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Merleau-Ponty and liberal naturalism

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61) was a phenomenologist. His *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) is one of the classic texts of that tradition. He also seriously engaged with a range of sciences throughout his career, from psychology through to biology and physics. Some philosophers even proclaim him to be one of the first cognitive scientists, *avant la lettre*¹. Although he said critical things about naturalism, along with many other phenomenologists, he also accepted a “truth in naturalism”, even if it could not be said to be *the* truth that constrains all others. As neither a classical naturalist nor a non-naturalist, then, he appears to be a moderate or liberal naturalist (hereafter LN)². But can a phenomenologist really be a naturalist, even a liberal one? A lot hinges on how we tease this out, both as to whether it is plausible to claim Merleau-Ponty as an LN (I argue it is), and as to whether it is an attractive and coherent position. Indeed, despite its important challenges to orthodox naturalism, there are arguably two traps for LN to avoid. If it becomes too liberal, we get: dualism or an ontological pluralism that is difficult to distinguish from a constructivism; or, in seeking to sidestep that metaphysical dilemma, there is sometimes an insistence on an overly neat methodological separation between description/understanding and explanation that is belied in practice (both scientific and philosophical). It is doubtful that such positions can legitimately claim to be naturalist in orientation, liberal or not. Merleau-Ponty’s version of LN avoids these traps, however, and it is thus a useful resource for contemporary work trying to navigate between scientific naturalism and non-naturalism.

1. Liberal Naturalism

LN refers to a diverse group of philosophers, including John McDowell, Hilary Putnam, and Huw Price, and others like Strawson and Rawls are sometimes co-opted (see, e.g. DeCaro and MacArthur 2010; this volume XXX). They are unified in opposing scientific naturalism, however, and we can hence define LN in opposition to what it rejects. Primarily, this is “strong” versions of naturalism, which involve claims to exclusivity of some kind: i.e. *only* scientific theories approximate to the truth; *only* the knowledge gleaned through scientifically reputable methods warrants the name; the *only* entities that exist (or are real) are those posited or required by our best sciences. LN aims to weaken or pluralise these exclusivity claims, whether in the methodological, epistemic, or ontological registers, without succumbing to non-naturalism or dualism. This is the dialectical difficulty of any “neither/nor”/“middle-way” strategy. It is liable to be criticized by the opposing sides for failing to give them what they want, or, if it is embraced by either side, it risks losing its point of difference³. In addition, there are more than a few philosophers who contend not just that a

¹ Merleau-Ponty is an important influence on the inter-disciplinary and empirically-oriented research that has come to be called “4e” cognition – embodied, embedded, extended and enactive cognition (c.f. Gallagher 2017).

² Other related positions include Hutto and Satne’s “relaxed naturalism” (c.f. chapter XX) and Lynne Rudder Baker’s “near naturalism”. DeCaro (2014) contends that that the suffix “near” in Baker’s expression signals that her view is neutral regarding the possible existence of super-natural entities (i.e. God).

³ Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy depends on a similar strategy. A *neither* empiricism *nor* intellectualism trajectory is fundamental to *Phenomenology of Perception*, and a *neither* reflection *nor* intuition move frames his methodological reflections in *The Visible and the Invisible*. His “indirect ontology” also proceeds by distinguishing itself from what it is not, *neither* monism *nor* dualism (see Reynolds and Roffe 2018).

particular middle-way option does not work, but that there is no viable intermediate position between dualism and physicalism (Kim 1999), or idealism and materialism (Gardner 2007).

Epistemically, LN is committed to the idea that, as Mario DeCaro puts it, “there are legitimate ways of knowing and understanding that are neither reducible to, nor incompatible with, scientific method” (De Caro 2014, and forthcoming). Such a claim is not obviously anti-scientific, but it needs to be established what those ways of knowing are, and in what ways they are irreducible to scientific method, which might be characterized as the “observing, hypothesis-forming, testing, formal modelling, axiomatizing and explaining that have been so successful in the natural, biological, social and mathematical sciences” (Railton 1997, 4)⁴. If LN’s methods are reducible to scientific methods and modes of explanation, then there is no reason for the naturalist to consider weakening their exclusivist epistemic commitments, especially given they will often appeal (perhaps problematically) to reducibility in principle rather than in fact.

But LN must also avoid the non-naturalist horn of the dilemma. As such, any allegedly irreducible methods and ways of knowing must not smuggle in dualist intuitions, or special reasoning powers that are outright contradicted by well-corroborated empirical studies. Prosecuting the case for consistency with natural science allows for multiple modes of explanation, but it also requires some sort of demarcation concerning *illegitimate* ways of knowing. If nothing is ruled out, LN’s epistemological openness threatens to collapse into an “anything goes” non-naturalism. This is arguably also the case for any stipulative move that simply declares different methods are at stake and that there is no significant epistemic problem concerning the diversity of the knowledge claims produced. That strategy pluralises ways of knowing, but replaces objectivism with relativism.

