

MERLEAU-PONTY'S READING OF KANT'S TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to explore Merleau-Ponty's ambivalent relationship with Kant's transcendental philosophy. I begin by looking at several points of convergence between Kant and Merleau-Ponty, focusing on the affinities between Kant's account of transcendental realism and Merleau-Ponty's notion of objective thought. I then show how Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Kant's paradox of asymmetrical objects points to a parallel in Kant's thought to Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception. In the second part of the paper, I show why Merleau-Ponty believes that, despite the promise of Kant's thought, he fails to adequately escape from objective thought. After presenting the central claims of the transcendental deduction, I piece together Merleau-Ponty's criticism of it by answering three questions: For Merleau-Ponty, how do we encounter the world prior to reflection? How is experience constituted? And what leads Kant to mischaracterise experience in his own transcendental philosophy?

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1. INTRODUCTION

While Merleau-Ponty has often been seen as rejecting Kant's transcendental idealism,¹ his relationship with Kant is a complex one, with Merleau-Ponty seeing Kant as reorienting the focus of philosophy towards a subject-centred account of the world, but at the same time covering over this insight through an overly narrow conception of synthesis. In this paper, I want to reconstruct Merleau-Ponty's analysis of where Kant goes wrong in his account of the nature of experience. While the bulk of literature on Merleau-Ponty discusses Kant in passing and negatively, I will demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty has a rich and nuanced view of Kant, which in turn leads to a number of structural analogies between their thought. Merleau-Ponty never provides an extended discussion of Kant, but references to him are nonetheless found throughout his work. In the first part of this paper, I will analyze several parallels between Kant and Merleau-Ponty, focusing on Merleau-Ponty's reading of Kant's paradox of asymmetrical objects. I will then turn to Merleau-Ponty's reading of the transcendental deduction. After setting out where Merleau-Ponty thinks Kant goes wrong in his analysis of experience, I will explore Merleau-Ponty's account of how Kant comes to mischaracterize something as seemingly immediately accessible as our experience of the world.

2. EMPIRICISM, INTELLECTUALISM, AND
TRANSCENDENTAL REALISM

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the failure of traditional accounts of meaning rests on a distinction between empiricism and intellectualism that already has resonances with Kant's philosophy. In this opening section, I want to

¹ Hass (2008, 34) argues rightly that Merleau-Ponty rejects Kant's model of sense data, and replaces the "I think" of Kant's transcendental deduction with the "I can" (85–86), but does not discuss the affinities between Kant's approach and Merleau-Ponty's. Romdenh-Romluc (2010, 20) similarly takes it for granted that intellectualism, one of the key targets of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, "is a form of idealism, —particularly the transcendental idealism espoused by Kant, and the earlier Husserl." Dillon (1988, 174) argues that it is in order to clearly delineate his approach from Kant that Merleau-Ponty abandons the vocabulary of phenomena for that of flesh in the *Visible and Invisible*. Carmen (2014) similarly straightforwardly assimilates Kant to intellectualism, though this is purely in the context of Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of the two, rather than his own positive project. Gardner (2015) does recognize the importance of Kant for Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, as does Matherne (2014; 2016). I will return to these readings later in this paper.

draw out these resonances. At the heart of Merleau-Ponty's project is the question of the origin of sense or meaning,² and in particular the different acceptations of the French word '*sens*.'³ Merleau-Ponty takes Hume and Descartes as archetypes of the traditional approaches of empiricism and intellectualism, and argues that they share key assumptions that lead them to fail to explain how the world comes to appear as meaningful.⁴ In the *Treatise*, Hume claims that "first principle ... in the science of human nature" is that "all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent" (Hume 2007, 1.1.1). Impressions are simple, atomic elements that are immanent to consciousness. All of our ideas either derive directly from impressions, or indirectly by being formed as a complex combination of simple impressions. Such simple elements hence provide a foundation for the sense that we attribute to the world: if an idea cannot be traced back to its constituent sensations, then we can take it to be meaningless. Taking Newton's theory of universal gravitation as a model (Hume 2008, 1.15), Hume suggests that the interplay of a small number of principles can together lead to the generation of the complex ideas we find in consciousness through something analogous to physical causal interactions. He therefore argues that a meaningful world is built up from the associations between various simple impressions that together form complex unities.

For Descartes, relations of judgment, rather than causal relations of association, hold ideas together.⁵ When we encounter complex ideas, we cannot

² See, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's synopsis of his project, *The Primacy of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty writes that: "The point of departure for these remarks is that the perceived world comprises relations and, in a general way, a type of organization which has not been recognized by classical psychology and philosophy" (1964b, 13). "The meaning which I ultimately discover is not of the conceptual order. If it were a concept, the question would be how I can recognize it in the sense data, and it would be necessary for me to interpose between the concept and the sense data certain intermediaries, and then other intermediaries between these intermediaries, and so on. It is necessary that meaning and signs, the form and matter of perception, be related from the beginning and that, as we say, the matter of perception be 'pregnant with its form'" (15).

³ On the various ways Merleau-Ponty uses the term *sens*, see Landes's introduction to Merleau-Ponty (2012, xlviii). See Merleau-Ponty (2012, 452–54) for the connection between '*sens*' as direction and as meaning. Here, Merleau-Ponty argues that meaning has to be understood as perspectival, and hence directional.

⁴ While I focus on this paper on Descartes and Hume as empiricists and intellectualists, principally because both figures are also central to Kant's development, as we shall see, empiricism and intellectualism are sets of assumptions that Merleau-Ponty takes to govern philosophy and psychology from the seventeenth century to the present. Carmen (2014, 47–48) makes a good case for Daniel Dennett being classified as an intellectualist, for instance.

⁵ See, for instance, Descartes (1984, 21).

be certain whether the structure of ideas emerges from the structure of the object itself, or from the influence of the imagination. Thus, when facing a problem, we begin by reducing it to simple terms meeting the criteria of clarity and distinctness, which we can know with absolute certainty, before determining the necessary connections between these terms (Descartes 1985, 120). In both empiricism and intellectualism, therefore, we have the claim that meaning is constituted from the combination of simple ideas or impressions into complex structures—in the case of empiricism, through association, and in the case of rationalism, through judgment.

For Merleau-Ponty, both approaches prove inadequate. Humean association cannot be the foundation for sense, since seeing elements as connected according to some aspect is a precondition for applying the laws of association in the first place.⁶ Everything is like everything else in some way, and unlike everything else in another. As such, it cannot be simply the presence of an idea that leads to the emergence of another idea. If this were the case, then it would be impossible for us to explain why this particular idea was called to mind by another. Rather, what allows us to associate one particular object with another is that we view an object under a particular aspect (or, in Merleau-Ponty's term, as according to a "synopsis [that] makes possible the resemblance and contiguity among them" [2012, 18])—as *already* having a certain sense or meaning. It is the particular aspect under which we see an object that leads us to associate it with a particular something else. As such, meaning precedes and makes possible association, rather than vice versa (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 16–20). Merleau-Ponty's claim therefore is that resemblance and contiguity emerge once we see the world as made up of objects, rather than making such a world possible. Descartes's attempt to understand perception as organized by judgment is equally problematic. We can note a difference between believing something and perceiving something. "Judging [is] a position taking, judgment aims at knowing something valid for me ... it takes sensing, on

⁶ In this respect, Merleau-Ponty notes that his argument here is anticipated by Kant's account of the synthesis of reproduction in imagination (Kant 1929, A100) in the transcendental deduction (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 18). Matherne (2014; 2016) notes parallels between the imagination and Merleau-Ponty, the former in terms of pathology, the latter between (Lachièze-Rey's reading of) Kant and Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body schema. While this is an important connection, Matherne does not take account of the important difference between the two models, that Kant's account of the imagination remains a constitutive account of synthesis, whereas Merleau-Ponty conceives of perception as organized according to what he calls a transition synthesis. We will return to the question of the imagination later in this paper.

