

THE DIALECTIC PERCEPTION-THOUGHT IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY

Charles Kasereka Muvunga¹, Dr. James Wangai Kabata², Dr. John Muhenda³

1(Department of Philosophy, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya)

2(Department of Philosophy, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya)

3(Department of Philosophy, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya)

ABSTRACT: This article was articulated around the conviction according to which knowledge comes from perception, that is to say, the dialectic between the subject and the world. However perception which sustains thought proved to be incapable of leading to things in-themselves, especially because of perspectivity. We then turned to the conditions of possibility of vision precisely colour and light with regard to objects which are characterized by constancy, size and shape. We insisted on sight leading to Being since for Merleau-Ponty, Being is perceivable. This moved our attention to experience refuting any ready-made necessity or mentalist thought. Indeed, we underlined that the canonical formulas of thought are drawn from the sensible world. Of course, thought was presented as being factual, perception as being the sure path to truth, and real being as that which appears. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty inaugurated the new Cogito different from that of Descartes. We ended this article by a critique of what we found untenable in Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, namely, understanding limited to the tangible, constancy, the conditions of sight and the declaration about the absolute certainty of the world (not of individual things).

Keywords: *Perception, thought, truth, vision, world.*

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is an effort to show that, in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the origin of thought and consequently of philosophical knowledge is the perceived world. Indeed, his entire phenomenological endeavour is a reaction to "dogmatism" or to what he calls intellectualism which is based on ready-made thought, that is to say, thought conceived without any reference to the perceived reality. The outcome of intellectualism is a prejudice to be overtaken by a philosophy of facticity that takes into consideration the perceived world.

In our previous article entitled *Essay on Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language* published in 2020, we presented Merleau-Ponty's thesis that being, thought and language are simultaneous, notwithstanding the fact that the structure of perception is prior to that of thought. The purpose of this 2021 article is to show that perception is nevertheless crucial for knowledge to take place. This was already mentioned in the previous article, but we feel the need to elaborate on it for the sake of philosophy of knowledge. The application of this article is related to the centrality of perception in the search for truth.

How then is the subject related to the world of perception? According to Merleau-Ponty, human knowledge comes as a result of vision. To what extent is vision or perception reliable? Merleau-Ponty is of the view that perception is the most reliable means to reality and truth, notwithstanding the fact that it cannot lead to absolute result. This is the essential point of what we are going to elaborate in this work. To reach our goal, we organizing this work into five sections, namely, 1) *Introduction*, 2) *Subject-World Relationship*, 3) *Appearance symbolizing the Real Object*, 4) *Critique of Merleau-Ponty's thought*, where we will give our contribution to philosophy of knowledge and 5) *Conclusion*.

II. SUBJECT-WORLD RELATIONSHIP

The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty puts an accent on perception, the means for a subject to be in contact with the world. It is the performance of a subject by which he becomes aware of things through the senses. Perception takes place in a relationship between a subject and the world given to him.

2.1 Perception

Philosophically speaking, perception is not a mere glance which takes place every moment, but the grasping of the intelligibility of a thing thanks to intentionality and attention.¹ Perception culminates in the dialectic as Merleau-Ponty asserts: “Perception is a moment of the living dialectic of concrete subject;”² it is a performance of an *ego*. What is perceivable is an impression which however is always in the midst of many other impressions inasmuch as the perceptual object is always part of a field.³ Indeed, “I perceive a thing because I have a field of existence and because each phenomenon, on its appearance, attracts towards that field the whole of my body as a system of perceptual powers.”⁴ This occurs because the sensible incites sensation on the side of the subject, since sensation is a modality of the soul.⁵ The sensible is not only things, but also everything that is drawn or designed in it, even a hole, everything that leaves an imprint, or everything which appears there, even in terms of gap (*écart*) and of a certain absence.⁶ Therefore, what is perceivable in a field is not only a thing but also an empty space: “Our perceptual field is made up of ‘things’ and ‘spaces between things’.”⁷ It is quite interesting to mention that even a gap, an empty space among things, or *écart* is also perceivable.

Besides, I can perceive something which is not material. In this sense, “it is possible to perceive a smile, or even a sentiment in this smile,”⁸ for it expresses something. Merleau-Ponty stresses this saying:

A face is a center of human expression, the transparent envelope of the attitudes and desires of others, the place of manifestation, the barely material support for a multitude of intentions. This is why it seems impossible for us to treat a face or a body, even a dead body, like a thing. They are sacred entities, not the ‘givens of sight.’⁹

Similarly, “In entering an apartment we can perceive the character of those who live there without being capable of justifying this impression by an enumeration of remarkable details, and certainly well before having noted the color of the furniture.”¹⁰ Henceforth, perception is oriented to whatever I can be aware of through my senses:

The perceived is not necessarily an object present before me as a piece of knowledge to be acquired, it may be a ‘unity of value’ which is present to me only practically. If a picture has been removed from a living room, we may perceive that a change has taken place without being able to say what.¹¹

Perceiving and sensing are synonymous: “Merleau-Ponty does not make a sharp distinction between sensing and perceiving, or between sensations and qualities.”¹² Nevertheless, there is a slight difference between the two: “What is called sensation is only the most rudimentary of perceptions, and, as a modality of existence, it is no more separable than any other perception from a background which is in fact the world.”¹³ Being an elementary perception, sensation has not yet been raised to the status of full experience. Sensation is therefore a “primary perception” which is a “non-thetic, pre-objective and pre-conscious experience.”¹⁴ Sense experience is engagement with the world; it is nothing else but “that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life. It is to it that the perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness. It is the intentional tissue which the effort to know will try to take apart.”¹⁵ The subject and the world are fused in sensation to the extent that communion becomes the keyword in its definition. Thus, “we define sensation as co-existence or communion.”¹⁶

¹ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 50, PDF e-book.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 166.

³ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 4.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 371.

⁵ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Union de l'Âme et du Corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson* (Paris : Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2014), 31.

⁶ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le Philosophe et son Ombre,” in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1280.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 18.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 166.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 167.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 173.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 374.

¹² Samuel B. Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 21.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 281.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 281.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 61.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 247-248.

The important thing to note is that knowledge of the world passes through perception.¹⁷ Ultimately, perception is very crucial in epistemology since it is the condition of knowledge: “All knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception.”¹⁸ Although all knowledge — including scientific knowledge — is acquired in the realm of perception, Merleau-Ponty avers that “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.”¹⁹ This would mean that all acts are subsequent to it and conditioned by it. How does perception lead to knowledge? For the empiricists and intellectualists, perception is a judgment,²⁰ given that “Judgement is often introduced as *what sensation lacks to make perception possible*.”²¹ For instance, I can perceive something indirectly by assuming it is there; I might not be in contact with the very thing, but I see its cover and deduce that it is there: “The men I see from a window are hidden by their hats and coats, and their image cannot be imprinted on my retina. I therefore do not see them, I judge them to be there.”²² In other words, I draw my conclusion, not from perception as such, but as a judgment which I make out of what I see. Here, perception appears to be an “‘interpretation’ of the signs that our senses provide in accordance with the bodily *stimuli*, a ‘hypothesis’ that the mind evolves to ‘explain its impressions to itself.’”²³

If empiricism and intellectualism can consider perception as a judgment, Merleau-Ponty looks at it as something different from judgment: if perception is a judgment, then it is a ready-made thought. To support this, he gives the example of a larger cardboard box which I judge heavier than the smaller one made of the same material, before I try to pick them up. In this case, “we have to say that the box is not felt but judged to be heavier, and this example which seemed ready-made to show the sensory aspect of illusion serves on the contrary to prove that there is no sensory knowledge, and that we feel as we judge.”²⁴ It is then good to say that perception is neither a judgment nor an interpretation as Merleau-Ponty writes: “To the world of opinion, perception can appear as an interpretation. For consciousness itself, how could it be a process of reasoning since there are no sensations to provide it with premises, or an interpretation, because there is nothing prior to it to interpret?”²⁵ This is accurate because reasoning requires prior ideas to be connected from which something new is inferred or a conclusion is drawn. It is then very clear that to perceive is not to judge. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty asserts:

to perceive in the full sense of the word (as the antithesis of imagining) is not to judge, it is to apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgement begins. The phenomenon of true perception offers, therefore, a meaning inherent in the signs, and of which judgement is merely the optional expression.²⁶

Perception is indeed an apprehension of the meaning of the sensible while judgement results from what the subject believes he sees. The sufferer of hallucination can make a judgement that he sees something, but in reality, he does not perceive anything.

Moreover, perception is an exploration and a journey: “in order to perceive a surface, for example, it is not enough to explore it, we must keep in mind the moments of our exploratory journey and relate the points on the surface to each other.”²⁷ It is a journey since it is a continuous endeavour. Furthermore, “perception as a unity disintegrates and reforms ceaselessly.”²⁸ Therefore, “I cannot simply identify what I perceive and the thing itself.”²⁹ Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that perception is incomplete³⁰ since the thing shows to me only some of

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty is convinced that there is no true knowledge except what is acquired through perception. This conviction is certainly based on phenomenology by which a subject grasps reality the way it appears to consciousness. Whatever I know is in consciousness, and phenomenologists insist that consciousness is always consciousness of something. This “something” is of course what I perceive or imagine. However, imagination leads the subject to conceiving something which is not there; hence, genuine knowledge results from perception.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 240-241.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xi.

²⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 200-201.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 37.

²² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 38.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 39.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 40.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 43.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 40.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 281.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 44.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 211.

³⁰ The incompleteness of perception shows clearly that it cannot exhaust reality, that it leads to a progressive but not definitive discovery of reality, and that by exploring reality, it faces something with many facets or simply a mystery. Yet, perception is the surest path to knowledge and truth; henceforth, knowledge is never absolute and truth is always partial.

its aspects.³¹ This simply means that perception cannot exhaust reality. One of the reasons for this is that I always perceive from a perspective.

2.2 *Perspectivity*

Perception is always done from a particular point of view or perspective, and each subject has one perspective at a time. There are many perspectives of the object under observation which the philosopher would inspect one after the other without ever being capable to think them together.³² For Merleau-Ponty, Perspectivity is crucial in the acquisition of knowledge: "All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless."³³ Perspectivity implies partiality which is an unavoidable way to look at reality: "Perspective does not appear to me to be a subjective deformation of things but, on the contrary, to be one of their properties, perhaps their essential property."³⁴

Objects are always seen in perspectives; they cannot "appear otherwise than in perspective,"³⁵ owing to the fact that a thing always shows one of its sides at once: "For example, I see the next-door house from a certain angle, but it would be seen differently from the right bank of the Seine, or from the inside, or again from an aeroplane"³⁶ and this, because I am limited to see a thing only partially. Of course, "my human gaze never *posits* more than one facet of the object, even though by means of horizons it is directed towards all the others."³⁷ The reason for this is that I am always in a certain place at a time from which I see things.³⁸ This would mean that I cannot perceive the whole of reality at once since this would mean that all the perspectives are taken together, yet to see an object from everywhere is impossible. Merleau-Ponty expresses this as follows: "if there is to be an absolute object, it will have to consist of an infinite number of different perspectives compressed into a strict co-existence, and to be presented as it were to a host of eyes all engaged in one concerted act of seeing."³⁹ Thus, reality is only grasped partially as Merleau-Ponty expresses it in quite a strange manner:

When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; but back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it 'shows' to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects from a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as guarantee of the permanence of those aspects.⁴⁰

As an individual, my perspective only shows me some aspects of the object; my observation therefore needs to be complemented by other perspectives. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty says: "It is true that I see what I do see only from a certain angle, and I concede that a spectator differently placed sees what I can only conjecture."⁴¹ To pretend to see the whole thing at once would mean to perceive things as they are in-themselves (*en soi*).⁴² A cube seen from everywhere would be a cube in-itself which remains unknown. I cannot pretend to have seen the cube of the definition, that is to say, "the six sides of the cube, even if it is made of glass, and yet the word 'cube' has a meaning; the cube itself, the cube in reality, beyond its sensible appearances, has *its* six equal sides."⁴³ If I move round it, I see the front face as a square which then changes its shape and disappears, while other sides come into view and one by one become squares and disappear as well.⁴⁴

Additionally, "A cube drawn on paper changes its appearance according as it is seen from one side and from above or from the other and from below."⁴⁵ Hence, the cube in itself (the cube as cube) is never perceived but judged, since the very definition of the cube exists only for thought and since the subject puts in place a positing power which alone can seize the whole of the cube.⁴⁶ However, "The cube with six equal sides is not

³¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 186.

³² Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Philosophe et la Sociologie," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 1180.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, ix.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 186.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 104.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 77.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 80.

³⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 106.

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 80-81.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 79.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 394.

⁴² Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 218.

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 236.

⁴⁴ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 236.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 40.

⁴⁶ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *L'Union de l'Âme et du Corps*, 27.

only invisible, but inconceivable; it is the cube as it would be for itself; but the cube is not for itself, since it is an object.⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty is speaking of the perceived cube which is never perceived the way it is defined. The cube of the definition is the cube as it appears in thought which is seen by the subject from nowhere.⁴⁸ A perceived object is not generated by the mind — since it is not ready-made — but reveals itself to the subject progressively. This is stated as follows by Merleau-Ponty:

If all the sides of the cube could be known at once, I would no longer be dealing with a thing which offers itself for inspection little by little, but with an idea which my mind would truly possess. This is what happens when I think of objects which I hold to be existent without actually perceiving them.⁴⁹

To consider an object as existent without perceiving it is to fall into an erroneous epistemological procedure. Such procedure which belongs to mentalists⁵⁰ misses the real object.

I have so far spoken about spatial perspective, but what has been said about it is valid for temporal perspective too:

If I contemplate the house attentively and with no thought in my mind, it has something eternal about it, and an atmosphere of torpor seems to be generated by it. It is true that I see it from a certain point in my 'duration', but it is the same house that I saw yesterday when it was a day younger: it is the same house that either an old man or a child might behold. It is true, moreover, that age and change affect it, but even if it should collapse tomorrow, it will remain for ever true that it existed today.⁵¹

Henceforth, I should say that the subject always perceives from spatial and temporal perspectives which condition a partial grasp of reality. This, for Merleau-Ponty, is not a sign of weakness inasmuch as the perspectival character of knowledge is not to be taken as an accident or imperfection tied to the body which always relates to things from a viewpoint. In my view, this would mean that even the most accurate knowledge has to be perspectival since the subject has no other ways to relate to things, except from a perspective. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty shows that knowledge by profiles should not be considered as degraded in comparison with what is often regarded as true knowledge, that which would reveal the total aspects of an object.⁵² Perspectivity is an obligatory way to see things since the subject finds himself in the presence of a field of perception which is "given only as a perspectival view of objects gifted with stable properties, a perspectival view of an objective world and an objective space."⁵³ To avoid perspectival approach to reality can lead to the shortcut of mentalists. As for Merleau-Ponty, the truth of perception suggests that I am not supposed to consider the appearance as a veil thrown between me and the real: the perspectival shrinkage or narrowing (*rétrécissement perspectif*) is not a deformation, and the shortest path is not the truest. What is near, what is faraway, and the horizon in their indescribable dissimilarity form a system, and it is their contribution in the total field which is the perspectival truth.⁵⁴ Though a thing is always seized from a perspective, it always has constant features which determine its identity.

2.3 Constancy of the Object

Speaking of constancy, Merleau-Ponty wants to answer the following question: "How are retinal images — so different depending on the points of view — going 'to provide the soul with a means' of perceiving the same thing under several profiles?"⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that "A thing has 'characteristics' or 'properties' which are stable, even if they do not entirely serve to define it, and we propose to approach the phenomenon of reality by studying perceptual constants."⁵⁶ The constancy of an object refers to something in it which does not change despite its many variations: "In all its appearances the object retains invariable characteristics, remains itself invariable and is an object because all the possible values in relation to size and shape which it can assume are bound up in advance in the formula of its relations with the context."⁵⁷ The question of constancy here is treated phenomenologically not scientifically: "The perception of a distance

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 237.

⁴⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *L'Union de l'Âme et du Corps*, 28. (« Transportons-nous dans le 'cube pensé' : il disparaît comme cube. Le sujet ne voit le cube de nulle part ; il le voit de toutes parts. »)

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 212.

⁵⁰ The problem of mentalists is that they rely on their thoughts generated, not from reality, but from the mind alone. They conceive ideas which have no roots in the real world and therefore go astray since they hold on the nonexistent.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 79.

⁵² Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 186.

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 219.

⁵⁴ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1656.

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 194.

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 348.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 350.

or a size is not the same as the quantitative estimations by which science makes distance and size precise.”⁵⁸ What matters in phenomenology is not precision in measurement or profile, but description of an object the way it appears to the subject.

