association:

Atomic empiricism, or associationism, faces the question of how the meaning of perception is constituted from atomic single impressions. The solution generally given is to present the “rules of association” as a condition for the meaning of perception.

Merleau-Ponty, however, considers that such a view is both ‘unjustified’ and ‘circular.’⁴⁶

Unjustified, because empiricism does not explain how the process of association functions according to rules of “contiguity” and “resemblance” especially as each atomic sensation “remains for ever what it is, a blind contact”. (PP, p. 16)

Associationism does not explain the shift from an isolated atom to a whole especially when the mind has no essential role in the constitution of meaning.

Associationism considers that the role of the mind follows the constitution of meaning.

The role of the mind is just to push the process of meaning forward. Describing this view of empiricism, Merleau-Ponty says: “An impression can never by itself be associated with another impression. Nor has it the power to arouse others.” (PP, p. 20) Furthermore, empiricism falls into circularity because it uses the principle of association to explain what it really needs to be explained, which is how an atomic impressions associate with each other and how the rules of association can be applied.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that our perceptual experience provides a unity that is already charged with meaning. This unity is the condition for the constitution of perceptual meaning. He presents the following example:

If I walk along a shore towards a ship which has run aground, and the funnel or masts merge into the forest bordering on the sand dune, there will be a moment when these details suddenly become part of the ship, and indissolubly fused with it. As I approached, I did not perceive resemblances or proximities which finally came together to form a continuous picture of the upper part of the ship. I merely felt that the look

⁴⁶ Check Carman in Carman and Hansen 2005, p. 56.

of the object was on the point of altering, that something was imminent in this tension, as a storm is imminent in storm clouds. Suddenly the sight before me was recast in a manner satisfying to my vague expectation. Only afterwards did I recognize, as justifications for the change, the resemblance and contiguity of what I call 'stimuli' (PP, p. 20)

Such a perceptual experience shows a contiguity of the parts of the ship is apprehended after an apprehension of an indeterminate unity in the perceptual field. At the beginning the border of such a unity seems to be blended in with the background. At this stage, despite the indeterminacy of meaning, a meaning is still given in the perceptual field. As the person approaches the ship a distinct outline of the ship emerges. Only at this stage can we recognize some contiguity and resemblance between the parts of the ship. Hence, noticing relations of association follows and does not precede an apprehension of a nascent meaning in our perceptual experience. A concept of "memory", however, is presented as an attempt to save the atomic understanding of perceptual experience.

Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the projection of memories⁴⁷:

Advocates of the concept of memory consider that memory contributes to the constitution of our perceptual experience. Our past experience can fill the gaps between the given stimuli and accordingly help constitute meaning of our attending experience. For example, when we read a book, our eyes do not focus on each letter of each word. This would leave some gaps that are not filled with impression or sense data. The role of memory here is to fill these gaps with the missing stimulus. (PP, p. 22)

The advocates of memory also argue that if we look at a view of a landscape upside down, we still recognize it because our memories provide us with the significance

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty considers both Brunshvicg and Bergson as related to this group of thinkers.

of such a view. Accordingly, remembering is considered to be an essential factor in the constitution of meaning in our perceptual experience.

Such an explanation of the role of the memory, however, is not possible because in order to recognize a group of stimulus as similar to a certain memory, an inherent and immanent meaning should be given first by these sense data, otherwise they remain separated stimuli with blind contacts. Merleau-Ponty considers that if memory plays a role in constituting the meaning of given stimulus we would be able to read the news paper or identify a familiar landscape when we look at it upside down. (PP, p.22)

The advocate of memory should explain how a single and isolated sensations can activate a specific memory and not another. For example, if I want to identify a single impression of a tree that is to be related to a memory of trees, I need first to have some understanding of a structure or meaning of each single impression in order to trigger a memory of a tree and not a stone etc. Accordingly, memory can not be the cause of the constitution of meaning, but a result of such constitution.

In this sense, the role of memory becomes “superfluous” because its role which is to identify a meaning in a group of stimulus is not needed. Such a meaning is already identified in such a group. Merleau-Ponty says:

[I]n order to fill out perception, memories need to have been made possible by the physiognomic character of the data. Before any contribution by memory, what is seen must at the present moment so organize itself as to present a picture to me in which I can recognize my former experiences. Thus the appeal to memory presupposes what it is supposed to explain; the patterning of data, the imposition of meaning on a chaos of sense-data. (PP, p. 23)

The recognition of an “immanent” meaning in the perceptual experience is the cause that triggers the related memory. It is important then to recognize that our perceptual experience is already “pregnant” with meaning.

III. The second preconception: Perception is constituted from qualities determined by the world:

In this section I intend to present Merleau-Ponty's meaning of the determinacy of perceptual experience. I also intend to show that associationism is the school which is originally accused of the error of determinacy. Such an accusation is made originally by Gestalt psychology and later adopted and altered by Merleau-Ponty. At the end of this section I intend to present my interpretation of some examples of the indeterminacy of perceptual meaning as presented by Merleau-Ponty.

Earlier in this chapter I presented Merleau-Ponty's second preconception as the determinacy of perceptual qualities. For example, "to see is to have colours or lights, to hear is to have sounds, to sense is to have quality." (PP, p. 5) This means that the meaning that we receive during our regular perceptual experience is the meaning of sense quality such as yellow, smoothness or sharp noise. This determinacy also means that the perceptual quality of the atom is not changed nor is affected by its context. The world sends determinate messages that cause our experience of determinate qualities. In Merleau-Ponty's view, however, such qualities are neither determinate nor are elements of our perceptual experience.

The preconception of the determinacy of perceptual experience falls back on the physiology of the "constancy hypothesis"⁴⁸. Such a hypothesis implies a strict connection or "a rigidly fixed correspondence between a local stimulus and experience." (Katz 51, p. 10) This means that there is a strict causal relation between an atomic stimulus and an

⁴⁸ Cf. Gurwitsch 66, p.5.

atomic sensation so that the first causes the second. (PP, p.8) In the following I intend to present Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the determinacy of experience. But before that, I would like first to identify some of the views which influence Merleau-Ponty's rejection of such determinacy.

The discussions of the determinacy of experience can be traced down to the associationism of modern psychology. For example, Herman Von Helmholtz⁴⁹ argues that the quality of an atomic sensation depends only on the atomic excitation that is issued from the object perceived. His view falls back on the constancy hypothesis. He says: "Sense-data depend entirely upon, and are determined exclusively by, the corresponding physical stimuli. It follows that whenever the same physical events stimulate the same elements of the nervous system, the same sensations cannot fail to appear." (qtd. in Gurwitsch 64, p. 90) This view is challenged by Gestalt psychology.

Gestalt psychology claims the quality of any part in the perceptual field depends on the relation of it to other parts in the same field⁵⁰. Merleau-Ponty's arguments against the determinacy of perception and the "constancy hypothesis" are strongly influenced by Gestalt psychology. He uses many examples and arguments from this school of thought to argue against associationism. Good evidence of this is that Merleau-Ponty's bibliography has many citations to the Gestaltist's works. In the following I present some of the examples that counter the view that perception is constituted of determined qualities.

⁴⁹ Check Merleau-Ponty's PP, p. 38, footnote

⁵⁰ Cf. Dillon 88, p. 64.

In those examples, I identify three kinds of indeterminacy⁵¹ of perceptual qualities in Merleau-Ponty writings: the first indeterminacy is related to context dependency, the second indeterminacy is related to the interrelation of sense-qualities in our perceptual experience, and the third indeterminacy of perception can be described as the indeterminacy of information presented in our perceptual experience.

The first kind of indeterminacy shows that sense qualities rely upon the context that is related to our perceptual experience. For example, if we look a pair of colored dots, such as (red and green) or (yellow and violet) which spread evenly on a piece of paper, from certain distance, the pairs of colors would look as one solid color of grey. (PP, p. 9)

To support Merleau-Ponty's example, such kind of indeterminacy or context dependency of perceptual qualities is well known in studies of art and design. For example, if the above mentioned pairs of colors were presented next to each other on a large scale surface, each color would appear fully saturated⁵². Such a degree of saturation, however, disappears when a color is paired with different colors. For example, if a room is painted with a light color, it looks bigger and if it is painted with dark color it looks smaller. In this case, light colors seem to recede and dark colors seem to advance. However, when we look at colored pictures, light colors seem to advance and dark colors seem to recede⁵³. The quality of color seems to depend on the context in which it is presented.

⁵¹ With these three kinds of indeterminacy, I intend to explain and extend Merleau-Ponty's concept of "ambiguity of perception" which is not explicitly clarified by Merleau-Ponty's writings.

⁵² The strength of color. The opposite character is the dullness of color.

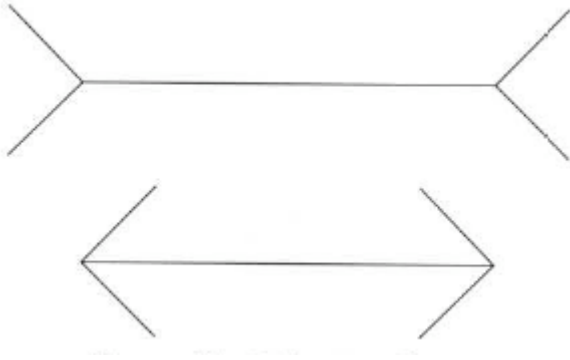
⁵³ The example is taken from a class in the theory of color at Sheridan College.

The second kind of indeterminacy that I can notice in Merleau-Ponty examples is the interrelation of sense quality. In such indeterminacy the qualities of different senses seem to be related to each other, we cannot separate them without losing a sense of reality. For example, the redness that we experience is not only the quality of color redness but a woolly redness such as the redness of a woolly carpet. Or it is the delicious redness such as the redness of the apple. It is not only redness but textual or tasty redness. When our eyes is stimulated with visual sense data of a surface, we not only perceive visual perception we can also perceive the hardness or the smoothness of surfaces. In this sense, the quality of our sensation is indeterminate.

The third kind of indeterminacy that I noticed in the Merleau-Ponty's examples is related to the indeterminacy of information. For example, when we look at someone's face, although we see it complete, yet, not all the details of his face are clear and determine at the time of perceiving. If someone asks us about some of the details afterwards, we would be surprised about how we miss the green color of person's eyes or his moustache. (PP., p. 13) In the same way, it is possible to perceive a crystal with many sides without perceiving the number of sides. If our perception is determinate we would have to perceive the exact number of sides.

Furthermore, optical illusions in general show the indeterminacy of information in our perception. Merleau-Ponty presents Muller-Lyer optical illusion as an example for such indeterminacy. The example is presented as follows⁵⁴:

⁵⁴ The figure is scanned from Carman and Hansen 2005, p. 55.



Merleau-Ponty says: “The two straight lines in Muller Lyer’s optical illusion [...] are neither of equal nor unequal length; it is only in the objective world that this question arises.” (PP, p. 6) At first glance the two horizontal lines might seem unequal. If we look, however with more careful and an investigating attitude, we would see the two lines as equal.

Merleau-Ponty here presents two kinds of attitude that a person can take towards the above shape: “natural attitude” and the “analytic attitude.” The natural attitude is the attitude that we usually take when we deal with things in a daily basis and in our every day living experience. The analytic attitude is the attitude that we take when we start to question one character in such experience. Merleau-Ponty considers the second attitude is related to objective thinking. In case, of Muller-Lyer optical illusion, he says: “it is only in the objective world that this question [of comparison] arises.” (PP, p.6)

In the case of the “natural attitude” the field presents itself as a unified structure. With this “natural attitude”, which is the “primary layer of sense experience”, we make no effort towards what we see. We experience things without investigation. The “analytical attitude”, however, starts when we start to ask “[W]hat precisely it is that I see.” (PP, p.263) A specific quality, a “separate sensory impact”, comes into being when we start to restrict our attention to certain aspects in what we experience.

For example, assume we look at some white papers; some are placed in the light; others are placed in the shade. When we look at the whole group of papers without the consideration that some of them are in the light and others are in the shade, we would be taking the “natural attitude” and we would be looking at white sheets of paper. When, however, we start to fix our gaze on some of the pieces that lie in the shade, the color of those sheets change into a “grey” or as a “steely blue.” By this we would be taking the “analytic attitude.” (PP, p.262)

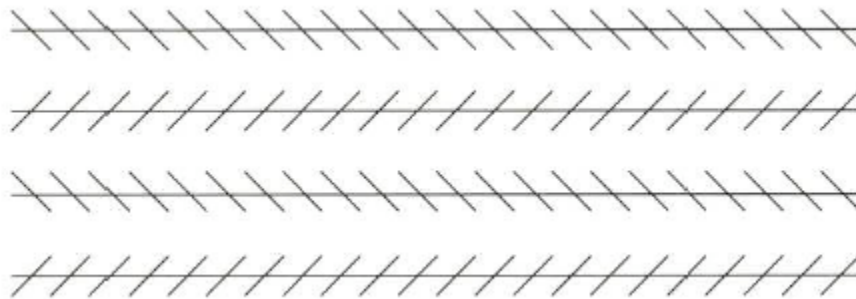
Merleau-Ponty does not deny that by analytic reflection on our perceptual experience, we can perceive a determinate quality. He, however, thinks that having a determinate quality is related to the level of analytic reflection and not to the level of our perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty says: “The determinate quality [...] is an object, not an element, of consciousness... indeed it is the very lately developed object of scientific consciousness.” (PP, p.7) In Merleau-Ponty’s view, perception is an experience of gestalt or significance that cannot be reduced to determinate sensory qualities. Such qualities, however, can be recognized in experience through the analytic observation of our experience itself.

It might be objected that there are determinate perceptions but we do not notice them or that we make mistaken judgements. If we, however, pay attention to them, we will be able to approach such determinate sensations. For example in case of Muller Lyer’s optical illusion described earlier, the indeterminacy of the equal or non-equal length of the two lines, the indeterminacy of information, is due to our judgement or mistakes that we make but if we pay attention we would be able to verify their equality.

Attempts to save the determinacy of perception:

According to the above examples, the understanding of perception as constituted of determined qualities and the “constancy hypothesis” are challenged especially by optical illusions. Advocates of these views, however, suggest the two concepts of attention and judgement as a way to save their views of the determinacy of perceptual qualities and the “constancy hypothesis”.

Zollner’s optical illusion is one of those cases that the advocates have tried to explain. The optical illusion can be explained in two steps: First, when a viewer is presented with a set of horizontal and parallel lines he/she would perceive horizontal and parallel lines. Second, when additional lines are added to the same set, and which are pointed in different directions, the parallel lines would lose their parallel meaning⁵⁵:



The viewer would stop seeing the horizontal lines as parallel.

If the “constancy hypothesis” is correct and applies to our perceptual experience, the two lines should not lose the quality of being parallel lines⁵⁶. That is because, and according to advocates of the “constancy hypothesis”, any part of our perceptual experience holds a determine quality that is caused by stimulus-data, and not according to

⁵⁵ The figure is scanned from Carman and Hansen 2005, p. 64.

⁵⁶ The argument was held by Gestalt psychology.

its relation to the other parts of the perceptual experience. In this way, perceptual illusions are considered to be a challenge to the atomic theory of perception.

In an attempt to save the constancy hypothesis, however, the advocates of the “constancy hypothesis” suggest that perception must require paying attention to the perceived stimuli and making a right judgement⁵⁷. Accordingly, advocates of the “constancy hypothesis” explained “Zollner’s illusion” as a result of a “mistake” in judgement. In addition to the previous claim that the constitution of meaning involves receiving a determinate and an atomic sense-data, advocates of the “constancy hypothesis” consider perception as involving an application of judgement. In cases of perceptual illusions, a false judgement hides or masks the true quality (meaning) of the given stimuli and they become unnoticed.

IV. Merleau-Ponty’s arguments against the preconception of determinacy of perception by the world:

In the third section of his introduction of *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty presents his argument against the atomic thinking that supports the determinacy of perception and constancy hypothesis. His argument focused on the rejection of both “attention” and “judgement”. The material and examples that he used are strongly influenced by Gestalt psychology⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ Such a view also goes back to Descartes.

⁵⁸ Especially from Wolfgang Kohler’s article *On Unnoticed Sensation and Errors of Judgement*. His aim was to argue against associationism’s concept of “unnoticed sensation” as a result of the application of judgement.

Merleau-Ponty's rejection of "attention":

According to the advocates of the determinacy of perception, "attention" is a "general and unconditioned power" that can be applied to any content of the perceptual experience. "Attention" is a faculty the role of which is like a "searchlight" that highlights a certain meaning or sensation that is hidden by a judgement. Through the process of attention the mind brings the meaning to our attention. If this is the case, it is not clear here how "attention" identifies the hidden unconscious perception. Merleau-Ponty says, "one would have to show how a perception awakens attention, then how attention develops and enriches it." (PP, p, 31) Accordingly, the significance that is inherent in the perceptual experience must be given first, in order for attention to reveal it. We need to first have some significance in our experience of perception in order to apply attention to its quality.

In an attempt to save the concept of "attention", it might be suggested that the role of attention is to highlight a mental significance. But if that is the case, one might ask why attention highlights a property of the mind if the mind knows everything. In that case there would be no necessary role for attention. Merleau-Ponty says: "[I]n a consciousness which constitutes everything, or rather which eternally possesses the intelligible structure of everything attention remains an abstract and ineffective power, because it has no work to perform." (PP, p.32) Such a view of attention lacks an understanding of the contingency of the events of thought. In order for significance to be experienced it should be given contingently first. The contingent significance can be distinguished from other significances and accordingly call forth the act of attention to illuminate it. (PP, p. 32)

Advocates of attention, who might be called advocates of intellectualism, fail to see the importance of such contingency in our perceptual experience.

Studies on infants show that in early stages of their lives they experience color sensation as indeterminate colors. With time, their experience of color is developed into identifying “warm” and “cold” colors. For example, distinction between the colors yellow, orange, and red is not as clear as the distinction between the colors of the same group and blue. At a latter stage, infants start to identify colors.

Some views explain the infant incapability to identify color in the early ages as related to the child’s ignorance or the child’s incapability to apply the name of colors which prevent the child from identifying colors at such early stage. “The child must, it was alleged, see green where it is; all he was failing to do was to pay attention and apprehend his own phenomena.” (PP, p. 35) In other words, the infant in early age perceives distinct qualities of color, the infant, however, does not pay attention to it.

Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that perceptual significance in the early stages of infant’s life is not given as qualities to be identified but rather as a lived phenomenon. Such level of significance precedes the level of attending to colors as distinct qualities. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the advocates of the determinacy of colour “were not yet able to conceive a world in which colours were indeterminate, or a color which was not a precise quality.” (PP, p. 34) So far I have presented Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of “attention” as a way to save the view of the perception of determinate qualities. In the following I intend to present Merleau-Ponty’s argument against judgement.

Merleau-Ponty's criticism of judgement:

Merleau-Ponty now turns to the hypothesis of mistaken judgement that is suggested by the advocates of the "constancy hypothesis" as a solution to explain Zollner's optical illusion as a "mistake". He thinks that the mistaken judgement remains unexplained. It is not clear why when we look at the parallel lines within the new context we tend to mistake it for non-parallel lines. He says: "How does it come about that it is so difficult in Zollner's illusion to compare in isolation the very lines that have to be compared according to the task set? Why do they thus refuse to be separated from the auxiliary lines?" (PP, p. 41)

The answer must be related to the visual phenomenon itself. When the new lines are introduced to the main parallel lines a new meaning has been introduced to the phenomenon itself. According to this, the parallel lines lost their meaning and became parts in the new merged meaning. In this sense the meaning of the phenomenon must be caused by the new structural relation between the old and the new lines. The new meaning transforms the phenomenon into a new structure. Such transformation makes it difficult for the perceiver to recognize any parallel lines because there is no parallel meaning existing anymore. (PP, p.41)

Many philosophers consider that perception involves an act of judgement. Descartes realizes that the constitution of perceptual meaning involves a judgement applied by the mind. For example, suppose through a window we see a view of some hats and coats. We would consider that what we see is hidden from us despite the fact that what we see is only hats and coats. Descartes says: "I judge that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the

faculty of judgement which is in my mind.” (Descartes, vol. II, p. 20) Hence, the meaning of our perceptual experience requires an application of the faculty of judgement.

Judgement, however, requires a spontaneous organization first in order to function. If we define the process of judgement as the application of a property of sensation to an object, then that object should be available as a meaningful unit in the first place. Merleau-Ponty says “judgement in this very general and quite formal sense explains perception, true or false, only when it is guided by the spontaneous organization and the special mode of arrangement of the phenomena.” (PP, p.41) Accordingly, advocates of the “constancy hypothesis” are mistaken when they explain perception as a result of judgement.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that everyday experience shows a clear distinction between perception and judgement. He says:

Ordinary experience draws a clear distinction between sense experience and judgement. It sees judgement as the taking of a stand, as an effort to know something, which shall be valid for myself every moment of my life, and equally for other actual and potential minds; sense experience, on the contrary, is taking appearance at its face value, without trying to possess it and learn its truth. (PP, p. 39)

If we compare the two experiences we find that perception precedes judgement. That is because the meaning of our perceptual experience is related to this particular moment of our life. Perception is this moment of intimacy with the object and with no effort to know it. The experience of judgement, on the other hand, seems to follow perception. That is because judgement requires basic material to work on. To judge is to apply a property to an object. Unlike perception, judgement is the process that involves breaking the intimacy with the object by taking a stand or a point of view based on other original significance.

Conclusion:

In this chapter I presented two preconceptions of objective understanding of perception; the first is that perception is constituted from atomic units. The second is to consider that the meaning of such units is determined by the world. Although Merleau-Ponty did not specify one school of thought to represent such objective thinking, his argument was against associationism in general and specifically modern associationism⁵⁹.

Merleau-Ponty rejection of the first prejudice is devoted to the rejection of the two concepts of “association” and “memory”. With regard to the concept of association, associationism failed to explain how “rules of association” function especially when an atomic sensation is in “blind contact” with another sensation and when there is no rule for the mind that is responsible for such association. The concept of memory is introduced as a way to associate atomic perceptions, which constitute our perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty, however, rejects such a view because the advocate of memory should explain how a single and isolated sensation can activate a specific memory and not another. In order to recognize a group of sense data as similar to a certain memory, an inherent and immanent meaning should be given first by these sense data. In general, Merleau-Ponty considers that we do not experience any “dotlike” impressions. He says “The immediate is no longer the impression, [...], but the meaning, the structure, the spontaneous arrangement of parts.” (PP, p. 67) A figure on a background is the simplest sensation that one can perceive.

⁵⁹ I would refer to modern associationism as the views that were challenged by Gestalt psychology.

Merleau-Ponty's second preconception is related to the determinacy of objective quality. He challenges the determinacy of perception using some of the Gestalt psychology's examples. Advocates of determinacy, however, suggest the two concepts of attention and judgement as a way to save their views. They claimed that a sensation can be hidden by a judgement. They argue the role of "attention" is like a "searchlight," which highlights the real sensation that is hidden by a judgement. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that it is not clear how attention identifies the hidden sensation. Merleau-Ponty also criticizes the concept of judgement that is suggested by associationism to explain optical illusions. He thinks that associationism needs to explain why the mistaken judgement happened in the first place. In his view, there is no mistaken judgement in the first place because the quality of perceptual experience changes according to the context to which it is applied.

The main result we have learned from Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the two preconceptions in this chapter is the existence a level of significance that escapes both the explanation of empiricism and intellectualism. Merleau-Ponty says: "In the first case consciousness is too poor, in the second too rich for any phenomenon to appeal compelling to it". (PP, p. 33) Here Merleau-Ponty is proposing that perception is related to a new level of significance that is richer than an empirical atomic significance, because this new level of significance is already a gestalt. Yet such gestalt cannot be described as an intellectual gestalt because it is too poor to be intellectual. In the following chapter I intend to explore this new level of significance that is suggested by Merleau-Ponty.

Chapter Three: Behavioral associationism:

Introduction:

In the first section of the introduction of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty considers that the advocates of the atomic understanding of perception fall back with their views on the physiology of the constancy hypothesis⁶⁰ which verifies “a point-by-point” path between a stimulus and its corresponding act. Such a physiology explains human behavior as “theory of nervous functioning, which establishes a theoretical correspondence between each element of the situation and an element of the reaction.” (PP, p. 8) Merleau-Ponty, however, did not expand on this topic in his *Phenomenology*. That is because he had already discussed the topic in his earlier work; *The Structure of Behavior*.

In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty presents some of the scientific theories of behavior contemporary to Merleau-Ponty’s time, such as the reflex theory and Pavlov’s theory⁶¹. These theories adopted the constancy hypothesis which implies the recognition of a path or a constant connection between a stimulus and a response. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that human behavior is not a “series of blind reactions to external “stimuli,” [...] but a dialectical interchange between man and the world, which cannot be adequately expressed in traditional causal terms.” (SB xiv)

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty defines the “constancy hypothesis” as “a point-by-point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception.” (PP, p.8) Such hypothesis also shows the body as constituted of parts; “receiver” parts, “transmitter” parts, and a “recording station”. (PP, p.8)

⁶¹ Laurie Spurling thinks that Merleau-Ponty refers to these theories as behaviorism.

In the following I intend to present Merleau-Ponty's argument against both reflex theory and the Pavlovian theory of conditioned reflex. The goal of this chapter is to trace the two preconceptions of objective thinking in those theories of behavior. The first preconception is the understanding of behavior as constituted of consecutive events of stimuli and action. The second preconception is the meaning of the experience of behavior as determined by the causal effect of external atomic stimuli. Merleau-Ponty uses some the views of Gestalt psychology to argue against these theories that support the constancy hypothesis and which I intend to call behavioral associationism. The result of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of these two preconceptions is Merleau-Ponty's three structures of behavior.

I. Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the preconception of the nature of behavior as "series of physical events"⁶² of stimuli followed by motor action:

Reflex theory:

Reflex theory follows the "constancy hypothesis" because it assumes a "pre-established nerve circuits." (SB, p. 8) Suppose we are in a dark room and a spot of light suddenly shows and starts to move on the wall, usually our eyes turn towards it and start to follow it. The reflex theory explains the movement of the eye following the light as related to the existence of "a pre-established nerve circuits" connected to certain muscles. When the lights stimulate the eye the excitations transfer through these circuits and release a mechanism in the muscles. For each behavior there is a circuit which sets free a

⁶² (SB, p. 125)

specific kind of behavior. In this way, the reflex model of behavior does not explain the body as one structural unit but rather as an atomic succession of stimulus and motor action.

Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that there are chemical conditions in the body which influence the composition of reflex behavior. Those conditions “are mostly conjoined at the critical moment.” (SB, p. 17) He says: “the reflex clearly seems to be under the influence of a series of chemical, [...] conditions powerful enough to cancel, sometimes even to reverse, the expected effect of a certain stimulus.” (SB, p. 17) Also, in certain situations it is possible to control a certain reflex behavior by preventing it when we pay attention to it. The intention of the organism plays a role in determining the execution of the reflex. Hence, the reflex circuits are not isolated paths that transfer the information that is coming from the environment. (SB, p. 18) In that sense, behavior cannot be treated as constituted from successive stimuli and motor responses.

