Chapter 1 The Mind-Body Problem

Anyone familiar with Merleau-Ponty’s works is certainly aware that they are varied and richly multifaceted. Yet one of the main recurring themes that define his works is his attempt to overcome Western dualism, in all its various forms: mind/body, subject/object, idealism/materialism, rationalism/empiricism, etc. In general terms, we must think of dualism as dividing something, anything, into two distinct and usually opposing categories, with categories that are so distinct that it becomes impossible to connect them in any meaningful way. The most general terms that Merleau-Ponty uses in the context of mind-body dualism is “for-itself” for mind, since the philosophical tradition treats the mind as something (even as some sort of substance) that is fully in possession of itself and of the internal relations of its meaningful categories, and “in-itself” for physical nature (and even the human body), since the physical objects of nature are just “dumb,” “dead” things with no awareness, just bits of extended matter in external relationships to one another. Given the opposing properties of the for-itself and the in-itself, it does become impossible to relate them meaningfully to one another, even given the great efforts of idealists/rationalists to place all of nature within the confines of clearly conceived (and abstract) categories, as well as the efforts of materialists/empiricists to reduce mind (consciousness) to neuro-physiological and ultimately physical events. While Merleau-Ponty’s first book The Structure of Behavior\(^2\) mostly offers a challenge to the materialist/empiricist camp, it does also argue against the idealist/rationalist school of thought. Yet it is his second book Phenomenology of Perception\(^3\) that frequently addresses various issues, such as the phantom limb, or, more broadly, attempts to understand human sexuality and human language, etc., by considering both empiricist and rationalist explanations of them. He then attempts to show how these theories fail to explain what is generally grasped as given immediately before us, and, finally, by offering a theory of bodily being-in-the-world that does satisfactorily explain what is given before us. He makes this attempt to overcome these oppositional explanations, to a certain extent at least, by attempting to redefine both mind and matter and, in addition, to blend and interweave them. He attempts this in his early, middle, and late works, with his solution, along with the integration of the terms of the opposing couplets, becoming more and more complete with each new book. Since mind-body dualism, and the difficulty that surrounds a satisfactory description of relationship between the mind and body, has remained so intractable, since a solution would undoubtedly be helpful, and since Merleau-Ponty spends a great deal of time and effort carefully studying this relationship, calling upon physics, biology, neurobiology, neurophysiology, and psychology, which most philosophers do not do, it will be worthwhile to follow his efforts.

We should also point out here that even though this issue can be treated on its own that it has much broader implications for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. His entire philosophical career is devoted to developing a middle ground between materialism/empiricism and idealism/rationalism. This development begins with a straightforward and yet critical scientific treatment of the mind and body in The Structure of
Behavior and ends with the articulation of a philosophical ontology that blends the flesh of the human body with the “flesh” of the world in the posthumously published The Visible and the Invisible.4

To understand Merleau-Ponty’s efforts, it will be useful to consider the following: first and foremost, his study of the relationship between body and mind in his early, middle, and late work; secondly, his answer to the question “how is it that the thing only appears at the end of my gaze but also as existing in itself?” in his early, middle and late works, with his answer more completely developed with each new book; thirdly, his treatment of the transition from perception to language in his middle and late work, again with his answer more completely developed in his more mature writings;5 and finally, his development of the term “flesh,” with its integration of body and mind, of lived through embodied experience and the world, in his late work The Visible and the Invisible.


The Structure of Behavior: In The Structure of Behavior, after consulting a plethora of studies of neurophysiology and perception (practically the studies of Gestalt psychologist, which, for the most part, have since been confirmed and not superseded), Merleau-Ponty argues that perceptual meaning must be considered to be original. The meanings present to perceptual consciousness cannot be constructed from discrete units of data in external relations, like bricks in a wall, as empiricists claim, nor can they be constructed from the abstract concepts of geometry and logic, as rationalist’s claim. Again, the meaningful gestalt structure of perceptual experience, i.e., whose meaning is greater than a mere sum of its parts, is not yet conceptual and is given in perceptual experience itself. Perception reveals meaningful relationships that are more than just external relationships and, yet, that are not simply the internal relations of conceptual meaning. Perception is original and primordial. It cannot be explained by or constructed from anything else, and it is first. It is there from the beginning and helps explain what will come later.
Given this understanding of perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state the following about the mind-body problem. “Every theory of perception tries to surmount a well-known contradiction: on the one hand, consciousness is a function of the body—thus it is an ‘internal’ event dependent upon certain external events; on the other hand, these external events themselves are known only by consciousness. In another language, consciousness appears on one hand to be part of the world and on the other to be co-extensive with the world” (SB 215, my bracket addition). Yet, again, given his theory of the original meaning of perception, and even though he admits that the world to which the perceiving human body belongs presents itself to this perceiving body as existing in its own right, he goes on to state that both mind and body have a meaning only because they are given in perceptual consciousness (SB 216).