I recognize a thing in duration thanks to its constancy. What I am capable of perceiving and identifying must be something constant. If a thing did not have stable properties, it could be difficult to recognize it. Even though a thing appears under several profiles, there is something immutable in it; “A thing has in the first place *its* size and *its* shape throughout variations of perspective which are merely apparent. We do not attribute these appearances to the object itself, but regard them as an accidental feature of our relations with it, and not as being of it.”⁵⁹ The changes in anything are accidental but its universals are stable: “What we are affirming in the specific being of the object, is in reality a *facies totius universi* which remains unchanged, and in it is grounded the equivalence of all its appearances and the identity of its being.”⁶⁰

The being of a thing is determined only when its constancy is seized. It can be concluded so far that the invariable or the constant in the object is size and shape and the variables are appearance, distance and orientation (perspective).⁶¹ Nevertheless, there are things whose constancy is to be approached from other criteria besides size and shape. To express this, Merleau-Ponty writes: “It has been found possible to speak of a constancy of sounds, temperatures, weights, and indeed data which are in the strict sense tactile, a constancy itself mediated by certain structures, certain ‘modes of appearance’ of phenomena in each of these sensory fields.”⁶²

Furthermore, in perceiving, a subject often seizes an apparent size in depth. An apparent size refers to the fact that the size of an object changes according to the distance separating it from the subject:

It is the apparent size of the table, the piano and the wall which, relative to their real size, assigns to them their place in space. When the car slowly climbs up towards the horizon, all the while decreasing in size, I account for this appearance by constructing a displacement in terms of breadth such as I should perceive if I were observing the scene from an aeroplane, and which, in the last analysis, is the whole meaning of depth. But I have also other signs of distance to go on. As an object approaches me, my eyes, as long as they are focused on it, converges.⁶³

When I fixe my eye at the orifice of a tunnel in order to see through it the opposite orifice, the latter looks smaller than the former, even though they are equal in size. This apparent size is due to the distance separating it from my point of vision; it is the depth in my experience of vision. All the objects are perceived in depth due to the distance separating them from the subject. In addition, Merleau-Ponty asserts:

It follows that the phenomenon of ‘apparent size’ and the phenomenon of distance are two features of a comprehensive organization of the field, that the first stands to the second neither in the relation of sign to meaning, nor in that of cause to effect, but that, like the motivating to the motivated, they communicate through their significance.⁶⁴

A field always gives the notion of depth due to the distance between subject and object. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty avers: “Apparent size as experienced, instead of being the sign or indication of a depth invisible in itself, is nothing other than a way of expressing our vision of depth.”⁶⁵ Depth is not visible since it is nothing else but the relating dimension between the subject and the object of vision. Depth has meaning only with regard to a real situation, not a mere mental scenario. Since the mental object of intellectualists is not real, it cannot be affected by depth; the intellectualist mind only has an ideal object. Merleau-Ponty says further the following:

When I look at a road which sweeps before me towards the horizon, I must not say either that the sides of the road are given to me as convergent or that they are given to me as parallel: they are *parallel in depth*. The perspective appearance is not posited, but neither is the parallelism. *I am engrossed in the road itself*, and I cling to it through its virtual distortion, and depth is this intention itself which posits neither the perspective projection of the road, nor the ‘real’ road. And yet is not a man *smaller* at two hundred yards than at five yards away? He becomes so if I isolate him from the perceived context and measure his apparent size.⁶⁶

The foregoing paragraph presents depth as an intention which is neither a perspectival projection (since the subject seems to see the road under observation the way it is) nor the real object (since the subject is

⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 218.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 348.

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 350.

⁶¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 351.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 365.

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 299.

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 302.

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 302.

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 304.

incapable of the absolute perception of the road). This is a tension in the perceiving subject which explains the mystery of reality. By introducing depth in his epistemology, Merleau-Ponty indicates that a subject cannot perceive reality as it is in itself, but reality as he constitutes it. Constitution saves from intellectualism as Merleau-Ponty rightly states: "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."⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty attributes this philosophy to Husserl for whom the transcendental field has ceased to be only that of human thoughts and has become that of the entire experience.⁶⁸ The best way to enter into experience is vision; it is therefore important to develop a theory of vision according to Merleau-Ponty who was of course influenced by Aristotle and mostly by Husserl.

2.4 Centrality of Vision

Though Aristotle advocates for the importance of all the senses in the acquisition of knowledge, he nevertheless gives greater value to sight. For him, men take greater delight in sight inasmuch as it helps them to perceive differences between things better than any other sense.⁶⁹ This Aristotelian viewpoint will be very inspirational for Merleau-Ponty to the extent that he will give a lot of importance to sight in his epistemology. As for Claude Lefort,⁷⁰ meditation on sight is a leading factor of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.⁷¹

Husserl is the one who influenced Merleau-Ponty the most about vision since he states that "inquiry must concern itself always with *pure 'seeing'* and, therefore, not with the genuinely immanent."⁷² It is through pure seeing that the essences are arrived at, since the inquiry that Husserl is talking about is "inquiry into essences."⁷³ This Husserlian viewpoint shows that genuine knowledge comes, not from inner being, but from the object of vision which is evidently there or which is given. Additionally, he asserts: "The root of the matter, however, is *to grasp the meaning of the absolutely given, the absolute clarity of the given*, which excludes every meaningful doubt, in a word, *to grasp the absolutely 'seeing' evidence which gets hold of itself*."⁷⁴ The seeing in question here is not the lowest or naïve level since for Husserl, "it really makes no sense at all to talk about things which are 'simply there' and just need to be 'seen.'"⁷⁵ Serious thought has to go beyond what is simply natural.

Having given the Husserlian inspiration about vision, we move to Merleau-Ponty who developed this theory on his own. What is Vision and what is its condition of possibility? Vision is seeing and the visible is colour: "Sight, it is said, can bring us only colours or lights, and with them forms which are the outlines of colours, and movements which are the patches of colour changing position."⁷⁶ Hence, I see things under two conditions, first, that they are coloured and, second, that they are put in light. In thick darkness, we don't see anything but darkness since the latter is coloured — it is dark or black. Actually darkness is that blackish reality which covers all objects in such a way that they become hidden from our eyes. If something is not coloured, it becomes invisible.⁷⁷ Additionally, vision takes place by intentionality⁷⁸ otherwise, the subject cannot perceive at all.

Besides, vision puts the subject in contact with the world. In his later works, Merleau-Ponty says that to see is to have at a distance.⁷⁹ Sight envelopes, palpates, and espouses things.⁸⁰ Vision grants to me the presence

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 437.

⁶⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Philosophe et son ombre," 1286.

⁶⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, I, 980, 25.

⁷⁰ Claude Lefort (April 21, 1924–October 3, 2010) is a French philosopher. He was a student and intimate friend of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He collected the works of his master in a book entitled *Œuvres*. He was a Director of studies at the *Ecole des Hautes études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) in Paris. There, he taught Political Philosophy [Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Œuvres*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 7].

⁷¹ Cf. Claude Lefort, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," in *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 13.

⁷² Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 7.

⁷³ Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 7.

⁷⁴ Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 7.

⁷⁵ Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 9.

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 266.

⁷⁷ Something to see offers itself to the subject as a coloured thing; otherwise, it is not visible at all. Is there anything which is absolutely colourless? If yes, it cannot be seen. I think of the air, which is something material since I can feel it on my skin, but which I cannot see, because my eyes are incapable to perceive its colour. It probably has no colour; if it has, then it must be too light to be perceived by bare eyes.

⁷⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 471.

⁷⁹ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "L'Œil et l'Esprit," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 1597. (« voir c'est avoir à distance »)

⁸⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1758. (« Le regard, disions-nous, enveloppe, palpe, épouse les choses visibles. »)

of what is not me, of what simply and fully is (*de ce qui est simplement et pleinement*).⁸¹ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty refers to Bergson who says that the plenitude of things under my gaze is as if my vision was being done in them rather than in me. There is a relationship between being and me, which makes it possible that being be for me a spectacle.⁸² This relationship is nothing else but the dialectic perception-thought that generates knowledge. Merleau-Ponty shows that perception is at the measure of being and opens me to it: Perception is in Bergson the whole of these complementary powers of understanding which are only at the measure of being.⁸³

Being is the perceived being,⁸⁴ the spontaneous or natural being which the Cartesians did not see, since they were looking for being at the background of nothingness and since, as Bergson would say, in order to take hold of the in-existent, they sought the necessary which is ready-made.⁸⁵ Vision however does not present to the subject a ready-made thing, but an object of experience. Merleau-Ponty expresses this as follows: "But vision is not thinking that one sees, if we understand thereby that it itself links up with its object, and that it becomes aware of itself as absolutely transparent, and as the originator of its own presence in the visible world."⁸⁶ I do not see things in my mind, except what my vision brought in. Concretely speaking, I see things or I see the world; I must therefore be oriented to the worlds: "The essential point is clearly to grasp the project towards the world that we are."⁸⁷ I am a project towards the world and indeed I tend to and perceive things which are in the world. To see a thing is to confirm its Being-There. I know only what really exists, and the best way to be in contact with the existent is vision. For Merleau-Ponty, "it is not possible to see what is not there"⁸⁸ lest vision be equated with illusion. Even metaphysics is done through the vision of the world. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that the greatest merit of Husserl as from the time his philosophy reached its maturity is to have circumscribed in the vision of essences the morphological essences and the phenomenological experience constituting a research field where philosophy and knowledge of positive science would meet.⁸⁹ Husserl is convinced that the essences are seen, and he expresses this in many instances. For example, he says the following: "It seems, at first, that in 'seeing' essences we have only to grasp in its generality the genuinely immanent in the *cogitationes* and to establish the connections rooted in essences."⁹⁰ What he calls genuinely immanent is different from the Cartesian immanence; it is precisely that which results from seeing.

I can now say that the vision of essences comes in as a result of a cognitive process starting from seeing in the natural field. However, vision in the natural field does not show the object as it really is since a thing can appear differently from time to time due to colours in which it is successfully observed. Merleau-Ponty summarizes this as follows:

In gaslight a blue paper looks blue. And yet if we look at it with the photometer we are surprised to see that it sends the same mixture of rays to the eye as does a brown paper in daylight. A feebly lighted white wall which, with the reservations already stated, appears white to the unhampered vision, appears a bluish-grey if we look at it through the window of a screen which hides the source of light.⁹¹

There is therefore change of colour due to light: "It is known that a ring of gray paper on a yellow ground appears blue and, on the other hand, that a window illuminated by neutral daylight appears bluish in a room lighted by the yellow light of electricity."⁹² It is therefore challenging to speak about the constancy of a colour. To continue this idea, Merleau-Ponty says:

A gray ring drawn on a ground which is half green and half red appears gray when it is perceived as a single figure and appears half reddish, half greenish, if a line cutting the circle at the juncture of the grounds causes it to be seen as a whole composed of two half circles placed against each other.⁹³

⁸¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "L'Œil et l'Esprit," 1624.

