Just as birth and death are non-personal horizons, so is there a non-personal body, systems of anonymous functions, blind adherences to beings that I am not the cause of and for which I am not responsible

Merleau-Ponty

Chapter 3

Phenomenological Concept of Lived Body
As we have seen in the previous chapter, Descartes’ attempt is to show once and for all that mind and body are two distinct, separate and independent substances. Body, he concludes, is extensive, inert, subject to mechanical laws, having no desire, purpose, or power of spontaneous motion. It is on such a view as this that the impressive body of modern physics, from Newton to the middle of the nineteenth century, was built. The mind, on the other hand, is for Descartes a substance with no extension, whose essential nature is to think.

We have also seen that this extreme dualism of Descartes performed the great service of laying a solid foundation for the development of modern medicine. One of the fundamental problems that we have identified with the Cartesian model of embodiment is the reduction of body to the status of a machine. In the recent past there have been many attempts to challenge the Cartesian model and to explore relevant alternatives. Phenomenology can be regarded as one of such attempts. French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty’s principal target of attack is the Cartesian paradigm of embodiment. He attempts to refute the twin tendencies of western philosophy namely empiricism and rationalism, and to re-articulate the relationship between body and mind, subject and the object among various other dualisms. Throughout his philosophical career, Merleau-Ponty’s attempt was to emphasize not only the existential nature of the human subject, but above all its bodily nature. Thus his philosophy can
be characterized as a philosophy of the lived body. This chapter is an attempt to have a detailed survey of Merleau-Ponty’s account of body especially as exposed in his works *Structure of behaviour* and *Phenomenology of perception*.

It was Edmund Husserl who introduced the concept of ‘lived body’ first. We have already discussed the relevance of this concept in the introduction of this thesis. The term ‘lived body’ derives from the German word *Leib*. In German, the term *Leib* is employed when one is referring to living bodies while the term *Korper* is used to designate inanimate or dead bodies as the body of a rock or of a human corpse. Husserl’s use of the expression ‘lived body’ was aimed at distinguishing the body that is lived by us from physical bodies. Cartesian scheme could be effective only on a plane where body is excluded from life. Lived body is body-in-life.

Husserl’s distinction between two concepts, *Korper and Leib*, arrives at attributing importance to body. In the chapter ‘The Constitution of Psychic Reality through the Body’ in *Ideas*, Husserl explores the fundamental role of body in perception and action. He argues that the body is “constituted originally through the sense of touch.”¹ He also says that “a human being’s total consciousness is in a certain sense……..bound to the body.”²
Merleau-ponty’s philosophy of the body owes much to Husserl’s phenomenology. The concept of intentionality is vital in discussing the concept of lived body. In the history of philosophy the notion of intentionality is a complex one. It has got a long history having its roots in medieval thought. It was Frans Brentano who revived the concept for the modern era and Edmund Husserl who developed it into a philosophical theme that came to be occupying a central role within twentieth century phenomenological thought. For Husserl, consciousness is essentially intentional in nature. It is invariably ‘of something’ and the ‘of ness’ or ’aboutness’ constitutes its very being.

Husserl identifies the term intentionality with consciousness as it is something which is bound up with the experienced world. Intending mind/consciousness is a being in communion with the world. More precisely, the world is the intentional correlate of consciousness. In a significant sense, consciousness constitutes the world-as-lived. Only with reference to the intentional powers we can understand the meaning of the objects. It is by this intentional power we experience the world. Thus the intending consciousness/subjectivity is not just an item in the world, but the mode in which the world discloses to be.
Merleau-Ponty locates the intentionality of consciousness in the lived body. By doing so, he attempts a reformulation of the intentionality of consciousness into bodily intentionality. Body is an intending entity. It exists primarily by interacting with its lived world. The interacting or intending ‘I’ is not something located in another dimension to the body acting in space and time. It is body itself. As Merleau-Ponty says the original sense of the ‘I’ is ‘I can’, a practical sense of body’s expressive possibilities. Body as extended in the spacio-temporal realm cannot be of the nature of a closed monad. Body is essentially open towards the other. And, openness constitutes its basic structure.

What is this openness? To say that body is essentially open is to say that its existence consists in its constant reaching out, directedness towards its environment, i.e. the lived world. Precisely, the very existence of my body consists in its intentionality. Bodily intentionality refers to body’s deep-level engagement with its world. World is its environment and not something composed of objective dimensions of space and time. Our relation to the world is not a subject-object relation. It is of the nature of a lived encounter, the thing encountered is not a world composed of some alien space-time frames. The objects in the world are meaningful only as our body means them, as our body senses them, as we speaks about them or as we desire them. In fact, my perception of the world comprises of the potentials of my bodily movement,
motility. We encounter a lived world, spatial and temporal dimensions of which are the dimensions of body’s being ‘with’ it. “I am not in space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them.”

Merleau-Ponty thus offers a fresh paradigm of body that goes beyond biological account. It directly challenges the underlying assumption of objectivism. Science distances the body by admitting as only phenomena that can be mathematized and objectified and ignores the body as it is lived by each of us. In response to this approach phenomenological method entails describing phenomena as they appear to us and are lived by us in our experience. Merleau-Ponty exposes the limitations of both the empiricist’s denigration of the body as a passive receptor and then active calculator of sense-data and the idealist’s disregard of the body in favor of mind. Let us see how he attempts to do this.

3.1. Critique of Empiricism and Rationalism

In phenomenology of perception he criticizes both empiricist and intellectualist approaches to perception. For both these philosophical traditions the world is outside and objective. Empiricism includes both the British empiricism and behaviourism. The characteristic feature of these two is their atomistic approach. The underlying idea of atomism is that all experiences or
behaviours of an organism are composed of basic elements such as sensations or sense-data.

The empiricist account of behaviour fails when it comes to address the general or structural behaviors in organisms. This is because the empiricist understanding of the behavior is atomistic in nature. In *Structure of behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty argues that behavior is not made up of the random association of countless reflexes or stimulus-response chains. Only the behaviour which is pathological lacks overall organization. But, normal behaviour definitely exhibits a form of general co-ordination or functioning which controls and orders the individual reflexes. Unlike empiricistic account, Merleau-Ponty provides a non-atomistic account for the same. He cites following evidences for the general or structural or well-coordinated functioning of behavior: 1. Cases of substitutions of skills in the body, such as the ability to transfer one’s handwriting from paper to a blackboard, even though a different set of muscles are involved. 2. Examples of detours effected when a part of the body is unable to be used and alternative routes are provided so that the organism can continue to function. 3. Evidence from brain lesions which provoke structural disorders affecting the workings of the whole body.” All these examples or evidences of Merleau-Ponty show the fundamental organization of the body.
Since behavior is defined in terms of simple response to stimuli originating from environment, Empiricism cannot explain the above mentioned well-organized functions of the body. However, it appears that in some sense an organism chooses its own environment. This is because of the earlier stimulations the organism has received from its environment and the exposure of organism’s receptors to such stimulations.

For Merleau-Ponty, behavior is better understood as a dialogue or dialectic between organism and its environment. Instead of understanding behavior as simple product of environmental conditioning, in Merleau-Ponty, the environment creates the organism. Behavior is neither conditioned nor accidental. It is rather an expression of the biological meaning of the total situation in which it occurs:

If I catch my toe on a root while walking, the flexor muscles of the foot are suddenly relaxed and the organism reacts by accentuating this relaxation, which will liberate my foot. If, on the other hand, I miss my step while coming down a mountain and my heel strikes the ground sharply before the sole of the foot, the flexor muscles are once again relaxed suddenly, but the organism reacts instantly by a contraction... Here the variations of responses in the presence of analogous stimuli are related to the meaning of the stimulations in which they appear and,
inversely, it can happen that situations which appear different if they are analyzed in terms of physical and chemical stimuli provoke analogous reactions.⁵

This inability to account for the structural and meaningful aspects of behavior is a result of the empiricist notion of experience. Experience is defined simply as the recording of sensations or impressions received from the environment. This is completely artificial. It is hard to find examples of pure sensations in our actual experience except perhaps in such cases as dozing. Our experience does not consist of a series of isolated sensations somehow joined together. But it is organized in terms of a field-structure. We never normally experience dots of sensation, but points on a horizon, figures on a ground with respect to its environment.

