

The Creative Appropriation of Our Situation: On Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

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In an essay that begins somewhat nostalgically, Sigmund Freud recalls how on a summer walk he tried to console a young poet who was feeling sad about the transience of things. He said the sorts of things an older person might be expected to say to a younger person, unobjectionable but predictable things, with equally predictable lack of immediate effect. The exchange would have been utterly unremarkable had it not happened to occur in the year prior to the outbreak of World War I. Looking back on the war that gave a new context to the question of transience, Freud strikes a different tone: the war, he says, “shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, [...] it revealed our instincts in all their nakedness and let loose the evil spirits within us which we thought had been tamed forever by centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds. It made our country small again and made the rest of the world far remote. It robbed us of very much that we had loved and showed us how ephemeral were many things that we had regarded as changeless.”¹

As Freud well knew, it belongs to consciousness to misconstrue itself. It tends to lose itself in its dealings with the world, either taking things as its theme and forgetting itself, or, even when it recognizes itself as its theme, doing so in the same way that it deals with things. These sorts of errors are subtle and difficult even to state clearly, since our very ways of thinking and speaking are formed through our dealings with the world. The problem is compounded by the fact that our world is as much a cultural one as it is a natural one. Our self-understanding, too, is

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¹ Sigmund Freud, “On Transience,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, XIV 307.

part of that world, and as a result, when we make errors about our situation, they become part of it. To get a clearer view of ourselves, then, we cannot simply turn away from the world.

But this is to say that it also belongs to consciousness to be, in some fashion, aware of itself. In learning to navigate its world, it learns at the same time about its own powers and possibilities, its perceptual discernment, its bodily coordination, its intellectual and cultural insight. It comes to know itself, not despite, but in and through its engagement with things and other people and in general in its grappling with the determinacies of our shared world, even with what is partial or erroneous in them. This worldly coming-to-know—this oblique acquisition of self-knowledge—is something that can be built on or passed down, patiently accumulated by generations who remain strangers to their fellow-workers in this labor. For all that it can be amassed, however, the work of culture is decidedly not the establishment of something permanent.

This is the difficult thought that our embodiment, our historicity, and, in a word, our finitude demand that we grapple with. It is one that science and philosophy, powerful achievements on their own, have often failed to acknowledge, for essential reasons. The quote from Freud with which I began bears witness to how surprising was the war's revelation of the fragility of millennial human accomplishments. "Many things," he says, "we had regarded as changeless." But many valuable and necessary things are *not* changeless. They are afflicted with something like "inherent vice," to borrow a term, an object's own tendency to deteriorate over time, in effect, to destroy itself.

In the particular context of scientific knowledge, Edmund Husserl powerfully described some of these inherent causes of degradation in his work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Husserl noticed at work in science itself a process he called

“sedimentation”: the advance of science progressively builds up a multi-layered structure, since each new advance depends on taking previous advances for granted. But that means the ultimate foundations are ever receding and it grows increasingly difficult (if it has not long passed being impossible) for any individual researcher to have an adequate grasp of all the bases of their claims. In response, Husserl called for a reawakening of what had become sedimented, a return to primordial experiences, with the thought that the enduring legitimacy of the entire scientific enterprise, or perhaps even of “Europe” or “the West” itself, might thereby be secured.

The philosopher whose work I want to talk about here belongs to this phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Husserl, but he also extends and modifies it, beyond the ways various other German and French philosophers had already done. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s main work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, stands in a complex relation to these and its other philosophical predecessors, partly because of its incorporation of material traditionally thought to lie outside the realm of philosophy—in particular, psychology and art—but partly, too, and most importantly, because of its own distinctive character. In what follows, I will mostly forgo the history of ideas and present what seems to me to be a central theme of that book, an abiding and orienting concern that will, I hope, indicate adequately in a short time what is distinctive and valuable about it. This will necessarily involve some simplification and most of all a reduction of live thinking to static propositions. I hope that shortcoming will not turn you away. The book itself is rhetorically and argumentatively difficult, sinuous and laden with scholarly reference, but it’s also full of vital insight, concealed in seemingly offhand comments that reveal, in a manner reminiscent of Aristotle, a fully committed philosophic mind that discovers meaning in all things great and small, perhaps especially the latter.