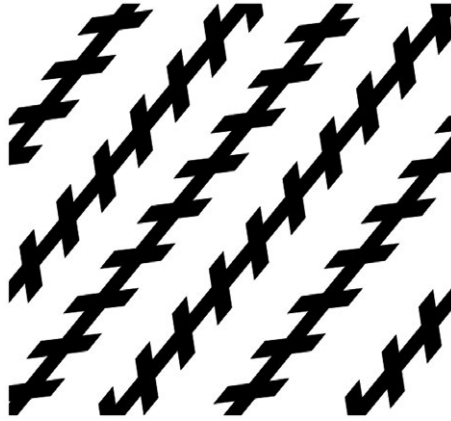


Figure 1. The Zöllner illusion.

the contrary, to be the giving of oneself over to appearance without seeking to know it or possess its truth” (35–36). This has implications for the intellectualist view that perception itself is judging. Consider the Zöllner illusion (Figure 1):

Here, the parallel lines appear to converge and diverge from one another. For the intellectualist, such illusions present a problem, since once we recognize that this *is* an illusion, they have to hold that we have two incompatible beliefs: one from perception that the lines are nonparallel, and one from reflection that they *are* parallel. For the intellectualist, therefore, seeing the illusion involves holding contradictory beliefs, but this is to mischaracterize the dissonance we experience when viewing illusions. Furthermore, the intellectualist cannot explain in the first place why the addition of the auxiliary lines creates the illusion, as it is unclear why the addition of qualities would change those already present. Rather, judgment “break[s] up previous relations and establish[es] new ones” that overwrite “a perceptual syntax that is articulated according to its own rules” (38).

Merleau-Ponty’s diagnosis of the problem in both traditions is what he calls the “experience error”: “we immediately assume that what we know to exist among things is also in our perception of them” (5). This leads to the perceptual atomism present in both traditions. The characteristics of unity and determinate quantities they attribute to objects perceived are attributed to the nature of perception itself. At the heart of the empiricist and intellectualist accounts of perception, therefore, is the assumption that

the nature of perception is merely different in degree from the nature of objects independent of perception. “Through optics and geometry we construct a fragment of the world whose image can, at any point, form on our retina” (6). Merleau-Ponty’s claim here is not that empiricism and intellectualism necessarily hold that we have access to the world of objects, but that this world provides the norms through which we evaluate and understand the structure of perception. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty echoes Kant’s characterization of empiricism and rationalism as forms of transcendental realism. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that both confuse appearances with things in themselves (Kant 1929, A490–1/B518–9), and thus combine a (transcendental) realism about the existence of space and time with the possibility of an (empirical) idealism, since it is impossible on this assumption to show that our internal representations correspond with objects within space and time. As Henry Allison convincingly argues, at the heart of transcendental realism is a “theocentric” conception of cognition where human cognition of objects differs in degree from how objects would be seen from a god’s eye view.⁷ Kant argues, rather, that human cognition is discursive and takes space and time as intuitions rather than things in themselves, and, since intuition has a different mode of organization to judgment, involves a difference in kind from the direct cognition God would have, rather than simply being an inadequate form of it. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty notes that in empiricism and intellectualism, phenomena such as depth are understood in terms of a “*pensée de survol*” of the world that takes our perspectival relation to it to be an inessential feature of it. Empiricism and intellectualism are both unable to account for our lived experience of perspective because the attempt and fail to reconstitute it from a similarly objective god’s eye view set of spatial relations where depth and breadth are

⁷ Allison (2004, 20–49). Merleau-Ponty makes the same point in several places. For instance: “We began from a world in itself that acted upon our eyes in order to make itself seen by us; we have arrived now at a consciousness or a thought about the world, but the very nature of this world is unchanged ... We pass from an absolute objectivity to an absolute subjectivity, but this second idea is worth only as much as the first, and only finds support in contrast to the first, which is to say, through it” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 41).

interchangeable.⁸ “For God, who is everywhere, breadth is immediately equivalent to depth. Intellectualism and empiricism do not give us an account of a human experience of the world; they say of human experience what God might think of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 266–67). As such, we can see a strong structural analogy between Kant and Merleau-Ponty in the ways in which they carve out the space for their own responses to the classical philosophical approaches. Both see traditional philosophical approaches as illicitly presupposing access to the object outside of experience, with Kant arguing that such an object can only be thought rather than known, and Merleau-Ponty denying the coherence of an object outside of the perspectival framework. In this regard, it is worth noting that Merleau-Ponty explicitly adopts something similar to what Kant calls the “indirect proof of the transcendental ideality of appearances” (Kant 1929, A506/B534), where Kant argues in the transcendental dialectic that the antinomies inherent to empiricism and rationalism can only be resolved by moving to a transcendental idealist understanding of the world.⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, this takes the form of showing that neither the empiricist and intellectualist variants of objective thought, which he describes as “thesis and antithesis” (2012, 28, 181), are able to coherently formulate accounts of various aspects of our experience such as our relations to our bodies, to others, and ultimately, as we have seen, to account for the possibility of a

⁸ Romdenh-Romluc (2010, 28–30) sees the distinction between empiricism and intellectualism in terms of how they understand the nature of the world, taking them to hold commitments such as assuming we can know the world in itself (empiricism) or not (intellectualism), and seeing consciousness as a part of the world (empiricism) or as separate from and constituting a world (intellectualism). She sees the reliance of empiricism on causal relations and intellectualism on juridical relations to derive from these conceptions of the world. Formulating this distinction in terms of claims such as these is problematic, since empiricists such as Hume deny we can know the world in itself, whereas in different ways, intellectualists such as Descartes and Hegel argue that we can know it. I argue instead that empiricism and intellectualism are distinguished by whether the sense we find in experience is constituted through the interplay of causal (empiricism) or juridical (intellectualism) relations (with both models of relation presupposing a field of determinate entities to be related). Taking the types of relations that constitute sense as primary shows why there is a tendency for empiricism and intellectualism to understand the world in the ways Romdenh-Romluc describes, but also leaves space in each category for figures who develop different ontologies on the basis of those relations. Cf. Carmen (2014) for a more sustained analysis of intellectualism and empiricism in terms of sense.

⁹ Here, Merleau-Ponty shares with Kant the view that the thesis and antithesis appear to exhaust the field of possible explanations, but that in fact both are false and rest on the assumption of the independence of the world (in terms of objective thought for Merleau-Ponty, or transcendental realism for Kant). It is only by removing this assumption that we are able to satisfactorily explain the phenomenon in question. Merleau-Ponty's position differs from Kant in that Kant argues that the thesis and antithesis each appear satisfactory in their own terms, but contradict each other; for Merleau-Ponty, the thesis and antithesis are in their own terms contradictory.

meaningful world.¹⁰ In the next section, I want to look at how this plays out in terms of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of one of Kant's key arguments for the difference in kind between sensibility and the intellect.

