

## Merleau-Ponty and the Fourth Dogma of Empiricism

It has become a commonplace in philosophy (and in the theoretical humanities more generally) to assert the ultimate inaccessibility of material reality, to interpret the experienced limitations of the human intellect and epistemic capacity as evidence of our cognitive inadequacy to the world. This conviction takes myriad forms—historical, cognitive, social, linguistic—but can be fairly recognized (if not defined) by its metaphors: We are “trapped” by our senses, our historical moment, our race, “limited” by our conceptual schema, our language, our moral conscience. We cannot get “outside” of the web of concepts, “around” the veil of sense, “beyond” the horizon of language to see the world as it is. These metaphors give expression to the notion that our mind “inside” cannot grasp the reality “outside” because we are confined by personal, social, historical, ethical or linguistic walls which, however flexibly they may be bent to the shape of the world, still intrude their impervious bulk between us and the reality we seek to know.

It is generally supposed that this picture is made inevitable by the structure of our epistemic cognition: our senses deliver impulses of some kind that are arranged, synthesized or otherwise interpreted by large-scale cognitive structures to produce conceptually ordered beliefs. Isn't it *obvious* that people approaching the world with significantly different sets of conceptual schema will thereby understand the world differently? And does it not follow that understanding is determined by conceptual schema, and not—most importantly—by the world (even assuming that “the world” has an unambiguous referent)? I do not wish to deny the plausibility of this vaguely neo-Kantian account of our epistemic cognition. And I certainly agree that when it is supposed that the reception of sense-data constitutes the whole of our epistemic contact with the world, then we can retain this plausible account *only* by conceding our cognitive confinement. So where do we go from here?

William James once observed that “[e]xperience . . . has a way of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulations.” This seems to me just right, yet as I have argued elsewhere, the Pragmatist’s notion of experience was not broad enough to preserve the insight.<sup>1</sup> I believe it is worth preserving, and that the way to do so is to learn to see in mindful, embodied activity a kind of epistemic openness which lets the world seep through conceptual boundaries real and imagined, and reveals us as beings cognitively in touch with (because physically *in*) the world. For the complete identification of our empirical porosity, our epistemic openness, with sensation is an unrecognized dogma of empiricism—its fourth, for those who are keeping count. I believe that it is possible to dispense with this dogma, but with it will have to go our easy confidence that it is in fact possible to understand mind as over against body, thought over against action, or a cognitive “inside” opposed to a material “outside” with precise delimitations and impenetrable boundaries.

As you will perceive, this is a broad and ambitious project. I laid some groundwork for this project in my 1997 book;<sup>2</sup> I should like here to report on the primary critical finding of that work: its identification of the Fourth Dogma of Empiricism as a central determinant of this picture of our epistemic confinement. I will then try to inch the project forward by explaining why I have been turning to Merleau-Ponty for help in thinking about the direction epistemology might take without the fourth dogma. But I want to be clear at the outset that my intent is to encourage you to think in a certain direction, to consider a modified set of theoretical preconditions for epistemology and phenomenology, and not to convince you of any particular epistemological theory.<sup>3</sup>

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1 *Content and Comportment: On Embodiment and the Epistemic Availability of the World* (Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD) 1997 pp.53-85

2 *Content and Comportment*

3. I focus on the critical finding, rather on the reconstructive project, for three closely related reasons. First, I want very much to encourage a re-thinking of epistemology within “analytic” philosophy, and to do this it will be necessary to show, in familiar

## Why the *fourth* dogma?

The fourth dogma, what I wish to deny, is what is left of empiricism once we have purged from it Quine's two and Davidson's third dogmas. The first three dogmas relate to the *nature* of experience itself: to accept the arguments of Quine and Davidson is to deny that, prior to conceptual synthesis, sensation has qualities which can be experienced non-cognitively as such; it is to deny that (again, prior to cognitive interpretation) experience has what Rorty calls "raw feels" in terms of which we can access, or get some phenomenological handle on, our sensory experience. Quine and Davidson do not claim that our experience has *no* phenomenological content (that there is nothing it "feels like" to touch wet grass); instead they argue that whatever wet grass "feels like"—whatever the content of this experience—no stimulation of our sensory receptors warrants the name "experience" except that which is conceptually structured. Those unfamiliar with the arguments of Quine and Davidson can consider instead those of Merleau-Ponty, which make clear that nothing in the realm of our actual experience answers to the empiricist notion of pure experience—according to which