⁸² Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Bergson se faisant," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 1401.

⁸³ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Bergson se faisant," 1402.

⁸⁴ The consideration of being as what is perceived is a shift from the traditional metaphysics for which being is abstract. Henceforth, being is tangible, the concrete being, different from that of the intellectualists. The phenomenological being is nothing else but reality, something which really is.

⁸⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Bergson se faisant," 1403.

⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 471.

⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 471.

⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 305.

⁸⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Philosophe et la Sociologie," 1175.

⁹⁰ Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 8.

⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 357.

⁹² Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 80-81.

⁹³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 83.

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty shows that, among all the senses, sight seems to be the archetype inasmuch as it presents the object to the subject with more clarity. Though the senses communicate, sight gives more details to things. The blind people who have been cured by operation testify this as Merleau-Ponty shows:

These patients declare that tactile objects are not genuine spatial totalities, that the apprehension of the object is here a mere 'knowledge of the mutual relation of parts', that the circle and the square are not really perceived by touch, but recognized from certain 'signs' — the presence or absence of 'corners'. We conclude that the tactile field has never the fullness of the visual, that the tactile object is never wholly present in each of its parts as is the case with the visual object, and in short that touching is not seeing.⁹⁴

The things I know by touching will reveal themselves to me in a better way when I see them, since sight presents things to me with a clearer picture than any other sense can do. To elaborate on this, Merleau-Ponty refers to the experience of a blind person as follows:

One blind boy of twelve gives a very good definition of the dimensions of sight: 'Those who can see,' he says, 'are related to me through some unknown sense which completely envelops me from a distance, follows me, goes through me, and, from the time I get up to the time I go to bed, holds me in some way in subjection to it'.⁹⁵

Sight is for the person born blind an unknown sense which could be known only if he could see. Frankly, the blind people "ask a question to which only sight could provide an answer. And this is why the blind person, having undergone his operation, finds the world different from what he expected, as we always find a man different from what we have heard about him."⁹⁶ Merleau-Ponty explains the difference between the appreciation of things that the subject has out of sight and what he could have without sight, in these words:

The blind man's world differs from the normal person's not only through the quantity of material at his disposal, but also through the *structure* of the whole. A blind man knows quite precisely through his sense of touch what branches and leaves, or an arm and fingers, are. After the operation he marvels that there should be 'such a difference' between a tree and a human body. It is clear that sight has not only added fresh details to his knowledge of the tree. What we are dealing with is a mode of presentation and a type of synthesis which are new and which transfigure the object. If we take as an example the structure 'light-illuminated object' we shall find only somewhat vague analogies in the realms of touch. This is why a patient operated upon after being blind for eighteen years tries to touch a ray of sunlight. The whole significance of our life — from which theoretical significance is merely extracted — would be different if we were sightless.⁹⁷

At the end of this section, I would like to acknowledge that vision is central in generating knowledge or in presenting reality to the subject with clarity. Nonetheless, it does not exhaust reality since the latter is characterized by depth. Merleau-Ponty underlines that the fleshly being as being of depth, the being of latency which presents a certain absence, is a being of many facets or many pages (*à plusieurs feuillets*).⁹⁸ The facets of the visible being are not only many but innumerable. In order to perceive well these multiple facets of reality, the senses need to collaborate with each other.

2.5 Unity of the Senses

The senses are diverse and Merleau-Ponty acknowledges this as follows: "The senses are distinct from each other and distinct from intellection in so far as each one of them brings with it a structure of being"⁹⁹ which can never be exactly transposed.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the senses are interconnected and all are better understood when associated with vision. Vision is to be taken as perception at large and not only as seeing since for Merleau-Ponty after Heidegger, in all the senses, it is as if I see.¹⁰¹ Heidegger says it as follows: "('We not only say, 'See how that shines', when the eyes alone can perceive it;') (...) ('but we even say, 'See how that sounds', 'See how that is scented', 'See how that tastes', 'See how hard that is'.')"¹⁰² To see through other senses would mean that sight is the typical sense which represents all the other senses: "When I say that I see a sound, I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my whole sensory being, and particularly with that sector of myself which is susceptible to colours."¹⁰³ Merleau-Ponty affirms that all the senses converge in one:

⁹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 260.

⁹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 260.

⁹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 260-261.

⁹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 261.

⁹⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1761.

⁹⁹ The phrase "structure of being" denotes the facticity of being since structure is factual.

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 261.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "L'Œil et l'Esprit," 1623.

¹⁰² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1962), 36, 171.

¹⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 272.

The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing. One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass. One sees the springiness of steel, the ductility of red-hot steel, the hardness of a plane blade, the softness of shavings. The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: it stands in a certain relation to their specific nature, and appeals to all our other senses as well as sight. The form of a fold in linen or cotton shows us the resilience or dryness of the fibre, the coldness or warmth of the material.¹⁰⁴

When the senses are oriented to an object, they are in contact with the structure of that single object from different sensations. Thus, "In the jerk of the twig from which a bird has just flown, we read its flexibility or elasticity, and it is thus that a branch of an apple-tree or a birch are immediately distinguishable."¹⁰⁵ Even though flexibility and elasticity are perceived by touch, I see it in the way a thing behaves or manifests itself. In the same sense, "One sees the weight of a block of cast iron which sinks in the sand, the fluidity of water and the viscosity of syrup."¹⁰⁶ This is easy to understand when brought to ordinary language: when someone hears properly and understands, he can say, "yes, I see," as if he sees with ears; to see is here done by an interior eye which would be the eye of the spirit. When I hear a noise, it can reveal to me how what produces that noise looks like. Hence, "I hear the hardness and unevenness of cobbles in the rattle of a carriage, and we speak appropriately of a 'soft', 'dull' or 'sharp' sound."¹⁰⁷

We should be used to think that all that is visible is shaped in the tangible (*tout ce qui est visible est taillé dans le tangible*), all that is tacit is somehow destined to visibility, and that there is encroachment upon each other, not only between the touching and the touched, but also between the tangible and the visible. Moreover, both the tangible and the visible belong to the same world. Indeed, all movement of my eyes or even all movement of my body has its place in the same visible universe and this is a marvel which is less noticed. There is a double and crossed raising (*relèvement*) of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible, they complement each other yet they do not confuse each other. Each of the two parts is a total part and yet they are not superimposed on each other.¹⁰⁸

The intercommunication of the senses helps the subject to perceive a thing better: "The table which I touch is the same one as the table which I see."¹⁰⁹ When the senses collaborate in perceiving, they give a clearer picture of a thing, they bring a subject closer to the reality under study. Merleau-Ponty compares the communication of the senses with the operation of the two eyes of the same person: "the senses interact in perception as the two eyes collaborate in vision."¹¹⁰ Two eyes always see more clearly than one. In the same perspective, two or more senses joined perceive better than one. Merleau-Ponty shows that different senses complement each other against the same background, claiming the total being.¹¹¹ The qualities of a thing are in unity: "For example, the brittleness, hardness, transparency and crystal ring of glass all translate a single manner of being."¹¹² Of course, "The sensory 'properties' of a thing together constitute one and the same thing, just as my gaze, my touch and all my other senses are together the powers of one and the same body integrated into one and the same action."¹¹³

In addition to that, the senses are many but they bring information to the same ground, the body. It can be asserted that the communication of all the senses passes through a common denominator, the body: "my body is a ready-made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another. The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, and are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea."¹¹⁴ Hence, "any object presented to one sense calls upon itself the concordant operation of all the others."¹¹⁵ Thus, "When I both touch and look at an object, it would be said, the single object is the common ground of these two appearances"¹¹⁶ as one visible thing is common to two eyes.

If therefore a phenomenon "strikes only one of my senses, it is a mere phantom, and it will come near to real existence only if, by some chance, it becomes capable of speaking to my other senses, as does the wind

¹⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 266-267.

¹⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 267.

¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 267.

¹⁰⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 267.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1759-1760.

¹⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 267.

¹¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 271-272.

¹¹¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 261-262.

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 372.

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 370.

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 273.

¹¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 370.

¹¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 268.

when, for example, it blows strongly and can be seen in the tumult it causes in the surrounding countryside.”¹¹⁷ What I see is appearance which actually is the expression of reality.

III. APPEARANCE SYMBOLIZING THE REAL OBJECT

Is there any object I can apprehend without it appearing? Or, is there any object I can know without it being portrayed in appearance? This section aims at showing the connection between appearance and reality, especially the idea that, without the senses, the knowledge of objects would be an illusion.

