Perception and Self-Awareness in Merleau-Ponty:

The Problem of the Tacit Cogito in the *Phenomenology of Perception*

*Wai-Shun Hung*

*Chinese University of Hong Kong*

**Introduction:**

The *Phenomenology of Perception* and the Philosophy of Consciousness

If the legacy of Descartes is his idea of consciousness as a realm of interiority and transparency, the contributions of many twentieth-century philosophers consist precisely in their efforts to criticize this Cartesian notion of self. Among these efforts, Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* occupies an ambiguous position. While its analysis of being-in-the-world as bodily insertion, of expression as incarnation of sense, and of the opaqueness of our inner life challenges the idea of consciousness as a realm of transparency and self-presence, its notion of a tacit cogito seems to remain a notion of self-presence, especially when compared to the critique of the metaphysics of presence put forth by Derrida, with whom Merleau-Ponty has much in common.1 As to Merleau-Ponty himself, it is well known that he later concludes that the “problems posed” in the *Phenomenology* are “insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’–‘object’ distinction” (*VI* 253/200) and that “what I call the tacit cogito is impossible” (*VI* 224/171).2 However, the meaning of these criticisms remains to be

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2 The following abbreviations will be used in this essay, and the English translations have been modified occasionally for accuracy and consistency:
clarified, and it is clear from the start that while the tacit cogito fails as a solution, the “problems posed” with this notion are indeed genuine and remain to be clarified. In this essay, we will attempt to understand Merleau-Ponty’s considerations behind the notion of the tacit cogito, and suggest that while this notion does not resolve the issue that it was intended to, the *Phenomenology* already contains another line of thought that will lead to Merleau-Ponty’s later solution to the same issue, namely, the relation between self-awareness and intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty describes his work in the *Phenomenology of Perception* as a study of perception as “an original modality of consciousness” (*PrP* 41/12). In opposition to the two reductionistic approaches that he calls “empiricism” and “intellectualism,” he shows that the perceptual subject eludes the simple dichotomy of activity and passivity, the for-itself and the in-itself, but is rather an ambiguous junction of the two. We neither discover a ready-made meaning in the world nor impose a meaning upon it with the sense-giving acts of a pure consciousness; instead, meaning arises from perception, our primordial contact with the world. Drawing on the results of psychology and physiology, Merleau-Ponty describes how the conscious subject carries out tasks against a background of habitual skills sedimented in its body, and shows that that prior to these conscious acts the body already has a hold on the world and itself in perception and sensory-motor skills, which enables the subject to “‘be at home in’

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*PrP* Le primat de la perception (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1996)/The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays, tr. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964)


(fréquenter) the world, ‘understand’ it and find a meaning in it” (PhP 274/237). Hence, instead of the constituting consciousness of idealism, “the truly transcendental” is the ambiguous life (PhP 418/364-365) which is both the personal life of the subject and the pre-personal, natural life of the body. As the two basic features of subjectivity — transcendence and self-awareness — can already be found in it, the body can be described as “a natural self” or as “the subject of perception” (PhP 239/206), but strictly speaking it is rather a “pre-subject” or natural subject “beneath” the conscious, reflective subject: “there is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marked out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body” (PhP 294/254).

The first two parts of the Phenomenology of Perception is mainly concerned with describing the transcendence and self-awareness of the body-subject as well as the world unfolded before it, and as Renaud Barbaras notes, the turn, in part three of the book, towards “being-for-itself” is not unsurprising, as “one would think that the discovery of the body as natural subject of perception invalidates the question of for-itself”. Now in the “cogito” chapter Merleau-Ponty does pursue a critique of the Cartesian notion of consciousness, yet immediately after this critique is a renewed discussion of the notion of consciousness. Here the Cartesian position is represented by Descartes himself and Lachièze-Rey. The main thrust of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism is that, just as our perceptual experience is marked by “a thickness and an opacity” (PhP 56n./45n.), in our “inner life” consciousness is never totally transparent to itself, whether it is in its self-understanding in its emotive life, or in its experience of the