It is clear, however, that LN is open to the possibility that methods like phenomenology, hermeneutics, transcendental reasoning, etc., *might* count as legitimate ways of knowing, and this is not the case for scientific naturalism. As such, Merleau-Ponty’s epistemic commitments might be brought within the fold, if we can show that they are not reducible to the scientific, and if there are sufficient criteria and exclusions to establish his naturalist credentials.

Ontologically, LN holds that there are entities (or structures, processes, etc.) that are not part of the basic scientific furniture of the world, but which are real or exist. If the “super-natural” move is to invoke Platonic forms, creationism, magic, God, or vital teleological forces without physical instantiation, LN insists on the ontological reality of more everyday middle-sized “dry goods” as J. L. Austin puts it. These are the more mundane entities that constitute, or are presupposed by, what Wilfrid Sellars calls the manifest image. They are not “spooky” in any obvious sense, since all human societies are structured around them (e.g. persons, artefacts, norms), but questions remain as to their ultimate compatibility with the scientific image in terms of its methods and its objects/processes/structures. Are persons, artworks, and each of the so-called “4Ms” – Mind, Meaning, Morality and Modality (cf. Price 1997) – reducible to scientific objects, and thus what naturalists call the “causal closure” of the physical, the idea that all physical events have only physical causes?

A weak way to argue for the possibility of LN is to deny any incompatibility with science, whether in terms of its methods or its objects. A more modally committed way is to show that science (and scientific naturalism) constitutively depends on the manifest image, and/or on what phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty call the *Lebenswelt* (life-

⁴ Appealing to intuition or ordinary language on such matters may not be sufficient, potentially begging the question against the naturalist or allowing a dualism to sneak back into the picture. This is arguably a question for versions of LN committed to a Wittgenstein quietism and/or the idea of a metaphysics-free *Lebenswelt*. For phenomenology the life-world is prior to scientific idealisations but it is not itself pre-predicative or prior to naïve metaphysics (Staiti 2018).

world), which is argued to be both prior to, and presupposed by, the idealizing of natural science. These methodological and epistemic arguments aim to show that any project of elimination or reduction is untenable because it smuggles in what it purports to explain (e.g. the 4Ms, subjectivity, temporality, etc.). Any contention that there is a necessary presupposition of the manifest image (or the life-world) typically remains at a level of abstraction, however. It enables a kind of reconciliation by fiat, especially if it is also held (with Husserl) that any transcendental investigation can learn nothing from the sphere of the ‘positive’ and empirical science – indeed, that something like this would be a category mistake or non-sensical.⁵ Such a solution also offer little guidance in any more restricted domain of inquiry, where there is at least the appearance of conflict between scientific claims and others that are more philosophical and/or common-sensical in orientation. In my view, the naturalist is right to ask for some details concerning their inter-relation, since otherwise it is a solution from “on high”, transcendently secured perhaps, but not one that speaks to the conflict on the ground.

Despite this explanatory demand, however, the scientific naturalist is also sceptical of the global reconciliationist ambitions at the heart of LN (see DeCaro 2014). Although various naturalist programs aim to reduce everyday objects and ideas to scientific objects (or properties, theories, etc.), the reduction conserves that which has been reduced in only a weak sense. After all, the core claim of any reduction is that x is nothing more than y, or x is nothing over and above y (e.g. Smart 1959). It is not eliminativism, because they do not deny that x is real. They simply hold that x is ultimately y, at its most basic level, and the more basic level (or the reduced theory) is considered to have the greater epistemic warrant. In practice, this means that orthodox naturalism has an antipathy towards attempts to “have it both ways”, which aim to unify ordinary justification and our life-world with scientific inquiry (see, e.g., Kornblith 2014, 166). In the end, if the basic theory or properties are defined by the norms and methods of natural science, then as Sellars famously puts it: "In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not" (Sellars, 1963 §41). This *scientia mensura* principle, as it is known, appears to endorse strong versions of methodological and ontological naturalism. It opens up the prospect that the scientific image might eliminate or replace the manifest one, even if Sellars himself also advocates the need for a “stereoscopic view” in ways that have been taken up by “left” Sellarsians like McDowell, Brandom, Putnam, and others⁶.