3. KANT AND MERLEAU-PONTY ON ASYMMETRICAL OBJECTS

Merleau-Ponty's references to Kant are scattered throughout his work and show a deep technical knowledge of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Our initial impression may be that on Merleau-Ponty's distinction, we should categorize Kant as an intellectualist, but there are difficulties with reading Merleau-Ponty as straightforwardly making this move.¹¹ First, Merleau-Ponty's distinction between empiricism and intellectualism tracks

¹⁰ In this, I disagree with Gardner's claim that Merleau-Ponty assumes a transcendental idealist position as a presupposition. Gardner argues that there are three possible interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception: that it "undertakes an enquiry into the nature of perceptual experience for its own sake" (2015, 300), that it assumes a transcendental position, "but only provisionally, as a hypothesis to be tested and confirmed by the discussion of perception" (302), or that it assumes, nonprovisionally, a transcendental position at the outset. Gardner argues for the third interpretation, claiming that "the *Phenomenology of Perception* should be regarded as simply not addressed to the naturalist or scientific realist: it is not intended to persuade anyone who is not already of a transcendental persuasion. Though this does mean that in one respect Merleau-Ponty is merely preaching to the converted, it by no means renders his argument pointless" (306). While Gardner does recognize the importance of the antinomies to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, he argues that Merleau-Ponty's arguments from antinomies only emerge later in the work in relation to objective thought's accounts of intersubjectivity, temporality, and freedom, (308) and so does not see these as being used to justify Merleau-Ponty's attempt to give primacy to perception (a thesis Gardner equates with transcendental idealism). I argue instead that Merleau-Ponty holds that objective thought is unable to understand perception as meaningful, since it can only understand the connections between perceptions in causal (thesis) or juridical (antithesis) terms, and each of these interpretations proves incoherent. Merleau-Ponty's solution is therefore to reject the implicit assumption of objective thought and recognize the primacy of perception. As Merleau-Ponty writes: "One of Kant's discoveries, whose consequences we have not yet fully grasped, is that all our experience of the world is throughout a tissue of concepts which lead to irreducible contradictions if we attempt to take them in an absolute sense or transfer them into pure being, and that they nevertheless found the structure of all our phenomena, of everything which is for us. It would take too long to show (and besides it is well known) that Kantian philosophy itself failed to utilize this principle fully and that both its investigation of experience and its critique of dogmatism remained incomplete" (1964b, 18–19).

¹¹ Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty does see Kant as falling into many of the errors of the intellectualist account, and Merleau-Ponty is clear on these limitations (see, for instance, Merleau-Ponty 1963, 201) but the degree to which Kant is seen by Merleau-Ponty as moving beyond the common assumptions of intellectualism and empiricism has not been recognized in the literature. Cf., for instance, Rockmore (2011, 193), who argues that "Merleau-Ponty's claim about the epistemological importance of phenomenology rests on his critique of idealism and his assertion of the primacy of perception ... Merleau-Ponty seems not to know much about idealism, which he refutes without adequately characterizing it."

closely the distinction at the heart of Kant's critique of transcendental realism. Second, Merleau-Ponty praises Kant for recognizing that experience is at the heart of our relationship to the world. He cites an argument that Kant derives from his paradox of asymmetrical objects, a paradox that Kant argues emerges if we attempt to understand the world in purely conceptual terms. Kant's target is Leibniz's transcendental realist claim that while there is a difference between God's thought of the world and the thought of finite beings, this difference is merely a difference in degree. For Leibniz, all truths are analytic truths for God, in that all properties and events that happen to an object are contained within its concept as an infinite number of predicates. Since finite beings cannot perform the kind of infinite analysis of an object open to God, we cannot distinguish all of these properties, and hence our understanding of the world is confused. We therefore perceive as spatial relations what an infinite intellect would perceive as conceptual properties. What are analytic a priori truths for God therefore become synthetic a posteriori truths for human beings. (Leibniz and Clarke 2000, 15). Leibniz argues, therefore, that perception involves a confused relation to things as they are in themselves and one that only differs in degree from an intellectual relationship to them.

It is against this view that Kant presents the paradox of symmetrical objects. In his critical period, the main formulation of the argument is found in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*.¹²

What indeed can be more similar to, and in all parts more equal to, my hand or my ear than its image in the mirror? And yet I cannot put such a hand as is seen in the mirror in the place of its original; for if the one was a right hand, then the other in the mirror is a left, and the image of the right ear is a left one, which can never take the place of the former. Now there are no inner differences here that any understanding could merely think; and yet the differences are inner as far as the senses teach, for the left hand cannot, after all, be enclosed within the same boundaries as the right (they cannot be made congruent), despite all reciprocal equality and similarity; one hand's glove cannot be used on the other. What then is the solution? These objects are surely not representations of things as they are in themselves, and as the pure understanding would cognize them, rather, they are sensory intuitions, i.e., appearances, whose possibility rests on

¹² This argument also appears prior to the *Prolegomena*, where it is deployed against the Leibnizian conception of space and in favor of Newton's view of space as absolute. He also deploys the argument in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. See Buroker (1981) for an analysis of the changing uses of the argument and its importance for the development of transcendental idealism.

the relation of certain things, unknown in themselves, to something else, namely our sensibility. (Kant 1997, 37–38)

Kant's claim, therefore, is that objects encountered in space have properties that cannot be fully captured in conceptual terms. Here we can take up the Leibnizian notion that concepts are relations between terms. If we think about the qualities and relations that make up a hand, we can note that all of the distances and angles between the fingers are the same for the left and the right hand. If an object were purely constituted through conceptual relations, therefore, it would be indeterminate in relation to handedness. There is thus an "inner difference" (37) that exceeds conceptual determination. Kant associates this with the spatial manifold and uses this argument to justify his claim that there is a difference in kind between intuition and the understanding, and that both are needed for cognition of the world.

Merleau-Ponty cites Kant's paradox of asymmetrical objects to make two points about our relationship to the world. First, Merleau-Ponty notes that the paradox shows that "there is something brute in our experience ... We have to install ourselves in an experience" (2003, 21). That is, the notion that experience is from a given situation or perspective is central to it. Kant himself recognizes the importance of this nonconceptual element to experience in *What is Orientation in Thinking?*, where he argues that it is the "subjective distinction" (1990, 239) between left and right that allows me to orientate myself within space. A purely conceptual understanding of the world proves inadequate to explain my experience when "if for a joke, someone had shifted all the objects [in my darkened room] around in such a way that the relative positions remained the same but what was previously on the right was now on the left" (239). It is the nonconceptual "feeling of difference between my two sides, my right and my left," (239) that allows me to navigate the room. Kant goes on to note that not only does my orientation in the world require a nonconceptual installation in experience, but metaphysical speculation itself requires a relationship to our orientation in experience. When thinking of suprasensible objects, "we certainly do not turn the object into an object of the senses; but we do at least think something which is itself supra-sensory as capable of being applied by our reason to the world of

experience" (240). As such, Merleau-Ponty sees in Kant's philosophy an early formulation of the thesis of the primacy of perception.¹³