But this is ignored by empiricism which isolates experience from its context. A red seen on a white ground or on a purple ground will not be seen as the same, yet the concept of sensation never considers such differences. Empiricism postulates a simple parallel between sensations and the nervous system, but again this is not borne out. “Our retina, for example, is not homogeneous, and certain parts of it are blind to blue or red, yet I do not see any discolored areas when looking at a blue or red surface.”⁶
Furthermore, the notion of sensation levels down all experience to the passive recording of stimulation. It allows no differentiation between kinds of experience or between those experiences those passed over or ignored. Empiricism does not address the varying degrees of attention we give to our experience which influences its intensity and duration for us.

Empiricism, then, offers only an artificial and fragmented picture of experience and behaviour. It cannot, for example, account for innovation, creativity or improvisation in behaviour since it makes it intelligible only in terms of responding to given stimuli. Learning, for empiricism, can only take place on an extended ‘trial-and-error’ basis. But then it follows that, strictly speaking, there is no learning. Thus the atomistic and causal preconceptions of empiricism rule out any appreciation of the general alteration of behaviour and the acquisition of new goals and new meanings which occur in true learning.

So, empiricism practices a kind of a physiological reductionism. This makes it totally unsuitable for understanding the human or cultural world. It has no conception of meaning or significance which man projects around him. In short, empiricism reduces everything it sees to simple causal and physiological mechanisms.
Turning to rationalism, which would include the philosophies of Descartes, Kant, the neo-Kantians, and some elements of Husserl and Sartre, we find a kind of philosophy which at first sight appears totally opposed to empiricism. Empiricism views the world as a collection of externally related facts. In contrast, for rationalism the world is the result of the constituting processes of consciousness. It is the mind that gives meaning to the world and its mode of operation is pure reflection, not sensation.

Rationalism accepts the sensations, reflexes, etc., which empiricism posits as the elementary stuff of the world and which are in themselves meaningless. It merely adds that it is mind that injects these with meaning that joins up the dots of sensation to give a picture of the world. So, in one sense, rationalism is merely a higher level built on top of empiricism. In another sense, it can be seen as the simple inverse of empiricism. To every empiricist thesis, the phrase ‘consciousness of . . .’ or ‘thought of . . .’ is added, so that the objective world is not construed as self-sufficient, but as the creation of consciousness or thought. In either case, there is the same presupposition of an objective world which is in itself meaningless.

Merleau-Ponty’s specific objections to rationalism concern its view of reflection and of consciousness:
The world is there before any possible analysis of mine, and it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality. Analytical reflection believes that it can trace back the course followed by a prior constituting act and arrive, in the ‘inner man’ – to use St. Augustine’s expression – at a constituting power which has always been identical with that inner self. Thus reflection itself is carried away and transplanted in an impregnable subjectivity, as yet untouched by being and time.\(^7\)

Rationalism isolates consciousness from the world. It splits the self into an outer self and an inner self. Outer self is that which contact with the world and inner self is that which is beyond the world. To repeat, the basic concept of rationalism lies in reflection of mind. But rationalism does not address the origin of man. In the sense that, it does not speak of the life of man prior to reflection or no-reflection. Most of our everyday activities like taking a walk, catching a bus, eating, smoking, watching television etc are not carried out in full reflective clarity. In Ryle’s terminology, ‘knowing how’ is more fundamental than ‘knowing what.’\(^8\)
A change in the structure of consciousness which comes as a result of the reflection is never mentioned by the rationalist tradition. Through reflection consciousness turns back from the world into itself. By doing so, a division between the consciousness that is reflecting and the consciousness that is reflected-on is made.

In short, in identifying consciousness with reflection, rationalism cannot allow for any dialectic between the reflective and the pre-reflective levels of consciousness. Thus, like empiricism, it levels consciousness down. Instead of conceiving consciousness as the blind receiver of stimulation from outside, it turns consciousness into a wholly constituting and explicit enterprise, operating on the world in full self-awareness. The actual diversity and variety of types of consciousness – morbid, primitive, child-like, etc. – as well as cases where consciousness fails to be even potentially transparent to itself, such as insanity, self-deception, dreaming, forgetfulness, slips of the tongue and so on, are not taken seriously, and are often attributed as simple perversions of the will.

And so, in spite of their apparent differences, empiricism and rationalism converge to present a remarkably similar picture of the world. Both suffer from what Merleau-Ponty terms a ‘prejudice in favour of the world’. Empiricism
stops there; it has no concept of consciousness or subjectivity, but only of an objective world.

Rationalism conceives of consciousness as occupying some place above and beyond the objective world, which somehow endows the inherently senseless physical world with significance. For empiricism, there is no subjectivity. For rationalism, subjectivity occupies some otherworldly realm where it operates on the world from a distance. Neither can conceive of any living dialogue or dialectic between the subject and the world. Both are inherently dualistic, relying on the rigid distinction between subject and object, physiology and psychology.

3.2. Being-in-the-world

In *The Structure of Behaviour* Merleau-Ponty introduces the notion of *Gestault* (synonymous with form or structure). The concept of *Gestault* went beyond the analyses offered by either empiricism or rationalism. It particularly transcended the dichotomy of consciousness and nature which each presupposed.
The notion of *Gestalt* refers to the ability of an organism to function in a structured way. This ability is achieved exhibiting a general co-ordination of its parts oriented towards certain goals or intentions. *Gestaulten* are not empirical things as they are being relations between parts. They are also not forms of consciousness since they are not the product of thought, and exist in organisms which do not display self-consciousness.

Neither behaviour nor experience is reducible to the sum of its parts but manifests a primitive structure. The causal explanation of empiricism cannot agree this as it conceives only of external relations between discrete entities. In the same way, the rationalist assumption of a pure, reflective and transparent consciousness also cannot agree this since the structure of behaviour and experience are normally opaque to it.

In a similar way, Merleau-Ponty focuses on behaviour to go beyond the consciousness/thing dichotomy. Behaviour is on the organism in action as it meets and organizes its environment around it. Behaviour is the projection and putting into action the possibilities and intentions of the organism outside of itself. Also it expresses a certain integration of the organism with its environment:
The gestures of behaviour, the intentions which it traces in the space around the animal, are not directed to the true world or pure being, but to being-for-the-animal, that is, to a certain milieu characteristic of the species; they do not allow the showing through of a consciousness, that is, a being whose whole essence is to know, but rather a certain manner of treating the world, of ‘being-in-the-world’, or of existing.9

Existential phenomenology starts not from the assumption of an ‘objective’ world neither in-itself, nor from a pure, constituting consciousness. Rather, it starts from the very concept of how organism especially human organisms are in-the-world.

3.3. Heidegger’s concept of Being-in-the-world

Martin Heidegger, in his first main work Being and Time, widened the domains of phenomenology. Heidegger focused on the everyday world of being and understanding. His phenomenology is what he calls a ‘fundamental ontology’. It investigates different modes of what it means to be, rather than what it means to know. Heidegger begins with the concept of ‘Dasein’, the ‘being-there’ of human existence. This ‘being-there’ means that we are situated or ‘thrown’ into the world that we live in. We are always already there (da), involved in daily activities. But the term ‘Da-sein’ also signifies that we have a
relation to our own existence in asking what it means to be there at all. *Dasein* is the only being that asks the fundamental ontological question of what is being.

Therefore philosophy has to start with an analysis of the understanding human being – *Dasein*. This is the only way to start, since every other being in the world attains its meaning through the understanding of *Desein*. Human understanding as a ‘being-there’ in the world is accordingly the starting point for philosophy as a phenomenology of ‘everydayness’ – an investigation of the everyday forms of understanding carried out by human being.