The lecture falls into two main parts, corresponding to two related claims from the *Phenomenology* about the character of consciousness, experience, or perception. First, our perception, even in its most basic manifestations, takes the form of a creative appropriation of our situation; second, since the appropriative character of experience leads to its forgetting its creative character in the developed products of its activity, its continuing vitality demands that this forgetfulness be overcome, by further experience—in other words, by a fresh creative appropriation of our situation. A coda will reflect on this cyclical recuperative structure as definitive of human existence.

In this first part, then, I will discuss the notion of perception as creative appropriation of a situation, and then illustrate it with a few examples. Perhaps the most fateful choice of word is in Merleau-Ponty's title. What he means by "perception" covers an uncommonly broad range of human capacities: from the mere discernment of colors or pitches or shapes to the grasp of the possibilities for complex motor engagement afforded by the physical environment, from the ability to hear, understand, and speak a language to the power to glimpse the faults in the habitual styles of interpersonal interaction that have ruled one's life for many years, finally, perhaps even to the recognition of a growing momentum within history itself that one is poised to join or oppose. Attempting to present Merleau-Ponty's thought by writing this lecture has taught me how deeply ingrained is his commitment to the thoroughgoing unity of perception in this broader sense, even as that commitment poses problems to the interpreter, who might prefer that things be sharply distinguished and then stay put. While knowledge of his work has benefited from the attention of researchers working in philosophy of mind and cognitive science, their interest is often limited to perception as it is traditionally defined, that is to say, rather narrowly. By contrast, for Merleau-Ponty, there is nothing in human existence the meaning of

which remains comfortably confined to a separate realm. Perception is existential through and through, which is to say it is involved in and affected by everything that counts as meaningful for us.

A word now about “creative.” I mean two related things by calling our perception a creative appropriation of our situation. First, it is not a passive noticing, but goes beyond what is given by relating what is given to our concerns. Second, perception is the recognition and extension towards completion of promptings inherent in what is given. More on the second later, but the first is a familiar idea one can already find in Aristotle’s account of the form of soul common to all living things, the nutritive. Aristotle points out that “food” is a relative term that refers inherently to a living being who can feed (*De Anima* II.4). In the same vein, Merleau-Ponty writes: “Already the mere presence of a living being transforms the physical world, bringing to view here ‘food’, there a ‘hiding place’, and giving to ‘stimuli’ a sense which they have not hitherto possessed” (220).² In other words, the living being who can perceive does so in terms of its own project of life, imbuing the flatly physical world, which knows nothing of these concerns, with fresh significance.

But that means that something that in some way answers those concerns must also present itself. This is part of what I mean by saying perception is of a “situation.” Since the kinds of concerns living and thinking beings like ourselves bring with us are wildly diverse, perhaps even illimitable in principle, what is to count as answering them, what the object of our perception is, must be defined equally capaciously. “Situation” seems like a compact term for conveying not just some particular quality or item, but also a whole meaningful configuration of multiple interrelated elements: for example, the quality of illumination of one’s reading

² All references are to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), originally published in French in 1945 (Paris: Gallimard).

environment, one's domestic finances, the balance of spices in a dish, or the severely tested morale of one's colleagues in a common endeavor.

Finally, in addition to saying perception is creative and refers to a situation, I say it is an "appropriation." By that, I mean to highlight its cumulative, self-transformative, one might even say "prosthetic," character. When perception is not the nearly effortless recognition of what is already known, it is clear that it accomplishes something. It changes both the situation and the perceiver. All who are able to walk or speak, for example, have learned to do so and thereby entered a fundamentally different world, both acquiring these new powers themselves and entering a transformed situation that offers its own new paths to pursue. The process of perception in the sense of learning thus makes what we perceive in some way our own, not by transforming some external indifferent physicality into an internal mental representation of it, but by transforming the relation between "I" and "it" in such a way that those terms come to mean something different. This is perhaps clearest in the use of tools, which become as it were parts of one's body, but many other ways of being have for Merleau-Ponty this same structure (indeed, everything that counts for him as "perception").