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terms, that such a re-thinking is called for. Second, my own solution to the problem I outline is to import "continental" insights into analytic philosophy (I end this talk with a brief note on Merleau-Ponty) and to begin to see how this is even possible it is necessary to set up the framework within which the relevance of phenomenology to anglo-american epistemology can easily be seen. Finally, I think that an examination of some of the central concerns of anglo-american epistemology can actually help one see more clearly what is at stake in certain phenomenological treatises, which will not only allow the introduction of these works to a wider audience, but can also prevent certain common misinterpretations. Perhaps I should also say, by way of explanation, that it seems to me that the analytic/continental split marks no genuine philosophical divide, no fundamental disagreement about the important questions of philosophy, or even what constitutes an appropriate way to address them (not that individual philosophers don't come to blows on these questions); rather, it seems to me an entirely professional divide, a matter of which books tend to be used in the education of philosophers, and perpetuated by nothing more complicated than the fact that people tend to read what their friends (and teachers) read. The simple – and individual – step of reading into unfamiliar territory would go a long way to weakening the relevance of this split.

There are also some more idiosyncratic motivations for the project: it seems to me that cognitive relativism, in its numerous forms and incarnations, has seriously impoverished the current practice of philosophy. When we take ourselves to be trapped within the bounds of our conceptual inheritance, when, that is, we take *epistémé* to be impossible, or so severely curtailed that it is no longer recognized as such, we are left only with *techné*. Where *epistémé* requires reaching, or rather over-reaching, beyond the conceived, to that by which the conceptual is anchored, *techné* is focused instead on the practical management, the manipulation, of the given. It bears the same relation to *epistémé* as does technology to science – and I mean this in the fullest and most positive sense, for just as technology has in large measure made science as we know it possible, so too is *techné* necessary to *epistémé*. Yet it remains true that to *trade* science for technology would entail an incalculable loss. In denying the

perception is composed from a variety of stimulating qualia and inherently shaped contiguous fields of color-texture. On the contrary, our perceptual experience of the world is always already conceptually enriched, ontically structured, and spatially ordered. Experience, this is to say, cannot be understood in terms of singular “dot-like” impacts, but is rather the entire “shape” of our consciousness of the world, a conscious state populated by types and divisions, individuals and kinds, colors and textures, wholes and parts.

Such arguments, presented as convincingly as they are, spell the end of the empiricist notion of an autonomous stream of sensation with intrinsic and accessible qualities on the basis of which we judge the status of the physical world, back to which all our judgments can therefore be traced, and against which those judgments may be checked. The depth of this critique entices Davidson to claim that after we deny the third dogma there is nothing left to the empiricist position. But it is not so. For what remains within much of epistemology is the notion that sensation, even when reduced to an entirely causal role, is our only sort of contact with the world with cognitive and epistemic significance.

### **Knowledge and “aboutness”**

It is at this point that it becomes clear how simultaneous acceptance of the premises so far mentioned forces one into a self-defeating oscillation between skepticism and idealism,<sup>4</sup> neither of which positions have any room for genuine intentional connection to the world. For once we grant that experience is by its nature rich with conceptual content, and deny that sensation can carry any such content, we thereby make our understanding of the world rely entirely on our conceptual apparatus. If, by accepting the fourth dogma of empiricism, we preempt any

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very possibility of *epistémé*, it seems that philosophy has done exactly this. You needn't agree with this assessment; it is central only to my motivation for presenting the account that follows, and not to the account itself.