According to Heidegger, when we study our relationship to the world, we should not view the world as a collection of objects outside of consciousness. In normal understanding of the world, we are directed towards objects by way of consciousness. “We should instead study the ‘worldliness’ of the world, the way we are in the world, giving it meaning through our action; the world indeed being nothing other than a cultural, inter-subjective meaning-structure, lived in by us and, ultimately, a mode of ourselves.”10 For Heidegger, human understanding is always a being-there in the sense of being-in-the-world. This indicates that *Dasein* and world are thought as a unity and not as subject and
object. The world is not something external but the very being of Dasein is constituted by world.

The concept of ‘being-in-the-world’ resembles in many ways the concept of ‘life-world’ which Husserl developed in his later philosophy. Heidegger considered the meaning-structure of the world to be more primordial than the qualities of objects in the world explored by science. The concept of ‘worldliness’ in Being and Time indicates that the structure of the world is built up by the understanding actions, thoughts and feelings of human beings situated in the world, and not by any properties that belong to the world in itself as a collection of objects. Heidegger therefore writes that worldliness essentially is existential. He uses existential as something belonging to Dasein, to understanding human being and not to the world in itself.

Heidegger says “worldliness is an ontological concept and designates the structure of a constitutive factor of being-in-the-world. But we have come to know being-in-the-world as an existential determination of Dasein. Accordingly, worldliness itself is existential. When we inquire ontologically about the ‘world’, we by no means abandon the thematic field of the analytic of Dasein. World is ontologically not a determination of those beings which Dasein essentially is not, but a characteristic of Dasein itself.”
The meaning-structures of the world are made up of relations, not between things, but between tools. That is, the meaning of phenomena, according to Heidegger, is not primarily dependent upon how things look, but upon how they are being used. This makes the connection between the structure of the world and *Dasein* clearer. For how could the world itself as something independent of human beings lead us to an understanding of the function of any tool? A tool always refers to its user. “We will only learn what a hammer is by using it, never by staring at it.”

It is important to stress that the concept of tool or availableness in *Being and Time* is meant to cover all phenomena, not only human artifacts in the common sense. The sun, for example would be a tool for time measurement. When we study our being-in-the-world at the level of meaning – the phenomenological level – it is, according to Heidegger, to be understood as nothing but a basic openness to the world which is structured as a ‘totality of relevance’. And the totality of relevance is a totality of tools.

The relations between the different tools are explicated as an ‘in order to’. The tools in this way relate to each other; their meanings are determined by their places within the totality of relevance. “One uses a hammer in order to nail the palings, in order to raise the walls, in order to build the house, in order
to find shelter from the rain, etc.”14 The final meaning of every tool is the existence of human being – Dasein. The understanding of Dasein is the activity in relation to which every phenomenon (tool) takes on meaning. In this activity, we most often do not pay explicit attention to any of the tools. We are absorbed in the activity.

The being-in-the-world, the ‘worldliness’ of human existence, is conceptualized by Heidegger by stressing several different aspects of this existence. Since these aspects belong to the only being that truly exists- Dasein - and not to things, they are called ‘existentials’. Human beings exist: that is, they have a relation to their own being, and they are open to the world as a possibility for themselves. This openness to the totality of tools is a pattern not only of action, but also of thinking, feeling and talking. These three modes of being must, however, not be conceived of as attribute of a subject, but as a meaning pattern that binds human being and the being-of-the-world together. They must likewise articulate a being that is not merely contemplative but acts in the world, as the tool pattern makes obvious.

The phenomenology of being-in-the-world is developed in order to leave the subject-object model behind. The philosophical tradition, according to Heidegger, has remained enslaved to metaphysics of sight; that is, favored the
gaze, to the exclusion of other ways of encountering phenomena in the world. This has resulted in the positing of a human subject facing a world of objects.

The concept of being-in-the-world is further elaborated in *Phenomenology of Perception*, especially in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of body as the locus of intentionality. Let us see how Merleau-Ponty explains this particularly, by means of his concepts of motility, operative intentionality, embodied perception, space and time.

3.4. **Body as the locus of Intentionality**

Merleau-Ponty takes up Husserl’s crucial concept of intentionality with a changed emphasis. Body, for him is the locus of intentionality. Saying lived body is an ‘intending’ entity means simply that it is bound up with and directed towards an experienced world. It is a being in relationship to that which is the other, other people, other things and an environment. Moreover, in a significant sense, the lived body helps to constitute this world-as-experienced. We cannot understand the meaning and form of objects without reference to the bodily powers through which we engage them- our senses, motility, language and desires. The lived body is not just one thing in the world, but a way in which the world comes to be or the way it is lived. Merleau-Ponty gives an example:
In the midst of my writing, I leave my chair and computer screen behind, seeking a glass of orange juice. The action can be described in terms of a series of mechanistic events involving neuronal firings, muscular contractions, and the like. However, if this becomes our exclusive, or even dominant, mode of understanding embodiment, it renders obscure the bodily intentionality through which we constitute and respond to our world.\textsuperscript{15}

He explains that it was his body which demanded to move to the refrigerator raising his thirst and exhaustion. He continues: The juice stands out from the perceptual and cognitive background as just what is called for and my arm reaches for it as the result of a complex coordination of sensorimotor powers.\textsuperscript{16}

It is not the mental calculations like blood sugar coming down or osmotic adjustments which drive him to the juice. It is the lived-body or subject-body which experiences the world. In other words, the experienced world is constructed by the subject-body. He posits the world of thirst, tiredness, orange juice, refrigerators as well as computer screens, written language, readers and the like in relation to a subject-body. In his opinion, our idea of mechanistic body prevents us from understanding the notion of bodily intentionality. In the
mechanistic framework, bodily intentionality is obscured by recourse to an “immaterial mind” as the locus of all this intending.

Merleau-Ponty locates intentionality in motility. The body’s capacity of motion creates its surroundings and projects meaningful possibilities of movement and action. In Merleau-ponty’s own words, “to understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance.” What he means by motility is the capacity for action.

As human being who exists embodied, we enjoy or we experience the richness of motility in action. Motility refers to the body’s meaningfully organized behaviour. Motility is our capacity for self-initiated movement. Our being is grounded in the motility. That means our being is in a sense co-extensive with motility, or to be identified with motility. The perceptible body is guided in its synthesis by motives. Motivations are implied in sensation. Motives are implied in action and body is actively participated in the constitution of our world. Motility is a kind of bodily intentionality that is manifested in our actions. Merleau-Ponty argues that “our experience of the natural world, of others, of history, even of ourselves draws upon this basic bodily intentionality.”
Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept of ‘body image’ in order to explain the dynamic of motility. “Body image is a compendium of bodily experience.”

Through body image we get the impression of body possessing. We get a total awareness of our position in the inter-sensory world. So, body image is a way of stating that my body is in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty argues that body image cannot be understood simply as a region within the context of normal objective space. Rather, our body-image or body-space is to be understood as a background to our practical capacity to organize our bodily movements.

Body can no longer be regarded as an entity to be examined in its own right, but has to be placed in the context of a world. Moreover, being-in-the-world cannot be understood as a certain relation between a central body and a surrounding world, but has to be understood in terms of tasks, actions to be accomplished and a free space which outlines the possibilities available to the body at any time. In turn, these possibilities have to be understood not as the possibilities of a perceptual presentation or a conceptual representation of the world. Rather, they are the possibilities of action in a world.

Merleau-Ponty says that the spatiality of body is not like that of external objects. Bodily parts are inter-related in a peculiar way. He says that “my whole body for me is not an assemblage of organs juxtaposed in space.” We are in
undivided possession at it. The very being of ‘I’ itself means an undivided body. The outlines of body will not cross ordinary spatial relation. Our bodily organs and its position imply certain bodily purpose. Space and time are implied in experience. In the realm of experience, the spatio-temporal unity is not accidental. It is in same way anterior to them and makes their association possible. Body appears as an attitude which is directed towards a certain existing task. He says body’s spatiality is not a ‘spatiality of position’ but ‘spatiality of situation’.