In the remainder of the first part of my lecture, let me try to illustrate this creative, situational, and appropriative character of perception by reflecting on a few examples drawn from the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In particular, I will speak of our perception of the color of things in different conditions of lighting and our experience of space as oriented. As examples, they have the value of being about basic structures of ordinary perception that appear to be more direct or simple than they are. They also have the virtue of being good specimens of phenomenological description. In both, we find something like the projection of a norm.

The perception of color might be supposed to be something primitive and, as it were, almost mechanical. We sense a color, we might say, because of our physiology, because a color-stimulus has impinged upon a color-sensitive organ, and of course without this, there would be no seeing. But, turning to the description of sight, Merleau-Ponty notes a discrepancy between this theory and our experience: “a coloured area appears to be the same colour over the whole of its surface, whereas the chromatic thresholds of the different parts of the retina ought to make it red in one place, orange somewhere else, and in certain cases colourless” (8-9). In other words, if our experience of color were just the point-by-point registering of signals, the physiological differences in the receptors ought to show up as perceptual differences; but they don't. “The ‘sensible,’” he concludes, “cannot be defined as the immediate effect of an external stimulus” (9).

And it is not only the internal differences which are in some way ignored by perception: “This red patch which I see on the carpet is red only if a shadow lying across it is taken into account; its quality is apparent only in relation to the play of light upon it, and hence as an element in a spatial configuration. Moreover the colour can be said to be there only if it occupies an area of a certain size[...]. Finally this red would literally not be the same if it were not the ‘woolly red’ of a carpet” (5, translation modified). I don't mean to bring in all the complexities of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of color-perception, but I want to point to one aspect of the experience mentioned that is available to us with minimal preparation. Notice, if you will, some uniformly colored object, a carpet, a painted wall, a table. Note, too, that you see it as having a single color even though its parts are differently illuminated. Perhaps a patch of sunlight lies upon its surface; perhaps a nearby object casts a diffuse shadow from the lamplight. No matter: the thing has a color and you see that single color as belonging to it. That means that your sight

itself somehow reckons with the conditions of illumination and that the perceived color of some particular part of your visual field depends on the whole. This dependency can be revealed—to sight—by blocking your vision of the rest of the field, as Merleau-Ponty points out:

A feebly lighted white wall which...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. The painter achieves the same result without a screen and manages to see colours as they are determined by the quantity and quality of reflected light, provided that he isolates them from their surrounding, by half-closing his eyes, for example. (357)

It seems worth noting in passing that it is an essential competency of the painter to know this truth about the perception of color, one that escapes the naïve theorist. A few pages later, Merleau-Ponty makes explicit what is happening in the similar situation of adjusting from natural to artificial light by coming indoors; the latter may have a yellowish cast, but our perception corrects for it by making the new situation the norm. Light becomes “lighting”:

The yellow light, in assuming the function of lighting, tends to become anterior to any colour, tends towards absence of colour, and ... correspondingly objects distribute the colours of the spectrum among themselves according to the degree and mode of their resistance to this new atmosphere. Every colour...becomes determinate in relation to a level which is variable. The level is laid down, and with it all the colour values dependent upon it, as soon as we begin to live in the prevailing atmosphere and re-allot to objects the colours of the spectrum in accordance with the requirements of this basic convention. (362-63)

To conclude, then, in taking into account variations in lighting by preserving things’ uniformity of color, perception operates as a whole that involves the projection of a norm. It goes beyond

what is given, treating some light as belonging to things and some of it as belonging to the situation, that is to say as lighting, but doing all of that by the same means. It makes the situation answerable to its concern with visibility and the identification of objects, and is not concerned with some sort of mere registering of a stimulus.

Another indication of the creative character of perception involves our experience of space as oriented, that is, as privileging a certain framework of axes polarized as individually meaningful directions: up, down, left, right, forward, backward. The practical importance of orienting oneself in this way is plain. Somewhat harder to account for, however, is the manner in which a preference for perceiving something in a certain favored orientation is directly embodied in the meaning of that thing. A common example used by the school of Gestalt psychologists, from whom Merleau-Ponty draws much, is that of a square and a diamond, figures that are geometrically identical but perceptually distinct. Merleau-Ponty also uses the more vivid example of a face seen upside down.