3.1 Knowledge is based on Perception

Thought has a history; I should ask myself about the genesis of my thought and will realize that it results from my contact with reality. Any thought whose roots would be immanent to the subject would be pointless for reflecting mere imagination. Such a mentalist thought is erroneous since it is not based on reality. Merleau-Ponty shows that the sensible world is older than the universe of thought, since the first is visible and true and that the second, invisible and with deficiencies, has its truth only if it leans on the canonical formulas¹¹⁸ of the first.¹¹⁹ Reflection is a retrospective construction for it comes in principle after an experience of the world and of what is true; it is subsequent to facts since it is established in an order of idealization and of after-words (*l'après-coup*).¹²⁰ Merleau-Ponty shows that perception is prior to reflection when he says that a child perceives before he thinks.¹²¹ The event of perception opens to a perceived thing which precedes it and which is true before it.¹²²

Merleau-Ponty doubts about a reflection which passes through essences since the latter are invariable. Experience cannot be expressed by the essential invariants since some beings, for instance the being of time, cannot be confined in that fixation. Time holds by all its fibres to the present, and through the present, to the simultaneous. It could be better to describe in terms of facts and not of essences a subject situated in space and in time.¹²³ It is good to stress that thought is always based on the visible or on a fact even when the subject thinks in terms of an essence.¹²⁴ There is a dialectic between the visible world or the fact and thought from which comes any possible knowledge. For Husserl, all reflection is of course eidetic,¹²⁵ — *eidōs* meaning form, essence, type or species —, but “‘Good form’ is not brought about because it would be good in itself in some metaphysical heaven; it is good form because it comes into being in our experience.”¹²⁶

As the vein (*la nervure*) carries the leaf from inside in the depth of its flesh, ideas are the texture of experience. Ideas are elaborated in the thickness of being and cannot be separated from it.¹²⁷ In other words, ideas have their roots in the experienced being. In the Annex of *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty shows that it is from perception and its variants that I understand how the universe of knowledge managed to be built. This universe cannot tell us anything which does not come from the lived world.¹²⁸ Still in the Annex, he says that one admits a pre-constituted world and a logic only if he saw them spring up from experience of the raw being, which is like the umbilical cord of his knowledge, and the source of meaning for him.¹²⁹ Reflection implies a return to the interior self after obtaining data from the world of perception,¹³⁰ the true world.

¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 371.

¹¹⁸ The expression “canonical formulas” is a key to understand the metaphysics of Merleau-Ponty. The sensible world is true and offers a canon to the world of thought without which the latter would be a pure mental construction. The truth of the sensible world is testified by the fact that it is really there, prior to any knowledge, and it is perceivable. The world of thought however is inexistent unless it is considered to strictly be the meaning of the perceived world. The former is therefore drawn from the latter of which it is nothing else but an abstraction.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1647.

¹²⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1678.

¹²¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1647.

¹²² Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “La Prose du Monde,” in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1520.

¹²³ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1679.

¹²⁴ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Les Sciences de l'Homme et la Phénoménologie,” in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1236.

¹²⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1679. (Pour Husserl, « toute réflexion est eidétique. »)

¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 19.

¹²⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1746.

¹²⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1781.

¹²⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1781. (« Nous n'admettrons un monde préconstitué, une logique, que pour les avoir vus surgir de notre expérience de l'être brut, qui est comme le cordon ombilical de notre savoir et la source du sens pour nous. »)

¹³⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l'Invisible,” 1677.

3.2 Perception as Path to Truth

Why does Merleau-Ponty draw the attention of his audience to perception as path to truth? In order to understand his point, it is good to start from the critique he makes about the way analytic reflection constitutes reality:

Analytic reflection, it is true, breaks with the world in itself, since it constitutes it through the working of consciousness, but this constituting consciousness, instead of being directly apprehended, is built up in such a way as to make possible the idea of an absolute determinate being.¹³¹

For Merleau-Ponty, perception as meeting with natural things takes the first place of the subject's research.¹³² He is convinced that certitude comes through perception as he writes: "there is indeed one human act which at one stroke cuts through all possible doubts to stand in the full light of truth: this act is perception, in the wide sense of knowledge of existences."¹³³

Merleau-Ponty looks at reflective philosophy like methodical doubt or any other philosophy which reduces the openness-to-the-world to spiritual acts or intrinsic relations of ideas, as being three times unfaithful to what it intends to clarify: to the visible world, to the one seeing it, and to his relations with the other perceivers.¹³⁴ This can be summarized as doubts about the world, the subject and intersubjectivity. There is no reason to doubt about these three elements since they are obvious. Merleau-Ponty does not reproach reflective philosophy only for the fact of transforming the world into poems, but also for disfiguring the being of the reflecting subject in conceiving him as thought and, to finish, to make unthinkable his relations with other subjects in the world which is common to them.¹³⁵ Merleau-Ponty strives to correct the Cartesian analysis by coming back to the perceptive faith. Henceforth, he overtakes the crisis according to which philosophy was founded on its own power which had marked knowledge.¹³⁶

Perception gives to the subject faith about the world, about a system of natural facts rigorously related to each other.¹³⁷ Most importantly, our belief in the world is the condition of our belief in our thought. In other words, it is because we first believe in the world and in things, that we believe in the order and in the connection of our thoughts.¹³⁸ Before reflection and in order to make it possible, there is therefore a need for a naïve frequency in the world.¹³⁹ There is no doubt that natural certitudes rest, with regard to the spirit and the truth, on the first seat of the sensible world, and that our assurance of being in truth is but one with our assurance of being in the world.¹⁴⁰ Hence, to be an event and to be open to a truth is not a contradiction in perception but, on the contrary, the very definition of perception.¹⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty supports the idea that it is by borrowing from the structure of the world that the universe of truth and thought is built.¹⁴² The true which would be detached from the visible thing would be illusory¹⁴³ — it is good to remember that, in this context, the visible is all that can be apprehended through the senses, since vision represents all the senses.

The unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to all subjects is the seat of truth.¹⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty is convinced that truth is above all perceptive¹⁴⁵ — in the sense that unperceptive truth would be deceptive — and that "There are truths just as there are perceptions."¹⁴⁶ My relationship with ideas is therefore identical with my relationship with the perceived world.¹⁴⁷ Truth is the expression of the perceived world and

¹³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 46.

¹³² Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1782.

¹³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 46-47.

¹³⁴ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1672.

¹³⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1677.

¹³⁶ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1661.

¹³⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1661.

¹³⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1684. (« c'est parce que je crois au monde et aux choses d'abord, que je crois à l'ordre et à la connexion de mes pensées. »)

¹³⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1684.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1647.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "L'Algorithme et le Mystère du Langage," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1520.

¹⁴² Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1648. (Nous soutenons ceci « que c'est par emprunt à la structure monde que se construit pour nous l'univers de la vérité et de la pensée. »)

¹⁴³ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1648.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1647. (« Or, cette certitude injustifiable d'un monde sensible qui nous soit commun, elle est en nous l'assise de la vérité. »)

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1527.

¹⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 459.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *L'Union de l'Âme et du Corps*, 20. (« Mon rapport aux idées est donc identique à mon rapport avec le monde perçu. »)

perception implies a world which pre-existed it or which functioned before it. Knowledge takes root in perception notwithstanding the fact that it distinguishes itself from it. Knowledge is an effort to seize anew, to interiorize, to really possess a meaning which runs through perception and which forms itself therein. Perception opens to a world which is already constituted, but which it only reconstitutes.¹⁴⁸ As we perceive a thing, we have access to its significance. Merleau-Ponty asserts it as follows:

The significance of a thing inhabits that thing as the soul inhabits the body: it is not behind appearances. The significance of the ash-tray (at least its total and individual significance, as this is given in perception) is not a certain idea of the ash-tray which co-ordinates its sensory aspects and is accessible to the understanding alone, it animates the ash-tray, and is self-evidently embodied in it. That is why we say that in perception the thing is given to us ‘in person’, or ‘in the flesh’.¹⁴⁹

3.3 *The Real is the Perceived*

Merleau-Ponty is persuaded that “real being and appearance are one,¹⁵⁰ and there is no reality other than the appearance.”¹⁵¹ If really a subject perceives, he perceives a thing; if the thing is not there and he pretends to perceive, then he is in illusion.¹⁵² Perception is not an illusion and Merleau-Ponty puts it clear: “The difference between illusion and perception is intrinsic, and the truth of perception can be read off only from perception itself.”¹⁵³

Perception indicates that something meaningful is there, as Merleau-Ponty asserts: “Every sensation is already pregnant with a meaning, inserted into a configuration which is either obscure or clear, and there is no sense-datum which remains unchanged when I pass from the illusory stone to the real patch of sunlight.”¹⁵⁴ This shift is due to precision which comes in when I perceive better. Hence, Merleau-Ponty says: “The infallibility¹⁵⁵ of sensation entails that of perception, and would rule out illusion.”¹⁵⁶ What can counter illusion is true perception. In perceiving, we place our confidence or our belief in the tangible world. It is in so doing that perceptual truth becomes possible, having overcome any possible illusion, looking at it as null and void.¹⁵⁷ True perception refers to the real, something which is there and not an illusion:

Perception and the perceived necessarily have the same existential modality, since perception is inseparable from the consciousness which it has, or rather is, of reaching the thing itself. Any contention that the perception is indubitable, whereas the thing perceived is not, must be ruled out. If I see an ash-tray, *in the full sense of the word see*, there must be an ash-tray there, and I cannot forego this assertion. To see is to see something. To see red, is to see red actively in existence.¹⁵⁸

Convinced that there is no other way to express the knowledge of the world, Merleau-Ponty says that the world is nothing else but what we perceive.¹⁵⁹ Reflection owes perceptive faith everything; the conviction that there is something or precisely, that there is the world, comes from perception.¹⁶⁰ Philosophy is that exercise that aims at bringing things themselves from their silence to expression.¹⁶¹ Perception is the true vision of being: “It is of the essence of my vision to refer not only to an alleged visible entity, but also to a being actually seen.”¹⁶² The openness to a natural and historical world is neither an illusion nor an *a priori*, but it is an involvement in being.¹⁶³

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “La Prose du Monde,” 1521.