Merleau-Ponty gives to the body the unifying and synthesizing function that Kant locates in transcendental subjectivity. By projecting an aim towards which it moves, the body brings unity and unites itself with its surroundings. Through the projected possibilities of body, it sets things in relation to one another and to itself. The body’s movement and orientation organizes the surrounding space as a continuous extension of its own being. In action the motives are implied and body is actively participated in the constitution of our world. It is the body in its orientation towards an action upon and within its surroundings. This orientation of the body constitutes the ‘initial meaning giving act’.
3.5. **Operative Intentionality**

Merleau-Ponty discusses ‘operative intentionality’ for making the notion of being-in-the-world clearer. Let us follow his example. He considers at some length the case of a patient called Schneider, whose brain was initially damaged by a shell, and whose general behaviour manifests a persistent and structural form of pathology. For example, if he is ordered to perform an abstract movement with his eyes shut, Schneider has to go through a whole series of preparatory operations in order to ‘find’ the operative limb and the direction, pace and correct plane of the movement.

If, for instance, he is ordered to move his arm, with no detail as to how, he is first of all perplexed. Then he moves his whole body and after a time his movements are confined to the arm, which the subject eventually ‘finds’.21

The patient seems to experience his body as a formless and structureless mass into which actual movement itself introduces divisions and links. There is no general injury of movement – the patient can move his body as requested – nor of thought – is the order understood and finally correctly executed. Since Schneider can carry out complex operations the capacity for abstract thought is not lacking in the patient. Then, what is lacking is something
more fundamental, what Merleau-Ponty terms *motor intentionality*. Motor intentionality is a form of operative intentionality upon which any successful movement or thought is grounded. It is that which enables the normal subject to get directed of any command and carry it out spontaneously.

In normal subjects the body is an expressive and lived unity of its parts. All movements, at this level are undertaken and performed intuitively and as a whole from beginning to end, without any kind of thematic intellection or working out. Schneider, however, is unable to pattern his actions; he evolves either an ideal formula for the action or launches himself into a series of blind efforts in an attempt to perform it. He lacks what is presupposed in any normal action the background of its envisaged completion, so that the whole movement is oriented and directed from the start.

Schneider experiences his body not as an intentional unity but as a series of isolated parts, so that he has to think through his actions instead of living in them. It could be noted that the case of Schneider fits the rationalist view of being in-the-world remarkably well, in which all activity has an explicit and thematic intellectual component to it. Rationalism, like empiricism, Merleau-Ponty says, seems more suited to describing pathological existence than normal functioning.
To Schneider, the world has lost its human face. The world does not arouse emotional responses from him and if at all, only blunted ones. He is unable to experience the world as receiving his actions or operations. He lives in a world leveled down, in an alien world. His behavior is rigid and not spontaneous. He never acts in his own way as other people do. He can understand questions relating to his here-and-now situation, but cannot make sense of hypothetical or negative questions. He cannot play act by putting himself in an imaginary situation. A basic disturbance of operative intentionality is portrayed through Schneider. This reveals how normal being-in-the-world can be understood as a projection of what Merleau-Ponty calls an *intentional arc*:

The life of consciousness – cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’, which projects round about us, our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility. And it is this which ‘goes limp’ in illness.²²

In its extreme form, a breakdown of operative intentionality, the failure to project an intentional arc, results in madness. The world is no longer
experienced as a living, meaningful unity, but as fragmented and alien. Merleau-Ponty develops a more positive account of the kinds of knowledge, understanding and intentionality which are possessed by the human body as the subject of action. Turning his attention to various motor skills such as typing, driving or playing a musical instrument, he begins by arguing that empiricism and intellectualism do no better in accounting for these normal, habitual activities than they did for the abnormal case of Schneider.

For the empiricist, he argues, the acquisition of such skills has to be explained by a process of learning, through which certain ‘stimuli’ come to be associated with certain bodily ‘responses’, both of these being physicalistically defined. Hence the skill that is acquired must be capable, in principle, of being specified in terms of a determinate range of behavior that takes place in a similarly specifiable set of circumstances. Against this Merleau-Ponty presents the following objection. Any such ‘mechanistic’ theory, he says, runs up against the fact that the learning process is systematic:

The subject does not weld together the individual movements and individual stimuli but acquires the power to respond with a certain type of solution to situations of a certain general form. The situations may very widely from case to case [i.e. when their identity or difference is characterized physicalistically], and the
response movements may be entrusted sometimes to one operative organ, sometimes to another, both situations and responses in the various cases having in common not so much a partial identity of elements as a shared meaning.²³

Merleau-Ponty illustrates playing of a musical instrument to exemplify the skill. He portrays the ability of organist who needs only an hour’s practice to perform successfully his musical programme on an unfamiliar instrument. The stops and pedals were very different to the one that he was used to play on. The movements required for playing the instrument also were quite different. To the empiricist notion, the organist could be thought of having the skill previously acquired. Yet, within so brief a period of time, it is inconceivable that a quite new set of conditioned responses could have been learnt. To enable this rapid transfer to take place, therefore, what must have been acquired from the outset was the ability to ‘respond with a certain type of solution’ to a situation of ‘a certain general form’, and he argues that both situation and solution are specifiable ultimately only in relation to their musical significance for the organist.

Merleau-Ponty also claims that the way in which the organ player familiarizes himself with the new instrument shows what is wrong with an intellectualist account of bodily skills. According to intellectualist account,
one would expect him to proceed by examining carefully the unfamiliar instrument, noting the positions of its various parts, and drawing up a new mental map or plan of their arrangement, which he would then apply in practice. But what in fact he does is this:

He sits on the seat, works on the pedals, pulls out the stops, gets the measure of the instrument with his body, incorporates within himself the relevant directions and dimensions, and settles into the organ as one settles into a house. He does not learn objective spatial positions for stop and pedal, nor does he commit them to memory.\textsuperscript{24}

However, notes Merleau-Ponty, it might be objected that the acquisition of new bodily skills, as distinct from the modification of already habituated ones, is perhaps more susceptible to an intellectualist analysis. For example, is it not the case that forming the habit of dancing is discovering, by analysis, the formula of the movement in question, and then reconstructing it on the basis of the ideal outline by the use of previously acquired movements, those of walking and running?\textsuperscript{25}

Apparently the idea here is this: faced with learning, say, a new dance movement, one might proceed by first watching it being executed by someone; then breaking it down, mentally, into its sequential elements; and finally,
utilizing one’s already acquired repertoire of movements, attempting to apply this ‘formula’, monitoring one’s attempt to do so by reference to a mental picture of what one is aiming to achieve. Merleau-Ponty’s reply to this objection is as follows:

But before the formula of the new dance can incorporate certain elements of general motility (i.e. the already acquired ability to walk, run etc.), it must first have had, as it were, the stamp of movement set upon it. As had often been said, it is the body which ‘catches’ and ‘comprehends’ movement. The acquisition of a habit is indeed the grasping of significance, but it is the motor grasping of a motor significance.26

What he seems to be saying is this: It may well be that, acquiring this skill, a certain amount of conscious analysis and mental imagery is involved. But there is also an irreducibly bodily element of ‘understanding’, without which the crucial transition from the established to the new movement cannot occur. However one carefully analyses the new movement and pictures its relationship to already acquired forms. It is ultimately one’s body which has to grasp this relationship, to sense how this transformation can be executed, to feel incipiently what the new movement would be like, and so on. There is a point at which one’s body ‘knows what to do’ and ‘knows how to do’ and
without this practical knowledge on its part, a purely intellectual grasp will be of no avail.

To be precise, it is the body which ‘understands’ in the acquisition of habit. The intellectualist notion of understanding is containing sense-datum under an idea and body is an object. This appears to be absurd to Merleau-Ponty. He considers the phenomenon of habit as that which tends us to revise our notion of ‘understanding’ and our notion of the body. Furthermore, in revising one’s concept of understanding, one needs also to revise one’s concept of knowledge. This is because ‘understanding’ is no longer regarded as an act performed by a disembodied subject, and is instead directly attributable to the non-objective body.