investigation into the worldly origin of our concepts (in which investigation we might follow Husserl, or Merleau-Ponty), then it quickly becomes clear that the world can provide *no* epistemic friction by which content can be shaped or understanding challenged. For on this picture, the sensations through which alone the world contacts us can *never* “boil over.” Anomalous experience becomes by definition impossible, for even anomalies must be conceptualized if they are to be coherent *as* experience, and in particular if they are to be conceptualized with enough depth to be understood as inconsistent with some theory under consideration. Confronted with an anomaly, then, we do not have the option of conforming a theory more closely to pure experience (or the world it reflects), but only more closely to another theory—the one within which the anomaly was conceptualized. But if sensation cannot provide epistemic friction for our theories or concepts, and there is no other mode of epistemic access to the world, then the phenomenological order—the “world” of our “experience”—must be epistemically closed. Content can be traced to mind and no further; our cognitive insides cannot be related to the reality outside, and thus we cannot be supposed to be in touch with the world.<sup>5</sup>

From this position we are left with only variations on two stark choices. If we hope to make sense of our capacity to be cognitively in touch with actual particulars, we seem pushed towards idealism. For according to our current theory of experience, the world is present to us in terms of pre-given particulars; we perceive things as already individuated.<sup>6</sup> According to the constraints of the fourth dogma, the criteria of that individuation—and thus the “target” or our

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4. Technically, I should say “internalism” here, for I do not consider the pure idealist position, whereby there *is* no world metaphysically or ontologically distinct from our ideas.

5. This dilemma has both epistemic and political dimensions, for where structures of belief, and thus conceptions of the world compete, no appeal to a neutral set of facts or observations can possibly be grounds for deciding between them. Instead, all conflicts of this sort must be decided by – and must be *perceived* as requiring – the exercise of power, whether or not constrained by social institutions. It should be noted how much more radical this is than anything Thomas Kuhn supported; it strikes me as not merely mistaken, but dangerous. The appeal to facts – and the option of acceding to them – plays an extremely important role in settling interpersonal (and intercultural) disputes.

intention—can only be attributed to our conceptual scheme. Yet this threatens our claim to know *about* some particular in the world, for if the object is by definition a (synthetic) conceptual construction neither is it necessarily in, nor are its borders derived from, the world at all. By denying any epistemic openness to the ontic structure of the world, we can no longer do justice to our sense that to describe or think about something (e.g. my morning mug of coffee) is to think *about the mug* and not about the *idea* of the mug. And unlike Aristotle’s prime mover, our thoughts do not think only themselves. On the other hand, if we posit that intentional connections to individuals do not depend on the criteria of individuation actually employed, this would have the seeming advantage of allowing epistemically relevant connections to the world without conceptual mediation. The various causal theories of reference and intention offer some examples of this option; I can think about the mug because it is in fact the cause of my mug-like experience (there is some object in the world which caused my concept of ‘mug’ to be drawn into operation as one of the determinants of my current phenomenological state). But here we face the problem of skepticism. Since we have access only to experienced content, and since intentional connection is determined by something outside of experience, we do not have epistemic *access* to that to which we ostensibly refer, and thus no way of knowing (in any satisfying sense of that term) what we are referring *to*. It is unlikely that we would want to grant the existence of a genuine intentional connection to a person who sees his chair as an African elephant. Surely in this case he is not thinking *about* the chair, even if it is the causal origin of his perception. In neither case does the object of intention provide any epistemic friction or guiding influence for our conception of it—which surely makes doubtful the claim that there *is*

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6. This does not mean that our perception of ontological unities cannot change, as when we perceptually resolve the individuals that comprise a heap. But this shift is not an act of will, but of perception; unities that were not previously given as such, now are.

any veridical connection between our thoughts and their supposed objects. Without *epistemic* connection, the claim to intentional or referential connection looks tenuous.

If we do not wish to accept the above consequences, if we want to preserve the notion that thought reaches the objects of the world, we must admit *either* that some percepts are not blind without concepts, which would be a return to a more classical-minded empiricism, *or* that there is some non-sensual mode of epistemic access to the world, a mode of access that is not theoretically mediated in its contact with the world. I urge embracing the second lemma, arguing that the active body is epistemically “open” to the world; for concepts are receptive to the world in activity in ways they are not in sensation. To put it perhaps too plainly, in neo-kantian garb, I believe that the concepts that structure or synthesize our percepts are open to the world—open to modification—in bodily activity, and that this is how it is possible for experience to “boil over.”