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3 Cf. PhP 186/160.
hanging-together of a geometrical proof. Our emotions, instead of being transparent, are ambiguous even to ourselves. We can and do distinguish between “true” and “false” feelings and different degrees of reality for them (PhP 432/377), but when a feeling is described as “false”, it is not by appealing to knowledge gained from introspection. Sartre’s analysis has already shown that emotion is primarily a certain manner of apprehending the world, and our consciousness of it is non-reflective. Instead of being objects of our “internal perception” and relating only contingently to the world, emotions are ways of situating ourselves in the world and cannot be severed from it. They are projections of the intentions with which we pattern our behaviour, and, as in the case of perception, the awareness that we have of our emotions is also incomplete and open-ended. Thus when I become “disillusioned” of a relationship, or when I “discover” feelings that I have without realizing it, my discovery does not consist in the discovery of something hidden in unconsciousness, but rather comes from my observation and reflection on my own behaviour (PhP 436/381). Here my “introspection” is not a special kind of inner perception, but refers to a group of activities such as observation, recalling and taking note of my actions.

In the case of the geometrical proof, it would seem that I do not “create” a geometrical truth by proving it, and that it must have existed before I set to construct a figure to prove it; that, for example, a triangle has its properties independently of my attempt to prove them, and what I do in my proof is only to draw out what is eternally and unchangeably contained in the idea of a triangle. Thus while the synthesis in my actual perception of a triangular object will never be complete, the geometrical idea of a triangle is completely and immediately present to me. However, Merleau-Ponty immediately points out that the properties to be proved (that the angles of a triangle are
equal to two right angles, for example) and the steps leading to this conclusion are not really contained in the definition of a triangle, and the definition only serves as the starting point of my proof. Grasping that the steps hang together as the steps of one proof requires an *act* on my part, and the construction I make in the proof does not consist in the purely manual operation of my hand and pen on the paper (otherwise there would be no difference between a demonstration and any arbitrary set of strokes). It is rather a *gesture*, meaning that the lines I draw are the expression of an intention (*PhP* 442/386). What happens when it dawns on me that I can, by drawing a line through the apex of a triangle parallel to the opposite side, prove that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, is not that I now have a more adequate idea of the triangle, closer to its eternal ideal. Instead, in an act of “productive imagination” (*PhP* 443/386) I take up one of the possibilities suggested to me by the physiognomy or *Gestalt* (*PhP* 441/385) of the triangle. What this *Gestalt* gives me is not a set of “characteristics” arrayed exhaustively in thought, but a “dynamic formula” (*PhP* 443/386) that contains an indefinite number of possible structurations of space that my body can act out. In this way, the essences that geometry speaks of are “concrete essences,” and geometrical truths are proven when my body acts on the spatial possibilities presented by the *Gestalt* of an actual or imagined figure. These spatial possibilities are indefinite, and the triangle is always “bursting” with indefinite possibilities (*PhP* 443/386). Thus the sense of a geometrical truth is not determined once and for all. It can be fitted into new contexts (for example, from Euclidean to non-Euclidean space) and assume a new sense (*PhP* 454/396). On the other hand, the truths of geometry are not purely products of my imagination, and their truth is not grounded in my thought (*PhP* 444/387). For when I add further constructions to the triangle, I can...
bring to light more of its properties, and yet I assume that this newly transformed
triangle does not cease to be the same one that I began with. This is because my body
performs in this process a synthesis which is not upheld by an *eidos* of the triangle but
is grounded in its spatiality and derives its necessity from it. The idea of the “essence of
the triangle” is nothing more than the presumption of a completed synthesis, while the
idea of a completed synthesis itself is borrowed from perceptual synthesis: “unless the
perceived thing has for good and ever implanted within us the ideal notion of a being
which is what it is, there would be no phenomenon of being. What I call the essence of
triangle is nothing but this presumption of a completed synthesis, in terms of which we
have defined the thing” (*PhP* 444-445/388).