Second, Kant's paradox of asymmetrical objects points to a difference in kind between sensory and intellectual structures. If intuition were simply "intellectualised appearances" (Kant 1929, A271/B327), as Kant takes Leibniz to believe, then the structure of intuition would be only a confused form of that of judgment.¹⁴ As Kant points out in the *Critique*, however, there is instead a difference in the way in which concepts and intuitions are organized. Merleau-Ponty sees in this claim by Kant the seeds of an argument for the difference in kind between the structure of perception and the structure of objective thought¹⁵:

¹³ Merleau-Ponty gives a number of definitions of the primacy of perception that vary in scope. At its broadest, he glosses it as the claim "if we reflect on our objects of thought and science, they ultimately refer us to the perceived world, which is the terrain of their final application" (1964b, 35). This broad claim is one Kant would wholeheartedly affirm, as *What is Orientation in Thinking?* makes clear. Merleau-Ponty appears to take this statement at points as simply a methodological principle, implying that further claims about the nature of perception follow immediately from it, and at other points sees these claims as aspects of the primacy of perception itself. Kant would also presumably accept some of these richer aspects of the primacy of perception, such as the perspectival nature of experience and the difference in kind between perception (or intuition in Kant's case) and judgment. Other aspects, such as the importance of the body, or the claim that perception contains its own "nascent logos" or sense would be difficult to reconcile with his belief in intuition as a passive faculty. One might look to the *Opus Postumum* for a richer conception of the body and a more qualified account of the passivity of intuition (see Beiser 2002, 194–201), but it is beyond the scope of this paper to determine the degree to which these changes bring Kant closer to Merleau-Ponty.

¹⁴ Compare Merleau-Ponty's analysis of intellectualism, where he writes that "reflective analysis thus becomes a purely regressive doctrine according to which every perception is a confused intellection and every determination a negation" (2012, 40). This claim points to how uneasily Kant sits within Merleau-Ponty's characterization of intellectualism.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty describes objective thought as "thought applied to the universe and not to phenomena" (2012, 50), which Merleau-Ponty takes to be the thought of "common sense and of science" (74). As such, it presupposes the existence of a field of "ready-made things" (99) with fully determinate properties. It is therefore the presupposition shared by both empiricism and intellectualism. It provides the basis for traditional scientific and philosophical enquiry by guaranteeing a common objective framework that is "the same for everyone, valid for all times and for all places" (73–74) independent of the changes in perspective. The determinate model of the world allows for clear and distinct temporally invariant dichotomies in our characterization of it (50), and hence makes possible traditional models of philosophy or science. The difference in kind between perception and judgment, combined with his contextualism and belief in objective indeterminacy leads Merleau-Ponty to claim that while we can make judgments about the world, these judgments are always provisional and approximate. For instance, in the *Primacy of Perception*, he claims: "When I think the Pythagorean theorem and recognize it as true, it is clear that this truth is not for this moment only. Nevertheless, later progress in knowledge will show that it is not yet a final, unconditioned evidence ... Thus, here also we do not have a timeless truth but rather the recovery of one time by another, just as, on the level of perception, our certainty about perceiving a given thing does not guarantee that our experience will not be contradicted, or dispense us from a fuller experience of that thing" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 20).

The idea must be again taken up and generalised: there is a perceived signification that has no equivalent in the universe of the understanding, a perceptual milieu that is not yet the objective world, a perceptual being that is not yet determinate being. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 48)¹⁶

What Merleau-Ponty is suggesting here is that as well as the causal structures of association, and the subsumptive structures of judgment, there may be a third mode of organization that differs from either of the others. The organization of perception, which gives sense to the world, would also be generative of our reflective categories of judgment without resembling them.

Merleau-Ponty reads Kant as presenting a philosophy of the situation where the brute necessity of thinking discursively in relation to intuition signifies the fact that thinking must always be from a particular perspective on the world and must trace its origin back to perception itself. As such, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes something like an element of “thrownness” in Kant’s transcendental idealism. Given the importance of the interrelation of concepts and intuition, the point where Merleau-Ponty recognizes an affinity with Kant, the transcendental deduction is obviously of central importance, since it is here that this relationship is worked out. For the rest of this paper, I want to explore Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of the way Kant formulates this relationship.

4. KANT’S TRANSCENDENTAL DEDUCTION

I want to begin by providing a brief summary of the transcendental deduction, focusing on the way in which key notions such as judgment and the nature of the object are interrelated, before turning to Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of this position.¹⁷ Kant begins the transcendental deduction by claiming that knowledge involves some kind of synthesis: to make a statement involves bringing together different concepts into a unity. He then

¹⁶ Here I differ from Landes, who reads Merleau-Ponty as criticizing the distinction between intuition and understanding on the basis that “sensibility and understanding cannot be divided on pain of destroying the very structures of human experience and precisely because understanding is not a pure activity independent of its particular dialectical embodiment” (Landes 2015, 340). Merleau-Ponty understands clearly that for Kant, “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (Kant 1929, A51/B75), a claim reiterated in *What is Orientation in Thinking?*

¹⁷ The aim of this summary will be to highlight the salient points for Merleau-Ponty’s critique, rather than to analyze its effectiveness. See Guyer (1992) for an analysis of the flaws in Kant’s argument in the transcendental deduction. Allison (2004, 159–201) does his best to address these weaknesses in Kant’s argument itself.

notes that “appearances might very well be so constituted that the understanding should not find them to be in accordance with the conditions of its unity” (Kant 1929, A90/B123). Kant’s solution to this difficulty involves arguing that conceptual thought plays a necessary role in experience. We can draw a distinction between perception, which simply involves us being presented with appearances, and experience. For Kant, perception simply requires representations, while experience entails that these representations are of a world of objects. Kant argues that the concept of an object is not directly given within experience. Rather, our experience of a world made up of things *presupposes* a conception of an object, or objecthood.¹⁸ The question of the deduction can therefore be reformulated as, what is it that allows us to experience a world of objects, rather than simply appearances?

Kant notes that what distinguishes experience from simple sensation is that appearances are related together into unities. In the “B” deduction, Kant argues from the claim that:

It must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany all our representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that couldn’t be thought at all, and that is equivalent to saying that the representation would be impossible, or at least would be nothing to me. (B131–32)

In order to think a complex representation, such as a manifold, we must be able to ascribe all of those representations to one subject. While the elements making up a complex thought could be thought by a series of different subjects, to think those elements together as a whole, they need to be thought together by a single subject.¹⁹

This unity does not come from the “I think” that is able to accompany all of our representations. Often our experience lacks any explicit reference to an “I.” Rather, the “I think” that Kant begins with is a marker of a deeper process of unification: “the analytic unity of apperception is possible only under the presupposition of a certain synthetic unity” (B133). This unity is provided by the transcendental unity of apperception, which allows the “I think” to accompany all of our representations. As this unity is, and must be, prior to experience (since otherwise it would in turn be a representation in need of unification), it is not something that we can

¹⁸ “Now all experience does indeed contain, in addition to the intuition of the senses, through which something is given, a *concept* of an object being thereby given, that is to say, as appearing. Concepts of objects in general thus underlie all empirical knowledge as its *a priori* conditions” (Kant 1929, A93/B126).