If someone is lying on a bed, and I look at him from the head of the bed, the face is for a moment normal. It is true that the features are in a way disarranged, and I have some difficulty in realizing that the smile is a smile, but I feel that I could, if I wanted, walk round the bed, and I seem to see through the eyes of a spectator standing at the foot of the bed. If the spectacle is protracted, it suddenly changes its appearance: the face takes on an utterly unnatural aspect, its expressions become terrifying, and the eyelashes and eyebrows assume an air of materiality such as I have never seen in them. For the first time I really see the inverted face as if this were its 'natural' position: in front of me I have a pointed, hairless head with a red, teeth-filled orifice in the forehead and, where the

mouth ought to be, two moving orbs edged with glistening hairs and underlined with stiff brushes. (294)

In this orientation, the face becomes monstrous, no longer even a face, properly speaking. The very meaning of the face as perceived depends on its being oriented “correctly,” which is to say that our perception of spatial orientation, too, involves a norm. If we perceived things indifferently to their orientation, as perhaps we do in our use of geometrical diagrams, and then a concern for orientation was something superadded separately, the face when turned upside down would not change in meaning from “human” to “monster.” The fact that it does indicates how strongly we feel that norm, or rather, how strongly we depend on its being at work behind the scene, such that its absence makes the world a horror show.

Given how important orientation is, it’s surprising to learn that it is also quite changeable. This is not easily shown in ordinary experience, but can be revealed by experiments that cleverly undo elements of our normal perceptual situation. In one such series of experiments, psychologist George M. Stratton explored the visual contribution to the sense of spatial orientation with “a simple optical contrivance.”³ By means of an arrangement of lenses, he was able to project an inverted image of the whole visible world onto his eyes, to see it upside down. He forced himself to try to reckon with the world while wearing this device for several days during each trial. Surprisingly—if not shockingly—after a few days of disorientation, his vision of the world righted itself. It became the new norm. Think of what this means for your present perception: your visual sense of up and down is not permanent, but involves an invisible contingency, without which the simplest navigation of your environment would be impossible, as is shown in the experience of vertigo. And what this experiment shows that the experience of

³ G.M. Stratton, “Some Preliminary Experiments on Vision without Inversion of the Retinal Image,” *The Psychological Review* (1896), 512.

vertigo would not show, is that an altered visual sense of up and down, even a completely inverted one, can take on a stable form.

For Stratton, a key conclusion to be drawn from this is that “up” and “down” are not, so to speak, “hard-wired”; they do not have their meaning for sight because of the position of parts of the image on the retina. Hence, he speaks in the title of his paper about “Vision Without Inversion of the Retinal Image.” For sight, “up” does not mean “what is projected towards the bottom of the retina.” Merleau-Ponty agrees with him up to this point, but takes issue with the interpretation according to which the correction depends on the meaning of up and down residing in the sight of one’s own body, such that we would merely associate “down,” say, with the direction one must look to see one’s feet and that moving one’s body and seeing the visible results would be enough to bring about the correction. He writes:

[T]his interpretation is unintelligible. The inversion of the landscape, followed by the return to normal vision, are explained [on this theory] by supposing that ‘up’ and ‘down’ are inverted and vary with the apparent direction of head and feet *as the latter are given in the image*, that they are, so to speak, marked out in the sensory field by the actual distribution of sensations. But in no case—either at the beginning of the experiment, when the world is ‘inverted’, or at the end when it ‘rights itself’—can the orientation of the field be given by these contents which appear in it, head and feet. For these contents would themselves have to have a direction, in order to pass it on to the field. ‘Inverted’ [*renversé*] or ‘upright’ [*droit*], in themselves, obviously have no meaning. (287, tr. mod.)

Now, Merleau-Ponty knows that the direction of head and feet are not present only “as [they] are given in the image,” but are also felt; they make up an essential dimension of the subject’s proprioception, his feeling of his own body. He shows that knows this by pointing out that when

the subject is more involved in tactile activity, his vision reverts to a normal orientation more quickly.⁴ If he ignores that element when he takes issue with the above interpretation, he does so because to say that the visual field reorients itself to match the tactile field would only be to defer the immediate problem and conceal a deeper one.

One cannot take the world and orientated space as given along with the contents of sense experience or with the body in itself, since experience in fact shows that the same contents can be successively orientated in one direction or another.... What we want to know is how an object can appear to us as ‘right side up’ [*droit*] or ‘upside down’ [*renversé*], and what these words mean. (288, tr. mod.)