¹⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 372-373.

¹⁵⁰ Being is what *is*, and for this reason it has to be manifested. Epistemologically speaking, being manifests itself to the subject by appearing. Any being that does not appear to the subject cannot be an object of consciousness and therefore cannot be known. How can a subject know or speak of a being which does not appear? For Merleau-Ponty, being has to appear; deep in this conviction, he goes as far as equating being and appearance. Henceforth, that which does not appear is not being but mere imagination.

¹⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 343.

¹⁵² Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 343.

¹⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 346.

¹⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 346.

¹⁵⁵ In the original text, the author uses “évidence” not “infaillibilité.”

¹⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 346.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 346-347.

¹⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 435-436.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1644.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1664.

¹⁶¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1640.

¹⁶² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 436.

¹⁶³ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1714. (« L’ouverture à un monde naturel et historique n’est pas une illusion et n’est pas un *a priori*, c’est notre implication dans l’Être. »)

Thus, intellectualists are in error when they think that the object of experience is an illusion and that the real thing is conceptual. Merleau-Ponty expresses this as follows: “When Descartes tells us that the existence of visible things is doubtful, but that our vision, when considered as a mere thought of seeing is not in doubt, he takes up an untenable position.”¹⁶⁴ In fact, this Cartesian conjecture suggests that we see an object, but we do consider it as mere object of perception which cannot be trusted, while we trust our thought — forgetting that thought is constituted out of perception. So we trust our thought which is based on an object which we judge unworthy to be trusted. To describe this scenario, Merleau-Ponty writes: “The certainty of a possibility is no more than the possibility of a certainty, the thought of seeing is no more than seeing mentally, and we could not have any such thought unless we had on other occasions really seen.”¹⁶⁵

Countering intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty inaugurates another type of *Cogito*. He therefore says: “We must return to the *cogito*, in search of a more fundamental *Logos* than that of objective thought, one which endows the latter with its relative validity, and at the same time assigns to it its place.”¹⁶⁶

3. 4 The New *Cogito* of Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty does not reject the *Cogito* of Descartes as a block; he acknowledges his merits, but corrects in him what he says to be corrected. Nobody can refute the *Cogito* and deny consciousness, lest he fails to understand what he says and renounces all statement (*énoncé*), even the statements related to the material world.¹⁶⁷ In his “Travaux et Projet d’Enseignement,” Merleau-Ponty affirms that every knowledge presupposes the truth of the *Cogito*, but notices that some philosophers choose a shortcut to reflection, seeking knowledge from their inner selves. Knowledge of this kind is nevertheless truncated (*tronquée*) since true knowledge owes more to the external realities marked by history than to the direct elucidation of one’s own life.¹⁶⁸ Referring to Kant’s *Refutation of Idealism*, Merleau-Ponty asserts that “inner perception is impossible without outer perception, that the world, as a collection of connected phenomena, is anticipated in the consciousness of my unity, and is the means whereby I come into being as a consciousness.”¹⁶⁹ This rules out immanence which is characteristic of the Cartesian *Cogito*.

Unlike Descartes’, Merleau-Ponty’s *Cogito* does not proceed by doubting, but seeks to recover what doubt excluded. The *Cogito* does not lead me to lose everything: I, as thinking subject, retrieve what doubt put aside.¹⁷⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, “There is the absolute certainty of the world in general, but not of any one thing in particular.”¹⁷¹ In addition, doubt as such implicitly affirms certainty as Merleau-Ponty writes:

He who doubts cannot, while doubting, doubt that he doubts. Doubt, even when generalized, is not the abolition of my thought, it is merely a pseudo-nothingness, for I cannot extricate myself from being; my act of doubting itself creates the possibility of certainty and is there for me, it occupies me, I am committed to it, and I cannot pretend to be nothing at the time I execute it.¹⁷²

The *Cogito* of Merleau-Ponty, the true *Cogito*, is based on the phenomenon or on something which is the object of consciousness: “Now — such is the true *cogito* — there is consciousness of something, something shows itself, there is such a thing as a phenomenon.”¹⁷³ There is a difference between phenomenon and being; the first is the object as it is constituted in thought, and the second is the object as it is pre-constituted in reality. To affirm this, Merleau-Ponty says: “In consciousness, appearance is not being,¹⁷⁴ but the phenomenon.”¹⁷⁵

The philosophizing man erroneously believes that, when he speaks and affirms, he simply expresses the mute contact of his thought with his thought without any tie with the circumstances considered to be mere external facts.¹⁷⁶ The *Cogito* cannot hold without the world since it is not a unity of pure thoughts, but a result of the unity of the subject and the object. Merleau-Ponty’s *Cogito* is clearly not the dialectic thought-thought but

¹⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 436.

¹⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 437.

¹⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 425.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “La Querelle de l’Existentialisme,” in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1302.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Annexe. Travaux et Projet d’Enseignement,” in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1812.

¹⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xix.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *L’Union de l’Âme et du Corps*, 65.

¹⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 347.

¹⁷² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 464.

¹⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 345.

¹⁷⁴ This does not contradict the affirmation that *real being and appearance are one*; it rather brings clarification. Real being is that which appears, but once it is taken into consciousness, it is no longer the tangible being, but the phenomenon — the object of consciousness.

¹⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 345.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Les Sciences de l’Homme et la Phénoménologie,” 1209.

world-thought as he writes: “The true *cogito* is not the intimate communing of thought with the thought of that thought: they meet only on passing through the world. The consciousness of the world is not *based* on self-consciousness: they are strictly contemporary.”¹⁷⁷ They are contemporary since they imply each other; none of them can exist unless the other exists too. Henceforth, “The only way to think of thought is in the first place to think of something, and it is therefore essential to that thought not to take itself as an object.”¹⁷⁸ In the same sense, Merleau-Ponty affirms that “Rationality is precisely proportioned to the experiences in which it is disclosed.”¹⁷⁹ Henceforth, rationality becomes the intellectual effort to give meaning to what is experienced. This, however, is not an arbitrary enterprise since meaning results from the testing of many perspectives: “To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges. But it should not be set in a realm apart, transposed into absolute Spirit, or into a world in the realist sense.”¹⁸⁰ The absolute spirit here does not connote consciousness which is the realm of everything; it rather connotes intellectualism, a thought system which is conceived without roots in the world; as for realism, it is the trend according to which the world is what I see. Phenomenology distinguishes itself from both for it is not based on such absolute spirit nor on the world as it is, but on the world as it appears to consciousness.

For a philosopher to do philosophy, to distinguish the true from the false, he should articulate, not an intrinsic truth, but what the spirit learns from the external world. The Husserlian sciences of man — psychology, sociology and history — show in fact that the spirit is conditioned by what lies outside.¹⁸¹ Husserl clearly avers that “all explanation of spirit, in the only way in which it can be universal, involves the physical.”¹⁸² In other words, a pure spirit, a spirit without any contact with the world, cannot be explained. Hence, he insists saying: “The spirit is real and objectively in the world, founded as such in corporeality.”¹⁸³ Merleau-Ponty therefore says that Husserl surprisingly noted that even philosophy goes down to the flux which is our experience.¹⁸⁴ The study of the phenomenon is the Husserlian way of rooting reason in experience; that is why, at the end of his career, his phenomenology became a theory of reason hidden in history.¹⁸⁵ What is under play here is eidetic psychology: by eidetic intuition, I am not only contented to live experience, but to draw meaning from it.¹⁸⁶ As for Merleau-Ponty, “This new conception of reflection which is the phenomenological conception of it, amounts in other words to giving a new definition of the *a priori*.”¹⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty explicates this as follows: “From the moment that experience — that is, the opening on to our *de facto* world — is recognized as the beginning of knowledge, there is no longer any way of distinguishing a level of *a priori* truths and one of factual ones, what the world must necessarily be and what it actually is.”¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty considers the *a priori*, not as some knowledge prior to experience, but as necessary explication of experience. This, Merleau-Ponty avers as follows: “But these *a priori* truths amount to nothing other than the making explicit of a fact: the fact of the sensory experience as the assumption of a form of existence.”¹⁸⁹ The *a priori* stands therefore for the intelligible aspect of a fact, or simply what the subject understands of a fact.