One’s body ‘knows’ the world upon which it operates and ‘knows how’ to deal with it successfully in a way that does not require any clearly formidable thought or beliefs on the part of a conscious subject:

Our bodily experience of movement….provides us with a way of access to the world and the object, with a practical knowledge, which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary. My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of any ‘symbolic’ or ‘objectifying function’.27
Michal Hammond in his work *Understanding Phenomenology* interprets the terms translated here as ‘original’ (*originale*) and ‘primary’ (*originare*) in the following way:

One can take Merleau-Ponty to be making two distinguishable claims about the body’s practical knowledge. The first is that it is irreducible. The term ‘original’ is used in the sense that it cannot be analyzed further by reference to more basic concepts. In particular, it is not susceptible to an intellectualist analysis as, in effect, the practical application or exercise of the subject’s cognitive abilities. The practical knowledge possessed by the body provides the *foundation* for other forms of knowledge. The second one, ‘primary’ is employed in this sense of the term. Hence, for example, although humans can articulate the knowledge of spatial relationships involved in abstract movement in the form of explicitly stated propositions, one should regard this cognitive ‘representation’ of spatiality as rooted in, and derivative from, ‘the practical knowledge displayed in the actual ability to perform such movement’.28

Merleau-Ponty argues that one needs also to revise the intellectualist conception of intentionality. These elucidations enable us clearly to understand motility as basic [*originale*] intentionality. Consciousness is, in the first place [*originairirement*] not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’29 In other words; the irreducible and foundational form of intentionality is that which is involved
in one’s ability to act on the world. In such action it is one’s body which is ‘directed towards’ that world. Hence, for example: “In the action of the hand which is raised towards an object is contained a reference to the object, not as an object represented, but as that highly specific thing towards which we project ourselves, near which we are, in anticipation, and which we haunt.”

When the hand extends for an object it aims to reach this object. Its movements are organized in such a way to achieve this aim. It cannot be seen as the body having intentional guiding principle as that of conscious from outside, independently of it, while performing such actions. The intentionality, instead, belongs to the body itself and provides the basic ‘connection’ between human and the world, without any need for intervening (mental) ‘representations’ of it.

Through Merleau-Ponty’s writings we can find a body consciousness integrated in a bodily space. The body is a unity which antecedes any representation of its several parts. There is an original coincidence of consciousness in body in action. It means that the body in action projects a primordial spatiality which is itself, (like body) a unity which antecedes any representation of its several parts. So Merleau-Ponty says “the synthesis of one’s own body is therefore a synthesis of the world and a synthesis of the
body in the world. Body is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Motility is a kind of intentionality that is manifested in our ordinary, immediate perceptions, feelings and actions rather than our reflective thoughts. The body as such is inseparable in the ways in which our body relates us to our world. It informs the functioning of our sense-organs, our body image and capacity for movement, and draws upon our memory, which is somehow activated through our body.

Body is that by means of which consciousness is situated in the world. Merleau-Ponty rejects the conception of a pure and spectator consciousness and turns instead to the evidence of experience. It reveals consciousness as embodied or incarnated in a situation. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the study of consciousness in the world is a study of consciousness as embodied, and hence a study of the body as experienced, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the lived body or ‘body proper’.

Empiricism and rationalism could only acknowledge an objective body, the body considered as a physical object in the world, made up of flesh, bone and blood. The body as object is the body we find in the accounts of anatomy and physiology. “Whereas I move external objects by means of my body, which shifts them from one place to another, I do not move my body in this way.
Instead I move my body directly, or, to put it another way, my body moves itself, since it is always with me. I do not find my body at one point in space and transfer it to another, since I have not need to look for it.\textsuperscript{32} It is by means of one’s body one observes objects and situates himself in relation to them. But one cannot observe his body in the same way, there is no perspective one can gain on the whole of his body, since it is the body which enables one to have a perspective, as it is the body that enables one to move.

Rationalism was not unaware of these facts. Since it could only move from the notion of object to that of pure thought, it could not conceive of any synthesis between these two notions. It means that it had to somehow relate a physical, objective body to a pure, non-physical mind. This resulted in the doctrine of the ‘ghost in the machine’, where the body was considered to be the physical container of an ethereal mind. The problem then left behind was how this body which is in spatio-temporal realm relates with the non-physical entity of mind.

Merleau-Ponty overcomes this dilemma by refusing to start from the opposition between a physical body and a pure, non-physical mind. He grounds them both onto the more primitive (in a logical or phenomenological sense) level of being-in-the-world, of which the lived body is the intentional
expression. There is, for example, a kind of latent knowledge (in the sense of knowing how) manifested by one’s body, an awareness of itself which is not explicable as the work of a non-corporeal mind somehow operating on the body. In describing the body as it appears to our naive experience, we are brought to acknowledge the existence of a *body image* which functions below the level of our conscious reflection:

If my arms are resting on the table I should never think of saying that it is *beside* the ash-tray in the way in which the ash-tray is beside the telephone. The outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross. This is because its parts are inter-related in a peculiar way: they are not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other . . . my whole body for me is not an assemblage of organs juxtaposed in space. I am in undivided possession of it and I know where each of my limbs is through a *body image* in which all are included.\(^{33}\)

The body image reveals a *phenomenal body*, which enables us to know, for example, where we have just been stung by a mosquito without having to search for the spot in objective space, or where the parts of our body those are hidden from view. When we reach for an object, we look at the object, not at our hand. This is because the co-ordination of our body is not something we
have to consciously attend to. But its organization is there pre-reflectively in terms of the functional values when we aim for something:

If I am sitting at my table and I want to reach the telephone, the movement of my hand towards it, the straightening of the upper part of the body, the tautening of the leg muscles are super-imposed on each other. I desire a certain result and the relevant tasks are spontaneously distributed amongst the appropriate segments.34

The phenomenal body is to be understood as an ‘expressive unity’, a ‘synergic system’, to be compared not to a physical object but to a work of art. It is the seat of intentionality, so that in projecting itself onto the world, it makes the world the arena for one’s intentions. An individual’s body is also able to extend its hold on the world through the use of instruments or tools. A blind man’s stick, for example, is no longer an external object for him, but an extension of his own (phenomenal) body in which he is able to feel the pavement through his stick, as the key-bank of a typewriter, or the controls of a car, are incorporated into the body of an experienced typist or driver.

The unity and synergy of the body are not things that need to be constantly achieved. Instead they tend towards sedimentation so that the skills and habits acquired by one’s body in its movements and use of instruments become
permanently available for future use. The formation of habits and skills expresses “our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments”. 35

This sedimentation or acquisition of behaviors which then function quasi-automatically, serve as a ground for my being-in-the-world, freeing the energy and attention of the body and allowing it to evolve novel ways of acting and relating. This dialectic between sedimentation and innovation in fact defines the way my body is in-the-world.

The study of the body as experienced can be seen to raise two kinds of problems. The first concerns the relation between mind and body, the second the relation between the objective and phenomenal body. With regard to the first problem, it has been objected by some commentators that Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of embodiment, the unity of mind and body, manages in fact to remove all instances where mind can be distinguished from the body. Instead of exploring the interrelation of mind and body Merleau-Ponty simply dissolves mind into the body. However, it is not true that Merleau-Ponty assimilates consciousness or mind into the body. He argues instead that the relationship between mind and body is ambiguous because in one sense consciousness cannot be conceived except as embodied ( ‘I am my body’), and yet in another sense
there are times when we can identify consciousness as distinct from, although still related to, the body (‘I have a body’).

The relation between mind and body is understood phenomenologically in terms of the notions of integration and Gestalt. The terms consciousness (or mind) and body are, ideal-types, neither of which can exist in isolation from the other, and both of which function as two subordinate structures which can be integrated in different ways and to different degrees. There is dualism, a distinction between consciousness and the body: “when my body is ill, and I experience it as an impediment to my projects, or which hunger, thirst or sexual desire prevents my thoughts or emotions from coming out. Again, there are times, in nervousness or embarrassment for example, where I do not experience my body as the spontaneous expression of my intentions, but as a barrier or mask separating ‘myself’ from the world. There are also times when, in ‘flights’ of imagination or fantasy, I experience myself as no longer ‘in’ my body. There is, then, a ‘truth of dualism’.”