In order to answer these questions, Merleau-Ponty turns to another experiment on visual orientation that detaches it from tactile exploration of the environment or direct perception of one’s own body but still shows the same flexibility. Max Wertheimer, who studied the visual perception of motion, used an apparatus involving a series of mirrors that could be looked through to see a room tilted forty-five degrees from the vertical, with similar results to Stratton, in a much shorter time-frame.

The subject at first sees the room ‘slantwise’. A man walking about in it seems to lean to one side as he goes. A piece of cardboard falling down the door-frame looks to be falling obliquely. The general effect is ‘strange.’ After a few minutes a sudden change occurs: the walls, the man walking about the room, and the line in which the cardboard falls become vertical. (289, tr. mod.)

⁴ “It is noticeable that the normal situation is the more successfully achieved in proportion as the subject is more active; for example, as early as the second day when he washes his hands. It would appear then that it is the experience of movement guided by sight which teaches the subject to harmonize the visual and tactile data: he becomes aware, for instance, that the movement needed to reach his legs, hitherto a movement ‘downwards’, makes its appearance in the new visual spectacle as one which was previously ‘upwards’” (286).

Here, then, it's not clear how the problem of the origin of orientation can be referred outside the spectacle, as it was in the interpretation of Stratton's experiment. The reorientation of the visual field seems to happen within sight alone. Or at least, the non-visual consciousness of one's own body does not helpfully contribute to establishing the new visual orientation. In fact, it is at odds with it. However, under normal circumstances, without any experimental disruption of one's senses, your sense of spatial orientation need not follow the actual orientation of your body. You can lie on your side, for example, without coming to believe the world itself has fallen on its side. From this, Merleau-Ponty infers that it is not your actual body that is involved in this ordinary process, but your "virtual" body, what you take the orientation of your body to be. And so, too, in Wertheimer's experiment, the clash between competing orientations is resolved in favor of this projected or imagined one that is in accord with what the subject sees, and this resolution extends beyond sight.

This virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is, and that instead of his real legs and arms, he feels that he has the legs and arms he would need to walk and act in the reflected room: he inhabits the spectacle. (291)

What is striking here is the conjunction of two opposed tendencies. On the one hand, the experiment underscores the flexibility of our sense of orientation, possibly even more than Stratton's already surprising demonstration. On the other hand, it shows how thoroughly non-optional an orientation rooted in some kind of phenomenon that supports it really is. The absence of any orientation would be debilitating, a scarcely endurable vertigo. We *must* orient ourselves, and we must do so in terms of our bodily interaction with the world, but the phenomena by

which we orient ourselves are not sufficient in themselves to determine our orientation, which is shown by our felt uprightness being overridden by the sight of the tilted room.

In general, then, both sight's reckoning with lighting and our whole perception's reckoning with orientation testify to the presence of norms in experience that go beyond what is immediately presented and tend to complete what is inherent in it; they testify to the creative or virtual character of experience. Further, the ubiquity and invisibility of these structures of our perception, and the fact that normal perception depends on having settled these issues and built on the new situation they offer, all testify to its appropriative character.

In the closing pages of the section on spatial orientation just cited, Merleau-Ponty reflects on this inherent but ambiguous spatial situatedness of our existence and draws a significant conclusion from it. He notes that the correction of orientation found in Wertheimer's experiment, the supplanting of one spatial level by another virtual one, suggests a series that can have no first term in my personal history. Getting one's bearings always seems to mean reestablishing them. He concludes from this and other considerations that "My personal existence must be the resumption of a *prepersonal* tradition. There is, therefore, *another subject beneath me*, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is *my body* [...]. Space and perception generally represent, at the core of the subject, the fact of his birth, the perpetual contribution of his bodily being, a communication with the world more ancient than thought" (296, *emph. mine*).

It was the dream of a certain strain of phenomenology to return to just this sort of decisive point in the mind's history, this inauguration of meaning or birth of sense. It sought to reawaken primordial experiences, whatever they might be, to return to the primal self-evidences that consciousness's ceaseless construction had buried under layers of sediment. Merleau-

Ponty's response to this question about origins has led to the idea of a bodily substructure to experience, even a bodily prehistory to subjectivity. But the response itself is as internally complex and ambivalent as both the situation it is trying to describe and the tradition of thought surrounding it, so understanding it at all will require some flexibility. Like the visible landmarks by which a new sense of orientation in space establishes itself, key terms in the conceptual landscape—"body" and "mind" perhaps most of all—must here be allowed to come unmoored, to float uncontextualized until a new structure that comprises both, a new *Gestalt*, can come into view.