**The Return of the Cogito**

However, it is immediately clear that for Merleau-Ponty, the critique of the
Cartesian notion of consciousness does not imply a total critique of any conception of
consciousness whatsoever. In fact, even the Cartesian conception already draws
attention to an important feature of consciousness. The certainty of the Cartesian cogito
lies in its immediate grasp of itself in its acts of thinking. In including not only under-
standing, doubting, judging but also willing, imagining and even perceiving as thoughts,
Descartes is drawing on what he takes to be essential to these acts, namely, that they are
conscious acts, acts which we are aware of immediately as happening “within us”
(*Principles of Philosophy*, I, 9, AT VIII 7, AT IX 27), and it is this immediate
awareness that grants thought its certainty. Thereby Descartes sets up a subjective
realm of consciousness, an inner realm of immediacy and certainty, in opposition to an
objective realm, the “external” world, and distinguishes between the “thought of
seeing,” which is certain when taken by itself, and the transcendent interpretation of this thought articulated in judgement, which is open to doubt. This consciousness is reflexive, that is, it is always aware of its contents, as well as transparent, in that none of its contents can elude its grasp.

The Cartesian cogito is thus a “sphere of immanence,” a “realm in which my consciousness is fully at home and secure against all risks of error” (PhP 431/376). It is a self defined in terms of self-possession (PhP 428/373), and the relation of this consciousness to the body is merely contingent, that is, the body is not a necessary condition for there to be thoughts (Principles, I, 9, AT VII 7-8/IX 28). Yet we can already find in Descartes the idea of a transcendence which is given immediately in perception, only that his opposition between the inner and the outer (and between the thought of seeing and its interpretation in judgement) renders this transcendence problematic. If our relation to the transcendent things is understood in terms of the passivity of our consciousness, if the “thought of seeing” is taken to mean an “impression of seeing,” then its certainty amounts only to a probability and is no more certain than the purported existence of the thing seen. What’s more, talks of a probable|

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5 Cf. Conversation with Burman, AT V 149.
6 For example, in the famous analysis of our perception of a piece of wax, an outward movement from the interiority of the thinking self to the world is provided in the reflection on the indefinite series of possible aspects of the wax, and it is this indefiniteness, which is understood by the intellect, rather than their perceptibility by the senses, that constitutes the essence of things as such (Second Meditation, AT VII 31-34, Letter to Henry More, 5th February 1649, AT V 268). It is this definition of transcendence as possessing an indefinite and regular series of aspects that allows us to distinguish dreams from waking experience (Sixth Meditation, AT VII 89-90). However, Descartes does not follow this path to the end and maintains a separate notion of existence (SC 211-212/196).
7 Also, following the empiricist definition of perception as the possession of qualities impressed upon the subject by the stimuli, the awareness of anything other than the immediately given will be a judgement in the sense of an interpretation. Therefore, the assumption of an indefinite series of aspects will be a judgement, a jump from the object’s perceived qualities such as smell, colour and taste, and when I judge that what I see from the window, hidden by coats and hats, are humans instead of automatons, I am making an inference from given qualities to qualities which are “hermetically sealed” (PhP 41). However, as Alquié points out, in this passage in the Second Meditation (AT VII 32), Descartes’ point is that while
“thought of seeing” make sense only in comparison with cases of “genuine seeing” (PhP 430/375). On the other hand, if this relation is understood in terms of the activity of our consciousness, if the “thought of seeing” is our awareness of the constituting power of our consciousness, then the certainty of this constituting power must extend to the constituted (PhP 430-431/376). Instead of providing grounds for a distinction between the inner and the outer and for the establishment of a realm of pure thought, the analysis of perception shows us that all my perceptions have to take place from a certain perspective, namely my body, and the perceived object is always given with each perception but never completely:

Perception is precisely that kind of act in which there can be no question of setting the act itself apart from the end to which it is directed. Perception and the perceived necessarily have the same existential modality, since perception is inseparable from the consciousness which it has, or rather is, of reaching the thing itself…. If I see an astray, in the full sense of the word see, there must be an astray there. (PhP 429/374)

Furthermore, when Descartes outlines the three aspects of the certainty of my experience, he is in effect highlighting the fact that my experience is always given to me as mine, and in this regard, the Cartesian return to the self contains a valid insight: “the very experience of transcendent things is possible only provided that I bear and find their project in myself” (PhP 423/369). This “double sense of the cogito” is, for Merleau-Ponty, “the fundamental fact of metaphysics”: “I am sure that there is being — on the condition that I do not seek another sort of being than being-for-me.”

The question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them; *how the presence to myself (Urpräsenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time deposition* (Entgegenwärtigung) *and throws me outside myself*.

*(PhP 417/363)*

In other words, the question posed by the Cartesian cogito is that of the relation between self-awareness and intentionality, and what it should have revealed is that self-awareness is given in the awareness of an object, albeit in a different manner: “The primary truth is indeed ‘I think,’ but only provided that we understand thereby ‘I belong to myself’ while belonging to the world” *(PhP 466/407)*. Here Merleau-Ponty pursues a line of reasoning similar to Sartre’s in *Being and Nothingness*: the subject is totally “absorbed” in its consciousness of an object in its transcendence. If this subject is to seize itself in this consciousness, it has to interrupt the first act of object-consciousness in a second act which takes the first act as its object. For this second consciousness to be possible, the subject must have been aware of itself in some way even when it was totally absorbed in the object, and it is this awareness that gives rise to the spontaneous unity of consciousness. This self-awareness is not a second consciousness added to the consciousness of an object but the mode of being of every consciousness, and it must be related to the object-consciousness in a different way, or we would either have to accept an “unconscious consciousness” as our starting point or be faced with an infinite regress.⁹ If we are to avoid this difficulty, we must accept that

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prior to the reflective consciousness there is a non-positional consciousness whose relation to conscious acts is non-cognitive and immediate:

All thought of something is at the same time self-consciousness, failing which it could have no object. At the root of all our experiences and all our reflections, we find, then, a being which immediately recognizes itself, because it is its knowledge both of itself and of all things, and which knows its own existence, not by observation and as a given fact, nor by inference from any idea of itself, but through direct contact with that existence. Self-consciousness is the very being of mind in action.

\[(PhP 426/371)\]

**The Tacit Cogito**

Although Merleau-Ponty describes this pre-reflective awareness, which he calls the “tacit cogito,” as “the presence of oneself to oneself” \((PhP 462/404)\), unlike the Cartesian cogito, it is not “the transparency of a thought wholly in possession of itself” \((PhP 428/374)\). This self-awareness which enables Descartes to say “I think” rather than “there are thoughts” is mediated by our relation with the world. Hence, paradoxically, it is a consciousness that is not aware of itself. It is a cogito only when it expresses itself \((PhP 463/404)\).

The consciousness which conditions language is merely a global and inarticulate grasp upon the world…, and though it is true that all particular knowledge is founded on this primary view, it is true also that the latter waits to be won back, fixed and made explicit by perceptual exploration and by speech. Silent consciousness grasps itself only as a generalized “I think” in the face of a confused world “to be thought about.”