Non-naturalists also reject liberal projects of reconciliation. They do not seek to integrate scientific and non-scientific ways of understanding, nor to render them “continuous” in either methods, ontologies, or “results”. In negative vein, the non-naturalist will place pressure on any meta-philosophy of “mutual constraint” between science and philosophy, pointing out that this clarion call is often platitudinous and short on details, refrains that are very similar to those coming from the naturalist (cf. Zahavi 2009). The non-naturalist’s positive solution, if it does not explicitly countenance metaphysical dualism, involves a “methodological separatism” and a division of labour in which each is allocated to their own separate tasks/domains (Reynolds 2018). Such a move has a long and complex philosophical history that I cannot do justice to here⁷.

⁵ Husserl often makes remarks like this. See Hua VI, 208, and discussion in Overgaard 2004, 41. It is also true that elsewhere in his *oeuvre* he says quite different things, for example that every transcendental analysis has a parallel analysis that might be performed in regard to the “constituted”.

⁶ “Left” Sellarsians either drop the *scientia mensura* principle, or construe it in more liberal fashion, retaining a space for normativity, meaning, and the first-person perspective. See Sachs 2014; Macarthur 2019.

⁷ It might be thought that if any philosophical position can effect a synthesis and reconciliation of the empirical and the philosophical, the causal and the rational, it will come from the Kantian and post-Kantian traditions,

Husserl is an important figure to briefly consider, however, given his influence on Merleau-Ponty. Although there are resources within Husserl's thought that can be utilised for LN (see Staiti XXX; and this volume), his philosophy is based on a strong methodological distinction between philosophy and science, and between phenomenological philosophy (utilising the reduction) and ordinary reasoning, episteme and doxa. Husserl shares this view with the orthodox naturalist⁸, but he reverses what constitutes episteme and doxa. Doxa paradigmatically includes any unreflective and naïve science. This is "naturalism" in the pejorative sense, which he describes as the original philosophical "sin" (Husserl, cited in Moran 2013, 92).

Husserl instead defended a version of phenomenology as first-philosophy. In his lecture course of that name, he says:

Mind (*Geist*) in nature, the adaptation of mind to its nature, the evolution of cognitive minds, the evolution of the sciences and forms of human culture in general – all this also has its philosophical sides, but these philosophical sides do not belong in the theory of knowledge, to First Philosophy. I would say that they rather belong to "last philosophy".⁹

Husserl is quite clear here: the findings of science, and philosophical questions about the findings of science, are last philosophy. It is difficult to imagine stronger non-naturalist statements than these. It is also important to recognize the dismissal of any "best fit" approach to philosophy that aims to integrate the variety of knowledge claims in an overall picture of how "things hang together", to invoke Sellars, since that sort of coherentist picture would be insufficiently epistemically grounded. In regard to the Agrippa trilemma, Husserl thus chooses foundationalism over coherentism, notwithstanding that his later work famously proposed to address a crisis in the sciences by reawakening their forgotten phenomenological bases (e.g. *Crisis*).

By contrast, naturalists generally argue that any such theory of knowledge, qua first philosophy, is a foolhardy ambition. Without expressly targeting Husserl, Sider captures the prevailing sentiment, when he says: "it would be foolish to require generally that epistemological foundations be established before substantive inquiry can begin. Mathematics did not proceed foundation-first. Nor did physics. Nor has ethics, traditionally" (Sider 2001, xiv). Or, as Kornblith puts it:

the constraints that science presents for philosophical theorizing should be welcomed, for philosophical theorizing unconstrained by empirical fact loses its connection with the very phenomena which we, as philosophers, seek to understand. Philosophy is an autonomous discipline, in the sense that it addresses a distinctive set of questions and concerns, and in this respect it is no more nor less autonomous than physics or chemistry or biology. It is surely all the autonomy we should want. (Kornblith 2002, 27)

Who is right, Kornblith or Husserl? While I am much more indebted to Husserl in terms of my own topical interests and philosophical inheritance, I agree with Kornblith regarding the autonomy of philosophy. Unlike Kornblith, however, I think that theses regarding "mutual constraint" are compatible with phenomenology, and in fact make phenomenological reflection akin to a necessary but not sufficient condition, once we recognize that

including phenomenology. But judgments on this diverge widely. For orthodox naturalists, like Kornblith, the fate of post-Kantian reconciliatory projects are central to their scepticism.

⁸ At times, Husserl appears to agree with the orthodox naturalist that we should not be re-enchanting nature (see Staiti 2016). At other times he undertakes his own attempted re-enchantment, i.e. in his critique of the post-Galilean mathematicising of nature in *Crisis*.

⁹ Husserl, E. *Erste Philosophie*, Hua VII, The Hague, Nijhoff 1956, 385. See also Staiti 2016, 137.

phenomenology is always in dialectic with non and extra-phenomenology. Systematically showing that is beyond what I can achieve in this chapter, but I will sketch out some key aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thought that make the LN ascription reasonable.