Also, experiments show that there is no strict specific location of response for each excitation as reflex theory implies. Merleau-Ponty says:

The excitation of the macula can give rise to the localized sensation “in front,” “to the right” or to “to the left” depending on the position of the eye in the relation to the orbit and of the head in relation to the body. In the same way the excitation of one receptor can evoke different reflexes and the excitation of two distinct points can give rise to the same reflex.” (SB, p. 16)

This example shows that the reflex operates in a more contextual manner and with less specification than reflex theory describes. Such specification can only occur in laboratories where the body is subjected to circumscribed conditions and not a normal environment.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty thinks that reflex models cannot explain the successful adaptation of the reflexive movements of the body to stimuli. Merleau-Ponty says:

Even if there existed specific stimuli, receptors and nerve pathways, they would not of themselves be able to explain the adaptation of the reflex to the stimulus, since the movement to be executed in each case depends upon the initial position of the members, which is variable. (SB, p. 28)

For example, when we need to scratch a spot on our body, the movement of our hand will depend on the initial position of it which varies each time. If the reflex model of independent nervous circuits is valid it would imply the body possesses as many circuits as the potential “initial positions” of our hands. If we suppose that it is possible one might ask how the body is capable of choosing the right circuit among the many others in order to make the “appropriate movement in the situation considered.” (SB, p. 28)

Unlike the reflex theory, it seems to be that there are no specific circuits which are responsible for specific movement. Instead, Merleau-Ponty says: “There is something general in our reflex responses which precisely permit these effector’s substitutions.” (SB, p. 30) Such generality in the function of a reflex explains the similarity between our hand writing on a piece of paper and our hand writing on the blackboard, despite the fact that different groups of muscles are used in each case. This general principle is the body’s constitution of a habit.

Merleau-Ponty’s view against reflex theory is inspired by Gestalt psychology. Koffka criticizes reflex theory for considering the body as constituted of independent parts of sensory and motor circuits. He calls them “centripetal” and “centrifugal” branches. (qtd. in SB, p. 36) Evidence, however, suggests “the sensorium and motorium

function as parts of a single organ.” (SB, p. 36) Gestalt psychology considers that the body is a whole or a gestalt in which all parts are internally connected.

Merleau-Ponty presents the case of patients with “hemianopsia” in support of the gestalt model of the body. “Hemianopsia” is described as losing the functionality of half of each retina. According to the reflex theory, the result would be that the patient loses half of his visual field. Such a result, however, does not occur. The patient sees poorly but his visual field would not be reduced to the half of his normal field of vision. The eye balls change their positions and movements in a way that allows the retina a maximum exposure to visual field. (SB, 41) The case of “hemianopsia” shows that body works as a synergetic system. When half of the retina stops functioning, the nerve system gave up the old circuits and forms new circuits in order to achieve the maximum use of the visual stimuli.

This case also shows that the body is not passive, it aims at achieving a maximum grip of stimuli. Merleau-Ponty says: “the organism had adapted itself to the situation created by the illness by reorganizing the functions of the eye.” (SB, p. 41) This explanation contrasts with both the reflex and the Pavlovian models of the relation of the body with its environment. They describe this relation as a matter of linear causality.

2. Pavlov theory:

Although Pavlov’s theory implies more interaction between the body’s nervous circuits than the reflex theory, the theory keeps the view of the nervous system as composed of elementary circuits and not a system. For example, according to Pavlov’s theory of conditioned reflex, any injury in one local area in the brain would inhibit the function of another area in the brain.

The combination of these stimuli that are described by Pavlov theory “can only permit or prohibit, reinforce or attenuate, but not *modify qualitatively* the reaction” (SB, p. 61) In this way, “[t]he essence of nerve activity [in the Pavlov’s theory]⁶³ remains the same [as in reflex theory]⁶⁴; it is a process which can be broken down into real parts.” (SB, p.52) Those real parts are stimuli that cause certain action.

Evidence from patients with injuries related to the optical area, however, shows that an injury to one local area of color apprehension does not only lead to the loss of the perception of the colour related only to that area or another, but rather it modifies the perception of all colours. At first, all colours lose their intensity, and then they all become grey. Hence, local brain damage causes a global change that causes a qualitative change in perception as well as in behavior. (Bannan 1967, p.37) If we reflect on such examples, the relation of the injury to the symptoms (change of the quality of color) is not a relation of a cause to an effect, but rather a constitution of “a new *signification* of behavior.” (SB, p. 65)

Furthermore, Pavlov’s theory fails to explain learning. Merleau-Ponty thinks that learning something new usually involves a qualitative change in behavior. (SB, p. 96) Such a qualitative change constitutes a bodily aptitude or a talent for the body that did not exist before. Such a talent involves not only action that is related to one part of the body but the whole body acts as a unity to achieve the required goal. Each time the parts of the body combine together in different ways in response to a given situation. For example, if a cat learns how to get to a food by pulling a string, in future behavior the cat would pull the string either with its hand or its teeth. Also, when a child burns his finger for the first

⁶³ My addition.

⁶⁴ My addition.

time by a flame, he pulls his hand away from it. Such a reaction, however, is not repeated each time the child sees the flame. Instead the child just keeps his distance.

Accordingly and unlike the Pavlov's explanation, learning is not the repeating of the same action triggered by the same part of the body. It is the body's general "attitude" of response towards similar situations. (SB, p. 96) Pavlov's theory, however, fails to explain such qualitative changes in the body.

In this section, I tried to explain one of the preconceptions of the objective explanation of bodily behavior as constituted of successive events of atomic stimuli and motor reaction. In this section I presented the reflex theory and Pavlov theory as representing such a view. Merleau-Ponty's general argument against these two theories shows that the body acts as gestalt of general significances that can be "transferred" from one group of muscles to another and form a bodily habit (SB, p. 30) Such description does not corresponds to general concept of the "constancy hypothesis," which describes the body as constituted of pre-established circuits of stimuli and responses.

Merleau-Ponty shows that the model of the body according to reflex theory of behavior does not fit the description of the body as a gestalt which has flexibility in adapting to any given stimuli. Also, the reflex theory of behavior, with its restricted model, fails to explain the influence of other stimuli felt by the body, which can influence a certain motor action other than the original stimulus.

Although Pavlov's model has shown some advancement over reflex theory in the sense that it introduced the influence of stimuli on each other, such a theory, however, fails to explain the qualitative modification of the body due to injuries or learning.

Evidence shows that injuries result in qualitative changes in perception, and learning which lead to a body's possession of an aptitude or talent.

II. Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the preconception of the meaning of behavior determined by the world:

1. Reflex theory and Pavlov's theory express causality:

Reflex theory expresses a causal relationship between environment and organism with no consideration of the organism's interest in what is perceived. Merleau-Ponty says:

The adaptation of the response to the situation would be explained by pre-established correlations... between certain organs or receptor apparatuses and certain effector muscles... The organism is passive because it limits itself to executing what is prescribed for it by the place of the excitation and the nerve circuits which originate there. (SB, p. 9)

In such a model, the organism is passive in its relation to its environment. The release of the motor reaction is reduced to the effect of an "ensemble of colors and lights, a physical and chemical stimulus". (SB, p.9) This defies what has been described earlier as the body's capability to possess general powers, capable of regrouping in order to provide a better functionality in the environment.

Pavlov presents a developed version of the reflex theory. It explains the organism's involvement with a richer and more complex environment than that described by the reflex theory. The Pavlovian theory shows a stimulus can either "excite", "inhibit" or "disinhibit" the reflex power of the other accompanied stimuli. For example, if a person receives two sensory stimuli at the same time and one causes a painful reaction such as a sudden sharp noise and the other is just a touch, the result is that the first

stimulus would inhibit the second and the body would react to the first stimulus. Pavlov's theory still presents, however, the body as a passive receiver for a given stimulus.

2. Merleau-Ponty's structural relation with the world:

Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty has dedicated a whole book, *The Structure of Behavior*, to explain the structural relation between a living being and its environment, he did not explicitly define this structural relation. Based on my close reading of Merleau-Ponty's *Structure*, I managed to reveal three meanings that describe such a structural relation. The first meaning is expressed through the body's contributed movements towards constituting its situation. The second meaning is expressed through Merleau-Ponty's concept of "maximal grip" and which leads to adaptiveness. The third meaning is expressed through a situation that has a value for an organism and which explains learning.

2.1 The structural relation is defined through the movements of the body which contribute to the constituting a situation.

Earlier in chapter one I presented Merleau-Ponty's concept of "situation" which I have shown its similarity with the Gestaltist's concept of "behavioral environment". I have also shown that the concept of "situation" implies the body's activity in constituting its own situation. Merleau-Ponty holds that the body is active in its perception of the world. If we go back to the example of body's senses following the movement of a flying animal, described earlier in chapter one, we find that the (observing) organism is active in

perceiving certain sensation and leaving out others. The organism here focuses and offers some of its sensors to receive certain interesting sense-data which contribute to the kind of sense data that is received. (SB, p. 13) This means that not only are the sense-apparatus and the nervous system responsible for the kind of stimuli that are received from the world but the organism itself with its intentional movements makes a contribution (SB, p. 13)

This view contrasts both with the reflex theory and Pavlov's theory which explain the relation of the body to its environment as similar to the relation of a keyboard waiting for external forces to have their effect on certain keys and then produces a representation of that stimulus. According to Merleau-Ponty's view, however, the relation of the body to its environment is like the relation of a keyboard that moves itself to receive certain inputs. In the following I would like to pay a close attention to these certain inputs which lead me to explain the importance of such structural understanding of behavior.

In my view, the importance of describing such a structural relation is related to its role in constituting a situation for the living being. As presented earlier, the organism perceives a "situation" which has meaning for the organism. Such a "situation" is constituted by the organism itself. The activity of the organism shows in the organism's contribution, beyond that of the environment, in constituting its perception. Accordingly, the reaction, or the behavior, of the organism is a response to a situation rather than a group of isolated stimuli.

The failure of both reflex and Pavlov's theory in understanding of such a structural relation is related to their failure of the understanding the organism's behavior in relation to a situation. Although Pavlov's theory shows "how the organism can enter

into relationship with a much richer and more extended milieu than that which acts immediately on its sensory endings in the form of physical and chemical stimulations... the “situation” remains a mosaic of physical and chemical excitants and ... new connections result from the *de facto* contiguities which are encountered there.” (SB, p. 53) One might ask about the difference between the response to a “situation,” rather than to a group of stimuli. What difference does a “situation” make in the organism’s life or in specifically, in its living in the world?

Merleau-Ponty thinks that when an organism is placed in a particular set of environmental conditions, the body responds to a situation that has value for the organism rather than to objective sense-data that constitute no value. Merleau-Ponty presents the following example:

If I catch my toe on a root while walking, the flexor muscles of the foot are suddenly relaxed and the organism reacts by accentuating this relaxation, which will liberate my foot. If, on the other hand, I miss my step while coming down a mountain and my heel strikes the ground sharply before the sole of the foot, the flexor muscles are once again relaxed suddenly, but the organism reacts instantly by a contraction. (SB, p. 45)

This example shows two similar stimuli, which are directed at one foot. The reaction, however, varies according to different value of the situations for the organism. The stimuli provide for two different situations.

In the first case, the situation is that the body is losing its balance on a horizontal surface and accordingly in such a situation the response was not only to relax the flexor muscles of the foot but also to relax the whole body. Such behavior would bring the body back into balance. In the second case, the situation is that the body is losing its balance while walking downhill. The organism’s response is to relax the flexor muscles. This relaxation, however, is accompanied by a contraction of the state of the whole body.

Hence, the organism's response to stimuli is based on the situation in which these stimuli occur. (SB, p.45) The value of the stimuli (situation) plays a role in the kind of behavior taken by the body.

The relation between the situation and the reacting behavior cannot be described as a cause to an effect. They are linked in an internal and a structural relation where the environment's condition and the organism's interest cannot be taken separately. Both sides participate in creating the situation and the reaction to such a situation. (SB, p. 13) Merleau-Ponty says "that the relations between the organism and its milieu are not relations of linear causality but of circular causality." (SB, p.15) They both constitute a structure.

Merleau-Ponty holds that both the reflex and Pavlov's models of behavior cannot represent the normal activity of behavior. (SB, p. 44) The "normal behavior" considered here is the "normal activity of the animal" in its environment. But one might argue that both the reflex and Pavlov's theory manage to get results in laboratories which support their models of behavior. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that in such a case, where behavior is explained within laboratory environment, the animal is situated in "isolated stimuli" and not in "complex situation" such as in normal environment. This explains why both the reflex theory and Pavlov's theory, in the laboratory, get results that support their claims.

So far I have presented my first understanding of the structural relation of behavior described by Merleau-Ponty in his *The Structure of Behavior*. Such a structural relation presents the organism as an active being which participates and controls the kind of stimuli that it perceives and to which it reacts. Such an active role participates in

constituting a “situation” which holds a meaning for the organism and its successful behavior in its environment. Both Pavlov’s and reflex theory lack such a structural relation with the environment. Accordingly, they missed the understanding of behavior within the context of a “situation”. In their view, behavior was explained as a passive response to isolated stimuli such as quality of color or, sound, etc. Such an objective explanation, however, isolates a living being from its vital relationship with its environment. In the following I will present my second understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s structural relation of behavior through his concept of “maximal grip”.

2.2. A structural relation that is defined through the concept of “Maximal grip” which leads to adaptiveness:

Earlier in this section I have tried to show, based on Merleau-Ponty’s argument, that the meaning of bodily behavior cannot be determined by the affect of the world on the body, as both reflex theory and Pavlov’s theory indicate. That is because the living being is active in a sense that it participates in choosing the kind of stimuli that are valuable for it, especially for its proper act and adaptiveness in its environment. By failing to recognize the role of the “situation”, both Pavlov’s and the reflex theory fail to explain the organism’s adaptiveness in a given situation. In my view, there are two kinds of adaptiveness that can be distinguished in Merleau-Ponty’s views.

The first meaning of “adaptiveness” is the organism’s capability to pick the right action for a given situation. Merleau-Ponty’s views on the organism’s adaptiveness in a given situation show the influence of Gestalt psychology. As I have shown earlier, Gestalt psychology argues against theories, such as reflex theory and Pavlov’s theory,

which support the constancy hypothesis. For example, Koffka considers that all animal actions consist of doing what is best for its survival in the environment. He thinks that the explanation of action in causal theories of behavior does not imply any character of interest or adaptiveness to the situation. Such an explanation views organisms like a machine that acts “whether such an action be adequate to the circumstances or not. The relationship between situation and response is consequently purely contingent”. (qtd. in SB, p. 35) In this way, Merleau-Ponty follows Gestalt psychology in its consideration of the concept of adaptiveness in its explanation of behavior.

The second meaning of adaptiveness that I noticed in Merleau-Ponty’s writing is related to the organism’s tendency to achieve the maximum grip on the given situation. Merleau-Ponty, following Gestalt psychology, thinks that the explanation of perception should consider such adaptiveness. He says “the eye always places itself in such a way that it receives the richest possible stimulations from the object looked at.” (SB, p. 36) In other words, each movement of the eye is a movement toward achieving the best grip on the given situation. Such an intentional movement is invested with value for the organism and hence escapes any objective explanation of perceptual behavior. Hence, both reflex theory and Pavlov’s theory were mistaken when they explained behavior based on an account of the causal effect of external stimuli, which considers the body as passive receiver. With such a mistaken view they fail to explain the adaptiveness of the organism to its situation.

In the following I intend to expand Merleau-Ponty’s concept of adaptiveness through a comparison between Merleau-Ponty and James Gibson. I will also explore David Hilditch’s view, in which he argues that Merleau-Ponty presents a stronger

“organism-dependent” theory of affordance than Gibson. In my view, however, Hilditch fails in his argument to present Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “maximum grip” which explains “adaptivness”. My argument of the concept of “maximum grip” will present a stronger argument than Hilditch’s argument. Before presenting such an argument I would like first to identify the reader with some of James Gibson’s views, such as the concept of “affordance”.

James Gibson’s concept of affordance:

Gibson thinks that the environment offers two levels of reality: One level is composed of the material things that exist in the world. Those things are “substances,” “surfaces,” and “mediums”⁶⁵. Another level is the level of affordances (phenomenal). In his definition of the concept of affordance, Gibson says: “the affordance of anything is a specific combination of the properties of its substance and its surfaces taken with reference to an animal.” (Gibson 1977, p. 67) Affordances possess an objective side and subjective side.

With regard to the objective side, Gibson considers that material things provide different kinds of affordances to different kinds of animals. For example substances can afford nutrition, shelters, tools etc. “Surfaces” afford walking, climbing, etc. Affordances can be beneficial or harmful. Mediums, can afford moving. In Gibson’s opinion, these affordances come from the combination of their properties and not from the effect of each property on its own. These “substantial properties combine to make properties of a higher order.” For example, “a solid, level, flat, extended surface affords support and constitutes a ground for terrestrial animal.” (Gibson 1977, p. 72) A ‘solid surface’ and a ‘certain

⁶⁵ Mediums of air or water

height' would constitute a "sit-on-affordance" for a person⁶⁶. The properties of these materials, which constitute affordances, are ecological because they are properties for a certain living being. These affordances imply a certain bodily relation with the world.

With regard to the subjective side, when an organism perceives an affordance move, it perceives it in relation to its bodily capability. If the organism is capable of walking, running, and climbing, it would perceive affordances in relation to its performance of such activities. In the case of a surface that is "rigid," "flat," and "extended", if the height of this surface is similar to the height of a human knee, the total of these properties would afford a "sit-on-able" significance for a human. Also, a human "can get a grip on a handle but not on a wall." (Gibson 1977, p. 79) With the subjective and objective side of an affordance, both the environment and the organism participate in the constitution of the meaning of the affordance.

Such understanding of "affordance" is different from the scientific and rigid distinction between a subjective and an objective quality. Gibson's says:

An affordance is not what we call a "subjective" quality of a thing. But neither is it what we call an "objective" property of a thing if by that we mean that a physical object has no reference to any animal. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. The affordances of the environment are facts of the environment, not appearances. But they are not, on the other hand, facts at the level of physics concerned only with matter and energy with animal left out. (Gibson, p.70)

The concept of affordance is not fact or appearance only but facts "for the organism" and such a character escapes the scientific explanation.

⁶⁶ Gibson, also, presents the concept of a "niche" which is related to his ecological theory of affordances. A "niche" does not signify a suitable place, a "habitat", for living but a phenomenal significance for the organism. A niche specifies ways of living. "The natural environment offers many ways of life and a way of life is a set of affordances." Gibson defines a niche as "a set of affordances [...] a setting of environmental features that are suitable for the animal, and into which it fits metaphorically." (Gibson 1977, p. 69)

Like both Gestalt psychology and Merleau-Ponty, Gibson considers that significances are not sense qualities, as described by the scientific and the objective understanding of perception. Gibson says:

All of these objects have properties or qualities: color, texture, composition, size, shape, and features of shape, not to mention mass, elasticity, rigidity, and the like. Nevertheless I suggest that what we perceive when we look at them are their affordances, not their qualities. We can, of course, discriminate these dimensional qualities if required to compare them as objects. But the unique combination of qualities that specifies what the object affords us is what we normally pay attention to. (Gibson 1977, p.75)

Gibson does not deny that we are capable of distinguishing qualities such as color, shape, and size in our perception. In normal, every day, behavior within the environment, however, we perceive value, meaning or significance “for us.”

Gibson here makes a distinction between two levels: the level of affordances and the level of property, or quality, that is discovered when we contemplate such a level. Gibson holds that gestalt significance is given first before any individual sense quality is given. Affordances are related to the level of perception. Such a priority makes sense especially if perception is considered to be vital to the existence of the living being and to their survival in their environment. The property of quality is related to the analytical level, the manner in which we examine our experience of perception.

In Gibson’s view, infants do not first distinguish separate qualities of things and afterwards learn the combination of them which constitute the significances of those things.

Phenomenal objects are not built up of qualities. It is quite the other way around. Objects, more exactly the affordances of objects, are what the infant begins by noticing. The meanings are observed before the substances and surfaces are. Affordances are invariant combinations of variables. And it is only reasonable to suppose that it is easier to perceive an invariant combination than it is to perceive all the variables separately. (Gibson 1977, p. 75)

Hence, on the level of perceptual experience, we experience a “phenomenal object” from which, at later stages of age and thinking, we can discriminate distinct qualities.

Hilditch’s evaluation of Gibson’s “affordance”:

Hilditch presents a distinction between the views of Merleau-Ponty and Gibson with regard to the role of agents in structuring the content of perception. Hilditch says “while Gibson argues that perceptual “content” are organism independent, Merleau-Ponty claims that they are constituted by the organism.” (Hilditch 95, p.33) Accordingly, Hilditch thinks that Gibson’s views on affordance presents a “far too passive notion of perception.” (p. 47) Hilditch’s argument is as follows: Gibson offers a theory of affordance that is “organism-dependent” in a weak sense, while Merleau-Ponty presents a strong “organism-dependent” theory of affordance.

Gibson’s theory presents a concept of “organism valences” which has a “subjective aspect.” Hilditch thinks that such valences present a weak sense of “organism dependent.” Valences are the “the qualitative effects of affordances on organism.” It is the effect of the affordance on an organism in the sense that the organism “moves toward” them or “away from” them according to its needs. (Gibson 1982, p. 120) In this sense, “valence” has a more subjective aspect than “affordance” which does not change according to the organism’s needs. Gibson says “the affordance of something is assumed not to change as the need of the observer changes” (Gibson 1982, p. 409, qtd. in Hilditch 95, p. 45)

Furthermore, Gibson considers that organism action or “locomotion” implies a “subjective aspect.” Those actions which help set the organism in places from which

affordances become available to a perceiver. Hilditch, however, thinks that “these actions and sensations remain externally related to the “objective” significances which those affordances bear and which the perceiver actually directly perceives.” (Hilditch, p.46)⁶⁷ This externality of relation comes from the role that Gibson attributes to perception as “an act of attention to or awareness of the world, and as such has no constructive or constitutive role vis a vis the perceived.” (Hilditch 95, p. 47) Accordingly, an organism’s actions present us with a weak sense of “organism-dependence”.

By contrast, Hilditch thinks that Merleau-Ponty’s theory presents us with a strong ‘organism-dependent’ sense of affordances. Hilditch writes:

Perceptual affordances [presented by Merleau-Ponty]⁶⁸ operate within perception not as organism-independent properties for awareness but as activities of the milieu on the organism, the affects of which are dependent on the organism’s own actions. **Thus, affordances can operate only because their significances are in some sense embodied.**” (Hilditch 95, p.48)

In his *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the relation between the organism and its milieu is a structural relation. He says “one cannot assign a moment in which the world acts on the organism, since the very effect of this “action” expresses the internal law of the organism.” (qtd. in Hilditch 95, p. 48, see also SB, p. 161)

The concept “action” is important here for it shows that perception is not an “awareness” of the world, rather perception expresses an interaction of actions between the organism and its milieu. Hilditch says perception is “the organism-acting-on-the-world as-it-acts-on-the-organism.” (Hilditch 95, p. 48) The organism’s contribution is its participation in constituting the affordances and accordingly in constituting the perceptual field. As Merleau-Ponty says:

⁶⁷ Gibson also says “the perceiver does not contribute anything to the act of perception, he simply performs the act.” (qtd. In Hilditch 95, p. 46)

⁶⁸ My addition.

When my hand follows each effort of a struggling animal while holding an instrument for capturing it, it is clear that each of my movements responds to an external stimulation; but it is also clear that these stimulations could not be received without the movements by which I expose my receptors to their influence' ... The properties of the object and the intentions of the subject... are not only intermingled; they also constitute a new whole. (SB, p. 13)

In such an interaction between the person and the struggling animal, the action of the animal "solicits" certain responses from the person and the person's action create new solicitations for the animal's actions. In this sense "perception opens on a reality which solicits our action rather than on a truth, an object of knowledge." (SB, p.169) Here, the subject participates in the constitution of perception. "The perceived is experienced as a temporally extended action on the perceiver, structured by the actions of the perceiver." (Hilditch 95, p. 49) Hence, what is perceived is strongly "subjective-dependent."

In case of tennis player, the tennis court is not presented to the player as "object" but as "lines of force", solicitations, that require certain actions. Each time the player responds to the ball, he participates in changing those solicitations because the field provides new and different kinds of solicitations, which require further action. Hilditch says: "Each new action repolarizes the field again, and this in turn opens up new action possibilities which lead to further actions." (Hilditch 95, p. 50) Merleau-Ponty says that each action "modifies the character of the field and establishes in it new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field." (qtd. in Hilditch p. 50, see also SB, p. 169). In this sense, "the field is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions." (SB, p.169)

Furthermore, Hilditch thinks that Merleau-Ponty's "lines of force" which correspond to the subjects "practical intentions" imply a more "perspectival" and "operational" form of affordance than Gibson's concept of "affordances." For example, if

we consider the affordances given by a chair, according to Gibson, the chair would offer a “sit-on-able” no matter where the subject stands in the room; in front or at the side or the back of the seat. Hence, the perceptual field offers a single “sit-on-able” affordance to the perceiver.

According to Merleau-Ponty, however, the perceptual field would offer a “flow of multiple affordances” that would offer different actions according to where the perceiver stands in relation to the chair. (Hilditch, p.51) Hilditch says:

[W]hat is actually articulated across micro-time intervals in the sitter’s lived perception is a flow of multiple affordances, each offering its own specific form of action-guidance vis a vis the organism’s present position. The chair then would offer not one but many affordances, each operative in different perceiver-chair relationship. (Hilditch 95, p.52)

In that sense Merleau-Ponty’s concept of situation affords “relations running between objects and the organism.” (Hilditch 95, p.51) This is different than Gibson’s concept of affordance which provides information about the object with no consideration as to where the subject stands in relation to that object.

Hilditch thinks that Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of behavior includes an integration between the outside and the inside information. The “exteroceptive excitation” is information that comes from outside. The “interoceptive excitation” is information that the organism already holds. In the process of perceiving an object, in addition to the information that an organism receives from sense apparatus, the organism integrates such information with information that comes from the body, specifically from his motor muscles. (SB, p. 90) Such integration between the internal and external information, however, contrasts with Gibson’s affordances, which rely on information coming only from the outside. (Hilditch 95, p. 52)

Merleau-Ponty's concept of "Maximal grip" explains the strong sense of organism dependent affordance:

Hilditch presents a reasonable argument that supports his claim that Merleau-Ponty presents a stronger sense of organism dependent affordance than Gibson's affordance. In my view he misses an important point in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of behavior. This important point is the organism's role in constituting the affordance by obtaining the "maximal grip" of any given situation, such as the "maximum of visibility".

Merleau-Ponty thinks that living beings always tend towards reaching an optimal grip of the world. Merleau-Ponty says:

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend towards the maximum of visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope. (PP, p. 352)

In every day experience a living being always aims toward receiving the maximum perceptual hold of things within its domain of interest. The ear moves toward the sound, the body moves towards or back from a view. These are acts the goal of which is to perceive the situation with maximum accuracy.

Such a tendency of the body does not only apply in normal cases, it also applies in some of the pathological cases such as the case of "hemianopsia" which was introduced earlier in this chapter. "Hemianopsia" was described as losing the functionality of half of the retina. As we described earlier, in such a condition one would expect the patient to lose half of the visual field. But due to the new "oscillated" movement of the eye balls, the patient becomes able to perceive a full visual field instead of half of it. Such an example shows that the body, with regards to its sensory preceptors, always places itself in a manner as to achieve the maximum grip on the given situation.

Such a tendency of the body to achieve the maximum grip of situation is, in my view, a strong sense of “organism dependent” affordance. That is because without such a condition the affordances would not be within the focus of the body’s sensory preceptors. And if they were perceived they would not be sufficient or accurate. Hilditch, however, misses this important role of the body.