The best way to philosophize is to make reason spring up from nature: “one may say, not that there is a reason hidden behind nature, but that reason is rooted in nature; the ‘inspection of the mind’ would then be, not the concept gravitating towards nature, but nature rising to the concept.”¹⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty insists on the importance of nature as follows: “The natural world is the horizon of all horizons, the style of all possible styles, which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life.”¹⁹¹ It is to be underlined that “Reflection is not absolutely transparent for itself, it is always given to itself in an *experience*, in the Kantian sense of the word, it always springs up without itself knowing

¹⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 347.

¹⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 460.

¹⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxii.

¹⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxii.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Les Sciences de l’Homme et la Phénoménologie,” 1204.

¹⁸² Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy: Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 184.

¹⁸³ Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, 184.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Les Sciences de l’Homme et la Phénoménologie,” 1210.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Les Sciences de l’Homme et la Phénoménologie,” 1214-1215.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Les Sciences de l’Homme et la Phénoménologie,” 1216.

¹⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 256.

¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 256.

¹⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 257.

¹⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 48.

¹⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 385.

whence it springs and offers itself to me as a gift of nature.”¹⁹² Reflection is no longer the passage to another order which reduces that of tangible things, but the most accurate consciousness of being rooted in them. Henceforth, the consideration of existing things is the condition of a plausible philosophy.¹⁹³ It is clear that for Merleau-Ponty, evidence comes through experience: “The first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world,”¹⁹⁴ the intellectualists’ world. Thus, a true *Cogito* is not idealism, but insertion in the world:

The true *Cogito* does not define the subject’s existence in terms of the thought he has of existing, and furthermore does not convert the indubitability of the world into the indubitability of thought about the world, nor finally does it replace the world itself by the world as meaning. On the contrary it recognizes my thought itself as an inalienable fact, and does away with any kind of idealism in revealing me as ‘being-in-the-world’.¹⁹⁵

Merleau-Ponty goes as far as affirming that perception leads to the thing itself: “It is the thing itself which I reach in perception since everything of which one can think is a ‘signification of thing’ and since the act in which this signification is revealed to me is precisely called perception.”¹⁹⁶ It is therefore being that I target in perception.

3.5 Being and Appearance are together

It is by seeing, it is by our eyes that we arrive at the true thing;¹⁹⁷ it is on top of perception itself that we ought to seek the guarantee and the sense of its ontological function.¹⁹⁸ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty asserts:

This evidentness of the phenomenon, or again of the ‘world’, is no less misunderstood when we try to reach being without contact with the phenomenon, that is, when we make being necessary, as when we cut the phenomenon off from being, when we degrade it to the status of mere appearance or possibility.¹⁹⁹

The best way to understand the above viewpoint of Merleau-Ponty is to consider being in its concrete aspect, where the subject as well as the object is being.²⁰⁰ Each individual thing is a representative of a type or of a family of beings. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty is of the view that being has a mysterious attachment with locality and temporality.²⁰¹ Once and for all, the being-object is placed before me as the only one giving meaning to me.²⁰² This is being as object, and there is the being of beings in which all beings share. Thus, to come into the world, we particularly rest on one portion of being.²⁰³ Being can be considered to have portions or segments. In that sense, depth, colour, form, line, movement, contour, and physiognomy (*physionomie*) are the branches (*rameaux*) of being, and each one of them can bring out the whole tuft.²⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty simply says that it is the subject in a situation which makes that being be (*qui fait être l’être*) and that a situation is a region of being.²⁰⁵ What is under play is the definitions of “being as that which appears, and consciousness as a universal fact.”²⁰⁶

This is probably an influence from Bergson since for Merleau-Ponty, one of the positive points to retain from Bergson is the theory of pure perception in which being is always a perceived being.²⁰⁷ Since it is through perception that being is arrived at, it is not seen exactly the way it is. Of course, we never obtain being as it is; we only have it as interiorized, reduced to its sense of spectacle.²⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty finally says that vision is the

¹⁹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 49.

¹⁹³ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Philosophe et la Sociologie,” 1178.

¹⁹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 66.

¹⁹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xiv.

¹⁹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 199.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1643.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1642.

¹⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 462.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1657.

²⁰¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1741-1742.

²⁰² Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1681.

²⁰³ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1692.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “L’Œil et l’Esprit,” 1626.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1692.

²⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 462.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *L’Union de l’Âme et du Corps*, 88.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le Visible et l’Invisible,” 1706. (« Je n’ai jamais l’être comme il est, je ne l’ai qu’intériorisé, réduit à son sens de spectacle. »)

meeting, as at a crossroad, of all the aspects of being.²⁰⁹ Henceforth, sensation which comes through experience is “one of our surfaces of contact with being”²¹⁰ since it is through it that one arrives at being.

If being is what appears then how do we explain contingency of the world? Merleau-Ponty expresses as follows the idea of contingency: “the 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, nor as a problem to be solved as soon as possible by the discovery of some deeper-laid necessity.”²¹¹ The contingency of the world is opposed to a certain necessity which would be its truth; these two should not be taken in opposition because both belong to the same world. For Merleau-Ponty, “The world is that reality of which the necessary and the possible are merely provinces.”²¹² The contingency of all that exists and of all that is valuable (*vaut*) is not to be taken for granted, but rather, it is the condition of the metaphysical gaze (*vue*) on the world.²¹³

IV. CRITIQUE

4.1 Understanding is not limited to Tangible Things

Looking at the origin of knowledge, we are quite convinced that it comes from perception as Merleau-Ponty strongly affirms. It is indeed doubtful to consider some objects as existing without perceiving them, or to consider that ideas spring up in the mind without any connection with the external world, the world of perception. How do those who pretend to know without any reference to the sensible world acquire their knowledge? For Merleau-Ponty, the sensible world provides the subject with canonical formulas which rightly guide the declarations in the world of thought. For him, reflection is retrospective and this would mean that genuine thought is always based on facts or on experience. That is how he came up with his new *Cogito*, inspired by Husserl for whom reason has to go down to experience.

Knowledge certainly comes through experience. When we figure out the situation of a person born with total disabilities affecting all his senses, we guess that he cannot know anything, rationally speaking. He can only have introspective feelings related to hunger, thirst, pain, etc. Of course, a person who cannot see, hear, smell, touch, and taste is incapable to form the concepts of things. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty bent too much to the visible world up to ignoring any other path to knowledge. He clearly asserts: “if we rediscover time beneath the subject, and if we relate to the paradox of time those of the body, the world, the thing, and others, we shall understand that beyond these there is nothing to understand.”²¹⁴ In this sense, there is no possibility to understand God, the angels or spirits since they are not part of the abovementioned entities.

Here, Merleau-Ponty is to be overtaken by showing that spiritual beings are liable to understanding and therefore to knowability. Spiritual beings are of course mysteries, but mysteries are knowable in as far as they reveal something about their nature. This revelation comes to me always through my senses inasmuch as it occurs as a vision, a voice, a touch, etc. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty remains nevertheless inspirational for having stated that all our knowledge is acquired through the senses. Most of the things I know about God are what I hear about or from Him, through other people, in a mysterious communication, or through the Holy Scriptures. By limiting the understandable to the body, the world, the thing (understood as tangible thing), and other subjects, Merleau-Ponty fails to consider the totality of reality. God and other spirits are parts of the totality of reality and are liable to knowledge. Since they are part of reality, they are obviously part of the object of epistemology; I cannot run away from studying them. What Merleau-Ponty failed to see is that they are great mysteries requiring an adumbration of a higher level and that they are in touch with the senses given that nothing is known in the phenomenological way except through experience.

4.2 The Problem of Constancy

Merleau-Ponty affirms that a thing has properties which are invariable or constant. This comes from the conviction according to which a thing is recognizable in time thanks to immutable or stable properties. Samuel B. Mallin observes that Merleau-Ponty treats constancy after David Hume as he writes: “Hume’s concern revolves about the question of how we can know that something is the same thing (reidentify it) when it is experienced again after an interruption.”²¹⁵ We recognize a thing we previously saw “because we in fact posit constant properties in an object beyond their diverse appearances, we must just *assume* that there is a function

²⁰⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, “L’Œil et l’Esprit,” 1625. (« La vision est la rencontre, comme à un carrefour, de tous les aspects de l’Être. »)

²¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 257.

²¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 463.

²¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 464.

²¹³ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le Métaphysique dans l’Homme,” in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1345-1346.

²¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 425.

²¹⁵ Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 117.

that allows us to do so.”²¹⁶ What is invariable (constant) in the object, Merleau-Ponty says, is size and shape (the real or substantial properties leading to objectivity) and what is variable is appearance, distance and orientation (perspective).

To consider size as invariable is however problematic because some objects change in size. The concrete example is that of the organic or living beings: in the case of human beings, an adolescent is a small boy who changes in time into a big man — in this case, size has changed, but the one who knew that person at adolescence is likely to recognize him despite the change in size. It is nonetheless good not to pull Merleau-Ponty out of his context: his task is to determine the objectivity of what is perceived. In this sense, Mallin writes: “Merleau-Ponty states that this question leads ultimately to the question ‘how can there be objectivity’ (300), for the only way an appearance can be determinate is to be recognized or identified as an object or as ‘something.’”²¹⁷ In this context, size is constant and any change affecting it would only be apparent due to distance.