2. Merleau-Ponty: Perception and embodiment

Merleau-Ponty begins his first major work, the *Structure of Behavior*, by wondering if there is anything in the naturalism of science that might find a place “in” transcendental philosophy, rather than simply being bracketed away as a theoretical elaboration of what phenomenologists call the “natural attitude”. This attitude is the ordinary and everyday one in we navigate our practical world, and makes assumptions about the existence of the entities of the world, and it includes our common-sense beliefs and opinions. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

And once the criticism of realistic analysis and causal thinking has been made, is there nothing justified in the naturalism of science—nothing which “understood” and transposed, ought to find a place in transcendental philosophy? (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 4).

There is a lot to unpack in this remark, but Merleau-Ponty answers the question that he poses in the affirmative, concluding that there is such a place and a “truth of naturalism”. Indeed, his programmatic statements to this effect, at the beginning and end of the book, are important for many empirically-minded phenomenologists (e.g. Gallagher 2017)¹⁰. Accepting naturalism (and science) as playing a role *in*, as in “within” or internal to transcendental phenomenology, would be a “category mistake” for some other phenomenologists, however. This “category mistake” style retort arguably remains the orthodox phenomenological response to Merleau-Ponty's question.

While Merleau-Ponty is committed to phenomenology, he has a deflated conception of transcendental phenomenology in comparison to Husserl, one that is more provisional and fallibilistic. This might be a pro or a con, of course, but it is less suspect to a naturalist. Although Merleau-Ponty embraces the phenomenological idea that there is a world of perception that has its own sense and forms of intentionality that are irreducible to the causal, propositional, and linguistic, his Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* famously contends that the most important lesson of the phenomenological reduction is its incompleteness (Merleau-Ponty 2013, lxxvii). As defended by Husserl, the phenomenological reduction aims to bracket away the successes of our various sciences, as well as culture, history and metaphysics, in order to return to our experience of the things themselves, without presupposition. On Merleau-Ponty's view, however, this is a heuristic that can bring certain phenomena to light that were previously neglected (or where theory has over-determined the observation/experience), rather than a move that facilitates access to a presuppositionless starting point for a rigorous science of consciousness. These methodological differences have some important consequences for Merleau-Ponty's views on embodiment and perception, which are pivotal to his own middle-way between naturalism and non-naturalism, and important for LN more generally.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the body as a problem for empiricism and intellectualism, an antimony that he contends has characterised large parts of the history of Western philosophy. This embodied turn is not unique to Merleau-Ponty's thought, being also present in a complicated way in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Merleau-Ponty also borrows many of his analyses of embodiment directly from Husserl's phenomenology, particularly from *Ideas 2*, which Merleau-Ponty was an early reader of in

¹⁰ He concludes the book by calling for a redefinition of transcendental philosophy that makes it pay heed to the real world (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 224).

the Husserl archives in Leuven. But Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's treatments of embodiment have a quite different methodological (and ontological) status. We have already seen Merleau-Ponty's dialectical focus, in which the role given to the body (and perception) in the empiricist and intellectualist traditions is found wanting, both descriptively and explanatorily, thus motivating a rethinking of it. This differs from the way in which Husserl usually motivates his own phenomenology of embodiment (cf. Carman 1999).

In addition, we must consider their respective investment in, or denial of, the transcendental ego. For Husserl, although our embodiment gives us a worldly structure, it is also constituted within the field of consciousness by the "transcendental ego", which Husserl argues is required to understand both the empirical ego and the unity of the body-subject (cf. Staiti 2016, 131). The body is not identical with the transcendental ego; rather, the latter is the ground and condition of possibility of the former. For reasons related to this, Husserl is able to entertain thought experiments concerning the destruction of the world but the persistence of the transcendental subject (e.g. §49 in *Ideas*). For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, embodiment is paradoxically both constituting and constituted. What he calls the body-subject is the most basic enabling condition, albeit situated within a what he calls a phenomenal or transcendental field (this includes the socio-historical, and it is not a field of pure consciousness). Any reduction that aimed to bracket away our own embodiment would, on this view, be a Cartesian residue, and Merleau-Ponty argues that some of the key phenomena of interest to Husserl in his later work are presupposed by, rather than accessed through, the phenomenological reduction¹¹. Given that naturalism typically has a suspicion of transcendental reasoning, an allegiance to Ockham's razor (e.g. an injunction not to multiply entities unnecessarily), and raises questions about the capacity of reason to be autonomous, Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology appears to be the more naturalist position, even if questions remain about how his non-mechanistic understanding of embodiment fits with physicalism (see Reynolds 2020).

