The Phenomenal Field

In this final chapter of his ‘Introduction’ Merleau-Ponty retraces briefly the major points which have emerged in the previous chapters, discusses the need for the type of phenomenological description which the subsequent chapters will provide, and summarizes the direction which the latter will take.

By making sensing the possession of an inert quality, empiricism reduced the world to a spectacle and our own bodies to mere mechanisms. Sensing thereby lost that vitality, that mysterious richness, which it in fact has in our common experience. Empiricism rendered incomprehensible the primordial, pre-reflective significance which the world has for us as incarnate subjects, which makes of that world not a spectacle but ‘a familiar setting of our life’. It has therefore become necessary to reconsider the nature of sensing and to tackle the problem of describing it as ‘that vital communication with the world’, that ‘intentional tissue’ which underlies and sustains all thought. Sensation, attention and judgement as constructed by the classical philosophies can no longer be accepted; the emergence of significant groupings can no longer be reduced to a de facto co-existence or an intellectual connection of meaningless impressions. Perception can no longer be collapsed into knowledge; nor can the creating of connections remain the prerogative of the understanding. The prejudice of the world in itself must be abandoned and, with it, many of the concepts and distinctions employed by the classical philosophies. A new dimension calling for new conceptions is thus opened up, and Merleau-Ponty designates it ‘a phenomenal field’ to indicate that it is not a spectacle spread out before a disembodied mind, but rather an ‘ambiguous domain’ in which perspectival, incarnate subjects are situated. It is in this domain that perceptual experience can be rediscovered.

What place should this perceptual experience be assigned vis-à-vis scientific knowledge on the one hand, and psychological and philosophical reflection on the other? Merleau-Ponty con-
tends that 'science and philosophy have for centuries been sustained by unquestioning faith in perception'. Beginning with a preconceived idea of the world and a corresponding ideal of knowledge, science considered perception as providing access to that world and so paving the way for scientific knowledge. Consequently, instead of examining our actual perceptual experience of phenomena, science interpreted it with reference to the theoretical constructs of pure bodies endowed with statistically determined chemical properties and free from any force. Geometrical space and pure movement – both lacking any internal relationship to objects – replaced our lived experience of space and motion, while events became the result of determinable physical conditions. Objects were divorced from their relationship to any particular perceiver and thereby stripped of all perspectivity, ambiguity or indeterminacy. At least in principle, they were fully determinate and identical for all perceivers, thus ruling out any irresolvable contradictions within subjective or intersubjective experience. Since perception was not regarded as a dialectical process in which something comes into being, reflection considered a genealogy of being unnecessary. Moreover, the being which science defined became the only conceivable being, irrespective of the value assigned to the principles of science. As a result, the living body became an object like all the others, equally reducible to physico-chemical properties and causal relations. Emotions and attitudes were translated into impressions of pleasure and pain, and the latter linked to processes of the nervous system. Similarly, gestures and actions were resolved into objective movements explicable in terms of nervous functioning. Sensing became a matter of stimulus–response: the body, reduced to an object, mechanically received, transmitted, and reproduced qualities of the external world.

Since the living body has ceased to be the visible expression of our being-in-the-world and become instead a machine, subjectivity lost its anchor and became a disembodied consciousness surveying the world. Perception of others and co-existence with them became impossible. Since the body of the other, like our own, had been converted into an automaton, we could at best infer the existence of another consciousness which, like ours, was disembodied (and hence lacked particularity). But this meant constituting the other consciousness – thus reducing it to the status of an object in our world. Solipsism was unavoidable and