So far in this section, I have presented the second part of my understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the structural relation. Such an understanding is related to the organism’s tendency to achieve a “maximum grip” on the given situation. The body with its intended movements brings the best results of visual, auditory sensations. Such a concept of “maximal grip” has escaped scientific explanations of behavior and accordingly has escaped their explanation of the adaptiveness of the organism to its situation. In the following I intend to explain the third part of my understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of structural relation.

2.3 The structural relation is defined through the value of a situation for an organism and which explains learning.

My third understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s structure comes from Merleau-Ponty’s view that the value of the behavior to the living being becomes a reason for reconstituting the same situation again in the future. When the organism has this sense of the “value” of behavior the effect “becomes the cause of its cause”. (SB, p. 94) In the following I will explore such understating of structure.

The explanation of learning provided by Pavlov’s theory shows that when a living being faces a new circumstance, which expresses a problem, it attempts several actions until one action leads it to solve the problem. For example, if a hungry animal is placed in

a cage, and there is food outside the cage, the animal will make several attempts to move its body until one of them leads to the opening of the door and it can approach the food. In the future, when the animal faces the same given stimuli, it attempts the same successful movement that directed him toward the food. The movements which failed, however, would be eliminated from consideration in any future similar situation. (SB, p. 94) The actions which an organism performs are explained according to “cerebral mechanisms” which have no relation to value of the thing perceived, such as food, for the organism. (SB, p. 95)

Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that Pavlov’s explanation of learning shows only a succession of events, stimuli and action, which follow each other in objective time without any internal or meaningful relations between these events. In other words, such “stimuli” become meaningful for the organism because it leads to an action which is “favourable” action for the organism. (SB, p. 95) Pavlov’s explanation of learning does not include any “intentional character” or meaningful character for the learner. Those actions are not directed by the organism’s goal or interest. In this way, Pavlov fails to explain the animal’s fixation on certain behaviors. (SB, p. 94) Merleau-Ponty thinks that Pavlov’s theory fails to explain how the same situation suggests a new and different action in case the first action fails. Also, Pavlov theory fails to explain “by what mechanism are the favourable responses, and only those, established?” (SB, p. 94) This is because Pavlov’s theory is originally a causal theory.

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, however, the value of the behavior to the organism, in its positive or negative sense, has a relation to the behavioral fixation. (SB, p.95) Because such actions are “preferred” by the organism, certain actions become strongly recalled

while other actions are ignored. (SB, p.94) Having such a sense of “value”, the organism becomes the cause of its own cause.

In one of the experiments, a rat is trained to choose a path, marked by a white curtain, which leads to food, instead of choosing a path, marked by a black curtain, which gives it an electric shock at the end of it. Merleau-Ponty thinks that the training occurs because the white curtain and the actions that take place became valuable for organism. They both relate to the goal of the organism which is obtaining food. Merleau-Ponty says: “the white curtain becomes the conditioned stimulus of the “positive reactions” to the goal.” (SB, p. 94)

In the process of learning, a structural and internal relation is established between three elements; a “signal”, “preparatory reactions”, and “access to the goal.” Such a structure cannot be described as “a succession of physical events.” (SB, p. 100) In the process of learning, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the organism creates a relation between different “possible solutions”. Then the organism creates a relation between these “possible solutions” and the “goal” or the problem that they tried to solve and according to which their “value” is measured. In this sense, learning is not “recording de facto contiguities” but “succession for the organism.” (SB, p.100)

If we apply such a structural relation in the previous curtain experiment, we would find that the “white curtain”, the “path” which signifies the possible solution, and the “goal”, which is obtaining food, constitute a “spatial structure” which has meaning for the organism. (SB, p.101) The goal calls not only for motor reactions but also for other sensory apparatus to participate in a meaningful structure. Coordination between the previous elements and the movement of the organism is different each time and

depends upon whether such a structure has a meaning for the organism; or in other words, whether the sense-motor structure is close or far from achieving the goal of the organism.

(SB, p.101)

It might be argued, however, that Merleau-Ponty's concepts of 'signal', 'goal', "value", and action are merely "anthropomorphic" interpretations. This makes also the principle of the internal relation between a group of "stimuli" and a certain "action" "anthropomorphic" and accordingly does not explain the essential character necessary for the explanation of behavior. In other words, it is only a matter of our way of interpreting things that makes us consider such a relation essential. (SB, p.102)

Merleau-Ponty does not deny that these concepts of "signal", "goal", "value", and "situation" hold an "anthropomorphic" character because they "designate certain givens of human experience" (SB, p. 102) But he also considers that concepts such as "color", "light", or scientific language in general, also hold an "anthropomorphic" character because they are related to human experience. (SB, p.102) He says "It is clear that all the terms of which we can make use refer to phenomena of human experience, naïve or scientific." (SB, p. 102) The main difference between these concepts is whether they constitute the character of the experience itself or not.

Before ending this section, I would like to present an important point of Merleau-Ponty understanding of learning. In his view, learning is sedimentation of "aptitude". In his description of the moment of learning, he says:

at a decisive moment of learning, a "now" stands out from the series of "nows", acquires a particular value and summarizes the groupings which have preceded it as it engages and anticipates the future of behavior; this "now" transforms the singular situation of the experience into a typical situation and the effective

reaction into an **aptitude**⁶⁹. From this moment on behavior is detached from the order of the in-itself (en soi) and becomes the projection outside the organism of a *possibility* which is internal to it.” (SB, p. 125)

The bodily acquisition of a skill is important for Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of the embodied perception in his latter book, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, which I will expand on later in chapter four.

So far in this chapter I have presented the two preconceptions which are adopted by both the reflex theory and Pavlov’s theory of behavior. The first preconception explains behavior as successive events of stimuli and action. It also explains the body as constituted of separate pre-established circuits that are specialized in certain acts. Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of such a preconception shows the failure of both schools of behavior to explain the qualitative and general modification of the body which lead to a body’s possession of an aptitude or talent.

The second preconception that I have discussed in this chapter was that the meaning of behavior is determined by the world. Both the reflex and Pavlov’s theories have explained behavior based on the causal effect of external stimuli which considers the body as passive receiver. Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of such preconception was based on his understanding of organism’s “structural” relation with its environment. As Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly define such a “structural” relation, I dedicated this section to define such a relation. In my view such structural relation can be defined in three ways. First, the structural relation is defined through a bodily movement which contributes towards constituting a situation. Second, the structural relation is defined through the concept of “Maximal grip” and which leads to adaptiveness. Third, the

⁶⁹ My highlight.

structural relation is defined through a situation which has a value for an organism and which explains learning.

III. Merleau-Ponty's Structure of Behavior:

Merleau-Ponty considers that behavior is a structure or a form of situation and reaction. He says: "Situation and reaction are linked internally by their common participation in a structure in which the mode of activity proper to the organism is expressed." (SB, p. 130) Both situation and reaction are not related as a cause to an effect but they imply one another. This understanding of behavior contrasts with the scientific understanding of behavior as "a thing in-itself (en soi) which would exist, *partes extra partes*, in the nervous system or in the body; rather it sees in behavior an embodied dialectic which radiates over a milieu immanent to it." (SB, p. 161)

In Merleau-Ponty's view such a relation between situation and action cannot be reduced to stimuli and reflex. He says: "Just as it seemed to us to be impossible to reduce the pair: vital situation-instinctive reaction to the pair: stimulus-reflex, just so it will doubtless be necessary to recognize the originality of the pair: perceived situation-work." (SB, p. 162) The reason for the failure of the reduction is because the first pair holds a structural relation that is internal and cannot be found in the second pair.

In the following, I will present Merleau-Ponty's three structures or forms of behavior: "syncretic forms", "amovable forms", and "symbolic forms." These forms constitute three kinds of phenomenal relations of meaning or significance between situation and response. (SB, p. 103) These forms or structures are not arranged according to their complexity but according to whether "the behavior is submerged in the content

[of a situation]⁷⁰ or, on the contrary, emerges from it to become, at the limit, the proper theme of activity.” (SB, p. 103) It means that the difference between the three levels depend on the organism’s involvement in constituting the structure. The more the living being is being involved in constituting a situation with virtual meaning, rather than instinctual meaning, the more behavior becomes a gesture, rather than just a response. It should be noticed here that it is not necessary that one kind of animal be related to one type of form of behavior. That is because an organism can act according to its instinct at one time and according to its learned experience in another time. This applies to human beings as well.

The Syncretic structures:

The “Syncretic” structure describes the instinctual behavior of an organism. The behavior of an organism here is restricted to certain natural conditions in the environment that create the “concrete situation” for the organism. For example, an ant would not let itself fall on a surface, such as a piece of paper, until certain conditions of the shape of the paper, the distance between the ant and the ground, and the effect of the light are all gathered and appeared in one situation for the organism. It is noticed that only under these conditions, the instinctual behavior of the ant is released.

One might think that a “syncretic” behavior is similar to behavior described by the reflex theories of behavior; especially if both explanations seem to be a response to stimulations from the world. According to Merleau-Ponty’s view, however, there is a difference between the two explanations. In case of reflex theories, and as was explained earlier in this chapter, behavior is explained as consecutive events of stimulus and action

⁷⁰ My addition.

with no internal and necessary relation between the two events. There is an internal meaning in “syncretic behavior” that links the two events. Behavior here is a response to the situation that has instinctual value for the organism. The organism responds to a group of characters, which has a meaning for it and not to a group of stimuli.

Due to the instinctual and limitless meanings of a given situation, syncretic behavior does not show flexibility in a living environment. Merleau-Ponty says “[a]t this level behavior is tied either to certain abstract aspects of the situations or to certain complexes of very special stimuli.” (SB, p.105) In the laboratory, if a toad were presented with food separated from him by glass shield, the toad would keep trying to reach its food. (SB, p. 105) In this case, the toad’s perceived situation provides only a value of food and not a value of resisting shield. Because of that the toad just keeps trying.

Another example, which describes the restriction of the syncretic behavior to certain abstract characteristic of the situation, is the behavior of spiders. In an experiment, when an unmoving (dead) fly is placed on the web, the spider does not react to the fly. The spider, however, moves toward a “tuning fork” when the fork touches the web. In this case, the spider’s behavior corresponds to an abstract condition such as vibration in general rather than to a specific prey such as a fly.

The amovable structures:

In this structure of behavior, the organism notices a temporal or special contiguity in the lived situation that is not a “*de facto* contiguity” which corresponds to the organism’s instinct. Instead, and according to, the organism’s history of experience, the organism responds to a “signal” in the given situation which has only meaning to this specific organism. The corresponding behavior at such a level shows an elementary level

of learned and habitual behavior. Here, the amovable behavior is more advanced than the syncretic behavior because the former expresses the organism's involvement in constituting the value of the stimuli based on its previous personal experience.

For example, in an experiment⁷¹, chickens are presented with two pots of food A and B. The color of both pots is grey. Pot B, however, presents a lighter shade than pot A. The chickens are trained to eat from the lighter grey pot B. In a further step of the experiment, the chickens are presented with pot C that is also grey but with a lighter shade than pot B. The result of the new experiment is that, most chickens started to pick from the new pot C. The explanation of the new behavior of the chicken is that the chickens respond to a situation of a "sign-gestalt" which signifies "the lighter". This sign presents a certain value for the animal. It expresses phenomenal relation between the two colors and not physical relation. "Gray G1 and gray G2 are part of nature, but not the "pair of colors constituted by the organism in their regard." (SB, p. 129) Hence, the animal's action in this case is a response to a sign situation and not to a certain physical objective stimuli. (SB, p. 106)

Although animals can recognize a relation or a configuration between things in the perceptual field and use them as a tool to achieve successful behavior, the chimpanzee, however, "cannot vary the point of view, just as it cannot recognize something in different perspectives as the same thing." (SB, p.118) For example, the chimpanzee cannot recognize that the "the box-as-seat" and "the box-as-instrument" as two different signs or "aspects" of the box. (SB. P 116) Also, it is difficult for an animal to treat a fruit as a "goal" to be reached at one point of his approach and as a means to

⁷¹ The experiment is provided by the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Kohler.

open the door at another point. (Hadreas 86, p.22) Such capability, however, is reached by the symbolic structure of behavior.

The Symbolic structures of behavior:

This structure of behavior is attributed to humans. In my view, a “sign” becomes a “symbol” when a thing becomes open for free interpretation of the character that allows the application of more than one characteristic or significance. Merleau-Ponty considers that a symbol is related to the “general signification of the stimuli.” (SB, p.120) My understanding of such general signification is the ability to apply multiple “aspects” or “perspectives” or “points of view” to the same perceived thing. In the previous example of the chimpanzee, it is mentioned that animals cannot recognize different signs in one thing.

Humans, however, can see the box as a reaching tool, as sit-on tool, as a container, etc. In human behavior, “the tree branch which has become a stick will remain precisely a tree-branch-which- has-become-a-stick.” (SB, p. 175) The human capability to have different points of view for the same thing allows a person to choose a certain point of view at one step and change it at another step in order to reach the overall goal. For example, it is easy for a person to see a thing as a goal at one moment and as tool in another. This adds more richness to meaning of things perceived.

For this reason humans, unlike animals, are capable of building economic, social and cultural structures. Houses and clothing might have instinctual meaning if they are considered as a means for providing shelter and protection. But houses and clothing can also be an expression of beauty and style. Those meanings are richer than the meaning

found in concrete situations. Objective thinking misses that the meaning of human behavior is attached to the practical meaning of life.

Such a symbolic meaning solicits new kind of behavior which “reveals a new attitude towards oneself and others”. (SB, p. 174) Merleau-Ponty says: “[t]hese acts of the human dialectic all reveal the same essence: the capacity of orienting oneself in relation to the possible, to the mediate, and not in relation to a limited milieu.” (SB, p. 176) These acts do not have “significance in their own right. They are understood in reference to the aims of life” (SB, p. 163) In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the distinction between human beings and other living beings is the ability to behave according to a virtual situation that is created by human creativity and not by instincts.

Such a capability to perceive different perspectives is responsible for a human’s ability to create “instruments” that serve virtual needs rather than instinctual needs. Merleau-Ponty says: “[t]his power of choosing and varying points of view permits man to create instruments, not under the pressure of a de facto situation, but for virtual use and especially in order to fabricate others.” (SB, p. 175) Typewriters and musical instruments are examples of these instruments that serve a symbolic meaning constituted by humans. Accordingly, human behavior which is related to such instruments is a significance that makes sense only within human culture; within his/her aim and “meaning of life”. (SB, p. 163)

Conclusion:

In this chapter, following the goal of the thesis, I managed to identify two preconceptions of objective thinking in two theories of behavior; reflex theory and

Pavlov theory. The first preconception is the understanding of behavior as constituted of consecutive events of stimuli and actions. The body, according to such a preconception, is constituted by pre-established nerve circuits that serve certain acts. The second preconception is the meaning of the experience of behavior as determined by the causal effect of world. The body here does not hold any active function in constituting the meaning of behavior.

With regard to the first preconception, reflex theory fails to defy the constancy between a stimulus and action. The reflex theory of behavior fails to explain the influence of other stimuli given by the body and which can influence certain motor actions beside the original stimulus. Pavlov's theory tries to overcome the weaknesses of reflex theory by giving stimuli the power to inhibit each other. In Merleau-Ponty's view, however, Pavlov's theory fails to explain the qualitative modification of the body due to injuries or learning. Evidence shows that injuries would result in qualitative changes in perception, and learning would result in a body's possession of an aptitude or talent. Merleau-Ponty criticism of such a preconception shows the failure of both schools of behavior to explain the qualitative and general modification of the body which lead to the body's possession of an aptitude or talent.

The second preconception that I have discussed in this chapter was that the meaning of behavior as determined by the world. Merleau-Ponty thinks that both reflex and Pavlov's theories were mistaken when they consider the body as passive receiver and explained behavior as based on causal effect of external stimuli. Merleau-Ponty's criticism of this preconception was based on his understanding of the organism's "structural" relation with its environment. I dedicated section two of this chapter to

defining Merleau-Ponty's understanding of such a "structural relation" which he did not clearly identify. In my view such a structural relation can be defined in three ways. First, the structural relation is defined through a bodily movement which contributes towards constituting a situation. Second, the structural relation is defined through the concept of "Maximal grip" and which leads to adaptiveness. Third, the structural relation is defined through a situation which has a value for an organism and which explains learning.

Merleau-Ponty's rejection of these two preconception results in his understanding of behavior as constituted by the structure of a situation and aptitude. In such a structure behavior is a bodily acquisition of skills, which respond to situations, which have meaning for the organism. Such a bodily acquisition of skills is important for Merleau-Ponty's explanation of embodied perception described in his, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, which I intend to explore this topic in the following chapters.

Chapter Four: The phenomenal body

Introduction:

Earlier, in Chapter two, I explained Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the associationist atomic understanding of perception. He also rejected, I showed in chapter three, the atomic behavioral theories that support associationism's view of the understanding of the body as constituted of isolated atomic nervous circuits which connect an individual stimulus with an impression. Merleau-Ponty's rejection of associationism and its supportive theories are based on his adoption of the concept of the body as gestalt, or synergetic system. Such a view is influenced by Gestalt psychology. Merleau-Ponty uses Gestalt psychology studies to argue against the atomistic understanding of experience and the physiology of the constancy hypothesis that supports their views.

Despite the influence of Gestalt psychology on the understanding of the body as a gestalt, Merleau-Ponty disagrees with Gestalt psychology on the nature of body's gestalt. As it described in chapter one, the goal of Gestalt psychology was to provide a scientific explanation for its concepts. It reduced, according to its concept of isomorphism, human experience, which is a mental gestalt, to a physiological bodily gestalt. Merleau-Ponty, however, as I explained in chapter two, rejects such a reduction. His replacement for such reduction is the phenomenal body. In the following I will present his view of the phenomenal body.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section I will present some of the characteristics of the phenomenal body that distinguish it from other objects. Those

characteristics are the body's motor intentionality and the body image. Also, I will present in the same section the body's capability to constitute bodily significance. In section two I will present Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as a gesture. In section three, I will present Merleau-Ponty's explanation of perception according to his new understanding of the phenomenal body, including his explanations of the body's perception of color, space, and objects.

I. The phenomenal body:

1. The body as distinct from other objects:

According to the phenomenological description of our experience of our body, Merleau-Ponty notices some characters of the body that distinguish it from other objects in the world. The first characteristic is that our body is our anchor for observing other objects. There is more freedom in perceiving other objects than in perceiving our body. In perceiving objects, Merleau-Ponty says that "I can at least freely choose the side which they are to present to me." (PP, p. 104) We can move our body around that object and accordingly can perceive unlimited perspectives of it. In perceiving our bodies, however, the perspectives that we can perceive are limited.

The second characteristic that distinguishes the body from other objects is that my body is "constantly perceived" by me; this is not the case with the surrounding objects. (PP, p. 103) I can turn my back away from the desk and by doing this I stop perceiving it but I cannot turn my back away from my body. Also, things can move away from me but my body is always with me. Merleau-Ponty says: "To say that it always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with* me." (PP, p. 104) The

permanent relation between me and my body is “metaphysical necessity” because my body is always with me. My relation to “external objects”, however, is always contingent because I can either choose to allow them to be in perceptual field or turn my back on them

Third, the permanent presence of my body is a condition to the permanence of “external objects” as well as a condition for their perspective presence. Merleau-Ponty says: “if objects may never show me more than one of their facets, this is because I am myself in a certain place from which I see them and which I cannot see.” (PP, p.106) The exploration of the thing requires perceiving them from different angles. This means perceiving requires having different points of perspectives of the object. Such perceptions, however, requires a permanent presence of my body in all these observations. With such presence I explore things, hold them, and walk around them. Hence, the permanence of my body is the condition for having different perspectives of things.

Fourth, Merleau-Ponty thinks that external objects can be perceived and “observed” but my body can be perceived but not observed. Merleau-Ponty first identifies the meaning of observation. He says: “[O]bservation consists in varying the point of view while keeping the object fixed.” (PP. 105) There is always a part of my body that escapes my observation. Even if I used a mirror to observe my body; my body is a body with the intentional movement of an observer and not an observed thing. Merleau-Ponty says: “I can see my eyes in three mirrors, but they are the eyes of someone observing.” (PP, p. 105) It should be noticed that in Merleau-Ponty’s view, although I do not observe my body, I do perceive it.

Even if it is possible to perceive some parts of my body as objects we never perceive our whole body as an object. That is because there is always a part that escapes our perception. It is the part “by which there are objects.” (PP, p. 105) For example, Merleau-Ponty says:

My visual body is certainly an object as far as its parts far removed from my head are concerned, but as we come nearer to the eyes, it becomes divorced from objects, and reserves among them a quasi space to which they have no access, and when I try to fill this void by recourse to the image in the mirror, it refers me back to an original of the body which is not out there among things, but in my own province, on this side of all things seen. (PP, p.105)

This quasi-space that is occupied by my head is a subjective unobservable aspect of my body. This is always a subjective aspect of the body that prevents it from being a thing among other things.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty thinks that it is not possible to perceive our body perceiving. The act of perception cannot be perceived. Our body, in its active state, escapes being an object for our perception. For example, if my right hand touches a surface and my left hand touches my right hand while the right hand is touching things, the left hand, however, fails to capture the act of touching performed by the right hand. The act of touching cannot be touched⁷². The left hand would only perceive the texture of the skin. Hence, our body cannot be perceived during its act of perceiving. Such a phenomenon means that it escapes being an object.

Some views in psychology indicate that it is possible for the body to perceive while perceiving. For example, if we pressed our two hands against each other we will have a “double sensation”. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that both hands cannot be “simultaneously” sensing each other at the same time. He says: “When I press my two

⁷² Check Langer 89, p. 36.

hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of ‘touching and being touched.’(PP, p.106)

Another classical view indicates that the body is an “affective object” in a sense that it is the nearest object that affects the subject. Merleau-Ponty replies when I step on a nail and I say that “my foot hurts” this does not mean that my foot causes pain the same way that the nail causes a pain in my foot. The former cause is nearer to me than the latter. When I say “my foot hurts” it means that “the pain comes from my foot” or “my foot has pain”. In this sense the foot is not an external object that is close to us. In this way, “my body does not present itself as the objects of external impression do.” (PP, p.107)

In addition, there is distinction between moving my body and moving other things. When I move a thing, I need first to locate it in an objective space then approach it and hold it. When I need to move a part of my body I would not need to locate it. I have already an immediate sensation of how to execute the movement of my hand without any need to locate my hand. (PP, p. 108)

So far, the comparison between the body and other object shows that our body is not an object like any other object. The first characteristic of the body’s place in perception is that our body is an anchor from which we perceive things. The second characteristic is that our body is constantly with me and not in front of me like other objects. The third characteristic is that our body determines the condition for the permanency and perspective presence of other objects. The fourth characteristic is that things can be observed by our body, but our body cannot be observed by me. Even when

we observe some parts of our body there is always a part that escapes our observation. This indicates that the body possesses some characteristics that imply that it is a condition for perceiving objects. This condition distances the body from being an object and put it closer to being a subject. Earlier in chapter one I presented the concept of the gaze which describes an intentional movement of the eye. One might wonder what constitutes an intentional movement of the body.

2. The body as motor intentionality:

Merleau-Ponty thinks that our body possesses a “ready-made formulae” for movements toward things in the world. (PP, p. xix) Merleau-Ponty describes such motor intentionality as “something between movement as a third person process [reflex movement]⁷³ and the thought as a representation of movement-something”. (PP, p. 127) Motor intentionality cannot be explained as reflex movement because such intentional movement is triggered by a situation in virtue of its having a special meaning for the subject and not by stimuli that form a representation of qualities. Also this kind of movement does not require a consciousness, which describes how the movement should be made, because intentionality is not a matter of deliberate decision, rather it is bodily knowledge, or a knowledge that is recognized by the body, not the mind.

As it explained in chapter three, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the physiological account fails to recognize the intentional body, because such movements are not a response to an objective world but to “saliencies” or “affordances” which express its past experience and which “solicits” a favorite behavior for the animal. He says:

⁷³ My addition.

The gestures of behavior, the intentions which it traces in the space around the animal, are not directed to the true world or pure being, but to being-for-the-animal, that is, to a certain milieu characteristic of the species. (SB, p.125)

Such motor intentionality is expressed by our motor habits. When the body gains a new skill or habit, there is “sedimentation” of the behavior attached to it. Such sedimentation allows the body to act “quasi-automatically” and sufficiently when we are faced with a situation. It also allows the body to act sufficiently when it faces a new situation by relating this situation to the nearly similar previous situation. This provides a development in our way of acting in the world. (PP, p. 149)

Merleau-Ponty says: “Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world.” (PP, p. 166) In describing our everyday acts, we can divide them into two main categories. There are acts that require our paying attention to how to carry through the steps until we reach the required result of our act. These kinds of acts require our attention to each step we take or to what we need to do in order to reach our goal. But with time and practice these acts become more manageable and habitual; they require no effort or attention from us at each step.

Habitual movements do not require intellectual knowledge. Merleau-Ponty considers that the habitual body has an “impersonal” intentionality. He says: “my body must be apprehended not only in an experience which is instantaneous, peculiar to itself and complete in itself, but also in some general aspect and in the light of an impersonal being.” (PP, p. 95) The body projects itself into habitual acts and therefore it works on the pre-reflective level and does not require intentionality on the personal, or reflective, level.

For example when we type a word on a keyboard, the movements of our hands are not presented to us each time we need to type a letter. We do not need to look at the keyboard each time we type a letter, trying to attach the right finger to the right key. Such movements are not represented in the typist's mind. I do not represent in my mind, how to move my fingers on the keyboard. Merleau-Ponty says:

When the typist performs the necessary movements on the typewriter, these movements are governed by an intention, but the intention does not posit the keys as objective locations. It is literally true that the subject who learns to type incorporates the key-board space into his bodily space. (PP, p.167)

Rather, such an act is similar to our acts when we are asked to locate a spot on our bodies, we approach the spot without hesitation or thinking how to do it. We possess a direct knowledge of our body space. The same applies to the case of typing. Through training, the keyboard becomes integrated into the typist's body space into his bodily space. Habits are "knowledge in the hand".

Such motor habits explain learning because they express the body as gaining a new talent or attitude. Earlier in chapter three, I showed that both the reflex and the Pavlovian theory fail to explain learning because those explanations express a "stimulus" event followed by an "action" event. But according to Merleau-Ponty learning involves a qualitative change in the body itself by gaining a new bodily skill or attitude. In this sense, "stimuli" become a "stimulus" that has a value, and the movement is not only a movement but a bodily talent or attitude. Such a bodily attitude is a general talent for the whole body and not for one part of the body. Since Merleau-Ponty's concept of motor intentionality is similar to Jean Piaget views on motor significance in infants, I intend to introduce Piaget's view to support Merleau-Ponty views.

Piaget focuses, in his studies, on the development of perceptual significance in infants. Like Merleau-Ponty, Piaget was aware of the bodily capability to provide motor significance. He considers that the genesis of cognitive significance is essentially constituted by bodily motor intentions. Also, and similar to Merleau-Ponty, Piaget was aware of the structural relation between a living being and its environment. In the following I will expand on these two points.

Piaget thinks that the cognitive structure of humans is developed in an early stage in infants, he calls it the “sensorimotor” stage. This stage represents the child’s age from birth to 2 years old. At this stage, the child’s body recognizes certain valuable motor responses of the body to certain stimuli which result in satisfactory state for the child. Such a bodily response becomes a sedimented significance that can be used in similar situations in future to achieve the same result.