Although Merleau-Ponty insists that the perceptual world must be appreciated on its own terms, as much as possible, his view of perception is again methodologically distinct from Husserl's, even if doctrinally similar. For example, Merleau-Ponty agrees with Husserl that any perception occurs against a horizontal (or figure-ground) structure, and likewise emphasises a complex co-imbrication of perception and motility (whether possible or actual). While there are some technical differences between their views concerning the "co-presented" or "appresentational" aspect of an object we perceive (its back-side, say), and their treatment of our perception of other people (c.f. Overgaard 2017), the main difference between them is an epistemic foundationalism that remains part of Husserl's analyses.

For Husserl, the presentational aspect of perception makes it privileged, not just phenomenologically but also epistemologically. Husserl is interested in the justificatory force of experience, and perception is the "gold" standard. Without being able to consider potential counter-examples like hallucination here (and debates concerning disjunctivism), Husserl's basic claim is that perception presents the relevant objects in the flesh, unlike say imagining or thinking about those objects. For Husserl, that which is presented in this way (in a fulfilled intuition) is justificatory in itself, rather than in virtue of anything else (e.g. the game of giving and asking for reasons). Berghofer and Wiltsche (2019) give a useful example to help clarify what is at stake. On having commenced a coffee elsewhere in their university, they wonder if perhaps they had left their office door open, when they absent-mindedly ambled out together immersed in a conversation. Any belief that Berghofer or Wiltsche might have that the door is open or closed, prior to seeing it, gets its justification from other reasons we

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty has in mind motor-intentionality, temporality, the life-world, and intersubjectivity. Rather than directly criticize Husserl, Merleau-Ponty appeals to Husserl's "unthought" to support his own views.

(or they) might provide. For them, this might include a memory of perception, which is not quite gold-standard, and might elicit questions about the reliability of memory that appeal to other factors. They might also draw on the testimony of a colleague who walked past the door, or engineering knowledge that the door is weighted in such a way that it tends to close of its own accord. This gives general probabilistic knowledge that the door is likely to be shut, whether they closed it or not. But that differs from the knowledge given in, and only in, the direct perception of the door. To compress Berghofer and Wiltzsche's rich discussion, we have an asymmetry here, which might be expressed by saying that seeing is believing (sometimes), but believing is not seeing. Or, to the point in a more Merleau-Pontyan frame, with Claude Romano: "to perceive is not to believe, it is to have no need to believe" (Romano 2016, 311).

Most (if not all) phenomenologists would agree with some version of these ideas. But, on the Husserlian construal they are attached to the idea of "originary givenness" or "self-givenness" of perception, which also plays an important role in Husserl's famous phenomenological "principle of all principles", which he outlines as follows:

No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the principle of all principles: that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also *only within the limits in which it is presented there*. (1982, §24).

This principle establishes something akin to an epistemic tribunal in which perception, as an "originary presentive intuition", has evidentiary priority. Depending on how we understand the italicised remark (c.f. Berghofer 2017), other evidence is also comprehended in terms of its potential fulfillment in any such presentive intuition. Although this is debated, such a view appears to lead to scientific anti-realism about microscopic and theoretical entities in science that are not directly perceivable (in regular vision), and perhaps to a denial that the expert perceives what they think they perceive in an x-ray, say, or through a microscope (c.f. Wiltzsche 2012; Berghofer 2017; Reynolds 2018, chap. 3). Here the phenomenological epistemology appears to license conclusions that are ontological or metaphysical in character.

While there are various possible Husserlian rejoinders, Merleau-Ponty provides an alternative construal of the primacy of perception. He contends that perception *always* involves latency, depths, invisibility, and a persistent ambiguity. Perception has a primacy, but he would dispute that it is akin to a gold-standard that institutes a normative framework for reason and evidence, as well as the associated idea that science must (ultimately) be based in a self-present intuition of the object for it to be belief-worthy. While phenomenology can help us to avoid what he calls the "experience error", in which we make perceptions out of the things perceived (and retrospectively read theory back onto our experience), perception remains intrinsically paradoxical, rather than an epistemic ground from which we might build up knowledge *a la* empiricism. Perception is ambiguous in both the natural attitude *and* in our philosophical reflection on it. It has its own sense, but it does not inaugurate an epistemic tribunal of reason against which we can judge or measure rationality *per se*. Despite having himself used this very term, Merleau-Ponty thus ultimately avoids a "phenomenological positivism" about perception, as well as the idea of phenomenological epistemology as first-philosophy.