But this dualism can only be partial and provisional, in the sense that if consciousness is totally loosened from its anchorage in the body, it would have no means of expression and so would literally cease to be. Similarly, my body, if it is no longer ‘animated’ and ceases to be the expression of the
intentionality of consciousness, would no longer be a living body, but would fall back into the state of a physical-chemical mass. In the same way, there are times of almost total integration between consciousness and body. In those moments, we are truly ‘at home’ in our bodies and experience our body, not as a screen between us and world, but as our opening onto the world. Nevertheless, this integration is never absolute and it always fails since it depends on the interrelation of distinct structures.

Integration between mind and body always occurs even though it is partial and provisional because both structures are grounded on a level even more fundamental, namely our whole mode of being-in-the-world or existence.

In the same way the question of the relation between the objective and phenomenal body can be understood in terms of each representing two layers or structures which in actual functioning are integrated to a varying extent. The objective body can be understood as the depository of those automatic physiological processes that make up a large part of our relationship with the world, making my body always vulnerable to physical disease of injury. Indeed, the rhythms of sleep, hunger, thirst, sex, etc., provide a constant background and overall style to all our activities.
3.6. **Perception**

It is in terms of a phenomenological description of perceptual experience that Merleau-Ponty considers that the relations between consciousness and the world are most clearly and profoundly evident. Once again, his descriptions take off from a critique of the accounts of perception offered by empiricism and rationalism. For empiricism, perception is a passive recording of sense-data received from the environment, which then become associated to form distinct objects. Rationalism introduces thought or judgment as that which interprets these inherently meaningless impressions of the outside world received by consciousness. What we are offered is perception either as a blind, undirected, mechanical process, or as the same process but with acts of intellection superimposed on them. In both cases there is presumed to be a basic dichotomy between subject and object, inside and outside. The assumption of a physical world determinate and explicit in itself is simply recorded by consciousness. Both empiricism and rationalism asserts that the objective world being given passes onto our sense-organs’ messages which are registered and then decoded so as to reproduce the original text. There is then considered to be a point-by-point correspondence and causal relation between the stimulations or sense-data from the environment and our elementary perceptions.
Our actual perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty argues, bears witness to a primitive patterning of our perceptions into visual fields, with horizons of indeterminacy and points of clear vision. That is, all perception has the form of a figure/ground structure, and all perceptual objects are perceived in terms of their context (ground, horizon). Furthermore, what happens to be the figure and what the ground in any perception depend on how we focus our gaze, on our interests at hand, as much as on the perceptual objects. Perception itself, through its primitive patterning, *causes there to be* figures and grounds, determinate objects with their indeterminate horizons, so that ‘normal functioning must be understood as a process of integration in which the text of the external world is not so much copied as composed.’

Perception, in a sense, structures the perceived world. It is not so much the passive recording of sense-data as an expression of our perceptual intent. This is illustrated by the fact of perceptual gaps, where, for example, a face may be perceived as familiar without the colour of the eyes being registered.

Perceptual gaps are not simple failures to perceive but evidence that we perceive in accord with our interests and purposes at hand. Neither does perception depend on specific acts of interpretation by consciousness. In the natural attitude we ‘live’ in perception, apprehending perceptual subjects as charged with emotion or significance, as having an immanent sense which is
prior to any explicit acts of intellection on our part. In the case of a foot ball player, he does not consider football ground as an object. Rather it is field demarcated from the audience, with lines and all goal posts. This sense motivates him play to the goal. ‘The field itself is not given to him, but is present as the immanent term of his practical intentions.’

In short, the perceived world, as it appears to perceptual consciousness, does not consist of a vast number of spatiotemporally distinct objects. It is the task of perception to record and reproduce. It includes a system of interlocking visual fields, grounds and figures, allowing distinct and individuated objects to emerge only from a background of unclear entities, and making perception synonymous with a primitive patterning of the perceived world. For perception, ‘there are no things, only physiognomies.’

While empiricism made perception into a simple automatic process like that of the working of a camera, rationalism superimposed acts of judgment or intellection upon the perceived objects. For empiricism, perception is purely physiological and for rationalism it consists in two distinct layers, the physiological (recording sense-data) and the psychological (acts of interpretation).
But, phenomenology shows that perception is neither purely physiological and automatic nor purely psychological and reflective nor a mixture of these. The phenomenological perception is a pre-reflective (pre-conscious, non-thematic) intercourse with the world which, like all manifestations of being-in-the-world, removes the distinction between the physiological and psychological.

Perception is a primitive openness to the world. Indeed, it has something anonymous or impersonal about it, in the sense that perception entails certain sensitivity to colours, forms, outlines, etc. which never reach the level of reflection. One does not perceive the blue of the sky in the same way he decides to read a book or become a lawyer, since these are expressly personal acts. These personal acts create a situation for me whereas my perception of blue is a pre-personal opening of my body to the sensation of blue. ‘So, if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that one perceives in me, and not that I perceive.’

However, rationalism is not entirely wrong in making perception a series of explicit acts of intellection because perception is not wholly an impersonal affair. But it incorporates a whole range of experiences from the explicitly reflective to the totally unreflective and impersonal. For example, if one is
looking at some sheets of white paper and do not analyze one’s perception, the sheets look equally white. But if, one focuses on them, the sheets change their appearance and some now appear grey. That is, by focusing, by turning critically and judgmentally towards what one is seeing, he separates the region under scrutiny from its ground, and thus interrupts the visual field which had assigned to each part its determinate coloration. In other words, the whiteness of the paper does not lend itself to precise classification within the white – black range in one’s unanalyzed perception. It is only by explicitly focusing, by asking oneself what it is that he sees that he has turned the grayness of the sheets of paper into a quality of that paper.

There are, then, explicit acts of perception, in cases of focusing in order to make out what it is we see, or in cases of ambiguous perception where we are not sure what we do see. In these cases we interrupt our uncritical and total absorption in the visual spectacle in order to interpretatively put together the elements of perception to give meaning to what we see and assign it its particular features and qualities. Nevertheless these represent only a relatively small class of perceptions, and presuppose that spontaneous vision which puts one in direct contact with the world, and which one unreflectively live in. ‘Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.’
Perception is not the operation of pure mind or thought – which is not to deny that perception contains elements of thought – but is embodied. One perceives with his body, since both the position and movement of one’s body enables him to see and determines what is accessible to his vision. The theory of the body is already a theory of perception. The anonymity which is there when one opens oneself entirely to his perceptual field functions as the ground or base layer of all perceptions. In the same way his objective body is a layer presupposed in all the operations of his phenomenal body.

Indeed, one’s visual field, since it is animated and patterned by one’s phenomenal body is also a phenomenal field. This is because the phenomenal body is oriented towards its tasks and interests at hand and engaged in marking out possible areas of activity in the world. Now the fact that one’s perception is embodied means that it is perspectival. If one attends to his actual perceptual experience, he will become aware that he only sees ‘profiles’ of any object. That is, he sees it at from a single side at any given moment in time. Now, of course, subsequent perceptions can ‘fill out’ the perceived object as he moves round it and views it from different sides and angles. However, at any given moment he can see no more than his perspective allows. Therefore, objects in perceptual experience never appear in full determinacy since one can never see an object from all sides at once.
In the natural attitude one is unaware of perspective and believes his perception reaches the things themselves. We naively experience perception as direct access to the real world so that we see not ‘profiles’ of objects but the objects themselves. Perspective is not a limitation on perception, but the condition on which the real world appears to us. It means that while perception brings the real world to one, he can never apprehend it all at once, or from all sides.

Perspective, for Merleau-Ponty, is simply the mark of one’s ‘incarnation’ and embodiment in the world. But it does bring to light two essential aspects of perception: first, that it is *temporal*, which means that any given perception is informed by its predecessors and successors. Perceived object achieves its unity only in time. Secondly, perception confuses the *subject/object* distinction, since what might be seen as its subjective component (perspective) and its objective component (access to the real world) are only two sides of the same coin, and are fused in any given perception. This second aspect of perception can be further elucidated. In one sense, perception can be seen as motivated by the subject, since it depends on the body’s placement and direction, on our present interests and concerns, and on our ability to focus and hold parts of the visual field under scrutiny.
It is one’s visual field as a whole that directs his gaze, assigning value and significance to each part of his field in terms of an overall pattern. Our perception of colours, for example, depends on the structure of our visual field as articulated by the level and degree of lighting. In short, perception manifests a structure which is more primitive than the subject/object distinction. Perception expresses operative intentionality.