¹⁹ Kant expands on this claim in (1929, A99).

have knowledge of, but something we must presuppose as a foundation for experience. Similarly, Kant argues that we have a concept of an object that is not given in experience. It is simply a way of allowing the various appearances that are given to us to be united in a rule-governed manner. The object, which Kant calls the transcendental object, is “thought only as something in general = x ” (A104) and operates as a point around which the subject can unify the manifold. “The transcendental unity of apperception is that unity through which all the manifold given in an intuition is united in a concept of the object” (B139). Essentially, it allows representations to refer to something beyond themselves, and thus is a correlate of the activity of the transcendental unity of apperception, forming the kind of unity that we need in order to be able to apply the “I think” to our representations.

The subject and the object therefore ground each other. For representations to stand in relation to objects, it is necessary that the representations themselves have a certain unity. This unity is provided by the transcendental unity of apperception, which allows the “I think” to accompany all of our representations. As subjects unify representations, they ground the transcendental object, which is simply this formal unity of representations. The subject in turn is grounded by the object, since through the synthetic nature of the manifold it comes to know itself as a subject, and as that which synthesizes the manifold. This means that the subject necessarily relates to something beyond its own empirical representations, to a world of objects, even if the form of these objects must be given by the subject itself. We can now see why Kant argues that appearances *are* in fact in accordance with its conditions of unity. For experience to be possible, the subject needs to synthesize appearances into objective unities. What is integral to judging is that it is an active process, and that it involves the relation of properties to the concept of an object. The categories that structure experience share the structure of functions of judgment, but also contain a reference to intuition. They thus give us the essential characteristics of what it is for something to be an object (to be a substance, to have properties, etc.), and so it makes sense for the categories of the understanding to provide the rules by which the synthesis takes place. Thus, appearances are synthesized into experience by relating them to the notion of an object, and in order to relate appearances to the notion of an object, we need rules governing objects in general, and these are the categories.

What we can take from this brief exposition is that Kant takes a number of conceptual structures, such as judgment, the object, synthesis, and consciousness, to entail each other. Conscious synthesis takes the form of a judgment. When I count, or bring together, the moments of a judgment

(“the table is red”), it is I who actively relates these representations to one another. In a sense, the spontaneity of my ego is what holds together the passive determinations, “table” and “redness.” In taking this kind of synthesis as the model for synthesis in general, Kant develops a conception of experience that implies the relationship of a subject to an object, one that characterizes the world in terms of properties. In fact, Kant elsewhere suggests that the solution of the problem of how experience is possible by means of the categories “can almost be accomplished through a single inference from the precisely determined definition of a judgment in general (an action through which given representations first become cognitions of an object)” (Kant 2004, 11). As such, Kant points to a rich set of implications and interrelations between these concepts. A result of this is that Merleau-Ponty’s divergence from any of Kant’s core concepts will necessitate a broader set of revisions to the rest of them as changes propagate through these relationships.

5. MERLEAU-PONTY’S CRITIQUE OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL DEDUCTION

I now want to move on to reconstruct where Merleau-Ponty thinks that Kant goes wrong in his formulation of the transcendental deduction. To begin with a brief summary of the intuitions driving his criticisms, Merleau-Ponty argues that Kant’s approach presupposes our perceptual relationship to the world—that “when Kant justifies each step of his Analytic with the famous refrain ‘if a world is to be possible,’ he emphasizes that his guideline is furnished him by the unreflected image of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 34). While Kant recognizes this initial moment of unreflective engagement with the world, Kant fails to recognize that there are other modes of possible synthesis than reflection, and hence fails to recognize that our primary engagement with the world has a structure that is different in kind from the structure of reflection. Thus, it operates “in a style that is not the sole possible one,” and “mixes in presuppositions which we have to examine and which in the end reveal themselves to be contrary to what inspires the reflection” (32). Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Kant is therefore that he effectively falls foul of a transcendental illusion when he takes judgment to be the sole possible model for synthesis of representations. Kant begins with the notion of experience as “mutilated thought” (35), and then through the transcendental method, attempts to show what this notion of experience would presuppose. “It thinks it can comprehend our natal bond with the world only by *undoing* it in order to *remake* it, only

by constituting it, by fabricating it” (32). As we shall see, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism, while focused on the question of judgment, moves beyond intellectualism, also showing the limitations of Kant’s account of the synthetic role of imagination. Rejecting this assumption leads to a series of revisions of key Kantian claims. Merleau-Ponty’s key claim will be that in arguing that the “I think” must be able to accompany all of our representations, Kant implicitly characterizes our perceptions of the world as something analogous to propositions which can all be simultaneously be held in the mind. A proper analysis of the nature of perception shows this assumption is illegitimate. The nature of perception as involving a horizon leads to a rather different conception of the subject, synthesis, and the nature of the object. In effect, Merleau-Ponty accuses Kant of covering over a noncategorical synthesis of perception with the categorical model of the transcendental deduction, and hence understanding the constitution of experience in terms of a false movement. Merleau-Ponty never develops a sustained criticism of Kant, and so to tie together his scattered comments, I want to structure my account in terms of three questions. First, I want to ask, what is the unreflected image of the world that Merleau-Ponty begins with? The second question follows from this. If experience does not have the character that Kant assumes, then what gives unity to experience? As we shall see, Merleau-Ponty here argues for an alternative to what we might call a juridical model of synthesis, introducing the notion of a “transition synthesis.” The final question is, given that Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Kant is based on Kant’s misrepresentation of experience, how is it that Kant mischaracterizes something so fundamental as the structure of experience?

6. WHAT IS THE UNREFLECTED IMAGE OF THE WORLD?

In criticizing empiricism and intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty’s target initially appears to be the atomism at the heart of both accounts. Kant also argues in the third analogy, however, that objects cannot be seen in isolation from each other. “All substances, so far as they can be perceived in space as coexisting, are in thoroughgoing interaction” (1929, B256). As such, in this section, I want to look at the precise sense of atomism that Merleau-Ponty is opposing. The basis for Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of atomism are the results of the Gestalt psychology movement that show that the simple elements of perception at the heart of the classical accounts are in fact never encountered. As Merleau-Ponty notes, experiments show that the simplest elements of perception are not the kinds of homogeneous units presupposed by Hume’s account. Rather, perception involves a horizon

against which objects show themselves: the background against which the object we are perceiving shows itself is not a contingent feature of perception.²⁰ “A figure against a background is the most basic perceptual figure that can be given” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 4). Merleau-Ponty’s claim here is not that the basic unit of perception is affected by its background, but that the basic unit of perception is a complex structure including its background. This leads to a number of implications that move us away from the classical model of perception. First, the notion that perception always requires a context makes the kind of foundationalist project taken up by empiricism and intellectualism problematic. We can no longer build up the meaning of our perceptions by a process of analysis and a combination of absolutely simple elements, since there are none. Rather than sense being imposed on perception through a process of constitution that is external to the elements that make it up, perception has an inherent organization to it. As Merleau-Ponty notes, when we look at a patch of color against a background, we can see that our perception takes on certain formal elements. “The borders of the white patch ‘belong’ to the patch and, despite being contiguous with it, do not join with the background. The patch seems to be placed upon the background and does not interrupt it” (4). Even in the case of this simplest of perceptions, therefore, the parts that make up the perception point beyond themselves are, hence, already organized in terms of a sense or meaning.