In his final, unfinished work, *The Visible and The Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty returns to this "perceptual faith". He argues that this "faith" is not a reason or judgement, but refers to an openness (1964, 88) or "contact with being prior to reflection, a contact that makes reflection itself possible" (65). While "we can live it, we can neither think it nor formulate it, nor set it up in theses... And it is this unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us" (11). For Merleau-Ponty, this faith also involves an

ambiguous realism about the connection between perception and that which is perceived, which is both a part of ordinary experience and complicates any attempted phenomenological reduction. This perceptual faith is likely to be suspect to the naturalist, who maintains that the true is the objective. Perhaps it is ultimately little better than an illusion. Merleau-Ponty wants to guard against that conclusion, but not by simply accepting the opposite thesis, that the true is restricted to (or merely an elaboration of) the perceptual faith. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

if the philosopher questions, and hence feigns ignorance of the world and of the visions of the world which are operative and take form continually within him, he does so precisely in order to make them speak, because he believes in them and expects from them all his future science (1964, 4).

Note that Merleau-Ponty does not posit any sort of radical rupture between the pre-theoretical experience of the perceptual faith and future science. Rather, he speaks of the paradoxes of the vision and their “impossible details”. Whatever challenges science poses to our ordinary experiences of the world, and there are many, it assumes the background of an ongoing perceptual faith (otherwise we have skepticism, or some kind of Platonic heaven, both of which appear immanently problematic for modern science and Merleau-Ponty alike¹²). But we cannot reach further back to an epistemic ground, where that faith is no longer a faith but instead becomes strictly evidentiary and the basis for a rigorous science. To argue for the necessary presupposition of this perceptual faith, paradoxical as it is, is therefore not to limit science to the evidences of experience, not to commit the sort of justificatory mistake that Sellars calls the “myth of the given”¹³.

The Visible and the Invisible also offers some interesting reflections regarding ontological naturalism. According to Merleau-Ponty, “no ontology is exactly required by the thought proper to physics at work” (1964, 17). Note that this formulation does not insist on a neo-Heideggerian account of the ontological difference between ontic sciences and any properly ontological philosophy, nor a neo-Husserlian version of phenomenological first philosophy in which there is no encroachment between the philosophical and the scientific. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty’s remark allows that physics *might* constrain our ontology, but he also claims that if it does, it does not do so in any reductive manner: no ontology, he says, is “exactly required”, which is not to rule out some form of constraint. Contemporary physics does not entail physicalism, we might say today, and various deflationary naturalists like David Papineau and Arthur Fine might agree, along with those like John Dupré who adopt a process ontology.

In a related vein, Merleau-Ponty says that Einstein effectively postulates that: “what is not *that upon which we have an openness*, but only *that upon which we can operate*” (1964, 18). Recall that he defines the perceptual faith as “that upon which we have an openness”. Certain versions of philosophical science (i.e. scientific naturalism), then, ignore this openness and this faith. And whether or not Merleau-Ponty is fair in regard to Einstein, we might think here of Quine’s famous remark, “to be is to be the value of a bound variable”. This is a version of ontological naturalism in which the furniture of the world is any items expressly posited or required for our most mature sciences to do their work, in this case including mathematics.

For Merleau-Ponty, however, this proceeds from and depends upon the perceptual faith, but does not dissipate its obscurity. Any challenge that science poses to the perceptual faith will take for granted some dimensions of experience, observation, and connection with

¹² While many think skepticism is a sign of something having gone wrong with a philosophical world-view, see Hohwy 2017 for an alternative argument.

¹³ Sellars criticises any version of the given that has a dual role, as a basic epistemic given akin to sense-data, while also being justificatory in regard to the game of giving and asking for reasons (see Sachs 2014).

the world. As he puts it: “The binocular perception is not made up of two monocular perceptions surmounted; it is of another order. The binocular images *are* not in the same sense that the thing perceived with both eyes *is*. They are the phantoms and it is the real; they are the pre-things and it is the thing” (1964, 7). Here he reaffirms the ontological dimension of the perceptual faith. Any account of what *is* must be pluralised to include, rather than eliminate, this particular faith.

Some inheritors of the naturalist mantle have a quite different view. Consider what contemporary theorists of predictive processing and binocular rivalry are likely to say about the remarks from Merleau-Ponty we have quoted. Binocular rivalry occurs in experimental settings when different images are presented to each eye and an experiential oscillation between them is induced. Without being able to address the details of the predictive processing program (see Hohwy 2013), it explains this visual experience by drawing on the idea of the brain as a hypothesis engine that seeks to minimise prediction error. Some interpretations of this are more “internalist” than others, but the Bayesian-like operations of the brain involve a form of guessing (albeit informed by “priors”) on the causes of a given stimuli, which then sets up models of the world. On this view, however, perception is inferential and there is a genuine sense in which “we” (or our brains, at least) are quite radically separated from the world and groping in the dark. Our embodied and worldly sense of perceiving and directly interacting with the world of ordinary objects is indeed akin to a faith, in a more pejorative sense, and one which science can explain if not dispel. Unlike Merleau-Ponty’s ontological construal of the perceptual faith, this sort of “user illusion” idea appears to jeopardise the grounds from which the theorist of predictive processing proclaims their own scientific theories as true, which are experiential and observational, and also complexly related to the practical life of this or that scientist (c.f. Zahavi 2018). It is not clear that the appeal to mathematics and Bayesian formalism can assist the predictive processing theorist to resolve this *prima facie* problem regarding how to reconcile their realism about the brain and associated scientific theories with their manifest-image irrealism. While they might go more radically embodied and enactive in their view of cognition, as Andy Clark does, my point is simply that there is an ordinary and everyday realism about phenomenology, as Zahavi has also recently emphasised (2018). Unlike Zahavi, however, I think that the prospects for reconciliation of a perceptual realism with (rather than against) scientific realism are better with a Merleau-Ponty-inspired version of phenomenology.