Perception, thus, is intentional; it expresses the intentional unity of the body in concord with the world. This is illustrated by the phenomenon of binocular vision:

The passage from double, blurred, unfocused vision to the convergence of our gaze upon a single object is not explicable in terms of an inspection of the mind, but as the synergic expression of the body’s intending a single perceptual object. To this end, the eyes cease to function as separate organs, but co-ordinate in order to allow the body to pull itself together, synthesize its parts, and enable it to realize the intention that animates it. The establishment of single and focused vision is an achievement of the (phenomenal) body as it projects a visible and intentional setting round about itself. In this projection of a setting, perception reveals a primitive significance or sense of the perceived world. The sense of a perceived object depends on the subject’s orientation, the direction of his vision.42
3.6. **Object and world**

The theory of perception enables us to see how a phenomenological understanding of the concepts of object and world is possible. Perceptual objects (or, indeed, the objects of any mode of experience) are not experienced as spatio-temporal individuals. It is experienced as a pre-reflective unity intended by perceptual consciousness in terms of its perceptual syntheses of spatial and temporal perspectives. Objects are not determinate and external to the perceiver, but physiognomic, the embodiment of perceptual intentions, and hence serve to draw consciousness together and effect its unity. The unity of the object and the unity of perceptual consciousness presuppose each other and are dialectically interdependent.

Hence, as has been noted before, the objects of perception are themselves intentional:

The sentient and the sensible do not stand in relation to each other as two mutually exclusive terms. . . . it is my gaze which subtends colour, and the movement of my hand which subtends the object’s form, or rather my gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be
held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other.43

Perceptual objects share a system of interlocking horizons. They form a system in which each relates to the others. Now the fact of one’s embodiment means that he can occupy only a given point in space and time, and hence perceives objects from his point of view only. And it happens that objects get in each other’s way and restrict one’s vision. Yet, since objects are not passive and motionless holder of one’s gaze, but intentional unities, one’s look becomes a form of habituation of the object. So it is in these terms of habituation that one can perceive aspects of other objects hidden to oneself.

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, every object is the mirror of all others: When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can ‘see’; the back of the lamp is nothing but the face which it ‘shows’ to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one guarantees the permanence of those aspects by their presence.44

Hence, we do not perceive discrete objects, but chains of objects linking up with each other and subject to the overall patterning of our visual field. This
systematic interrelatedness of objects help us understand perceptual illusions. The fact that our senses can be deceived has often been cited as evidence that we cannot trust our senses, which therefore need to be ‘corrected’ by our ‘scientific’ knowledge. But these illusions can be explained in terms of the descriptions of perception and object that have been given. For example, it has been argued that our senses are deceptive because large things seen at a distance look small, and round coins seen from an angle appear elliptical. But this merely expresses the fact that all perception is perception from somewhere, and each perception can only offer us one perspective on the perceived object.

Each perspective is informed by previous and later perspectives, which together make up the object-for-us. Hence when we get to see the object close up, we will perceive the object within a far clearer field, and see its ‘true’ size or shape.

Similarly, the fact that a stick half immersed in water looks bent is explicable in terms of perspective. Since objects often get in each other’s way, it can be seen that making the stick look bent is water’s way of getting in the way of our perception of that bit of the stick that is under water. It is the visual field as a whole, and the articulation of objects within it, that determines which
parts of it are clear to our vision and which parts are indeterminate or ambiguous, and hence possibly subject to illusion.

Merleau-Ponty’s point here is that illusions are possible only because there are veridical perceptions. Any present mis-perception is always open to future correction when one’s perceptual grip on the object is stronger. Perception is incomplete – One can never see an object from all sides or angles at once, so that its fullness always eludes the individual. Hence it is subject to endless exploration. One is directly open to it and it is potentially accessible to his gaze. It is the horizon – the systematic interrelatedness of perceptual objects – that guarantees their unity and their realness.

Hence all objects presuppose the world, that which is made up of all possible objects and their interrelations. “The world is the ‘horizon of all horizons’, ‘the style of all possible styles’, the field incorporating all potential fields, the indeterminacy which is the ground of all determinacy, in short ‘that which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life.’”45 There is then the absolute certainty of the world in general, although not of any one thing in particular.
All perception presupposes a ‘perceptual faith’, a primordial belief in the realness of one’s perception and of the world, a faith that is never questioned in natural perception. That is not to say that it is not immune from doubt. It is after all still a faith and there are cases of almost total insanity where the perceptual faith collapses.

However, all questioning of the world presupposes that there is something to question and all doubt assumes there is some form of certainty, if only the certainty that one does in fact doubt, and that it is oneself who is doubting. “All human activity is a form of commerce with the world, which is present as the background to all possible experiences. ‘I may well close my eyes, and stop up my ears, I shall nevertheless not cease to see, if it is only the blackness before my eyes, or to hear, if only silence.’”

3.7. Space and Time

In the same way as he distinguished between the objective and phenomenal body, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes objective space from existential (lived, phenomenal, virtual) space. Objective space is the space of rulers and tape-measures, the space dealt with by science, a space in-itself which is ‘there’ prior to any spatial subject. This is the only space one meets in empiricism and
rationalism. For empiricism, objects occupy pure positions, and have a kind of spatial orientation in-themselves apart from a subject. Rationalism – since the only space it allows is objective space – conceives of the subject as disembodied, a pure intellect without inherent directedness, though able, in thought, to trace out all possible directions in space. Both ignore lived or existential space, our actual experience of being oriented in the world and situated in relation to objects. This is spatiality of situation (or relation) rather than of pure position (or space in-itself). Spatial terms like ‘top’, ‘bottom’, ‘near’, ‘far’, etc., derive their significance from one’s lived space, which is one’s spontaneous evaluation of his environment in terms of the projects in his hand.

“This pre-themed hold of my body on the world is expressed in the concept of spatial level, which is a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain gearing of my body to the world.”47 One’s body unfolds spatial relations so that it can inhabit or be at home in its environment. Merleau-Ponty gives the following example to illustrate the spatial relation to the body: If a subject is placed in a room in which he can only see the room through a mirror which reflects it at an angle of 45 degrees to the vertical, he first of all sees the room ‘slantwise’, so that another man walking in the room seems to lean to one side. But after a few minutes, through a redistribution of the points of top and bottom, the same man is seen as walking upright. In short, during the experiment the
spatial level has been spontaneously changed as the subject projects a new spatial orientation around himself so that he can comfortably inhabit his new setting. A given spatial orientation or level, then, is the result of a dialogue between bodily orientation and the spatial orientation of the given environment to the individual, which extends to the whole spatial field.

Different kinds of existential spatialities exist in relation to different modalities of being-the-world. For example, there is (1) the space of night-time: when the world of clear and articulate objects is abolished and we evolve a kind of spatiality without things; (2) the space of dreams or myths: in which events and objects become embedded in their vital and sexual significance and the events of objective space (and time) are distorted; (3) the space of dancing: an aimless and un-oriented space, where the movements of the body are an end in themselves and have an emblematic value; (4) hallucinatory space: where the boundaries normally drawn between the body and the world collapse, and objects, instead of keeping their distance, become rooted in our body, or our body extends to the world.

In these different modalities of existential space, it can be seen that the meaning of objects and of the world changes depending on the form of our spatial hold on the world. Objects can become in-distinct and sinister, or charged
with symbolism, or totally alien. We see here, once again, operative intentionality at work creating a primitive significance in the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, spatiality is co-extensive with existence. All existence is spatial, and space is a kind of pre-personal horizon to all our experience. The constitution of a new spatial level always takes for granted a level already given. Because we are in a world of real objects, a world not created by consciousness for its own purposes, all modalities of existential space are related in some way to physical or objective space, space necessary for the practical utilization of objects in the world. Objective space lies on the horizon of every existential space, so that, for example, the space peculiar to dreaming must still work on and refer to the spatially distinct objects of the real world. Indeed, the loosening of existential space from its anchorage in physical space is the defining characteristic of hallucinations.