\[(PhP 462-463/404)\]
At the same time, this pre-reflective awareness must be capable of being taken up by reflection, and Merleau-Ponty explains this relation between reflection and the pre-reflective with the Husserlian notion of *Fundierung*, founding-founded (*PhP* 451/394). Thus reflection makes explicit the genesis of sense already at work in the pre-reflective, while the pre-reflective is present only in its appropriation by reflection. In this way, while reflection is a creative act of expression, the sense it expresses is nonetheless experience’s own. The “purity” of this sense is guaranteed, since the pre-reflective is always anterior to reflection and is thus kept outside it as its limit, as “an original past, a past that has never been present” (*PhP* 280/242). Yet to think of the relation between reflection and the pre-reflective in this way is to conceive of reflection in terms of negativity, and what is negated (the pre-reflective) as a positivity that is merely “elsewhere.” Thus M. C. Dillon is led to say that when Merleau-Ponty calls the pre-reflective “a past that has never be present,” this “past” is only “never present to reflective consciousness, but fully present to pre-reflective consciousness.”¹⁰ And as we will see, this idea of reflection will eventually jeopardize the *Phenomenology*’s effort to characterize a self-awareness that is not in the form of object-intentionality. Also, it is this idea of reflection that attracts the criticism that Merleau-Ponty has re-introduced another notion of self-presence. Jacques Taminiaux, for example, has noted that there seems to be two opposing movements in the *Phenomenology*, giving rise to two very different conceptions of reflection.¹¹

“The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (*PhP* viii/ix). Instead of being a disclosure of the structures of

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¹¹ Jacques Taminiaux, op. cit..
the transcendental consciousness as Husserl has once conceived it, the phenomeno-
logical reduction is later spoken of as “a ‘wonder’ in the face of the world” (PhP viii/xiii). It is the realization that the act of reflection is itself temporal and situated in
an unreflected life. This life is that of the tacit cogito, which as we have seen is only an
inarticulate grasp on the world and which is a cogito only when it has found expression
for itself. Thus reflection is that very act which produces the meaning of this life, a
meaning which would otherwise not have existed prior to its expression, and the
relation between reflection and the unreflected life is one of Fundierung. This is what
leads Merleau-Ponty to declare that “the phenomenological world is not the bringing to
explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying-down (fondation) of being.
Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the realization of a
truth” (PhP xv/xx).

Yet in almost the same passages, we find another description of the tacit cogito
as a primary seat of meaning, which is the basis of all acts of expression:

Nevertheless, I should find [Descartes’ words] not so much derivative
and inauthentic as meaningless, and I should be unable even to read
Descartes’ book, were I not, before any speech, in contact with my own
life and thought, and if the spoken cogito did not encounter within me a
tacit cogito. This silent cogito was the one Descartes sought when
writing his Meditations. It gave life and direction to all expressive
operations which, by definition, always miss their target.

(PhP 460-461/402, italics mine)

We have experience of ourselves, of that consciousness which we are,
and it is on the basis of this experience that all linguistic connotations
are assessed, and precisely through it that language comes to have any
meaning at all for us.
Together with this, we find a “positivistic” description of reflection that sees the reduction as “the ambition to make reflection emulate the unreflective life of consciousness” (PhP xi/xvi). Thus reflection is no longer understood as a creative act of expression but as an attempt at coincidence. As Taminiaux points out, what is at stake here is the secondary status of language with respect to the “silence of self-relation,” to the mute experience of meaning in consciousness as a primary sphere of signification.\(^{12}\)

It is the office of language to cause essences to exist in a state of separation which is in fact merely apparent, since through language they still rest upon the pre-predicative life of consciousness. In the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning around which the acts of naming and expression take shape.

On the one hand, according to the “positivistic” concept of reflection, in the unreflected and pre-predicative consciousness there is already a primary meaning which is the basis of language, and what language does is only to introduce an apparent state of separation. On the other hand, according to the gestural theory of language and the “artistic” conception, speech does not translate ready-made thoughts but rather accomplishes it. The expressivity of the inner life is already that of language (PhP 213/183).\(^{13}\)

The Cogito in *The Visible and The Invisible*

\(^{12}\) Taminiaux, ibid., p. 97.
\(^{13}\) Cf. Taminiaux, ibid., p. 105.
However, it is worth noting here how empathetically Merleau-Ponty distinguishes his position from Bergson’s, who sets up the “lived-through” as “an immediate ‘given’” and “an ‘inner’ layer of experience” against the “thought-about” of reflection, to such an extent that Merleau-Ponty will say that this “internal experience…is meaningless” (*PhP* 319/276):

There is no experience without speech, and the purely lived-through has no part even in the speaking life of man. However, the fact remains that the primary meaning of discourse is to be found in the text of experience which it is trying to communicate.