3. *Conclusion: Merleau-Ponty as Liberal Naturalist*

Are Merleau-Ponty’s transformations to the phenomenological project sufficient to make him an LN? It is clear that Merleau-Ponty is not a scientific naturalist, since he is not committed to a strong (i.e. exclusive) reading of either ontological or methodological naturalism. He thus meets condition 1 for being an LN.

Whether Merleau-Ponty meets condition 2, and avoids non-naturalism, is more difficult to establish. This is because of a lack of clarity around what non-naturalism might be, and the reasonable concern that many accusations of “spookiness” are a “straw-man” argument that the naturalist uses to dismiss a range of view. Indeed, virtually no philosopher explicitly accepts super-naturalism, or *explicitly* posits entities or ways of knowing “whose existence or truth would contradict the laws of nature insofar as we know them” (DeCaro and Macarthur 2010, 12). Nonetheless, the issue is whether or not Merleau-Ponty *implicitly* contravenes norms of naturalism and a more nuanced understanding of condition 2 that really does apply to at least some positions. If we rule this out, we seem to sidestep naturalism, effectively saying there is no genuine issue to address. Sidestepping naturalism may or may

not be the right philosophical strategy, but it does not allow a philosopher to establish that their position avoids super-naturalism and constitutes a genuine middle-way.

In the epistemic and methodological register, an allegation of spookiness is likely to accompany the ascription of implausible powers of cognition to the armchair philosopher. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty engages in forms of reasoning that many naturalists would regard as suspect. Notably, he is part of a tradition of transcendental phenomenology, even if unlike most in that tradition he insists that the distinction between philosophy and science is imprecise and that, insofar as they can be distinguished, they exist in something like a relationship of “mutual constraint”, as Francisco Varela and others have emphasized in recent times (1996, 343). Merleau-Ponty’s work is also arguably unique in this tradition by proceeding through systematic engagement with a variety of sciences – including Gestalt psychology, physics, anatomical biology, morphogenesis, and beyond – in ways that respect the epistemic credentials of science and do not set limits upon what science might achieve from the philosophical armchair. He is not a methodological dualist, or a methodological separatist. His project is not to rigorously distinguish the empirical from the transcendental, or the a priori from the a posteriori, and assign to each their “relative right” and autonomy (see Staiti 2016; cf. Reynolds 2018).

Of course, without that distinction in principle, it might be thought to be a “slippery slope” to the Sellarsian view that science is the measure of all things, and to a strong version of scientific naturalism. Again, this is the dilemma that confronts all purveyors of middle-ways. And while we have seen that Merleau-Ponty is not a scientific naturalist, that does not free him from the horns of this dilemma, since the worry might instead be that there is no coherent and stable “middle” space to occupy. For Merleau-Ponty, however, it is the dialectical aspect of his thought that is central to his solution. It means that justification is holistic more than foundationalist, and it enables him to endorse something akin to a “results continuity” thesis regarding philosophy and the relevant empirical sciences over the long haul, albeit not necessarily deference to the current scientific orthodoxy. He also claims that the actual methods of each are complexly intertwined, with something like an a priori lab and an a posteriori arm-chair, rather than being strictly autonomous (cf. Reynolds 2018). By my lights, then, Merleau-Ponty avoids scientific naturalism and has enough constraints built into his philosophy to rule out first-philosophy and other forms of non-naturalism, especially in his early work.