What is important to note in this account of perception is that it is not simply a rejection of atomism. “Psychological atomism is but a particular case of a more general prejudice: the unquestioned belief in determinate being and in the world” (510). This generalization of the claim is important. When we examine our own visual field, for instance, despite the fact that the edges of the field may correlate with the edge of the sensitive area of the retina, we do not experience our visual field as having a determinate edge to it. “We ought to thus perceive a sharply delimited segment of the world, surrounded by a black zone, filled with qualities without any lacunae, and subtended by determinate size relations like those existing upon the retina. But experience offers nothing of the sort, and we will never understand what a *visual field* is by beginning from the world” (6). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty notes that children do not initially perceive a wide range of colors,

²⁰ Dillon (1988, 61) cites a number of studies by Metzger, Koffka, and Corso that show that “even when, objectively speaking, there is a complete absence of stimulation, the subjects perceived figures against the uniform grounds, figures which either were generated somatically (heartbeat, breathing, etc.) or were illusions.”

but until nine months of age, appear to only distinguish the colored and the achromatic (32). As they develop, they gain a sense of warm and cold tones before developing a whole range of colors. What we have here for Merleau-Ponty is not a failure to properly attend to the nature of color, but rather a process whereby indeterminate qualities are thematized as consciousness develops. “To pay attention is not merely to further clarify some pre-existing givens; rather, it is to realise in them a new articulation by taking them as *figures*” (32).

The reference to the wider problem of determinate being makes clear that there is a sharp divide between Merleau-Ponty and other figures who might also reject atomism, including both Kant and Hegel.²¹ As we noted earlier, Kant argues that “there is a unity of nature in the connection of all appearances” (1929, A216/B263) in the analogies. Here, Kant argues that this unity of nature has to be understood as something internal to experience, rather than being simply a metaphysical or psychological principle. “Taken together, the analogies thus declare that all appearances lie, and must lie, in *one* nature, because without this *a priori* unity no unity of experience, and therefore no determination of objects in it, would be possible” (A216/B263). While Kant’s claims in the analogies point to the need to understand nature as a unified system, the notion of unity here is at best organic, with each object a fully determinate entity in reciprocal relations with other objects. For Merleau-Ponty, too, our experience of the world is one of a unity, but this unity is between a determinate object and a field of indeterminacy. Returning to the theme of attention, Merleau-Ponty writes, “the act of attention is, however, at least rooted in the life of consciousness, and we can finally understand that it emerges from its indifferent freedom to give itself a present object. The passage from the indeterminate to the determinate, this continuous taking up again of its own history in the unity of a new sense, is thought itself” (2012, 33). There is no equivalent notion in Kant’s thought. While the third critique does include the notion of indeterminacy, this is only as a yet to be completed determination achieved through reflective judgment.

A figure is not perceived against other objects, but against a horizon that remains indeterminate. This is a necessary feature of perception, which

²¹ Berendzen (2009, 165) is wrong to argue that Merleau-Ponty “obviously falls” into the Hegelian tradition of overcoming Kantian dualisms. In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s brief but pivotal reference to Kierkegaard in defining objective thought (see 2012, 74) suggests that Merleau-Ponty is better situated in the tradition of reaction to Hegel’s approach to philosophy.

always occurs from a perspective, and thus always requires that the space of perception has a direction, and hence a horizon:

Thus, since every conceivable being relates directly or indirectly to the perceived world, and since the perceived world is only grasped through orientation, we cannot dissociate being from oriented being; there is no reason to 'ground' space or to ask what is the level of all levels. (264)

This explains the experience of the child with color. It is not the case that they are simply inattentive to the nature of color. Such an interpretation conflates a previous indeterminacy with a determinate but unattended to characteristic of the object, and hence falls prey to the experience error. Rather, certain features of the object that are initially a part of the indeterminate horizon of the object are actively constituted as the object itself. Attention therefore constitutes a new determination of the object, and this new determination is then read back into the previous relations with the object. What Merleau-Ponty is proposing, therefore is an asymmetric relationship between a figure and background, rather than simply a reliance of figure on other figures for its determination. This different account of the nature of experience necessitates a different notion of synthesis.

7. HOW IS EXPERIENCE CONSTITUTED?

How does this alternative view of the nature of experience affect its constitution? Merleau-Ponty notes that Kant "starts [the transcendental deduction] with the principle that if a perception is able to be my own, it must from the start be one of my 'representations'" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 43). We have already seen how various claims Kant makes in the transcendental deduction form a network of mutually supporting assumptions, and Merleau-Ponty notes that this assumption that experience is to be understood in terms of judgment is key. Once we make this claim, we are left in a position whereby it must be the understanding that unites within the object the aspects under which the object presents itself. Kant notes, in turn, that "we can reduce all acts of the *understanding* to judgments, and the understanding may therefore be represented as a *faculty of judgment*" (Kant 1929, A69/B94). In relating a series of passive representations to the concept of an object, Kant therefore draws on the kind of synthesis we use when making judgments:

By *synthesis*, in its most general sense, I understand the act of putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one [act of] knowledge. (A77/B103)

Thinking of perceptions in terms of representations that are amenable to a model of synthesis based on judgment shows a sharp difference from the account of perception Merleau-Ponty introduces. For Merleau-Ponty, perception involves the determination of a figure against an indeterminate ground. The kind of synthesis one finds in judgment involves bringing together representations that are in themselves distinct into a unity. To use Kant's example:

In every judgment there is a concept which holds of many representations, and among them of a given representation that is immediately related to an object. Thus in the judgment, 'all bodies are divisible', the concept of the divisible applies to various other concepts, but is here applied in particular to the concept of body, and this concept again to certain appearances that present themselves to us. (A68–69/B93)

Here, whilst the judgment itself is based on the reciprocal determination of these representations through the structure of the subordination of the predicate to the subject, the two representations, in themselves, are still fully determined. As each is determinate and self-sufficient, they require the agency of the subject in order to bring them together. This leads to the result that the unity of the object is governed by the categories, and hence, as Kant shows in the second analogy, that this unity in turn implies that the object can be understood as participating in a field of objective determinate objects systematically integrated into a set of relations of cause and effect.²² Once the nature of the world is understood in terms of relations of knowledge, it is no surprise that there is no place for perception as

²² Merleau-Ponty discusses this implication in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: "Nevertheless, two sorts of reflections are possible here. The first—intellectualist reflection—thematizes the object and consciousness, and, to repeat a Kantian expression, it 'raises them to the concept.' The object thus becomes *what is*, and consequently what is for everyone and for all times (even if only as an episode that is fleeting, but of which it will always be true that it existed in objective time). Consciousness, thematised by reflection, *is* existence for itself. And, with the help of this idea of consciousness, and this idea of the object, it is easy to show that every sensible quality is only fully an object within the context of the relations of the universe, and that sensation can only be on condition of existing for a central and unique I" (2012, 226–27).

something prior to the objective and universal structures of the categories.²³ The world becomes “an invariable system of relations to which every existing thing is subjected if it is to be known ... like a crystal cube, where all possible presentations can be conceived but its law of construction and that allows its hidden sides to be seen in its present construction” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 342).