The second stage of the cognitive development that Piaget described is the “pre-schooler” or “pre-operational” stage. This stage represents the child’s age from 2 to 7 years old. At this stage, the child shows signs of thinking but still not advanced. For example, a pre-school child is capable of understanding the concept of objects such as apple or triangle, through the process of pointing separately from daily interactive behavior with the surrounding. Such cognitive development might be related to the child’s beginning to learn language skills. The child at this stage, however, is incapable of performing a “transitive inference task,” Piaget thinks that pre-school children cannot infer “the blue rod is longer than the yellow rod” from the following two propositions “the blue rod is longer than the green rod” and the “green rod is longer than the yellow rod.” (Thelen and Smith 1995, p. 22)

The third stage of the cognitive development is the “concrete operation” stage. This stage describes the child’s development from 7 to 11 years old. In this stage the cognitive behavior of a child shows some degree of logical and conceptual manipulation. For example, a child in this stage knows that things preserve their quantity if they are put in another container or a number of marbles does not become more if they are spread⁷⁴. Such information, however, is approached in attending a concrete situation where the child can observe objects and is not totally abstract thinking. The final stage is the “formal operation stage” of cognitive development is defined as the capability to apply logical rules to totally abstract ideas.

Most of the Piaget results were approached through experimental studies on children⁷⁵. One experiment that is important here is his experiment of “revealing” games which examines the infant’s understanding for the continuous existence of object through changes in time and space. This experiment has lead to more contemporary discussion that is known nowadays as “A-not-B” Error. In his *Construction of Reality in the Child*, Piaget describes his experiment on his son Laurent, as follows:

When Laurent was 9 1/2 months old, Piaget placed him on the sofa with “coverlet A on the right and wool garment B on the left” (p. 58). He placed his watch under A, and observed Laurent lift the coverlet and recover the watch. Piaget repeated this hiding and retrieval game several times. Then Piaget hid the watch at the location B: “Laurent watches this maneuver attentively. But at the moment the watch has disappeared under garment B, he turns back toward coverlet A, and searches for the object under the screen (qtd. in Smith & Thelen 1994, p. 235).

The conclusion of the experiment is that infants around the age of 9 months do not develop a full understanding of an object. The significance of object is not yet understood

⁷⁴ <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/piaget.html>

⁷⁵ Thos children were most of the time his children.

as separate from the infant's own action. Piaget has explained that the error occurs because at that age infants "did not completely understand the independence of objects from his own actions on them."(ibid., p. 280) There is no representation of the object as being in a space that is separate from the infant's bodily behavior.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Piaget's significances started with bodily motor intentions. Bodily significances are skills or "schemas." Those schemas started as simples and they develop as the infant extends her/his exploration of the world. For example, an infant learn how to "grab and thrust"⁷⁶ a rattle in his mouth after several attempts. These skill or schema becomes available whenever the baby is faced with the same situation even with different object with the same size. For example, the baby is capable of applying the same schema of "grab and thrust" on her father's watch. Piaget calls incorporating a new object into old schema "assimilation".

Assimilation, however, does not apply to some other objects the baby faces such as a beach ball. In this case, the baby will not be able to apply the "grab and thrust" schema on the beach ball. He will be capable of grabbing the ball but not thrust it in his mouth but instead suck or droll on it. Here, the new object is not incorporated under the "grab and thrust schema" but the schema is adapted to the new object. Piaget calls such development in the schema by "accommodation." Piaget holds that both "assimilation" and "accommodation" contribute to the infant's learning.

⁷⁶ Check C. George Boeree, Personality theories: Jean Piaget, <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/piaget.html>

3. The Body image⁷⁷:

One might wonder how the parts of the body cooperate with each other to produce the right movement when the body faces certain situations. Merleau-Ponty considers that the relation, between the parts of my body, is different than the relation between things in objective space. Merleau-Ponty says:

If my arm is resting on the table I should never think of saying that it is beside the ash-try in the way in which the ash-try is beside the telephone. The outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross. This is because its parts are inter-related in a particular way: they are not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other. (PP., p.112)

As it explained earlier in this chapter, Merleau-Ponty considers the body to be a system or a structure. This means that the parts of the body are not set next to each other in an external causal relation but as a unity where all the parts are related to each other in internal relation. Any change that affects one part would also affect the rest of the other parts too.

The function of any part cannot take place separate from other parts. Merleau-Ponty says: “my whole body for me is not an assemblage of organs juxtaposed in space. I am in undivided position (possession) of it and I know where each of my limbs is through a *body image* in which all are included.” (PP, p. 113) The concept of body image is a phenomenal concept which cannot be explained as the awareness of additive parts of the body but instead the body is experienced as being undivided. Merleau-Ponty says:

If I stand holding my pipe in my closed hand, the position of my hand is not determined discursively by the angle which it makes with my forearm, and my forearm with my upper arm, and my upper arm with my trunk, and my trunk with the ground. I know indubitably where my pipe is, and thereby I know where my hand and my body are. (PP, p. 115)

In this sense, the body image means my awareness of my body as structure.

⁷⁷ Cf. Weiss 1999, Also cf. Lingis 1999.

All parts of my body are open to each other and are capable of communicating and regrouping each time the body faces a specific situation. Although the physical parts of the body contribute to the constitution of the “body image”, such unity, structure or “body image” cannot be explained or reduced to a physical explanation. Each rearrangement of the parts of the “body image” is “polarized by its tasks, of its existence towards them, of its collecting together of itself in its pursuit of its aims; the body image is finally a way of stating that my body is in-the-world.” (PP, p. 115) The unity is obtained from the situation that the body is facing in the world. The “body image” is an expression of an active body dealing with situations.

The “body image” provides flexibility to the body in dealing with different situations. For example if we are faced with a certain task, such as picking up the phone on the corner the desk, the parts of the body, the hand, the back, and all different muscles do not arrange themselves in one way in order to achieve the goal. There are several different ways that the parts of our body can rearrange themselves in order to achieve the efficient behavior. We can stretch one hand with our body leaning forward while we are sitting, or we can stand up and walk around the desk. In each case the parts of our body arrange themselves in order to achieve a task, which is, in this case, picking up the phone. (PP, p. 172)

Also, such reorganization of the “body image” can be extended to incorporate external tools. For example, when the blind person uses a stick for guidance, the stick becomes a part of the person’s “phenomenal body.” Probably, at the beginning, the blind person would pay attention to the stick. But when the person gets used to the stick, he/she would stop paying attention to how to handle it and instead focus on what the end of the

stick would guide him/her to. The same point can be applied between a skilled typist and a typewriter.

Furthermore, the advantage of having such “body image” is that the organization of the parts of our body does not require any of our attention. Merleau-Ponty says: “I don’t find [my body]⁷⁸ at one point of objective space and transfer it to another, I have no need to look for it, it is already with me... the relationships between my decisions and my body are magic.”⁷⁹ (PP, p. 108) That is why when we try to reach for an object, we tend to focus on the object and not on our body because our body does not require any attention from us. The relation between the decision and the body is not consciously controlled but is approached on the level of “pre-reflective”. This decision is not the kind I intend to use this part of my body to do this act. Merleau-Ponty thinks a person experiences his body as an undivided unity that is “at his disposal” and that does not require any presentation of such unity. This unity is behind one’s setting off of any parts of a body in certain acts. Through such unity or a “body image” a person can project his body to enact one of its habitual tasks which is elicited by the given situation. (PP, p.101)

Up to this point in the chapter, I have presented Merleau-Ponty’s concepts that constitute the phenomenal body. These concepts are “motor intentionality”, “habitual body,” and “body image”. A phenomenal body is not accounted for by both the physiological explanation and the intellectual explanation. The physiological explanation misses such a phenomenal body because intentionality is related to the mind and not to the body. Merleau-Ponty says: “the life of consciousness-cognitive life, the life of desire

⁷⁸ My addition.

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, however, fails to explain this “magical” relation between my decision and my body. That is due to the lack of evidences at his time. Nowadays, physiological evidences explain such relationship. I intend to return to this issue in chapter 6.

or perceptual life- is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects around us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation.” (PP, p. 157)

Human experience is related to the primordial level of an “intentional arc”, or bodily sedimented significances. In the following, I intend to explore such bodily significances by introducing pathological case of Schneider that reveals such bodily significance.

4. The body and the power of existence:

4. 1. Schneider’s case:

Schneider is a patient who recovered from a head injury. His behavior is normal in relation to actual concrete situations. Concrete situations are situations which relate to the things that surround him and which solicit a daily behavior or “concrete movement.” (PP, p. 118) For example, he is capable of reaching for a box of matches in his pocket or lighting a lamp. He works in wallet factory. He cuts leather and assembles it and his speed of production is normal.

Schneider’s behavior, however, is not normal when he is faced with an imposed situation⁸⁰ such as when his doctor asks him to do something. For example, he cannot point with his finger to any part of his body, such as his nose, if he is asked to do that. But he is able to grasp those parts. He cannot point with a “wooden ruler” to a point on his body but he is able to locate on his body the place where a mosquito bites him.

Furthermore, Schneider is incapable of initiating a sexual intimacy unless his partner starts it first. His sexual desires cannot be triggered from just looking at naked

⁸⁰ An imposed situation is the kind of situation that is not brought by every day living situations but which is imposed by a request.

pictures or at a real naked body. (PP, p.179) Schneider requires a real contact from his partner in order to engage in sexual behavior.

Both physiological and psychological accounts fail to explain Schneider's case: On the one side, the physiological account based on reflex theory fails to explain Schneider's disability, because Schneider does not suffer from serious damage to his senses and sexual organs. According to such an account Schneider, a naked picture should initiate a sexual act. The problem is that Schneider cannot initiate the sex act. His partner has to initiate such an act.

The intellectual account, on the other side, also fails to explain Schneider's case. The intellectual account says that some mental images can arouse the feeling of pleasure and pain. Accordingly, some mental images or representations can cause an erotic experience. Intellectualism explains Schneider case due to a loss of some of sexual, or mental, images that cause erotic experience. Such an account, however, fails because Schneider could not reach an erotic experience either from remembering those images, from watching sexual pictures, or from watching a naked person standing in front of him. Schneider does not grasp those images as sexual. In other word, he does not perceive the image as sexual.

4. 2. Merleau-Ponty account of Schneider's case:

In the earlier explanation of the body, it was mentioned that our awareness of our body and its parts is not one which can be described as an objective relation but one where they envelop each other in a "body image." Such a relation between the parts becomes a background, from which our habitual and motor actions stand out. (PP, p. 119) Schneider's body is intact because he does not have a problem in locating a mosquito bite

on his body. (PP, p. 121) The physiological explanation does not recognize the significance of the movement of the hand to reach the painful spot. The movement of the hand is explained in a causal and external relation to some given stimuli which are provided by the painful spot or the touch of a ruler. The significance of the movement, however, is only expressed by the phenomenal body and its motor intentionality.

Things in the world have significance for our bodies; they come with motor significance. Merleau-Ponty thinks that those objects “offer themselves to the subject as poles of action; through their combined values they delimit a certain situation, an open situation moreover, which calls for a certain mode of resolution, a certain kind of work.” (PP, p. 122) In the wallet factory, the leather, scissors, and needles, are related to Schneider’s body as objects for his motor intentionality, his habitual body.

Merleau-Ponty explains that Schneider’s inability to point at things, or respond, is related to his inability to project himself into a situation created by an abstract request. He can only project himself into a concrete situation and not an imaginary one. Schneider “is tied to actuality, he lacks liberty, that concrete liberty which comprises the general power of putting oneself into a situation.” (PP, p. 157) Schneider then is incapable of projecting himself into a new situation or a new form of existence or being. He is stuck in this one realm of existence, the realm of habitual concrete significance. The normal person, however, is able not only to situate himself/herself in a concrete situation, but also is able to situate himself in a fictitious or abstract situation.

Here Merleau-Ponty introduces a power which, in my view, is a phenomenal power that a body possesses and which is responsible for projecting itself into a situation. Such a power furnishes objective stimuli with meaning in a way that a nude picture

becomes sexual for the subject. (PP, p. 180) This power implies that the subjective character of the body is related to the phenomenal body. Merleau-Ponty calls this power “existence”.

In the rest of the chapter, I intend to focus on explaining Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “existence”. Since this term comes close in meaning to “intelligence”, I intend to distinguish Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of “existence” from the classical understanding of intelligence as representational. Such a distinction would also imply a different kind of subjectivity, one that is different from the Cartesian subjectivity. I will, however, deal with this point later in chapter five.

The important point of presenting Schneider’s case is to show a level of giving meaning or a power that is between a mechanical response and mental representation.

Merleau-Ponty says:

A sight has sexual significance for me, not when I consider, even confusedly, its possible relationship to the sexual organs or to pleasurable states, but when it exists for my body, for that **power**⁸¹ always available for bringing together into an erotic situation the stimuli applied, and adapting sexual conduct to it. There is an erotic comprehension not of the order of understanding. (PP, p. 181)

Merleau-Ponty thinks that in any sexual situation there must be a power of comprehension at the level of the body that is essential to perceive, to live, such a situation. In a situation, the subject situates itself in a certain mode of being, which is a certain form of motor intentionality which is taken to be the way the body positions itself to receive certain inputs from the world. Such intentionality is a part of our “intentional arc” which provides our experience with its vital meaning. Such an intentional domain is also the source of other vital experience such as thinking and representing ideas.

⁸¹ Me emphasis.

Merleau-Ponty found that his view on the power of existence comes close to Freud's views on sexuality. Freud does not consider sexuality as related only to a sexual process that is aimed toward a sexual end and which is related only to sexual organs. Sexuality, is rather a "general power" that is behind any human activity. "[M]an's sexual history provides a key to his life, it is because in his sexuality is projected in his manner of being towards the world." (PP, p. 183) Such sexual power provides meaning to our everyday living acts and behavior.

Although Merleau-Ponty agrees with Freud that sexuality has an existential significance that cannot be reduced to physiological explanation, he does not agree with him that all human experience has a sexual significance or meaning. Since Freud does not specify sexuality with certain functions that are caused by certain organs, there is no reason to consider sexuality as the power that provides significances to our acts. (PP, p. 184) Merleau-Ponty says: "[S]ince it is no longer a separate function definable in terms of the causality proper to a set of organs, there is now no sense in saying that all existence is understood through the sexual life, or rather this statement becomes a tautology." (PP, p. 185) Such a view of sexuality as a general power becomes tautological because sexuality would become the general nature of existence and there is no sense of referring to it as sexual which indicates a specific significance. In Merleau-Ponty's view sexuality possesses existential significance. In the following, I intend to explore such existential significance.

Merleau-Ponty presents a case of a patient who lost her voice and her ability to swallow food after her mother forbids her to see the person with whom she is in love. The Freudian explanation would be limited to the sexual level. Merleau-Ponty, however,

considers that such symptoms are related to another existential level, “communal existence”. The girl’s body refuses to live or experience living with the other; her mother, or people in general. (PP, p. 185) Since the mouth is the part of body that we communicate with others, the lost of the voice is an expression of the refusal to communicate with others. Hence, losing the voice is a “sign” and the rejection of living with others is the “signification”. In this case, one might wonder if the girl would represent such signification in her mind.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that when the girl lost her voice she did not act voluntarily. She did not present in her mind an “inner state” that expresses her intention similar to when we decide to do something such as shaking hands with people or stop talking to them. The girl’s silence is not voluntary. Her power to speak was returned only when she was allowed to talk to person she loves. Her voice was returned not as a result of her will or intention to speak again. There is no intellectual effort involved here. Such intentionality belongs to the body. It should be noticed that the throat in this case is not an objective part. This part of the body possesses significance. The body expresses a significance which is a refusal to communicate with others by losing her voice which is the sign. (PP, p. 187) Here the body is the sign and significance of the sign.

To explain the concept of the body as a sign and significance at the same time, Merleau-Ponty presents an analogy between body and works of art such as poems, pictures and music. Considering works of art as structures, the significance of a piece of art is given through the way colors or pieces of material stand against each other. (PP, p. 175) In the same way, our experience of a specific meaning is given through a specific organization of the parts of the body. The body “is a grouping of lived-through meaning

which moves towards its equilibrium.” (PP, p. 177) Our motor habits, as forms of signs, are forms of significance grasped by the body.

Merleau-Ponty considers that our “body expresses total existence”. This does not mean that body and existence are two elements that are external to each other. Merleau-Ponty says “existence realizes itself in the body. This incarnate significance is the central phenomenon of which body and mind, sign and significance are abstract moments.” (PP, p. 192) This means that neither our experience of existence alone nor our body’s expression constitute a “human being.” They imply each other. One cannot reduce existence to the physical body. In other words, existence cannot be considered as mental states that can be explained and reduced to a mechanical description of body the way Gestalt psychology tried to do. Merleau-Ponty describes existence or human experience as of “ambiguous setting” or as of a “woven fabric.” (PP, p. 193)

Understanding the ambiguity of existence takes us back to the concept of the body image described earlier in this chapter. Such a concept shows that, in human experience, the body is perceived as a structure where all parts participate in achieving a certain goal. All parts of the body are interconnected to each other in such a way that a specific function cannot be assigned to one specific part of the body without including the others. In other word, the relation is always structural.

In accordance with the structural nature of the body, all kinds of human experience are intermingled. There is no strict boundary that separates a distinct experience, such as sexuality, from any other experience. In that sense, sexual experience is influenced by the history of different experiences that a person has in the past. Therefore, it is hard to label an experience as purely sexual. Merleau-Ponty says: “all

human 'functions', from sexuality to motility and intelligence, are rigorously unified in one synthesis." (PP, p. 197) In this sense, human experience is "indeterminate." (PP, p. 196)

Such "indeterminacy" explains why sexuality can neither be related to a represented consciousness nor to a represented subconscious. This is because representation requires distinct and determinate attention. "There are here blurred outlines, distinctive relationships which are in no way 'unconscious' and which, we are well aware, are ambiguous, having reference to sexuality without specifically calling it to mind." (195) Sexuality can be explained only as one form of existence. The awareness of sexuality is not like the awareness of "I think that" but an indeterminate awareness. It is like the awareness of the patient of his amputated limb. Such an awareness of a phantom limb is not a matter of deliberate or conscious decision. Rather the phantom limb has an "indeterminate" presence.

In addition to its ambiguity, existence is described as the structure of sedimented experiences. Once an experience becomes a part of such a structure it becomes essential to the total structure of existence. In this sense, there are no fortuitous attributes in existence. Such attributes, however, are not essential in a sense that each person must hold the same attributes. Human existence is then an historical concept. (PP, p. 198) Each person possesses a unique existence.

Such an understanding of significance that is related to the body, however, might be challenged by the meaning that is constituted and delivered by language. It might be argued that such meaning is more essential and precedes the significance that is delivered by the body. According to such understanding, language is constituted from two parts:

“words” and “verbal images”. Verbal images are “traces that are left in us by words spoken or heard.” (PP, p. 203) According to empiricism those traces are “physical” and can be approached through the “laws of neurology”. (PP, p. 203) According to the proponents of intellectualism, these traces are “imprinted” in our unconscious life and can be followed by mental process. (PP, p. 203)

Such a representational understanding of language, however, is challenged by cases of aphasia⁸². If meaningful language depends essentially on physical or mental representation of a “verbal image”, one might wonder why, in cases of aphasia, the meaning of a word occurs in certain experiences and situations and disappears in another. In these cases, patients are capable of using words that are called for in purposive concrete situations where words are called for by daily situation. Those patients, however, are incapable of remembering these words in situation where language is called for by a “gratuitous” situation, that is if they are asked to identify the name of some items or their colors. In their every day living, however, the patients can identify the same items and use their name correctly.

Again Merleau-Ponty uses Schneider case as an example of an aphasia case. Schneider cannot identify things categorically. He cannot classify things according to their colors if he is asked to do that. His speech is always related to practical and every day dialogue. If he took the initiative to ask a question or start a conversation, it would be related to a daily and habitual question such as asking his children about their day at school. He, however, cannot use language to lead a conversation. Furthermore, he considers false statements such as the “the sky is black” as meaningless. He can speak

⁸² “Loss or impairment of the power to use or comprehend words”, Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.

only if he has prepared his sentences. In general, Schneider never felt the need to use language. (PP, p. 228)

Cases of aphasia provide two results: First, they show that language cannot be explained as representation of “verbal images” because the patient is not capable always of having access to such “verbal images”. Second, cases of aphasia demonstrate that the meaning of language is essentially not related to the level of thinking, such as categorizing, but rather to the level of practical and living situation described earlier. The use of language seemed to work properly, in the case of aphasia, when it is related to every day living context, that is the concrete situation. This is different than the experimental, or abstract, situation which seems to be related to a different level of existence. In the following I present Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of language.

II. Gesture: the body as a sign and significance:

As it mentioned earlier, both empiricism and intellectualism share a representational account of language. In both cases words “are external sign of an internal recognition.” The uttered and heard words are signs that cause the meaning event which is either a physiological event (empiricism) or a psychological event (intellectualism). (PP, p. 205) The sign and the significance of the sign are two separate events. They both share the view that words, as spoken or heard, come with no “inner power”. Merleau-Ponty, however, holds that words are structures. A word is pregnant with its significance.

At the beginning stage of learning language as a child, or as an adult, we first learn the use of word in a “context of action” within a certain culture and through the process of communicating with other people. (PP, p. 208) For example, the word “Ahlan”

for a non-Arabic speaker, is just phonetic unit with no meaning. When the word is used in the “context of action” for example when we say it to welcome people, then the word starts to possess meaning. The essential meaning of a word is a form of bodily gesture that is related to a specific relation with the world, rather than a physical or intellectual process of representing a verbal image.

The concept of gesture plays an important role in Merleau-Ponty’s view of the phenomenal body. This is because a gesture is a bodily movement that can be considered as a sign that implies meaning that can be understood by others in a cultural context. For example, the combination of knitting of the brows and narrowing of the eyes are taken by many to be signs for meditation. (PP, p. 225) The concept of a gesture is important for it presents the body as a sign with significance that essential to it rather than external.

In my view such a view overcomes Gestalt psychology’s failure of reducing human experience to the physiological structures. Overcoming this is not a matter of reducing human experience to physiological structures but rather puts an end to the principle of mind-body distinction and to the problems that come with such a principle.

I just want to stop for a moment here on the importance of the concept of gesture and its contribution in overcoming some of the difficulties that other schools of thoughts failed to overcome. This brings us back to the failure of Gestalt psychology to notice such a concept. In my analyses in earlier chapters, I have shown that Gestalt psychology has provided the concept of Gestalt which influences Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of human experience and human body. They also have provided the concept of a “behavioral environment” which influenced Merleau-Ponty’s development of his concept of situation that implies our structural relation with the world. They, however, failed to

keep their concept of “behavioral environment” when they tried to reduce human experience to the physical body. Their main failure is not the reduction itself but their assumption of the distinction between two realms: the phenomenal and the physical. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of gesture shows that the body possesses an immanent meaning and thus overrides the distinction.

Merleau-Ponty considers that our bodies are capable of performing an “indefinite series of discontinuous acts”, the body is capable of transforming itself into patterns of behavior. A pattern of behavior becomes a gesture when it becomes understood by others. Such a gesture or meaning reveals itself to people whenever the behavior occurs. (PP, p. 225) The same applies to language. Merleau-Ponty says:

Language, in its turn, presents no different a problem: a contraction of the throat, a sibilant emission of air between the tongue and teeth, a certain way of bringing the body into play suddenly allows itself to be invested with a figurative significance which is conveyed outside us. (PP, p. 225)

The body with an intentional attitude is able to constitute a word with its significance.

Words are gestures in a sense that the meaning of the word is not separate from the word as articulated but it inhabits the word itself. Merleau-Ponty presents his analogy between the word and a piece of art as a way to explain the attachment of the significance to the sign itself. Like any other structure, in music, the meaning of a conducted music or a piece of art is not separate from the sound or color used. The structure of sound or colors against each other forms the meaning of such structure. If we take each part of a structure separately, there is no meaning given with them. The meaning, however, is given immediately with the structure.

There must be a level of meaning that words hold, which precedes the level of representing or reflecting such as thinking. When we think, our thoughts are not clear to

us if we could not express them in words. Our thoughts are indeterminate as long as we do not put them into words, write them, or talk about them. (PP, p. 206) If we go back, to works of art, music and words, and try to approach their meaning through the analysis of their parts, we would not be able to do that, unless we experience them as total in real life. (PP, p. 212) For example the word “ahlan” would not have any meaning if the uttering person did not experience its use in real life. When the throat utters the word it is already reconstructing itself into a phonetic existence. Such phonetic existence is a structure that is sedimented at some time in the past.

Accordingly, words possess meaning that is essential to thought. Such meaning, however, precedes the conceptual meaning of the word. Merleau-Ponty says: “We find here, beneath the conceptual meaning of the words, an existential meaning which is not only rendered by them, but which inhabits them, and is inseparable from them.” (PP, p. 212) This means that thought is not an internal realm that exists on its own and is independent from our perceptual experience and our interaction with the world. If this were the case, we might wonder why we believe that this “inner life” is the source of any meaning or significance.

Merleau-Ponty replies: “What misleads us in this connection, and causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought is already constituted and expressed, which we can call silently to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusion of life.” (PP, p. 213) As noticed earlier, when language is constituted for the first time, the significance is given directly as a bodily modification. The constitution of thought, however, is a matter of reflecting on already sedimented bodily

significances. Thought is then a second order language and based initially on the sediment of bodily significances. In this sense thought cannot exist before expression.

Language is a sedimented habitual bodily experience which we do not need to represent. According to Merleau-Ponty, after the process of learning, language will be incorporated within our “body image”. Like other habitual bodily movements, language will be in immediate contact with “fields of action”. As language becomes one of our body’s functions, we do not need to represent the meaning of a word when we hear a word. The meaning is captured by the body capturing the group of sound stimuli.

Learned language is this background of “phonetic gesticulation”. Merleau-Ponty says. “[T]he word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and is part of my equipment.” (PP, p. 210) Learned language, like any other habit, is a bodily motor intentionality that became sedimented in the bodily structure in one point in the body’s history.

Such an understanding of language does not only explain the genesis and the constitution of language but also explains some of the pathological cases including Schneider’s inability to remember and use words in a context other than one related to his every day experience. Merleau-Ponty thinks that Schneider’s deficiency is related to his body’s inability to exist in a conceptual or categorical structure of existence. Merleau-Ponty says:

[T]o name a thing is to tear oneself away from its individual and unique characteristics to see it as representative of an essence or a category, and the fact that the patient cannot identify the samples is a sign, not that he has lost the verbal image of the words red or blue, but that he has lost the general ability to subsume a sensory given under a category, that he has lapsed back from the categorical to the concrete attitude. (PP, p. 205)

Such an act “is therefore not an ultimate fact, it builds itself up within a certain attitude.”
(PP, p. 223)

III. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenal and existential approach to Perception

1. The explanation of sense experience:

Earlier in chapter one, I showed that both empiricism and intellectualism explain sense experience according to objective thinking which considers sensation as constituted by determinate and atomic sense qualities. Empiricism considers sensation as a quality or “state of consciousness” and intellectualism considers sensation as “consciousness of a state or quality.” (PP. p.242) The first is related to the realm of existence “in itself”; the second is related to the realm of existence “for itself.”

Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that sensation “is neither a state or a quality, nor the consciousness of a state or a quality.”(PP, p. 243) Rather, sensation is originally a gesture which possesses motor significance. Merleau-Ponty presents some pathological cases that reveal such a level of significance. In some cases, when the patient is presented with the colors blue and green at the same time, the patient would feel a smooth movement in the arm. When the patient is exposed to red and yellow, the patient would feel rough movements in the hands. The presentation of the colour red to the right eye, would produce the feeling of stretching the arm outwards, whereas the application of green color would be accompanied with a feeling pulling the arm towards the body. (PP, p. 242) The application of blue and red would accompany a bouncing movement of the arms. Each of the previous cases shows that the sensation of colors is accompanied with “motor physiognomy” or vital significance which indicates that the explanation of

sensation is far more complex than being “just a state or a quality” or consciousness of sensible qualities. (PP, p. 243)

The motor and vital significance of color cannot be explained according to the physiological explanation which is the effect of light with a specific wave length on our eyes which produces the sensation of color. Furthermore, the motor significance of color cannot be explained according to the account of intellectualism because such an account requires that the subject holds a “clear awareness of a certain *quale*.” If that is the case then, it is not clear in some cases of experiencing color why the subject can experience the motor significance of the color even before being aware of the color itself. For example, the subject can experience the “accentuate” behavior of the color red before being aware of the color as red. (PP, p. 244)

To understand Merleau-Ponty’s view of the motor significance of color, we need to reject the understanding of motility as “the mere consciousness of my movements from place to place in the present or immediate future.”(PP, p. 244) Instead, Merleau-Ponty considers motility to be the “function” or the expression of our being and vital existence in the world. Merleau-Ponty thinks colors hold an existential and vital significance. For example, green and blue are “restful” colors. Red and yellow have a demanding effect. Patients experience a different effect with a different color; with a yellow color, a patient experiences a “stinging effect”, the awareness of blue color is attached to a feeling of the color being surrendered to the patient’s eyes, the awareness of red color is attached with a feeling of being invaded by color.

Furthermore, in these color experiments if patients were exposed to color in “a weak or short duration”, patients would experience vital and “bodily attitude” of the color

before seeing the color. In such experiments, one patient says: “there is in my body a sensation of slipping downwards, so that it cannot be green, and can be only blue but in fact I see no blue.” Another patient says that “I clenched my teeth, and so I know that it is yellow” (PP, p. 245) Merleau-Ponty thinks that before we see a color and recognize it as a color of a certain type or as sense quality, we perceive it as a bodily attitude. This explains “why red signifies effort or violence, green restfulness and peace” because we capture the concrete meaning and significance of such color through our bodies. (PP, p. 245)

Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty does not seem to approve of, at least on the level of perceptual experience, a distinction between two external facts, that is, the sensation of the color and the motor significance. He says:

When we say that red increases the compass of our reactions, we are not to be understood as having in mind two distinct facts, a sensation of redness and motor reactions- we must be understood as meaning that red, by its texture as followed and adhered to by our gaze, is already the amplification of our motor being. (PP, p. 245)

Hence, the motor and vital significance of a color is not an effect but a form of being or existing. In other words, sensation is “a form of communion” performed by a sentient subject. (PP, p. 246)

The subject that Merleau-Ponty means here is not a consciousness or a thinking subject that becomes aware of a sense quality. Before expanding on this subject, I intend first to focus on the relation between the sensor and the sensible. Merleau-Ponty describes sensation as a “power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with it” (PP, p. 245) He thinks that the subject does not represent sense data that is received from the world as sense qualities, but rather the subject “enters into a sympathetic relation with them.” The subject does not

experience the color blue the same way as when it thinks that “the geometer’s circle is the same in Paris and Tokyo.” (PP, p.248) The color blue is not knowledge or an idea that the subject reflects on. Rather the subject here enters into a relation with the color instead of representing it as an object.

The relation between sensor and sensible is more like a sympathetic relation.

Merleau-Ponty says:

It is my Gaze which subtends colours, and my movement of my hand which subtends the object’s form, or rather my gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action. (PP, p.248)

Such sympathetic relation reveals the similarity in nature between the sensor and the sensible. They both are related to the same world. In Merleau-Ponty’s view the sensor is the body. But the body that he describes here is not a thing or an object but the phenomenal body or a body as subject.

Merleau-Ponty describes the relation of the body to the sensible as similar to the “sleeper to his slumber.” Before falling into sleep we voluntarily start to breathe heavily and “slowly”. When we enter the stage of sleeping; the voluntary rhythm of breathing becomes an involuntary status of our sleeping experience. (PP, p.246) Merleau-Ponty says:

In the same way I give ear, in the expectation of sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes position of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red.” (PP, p. 246)

Sensation is a form of “co-existence” or “communion” with the object through a vital and motor significance. Hence, the body is not merely a transmitter of sense impressions. The body is the subject of sensation that captures the meaning of these sensory fields first,

before any process of thinking, through its communion with the sense-data received from the world. In this sense the body is a meaning giving existence.

The subject that is related to the body comes with an “anonymous” and “depersonalized” character. For example the subject “I” that is expressed when “I see the blue sky” is not the same “I” that is expressed when “I understand the book” or when “I decide to devote my life to mathematics.” Merleau-Ponty considers that the first “I” is exposed to “a given situation” which is being sensitive to colors and the “I” here corresponds to such a sensitivity. In this sense, there is nothing personal involved. The subject that is involved here is a pre-personal subject. The second and the third “I”, however, are related to a “creative situation” which is created by the “I” itself. A thinking “I” creates the situation of understanding or making a decision. (PP, p. 250)

Peter Hadreas, in his *In Place Of the Flawed Diamond: An Investigation of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, presents an example of the pre-personal “I”, in our every day living experiences. He says suppose that we have a craving for a certain type of meal when we pass by one of the restaurants that prepare such a meal. We sit and make our order. Unfortunately the waiter informs us that the meal is not available. At that time, even if we decided to make another choice, we are frustrated for an unknown reason. The body involved in this experience was ready and prepared with an intention to have the certain meal. (Hadreas 1986, p. 79)

The subject involved here is pre-personal subject; a “natural self.” Merleau-Ponty thinks that each sensation belongs to a “natural self” that is born and dies with it. A natural self and its existential modality are “natural powers” that are constituted and

sedimented sometime during an individual's history. (PP, p. 249) Based on his phenomenal and existential understanding of the body, I intend to present Merleau-Ponty's explanation of the perception of color, space, and things.

2. The perception of constancy of color:

Despite one's different experiences of different shades of certain color a person can still identify one kind of color. Merleau-Ponty questions the constant or real color. What stands for such constancy? On one hand, empiricism explains such a constancy as related to memory of a certain color as imprinted in us through several experiences and under "normal" conditions such as, the day light, short distance and in general under certain condition. Each time an actual color is perceived, our memory brings the experience with normal condition into presence and accordingly we identify the color according to such "normal" conditions.

Our perceptual experience, however, shows that we can have experiences of different shades of the same color. The color changes according to light. Also, the experience of brown as the color of the table is different than the experience of brown as the color of a carpet. (PP, p. 354) If we experience color as quality, we would experience the color brown in both cases as the same brown. In this sense, empiricism fails to explain real experience of color.

The same argument applies to intellectualism which considers the constancy of color is a judgement of an ideal quality. But in experiencing color we do not experience an ideal color, the brown that we experience in daylight is not the same brown that we experience in dark. Merleau-Ponty says:

For a judgement capable of distinguishing within a given appearance that element which is to be accounted for by the particular lighting must lead to ultimately to an identification of the object's own true colour, and we have seen that this does not in fact remain identical. (PP, p. 355)

Also, the brown that we experience in the table is different from a brown that we experience in the carpet. Both empiricism and intellectualism run into problems, for they both based their views on the recognition of a “fixed qualities which make their appearance in a reflective attitude.” (PP, p. 355)

Merleau-Ponty, however, explains color constancy as the function of three structural aspects: Lighting, organization of the field and the constancy of things. (PP, p. 363) In the following I present the first two aspects and I will leave the third to the end of the chapter.

2.1 Lighting:

Lighting plays an important role in constituting the shade of the color. Although we notice the color of the light when we enter a space, the light usually becomes neutral after we enter it. The function of lighting becomes the background according to which our visual body situates itself to perceive a certain level of colors. Merleau-Ponty thinks that our body assumes such level of light and considers it as a norm. (PP, p. 362) For example, if we stand in a lighted area looking at a white paper in a shaded area of the same room, we would consider that we perceive a white paper and not grey. My body, understood as a power which inhabits its environment and in its consideration of color, assumes the level of light illumining the atmosphere. In this case the body considers itself as standing in a lighted area looking at a thing in the shaded area.

The body always assumes the level of lighting in the structure of visual experience. It situates itself with respect to a certain level of lighting. For example, a

photometer experiment shows that the wave length of the color blue in a gas light is equal to the color brown in the daylight. According to the empirical and representational account the person should see the blue thing in a gas light as brown because they have the same wave length. But as the body considers the level of lighting that it inhabits, a person would be able to experience blue as blue and not a brown color despite their similarity of wave length. (PP, p. 357)⁸³

2.2 The organization of the field:

The organization of the field is the second element that constitutes the color constancy. When, in a dark room an arc beam of light is thrown on a disk, both the light and the disk fuse and become a solid cone to a perceiver. When a piece of white paper is introduced into the beam of light, the beam and disk become disconnected and the light loses its solid quality and becomes light again. (PP, p. 363) The experiment shows that the quality and value of each part in the visual field relies upon the “configuration” of the rest of other parts. When we look at a painting of a landscape, the color green would not only be seen as an area filled with color but it would be seen as a grassy green. The same color would lose such “value” or “thickness” when it looked at in isolation from the rest of the painting. Hence, “our perception is in its entirety animated by a logic [of gestalt]⁸⁴ which assigns to each object its determinate features in virtue of those of the rest.” (PP, p. 365)

Merleau-Ponty, however, warns us from the gestalt’s interpretation of the organization of a field as caused only by the effect of the elements on each other in the

⁸³ Also check Mallin, p. 144.

⁸⁴ My addition.

perceptual field. Instead, he considers that the body as a subject is responsible in first place for bringing all these elements together to form significance. According to our phenomenal body not only we can see visual qualities but also tactile qualities such as a woolly redness of a carpet.

Also, as I explained earlier, the body is responsible for the constancy of all these colors to each other by bringing all these colors under a certain level of lighting. “Only when the gaze assumes a level of lighting will colors be able to superimpose themselves on each other.” (Mallin, p. 153) Before introducing the third aspect of the “color-function” which is the constancy of things, I intend to present the existential understanding of space.

3. The Perception of space:

3.1 Oriented space:

In one of the famous experiments by Stratton, a person with normal vision is given a pair of glasses that alters the retinal image and makes it upside down. On the first day, images appear inverted and unreal. On the second day the person starts to feel that he sees things normally with no feeling of inversion in his vision. He, however, feels inversion in his body. He feels that his body is upside down. After a week, the person starts to feel that both his vision and his body in the right and normal position. (PP, p. 285) In this experiment, Merleau-Ponty searches the significance of “upright” or “inversion” in our perceptual experience. In other words what is the origin of the normal orientation of the body?

Empiricism fails to explain the significance of oriented space. Since empiricists considers orientation of space is a property that is related to external world, then the

person should experience the inversion of sight as long he wears the inverted glasses. Empiricism is faced with the question of “how the image of the world which, in itself, is inverted, can right itself for me.” (PP, p. 288) Empiricism “treats the perception of space as the reception, within ourselves, of a real space, and the phenomenal orientation of objects as reflecting their orientation in the world.” (PP, p. 288) The experiment, however, shows that the person’s vision is corrected after wearing the inverted glasses for a period of time. Empiricism fails to explain the correction of inversion in our visual experience.

Intellectualism faces the same difficulty in explaining the experience of inversion or oriented space, simply because mind belongs to the realm of the “for-itself” which does not belong to “anywhere”. The meaning of “up” and “down” mean nothing to a mind that is not located in space. Merleau-Ponty says: “[t]here is nothing, for a constituting mind, to distinguish the experience before from the experience after putting on the glasses.” (PP, p. 288) Hence, intellectualism not only fails to provide an explanation to the correction of inversion, it fails to explain the source of significance of oriented space.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that the sense of orientation and the meaning of “up” and “down” are established when my body is “anchored” or geared into the lived world. The sense of orientation establishes “when my motor intentions, as they unfolds, receive the responses they expect from the world.” (PP, p. 292) The inversion of visual field that occurs at the beginning of the experiment is related to the incapability of the body to anchor itself to the world or “live in it.” (PP. p. 293) But since the body starts to situate itself in such visual field, in a way that its behavior succeeds in responding to things

perceived, things starts to look normal again and not inverted. Hence, our structural relation with the world provides the general setting or background for our significance of orientation in the world.

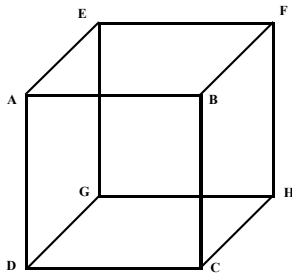
3.2 Depth:

Merleau-Ponty holds that both empiricism and intellectualism fail to explain “depth” or “distance.” On one hand, empiricism fails to explain the significance of depth because stimuli project a flat, two dimensional, picture on our retina. On the other hand, intellectualism considers that such significance is given by a subject that synthesizes such relation and adds meaning to it. The close significance of depth in both empiricism and intellectualism can give is a “juxtaposition” of points seen from one side and “making it comparable to breadth”. (PP, p. 297) In both cases the explanation expresses an objective understanding of depth.

Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that both explanations ignore the lived experience of depth. Such a significance is primordial to both explanations. Merleau-Ponty considers that depth expresses the structural relationship between subject and its environment. In his view, “[d]istance is what distinguish this loose and approximate grip from the complete grip which is proximity.” (PP, p. 305) Merleau-Ponty considers that the significance of depth has a relation to the significance of the size of things in the world. When things go away from us, they tend to become smaller and less distinguishable. Merleau-Ponty says: “One can say that the man two hundred yards away is a much less distinguishable figure, that he is less strictly geared to my power of exploration. Again one can say that he less completely occupies my visual field”. (PP.

p.304) In this way, the significance of depth or distance, as well as size, comes from our visual grip on things.

Merleau-Ponty assigns a role to our gaze in constituting perceptual significance. He says: “the gaze as a sort of knowledge machine, which takes things as they need to be taken in order to become a spectacle, or which divides them up in accordance with their natural articulations.” (PP. p. 307) In perceiving a cube, we focus on one side such as ABCD.



In doing so, a side becomes nearer than the other side. Such an act of gazing becomes anchored on the side which becomes the foreground of the figure and the other side recedes to become the background or the other side of the cube. (PP, p. 307) The significance of depth then is constituted with such movement of the gaze.

Saying this about the gaze does not mean that we or our gaze constitutes the significance. Merleau-Ponty says:

[I]n normal perception the significance of what is perceived appears to me as built into it and not constituted by me, and the gaze as a sort of knowledge machine, which takes things as they need to be taken in order to become a spectacle, or which divides them up in accordance with their natural articulations. (PP, p. 307)

For example the line does not become a line in front to us because of “mental inspection”. But rather, through the inspected movement of my gaze along it we can reach an embodied, “animated” significance of the line. Such a movement is “motivated” by the thing being seen. (PP, p. 307)

3.3 Motion:

As the outcome of objective thinking, an explanation of movement defines movement as a change of place or position. Accordingly, the significance of movement can be approached by specifying each movement in space. Such an understanding, however, is challenged by one of Zeno's paradoxes. Such a paradox shows that in order to reach location A in space, the person needs first to reach location B located half way between where the person stands and his final destination. The same thing is repeated with point B. If this is repeatedly applied to each point located between the start point and final destination, the result would be an infinite regress and the person would never be able to reach location A.

The objective significance of movement is also challenged by the view that our perceptual experience of movement does not show that the significance of movement involves the attempt to locate each point of the movement of things. For example if we try to follow a quick movement of a pencil in front of us from one location to another, although we do not locate any intermediate location of the pencil, we still perceive the movement of it. Also, if we try to slow down such movement to the extent that we start to locate each position of the pencil, the way the objective understanding of movement suggests, we lose the experience of the pencil's movement. (PP, p. 314)

In Merleau-Ponty view, the significance of motion is related to the fixing of our gaze in the world. For example, if we are on a boat or on a train that is moving, we can either consider that we are moving and the landscape is fixed or we perceive the landscape is moving and we are fixed (PP, p. 323) Hence, "what makes part of the field

count as an object in motion, and another as the background, is the way in which we establish [as body] our relations with them by the act of looking.” (PP, p.324) The movement is an expression of body’s grip to the world.

4. Perception of thing and the natural world:

So far, I have shown that the significance of properties of our perceptual field, such as orientation, depth, and motion, are neither related to mind without consideration of the body, as intellectualism claims, nor to the causal effect of the world on a body as empiricism claims. Our perceptual significances are the result of a phenomenal body and its structural relation with the world. In the following I will present Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of other perceptual significances such as size and shape.

4.1 Perception of size and shape:

Merleau-Ponty considers that both size and shape are an expression of our bodily hold on the world. But before explaining such a bodily hold I would like first to go back to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenal concept of “maximum grip” that I already presented in chapter three. Merleau-Ponty thinks that there is always a certain distance from which the phenomenal body is in its “maximum grip” of clarity of its perception of an object. For example, in an art gallery, in case of visual perception, each piece of art has an “optimum distance” from which it can be clearly seen. If we stand further than such distance we miss some of the details in the piece of work, and if we stand shorter than such distance, the piece of work looks blurred. In every day living, we always tend to act within such optimum distances. (PP, p.352) This applies also on other kinds perceptions such as tactile and audible perceptions.

The phenomenological significance of size can be expressed through the “tension” of visual appearance on my gaze. For example if two objects are located in front of us from the same distance, but our “gaze cannot fully take” one of them the way it takes the other object, then one of them is bigger than the other. (PP, 353) It should be noticed here that the significance of size is the result of two contributions; first the world that affects the subject’s visual apparatus and second the gaze of subject that focuses on certain aspects of the visual field.

With regard to the significance of shape, the object is signified as circular if “all its sides being equally near to me, it imposes no deviation upon the regular curvature of my gaze, or if those deviations which are imposed are attributable to the oblique presentation, according to the knowledge of the world which is given to me with my body.” (PP, p. 353) Such a movement of gaze shows the important role of motor intentionality described earlier in chapter two. With motor intentionality, the significance of size and shape is achieved through a “prelogical act” taken by the body rather than an intellectual act. (PP, footnote, p. 353)

The motor intentionality of a gaze cannot be understood according to some physical model that describes the movements of the eye according to fixed and causal affect of certain muscles on each other. Rather, the motor intentionality of a gaze can only be described according to the “potentiality” of the body of organizing itself each time in a certain structural relation that achieves the maximum focus in the situation underhand. (Mallin, p. 128) This reminds us of case described earlier in chapter three in which one eye or half retina functions. In such a case, the body restructures itself in a different way than in normal cases to achieve the maximum satisfactory result.

The motor intentionality of the gaze cannot be described through the physical movement of the eye which scans the object “point by point” or “part by part.” That is because the interest of the phenomenal body sets the level of generality of the structure. For example, the structure that is required to achieve the recognition of a male from a female is different from the structure that is required to achieve more specific information such as recognizing certain details in a face. (Mallin 1979, p. 129) In this sense the eye cannot be described as a passive apparatus that receives sense data. So far I have presented Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of perception of size and shape of things in the world; I now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s account of the perception of things.

4.2 The Perception of a thing:

Merleau-Ponty thinks that when we perceive, we do not perceive “quale”, as empiricism claims. Nor do we perceive a “notion” like intellectualism claims and which is recognized by the mind alone. We perceive things as “motor intentions” of our body directed toward the thing perceived. (PP, p. 373) For example, the significance of an ash-tray is not an idea that is clear and distinct to be observed by the mind alone. When its “motor intention” is directed toward the ash-tray, the phenomenal body sketches ambiguously the ash-tray for itself. In this sense, perception of a thing is another mode of existence for our body. The perceived thing is the “certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we [phenomenal body]⁸⁵ have of meeting this invasion.” (PP, p. 370) The significance here is captured first by the body and not the mind.

When we experience a thing, we experience a structure of sensations that are not separate from each other. Each sensation implies other sensations of the same thing

⁸⁵ My addition.

through our body image explained earlier in this chapter. Through such a body image, when we are looking at a thing, our attendance not only calls our attention to the visual property of a thing but also to its other properties such as the tactile, sound or taste. It is impossible to describe a perceived color without adding a tactile value such as a silky or warm red. (PP, p. 376) Here, our body is attending the presented phenomenon as one system of several powers. (PP, p. 370)

The identity of a thing then is the result of our bodily image and its intentional exploration of a thing. Merleau-Ponty says, “The identity of the thing through perceptual experience is only another aspect of the identity of one’s own body throughout exploratory movements”. (PP, p. 215) Here for example, the unity, structure, of the gestalt of a thing is not recognized according to some laws of grouping, like Gestalt psychology claims, but through the phenomenal body; through its body image. Merleau-Ponty says: “I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject, and this life among things has nothing in common with the elaboration of scientifically conceived objects.” (PP, p. 215) In this sense, the thing is correlated to the body because “its articulations are those of our very existence.” (PP, p. 373) Such an essential motor intentional hold on things presents the thing standing at the end of our “sensory exploration.”

The reality of a thing is approached when the thing meets the demands of its structure. For example, if an outside phenomenon such as wind, in the presence of all senses, interacts only with tactile sensation then such a phenomenon is only a phantom. Merleau-Ponty says: “what I call experience of the thing or of reality [...] is my full co-existence with the phenomenon, at the moment when it is in every way at its maximum

articulation, and the ‘data of the different senses’ are directed towards this one pole.” (PP, p. 371) The wind is real only when I hear the noise, see things fly etc. Someone might argue against the truth or the reality of our perceptual experience, especially if our perceptual experience is full of illusions. We might even ask what if all what we perceive is illusion. I will present and discuss such argument latter in chapter five as a part of an argument against Descartes’ doubt.

Conclusion:

In this chapter I focused on Merleau-Ponty’s genuine contribution; the phenomenal body. Such a concept is Merleau-Ponty’s solution to the preconception of the objective understanding of the body. As I showed in earlier chapters, both associationism and Pavlovian theories base their view on understanding the body as being constituted of separated, pre-established circuits that link one point of stimulation to a point of experience. These explanations have seen the body as a passive being in its relation with world.

Gestalt psychology was one step ahead of the physiology of the constancy hypothesis. They presented the body as a gestalt. They understood such bodily gestalt as a physical entity that functions according to laws of grouping. Such physical understanding of the gestalt, however, can not include the intentional character of the body and therefore fails to explain experience. The failure of Gestalt psychology is related to their objective explanation of the body and also is related to its distinction between two realms of experience and body. Merleau-Ponty’s overcoming the Gestaltist’s failure is accomplished through his concept of the phenomenal body. In this

chapter I have presented the main characteristics of the phenomenal body such as its motor intentionality, body image, and the body's capability to constitute bodily significance. Merleau-Ponty overcomes the mind-body distinction by introducing the phenomenal body, which implies the body's capability to be a sign and significance. In this conception the intentional character of human experience is finally realized.

In earlier chapters I have focused on exploring Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body's structural relation with the world. The Gestalt psychologist's study of structural relations paved the way for Merleau-Ponty's views on this topic. Such a relation implies that behavior is not a passive response to messages sent by the objective world. Behavior is a response to things that solicit our motor intention. The meanings of these solicitations are private meanings which reflect the living being's interest and history. The constitution of such meaning-for-a living being is not explained in chapter three because it required the introduction of phenomenal body which was the major goal of this chapter.

The meaning-for-a living being is constituted through the body's capability to constitute bodily meanings. The motor intentions of the phenomenal body play a role in constituting those meanings. The movement of the body is not only a movement but also significance. These movements are gestural movements. Merleau-Ponty presents some examples of perceptual bodily significances. For example the significances of "up" and "down" are constituted as the body's motor intentions receive the responses that they expect from the surrounding environment. The significances of depth, near, or far are constituted from the poor or maximum grip of the body's motor intentions about the object perceived. The significance of motion is constituted when the body chooses a point

of fixing its gaze in the world. The significance of size is perceived according to the “tension” of visual appearance on my gaze. The significance of shape is a result of the “deviation” of my gaze or the intentional body during its exploring movement. Finally, the significance of a thing is perceived as a group or structure of motor intentions of the phenomenal body. Such a structure is constituted through a body image where all sensations are open to each other. The reality of a thing is approached when the thing meets the demand of such structure. I will expand my discussion of the reality of the world in the next chapter as one of the topics that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenal body implies.

Chapter five: The phenomenal body and Cartesian dualism:

Introduction:

In the previous chapters, I have tried to trace the two preconceptions of the nature of experience and the determinacy of its meaning in Merleau-Ponty's criticism of associationism, the physiology of associationism, and Gestalt psychology. I have, also, presented Merleau-Ponty's substitutions for these preconceptions which are the phenomenal body and its structural relation to the world.

The two preconceptions of the objective understanding of human experience have influenced many philosophical views in the past. Rene Descartes is one of those who were impressed with the objective methods of science. His views on experience are strongly influenced by objective thinking. Merleau-Ponty dedicated part three of his *Phenomenology* to examine some of Descartes' views that were influenced by the prejudices of the objective understanding of experience.

My approach in this chapter is different than my approach in the previous chapters in the sense that Descartes is a classical case and not a contemporary case to Merleau-Ponty. Also, I do not consider that Descartes had a direct influence on constituting Merleau-Ponty's views like other schools that I have described in earlier chapters. Rather I consider Descartes as a case that Merleau-Ponty criticizes based on his views he developed earlier in both *The Structure of behavior and Phenomenology of Perception*. Hence, in this chapter I intend to present the Cartesian objective understanding of the body and the philosophical implication of such a preconception. I, also, intend to present Merleau-Ponty's response to these views.

In section one I intend to show the difference between the Cartesian *cogito* and Merleau-Ponty's tacit *cogito*. Secondly, I present the first implication of the Cartesian's understanding of the body, which is the understanding of essence and absolute knowledge. Following that, I will present Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the Cartesian view. Thirdly, I will present Cartesian doubt followed by Merleau-Ponty's rejection of such doubt. Fourthly, I will present the Cartesian view on of the clarity and distinctness of perception. I will then show how such a view, however, is challenged by Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perceptual experience.

I. The body in the Cartesian thinking:

1. Cartesian dualism:

Descartes considers that body and mind are two different substances. He approached this result in his Second Meditation when he realizes that he exists as a thinking being. Descartes says: "I am, then, in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks; that is I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason." (Descartes, vol I, p. 18) He also considers that we have bodies that are not essential to our existence as minds. The "I am" or subjectivity is a thinking *cogito*. Body and mind are two different things that cannot be reduced to each other⁸⁶.

⁸⁶ Two doctrines emerge from Cartesian duality. "Materialism is the doctrine that a person is a highly complicated physical object and that all the putative mental facts about a person are really physical facts, or at least are logically dependent upon physical facts. Idealism is the doctrine that a person is a non-physical mind, or consciousness and that all the physical fact about a person are really mental facts, or at least are physical." (Preist 98, p.57)

Descartes considers the body as a machine. In his *Treatise on the Man*, Descartes explains how the body functions in perception. He says:

[Y]ou can think of external objects, which stimulate certain nerves and cause spirits contained in the cavities to pass into some of the pores, as being like the fingers of the organist, which press certain keys and cause the air to pass from the wind-chests into certain pipes. (Descartes, vol 1, p. 104)

It is clear here that such an understanding of the body has the same form as the physiology of the constancy hypothesis described earlier in chapter three. In the body there are nerve paths that carry material particles, which are caused by the stimuli, from the stimulated area to the gland. (Descartes, Vol. 1, p. 100) The gland is located in the brain where the soul exists. In this gland, the atomic spirits are transformed into ideas. In this sense, the body is passive because the intentional movements made by the body do not contribute to the process of perception.

