What characterises western philosophy, and distinguishes it from the existential phenomenology of someone like Merleau-Ponty, is the assumption that ‘thought prevails over experience’, that the ultimate perspective which embraces and explains all other perspectives, is that of the thinker, and that the world and experience can only be for the philosopher, what they can be thought of as being. For those thinkers of the modern era, in particular the empiricists and rationalists, this means that the only relationships between subjects and between subjects and the world, which can be considered, are relationships which would be possible in the world as it is represented in scientific thought.

This implies that, irrespective of our experiences, and of the results of empirical research into our powers of perception, all perception of the world and of others has to be depicted as ‘mediated’ through ‘representations’. For example, if I consider the anatomical structure of my eye and the nature of light, as these are represented in scientific thought, it is clear that the eye provides me only with images of the world. The physical and chemical properties of the world affect my senses, producing ‘sensations’, from which images of the external world are formed. I have a direct or unmediated contact only with these ‘representations’, these ‘contents of consciousness’ from which I infer the existence and nature of an external world. Similarly, I have no direct contact with the experience which others have of the world and of me, I can only infer that others have thoughts and experiences from an observation and an interpretation of their behaviour.

However this it is not the way in which I experience these relationships. In general, I experience myself as seeing the world itself. Perception seems to ‘open up’ to the world, rather than simply registering the effects of the world on my senses. At the moment of perception I am more sure of the existence and nature of the object I see than I am sure of any of my sensations or images. External perception seems to precede internal perception, and to recognize an object as being external is to recognize it as being more than what it is ‘for me’. Sometimes its being ‘more than what it is for me’ is encountered in the form of its being there for others. If I am looking at an object with a companion it is not for me as if each of
us contemplates his or her own private image of the object, because I experience the other as contemplating the object itself, the same object which I see. Not withstanding the fact that I may often be deceived, I am generally more sure that my companion is conscious, and ‘open’ to this object, than I am sure about any ‘signs’ in her behaviour or sure about the reliability with which I could interpret such signs. In other words I am more sure that this object I see exists ‘for her’ than I am sure of any of my images or cognitions, about anything that exists ‘for me’. Everything suggests therefore that I have an unmediated precognitive ‘contact’ not only with the world but also with the ‘contact’ which others have with the world.

Traditional theories of perception often use the argument from illusions for defense. Here too the implicit assumption is that, like perception, the illusory perception must be depicted as an event which can take place in the world as this is represented in scientific thought. From the fact that sometimes we ‘see’ things which later we discover were never there, or that we think that we perceive when later we realize that we were only dreaming, it is argued that all perception involves an inference from signs, and that illusions are examples of incorrect inferences. But this account of how we recover from our illusions, just like the traditional accounts of how we perceive, does not accord at all with our experience. The way in which we experience the recovery from illusions never undermines our perceptual conviction that we see the things themselves. Nor does the way in which we wake up from a dream invite us to consider the possibility that we are still dreaming. The skeptic’s conclusion follows from the way in which we think about the illusory experience or the dream. When I awake from a dream it is not as if I have merely changed my hypotheses about what is real and what is dreamt; it is for me to ‘emerge’ into a world as that which has been there all along, and to leave behind a world which ‘dissipates’ as that which was never there.

Because of the assumption that thought prevails over experience, these experiences are never given any consideration in traditional philosophy, because the unmediated contact with the world and with others which they imply is impossible within the world as it is represented in scientific thought. The question about what is it like to perceive is held to be secondary to the question about what ‘actually’ happens when we perceive. However, what I will attempt to show is that any theory which places the subject in such a scientific world takes for granted, without being able to acknowledge it, ‘precognitive’ unmediated relationships between subjects and between subjects and the world, relationships which