(*PhP* 388/337)

This passage sums up the position of the *Phenomenology*. While he criticizes the Cartesian conception of the subject as a sphere of interiority, Merleau-Ponty never proceeds to accord language the independent and foundational status once accorded to the self-transparent subject or to conclude that subject and meaning are produced by the “movement of the signifier.” Instead, the study of perception leads him to recognize the need to maintain some notion of subjectivity, a subject which uses language to articulate its experience which is nonetheless meaningful due to its pre-linguistic, practical contact with the world. The problem for him is rather how to construe this primary, pre-reflective contact with the world and its relation to language and reflection. The difficulty of the *Phenomenology* is that, although it stresses the practical nature of our bodily contact with the world, and although it discovers in the body “a kind of reflection” (*PhP* 109/93), in the end it still seeks to make this contact the coincidence between thought and Being,14 thereby construing it as a kind of “proto-reflection.” However, if we follow the analysis of the body closely, we will find in there the

description of a kind of “bodily reflection” in which the body is given to itself in a way that is different from the mode of givenness of an object. In the *Phenomenology*, the phenomenon of “double sensations” is used to show that the body is never entirely an object, as in its active role the body is that by which there are objects (*PhP* 108/93). Furthermore, the body-subject and the objective body are not ontologically distinct, because as an incarnated subject the perceiver is also a part of the world. In this way, the body is ambiguous, alternating between its subjective and objective roles such that they are neither fully coincident nor distinct (*PhP* 109/93). However, this description has not yet exhausted the significance of the phenomenon. When my right hand touches my left hand, I am aware of my left hand as a “physical thing,” but at the same moment, in an “extraordinary event” (*S* 210/166), my left hand also experiences the touch. Apart from the sensations I have of my left hand as a thing, there are also sensations *in* my left hand. These sensations do not simply add to the sensations of my left hand as a physical thing and make them richer; rather, my left hand is now invested with the same exploratory power and becomes lived body, and the touched hand becomes the touching hand. As Husserl says:

> But when I touched the left hand I also find in it, too, series of touch-sensations, which are “localized” in it, though these are not constitutive of the properties (such as roughness or smoothness of the hand, of this physical thing). If I speak of the physical thing, ‘left hand’, then I am abstracting from these sensations [. . .]. If I do include them, then it is not that the physical thing is now richer, but instead *it becomes lived body* [Leib].\(^{15}\)

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As the sense of touch is diffused in my body, my body becomes a “sensing thing” or “subject-object” (S 210/166). To use Husserl’s expression, the body is “originally constituted in a double way,” both as physical thing and as bearer of localized sensations. The tactile self-constitution of the body also plays a key role in kinaesthetic experience. For example, when I touch an object, the tactile sensation occurs in conjunction with a sensation of the movement of my hand, and when I look at a moving object, the object is given with a sensation of my eye-movement. In this way, every visual or tactile experience is given in correlation to a kinaesthetic experience. In fact, an experience is not only linked to a kinaesthetic experience of actual movement but to a horizon of possible movements given to me by my kinaesthetic sensations. Each experience is, in Husserl’s words, “so enmeshed with the entire system” of possible movements that — in the case of vision, for example — “I can say with certainty that if I were to move my eyes in this direction or in that, specific visual appearances will accordingly run their course in a determinate order.” In other words, the horizon of the aspects of a perceptual object is correlated to my kinaesthetic horizon, giving the kinaesthetic self-awareness of the body an indispensable role in the way a perceptual object is given. On the other hand, in its kinaesthetic self-awareness, my body accomplishes a kind of bodily reflection in which it apprehends itself only through the difference of its parts and also through the route of exteriority, in a circuit of selfrelation in which the world is necessarily caught up. In other words, here self-

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16 Ibid., p. 153. Cf. ibid, p. 158.
awareness is truly analysis as a moment of our relation to the world that is not itself a form of object-intentionality.