Descartes' views about the body imply some difficulties. On the one hand, Descartes accepts the interaction and the intimate relationship between mind and body. He says: 'I am not present in my body merely as a pilot is present in a ship; I am most tightly bound to it, and as it were mixed up with it, so that I and it form a union.' (qtd., in Langer, p. 30) Descartes approached such a result in his meditation on living experience. On the other hand, Descartes considers that body and mind are two different essences and he refuses to reduce either one to the other. If this is the case it is difficult to understand how different substances can be open to one another.

Descartes has struggled to keep both a distinction and a union between the mind and the body. Such a struggle appears throughout his written work. At some points he tried to get the meaning of the two concepts closer, yet in other parts he insisted on their

distinction. For example, in his letter to Hyperaspistes August 1641⁸⁷, Descartes says: “[I]f ‘corporeal’ is taken to mean anything which can in any way affect a body, then the mind too must be called corporeal in this sense.” (qtd. in IS⁸⁸, p. 33) Also, the struggle shows in his letter to Arnauld, July 29, 1648: “For if we count as corporeal whatever belongs to a body, even though not of the same nature as body, then even the mind can be called corporeal, in so far as it is made to be united to the body.” (IS, p. 34) With such attempt to bring the two concepts closer, Descartes, however, persists in the distinction. For example, in his letter to Elisabeth he considers that the extension of the body is different from the extension of the mind. (IS, p. 34)

2. The phenomenal body as a solution to the mind-body problem:

Descartes’ concepts of matter and mind, extension and thought, imply opposition and duality. Merleau-Ponty’s view about the phenomenal body, however, avoids such a dualism. In his view, the body itself possesses subjective characters. Subjective characters are explained in earlier chapters as the body’s power to possess significance through its motor intentions toward the world. This subjectivity, or *cogito*, does not hold a mental significance, such as the thinking *cogito*, but instead it holds a motor significance; a tacit *cogito*.

Such a tacit *cogito* precedes the thinking *cogito*. In earlier chapters I have shown that the significance that is expressed in speech is not that of thought but of originally bodily significance. For example the significance of word ‘sleet’ is originally given first

⁸⁷ From Merleau-Ponty’s lectures, *The Incarnate Subject*, (1947-48).

⁸⁸ Abbreviation of Merleau-Ponty’s *The Incarnate Subject*.

not as an “idea” but as a gesture, “a certain use made of phonatory equipment, a certain modulation of my body as a being in the world.” (PP, p. 469) As the body holds this power of giving significance, it itself can be considered as a *cogito*. Furthermore, since such a *cogito* is the source of both speech and thought, this *cogito* can be called a tacit *cogito*.

When Descartes, in his *Meditations*, said “I am thinking, therefore I am”, he considered that his existence is essentially an existence of a thinking being. Merleau-Ponty, however, considers that such thinking *cogito* is a verbal and linguistic *cogito*. Merleau-Ponty says: “By following the meaning of the words and the argument, [Descartes] reached the conclusion that indeed because I think, I am; but this is merely a verbal *cogito*, for I have grasped my thought and my existence only through the medium of language.” (PP, p. 466) Since we cannot think without language then thinking is conditioned by language. If this is the case, one might wonder what the genesis of language is.

Earlier in chapter four, I presented Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of the genesis of language which is a “phonetic gesticulation”. Language is a structure of bodily vocal motor intentions that become sedimented in the bodily structure in one time of the body’s history. Their significance is given directly as a bodily modification. Thought, however, is a second order language and based initially on the sedimented bodily significance. In that sense thought cannot exist for itself before bodily expression. In this sense, the existence of such spoken *cogito* relies upon a tacit *cogito* which is described earlier as the phenomenal body. Such tacit *cogito* is more essential to our existence than the thinking *cogito*.

The significances of the tacit *cogito*, unlike the Cartesian *cogito*, are historic and related to the world. The bodily significances described earlier are constituted by the body's movements toward the world. Merleau-Ponty says:

[W]hen I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because as body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. (PP, p. 475)

The significances of the tacit *cogito* are constituted in the world and with the world; in correspondence with a situation in the world. If the *cogito* is essentially a mental being and not a body, it would be possible to consider its significances not to be related to the world. But this is not the case here with the tacit *cogito* because, as was shown in earlier chapters, the genesis of motor significances is constituted in the world and with the world. But we might wonder how mental concepts, such as essences and absolute knowledge, might be explained. In the following I will present both Descartes' and Merleau-Ponty's view on this topic.

II. The explanation of essences and absolute knowledge:

Descartes considers that absolute knowledge such as knowledge of mathematical fact can be approached. Such knowledge is eternal which means that its existence is not rooted in our perceptual experience. Descartes says: "When I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind." (Descartes vol. II, p. 45) In this sense, mathematical facts and their meaning are eternal and do not hold existential

value. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that there is no absolute knowledge, essences or ideas which are not embedded in our every day perceptual experience.

Merleau-Ponty's reply:

In Merleau-Ponty's views any realm of thought or truth is essentially rooted in a primary level which is the level of our perceptual experience that is in the world and real. Merleau-Ponty says; "There would be neither thought nor truth *but* for an act whereby I prevail over the temporal dispersal of the phases of thought, and the mere *de facto* existence of my mental events." (PP, p. 447) Every thinking act requires fixing or focusing on appearance.

Earlier in chapter three, I explained the existential and lived significances of things. In the same way, both mathematical shapes, the relation of their parts, and the words that are used in their definitions are embedded in our perceptual experience. The significance of geometric shapes and their demonstration are essentially constituted first as motor significance for our phenomenal body and through the process of acting such as drawing those shapes on papers. Furthermore, the words that are used for their definitions such as 'up', 'down', 'right' and 'left' imply concrete significances of relations. Those significances are our body's grip on the world and its relation with things as they become poles towards which our bodies are directed. In this sense, the significance of these shapes and their definitions are not essentially related to a realm of pure essences⁸⁹ but to the real world. (PP, p. 449)

⁸⁹ The concept of essence comes from the Greek work "eidos" which means the essential core. In the context of our phenomenological study, essence means what is essential in our immediate perceptual experience.

The meaning of those geometrical shapes is originally a “gesture”. Earlier in chapter two, I have shown that gestures are both sign and significance at the same time. For example when we start drawing, the drawn lines provide my body with certain orientations. Merleau-Ponty says: “I ‘consider’ the triangle, which is for me a set of lines with a certain orientation, and if words such as ‘angle’ or ‘direction’ have any meaning for me, it is in so far as the system of special positions provides me with a field of possible movements.” (PP, p. 449) In this sense, the essence of geometrical shapes is captured first as, “a certain modality of my hold on the world”, as a “concrete essence”. Hence the construction of the triangle is captured first as concrete essence and as “formula of attitude” and not as a group of objective qualities that are not related to any lived experience.

The subject of such concrete essence is the “phenomenal body” or “motor subject” described in earlier chapters. The movement of such body cannot be described in objective space. It is not a movement in space. The movement of the body is intentional movements. The body is not an object or “passive body”. It is an intentional body. (PP, p. 450) The significance and the structure of these essences are approached with the intentional motility of the body. In this sense, the mathematical essences are captured first as one modality of our being in the world.

The notion of “essence” is constituted within our perceptual grip on the world. The meaning of the essence is not related to a realm of idea or transcendental thinking. Merleau-Ponty says: “it is from the world of perception that I borrow the notion of essence. What I call the essence of the triangle is nothing but this presumption of a completed synthesis, in terms of which we have defined the thing.” (PP, p. 451) Such an

essence is essentially captured by the body and its intentional movement in the world. In this sense mathematical essences, like other human products such as speech, are cultural and historic beings and do not essentially possess an eternal value. To expand on such a point I would like first to go back to the existential explanation of speech.

In chapter four I have explained two kinds of speeches; conceptual speech and gestural speech. Conceptual speech is a secondary form of speech according to which, we can recall thought or ideas. This kind of speech delivers thought or significances that are already possessed and sedimented. Existential speech is primary speech. The meaning of such speech exists for us when words as phonetic signs are used in a contextual and cultural form of action. Words here are gestures which constitute both a sign and significance. This speech is an “originating” or “creative” form of gesture of expression in general. Hence, any form of thinking of essences or ideas is embedded in this primary form of expression. Essences originate in our perspectival every day experience and they become fixed by our contemplation of things in language. That is because language, through its expression, fixes our experience and makes it an object for our reflection. (Kwant, p. 160)

Accordingly essences or ideas are not eternal significances like Descartes claims. Rather, they are human and historical significances. Essences are human because without our body with its specific “phonatory or articulatory organs,” and a body that possesses intentional movement, there would not be any gestural speech and accordingly there would not be conceptual speech. (PP, p. 454) Essences and ideas are historical because they are originally creative expressions that are started by a person who lives in a certain geographic and cultural environment. Merleau-Ponty says:

the idea of the triangle with its properties, and of the quadratic equation, have their historical and geographical area, and if the tradition in which they have been handed down to us, and the cultural instruments which bear them on, were to be destroyed, fresh acts of creative expression would be needed to revive them in the world.” (PP, p. 454)

Unlike music or painting, thought, however, is capable of disconnecting from such cultural and material instrument and obtains an “eternal value.”

The explanation of such a “disconnection” and “eternal value” might be explained as related to the tendency of the significance of thought, especially of science, to be applied to nature whereas the significance of art tends to be private. For example, to say that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles we expect that such significance applies to all triangles that we draw or we perceive in life. This is, however, different than music or painting, whose significance does not imply any application. (PP, p.455)

Our tendency to consider thought as possessing an eternal significance is related to the sedimented characteristic of our perceptual experience. As was explained in earlier chapters, after our body captured the structure of certain geometrical shapes such as a triangle, we are able to obtain their significance even when we forget the details of such primary experience. The same thing applies to experiences of art and music. What ever we experience becomes a part of us. In this sense, ideas are not eternal but sedimented and carried forward experiences which are related to this world. (PP, p. 457)

Since ideas are not related to the realm of eternity their truth and certainty are not absolute. As it explained earlier, thought and ideas are rooted in our perceptual experience and its “sedimented history.” (PP, p. 459) Such sedimented history becomes that background for all our ideas and beliefs. Since such experience runs in time and

place, those ideas, which are rooted in this existing world, are not eternal either.

Accordingly, the certainty and truth for such ideas are not absolute.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that it is not possible to reach absolute truth. Merleau-Ponty says: “we possess a truth, but this experience of truth would be absolute knowledge only if we could thematize every motive, that is, if we ceased to be in a situation.” (PP, p, 460) To approach absolute knowledge requires that we possess every possible intuition of a thing at the same time. Such an act, however, is practically impossible. Furthermore, possessing an absolute knowledge requires that we isolate our contact with this particular, singular, moment of experience. Such isolation, however, cannot be approached.

Although our perceptual experience is perspective and contingent, we are always capable of correcting our thoughts. That is because we are always live in a “world horizon” through which we can always correct our perceptual errors. Merleau-Ponty says: “[t]he contingency of the world must not be understood as a deficiency in being, a break in the stuff of necessary being, a threat to rationality” (PP, p. 464). This contingency is in the world, which means it is an ontological contingency.

Our feeling of possessing a self evident truth of mathematical facts comes from their original roots in our actual perceptual experience. Such a concept of truth, however, is questionable since any such concept of truth is not the only possible one. Truth can be interpreted in different ways. For example, space, can be interpreted as Euclidian space or non-Euclidean space. This also applies to social truth. In this sense, self-evident truths can always be challenged.

Descartes’ understanding of essence and absolute knowledge misses the social and cultural context of human experience. His view was influenced by an understanding

of body as a passive machine that is incapable of constituting significances. As significances are related to the realm of mental or soul, essences and absolute knowledge are related to such a non-worldly realm. Such an explanation detaches significances from its human and historic concepts. Accordingly, Descartes dualism detaches the human being from the world. Such a dualism has not only detached significance from the world it also doubts the reality of the world. In the following I will explore Descartes' doubts of the reality of the world.

III. The reality of the world:

In his *Meditations* through his use of methodological doubt, Descartes came up with his first certain result that each of us is essentially a "thinking being". Such a being is a cognitive being with no reference to a body. Descartes considers that we can conceive of ourselves without a body but we cannot conceive of ourselves without mind. He also considers at that stage of his doubt, that our perception is related to such realm of being which is not necessarily in the world. At this point Descartes establishes a separation between what appears in our perception and the reality of such appearance.

Descartes considers such appearances are certain because they belong to the realm of thinking. The existence of those appearances of things that exist outside the realm of thinking, however, requires a proof. For example, I cannot be in doubt about seeing an ash-tray because I am thinking of one. Such an ash-tray, however, does not necessarily exist outside my head. (PP. p. 435) In this sense, perception does not possess any essential connection to the ontological existence of the world.

Descartes managed to prove the existence of the external world only after his first proof of the existence of God. His argument for the existence of the external world was through his discovery of the idea of a complete being which is God. In his fifth meditation, Descartes argues that God is not deceitful and accordingly all clear and distinct ideas that he perceives must be true including the reality of the world. The important point here is that Descartes' proof for the existence of the external world does not rely upon anything given in perceptual experience. In this sense, there is no essential relation between appearance and the thing appeared.

Merleau-Ponty's view on Cartesian doubt:

Merleau-Ponty considers that Descartes was mistaken when he tried to reach certainty about the world at the level of thinking. Our certainty of the world is derived from our act of doubting itself and not doubting thoughts. If I try to verify the reality of my doubt through doubting thoughts, like Descartes did, I will end in an infinite regress "for I shall need to call into question my thought about doubting, then the thought about that thought, and so on". (PP, p 464) Merleau-Ponty considers that our doubt of things and of ourselves are only "pseudo-nothingness" that is because doubt is always in the world. Merleau-Ponty says "I cannot extricate myself from being." (PP, p. 465) In this sense we are connected with being even when we doubt our being. This being is being-in-the-world. The mistake that Descartes made is that he did not consider his doubt as an action in the world but as just an act of pure mental thought. Descartes could have approached the certainty of his existence through the certainty of the act of doubt as an act in the world. (PP, p. 465)

In his proof of the external world, Descartes ignores any structural relation between the appearances (perception) of a thing and the thing itself which guarantees the real existence of the thing. If Descartes, as well as intellectualism in general, considers that perception is just a mental “constitution of what is seen”, such a constitution would not necessarily refer to the external thing. Merleau-Ponty says:

It would be contradictory to assert both that the world is constituted by me and that, out of this constitutive operation, I can grasp no more than the outline and the essential structures: I must see the existing world appear at the end of the constituting process, and not only the world as an idea, otherwise I shall have no more than an abstract construction, and not a concrete consciousness, of the world. (PP, p. 437)

In this sense, Descartes is required to explain why in each lived experience we have an understanding of the specific significance of things, such as of a specific color, a specific distance and a profile from where we stand. (PP, p. 436) Would not such specification and its attending structural relation with its surrounding be considered as an indication of the real existence of things outside our minds?

The structural relation between perception and the world:

As it presented in the previous chapters, Merleau-Ponty presented the structural relation between perception and things in the world. Merleau-Ponty says “Perception is precisely that kind of act in which there can be no question of setting the act itself apart from the end to which it is directed.” (PP, p. 435) Things in the world are always presented to us from a certain angle, and in a way that they respond to our sensory apparatus and accordingly entering our sensory fields. We always see the “ash-tray” from certain angles and if we walk round it we will see other sides that are hidden from us.

Merleau-Ponty says: “the very quality itself, in its specific texture, is the suggestion of a certain way of existing put to us, and responded to by us, in so far as we

have sensory fields.” (PP, p. 436) For example, the color of a red carpet would be perceived not as a pure quality of red but as accompanied with texture as wool-red. In this sense, it is not appropriate to “dissociate” the certainty of outside things from the certainty of their appearance in our perceptual experience.

In previous chapters, I have already shown that Merleau-Ponty does not consider perception as a mere cognitive act but rather as an actual activity of the body. The body with its motor intentionality projects itself in a specific way in order to grasp a bodily significance of a thing perceived. Such motor intention is our body’s way of sketching things and approaching their significance. Merleau-Ponty says:

In so far as I find things round about me, this cannot be because they are actually there, *ex hypothesi*, I can know nothing of this factual existence. The fact that I am capable of recognizing it is attributable to my actual contact with the thing, which awakens within me a primordial knowledge of all things, and to my finite and determinate perceptions being partial manifestations of a power of knowing which is coextensive with the world and unfolds it in its full extent and depth. (PP,p. 430)

Hence, the relation between the subject and object is not a cognitive relation such as thinking of something but rather a relation of being, or existence, in the sense that the motor intentions of our bodies replicate the thing itself and therefore “co-exist” with it.

Earlier in chapter four, I mentioned that the constituting structure of a thing and its identity is related to the openness of our sensation on each other. For example, visual significances imply other significances including tactile, vocal, and odor significances. These significances constitute the structure of a thing. The reality of things in the world relies upon how our perceptual phenomenon of a thing corresponds to such structures. For example the reality of wind is tested according to its correspondence to our tactile, visual, and other aspects of our perceptual structure of wind. Merleau-Ponty considers

such a structure as the norm according to which we can make a distinction between the real and the illusory.

The ontological implication of perception: The explanation of illusions and Hallucinations as acts in the world:

In the following, I will present the ontological thesis of perception. In Merleau-Ponty's view the real world is the phenomenal world, the world as we experience it. Since perception is our access to phenomena (experience), then Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception is an ontological thesis. In my view the ontological implications of perception are argued for in two of Merleau-Ponty's books: *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and The Invisible*. In the following I will present first his short argument from *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty says: "We SEE THINGS THEMSELVES, the world is what we see: formulae of this kind express a faith common to the natural man and the philosopher-the moment he opens his eyes." (VI, p.3) The real world is the world that we experience at this moment and this place. I experience a perceptual field that presents a world. I have no hesitation in believing that I am in a real trouble if my experience presents me with a dangerous situation; where I need to take action otherwise I will get hurt. This trust or faith, in perceptual field that presents things themselves, is not only accepted by ordinary persons, but also by philosophers.

In everyday living experience, a philosopher does not need to provide evidence for why he needs to trust the reality of the world. On the level of perceptual experience, the philosopher does not need to "distinguish between the assurance of seeing and the assurance of seeing the true, because they are one and the same thing." (VI 28) Hence, the belief that our "perception goes to things themselves" is supported by our every day

lived experience. With such a view, Merleau-Ponty sets his thesis of “the primacy of perception” which shows that our perceptual experience is our primordial openness to the world. One’s perceptual faith, however, can be challenged by an argument from “illusion” or “hallucination”.

1 The relation between “illusion” and “disillusions”:

Since Descartes’ doubt in the reality of the world is based on the deceptive and the illusory nature of perception, I will dedicate the rest of this section to present Merleau-Ponty’s argument for the interconnection between the experience of “illusion” and the experience of “disillusion” in a sense that each reveals the other and each one cannot be identified without the other. Merleau-Ponty says: “We know that there are errors only because we possess truth, in name of which we correct errors and recognize them as errors.” (PP, p.344) Hence, in one way, we know that what we see is mere illusion only when the disillusion is revealed. In another way, the recognition of truth is based on the awareness that there is a “break with the immediate”. (P. 346)

Both illusion and disillusion are necessarily ontologically connected. There is no discontinuity when one appearance takes over from the other appearance. Merleau-Ponty says: “When an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first.” (VI, p.40) When we mistake seeing a tree for a person and the tree reveals itself as a person, there is “a phenomenon of succession: an anthropomorphic tree in the process of manifesting itself as such.” (Dillon, p. 95) There is a “unitary phenomenon” between the two appearances that reveals itself in one moment in one mode and another moment in another mode.

Perception, whether it is true or false, has equal power to present the world “*as possibilities of the same world.*” They are the subject’s perspectiveness on the same “Being.” (VI, p. 41) Merleau-Ponty thinks our perception of things is always in the process of changing and this might let us describe it as probable or even as opinion. He thinks, however, that perception with such a character, even in the case when it is false, still presents or refers to the same world. When one perspective takes over from another in a way that the first disappears, this should not discourage us from thinking that these perspectives refer to the same reality. Also, we should not consider that these perspectives fail to verify the world. They, instead, should be considered as “progressive approximations” of the world. (VI, p.41)

Illusions are “lived” experiences. They reveal our relationship with our past and future. As it was explained earlier, perception is temporal in a sense that it is a continuous field of the past, present and future experiences. Illusions occur as a result of being open to our past experiences and also to our interpretation of future experiences. Merleau-Ponty says: “It is this opening upon a world which makes possible perceptual truth... enabling us to ‘cross out’ the previous illusion and regard it as null and void.” (PP, p. 347) With the same openness to the world, we are also capable of correcting these interpretations.

In the process of perceiving, it is necessary to situate ourselves in the precise distance where we can clearly perceive things. Sometimes we are not capable of situating ourselves at such a precise distance where all our senses have their full capability to grasp a clear perception of the thing. When we have a poorly perceived stimulus, our perceptual ability to provide our own interpretation due to its connection to the past and to the

future, we tend to “overspecify” what is given in experience and fall into error. (Mallin 79, p. 211)

The explanation of Hallucinations:

Merleau-Ponty thinks that patients with hallucinations can make a distinction between their hallucinating experience and their perceptual experience. For example, patients who suffer hallucinations of “electric current” can make a distinction between these hallucinations and electrical shocks given by the doctor (PP, p.389). Furthermore, a patient who hallucinates about hearing voices and seeing an angel when she turns her head, makes a distinction between these voices and real voices such as her doctor’s voice. The patient does not count the doctor’s voices as among these voices that she hears in her head. (PP, p. 390) In general, patients usually describe their experience of auditory hallucinations as if they come from a telephone or a radio. This indicates that these voices are artificial in comparison with real voices. Patients are capable of making a distinction between the two kinds of voices (PP, p. 390).

The failure of the empirical and intellectual explanation of Hallucination:

Empiricism explains hallucination as the causal effect of the world on the sensory apparatus and the production of stimuli that travel to the centre of the nervous system to finally produce a state of consciousness. “For empiricism, hallucination is an event in the chain of events running from stimulus to the state of consciousness.” (PP, p. 391) Such an explanation does not show the distinction between hallucinations and perception, for they both are explained as a result of causal effect of the world on our sense-apparatus.

Intellectualism explains hallucinations as a matter of making a false “judgement” or “belief” or “interpretation” about what is experienced. Such a view is challenged by Merleau-Ponty because, as it mentioned earlier, although patients believe that they see and hear, they can clearly make a distinction between their hallucinations and other perception. For example, if they were asked about their beliefs in their visual hallucination they would answer that “they believe they see what they do not really see” (PP, p.390)

Both empiricism and intellectualism base their views on the primacy of objective thinking in the sense that they consider the phenomenon of hallucination as “objective being”. According to empiricism, they explain hallucination according to a causal relation starting from “stimulus” to a “state of consciousness”. According to intellectualism, the mind constitutes it. (PP, p. 391) Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that both empiricism’s and intellectualism’s explanations “construct the hallucinatory phenomenon instead of living it.” (PP, p.392) With their explanations they both ignore the “concrete” situation in which hallucination occurs.

Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of hallucination:

To understand hallucination, Merleau-Ponty thinks that we need to compare our perceptual experience with the patient’s hallucinatory experience. (PP, p. 394) If we started by describing our experience we find that our visual, auditory and tactile senses are in coordination with each other. They confirm each other and constitute a whole. Any change in movement would affect such total structure and present new experiences that correspond to his expectations.

This is, however, not the case with the patients who have hallucinated experiences. The patient does not coordinate between the visual, tactile, and auditory parts of the hallucination experience itself. Usually there is confusion between the roles of sensory apparatus and stimuli that are produced. For example, the patient would hear with his mouth. Furthermore, there is no change in the perceptual experience according to changes in space. In general, hallucination does not seem to be open to the world the way perception is. Although hallucinations present their own structured world in a way that is different from the perceived world, they also can “superimpose” on the perceived world.

There is a distinction between the “real thing” and the “hallucinatory thing.” The real thing is always supported by continuous perceptions. Unlike the “hallucinatory thing,” the real thing seems to exist by itself and behaves in its own way. A patient would know what the hallucinatory person says before opening his mouth. He says: “The person who speaks to me in my dream has no sooner opened his mouth before his thought is conveyed miraculously to me.” (PP, p.396)

According to the previous description of both hallucinations and perceptions, Merleau-Ponty considers both experiences to be different phenomena. His explanation is related to the phenomenal body. As it explained earlier, the phenomenal body during its living in the world possesses certain significances and abilities to act in its correspondence to certain situations. Those abilities are sedimented. In the case of normal perception, those sedimented significances are motivated by external stimuli. In the case of hallucination, however, such significances are triggered by their sickness condition.

Merleau-Ponty says:

There are hallucinations because through the phenomenal body we are in constant relationship with an environment into which that body is projected, and because, when divorced from its actual environment,

the body remains able to summon up, by means of its own settings, the pseudo-presence of that environment. (PP, p. 396)

Objects of hallucination are not organized according to time and expectations in the same ways as object of perception because they are only sedimented meanings that are triggered by the patient's disorder.

Up to this point I have presented some of the Cartesian prejudices based on his objective understanding of the body and Merleau-Ponty's responses. In this section I mentioned that the Cartesian doubt in the reality of the world was one of the implications of the Cartesian dualism. This dualism detaches our being as a thinking being from the world and treats the body as an object like any object in the world without a subjective character. This view leads to Cartesian doubt in the reality of the world.

Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that the reality of the world is preserved by the body's capability to constitute motor significance. Also, the reality of the world is preserved by our body's structural relation to the world as the world is the pole for our motor intentions. The reality of things is tested according to the correspondence of those things to the phenomenal significances that are constituted by our body.

The reality of the world as lived is supported by our perceptual faith. Such a perceptual faith, however, could be challenged by two arguments: the argument of "illusion" and the argument of "hallucination". Illusions are "lived" and sedimented experiences. They occur as a result of being open to our past experiences. Like any other bodily significance, "hallucinations" are bodily sediment significances that are constituted in the world and are not triggered by external stimuli, as in normal perception, but which are triggered by the patient's physical disorder. In this sense, both the reality of the world and our perceptual faith in it is preserved. In the following section, I intend to

present the last of the implications of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the prejudice of the body. This implication is the clarity and distinctness of perception.

IV. On the clarity and the distinctness of perceptual experience:

Cartesian view on the clarity and distinctness:

As Descartes did not apply any subjective character to the body, he considers that perception, especially sensation, is related to thinking. He says: "what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense it is simply thinking." (Descartes vol.1, p.19) In his view, perception is a form of thinking. If this is the case, Descartes considers our perception should be characterized by clarity and distinctness. He considers that when we perceive we have no doubt or error regarding what we perceive. The error and deception occurs when we try to judge what we perceive as something existing outside in the world.