In this second part of the lecture, I will try to do justice to an essential component of this description of experience as embodied and historical, what I will provisionally call the sense of the creative as both *originating* (since it imbues the merely physical with historical significance) and *alienating* (since it can only embody significance in matter). This two-fold structure, implicit in the notion of the creative appropriation of a situation, will be displayed in three domains. First, we will consider the body as the agent of knowledge in the acquisition of habits and of expression in the development of gesture and language. Second, we will consider the gestural and comprehending body at work in geometrical demonstration, founding a tradition of knowledge. Finally, we will consider the results of creative expression (whether in language, science, or art) as continually requiring fresh action on our part.

With respect to the first domain, I've already spoken of the phenomenon of habituation as one kind of "appropriation." By that, I meant to indicate the way it transformed the one who acquired a habit by giving her new powers as well as the way it transformed the world, revealing it as open to new modes of engagement. While habituation has these two sides, it is a single

process, which I think is the point of the final sentence in this brief description of the kind of knowledge possessed by one who has learned how to type:

To know how to type is not ... to know [*connaître*] the place of each letter among the keys, nor even to have acquired a conditioned reflex for each one, which is set in motion by the letter as it comes before our eye. If habit is neither a knowledge of that sort [*connaissance*] nor an involuntary action, what then is it? It is knowledge [*savoir*] in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort. (166, tr. mod.)⁵

In other words, the knowledge the typist possesses is inseparable from its realization; it is “knowledge in the hands.” The point may seem to be a minor one, but it goes against the grain of what we often thoughtlessly mean by “knowledge” or “hands,” when we focus on the supposed immateriality of thought in the first case, or on the supposed thoughtlessness of matter in the second. Merleau-Ponty elaborates:

We said earlier that it is the body which ‘understands’ in the acquisition of habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd, if understanding is subsuming a sense-datum under an idea, and if the body is an object. But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of ‘understand’ and our notion of the body. To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance—and the body is our anchorage in a world. (167)

⁵ I include the French to show that Merleau-Ponty does not directly contradict himself here, though he may contradict how English-speaking students of French are often told to think of the difference between these two verbs for knowing. However that lexical difference ought to be delineated, it ought to be clear that what it means to know is precisely what is at issue here, such that appeal to the dictionary cannot be decisive.

In this account of habit as a bodily understanding, the emphasis is on success, on the harmony of aim and act. We experience this harmony, and therefore this contact with meaning, in every habitual competency we acquire. But since they are embodied, since they are “anchored” in the world, our habitual ways of dealing with things are also inescapably public, with the result that they are equally gestures. Even a bodily “reaction” can take on extra significance and become an act of expression:

For example, the frowning of the brows intended, according to Darwin, to protect the eye from the sun, or the narrowing of the eyes to enable one to see sharply, become component parts of the human act of meditation, and convey this to an observer. (225)

Two kinds of abstraction or transcendence are at work here simultaneously. First, what might once have been a merely instinctual reaction takes on a broader significance. For example, while reading, I may squint when I can’t “see” what some author is saying, even though the problem is not with the visibility of the words on the page. Second, by taking place in this domain, bodily behavior becomes a sign to others of the meaning with which one is in contact. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “it is through the same power that the body opens itself to some new kind of conduct and makes it understood to external witnesses” (225). Habit, in its embodied perceptibility, is already on the way to gesture, which is already on the way to language. In each, there is origination of meaning, without leaving the realm of the body, so long as we understand what “body” means.

In particular, in gesture we have something that is only a movement, the motion of a body, but is taken and presents itself as a *significant* movement, one that stands out against the background of nature. This recalls the first example of the character of perception that we

considered. Just as gesture is only ever movement, we saw that what counts as “lighting” is only ever light. The perceptive body has managed somehow to make a distinction within the realms of movement and light. In general, for Merleau-Ponty, this link between embodiment and origination of meaning is present at all levels of our existence.

