

Hars, L. Merleau Ponty's Philosophy

2 The Secret Life of Things

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Experience in its immediacy seems perfectly fluent. The active sense of living which we all enjoy, before reflection shatters our instinctive world for us, is self-luminous and suggests no paradoxes. Its difficulties . . . are uncertainties. They are not intellectual contradictions.

—WILLIAM JAMES¹

Nothing is more difficult than to know precisely *what we see*.

—MERLEAU-PONTY²

1. Phenomenology, Ontology, Symbiosis

In the previous chapter I argued that our intellectual efforts to understand ourselves, our relations with the natural world, and with others require that we carry out a phenomenological study of living perceptual experience. I have suggested that this is not really optional: no matter how extensive or fine-grained our neurophysiological explanations of perception become, there is a priori always more than they can capture. This “always more” that analytic explanation leaves behind is not minor or irrelevant, but immensely significant. It is the dynamic experience that we live in every moment of our lives. It is also the distinctive knowledge of ourselves, the world, and others that we get from that experience—knowledge by direct acquaintance. Indeed, I have argued that living experience isn’t some screen of ideas inside the mind or a veil of subjective appearances. For Merleau-Ponty, quite the contrary: it is a continual opening to and immersion in a natural world that is not oneself; it is the field in which we live, breathe, think, and love. Understanding this experience on its own terms—studying and articulating its unique features—isn’t some retrograde mysticism, but rather part of an important intellectual movement toward enriched understanding and integrated living. I am convinced that these goals are part of the enduring legacy of phenomenology, part of the reason Merleau-Ponty’s thought has remained vital and productive for many philosophers and theorists around the world.

Nonetheless, I have also shown how easy it can be to overlook living experience. As we have seen by considering the Cartesian-empiricist tradition—and even the contemporary physicalist movement—there is an extraordinary tendency to miss the complex characteristics of living perception. There is a

profound temptation to intellectually reify some one aspect of the experiential field as *constitutive* of the field. All this is why Merleau-Ponty says (in the above epigram) that “nothing is harder than to know what we see.” As he puts it in a public radio address in 1948:

The world of perception, or in other words the world which is revealed to us by our senses and in everyday life, seems at first sight to be the one we know best of all. . . . Yet this is a delusion. In these lectures, I hope to show that the world of perception is, to a great extent, unknown territory. . . . I shall suggest that much time and effort, as well as culture, have been needed in order to lay this world bare and that one of the great achievements of modern art and philosophy . . . has been to allow us to rediscover the world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget. (WP 39)

Again, this cultural work of “rediscovering the world” is called phenomenology. For the philosopher, as distinct from the artist, it involves studying living experience on its own terms, criticizing abstract accounts and models of reality that hide and deform it, and trying to find language that will reveal this elusive experience to others for their confirmation or criticism. This understanding of phenomenological method permits some insights that may be illuminating. First, it allows us to see what I believe is an enduring distinction between Merleau-Ponty’s method and Wittgenstein’s “grammatical investigations.” For despite many similarities in their views and arguments (to an uncanny degree for thinkers who did not know each other’s work), Merleau-Ponty has little confidence that grammatical studies into the proper content and boundaries of language regions can let experience come alive. For him (following Heidegger), bringing the subtleties of experience to light and life requires extremely intentional, strategic acts of showing (saying to show). Further, these acts of showing may well require the creation of new language, new forms of expressive and evocative language, rather than Wittgenstein’s reliance on existing and “ordinary” language.

A second thing I should say about Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological method is that it has substantial ontological intentions. To show this, I want to mention an old, malingering criticism that “phenomenology is all well and good, but its results and insights are merely psychological.” At this point we are able to identify the error in this effort to contain or minimize phenomenology: it depends upon the notion that perceptual experience is essentially subjective (“merely psychological”) rather than *real*. However, once we have abandoned the Cartesian theory of perception as abstract and illegitimate, once we give up the traditional notion that experience is a “screen” hiding reality (the Cartesian Theater), then Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to study, uncover, and show