Concerning his self-criticism, while it is true that Merleau-Ponty later concludes that the *Phenomenology* begins from the consciousness—object distinction and thus remains entrenched in the philosophy of consciousness, and that language assumes an ever-increasing role in his later works, this never leads to a reversal of his earlier position.

What I call the tacit cogito is impossible. To have the idea of “thinking” (in the sense of the “thought of seeing and of feeling”), to make the “reduction,” to return to immanence and to the consciousness of . . . it is necessary to have words. It is by the combination of words . . . that I *form* the transcendental attitude, that I *constitute* the constitutive consciousness. The words do not refer to positive significations and finally to the flux of the *Erlebnisse* as *Selbstgegeben*. Mythology of a self-consciousness to which the word “consciousness” would refer—there are only *differences* between significations.

(*VI* 224-225/171)

After saying that “the tacit cogito is impossible”, Merleau-Ponty immediately adds that “yet there is a world of silence, the perceived world, at least, is an order where there are non-language significations—yes, non-language significations, but they are not accordingly *positive*” (*VI* 224-225/171). For him, there is always a signifying intention that lives from our contact with the world, which “animates linguistic events and, at each moment, makes language a system capable of its own tallying and confirmation.”

Expression will always be of such nature that although the signifying intention is confirmed in expression, this confirmation is at the same time a rediscovery

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of the original intention. But if the recovery of the origin turns out only to be its re-
discovery, this does not entail the absence of an origin. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty’s
later work is still a development of his earlier position, and the unsolved problem of the
*Phenomenology* lies in the passage from the non-positive meaning of perception to
linguistic meaning (*VI* 230/176) rather than the idea of the silence of perceptual life.
Thus we find the later Merleau-Ponty calling perception an “*articulation* before the
letter” (*VI* 168/126) and saying that “language is not a mask over Being,” which does
not interrupt “an immediation that would be perfect without it” (*VI* 167, 168/126), as
language and this articulation will be homogeneous. If it can be said, after Lacan, that
vision and thought are “structured like a language” (*VI* 168/126), it is because the
structure of Being is such that the possibilities of language are already given there (*VI*
203/155). Reflection, as an effort of expression, is a possibility of Being itself, and if
one begins wit the unreflected, it is because one has to begin somehow (*VI* 56/34). But
reflection does not confront the unreflected as “the originary,” as there is no longer the
originary or the derived. It is an operation that arises from the unreflected and from
which it is never separated.

The visible and the philosophical explicitation of the visible are not side
by side as two sets of signs, as a text and its version in another tongue. If
it were a text, it would be a strange text, which is directly given to us all,
so that we are not restricted to the philosopher’s translation and can
compare the two. And philosophy for it part is more and less than a
translation: more, since it alone tells us what the text means; less, since
it is useless if one does not have the text at one’s disposal.

(*VI* 58/36)
In its critique of the Cartesian notion of consciousness, the *Phenomenology* has shown that in every domain, from perception to action and to expression, the self is never an inner realm fully present to itself independent of its body, the world and language, but is always inscribed within the world through the body and through language. Yet it is only in Merleau-Ponty later works that the significance of this inscription of the self in language becomes fully developed. The reflection upon the self, as he later puts it, is an attitude formed with language, within history, and in a life, and not an immediate and originary experience. At the same time, he will always come back to the idea of the existence of pre-linguistic meanings that philosophy (and art) will seek to make manifest. “If Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being” (*VI* 162/122), and it is through reflection that it is revealed as hidden. In this way, reflection becomes, for Merleau-Ponty, the attempt to unveil what Husserl has already caught sight of when he in the *Ideas II* concludes that the constitution of the body will never be complete and that there is always a “back side” which escapes us: the natural or “wild” being of which expression is one of its own possibilities, as the self-mediation, or coiling-over, of the flesh.