According to Mallin, the theory of constancy makes of Merleau-Ponty a realist and the following is the description he makes of it: “his noncausal and nondualist realist theory, which, as a form of realism, must make central the possibility and analysis of the constancy of properties and objects.”²¹⁸ He further underlines the problem related to the fact that Merleau-Ponty gives to shape and size “the status of primary (‘real’ or ‘substantial’) qualities; for when this fact is taken seriously, one must be pushed toward a realism.”²¹⁹ Indeed, Merleau-Ponty falls into realism, the very vice which he intends to do away with. The theory of constancy seems to oppose his phenomenological stand according to which reality is a mystery or something unstable due to temporality.

It is good to refer here to the notion of mystery according to Gabriel Marcel and Merleau-Ponty. In effect, Merleau-Ponty was influenced by Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), since “In October, 1936, he reviewed Gabriel Marcel’s *Being and Having*”²²⁰ in which the issue of mystery is treated. According to Gabriel Marcel, a mystery is something which is beyond a problem. Mystery transcends all conceivable techniques (adequate to solve a problem) since we, ourselves, are involved in it to the extent that the distinction between our inner being and what is set before us disappears. This is helpful to Merleau-Ponty in the elimination of dualism between the object and the subject. Credit must be given to Marcel for stating that mystery is knowable though it discloses itself to human mind gradually and never totally. I know about a mystery the much it reveals itself to me and what it keeps unrevealed is its hidden side.²²¹ In the same line, Merleau-Ponty says that the world and reason are defined in terms of mysteries not of problems for they cannot be dispelled by any solution.²²² To say that the world is a mystery implies that reality is a mystery. Any reality is therefore a mystery which cannot be confined in a frame of properties of the realist type mentioned above.

By affirming constancy of size, Merleau-Ponty is limited since he does not see that size can effectively change because of growth or shrinkage. In the above example of the adolescent who has moved to adulthood, change of size is clearly seen because the person has grown bigger, and some additional aspects like beard, modification of voice, have appeared, and still the person is recognizable. In most organic and solid beings, the invariant is only shape which permits that a thing be recognized despite its change in size. Nonetheless, some organic beings change even in shape and become deformed or simply look different. This is the case of a young tree which progressively changes its shape as more branches grow.

In our view, Merleau-Ponty would have overcome the belief in constancy by clarifying two scenarios: 1) the slow change of all things in time, and 2) the states of matter. The first suggests that things make changes (which sometimes are unnoticeable) in time. The organic or living beings are born, grow, get old and know decay, while the inorganic things deteriorate and change their substances. The second suggests that some material objects progressively modify their sizes or even their shapes. These are for example smoke (or anything in the gaseous state), flame and water or any other thing in liquid state. In this case, shape is not at all invariant. However, we perceive all material things and recognize them in time despite their states, though they might not be constant in the sense of having fixed shapes and sizes. We perceive the wind as it blows on our skin even when it appears to be shapeless and sizeless. The problem here is to know whether this water or this wind is the same as what we perceived previously since it has no shape or size determined by itself. We have the impression

²¹⁶ Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 117.

²¹⁷ Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 116.

²¹⁸ Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 113.

²¹⁹ Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 118.

²²⁰ John F. Bannan, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 4.

²²¹ Cf. Gabriel Marcel, *Being and having: An Existentialist Diary* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), 117-121.

²²² Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxiii.

of perceiving water or wind in general and not as an individual thing. What we can perceive as an individual thing is a river, not its water, hurricane or maelstrom not the wind.

Size and shape are therefore necessary features only for the perception and recognition of solid matters — notwithstanding the fact that, even there, size and shape always make a slow motion. The claim for water (or any other matter in liquid state) can be that it takes the size and shape of the container, but the fact that we recognize it as water regardless the form of its container reveals to us that the indicator of its nature is essentially something else than size and shape; it is about recognizing its substance. Despite the claim that philosophy is not a science, we have come to believe that technological tools like the apparatuses of a laboratory are factors that can enhance human capacity to perceive, especially when they help to identify the substance of a thing, for example to show that water is true water and not any other liquid.

The true invariable is neither shape nor size but a mystery of recognizance without which nothing can be recognized when perceived again, since a thing always reveals more details at each new perception. This mystery is the guardian of the secret of being and ipseity. There is an immutable character in each being which is beyond description. Of course, description cannot exhaust a mystery; if it could, then when you see for the first time a person we described to you, you could not see anything more than what we dared to present. But, despite the precision given in description, it is impossible for it to lead to a clear image of an unknown person.

4.3 Conditions of Possibility of Sight

Merleau-Ponty argues that the conditions to see things (forms or movements) are colour and light. This is to confirm that what is visible is only the lighted colours, light itself and darkness, without forgetting that too much light dazzles the eyes up to impeding sight. If one of the above conditions is not fulfilled, sight becomes problematic: we cannot see properly if there is no enough light; moreover, we cannot see properly if there are no enough colours. As an object covered by darkness is faded or invisible — except for nocturnal animals —, a colourless object or an object with very light colour is invisible or hard to see. For example, birds heat clean windows made of clear glasses because they don't see them. Also, people walk into clean walls made of clear glasses because they are difficult to be seen.

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty forgot a third condition of possibility of sight which is size: if an object is too small, it cannot be seen. One can enhance his capacity to see smallest things by some devices, but this always goes up to a certain extent for it cannot cross some limits. This would mean that some smallest things may still be hidden, confirming the mystery of the world, and are likely not to be perceived because of their smallest sizes. For Merleau-Ponty, reality is what we perceive, the implication being the exclusion from reality of the smallest beings which are difficult to perceive.

4.4 Ambiguity of the Absolute Certainty

Merleau-Ponty declares that there is the absolute certainty of the world in general but never that of anything in particular. This is probably an influence from Husserl who says: “No sensible man will doubt the existence of the world, and the sceptic in action belies his own creed.”²²³ This would mean that one is absolutely certain of the world which he sees. Moreover, as a scholar of La Trobe University of Australia Jack Reynolds observes, the complicity of body and mind which is revealed in habit and in the mastery of a certain technique proves that there is an absolute awareness of one's own subjectivity.²²⁴ The observation of Reynolds is genuine since the absolute certitude of the perceived world must go hand in hand with the absolute certitude of the subject. Besides, it is ambiguous to affirm the absolute existence of the whole while denying it to the parts of that whole.

However, Merleau-Ponty is not totally wrong; what fails him is language given that he did not express well what was in his mind. The declaration about the impossibility of certitude concerning an individual thing is understood if taken in relation with the whole work of Merleau-Ponty which underlines inexhaustibility. He could therefore say that the world as a whole is absolutely certain in the sense that we cannot doubt about its existence lest we deprive epistemology of its significance, and that an individual thing is certain insofar as we are aware of it through the senses, but that the knowledge we have of it is not absolute because we cannot exhaust its meaning.

V. CONCLUSION

The gist of this work is that thought and knowledge result from the perceived world; they owe a lot to the external world. Perception dissipates all possible doubts inasmuch as it is directed to the real world or to a thing which is really there. Thus, it opens to truth. Of course, there are truths just as there are perceptions. The real thing is not primarily the concept or thought of an object but the object of experience. Merleau-Ponty therefore inaugurates a new *Cogito* different from that of Descartes — a shortcut to reflection since it seeks

²²³ Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, 29.

²²⁴ Cf. Jack Reynolds, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed on November 2, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/>.

knowledge from inner self. The new *Cogito* is based on the phenomenon, the object of consciousness. The phenomenon is so crucial since it represents that object, the real object, by which consciousness comes into being. The presence of the real object of consciousness suggests that the true *Cogito* is not idealism, but insertion in the world. Frankly speaking, the universe of thought cannot constitute any idea except what comes from the lived world. Forms or ideas come into being out of experience and that would mean that they are elaborated in the thickness of the appearing being to the extent that they cannot be separated from it.

Nevertheless, perception does not lead to the absolute truth of reality since it is an exploratory journey; it is a unity that reforms ceaselessly. Failure to obtain final truth of reality through perception is due to perspectivity (which implies partiality), apparent size of an object seized in depth, change of colour of a visible object because of variation of light, experience based on variants (affected by time) and not on invariant essences, etc. The impossibility to perceive the world as it really is indicates that reality is a mystery which reveals itself progressively in space and time.

Though Merleau-Ponty contributes a great deal towards the development of the theory of perception, his work is not perfect. He limits human capacity to know to what is visible, but it should be extended to the spiritual world; he understands shape and size as being constant and therefore as being the conditions for recognition of things in time, but some of the things are not bound to those features — there must be a mystery of recognizance which is beyond anything describable —; he gives the conditions of possibility of sight which are colour and light, but there must be a third condition which is size; he speaks of the absolute certainty of the world and not that of an individual thing, but for us, we cannot affirm the absolute existence of a whole and deny it to its parts.

All in all, the heart of the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty is perception of reality. The theme of perception implies the dialectic between the world and thought from which knowledge springs up. Genuine thought or genuine knowledge results from perception of a real thing.

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