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body’s natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. At all levels it performs the same function which is to lend ‘a little renewable action and independent existence’ to instantaneous expressions of spontaneity. Habit is only one form of this fundamental power. (169, tr. mod.)

An example of the third level of meaning-generating activity which example Merleau-Ponty discusses at some length is that of geometrical demonstration, and in particular the proposition (I.32 in Euclid’s *Elements*) concerning the sum of the interior angles of a triangle being equal to two right angles. In part, he chooses this example as a response to Descartes, who, in his *Meditations*, appeals to it as proof of the power of the mind unaided by the senses. Given his exploration of perception and redefinition of the body, Merleau-Ponty has a different take on the issue and the example helps to highlight that. But in part, I think, he uses it for the same reason as Descartes, namely, that geometry on its own terms presents itself as (and has been taken as) a model for knowledge as such. It is layered—with many propositions depending on

previous propositions, as I.32 depends on propositions about the equality of angles formed by lines cutting parallel lines—and may therefore become “sedimented,” but it seems that each layer that is taken for granted can be “reactivated”; in demonstration, we assume that we can always retrace our steps by demonstrating anew the earlier propositions on which the present one depends. For Descartes, this experience of logical necessity and thoroughgoing connection is evidence that there is an eternal idea of the triangle, a “true and immutable nature” that the mind attains to in demonstration.

Merleau-Ponty analyzes the situation differently, in accordance with his notion of embodiment as originating meaning. He focuses on the fact that the demonstration requires an auxiliary construction. To prove that the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, one extends one side of the triangle, and from the point where the extension began, draws another line parallel to the opposite side. Having drawn the lines, one must treat the construction as revealing something, and so must see the angles fanned out on the outside of the triangle as “the same” as the interior angles. But this is not the act of a disembodied mind in touch with an essence, says Merleau-Ponty, but involves the body’s capacity for gesture. He writes:

There is no definition of a triangle which includes in advance the properties subsequently to be demonstrated and the intermediate steps leading to that demonstration. Extending one side, drawing through the apex a line parallel to the opposite side, introducing the theorem relating to parallels and their secant, these steps are possible only if I consider the triangle itself as it is drawn on the paper, on the blackboard or in the imagination, with its physiognomy, the concrete arrangement of its lines, in short its *Gestalt*.... The construction makes explicit the possibilities of the triangle, considered not in the light of its definition and as a pure idea, but as a configuration and as the pole towards which my

movements are directed. The construction is a gesture, which means that the actual lines drawn are the outward expression of an intention. But then what is this intention? I ‘consider’ the triangle, which is for me a set of lines with a certain orientation, and if words such as ‘angle’ or ‘direction’ have any meaning for me, it is in so far as I place myself at a point, and from it tend towards another point, in so far as the system of spatial positions provides me with a field of possible movements. This is how I grasp the concrete essence of the triangle, which is not a collection of objective ‘characteristics’, but the formula of an attitude, a certain modality of my hold on the world, a structure, in short. (449, tr. mod.)

In other words, both the means and result of demonstration are different from what Descartes supposes, in that they are an extension of the idea of the body as the agent of understanding: the means I bring to bear on the construction involved in a geometrical demonstration are of a piece with my general powers of perceiving and moving and orienting myself in space, and therefore involve a virtual embodiment (“I place myself at a point”), and the end of the demonstration does not leave me with an eternal idea, but what Merleau-Ponty calls by a variety of names: a “concrete essence,” a “material essence,” a “dynamic formula,” and a “structure” (his usual translation of *Gestalt*).

Transferring the idea of bodily understanding to what may be considered the domain of separable mind prompts a challenge. One might well ask how this bodily grappling with what is not quite an idea can possibly count as knowledge. There is a trade-off in Merleau-Ponty’s approach: if the object of experience is dynamic (and therefore capable of revealing what is true in it in response to our creative gestures of construction), that is as much as to say that it is incomplete, and our knowledge of it in some way uncertain. In the “intellectualist” account of

geometrical knowledge, the power of mind seems to depend on a perfect clarity, on its objects and activity having no hidden aspects or unresolved assumptions. On Merleau-Ponty's account, the partial, certainly, and maybe even the erroneous can still be productive of new knowledge. This is easier to see and perhaps more persuasive in what he has to say about the relation of thought and language generally, which we'll consider now.