Ontologically, however, does he avoid the charge of super-naturalism? This charge will be levelled at any hint of dualism, any area where the regular spatio-temporal order of cause and effect does not apply. There can be a naturalist “black-mail” about this, of course, in which consciousness itself might become suspect and we end up with a rather austere and disenchanting view of the world. But is there an implicit ontological dualism in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, when he suggests that “perception is not an event in nature”, or if he effectively advocates an emergentist view, contrary to the standard naturalist acceptance of the causal closure of the physical, as I contend elsewhere? (cf. also Thompson 2007). Both cases commit him to dualism from an orthodox naturalist perspective, but he is expressly endeavouring to set out a middle-way. This is not a simple question to adjudicate without presupposing this or that epistemology and metaphysics. It is clear that, like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty does not think that everything real is explicable in terms of a physical law, best stated at the level of physics. While this view is controversial, it does not entail that he is a non-naturalist, and/or anti-science. Both the thesis of the unity of science, and various strong ontological construals of naturalism (e.g. physicalism and the causal closure of the physical), go beyond anything a scientist would be liable to proclaim (cf. Ritchie 2005). Moreover, a temporal and biological naturalism remains a viable prospect (see Reynolds 2019; Morris 2018) that is less exclusionary in terms of what it rules out. For example, it

accords a holistic explanatory priority to organisms, rather than subscribing to the sort of “smallism” in which what is real (causally and ontologically) is the micro-physical, the neurological, or genetic (i.e. DNA). It is hence arguable that taking the naturalist challenge seriously does not entail that we must give in to it. There is room for ontological work beyond saying that our current best sciences just give us our ontology. If that ontology is promulgated through reflection on those sciences, including lacunae in their own self-understanding¹⁴, then we face a difficult interpretive question. Is any resultant philosophy a form of speculative metaphysics, which the naturalist will rule out, and might also be taken as a bridge too far for even a liberal naturalism? Does it re-enchant nature, or are there ways of rethinking nature that are not super-naturalist?

These questions are especially pressing in regard to *The Visible and the Invisible*, where Merleau-Ponty elaborates a new philosophy of nature (cf. Gallagher 2018; Morris 2018). It is not meant to be dualist, of course, but to what extent is this ontology of nature, replete with terms like chiasm, flesh, etc., compatible with naturalism? It is fair to say, with Gardner (2017), that not many naturalist philosophers are interested in these sorts of ideas, which are not based on concepts part of any mature science. There is certainly a rethinking of nature at stake here, if not a re-enchanting. For many naturalists, any re-enchanting of nature that conceives of teleology and purpose (say) as part of nature, or enactivist reconstructions of the relationship between life and mind (like Thompson 2007) are *prima facie* suspect. Why? Nature is conceived of in a certain way, primarily inherited from Newton, involving objective forces, fields, molecules (or fermions and bosons in recent times), and governed by laws. This understanding is dominated by “philo-physics” and the idea of a hierarchy of sciences with potential inter-theoretic reduction – via bridging laws – between them. But this is not the only way to think about nature, even within physics, and especially if we draw on other sciences (cf. Gallagher 2017; Gallagher 2018), and perhaps biology in particular (cf. Reynolds 2019). Likewise, if we proclaim the diversity of methods and objects of the sciences and deny any thesis of the unity of science (e.g. with the work of Dupré), there is again more philosophical room to move.

In Merleau-Ponty’s work, both early and late, certain themes persist that promise a way beyond the dilemma we have inherited: a primacy of perception and a faith in everyday objects on the one hand, versus a primacy of scientific objects and theories on the other hand, the latter of which is standardly accompanied by reductionist programs that seek to explain the whole compositionally. LN is right to rethink this and explore new options between naturalism and non-naturalism, but Merleau-Ponty is an important dialogic partner for this project. In particular, his phenomenology can help LN to articulate the relationship between the manifest and scientific images in a way that embraces an ambiguous perceptual realism that can be reconciled with the scientific image. Husserlian phenomenology achieves this reconciliation through a strict methodological separation and an epistemic priority of perceptual presence at the expense of the abstractions of the scientific world. Husserl argues that our increasingly abstract sciences are in crisis and in need of renewal via a phenomenological undertaking that uncovers the perceptual and phenomenological bases from which they have lost contact (c.f. Husserl 1970). His proposed reconciliation is radical, but being foundational rather than dialectical, it is hard to motivate with contemporary naturalism. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is a more likely and propitious partner for LN in the work ahead. That said, it might be that the preferable theoretical resource for versions of LN that aim for metaphysical neutrality and/or quietism is a version of descriptive Husserlian phenomenology that is shorn of the foundationalist commitment to revivifying

¹⁴ Although it was incomplete at the time of his death, his plans for *The Visible and the Invisible* went in this direction, and his *Nature* course notes provide some indication of what this might have looked like.

science through phenomenology¹⁵. Just as phenomenology bifurcates on this question of metaphysics, so too does LN between quietist and realist versions (see DeCaro 2015), and it is Merleau-Ponty's *oeuvre* that can best assist with that second task.

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¹⁵ This is basically what Gilbert Ryle argues about Husserl. Ryle is another figure worth co-opting for LN.

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