### **What Perception Is**

Even if, given such a brief account, you do not see that this dilemma is the inevitable result of the given premises, I do hope you will agree that if you *were* to see its inevitability, that (1) we would need a way out, and (2) denying the fourth dogma offers one possibility. But what does this mean to claim that we have another mode of epistemic access to the world, that perception, now in the general sense, utilizes sensitivities beyond the sensual? What, exactly, do I think perception *is*?

To help us move forward on this difficult question, let me replace it with another: given my critique of empiricism, am I still in any way an empiricist? Is there anything left to the empiricist position, having shorn it now of *four* dogmas? I am especially sensitive to this

question, for it was raised somewhat forcefully in a review of *Content and Comportment* by Philip Dwyer:

What nullifies much of O'Donovan-Anderson's account is *his* acceptance of what I suppose must be the fifth dogma of empiricism, but deserves to be known as the first. ... the view that our perceptual consciousness of things is constituted by or otherwise involves some sort of epistemic dealings with mental entities or stuff and that these dealings are required to get us *from* the mental entities *to* the things. (p.139)

On the strength of the fact that, despite my critiques of empiricism, I continued to write about sensations, sensible qualities, and the like, Dwyer suggests that what I have in mind is only another version of empiricism, in which perception delivers to us mental objects (or perhaps one great big mental object) to be massaged into order by some mysterious corporeally grounded mental process. Speaking about the obvious fact that we can *see* the edge of a thing, for instance, I write (and Dwyer quotes)

No doubt these perceptions have behavioral significance, and the surely have (let us call it) metaphysical significance in so far as they allow us to identify particulars, but this significance cannot be derived from the qualities of the perceptual field considered as such; there is nothing intrinsic to the phenomenological quality of the shading around a sphere which makes it signify the boundary of that sphere. (p. 115)

I here use terms – ‘perceptions’, ‘quality’, ‘perceptual field’ – of empiricist provenance, and in the way the empiricists would use such terms, with the eventual point being that the content of these items in our ontology much be richer than we have previously supposed. Forgetting, or ignoring, the critique of empiricism which precedes such claims, however, it is more than possible to read this sentence in empiricist terms. Although this is a misreading, I hope here to turn it into an instructive one. I believe, as does Professor Dwyer, that

To see is to see in depth, given which we can also see that things are round or rough or plump or plush or deep or shallow. It goes without saying that what one can see one can touch or get closer to or walk round and in general ‘interact with bodily’ *in other ways*. There is no question of having to make up the epistemic deficiencies of what perception allegedly gives us – ‘sensation’ or ‘sensory experience’ or ‘the perceptual field as such’ – in order to get to mind-independent things. We perceive *them*. (p.140)

However, nothing ever goes without saying in philosophy, and there is always another question. Mine is: how is it that this is so? What must our epistemic sensitivity *be like* to know, to perceive, to be in touch with the objects of the world? It is, I think, clear that it *cannot* be like

what classical empiricism described; and I have been arguing (or, more precisely, paraphrasing arguments to the effect) that it also cannot be like what empiricism suggests even after being shorn of its first three dogmas. We perceive the world, not our idea of it. But does this mean that we should not talk about sensations at all, that they have no place in our mental ontology? Is there no such thing as “sensory experience”? Is there nothing that answers to the phrase “our idea of the world”? I cannot bring myself to answer “yes” to any of these questions. Am I then still caught in the empiricist fly-bottle, unable to find my way out? Faced with these considerations, I thought it worth trying to put down exactly what it was that I thought worth preserving in the empiricist tradition, the better to expose any unwanted and unseen consequences, constriction of the imagination or subtle philosophical inertia. I came up with three very general, but perhaps important things:

- (1) A picture of human beings as sensing beings, whose sense organs react physically and measurably to the stimuli of the world. One of the wonders of the mind is that this causal *reactivity* is at the same time an epistemic *sensitivity*; it remains a mystery how this could be so.<sup>7</sup>
- (2) The supposition that our experience of the world *is*, although not in the manner to which Dwyer objects, an object of consciousness. This ability of the mind to take itself as an object leads to another—and perhaps the most dangerous—part of the empiricist inheritance:
- (3) A way of talking about (the contents of) experience that includes words like ‘sensation’, ‘concept’, ‘percept’, and even ‘experience’ itself.