Descartes' view that perception is a form of thinking influences the representation of objective thinking by both empiricism and intellectualism. On one hand, empiricism considers perception to be an experience of clear and distinct "private states of consciousness". On the other hand, intellectualism considers perception to possess a clear and distinct thought that belongs to a realm of "transcendental immanence." (PP, p. 439)

Merleau-Ponty's view:

Merleau-Ponty, in contrast with Descartes, does not consider perception as a manner of thinking. We do not represent ideas or significances in every day perception, but possess them as sedimented bodily significances. Merleau-Ponty says: "my body, in

a familiar surrounding, finds its orientation and makes its way among objects, without my needing to have them expressly in mind.” (PP, p. 429) In earlier chapters I have shown that our bodies find their orientation in the world through their structural relation to the world. This relation involves the concept of situation, synergetic body, and the sedimented motor intentionality of the body. Such an understanding of perception contrasts with the understanding of the process of perception as a representation of determinate ideas.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that our perception is not thinking. He thinks that the process of perceiving is neither representing passively some of the “psychic event” nor setting off a constituting power that constitute all possible sensation or thinking. In the process of perception we perceive things as motor significance for our bodies. If perception is not a type of thinking, it implies that it is not necessary to apply some of the cognitive characteristics such as clarity and distinctness to perception.

It might be argued that perception is not clear and distinct with respect to objects, whereas perception is clear and distinct when it is related to will and emotion. In such cases consciousness is self-transparent and in a “full possession of itself”. For example when we feel love or sadness we are conscious of those feelings. To be conscious of something means to know such a thing. This means to feel something is to know it. (PP, p. 439) On the opposite side, false feeling means to “misinterpret” or to make an error of judgement.

Here Merleau-Ponty wants to make it clear that illusory emotions are not “misinterpretations” or false judgements. For example in case of false or illusory love, like real love, we are attached to the other. These feelings become the focus of our life.

When we express our feelings about them, there is no misinterpretation or misjudgement because our whole life is truly committed to a kind of living that includes or evolves around that person. This means that we experience the feeling of love. If this is the case, how do we distinguish this “illusory love” from the real, true love? According to my understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s view of perceptual significance, those feeling are sediment significances that were constituted in the past and which related to another person. The significance is “the likeness of the ‘loved’ women to another, or boredom, or force of habit, or a community of interests or of convictions.”(PP, p. 440) The point of the distinction between “illusory love” and “true love” is that in the first case, the person becomes a pole of attraction for already constituted significances. In the second case, however, the significance of love is constituted from being attracted to a certain “manner of being” which explains the genuine feeling toward that person. In the first case our attraction is an attraction to a sediment “quality” whereas in the second case is an attraction to “the individual manner of being.” (PP, p. 440)

Merleau-Ponty considers that the person in his experience of illusory love is capable of distinguishing it from true love. This is similar to cases of “hallucinations” described earlier, where the patient is able to make a distinction between his hallucinations and her/his real perceptions. Yet, this love would not come without any significance because there are certain feelings that are meaningful and significant during such experience. Merleau-Ponty says:

It cannot be said that this love, while it lasted, was indistinguishable from true love, and that it became ‘mistaken love’ when I repudiated it. Nor can it be said that a mystical crisis at fifteen is without significance, and that it becomes, when independently evaluated in later life, an incident of puberty or the first signs of a religious vocation.” (PP, p. 441)

In this sense, neither true love nor illusory love to be explained as mental processes.

In case of true love, we do not project or represent an idea of love but live it in an ambiguous manner. Although we noticed a few facts such as looking forward to seeing that person, the heavy beating of the heart and being speechless when we meet him/her, it is not clear to our mind that all those acts are related to one situation, that of being in love. Merleau-Ponty says: "I am aware that my thoughts and actions were polarized, I pick out the course of a process of organization, a synthesis in the making. Yet it is impossible to pretend that I always knew what I now know." (PP, p. 443) When I reflect on those facts, on all those feelings, I discover that it is clear and distinct to me that I am in a state of love. In this sense, being in love is essentially not a matter of knowing or making a judgement. Being in love is to live the feeling in an ambiguous sense.

Neither can we say that true love is related to the unconscious which we now became conscious of but rather it is lived as bodily significance. Merleau-Ponty says:

The love which worked out its dialectic through me and of which I have just become aware, was not, from the start, a thing hidden in my unconscious, nor was it an object before my consciousness, but the impulse carrying me towards someone, the transmutation of my thoughts and behavior. (PP, p. 443) Love is lived as motor intentions and not known. Love is not a representation of a determinate of quality but a bodily significance. Love is one manner of bodily being in the world.

Conclusion:

The aim of this chapter was to present Descartes' preconception of the understanding of the body and its philosophical implication. A further aim of this chapter was to present Merleau-Ponty's views concerning these preconceptions. In the first section, I presented the distinction between the Cartesian *cogito* and Merleau-Ponty's

tacit *cogito*. Unlike the Cartesian *cogito* which is related to the mental realm, the tacit *cogito* is historic and related to the world. The tacit *cogito* is a structure of motor significances or gestures which correspond to a situation in the world. The bodily significance is constituted by the body's movements toward the world.

In section two of this chapter, I presented the first implication of the Cartesian understanding of the body which is the understanding of essence and absolute knowledge. In this section I presented Descartes' understanding of the essence and absolute knowledge which misses the social and cultural context of human experience. His view was influenced by his understanding of body as a passive machine that is incapable of constituting significances. As significances are related to the realm of the mental or the soul, so essences and absolute knowledge are related to the mental. Such an explanation, however, detaches significances from its human and historic concepts. Accordingly, Descartes dualism detaches the human being from its world.

In section three I presented a description of Cartesian doubt in the reality of world. Such doubt is one of the implications of the Cartesian dualism. This dualism detaches our being as a thinking being from the world and the body was treated as an object like any object in the world with no subjective character. As the Cartesian certainty in a world was saved by an eternal being, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the doubt in the world is not acceptable.

Merleau-Ponty considers that the reality of the world is preserved by our existence as phenomenal bodies and by our structural relation with the world as the world is the field for our motor intentions. The relation between our intentional body and objects in the world is not a cognitive relation but rather a relation of existence or, in

other words, a relation of a “co-existence”. The reality of things is tested according to its correspondence to the phenomenal structures that are constituted by our body. The reality of world as lived is supported by our perceptual faith. Such perceptual faith, however, could be challenged by two arguments: the argument of “illusion” and the argument of “hallucination”.

With regard to challenge of “illusion”, Merleau-Ponty claims that both illusion and disillusion are necessarily and ontologically connected. He thinks that the two appearances are united in a “unitary phenomenon” which reveals itself at one moment in one mode and at another moment in another mode. Illusions are “lived” and sedimented experiences. They occur as a result of being open to our past experiences.

With regard to the challenge of “hallucinations”, Merleau-Ponty claims that on the level of experience, a patient is capable of making a distinction between his/her experience of “hallucinations” and normal perception. Like any other bodily significance, “hallucinations” are bodily sedimented significances that are constituted in the world. In the normal perceptual case, these sedimented significances are motivated by external stimuli. In the case of hallucination, however, such significances are triggered by the patient’s sickness condition.

Finally, I presented the Cartesian view of the clarity and distinctness of perceptions. Such a view was based on considering perception as a form of thinking. But since perception is a bodily motor significance that is recognized by the body and not the mind, clarity and distinctness as character of thinking might not necessary apply. According to Descartes’ understanding of perception, illusion can be explained as false judgement. Merleau-Ponty, however, considers that illusory emotion is not a false

judgement because false judgement implies not having a feeling. In case of “illusory emotion”, however, there is a true significance that is experienced by the person during an illusory emotion. The distinction between “illusory love” and “true love” is that in first case, the person becomes a pole of attraction for already constituted significances whereas in the second case, the significances of love are constituted for that person as genuine “manner of being.”

In our experience of true love, we do not project or represent an idea of love but we live it in an ambiguous manner. Sometimes, although we noticed a few facts and changes in ourselves during the time of experience, such as looking forward to seeing that person and the heavy beating of the heart, it is not necessary that we clearly notice that all those acts are related to the situation of being in love. Those feelings, however, can be discovered in the process of reflection. Hence, our perceptual experience in general cannot be described as a clear and distinct. Neither can we say that such an experience is unconscious, which we become conscious of, because such experience is a bodily motor significance.

Chapter Six: Science and human experience:

Introduction:

Merleau-Ponty's views on the body and its relation to the world have attracted some recent cognitive studies. The aim of this chapter is to present some of the contemporary scientific and phenomenological views that support Merleau-Ponty's argument against an objective understanding of human experience. These supporting views are enactive approaches to perception. They include work by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch and others. Walter Freeman and Hubert Dreyfus also express views that support Merleau-Ponty's non-objective model of human experience.

In section one I identify for the reader the representational approach and the enactive approach. I also present the point of conflict between the representational account and the enactive account of experience. In section two of this chapter I present three arguments that support the enactive approach against the representational account. The first argument shows that the scientific explanation of color does not apply to the phenomenal experience of color. The second argument is that physiological model defies the representational approach. The third argument is an observation on "Mr. P" case. In section three I present two concepts of the enactive approach: "microworld" and "microidentity". I present some of their characteristics that are similar to Merleau-Ponty's concepts of "situation" and "motor intentionality". In section four I present an enactive explanation of the emergence of appropriate acts. In this section I present Dreyfus's argument against Searle's concept of "intentionality in action".

I. Point of conflict: the world represented or enacted?

The enactment approach describes the position of a group of scholars and scientists who hold that the mind does not essentially represent information of the world but rather “enacts” the world. The enactive approach is a branch of a fairly new science, which was constituted almost half a century ago, and which called “cognitive science”. Cognitive science combines studies such as psychology, neurology, linguistics, and computer science. The main aim of this science is to “make explicit the principles and mechanisms of cognition, including their organic basis and evolution in animal life.”

(Varela and Thompson footnotes, p. 1)

Cognitive science does not only include the enactment approach, as a branch of its studies, but also includes computational and representational approaches. The latter approach emerges earlier than the enactive approach in cognitive science. The representational approach is also called cognitivism. (Varela *et al*, p. 7) In this approach the mind is viewed as an information processing device which represents information coming from the outside world. The mind, therefore, is viewed as “an input-output device that processes information” according to, logic-like, rules. (Varela, p. 151)

In case of explaining visual perception, the representational account explains perception as constituted by a set of “snapshot representations” happening between blinks. The mind (the brain) takes these snapshots as inputs and constitutes a united image of the external world. It should be noticed here that the inputs that constitute perceptions under this view are only external inputs. Furthermore, the representational account does not take into account action in the process of perception. For example, the movement of any part of the body such as the head or the eye during the fixation of the

thing perceived is not counted as a part of process of perceiving. Therefore, the representational account does not consider any “intrinsic connection” between perception and action. (Thompson & Varela⁹⁰, p. 8)

Over the last three decades and with the growth and development of computers, some views strongly support the analogy between mind and computer. They hold that mind can be modeled after computers⁹¹ especially when they are both understood to share concepts including representation and computation. Similar to the mind, computation in computers is the result of the manipulation of symbols by “algorithms-mechanical procedures”⁹² and “logic-like” rules (Varela 1999, p. 7) According to such an analogy, the representational view finds its support in computer models and considers such models as a true representation of the function of brain. The brain is viewed as constituted of physical symbols that represent the outside world and, under this view, these symbols are manipulated by the brain through the application of its rules.

The “enactive” approach, however, differs from the representational approach on the explanation of human experience described above. The enactive approach rejects the understanding of experience as essentially representational. Varela and his colleagues think that the representational view of perception is not based on any biological or ecological explanations. Supporters of the enactive approach think that the representational view expresses a fascination with computers as intelligent objects.

⁹⁰ From the unpublished book, *Why Mind Isn't in the Head*, written by Evan Thompson and Francisco Varela. The year of this text is not available.

⁹¹ There is a wide range of disagreement with regards to the nature of those representations. (Thagard 96, p. 10)

⁹² Paul Thagard, *Mind: Introduction to Cognitive Science*, p. 11.

Varela *et al.* describe two senses of representation: One is weak and practical and the other is strong and deceptive. The weak sense of representation is pragmatic and “construal.” This sense is like saying I have an image in my mind and this image represents for example my brother, without explaining the constitution of human experience as representational. The strong sense of representation is when we start to explain how perception and mind must work on such a weak sense of representation. It implies that our way of living in the world is to represent or to “map” perceptual properties such as color, sound, length, etc. (Varela *et al.*, 1991, p. 135)

This main point of contrast between the enactive and the representational approaches parallels the contrast between Merleau-Ponty and the objective views of perception with regard to the constitution of perceptual meaning. Such a similarity should be of no surprise especially as Varela and his colleague were aware of Merleau-Ponty’s writing and his approach. Hence, we might say here that the conflict between the enactive approach and the representational approach is a continuation of the conflict between Merleau-Ponty and the objective understanding of perception.

This continuation of conflict explains the importance of describing the conflict between the enactive and the representational approach at this stage of my thesis. I will also examine the similarity between Varela *et al.*, and Merleau-Ponty’s views, especially with regard the understanding of perception and its relation to action.

II. The enactive approach:

The advocates of the enactive approach argues that the point of departure for the representational account is that the world possesses certain defined properties such as

color, sound, length, motion. Perception means to recover these properties of the world. The advocates of the enactive approach also argue that the concept of representation does not only apply to realism, it also applies to idealism which means “to project what is inner.” (Varela *et al.* 1991, p. 172) Both realism and intellectualism explain the role of perception as recovering pieces of information “by internally representing them”. (Varela *et al.* 1991, p. 9)

1. The perception of color:

Varela *et al.* think that there is “no one-to-one relationship” between the wavelength of light reflected from a certain surface and the perceptually produced color. For example, green surfaces reflect a “high percentage of middle wave light” when the surface is monitored without being adjacent to any other coloured surface. This result, however, is achieved only under restricted laboratory conditions. In normal conditions such as a living environment, where surfaces are adjacent to each other, the green surface “reflects more long-wave and short wave light than middle-wave light.” (Varela *et al.*, p. 160) The above example shows that “we cannot account for our experience of color as an attribute of things in the world by appealing simply to the intensity and wavelength composition of the light reflected from an area.” (Varela *et al.*, p. 161)

The interesting point here is that despite the difference between the wave length in the above two cases, the perceiver would still identify the color green in both cases even when there are differences in shades. This means that the perception of color is constituted by the perceiver. In other words, perception is phenomenal and not a quality that is given by the world and recovered by the perceiver. This example expresses the color constancy phenomenon described earlier in Merleau-Ponty’s views on perception.

2. Walter Freeman physiological explanation of lived experience:

Varela and his colleagues think that Walter Freeman presents a cognitive model that represents the enactive approach. Freeman presents an experiment that explains a rabbit's experience of odors⁹³. In this experiment, a device is inserted in a rabbit's brain's olfactory area which monitors the activity of brain cells in that area. After the rabbit is exposed to the same odors several times, a certain temporal "pattern" of global "self organized" of neural activity started to appear. This "emerging patterns seem to be created out of a background of incoherent or chaotic activity into a coherent attractor." The state of coherent attractor is the state of the cortex being settled into a "global electrical pattern." The pattern of neural activity lasts during the "sniffing" process and afterwards the state of cortex goes back to a chaotic state again. In Freeman's view, the chaotic state of the brain gives the brain the ability "to respond flexibly to the outside world and to generate novel [new] activity patterns." (Freeman 1991, p. 1)

Freeman thinks that although such organized neural activity is "triggered" by stimuli, this activity is neither the outcome of "information processing" nor the "representations of stimuli". Instead, this activity is a "manifestation" in a sense that the brain "formulate[s] expectation". After several exposures to a certain odour stimulus, the brain started to formulate a new pattern of neural activity.

The brain here "selectively" joins a group of neurons together to constitute a form or pattern of neural activity. (Varela 1999, p. 50) The brain "participates in assigning meaning to stimuli." (Freeman 1991, p. 5) Freeman says: "The patterns show that brains

⁹³ The details of the experiment are published in *Mass Action in the Nervous System*, Academic Press, 1975

do not take information into themselves. They formulate expectations”. (Freeman 2001, p. 1) In my view, those expectations are the bodily significance of the perception of smell. In this way, perception is not to “form representations of stimuli” but a constituted pattern of neural activity that become significant for the perceiver’s body.

Varela and his colleagues think that Freeman’s model supports the enactive approach and not a representational approach. Varela says: “[t]he smell appears in this light not as a mapping of external features, but rather as a creative form of enacting significance on the basis of the animal’s embodiment history.” (Varela 1999, p. 50) Such a model does not show the brain as representing the perceptual significance caused by stimuli from outside world. The brain does not “process” outside information to produce “outputs”. Rather, “the architecture of the brain supports a different kind of operation: signals move “back and forth,” gradually becoming more coherent until a “microworld” has been constituted.” (Varela 1999, p. 49)

3. The neural function in (LGN)⁹⁴ area of brain:

During the sixties and seventies, neuroscientists looked at a brain as an information-processing device. In this view the brain receives information from the outside world through certain sense apparatus then it translates such information and produces the appropriate act. Latter studies, however, show that the neuronal system acts according to such analogy only in certain conditions such as being under anesthesia or being exposed to very simplified inputs.

⁹⁴ Lateral geniculate nucleus.

In case of normal every day living experience, however, the neural acts “become highly context sensitive”. (Varela *et al.* p. 93) This context sensitivity implies the influence of neural activity far from the receptive area. For example, in case of visual perception, stimulations usually enter the eye and transfer through the optic nerve to an area in the brain called the “lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN).” (Varela *et al.* p. 94) Afterwards, such information transfers from the “LGN” to the visual cortex. According to the information processing view, 100% of the information that enters “LGN” is information which comes from the retina, the outside world.

However, in fact only 20% of the information that enter the “LGN” comes from the retina. The rest of the 80% of information comes from other areas in the brain.

Studies also show that the areas of the brain are connected reciprocally. Varela says:

Consider, for instance, the mammalian visual system. Consider, further, the well-known flow of impulses from the retina to the so-called first “relay” station in the visual system, the dorsal thalamus (call this the region A), and then on from the thalamus to the primary visual cortex (call this B) and then on to other cortical regions. There are, in accordance with the Law of Reciprocity, connections from B back to A, from the cortex back to the thalamus, **and they are even more numerous than those from the thalamus to the cortex**⁹⁵. This bidirectional thalamus-cortical neural traffic is not a mere anatomical nicety: the visual performance of an animal depends on the integrity of this feedback loop. (Varela 1999, p. 47)

Such an example shows that the brain, in case of perception, is not a passive receiver for stimuli from the outside world. The brain here is not like a computer that processes “inputs” to produce “outputs”. (Varela 1999, p. 48) The brain, through the feed back that goes from the cortex back to the thalamus proves that the brain participates in constituting visual perception including colors by contributing its own information and selections.

⁹⁵ My emphasis.

According to the enactive approach, our visual perception of the world is somehow influenced by the information contributed by our brain to our sensory input. These physiological observations imply that the manner in which visual qualities are related to neural networks has some degree of independency and that their interconnectedness helps to produce sensory significance. (Maturana and Varela 1987, p.162) According to this view, contextual and reciprocal neural networks understand a perceptual quality such as color is not in isolation from other perceptual visual qualities such shape, size, texture, etc. The interrelation between networks explains how “color perception partakes of both visual and sensory modalities”. (Varela *et al*, p. 164)

4. “Mr. I” and the experience of color:

Varela and his colleagues present the case of “Mr. I” which provides an example of interrelational participation. “Mr. I” is an artist who became color-blind after being involved in an accident. He sees things only in black or white. Losing the perception of color influences his total perceptual experience. For example, rather than color he sees things as, “distasteful”, “stained”, “unnatural”, “dirty”, “impure”. Losing the sensation of color affects his taste of food and music. His general behavior has changed. He became a person that prefers night time more than day time. At the beginning of his colorless experience, he missed the sensation of color. Later in time he stopped missing this experience. The “Mr. I” case proves wrong the view that sensory qualities are originally located in the world “independent of our perceptual capacities”. That is because sense qualities are constituted from variable inputs that are contributed by different neural networks. (Varela *et al*. 1991, p. 165)

The objectivist and the representational account might still object that despite such interconnection structure of our neural nervous system, such a system can recover some constant quality of objects such as the “surface reflectance of an object”. (Varela *et al.* 1991, p. 165) Such a quality controls the kind of wave length reflected by a surface. This quality is both “physical” and “constant”. It might be claimed also that “not only the function of color vision is the recovery of surface reflectance but also that color itself is just the property of surface reflectance.” (Varela *et al.* 1991, p. 165)

Varela *et al.*, however, think that the experience of color shows that colors have certain characteristics that cannot correspond to surface reflectance. The first point of their approach is to present the “structure of color” as we experience it. Based on perceptual experience, all colors can be reduced to six basic colors; red, green, yellow, blue, black, and white. Other colors such as orange or turquoise are not basic colors but combined colors. For example orange is a combination of the two basic colors red and yellow.

Colors possess three characters of hue, saturation, and brightness. Hue describes the color itself such as red, yellow, orange. There are basic hues and combined or binary hues as was described earlier. Also, there are “opponent colors” which if they combine would not produce binary colors. For example red and green, blue and yellow, are binary hues. Color also can be characterized according to its “saturation” which is the strength of color. “Brightness” is the third characteristic of color. It specifies the color according to brightness or darkness of color.

Let us now examine those characteristics of color with the representational view. This view claims that our color experience represents characters of the “surface

reflectance”. According to the representational claim, “we should be able to match these features of color with corresponding features of surface reflectance.” (Varela *et al* 1991, p. 166) This is, however, not the case. Surface reflectance can only be characterized according to short, middle, or, long waves and not be characterized according to “basic” or “binary”. Also, we cannot find these latter characters of “saturation” or “brightness” in the reflected light. Accordingly, the character of experienced colors cannot be reduced to any “nonexperiential, physical counterparts.” (Varela *et al* 1991, p. 166)

Varela and his colleagues here support the primacy of perceptual phenomenon. They show that the above characteristics of colors are originally phenomenal characteristics that cannot be reduced to physical characteristics such as wave length, and cannot be explained without referring to a subject. This recalls Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception described earlier in chapter one. In the following I will expand more on the phenomenological and existential aspects of the enactive approach.

III. “Microworld” and “Microidentity”

Although the goal of the advocators of the enactive approach is to provide a scientific model of human experience, as it explained earlier, they insist on preserving the phenomenological and the existential approach to their explanation. In this section, I intend to explore such approach through Varela and his colleagues’ concepts of “microworld” and “micro identity.” In my view, these two terms are similar to Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of “situation” and “motor intentionality.”

Earlier I explained that the representational account understands the function of perception as representing an objective property of the world. According to the enactive

approach, however, the function of perception is to show “how the perceiver can guide his actions in his local situation”. (Varela *et al*, p. 173) With such emphasis on understanding perception within every day lived environment, Varela presents the two concepts of “microworld” and “microidentity”. He defines “microworld” with the “lived situation.” Varela considers that the concept of “microworld” as phenomenal. He says: “We could engage at this point of a bit of phenomenology and identify some typical “microworlds” within which we move during a normal day.” (Varela 1999, p. 10) The definition of the concept of “microworld” recalls Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “situation”, Gestalt psychology’s concept of “behavioral environment” and Gibson’s concept “affordances”⁹⁶. The significance of the “microworld” is to guide the perceiver’s action. (Varela 1999, p. 12)

Varela thinks that for each “microworld” or “lived situation” there is a corresponding “microidentity” which is our “readiness-for- action”. He says “[w]e have a readiness-for-action to every specific lived situation. (Varela 1999, p. 9) In his view, the best way to identify such a “micro identity” or “readiness to act” is to watch ourselves handling things such as when we use a fork and knife to cut food, when we tighten our shoelaces, how we use a pen to write, etc. We “know how” to perform these tasks without a need to think of each step. As we live our day to day lives, we move from one “microidentity” to another.

Both “microworld” and “microidentity” are embedded in a physiological system that is constituted of “sensorimotor” structure. (Varela 1999, p. 13) This system contains

⁹⁶ Varela *et al* think that Gibson’s approach is “compatible” with their view on the role of perception. They say “In Gibson’s view, certain properties are found in the environment that are not found in the physical world *per se*. The most significant properties consist in what the environment affords for the animal.” (Varela *et al*, p. 203)

groups of sub-networks that are independent, and yet interconnected. (Maturana and Varela 1987, p.162) Varela says: “perception and action, are fundamentally inseparable in lived cognition, and not merely contingently linked as input/ output pairs.” (Varela 1999, p. 12) Here one might wonder how Varela understands this as a structural relation?

There are two sides to understanding such a structural relation. On one side, the structural relation is based on the understanding of the function of perception as a guide for the perceiver to the proper action, that is how to act successfully in its environment. On the other side, such perception can be constituted, clarified, and changed according to the perceiver’s motor acts. Here, the constitution of perception, the “microworld”, “is no longer a pre-given, perceiver-independent world.” (Varela 1999, p.13) In this sense, the structural relation implies a mutual dependency.

The structural relation between perception and action is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s structural relation which I presented in earlier chapters. Varela admits to Merleau-Ponty the contribution of explaining the structural relation between the living being and its environment. He says: “Merleau-Ponty clearly recognized, then, that we must see the organism and environment as bound together in reciprocal specification and selection.” (Varela 1992, p. 104) The point of understanding perception and action, is that the world is no longer independent from the perceiver and the organism is no longer a totally passive being. (Varela 1999, p. 13)

This structural relation between perception and action plays an important role in the organism’s life. This relation is responsible for an organism acting properly in its environment, without the need to represent the condition of the proper act ahead of time. I intend to hold my elaboration on this topic at this stage of the chapter and to explore it

later in section four when I present Dreyfus's argument against Searle's representational account of behavior. Here, however, I intend to explore the importance of the structural relation between perception and action.

The importance of the structural relation appears its role in the smooth transitional movement from one "microworld" to another and from one "microidentity" to another. But before explaining this role of the structural relation, I intend to explain this smooth transition. For example, for the past half an hour, I lived a consequence group of situations and acts, such as sitting on my chair, behind my desk, stretching my hand to grasp my book, using my fingers to open it, going back to the same bodily posture as before, stretching my hand, and starting to type. The transition from one situation, one "microidentity", to another usually happens very smoothly and without thinking. (Varela 1999, p. 9) The same applies to acts or "microidentities". Here one might ask "how are we to understand the moment of negotiation and emergence when one of the many potential microworlds takes the lead and constitutes a definite behavior?" (Varela 1999, p. 49)

Now, to explain the role of structural relation in the smooth transition between groups of microworlds or microidentities, I will use Freeman's model. Earlier it was explained that, in Freeman's model of the brain, the purpose of the general chaotic state of the brain activity is to generate new activity in response to new events in the environment, and to respond instantly with the right action.

At the moment of breakdown, the mind is in a chaotic state where different neural structures are competing to be dominant for the next moment of interpretation between a perception (microworld) and motor action (microidentity). He says:

In the breakdown before the next microworld shows up, there are a myriad of possibilities available until, out of the constraints of the situation and the recurrence of history, a single one is selected. This fast dynamic is the neural correlate of the autonomous constitution of a cognitive agent at a given present moment of its life.” (Varela 1999, p. 52)

According to restrictions found in some given sense data and its recurrence in history, a structure of neural activity is then chosen. This neural activity comes with a certain property of bodily significance. At this moment a certain “microworld” and its correlated “microidentity” dominate the moment of being.

Not only does the structural relation between perception and action play a role in the smooth transition between groups of “microworlds” or a “microidentity”, Varela also thinks that the “recurrent” character of these “microworlds” and their correlated “microidentities” play a role in the smooth transition. There was not enough elaboration on why Varela considers such “recurrence” character has a role. But my guess based on Merleau-Ponty’s views, is that the “recurrent” character of both phenomena there is explained by the bodily sedimentation that is recalled in the future.