If we accept Merleau-Ponty's claim that the simplest structure of perception is a figure against a background, and hence, a mixture of the determinate and indeterminate, then perceptions do not form the kinds of determinate entities that are amenable to categorial synthesis. They simply do not stand on their own as distinct elements to be combined into the form of a judgment. Furthermore, the fact that there is a sense, or organization, to perception that differs in kind from that of judgment implies that there may be another form of synthesis that differs in kind from categorial synthesis. In accepting that perception has an irreducible sense within itself, Merleau-Ponty considers that sense may not simply be bestowed on a collection of passive givens by an active subject.

Rather than the categorial synthesis we find in transcendental idealism, it is organized according to a synthesis, “if one can still speak here of a synthesis” (344), that Merleau-Ponty calls a transition synthesis. This notion of synthesis has two key characteristics. First, as its name suggests, the transition synthesis operates through the transformation of a perspective rather than the constitution of one. Second, rather than relying on a series of determinate elements, it relies on the relationship between the determinate and the indeterminate. If we turn to Merleau-Ponty's account of the determination of directionality in space, for instance, he claims that without an originary presence in space, it is impossible to explain why one set of directions is privileged over another:

²³ We might at this stage return to Kant's initial distinction between perception and experience and ask whether perception, which was not defined by Kant as entailing a reference to objects, escapes from categorial synthesis. Toward the end of the deduction, however, Kant notes that in fact even perception is structured according to the categories insofar as it requires the space that perception takes place in to be determined according to the category of magnitude. In the *Prolegomena*, Kant similarly notes that sensation falls under magnitude, since “for indeed between every given degree of light and darkness, every degree of warmth and the completely cold, every degree of heaviness and absolute lightness, ... ever smaller degrees can be thought ... therefore no perception is possible that would show a complete absence” (1997, §24). Therefore “all synthesis, therefore, even that which renders perception possible, is subject to the categories” (Kant 1929, B161). This synthesis operates according to a “rule of apprehension,” operating through the imagination (see Allison 2004, 185–201). I will return to the significance of the imagination at the end of the section.

It is easy to show that a direction can only exist for a subject who traces it out, and although a constituting mind eminently has the power to trace out all directions in space, in the present moment this mind has no direction and, consequently, it has no space, for it is lacking an actual starting point or an absolute here that could gradually give a direction [*sens*] to all the determinations of space. (258)

Since the Kantian synthesizing subject is prior to the constitution of this space, we cannot explain its orientation within it. Rather, Merleau-Ponty claims that synthesis moves us from one set of “anchorage points,” which “invite us to constitute another space in the midst of a certain space to which they owe their stability” (259–60). As such, we are always already within a system of direction, or sense, which means that we can always account for our present perspective on the world as being a transition from a previous orientation—similarly, Merleau-Ponty gives the example of approaching the town of Chartres. When we look away, then return our gaze to the town, we do not have the experience of two perspectives that need to be reunited by an “invariant” (344). While we can abstract two moments from perception in order to make the judgment, “It’s Chartres,” this is only because they are both drawn from a single perception of the world, which cannot consequently admit the same discontinuity (344). For Merleau-Ponty, the question of synthesis is not about the constitution of space. Merleau-Ponty’s claim is, rather, that the subject is always already found within a spatial milieu. The question is not one of how space is constituted, but rather how a subject that is always already encountered in relation to a spatial world comes to change the directionality of that world.

The second claim is that synthesis does not operate in terms of determinate moments. As Merleau-Ponty notes, when we perceive a scene, our perception cannot be understood as a series of representations that require an external synthetic act of unification to be united. “The perceiving body does not occupy different points of view in turn beneath the gaze of a consciousness who has no place and who thinks these perspectives” (344). Rather, the different perspectives of my perception are only distinguished from one another through my reflection on them. It is only when I transpose my perspectival experience into the structures of reflection that it becomes individuated into moments.²⁴ When we looked at Merleau-Ponty’s

²⁴ In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty argues that our natural tendency to talk of perceptions means that to avoid falling into this illusion, we need to introduce a new way of talking about the subject’s relation to the world: “We exclude the term perception to the whole extent that it already implies a cutting up of what is lived into discontinuous acts” (1968, 158).

claim that perception was organized according to Gestalt structures, we noted that individual impressions pointed beyond themselves, implying borders or connections that were not strictly given. As such, there was a fundamental indeterminacy at the heart of perception, since spatial structures were determined by context. This holds true for temporal structures as well, and individual perspectives on the objects (to use the language of reflection) pass into one another without definite borders. "The diversity of points of view is only suspected through an imperceptible slippage, or through a certain 'indeterminacy' of the appearance" (344). This claim that perception is self-organizing eliminates the need to posit a transcendental unity of apperception and a transcendental object. If perception organizes itself, then there is no need to posit a transcendental subject responsible for the organization of experience. In this sense, perception is primary, and prior to the subject.²⁵ Merleau-Ponty's alternative conception of experience, therefore, points to a different conception of the kind of synthesis that makes this experience possible. Since the figure-background structure differs in kind from the structure of judgment, a different form of synthesis is needed.

In this section, I have focused on the role of the understanding and judgment in Kant's account of the constitution of experience. As Matherne

²⁵ In this sense Merleau-Ponty sees the subject and object as abstractions from a prior phenomenal field that tends to but never reaches distinct structures of subject and object. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the lived body is often taken to be the center of synthesis, often as playing the same functional role as the transcendental unity of apperception. As Merleau-Ponty makes clear in the *Visible and the Invisible*, however, the *Phenomenology of Perception* fails as a project because it begins from the "'consciousness'-'object' distinction" (1968, 200; cf. *ibid.*, 183). The *Visible and the Invisible* argues that the lived body and object are rather themselves subsequent to a primordial moment he calls "vision." This strong thesis of the ontological primacy of perception, even over the lived body, runs throughout the *Visible and Invisible*. For instance: "[Bergson] evokes, beyond the 'point of view of the object' and the 'point of view of the subject,' a common nucleus which is the 'winding' [*serpement*], being as a winding (what I called 'modulation of the being in the world'). It is necessary to make understood how that (or any *Gestalt*) is a perception 'being formed in the things.' This is still only an approximative expression, in the subject-object language (Wahl, Bergson) of what there is to be said. That is, that the things have us, and that it is not we who have the things" (1968, 194). Merleau-Ponty discusses this "event of the order of brute or wild being which, ontologically, is primary" (1968, 200) in his work in aesthetics, where he argues that "we speak of 'inspiration,' and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted" (1964a, 167). It is an open question as to whether the later work is a break with the *Phenomenology of Perception*, or a clearer formulation of its aims outside of the language of consciousness. I favor the latter interpretation, but Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Kant remain broadly the same between the two texts so we can note that even if the former holds, it is at least compatible with both philosophies.