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<sup>7</sup> It is this, call it *naturalistic*, view of the human being which accounts in part for the continuing attraction of the neo-Kantian perceptual psychology: concepts are drawn passively into operation in the course of perceptual experience, and the content of our awareness is a result of the synthesis of the world’s effect on us and our stock of empirical concepts. ‘Synthesis’ seems as good a name as any for the pre-conscious process by which the causal

It is yet an open question whether these words are reliable descriptors of real features of experience, or represent empty metaphysical chimera; perhaps, that is, feature (3) should be jettisoned. But it does seem, on inspection, that our experience of the world is highly structured, and contains heterogeneous elements that apparently answer to empiricist names.<sup>8</sup> If I see a dagger before me I do indeed perceive *the dagger*. But while I might sense its sharpness, or the coldness of its steel, these being identifiable sensations that are part of my experience of the dagger, I do not sense *that it is a dagger*, nor do I judge that it is so based on *sensual* evidence. I perform no post-perceptual manipulation or arrangement of sensation into a dagger-like mental object; this is not how perception works. Rather, perception makes the dagger present to mind, and that it is a dagger is a given feature of my experience.<sup>9</sup> But unlike the case of its silvery-sheen this feature does not reveal itself in, or as, sensation. What this says to me is that my experience has not just *sensual*, but *conceptual* features; and these features represent, as Professor Dwyer rightly cautions us to say, different aspects of my consciousness of objects. More than this, I believe that each such feature of experience is a sign of a different facet of our epistemic sensitivity to the world.

Perhaps this still seems an empiricist sort of account. And perhaps to a degree it is, but the empiricists, I should like to say, offered us a decent phenomenology accompanied by a lousy

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impacts of the world find themselves transformed into perceptual experience. But as I emphasize below, we must understand the claim in light of all the aforesaid critiques of the empiricist position.

8 Even so, we should not be led by such considerations to conflate *perception* of the world with *inspection* of experience. To do this is to treat perception as a species of self-consciousness, rather than kind of other-consciousness, which is a mistake at the root of empiricism.

9 A word about vocabulary: when I talk about sensations, I mean those features of our perceptual experience that are possessed of quality. I make no claim for the autonomy of sensations; they are not the pre-existing building blocks of experience; they are not experience per-se, nor the pure 'pre-conceptual' products of our sense organs. I say only that they are one identifiable feature of – one class of object to be found in – our experience. I use perception to refer to the entire range of our epistemic and information-gathering interaction with the world. The product of perception is not sensation, pure or otherwise; it is our experience – our consciousness – of the world.

Unfortunately, I did not follow this convention in *Content and Comportment*, with the result that my epistemological alternative was not presented as clearly as it might have.

metaphysics. Their account of the furniture of the mind appears natural and sensible, but the metaphysical underpinnings of that account are deeply mistaken; a sensation is not a thing unto itself, relating to experience like a tile to a mosaic, but it is not a nothing, either: it is neither more nor less than one identifiable *feature* of our experience, and a sign of one central form of our epistemic sensitivity to the world.