Distance can also be understood phenomenologically, in terms of our naive experience. We decide whether an object is near or far, big or small, not in terms of a comparison with another object but in terms of our whole visual and spatial field. One’s spatial field patterns his vision and so defines what is near or far, big or small.
In other words, distance, in its existential sense, is defined in terms of one’s perceptual grip on an object, on whether we can comfortably situate ourselves in relation to it. Hence we can judge its ‘true’ size. Otherwise, if our grip is loose or approximate we will not have clear evidence to the size or distance of an object. “Hence the distance from me to an object is not a space which increases or decreases, but is rather a ‘tension which fluctuates round a norm, that norm being the adequacy and clarity of my perception.”

In the natural attitude, distance is not so much determined by physical space as by availability and access as laid down by one’s guiding interests and concerns. One can experience himself as ‘centered’ where his given setting coincides with his real interests. He can experience himself as ‘de-centered’ where he experiences himself as ‘somewhere else’, for example as in relation to a person who is not in physical with the individual. This illustrates the fact that a person’s lived space is cut up and patterned in terms of his projects. For example, the centre of his space is usually his home or dwelling, in terms of which he orients himself in the lived world. Space is cut up into paths, pavements, roads, etc., which determine the availability of different parts of the lived world.
It may indeed happen that a point very near to a person in terms of physical distance is experienced as far away in terms of accessibility. For example, the physical distance between two points on either side of a wall separating two houses is very small; yet in terms of its accessibility – the fact that the individual has to go out of his house, knock on his neighbour’s door, ask his permission to go into his house if he is in, and so on – the actual distance may be very great.

Movement displays in striking fashion how our body inhabits space (and time). It reveals, behind our objective ideas about how movement occurs in terms of a change in physical space, the pre-objective experience on which it is grounded, where movement is hold on the world. We must leave behind our objective prejudices about phenomena being essentially stable with static properties. The experience of movement reveals a world made up not only of things, but also of ‘pure transitions’, of objects defined in terms of their behavior as they appear in one’s visual field. “The bird which flies across the garden is, during the time that it is moving, merely a grayish power of flight.”\(^4\) It is one’s whole visual field which determines what he sees as at rest and what as moving. Merleau-Ponty exemplifies the same in the following way:

If I see a stone falling through the air, this means that my gaze is anchored in the garden, so that it is in terms of the garden that the stone is seen as moving. It is my anchorage in my visual field,
like my spatial level, which patterns my perceptions, so that the church steeple begins to move only when I leave the sky and clouds in the margin of my vision.\textsuperscript{50}

It is only in case of vague perceptions, those perceptions cut off from their present context and past perceptions, that one can voluntarily choose his anchorage.

3.8. 1 Time

In all our discussions of experience, we have made mention of its inescapable temporal structure. For example, we have seen above how spatial perspectives are unfolded by the body. Spatial perspectives and synthseses, however, are also inherently temporal: relations of distance, of near and far, are determined just as much by the subject’s temporal situation as his spatial one – indeed, the two are inseparable. The very notion of spatiality implicates temporality. ‘Things co-exist in space because they are present to the same perceiving subject and enveloped in one and the same temporal wave.’\textsuperscript{51}

Perception according to Merleau-Ponty, is also through and through a temporal as well as a spatial affair. The unity of the perceptual object is achieved through a dual temporal process of pretension and retention There is, first,
prospective focusing, the bringing together of the confused mass of colours and reflections which fill in one’s consciousness as he opens himself to the perceived world. He directs himself towards the expectation of a determinate object, so that it can be maintained that ‘the object is the final stage of one’s process of focusing’. There is also a process of retrospective apprehension of the perceptual object, since it presents itself as real and determinate prior to one’s act of focusing, and hence as the prime mover and stimulus to all his perceptions.

We have seen, finally, in our discussions of the relations between mind and body, the objective and phenomenal body, objective and lived space, etc., that experience tends towards integration, the fusion of subordinate structures, without ever achieving total union or assimilation. All integration is temporal, which is the clue to how it is achieved towards the future that link up discrete instants into a temporal pattern or sens (direction and significance). It also demonstrates how integration is always unstable, since what can be patterned or structured can also be broken up as new patterns come into existence. We see, then, the phenomenon of time implicated in all our experiences.

Then, how should we phenomenologically understand time? Time presupposes a human attitude towards time. Time expresses one’s relationship
to the world. In the ‘objective world in-itself’, if such a thing could be conceived, there would be no time and no change, no ‘before’ and ‘after’ because it takes a human observer to introduce such distinctions. To say, for example, that ‘the water flowing past me was yesterday at its source’ is to establish my perspective on events as a vantage point, an anchorage by which to link up the water yesterday and the water now. Indeed, the very concept of an event in nature is the result of the human programme of cutting nature up to make it intelligible. Hence, prior to, and at a level more primitive than that of objective time, the time of clocks, we find a pre-thematic, existential experience of time as a network of operative intentionalities binding us to the world. Time is, metaphorically, not a line, moving in one direction through only one real point, the present. Neither is it a stream or river, making us believe that the past pushes the present into view, which in turn pushes the future – the problem with all spatial metaphors is that they are based on motion, which itself presupposes time. “Time is rather to be understood as a flux, a pattern of intentionalities.”

Hence existential or lived time is not a present linked to a future and to a past, or a succession of discrete instants, as it is at the objective level, but a single movement or thrust by which human projects carve out relations of ‘before’ and ‘after’ in the world. It is one’s field of presence, the arena of one’s
projects and actions in the world, which is the ‘primary experience’ in which
time and its dimensions, is most clearly revealed. The future and the past are
experienced as the horizons of his living present. The future is that towards
which one’s tasks and projects are directed, and hence is that which makes
sense of his present since it defines the orientation (sens), or at least the style,
of his present actions. The past is an ever-receding platform to one’s present
situation, yet which is subject to continual re-interpretation in the light of his
present and future projects. Future and past are not points on a line, but
intentionalities that anchor one to his environment.

In short, we find presupposed in all experience not a central I or self, but
temporality, so that, phenomenologically, subjectivity is temporality. “Here we
are at a level more primitive than that of subject and object, where in fact the
very notions of subject and object come into being. We find ‘subject and object
as two abstract “moments” of a unique structure which is presence.”53

Yet, like the objective and phenomenal body, or objective and existential
space, my lived experience of time is intimately related to an objective time.
The objective time takes shape on the horizon of all modalities of existential
time to which all one’s experience is linked in some way. This makes hours,
days, months, years, etc., arise as fixed points. There is not a natural time, a
time without subjectivity. But only a generalized time, ‘the perpetual reiteration of the sequence of past, present and future’ the cyclic time of our bodily functions and of nature, upon which all existence is founded.

We have seen how the body has been defined by Merleau-ponty as an ‘expressive unity, in which causal and intentional structures are integrated to a greater or lesser degree. The body is the medium in which this dialectic between causality and intentionality is accomplished. However, the overall effect of Merleau-ponty’s work is to displace our notion of the body from that formulated within the Cartesian tradition.

We shall conclude this chapter with an overall view of Merleau-ponty’s concept of body. Phenomenological body is not a separate physical entity in a world external to it but rather is of the same stuff as it environs. Nor is it in the world like an object in a container. But it is oriented towards the world and directed toward certain tasks as part of it.

This communion of body and its environs will help us ward off our inclinations to give empiricist interpretation of the body. The world and the body are an intertwining of routes and levels which refer from one to another. The perceived world, then, is not an object, but ‘the ensemble of one’s body’s
routes’. There are spatial levels, temporal levels, colour levels, lighting levels, etc… which are the lines of force uniting the flesh of the body with the flesh of the world. Quality, light, colour, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them. Being is not a substance, but is a relationship between body and world, a relationship which includes both terms. Merleau-Ponty expresses the intimate relation of body and world as follows: ‘Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.’

We shall see, in the next chapter, how the concept of lived body provides us with a conceptual platform to develop a critique of the Cartesian presuppositions of modern medicine.