These sedimentary characteristics can also be derived from Freeman’s enactive neural model described earlier in this chapter. As it explained earlier, the model describes the constitution of a pattern of neural activity (neural binding) out of the incoherent and chaotic background of neural activity. This pattern of activity is a “resonance binding”. (Varela *et al.*, p. 51) Varela believes that the constitution of a coherent neural activity is recognized later by the perceiver. (Varela 1999, p. 49) In the future, the interaction between environment and the perceiver recalls the same pattern of neural activity.

There are two cases, however, where the perceiver can feel the moment of “breakdown” between “microworlds”. The first case is when the perceiver faces unexpected experience such as a dangerous situation. Varela explains the moment of

“breakdown” between “microworlds” and “microidentity”, in the moment of an unexpected event. He says:

Picture yourself walking down the street, and perhaps going to meet somebody. It is the end of the day and there is nothing very special in your mind. You are in a relaxed mood, in what we may call the readiness of the walker who is simply strolling. You put your hand into your pocket and suddenly you don't find your wallet where it usually is. Breakdown: you stop, your mind setting is unclear, your emotional tonality shifts. Before you know it a new world emerges: you see clearly that you left your wallet in the store where you just bought cigarettes. Your mood shifts now to one of concern for losing documents and money, your readiness-to-action is now to quickly go back to the store. There is little attention to the surrounding trees and passersby; all attention is directed to avoiding further delays. (Varela 1992, p.101)

The moment of noticeable “breakdown” can also occur when we are in a new environment and we do not know how to act properly. An example of his case is when we visit a county with different culture. We find ourselves in a position of learning new ways of behavior such as how to greet others or how to use a certain tool. This kind of “breakdown” implies the historic and cultural character of both “microworld” and “microidentity”. Both are constituted during the life time of the body, in a certain environment.

In this section, I focused on exploring Varela's two phenomenal and existential concepts of “microworld” and “microidentity”. These two terms are similar in meaning to Merleau-Ponty's concept of “situation” and “motor intentionality.” The main point of similarity is the structural relation between perception and action. This structural relation can be understood as mutual dependency between the two concepts. As the function of perception is to guide the perceiver with the proper action to act successfully in its environment, such perception can be constituted, clarified, and changed according to the perceiver's motor acts. The importance of such a structural relation here shows its role in the smooth transition between a successive group of “microworlds” or “microidentities”. Not only does the structural relation between perception and action play a role in the

smooth transition between groups of “microworlds” or “microidentity”, the “recurrent” and “sediment” characteristics of these “microworlds” and “microidentity” also play a role in the smooth transition between them. The above two characteristics imply the historic and existential character of the “microworld” and “microidentity”. Furthermore during the above argument, I managed to show how both the “microworld” and the “microidentity” are embedded in a physiological system that constitutes of a “sensorimotor” structure. (Varela 1999, p. 13)

There is, however, one point that was left to be explored in the next section. This point shows that the structural relation between perception and action is responsible for the proper action of an organism in its environment. It eliminates the need to represent the condition of such proper action ahead of time, the way some representational views claim, for example John Searle’s. In the following section I intend to explore such this point.

IV. The proper action in an environment: An evaluation of John Searle’s representational account:

The important point of all that which was written in the previous section is that it can be taken as an introduction to the start of my argument in this section, that is the understanding of the reciprocal relation between perception and action. As the function of perception is to guide the perceiver with the proper action in its environment, the perceiver based on such feed back controls what it needs be perceive. The structural relation does not require that an agent thinks and represents in their mind, the conditions of a proper and successful behavior.

Some contemporary representational thinkers, such as John Searle, disagree with such a view. Searle considers that any action must be caused by “an intention in action” which is a representation in our mind or a “propositional representation of the action’s conditions of satisfaction.” (Dreyfus 2002, p. 2) In other words, during the performance of action, we must have, in our mind, consciously or subconsciously, the knowledge of what we are going to do. Searle calls it “intention in action,” which differs from the intentionality that expresses our attempt to start the act.

Searle considers that “subsidiary movements of an action must be governed by the relevant intention in action.” He says:

Intentionality reaches down to the bottom level of voluntary actions. Thus, for example, the skillful skier has his intentionality at the level of getting down the mountain. But each subsidiary movement is nonetheless an intentional movement. Each movement is governed by the Intentionality of the flow. (qtd. in Dreyfus 2002, p. 2)

Searle thinks that each “subsidiary” movement is governed by the general conditions of satisfaction or success. In the skier’s case, this general condition is to reach down the mountain.

Hubert Dreyfus, however, thinks that Searle’s view of explaining the intentionality of the “subsidiary movement” is problematic because it does not explain “how intentionality is supposed to be passed along, from an intention in action that represents only the conditions of satisfaction of the whole action, to every movement of the flow.” (Dreyfus 2002, p.3)

Dreyfus thinks that Merleau-Ponty presents a better understanding of the relation between organism and its environment than Searle. As it explained in earlier chapters, Merleau-Ponty thinks, when we face a situation that requires a response we face a state of disequilibrium. It is a state of “deviation” from a favourable relationship between our

bodies and the world. Such a deviation causes a certain “tension” between us and the lived situation. In this case the conditions of success are the movements that we make which brings us back into balance and enables us to achieve again a state of “equilibrium” between our bodies and the lived situation.

Dreyfus thinks that in Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of “motor intentionality,” the agent makes the “appropriate” movements without the need to represent the condition of success. “[O]ur body is not an object for an ‘I think’, it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium.” (qtd. in Dreyfus 1969, p.10) The situation solicits certain responses from the body and accordingly the body performs movement that “feels appropriate” without holding a state of mind that present any condition of “success”.

Dreyfus thinks it is possible to separate an “appropriate move” from a “successful” move. For example, in case of tennis player described earlier, sometimes the player feels that he made the right movement but for some other reason, such as the wind, the ball fails to land in the other’s player’s court. And sometimes, the player would feel that he made an “awkward” movement but for some reasons, again perhaps a gust of wind, the ball lands successfully in the other’s player’s court. Accordingly, Dreyfus thinks “Whatever makes the absorbed coping feel satisfactory, then, must be independent of success achieved.” (Dreyfus 2002, p. 3)

Dreyfus thinks that it is difficult to “specify success in advance”. My guess is that the reason for such a difficulty is because many aspects in the environment influence success for the achieving of one’s goals. One aspect may be the speed of the wind as was described earlier in the case of the tennis player. Also, action changes through time. So as

the action continues, each successful movement requires the specific conditions of success that are different than the initial condition of success and are based on the condition of the environment at any given moment. Dreyfus thinks that such conditions of satisfaction might be the “occasion” or the goal that starts the action. In his view, however, the player does not represent in his mind any condition of success, he just feels the “tension” of the field and his movement is solicited by some aspects that show in that field.

A good example of such solicitations is the “hot and cold” game. In this game one player guides the other to a “hidden” object through hints of the phrase “hot” which means getting near, or “cold” means getting far. (Dreyfus 2002, p.3) Each step the player makes is guided by the significance of these two situations. The player is led by those situated hints. He does not know in advance the conditions of success, he just responds to the “perceived condition of the situation” without knowing where each situation is leading.

Dreyfus thinks that Searle’s “intention in action” can be mere an “occasion” that starts motor intentionality without governing directly each subsidiary movement. There is, however, a “*sense of improvement*”, that a person feels during her/his body’s movement. (Dreyfus 2002, p. 3) Such a sense of improvement is expressed through the feeling of lowering the tension in the attended field. Just as in the case of the hot and cold game, although the searcher does not know where the clues are directing him to, he senses by the word “hot” that he is near reaching his goal. In that sense, there is no representation of conditions of satisfaction but rather a “sense of improvement”.

Dreyfus thinks that although Merleau-Ponty provided a detailed argument for the body's structural relation to the world he did not provide a physiological explanation that show how the living being, through its motor intentionality, acts successfully in its environment. He refers to such phenomenon as "magical." Earlier in this chapter I have presented Freeman's model to support the enactive approach. In the following I intend to present Freeman's model to explain the structural relation between the body and its environment.

Freeman's explanation of the body's structural relation to the world:

As it described earlier, Freeman's model has explained how perceptual significance can be constituted from the enactment of certain neural activities. Such a model can explain the process of learning in certain environments. When a living being faces a successful situation or a failure several times, its neural system constitutes a certain neural connection among itself and the given stimuli. When the living being experiences the same situation in the future, such neural activity is activated again.

Freeman's explanation is based on viewing the neural system as a "dynamic system" with a landscape of maximum and minimum points of energy. The maximum point represents the system at its highest state of tension, and the minimum point of energy represent the system at its lowest state of tension, called the "attractor". For each neural activity there is an "attractor" which tends to lower a tension in the animal system.

Dreyfus describes the law of the state of tension, using Merleau-Ponty's words, as the state of "optimal gestalt" or "maximum grip". To lower the tension in the neural system the body has to make movements that bring the animal's sense-motor system back to a state of equilibrium. (Dreyfus 2002, p.4)

In Freeman's model, the living being does not represent in his mind the state of equilibrium or how to be in a specific state of equilibrium. Instead, the organism feels the tension within the system and the tendency of such a system to move towards the state of control over the situation. The important point here is that Freeman's model shows that "the brain does not form conditioned responses to specific stimuli but, on the basis of experience, produces its own attractors that are evoked and modified on the basis of further experience." (Dreyfus 2003, p.5) This applies to the performance of skills.

For example, in case of an expert tennis player, the perception of the situation puts the sensory-motor system under a tension that requires a certain activity in the system, which, in this case, is the hand's movement in a certain way toward achieving less tension in the system. This movement lowers the tension in the system and brings the player in an equilibrium relation with the situation without any mental representation of direction which the player needs to move his hand. (Dreyfus 2002, p. 5) The role of stimuli here is to be manipulated and interpreted by the system and its history.

Although Merleau-Ponty thinks that the "intentional arc" is improved and developed through experience, he, however, did not explain how the development occurs. Hubert Dreyfus, however, presents the stages of development in skill acquisition in adults. Those stages are: 1. Beginner 2. Advanced beginner 3. Competence 4. Proficient 5. Expertise.

1. The beginners: In this stage the beginner follows the rules given by his instructor. The rule is based on noticing a "non-situational", "context-free" feature. (Dreyfus 96, p.3) For example in the early stage of learning how to drive, the beginner is directed to shift the gear to the second if the speed meter

reaches a certain limit. Beginners at this stage are slow performers because they need to remember which rule to apply each time they face a situation.

2. The advanced beginners: At this stage the student becomes more expert because he is capable of noticing features of the situation itself. These features are meaningful and situation dependent. For example the driver shifts gears when he hears a certain sound of his engine. This sound, however, cannot be described in words. (Ibid, p.4)
3. At this stage there are many situations with slight differences that require different rules of application. It is impossible to provide the learner with instruction on each situation. The learner has to try things out. In this level, the learner feels the pressure of making the right decision. (Ibid., p.5)
4. At this stage “The performer’s theory of the skill, as represented by rules and principles will gradually be replaced by situational discriminations accompanied by associated responses.” (Ibid., p. 6) The learner would be able to identify certain and important aspects of situation and the right response. The learner, however, needs consciously to take a decision on what to do. The trainer at this stage absorbs the situation and its probable response. For example, the driver at this stage would easily notice that the speed that he is driving, in a rainy day, might put him in danger. Then he has to make a decision on either to use the brakes or to reduce the speed in another manner. In both cases, the trainee is more relaxed in making his choices at this stage for he is more certain of what to expect.

5. Dreyfus says “The expert not only knows what needs to be achieved, based on mature and practiced situational discrimination, but also knows how to achieve the goal.” (Ibid., p. 7) The learner at this stage is capable not only to classify situations under some category but also, capable of classifying more “subclasses” that requires certain kind of technique. The expert driver knows to act in each specific situation. He does not need to know what to do. He just does it.

It is important to mention that Merleau-Ponty would agree with Searle that each action must have the condition of satisfaction or a goal that need to be achieved. We need to know ahead of time what would achieve a state of equilibrium or success. But this condition of satisfaction is mere an “occasion” that starts the motor intentionality. Recalling the previous example of the hot and cold game, although the searcher does not know where the clues are directing him to, at least the person who is giving the clues needs to know where these clues are leading the searcher. (Dreyfus 1998, p. 11)

Conclusion:

In this chapter I presented some of the contemporary scientific views that support the phenomenal and the existential approach of Merleau-Ponty rather than the objective understanding of human experience. I have shown that the conflict between the earlier views is paralled in the conflict between the enactive approach and the representational approach. The point of departure for the representational view is that perception means to recover a property of the world. The point of departure for the enactive approach,

however, is how the organism's action is guided in the world. Here the enactment approach is very close in meaning to Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body's motor intentionality and its dialectical and structural relation with the world.

In section two of this chapter I presented three arguments that support the enactive account as opposed to the representational account. The first argument shows that the objective and the scientific explanation of the perception of color do not apply to the phenomenal experience of color. Our experience is not an attribute of quality that exists in the world or wavelength that is reflected from the surface area. The second argument is based on Walter Freeman's physiological model of lived experience. The model shows that the brain "selectively" joins a group of neurons together to constitute a form or pattern of neural activity. (Varela 1999, p. 50) In this manner the brain selectively assigns meaning to stimuli. The third argument is based on the neural function in the LGN area of brain. The enactment view of visual perception shows that only 20% of the information that enter the "LGN" comes from the retina. The rest of the 80% of information comes from other areas in the brain. This example shows that the brain, in case of perception, is not a passive receiver for stimuli but rather a contributor. The fourth argument is an observation on the case of "Mr. I" which proves incorrect the view that sensory qualities are originally located in the world "independent" from our perceptual contribution. The case of "Mr. I" is also, support the primacy of perceptual phenomenon. It show that the characteristics of colors have originally a phenomenal character that cannot be reduced to physical characteristics such as wave length, and cannot be explained without being referred to a subject. This recalls Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception described in chapter one.

In section three, I focused on exploring Varela's two phenomenal and existential concepts of "microworld" and "microidentity" which are close in meaning to Merleau-Ponty's concept of "situation" and "motor intentionality." Varela presents a structural relation of mutual dependence between perception and action that is similar to Merleau-Ponty's. In addition to the structural relation between the two concepts of "microworld" and "microidentity", I explored some of their other characteristics such as their "recurrent" and "sedimentary" natures. These characteristics play a role in the smooth transition of modes and acts during a lived experience. The above two characteristics also imply the historic and existential character of the "microworld" and "microidentity". During presenting these characteristics, I also managed to show their physiological character through Freeman's model. In Varela's view, although both the "microworld" and the "microidentity" are existential and phenomenal, they are embedded in a physiological system that is constituted by a "sensorimotor" structure.

In the final section of this chapter I presented an enactive explanation of the appropriate action of a living being in its environment. In this section I presented Dreyfus's argument against Searle's concept of "intentionality in action". Searle thinks that each "subsidiary" movement is governed by the general conditions of satisfaction or success. Hubert Dreyfus, however, thinks that Searle's view is problematic because it does not explain how the general condition of the satisfaction can guide each sub-movement. Dreyfus thinks that it is difficult to "specify success in advance". As an action continues, each successful movement requires specific conditions of success that is different than what is required in the previous steps. Hence, Searle's condition of satisfaction might be the "occasion" or the goal that starts the action. but not the one that

governs the whole process. Dreyfus thinks that Merleau-Ponty presents a better explanation for the appropriate actions of a living being. Dreyfus also thinks that Freeman's model provides an appropriate scientific description of Merleau-Ponty's view.

Conclusion:

Maurice Merleau-Ponty thinks that many classical theories of perception are influenced by an objective and scientific way of thinking. They explain our perceptual experience in the same way objects are treated by science, as distinct entities that are influenced by causal relation. Human experience and especially perception constituted and reduced to distinct and isolated units composed according to certain rules. The meaning of these units is either determined by the world or by the mind.

These classical theories were laboured under the preconception of objective thinking in two ways. The first preconception is that perception is reduced to units such as “impressions”. The meaning of these units is considered to be a representation of the world. The second preconception is that perceptual meaning is caused by the world and the living being is passive in its relation to such constitution of meaning.

In my view, the result of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of these two preconceptions, and their relative development, give him his two main concepts: the phenomenal body and the perceptual meaning determined by the structural relation between the body and the world. Although there are some traces of these two preconceptions of perception in the introduction of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, there is no argument that shows how he approached these two results from the rejection of these two preconceptions. Hence, my thesis was dedicated to present Merleau-Ponty’s view of the phenomenal body, based on Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of the two preconceptions described above. In my view, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of these preconceptions can be

traced through his argument against Gestalt psychology, associationism, and behavioral associationism.

My thesis was divided into two parts. The first part contains the first four chapters which attempted to explain the two preconceptions through Merleau-Ponty's arguments against three schools of thought; Gestalt psychology, associationism, and behavioral associationism. Since the first part of my thesis was dedicated to provide an explanatory study on Merleau-Ponty's view on human experience, the same explanatory approach was carried through in the second part of my thesis. The first four chapters present the reader with schools that were contemporary to Merleau-Ponty's time, in chapter five I intended to extend the comparison to classical views such as those of Descartes. Also, since Merleau-Ponty's views are currently receiving a good deal attention from some of the contemporary views in cognitive science, I have in the final chapter of my thesis presented the reader with an account of the recent views that support Merleau-Ponty's understanding of experience.

The focus of chapter one was to explore the influence of Gestalt psychology on Merleau-Ponty's views. The first point of influence was that the phenomenal and the non-representational domain of experience were expressed through some of the gestaltist's concepts such as the concept of "gestalt" and the concept of "behavioral environment". The second point of influence was the active role of the organism in constituting experience. In my view, Gestalt psychology plays a role in Merleau-Ponty's argument against the two preconceptions of the objective understanding: the representational nature of experience and the passive role of the living being. Merleau-Ponty, however, disagrees with Gestalt psychology on its reduction of phenomenal experience to a physical event.

Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the Gestaltist's views of the nature of gestalt appears in two arguments. First, he argues against the reduction of both vital and human orders to physical order, due to the failure of such a reduction to preserve the normative and dialectic relation of the body to the world. Merleau-Ponty, also, argues against the individuality of physical structure. He argues against the idea that physical structure can exist in-itself without a perceiver. In his view, physical structures are objects of perception. In my view, his criticism of the nature of the gestalt as physical has set Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of the phenomenal experience. The result is important to my thesis for it defines the first character of perceptual gestalt.

In chapter two I presented two preconceptions of the objective understanding of perception. The first preconception is that perception is constituted from atomic units blindly associated with each other. The second preconception is considering that the meaning of such units is determined by the world itself. Merleau-Ponty directed his argument against associationism. Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the first prejudice is devoted to the rejection of the two concepts "association" and "memory". With regard to the concept of association, associationism failed to explain how "rules of association" function especially when atomic sensations are blindly associated with each other and also when there is no rule for the mind that is responsible for such association. The advocates of memory have failed to explain how a single and isolated sensation can activate a specific memory and not another. In order to recognize a group of sense data as similar to a certain memory, an inherent and immanent meaning must first be given by these sense data. In Merleau-Ponty's view a figure on a background is the simplest sensation that one can perceive.

The second preconception Merleau-Ponty rejects is related to the determinacy of objective quality. Advocates of this determinacy, however, suggest two concepts of “attention” and “judgement” as a way to save their views. They claimed that a sensation can be hidden by a judgement. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that it is not clear how attention identifies the hidden sensation. Merleau-Ponty also criticizes the concept of judgement suggested by associationism to explain optical illusions. In his view, there is no mistaken judgement but rather a change in the perceptual context.

The main result that can be carried on from Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of the two preconceptions in this chapter is the existence of a level of significance that escapes both the explanation of empiricism and intellectualism. Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is related to a level of significance that is richer than the empirical atomic significance because this new level of significance is already a gestalt. This level of significance, however, cannot be described as an intellectual gestalt because it is not rich enough to be intellectual. In the following chapter explored the level of significance that escapes both the empirical and the intellectual explanation.

In chapter three, I managed to identify the two preconceptions of objective thinking in two theories of behavior; reflex theory and Pavlov’s theory. The first preconception explains behavior as successive events of stimuli and action. It also explains the body as constituted of separate pre-established circuits that are specialized in certain acts. Reflex theory failed to defend the constancy between a stimulus and action. Pavlov’s theory attempted to overcome the weaknesses of reflex theory by giving stimuli the power to inhibit each other. Pavlov’s theory, however, failed to explain the qualitative modification of the body due to injuries or learning. Evidence shows that injuries produce

qualitative changes in perception, and learning results in a body's possession of aptitude or talent. Merleau-Ponty's criticism of this preconception shows the failure of both schools of behavior to explain the qualitative and general modification of the body which leads to a body's possession of an aptitude or talent.

The second preconception that I presented in chapter three was that the meaning of behavior is determined by the world, and accordingly the body is thought to be a passive receiver in constituting its behavior. Merleau-Ponty, however, thinks that the relation between a living being and its environment is "structural" and not causal. Merleau-Ponty, however, did not specify explicitly his understanding of this "structural relation". In my view this structural relation can be defined in three ways. First, the structural relation is defined through the body's movements to the constitution of a situation. Second, the structural relation is defined through the concept of "maximal grip" and which gives us an understanding of the nature of adaptiveness. Third, the structural relation is defined through a situation that has a value for an organism and which hence explains learning.

Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the two preconceptions of objective thinking lead to an understanding of behavior as constituted of a structure of situation and aptitude. In this structure behavior is a bodily acquisition of skills which responds to situations and which has a meaning for the organism. This concept of bodily skill leads us to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as motor intentionality which he elaborated on in his *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

The discussions of the two preconceptions in the first three chapters direct the reader to Merleau-Ponty's genuine contribution; the phenomenal body. The discussion in

chapter one has resulted in the primacy of the phenomenal experience. This result defies the gestaltist's understanding of bodily gestalt as a physical entity that functions according to laws of grouping. A physical understanding of the gestalt, however, can not include the intentional character of the body and its structural relation to the world. The failure of Gestalt psychology is related to its objective explanation of the body. In their view the body does not hold any phenomenal character or significance. In chapter two, the argument against both empiricism and intellectualism directed Merleau-Ponty to an understanding of significance that is richer than the empirical significance and poorer than an intellectual significance. The first significance is produced by an atomic bodily significance grouped according to laws. The second significance is intellectual and equal to a judgement. In chapter three, the argument against behavioral associationism has resulted in an understanding of the body's capability to reorganize its groups of muscles in order to act properly in its environment. These explanations show that the body is an active being in its relation to its world. Chapter three lead us to the understanding of the body's capability of possessing bodily significance. This significance is understood in relation to a situation that has a meaning for a living being. The bodily capability of "orienting itself in relation to the possible" constitutes Merleau-Ponty's concept of the phenomenal body. (SB, p. 176)

In chapter four I presented the main characteristic of the phenomenal body which is its motor intentionality. The movement of the body is not only a movement but also a significance. These movements are gestural movements. Merleau-Ponty presents some examples of perceptual bodily significances. The significances of depth, near, or far are constituted from the poor or maximum grip of the body's motor intentions on the object

perceived. The significance of motion is constituted when the body chooses a point to fix its gaze in the world. The significance of shape is a result of the “deviation” of my gaze or the intentional bodily during its exploring movement. Finally, the significance of a thing is perceived as a group or structure of motor intentions of the phenomenal body. Such a structure is constituted through a body image where all sensations are open to each other. The reality of a thing is approached when the thing meets the demand of such a structure.

In chapter five I presented Merleau-Ponty’s views of the phenomenal body and its structural relation to its environment, in relation to earlier philosophical views such as those of Descartes. In the first section, I have presented the distinction between the Cartesian *cogito* and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenal body as a tacit *cogito*. The main distinction between the Cartesian *cogito* and Merleau-Ponty’s *cogito* was that the former is detached from the world whereas the latter is historic and related to the world. The tacit *cogito* is constituted in relation to the body’s movements toward the world. Descartes understands the body as a passive machine and which is incapable of constituting significances.

In this chapter I have also discussed Merleau-Ponty’s view against Cartesian doubt of the reality of world. According to Merleau-Ponty, the reality of the world is preserved by our existence as phenomenal bodies and by the structural relation between our bodies and the world, as the world is the field for our motor intentions. The relation between our phenomenal body and the world is not a cognitive relation but rather a relation of a “co-existence”. The reality of things is tested according to its correspondence to the phenomenal structures that are constituted by the body.

Furthermore, I have presented Merleau-Ponty's argument against the Cartesian views of the clarity and distinctness of perception. Descartes understands perception as a form of thinking. Since Merleau-Ponty thinks that perception is a bodily and motor significance which is recognized by the body and not the by mind, clarity and distinctness as characteristics of thinking might not necessary apply to the body. In our experience of true love, we do not represent an idea of love but we live it in an ambiguous manner such as looking forward to seeing that person and the heavy beating of the heart. In that sense, our perceptual experience cannot be described as a clear and distinct.

In the final chapter of my thesis I presented some contemporary and scientific views that support Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal and the existential approach of experience. The conflict between Merleau-Ponty and the objective thinking about experience has extended to nowadays to conflict between the enactive approach and the representational approach. The main point of conflict is the understanding of perceptual experience itself. The representational approach sees perception as an attempt to recover the properties of the world, whereas the enactive approach understands perception as a guide for the organism's action. The enactive approach here is similar to Merleau-Ponty's concept of perception and the body's structural relation to the world.

In this chapter I presented four arguments that support the enactive account against the representational account. The first argument shows that the objective and the scientific explanation of the perception of color do not apply to the phenomenal experience of color. The second argument is based on Walter Freeman's physiological model of lived experience. The third argument is based on the neural function in the LGN area of brain. The fourth argument is an observation on the case of "Mr. I."

In this chapter I also presented Varela's two phenomenal and existential concepts of "microworld" and "microidentity" which are close in meaning to Merleau-Ponty's concept of "situation" and "motor intentionality." Varela presents a structural relation of a mutual dependency between perception and action that is similar to Merleau-Ponty. I presented some of their other characteristics such as their recurrence and sedimentation. These characteristics are responsible for the smooth transition between modes and acts during a lived experience. Although both "microworld" and "microidentity" are existential and phenomenal, they are embedded in a physiological system that is constituted of "sensorimotor" structure.

In this final chapter, I also presented the enactive explanation of the appropriate act. Thus I presented Dreyfus's argument against Searle's concept of "intentionality in action." Searle thinks that each "subsidiary" movement is governed by the general conditions of satisfaction or success, Hubert Dreyfus, however, thinks that such a view is problematic because it does not show how the general condition of satisfaction can guide each sub-movement. Dreyfus thinks that it is difficult to "specify success in advance". As action continues, each successful movement requires specific conditions of success that is different than what was required in the previous steps. Dreyfus thinks that Merleau-Ponty has provided a detailed argument for the appropriate act and its structural relation with its environment. Merleau-Ponty, however, did not provide a physiological explanation that show how the living being, through its motor intentionality, acts successfully in its environment. Dreyfus also thinks that Freeman's model provides the appropriate scientific supports for Merleau-Ponty's view.

It was clear from the final chapter that Merleau-Ponty' view is attracting the attention of contemporary thinkers in the field of cognitive science. The important lesson that can be learned from his philosophy of perception is that perception should be understood within the context of the aim of life, and in relation to our natural and social environment. Only then the understanding of perception will be freed from its objective preconceptions.

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