Now, I do think that what has been said represents a step forward, albeit a small one, but it is also obvious that the language of empiricism we have inherited makes the discussion difficult, and nowhere more so than in dealing with the question of realism. When I claim that sensual sensitivity is one aspect of perception, I do not claim that there is a stream of autonomous, sensual experience flowing from our sense organs and delivered to mind ready to fill in the empty conceptual shapes like color in an offset print job. Rather, our experience—the result of our perception—is always already a structured whole, with sensation getting its content, meaning, shape and significance only from its place in that whole. Sensation does not pre-exist experience, and is identifiable as such only upon reflection on, and inspection of our experience. But this does not mean that it is created *ex nihilo*, that is answers not to the world. Likewise with our conceptual—or, let us say, *categorical*—sensitivity to the world. There is no sequence of categories passively received from the world, needing to be synchronized with the sensual stream like a movie and its soundtrack. The concept of the dagger that is an analyzable feature of my experience does not correspond to any feature of the dagger I see, and there is no direct route to be traced from any given concept to any particular object in the world. And yet our categorical sensitivity is a genuine sensitivity *to the world*, rooted in our active presence in, and interference with the world.

If you have experience thinking through this thicket of philosophy, you may have some sense of what I am getting at. But how is one to say it? It seems necessary to say everything at once, and for all the qualifications and caveats to be simultaneously interpreted each in light of the other. Indeed, it begins to seem as if one needs in part *a way of talking* that will help us see more easily what we know from hard intellectual labor must be true. It was in such a mood, in the wake of such considerations, that I encountered the work of Merleau-Ponty, and as I close this talk, I should like to point to his work (understood properly) as an important example of epistemological thinking without the fourth dogma.

### **Knowledge and the body**

Writes Merleau-Ponty:

Vision is already inhabited by a meaning (*sens*) which gives it a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence. The pure *quale* would be given to us only if the world were a spectacle and one's own body a mechanism with which some impartial mind made itself acquainted. Sense experience, on the other hand, invests the quality with vital value, grasping it first in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that it always involves a reference to the body. The problem is to understand these strange relationships which are woven between the parts of the landscape, or between it and me as an incarnate subject., and through which an object perceived can concentrate in itself a whole scene or become the *imagio* of a whole segment of life. Sense experience is that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. (*Phenomenology of Perception*, pp.52-3)

The advantage of this approach, if one is attuned to appreciate it, is precisely his wanting to say everything, all at once, from the beginning. But this is obviously a great disadvantage to his general approachability. It is very hard to quote Merleau-Ponty; one wants to go on for pages, because each sentence modifies the last, and that modification carries over to the previous sentence, and on it goes. The *Phenomenology of Perception* is a work to be studied more than read, and approached with an awareness of the deep paradoxes that are in store for us when we try to understand knowledge. If one isn't ready to think with paradox as a constant companion then one isn't ready to think about knowledge: this is a debatable point. But it is certain that such a one is not ready to read Merleau-Ponty.

We must stress the point. How have we managed to escape from the dilemma of the *for itself* and the *in itself*, how can perceptual consciousness be saturated with its object, how can we distinguish sensible consciousness from intellectual consciousness? Because: (1) Every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us anonymously. I cannot say that *I* see the blue of the sky in the sense in which I say that I have understood a book or again in which I decide to devote my life to mathematics. My perception, even when seen from the inside, expresses a given situation: I can see blue because I am *sensitive* to colors, whereas personal acts create a situation: I am a mathematician because I have decided to be one. So, if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. ... It is true that knowledge teaches me that sensation would not occur unless my body were in some way adapted to it, for example, that there would be no specific contact unless I moved my hand. But this activity takes place on the periphery of my being. I am no more aware of being the true subject of my sensation than of my birth or my death. ... I can apprehend my birth and my death only as prepersonal horizons: I know that people are born and die, but I cannot know my own birth and death. Each sensation, being strictly speaking, the first, last, and only one of its kind, is a birth and a death. The subject who experiences it begins and ends in it, and as he can neither precede or survive himself, sensation necessarily appears to itself in a setting of generality, its origin anterior to myself, it arises from *sensibility* which has preceded it and which will outlive it, just as my birth and my death belong to a natality and a mortality which are anonymous. ... Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which had already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them. (*Phenomenology of Perception*, pp.215-6)

This is not, to say the least, easy going. Still, I hope that our short discussion and critique of empiricism will be helpful for those who are inclined to try it. Let me now try to use it to point in Merleau-Ponty's direction. It is, after all, where Merleau-Ponty himself began:

At the outset of the study of perception, we find in language the notion of sensation, which seems immediate and obvious: I have a sensation of redness, or blueness, of hot, or cold . . . Pure sensation will be the experience of an undifferentiated, instantaneous, dotlike impact. (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p.3)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds from considerations strikingly similar to those found in that line of argument running from Peirce through Quine to Davidson, which convincingly demonstrate the phenomenological irrelevance of "pure sensation" and reveal the wholeness, unity, and inherent structure of the perceptual field. Unlike these others, however, Merleau-Ponty insists from the beginning on the active, bodily, *comportmental* underpinnings to this structure. So much you know already. But for those coming out of a more analytic-minded tradition, it is important, reading Merleau-Ponty, to keep in mind just exactly what is at stake in the rejection of the empiricist position. In particular, I have heard people suggest that Merleau-Ponty is doing no more than merely *naturalizing* the conceptual scheme responsible for the structure of experience. Read this way, Merleau-Ponty would be analyzing the *content* of our perceptual structures and

finding there the mark of our physicality. This would, indeed, provide a necessary corrective to the rationalistic supposition that the origin of our conceptual scheme is entirely logical or linguistic; but to question only the supposed *content* of our conceptual scheme would leave the picture of our cognitive confinement essentially untouched. However, as we have seen, it is not the *content* of our concepts that is at issue, but their openness to the world. And it is just this that Merleau-Ponty insists upon: the structuring elements of our perceptual experience are themselves open to the world through bodily activity.

To consider only one example, the placement of objects in the objective, shared space of the perceptual field is at its root the placement of objects in a bodily space invested with comportmental significance. Only if this is so can we make sense of the *immediate* behavioral significance of some perceptions (“there’s a fire here!”). Objective space would have no sense for me *as a space*, that is, as a system of physical relations in which I myself am implicated by having—as an essential part of my being—a location as one thing among others, *except* for the fact that these objective relations are invested for me with comportmental significance. My ability to understand the difference between here and there depends on my ability to *enact* that difference; my habitation of any given “here” expresses my understanding of its special significance for me as a location, and likewise my understanding of the spatial relations which other things bear to me is in part constituted by the specifics of my behavioral orientation to them. But this does not mean that space is therefore an ideal phenomenal construction from corporeally-defined concepts. Rather, the mode of our openness to the reality of space is comportmental, and the bodily significance it thereby acquires does not imply the closing off or clouding over of my epistemic contact with space or its objects. I encounter the facts of space

comportmentally, and through behavioral interaction with the world the contents of my space-realizing concepts are influenced and altered.

The relationship between the two spaces would therefore be as follows: as soon as I try to posit bodily space or bring out its meaning I find nothing in it but intelligible space. But at the same time this intelligible space is not extracted from oriented space, it is merely its explicit expression, and, when separated from that root has no meaning whatsoever. (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p.102)

There is, I fear, no way to end a talk like this, which does not purport to offer a single definitive point, but rather just one contribution to an ongoing conversation on which I hope to have some effect. For now, I shall let Merleau-Ponty have the last word:

The real has to be described, not constructed or formed. Which means that I cannot put perception into the same category as the syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predications. My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises, and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the content of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams round things. I imagine people and things whose presence is not incompatible with the context, yet who are not in fact involved in it: they are ahead of reality, in the realm of the imaginary. If the reality of my perception were based solely on the intrinsic coherence of 'representations', it ought to be forever hesitant and, being wrapped up in my conjectures on probabilities, I ought to be ceaselessly taking apart misleading syntheses, and reinstating in reality stray phenomena which I had excluded in the first place. But this does not happen. The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgement before incorporating the most surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination. Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thought and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man',<sup>10</sup> or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself. When I return to myself from an excursion into the realm of dogmatic common sense or of science, I find, not a source of intrinsic truth, but a subject destined to the world. (*Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. x-xi)

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<sup>10</sup> In te redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas (St. Augustine)