We said the geometrical construction is a gesture, and earlier we identified gesture as on the way to language. The work of geometrical demonstration, and indeed of thought and culture generally, results in expression, meant to be something "acquired," something lasting.

Our body, to the extent that it moves itself about, that is, to the extent that it is inseparable from a view of the world and is that view itself brought into existence, is the condition of possibility, not only of the geometrical synthesis, but of all expressive operations and all acquired views which constitute the cultural world. When we say that thought is spontaneous, this does not mean that it coincides with itself; on the contrary it means that it outruns itself, and speech is precisely that act through which it immortalizes itself as truth. (451-52)

When Merleau-Ponty says that thought "outruns itself," I think he means to underline the way that the sort of knowledge we gain is itself something "embodied" in the sense of taking up residence in words. It outruns itself into words, which have a kind of fixity to them, an endurance potentially greater than other so-called "cultural objects," even the shaped stone of ancient ruins. But to say that thought outruns itself into words isn't to say that it simply produces an external and lasting mark of an internal and fleeting process: rather, thought itself comes into being in speaking.

It is, indeed, obvious that speech cannot be regarded as a mere clothing for thought, or expression as the translation, into an arbitrary system of symbols, of a meaning already clear to itself. It is said again and again that sounds and phonemes have no meaning in themselves, and that all our consciousness can find in language is what it has put there. But it would follow from this that language can teach us nothing, and that it can at the most arouse in us new combinations of those meanings already possessed by us. But this is just what the experience of language refutes. (451-52)

What he means by the experience of language here is perhaps clearest in the fact that the speech of another, using only words that both of us know, can teach us something new. This may be rare. Everyday speech usually gets by without changing much in our dealings with one another or our basic take on the world, and much that we do depends on that stability, that acceptance of a norm or level. But sometimes the words of a friend or a stranger, living or long dead, can rock us, pitching the familiar world headlong off its axes, more powerfully than any optical device that turns the mere spectacle of it upside down. "The lightning bolt steers all things," says Heraclitus, and I think, given his sense of the heart of language as the abode of thought, Merleau-Ponty would agree.

Self-possession and self-coincidence do not serve to define thought, which is, on the contrary, an outcome of expression and always an illusion, in so far as the clarity of what is acquired rests upon the fundamentally obscure operation which has enabled us to immortalize within ourselves a moment of fleeting life. *We are invited to discern beneath thinking which basks in its acquisitions, and offers merely a brief resting-place in the unending process of expression, **another thought** which is struggling to establish itself, and succeeds only by bending the resources of constituted language to some fresh usage.*

This operation must be considered as an ultimate fact.... Language outruns us, not merely because the use of speech always presupposes a great number of thoughts which are not present in the mind..., but also for another reason, and a more profound one: namely, that these thoughts themselves, when present, were never “pure” thoughts either, for already in them there was a surplus of the signified over the signifying, the same effort on the part of thought that has already been thought [*pensée pensée*] to measure up to thought that is still thinking [*pensée pensante*], the same provisional amalgam of both which gives rise to the whole mystery of expression. (453, *emph. mine, tr. mod.*)

There is more in this quote and more in this book than can comfortably fit in a sentence or a whole lecture of mere commentary. Still, this phrasing of the central idea seems emblematic. The book has long seemed to me to be struggling on nearly every page—often by example and sometimes, as here, by direct appeal—to teach us how to see this “other thought” in action, how to hear in the speech of others this “effort” and “surplus” that words record but cannot measure up to. Our speech, and indeed the whole of our meaningful behavior, may well be incomplete, not because it falls short of some sort of pure thought that exists aloof and worldless, but because its ownmost motion, its inherent gesture, calls out to what can meet it on its own terrain: another mind that can take up what is still living in what has been passed on. What experience originates it also alienates, consigning it to the materialities of culture, language, and history, where its fate is uncertain, but also where it is certain that neglect will ossify and petrify its once vital expression. The “creative,” then, is always recuperative, not in the sense that it can only recite the lessons of its elder masters, but in the sense that it can only come into its own by bodying itself forth, by committing itself to this world, this time, this life, always already underway.