(2016) notes, however, Kant also gives a prominent role to the imagination in the A deduction. Here, the imagination mediates between the synthesis or intuition and the synthesis of the understanding. Kant notes that it is a “merely empirical law” that “representations which have often followed or accompanied one another finally become associated” (1929, A100). He then argues that this empirical law requires a regularity in the appearances themselves. This is provided by the transcendental synthesis of the imagination, which organizes the manifold of intuition in such a way that past moments in time or in a sequence are preserved to be related to present moments. “If I were always to drop out of thought the preceding representations (the first parts of the line, the antecedent parts of the time period, or the units in the order represented), and did not reproduce them while advancing to those that follow, a complete representation would never be obtained: none of the above-mentioned thoughts, not even the purest and most elementary representations of space and time could arise” (A102). The imagination therefore lays the ground for the synthesis of recognition in the concept by the understanding, by providing a sequence of representations that can be brought together by judgment. In the B deduction, Kant argues that “it is one and the same spontaneity, which in the one case, under the title of imagination, and in the other case, under the title of understanding, brings combination into the manifold of intuition” (B162n). As Allison (2004, 196–97) argues, it therefore performs its functions according to the categories, albeit not in a subsumptive manner. As such, it falls under Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Kant’s model of synthesis. Nonetheless, even if we focus on the A deduction, we can note that the two features of Kant’s synthesis that Merleau-Ponty attacks are both present in the synthesis of the imagination. First, the imagination still plays a constitutive role in giving time a sense, and thus precedes it, rather than developing the sense of time within time itself. Second, as with the understanding, the imagination relates together determinate representations, whether representations of moments of time, or numbers when counting. As such, even in this instance, synthesis for Kant still fails to recognize indeterminacy. I want to raise a final question—why does Kant mischaracterize something that should be as immediately transparent as experience?

8. WHY DOES KANT MISCHARACTERIZE EXPERIENCE?

To answer this question, we need to turn to the question of how we characterize the world as a whole. The first thing to note is that the world for Merleau-Ponty is not something like a totality of objects. In keeping with

his claim that all perception has a figure-horizon structure, it is rather a background against which objects make themselves manifest. What Merleau-Ponty wants to make clear is that the unity of the world is not the unity of something like a system of appearances that we find in Kant's analogies, or of a fully determinate (and in principle, knowable) set of relations, such as we might find in naturalism. Rather, Merleau-Ponty argues that the unity of the world is more like the unity of style of an individual that is recognizable, yet unspecifiable:

I experience the unity of the world just as I recognise a style. Moreover, the style of a person or of a town does not remain constant for me. After ten years of friendship, and without even taking into account changes from growing older, it seems to be a relationship with a different person; after ten years of living in a neighbourhood, it seems to be a different neighbourhood. Yet it is only the *knowledge of things* that varies. Almost unnoticeable upon my first glance, this knowledge is transformed through the unfolding of perception. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 342)

As he writes elsewhere, “the natural world is the horizon of all horizons, and the style of all styles, which ensures my experiences have a given, not a willed, unity beneath the ruptures of my personal and historical life” (345).

As the horizon of all horizons is the ultimate horizon of our world, it cannot itself be made a figure, since there is no horizon against which it could appear. At the heart of Merleau-Ponty's critique of determinate being is the claim that Kant has fallen prey to a transcendental illusion that the style of this ultimate horizon can be thematized as an object, but such a thematization breaks with the principle that every figure appears against a background. This illusion has some basis in the nature of the transition synthesis, which allows us to shift between perspectives and hence change those aspects of an object that are foregrounded as determinate:

Each object, then, is the mirror of all the others. When I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities that are visible from my location, but also those that the fireplace, the walls and the table can ‘see’ ... Thus, I can see one object insofar as objects form a system or world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects and as the guarantee of their permanence. (71)

While there is a tendency to see the lamp as a unity, in fact, in attending to aspects of the object, others fall away into the indeterminate horizon. In this sense, perception gives us a constant transitional interplay between determinacy and indeterminacy. The implication of this is that the object

cannot be given in its absolute density, as attending to one moment of the object involves others falling back into indeterminacy. Furthermore, given the natural world is a horizon of all horizons, the world itself remains “an open and indefinite multiplicity where relations are reciprocally implicated” (73).

The error emerges when we fail to recognize this necessary horizontal nature of perspectives, and see each effectively as a possible representation of the object. This is effectively to see these perspectives as individual atoms, the totality of which “condensed into a strict coexistence” (72) would give the absolute object. While it appears that by comparing representations in memory, we could reach this density, in doing so, we have already reached the level of reflection, and we assume something like an “immense World-Memory” (73) as the source of our perspectives. The world is thus seen to contain all perspectives simultaneously. Once we have intellectually constructed the notion of an absolute object, we see this as the basis of our perception of the world, and thus in turn deduce our experience from the relations between objects.

Here we have the structure of the transcendental illusion at the heart of Kant’s account of perception. There is a tendency in perception toward giving us a determinate object. While it appears to reflection as if the object can be given all at once by a synthesis of all perspectives, “my human gaze never *posits* more than one side of the object, even if by means of horizons it intends all the others” (72). The actual transition from perspective to perspective entails a continual shift in the horizon: it is a presumptive synthesis. Reflection takes this process of interplay as a series of moments, all of which could be potentially given at once, and in this forgets the object-horizon structure of perception. It is only by effectively treating perspectives as things that can be placed alongside each other that we can make sense of simultaneously occupying a number of different perspectives. It effectively sees perception as a series of representations which could simultaneously be thought by an “I think” in the same way that a number of propositions could be related together by the same subject. Whereas for Merleau-Ponty, the openness of the world is a result of the necessity of the horizon structure, for the philosopher of reflection, we have what Merleau-Ponty calls the universe, which is “a completed and explicit totality where relations would be reciprocally determined” (73). Thus, by taking a tendency within perception for an absolute state, reflection thereby develops what Merleau-Ponty calls “the objective thought” of common sense and science. What is “the result and the natural continuation” (74) of perception in the end becomes forgetful of its initial perspectivism and is forced to reconstruct our

experience through the categories of causal sequences or judgment. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty notes ironically that while Kant's analogies suggest the kind of closed view of the world we find in the model of objective thought, or reflection, in the antinomies, Kant rightly denies the possibility of thinking of the world as a totality.

9. CONCLUSION

As such, we can see that Merleau-Ponty's reading of Kant is one of ambivalence. An inability to take seriously the possibility of synthesis which does not have its roots in determination and constitution makes Kant a figure to be surpassed. Nonetheless, Kant recognizes the centrality of our experience of the world and shows that our understanding of experience cannot presuppose the kind of theocentric view of it at the heart of both empiricism and rationalism. In this regard, rather than following many commentators in seeing Kant opposed to Merleau-Ponty, we should see Kant as a fellow traveler in recognizing the primacy of perception as the opening of philosophy. Seeing Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Kant as much more sophisticated than a straightforward dismissal presents us with a new point of reference from which to develop and interpret his philosophy. The indebtedness of Merleau-Ponty to Kant's transcendental idealism, together with the development of a new conception of synthesis allows us to see Merleau-Ponty as developing a new path beyond Kant that differs from both the post-Kantian augmentation of categorial synthesis²⁶ and the neo-Kantian downplaying of intuition.

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²⁶ I am here assuming a reading that takes Hegel as in part providing an alternative to Kant's metaphysical deduction (Houlgate 163). As Merleau-Ponty's own lectures on the concept of nature show, this does not preclude a radical rereading of thinkers such as Schelling that draws them closer to the kind of project Merleau-Ponty develops.

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