This means that “my total psycho-physical being (that is, the experience which I have of myself, that which others have of me, and the scientific knowledge which they and I apply to the knowledge of myself) is an interlacing of significations such that, when certain among them are perceived and pass into actuality, the others are only virtually intended” (SB 217). Thus, the “subjective” experience that appears to me in my perception of an object, and my perception viewed “objectively” from the outside from the point of view of a third-person, scientific observer, always remain secondary and virtual with respect to one another. Moreover, if it is true that perceptual experience is primary, then this experience (let’s call it “mind” in this case) cannot be constructed causally from the supposedly discrete units in external relations of reductionistic materialism, for then perceptual experience would be constructed by the third-person scientific observer and would no longer be primary, and, furthermore, the properties of a perceptual experience, with its parts related meaningfully (yet not conceptually) cannot be explained by discrete parts in external relationships. Yet Merleau-Ponty certainly does not deny that the body is the ontological seat of the perceptual process. As he puts it, “on the condition that ‘form’ is introduced in nerve functioning a parallelism or a rigorous ‘isomorphism’ could be maintained” between the nerve functioning and what appears to the perceiver (SB 92). However, since perceptual meaning is primary, since it is always richer than any third-person construction of it, and since the form of physiological functioning that is displayed to a third-person perceiver is, first of all, presented to the third-person as a first-person perception, and, secondly, cannot explain the properties of the perceptual form lived through by the primary first-person perceiver as the supposed result of discrete objective events in external relations, then the idea of a strict parallelism between physiological form and perceptual form can no longer be maintained (SB 92).

Again, the significations of my lived through perceptual experience have their origin in perceptual experience, which is prior to the objective constructions and explanations of science, and yet, Merleau-Ponty insists, this field of perceptual experience is “given only as a perspectival view of objects gifted with stable properties, a perspectival view of an objective world and an objective space” (SB 219). Thus, we must conclude that “the problem of perception consists in trying to discover how the inter-subjective world,
the determinations of which science is gradually making precise, is grasped through this field [of lived through perceptions]” (SB 219, my bracket addition). Or, in the context of our present investigation, the problem of the relation of the body to the mind, the problem of the relationship of the body as a worldly object (which science helps to make explicit) to the flux of lived through experiences of the body, is a perceptual problem (SB 219). The mind-body problem must be understood as a perceptual problem because it has its roots in the ambiguity of perceptual experience, or, more specifically, “in the duality of the notions of structure and signification. A ‘form,’ such as a ‘figure and ground’ structure, for example, is a whole which has a meaning and which therefore provides a base for intellectual analysis. But at the same time it is not an idea: it constitutes, alters and reorganizes itself before us like a spectacle” (SB 224). Or, again, a perceptual form is a concrete structure, in which the world is given as existing in its own right, that is meaningful, yet this meaning is not yet the meaning of an abstract idea. Thus perceptual structure is both “worldly” (i.e., is rooted in an openness upon a world that presents itself as existing on its own) and meaningful, since it is related to a perceiver. For example, when considering the well-known gestalt figure that can appear as a vase or as two faces in profile, we must admit that the form has an objective existence, in this case as lines on a piece of paper before the perceiver, but also that the perceiver plays an important role when it comes to the meaning of the form, for the form can be seen as a vase or as two faces. In addition, this meaning, which is present to the aware body subject, since it is rooted in an experience that opens upon a world that presents itself as existing in its own right, provides the basis for more abstract, inter-subjective and “objective” significations. Perceptual structure reveals both a stable, pre-existent structure and a structure that is only meaningful as a perceptual structure. Thus perceptual form presents itself as a real structure that is really only fully meaningful to a perceiving subject. In other words, the mind-body problem is a perceptual problem. Perceptual experience bears within itself the duality of structure and meaning, of the objective and the subjective, of body and mind. We must attempt to solve the problem of this duality by understanding the relation of the flow of perceptual perspectives, which are given personally to the perceiver, and which present a world as existing on its own, to the significations that are formed intersubjectively and that science is attempting to make more precise. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it: “it is a question of understanding, without confusing it with a logical relation, the lived relation of the ‘profiles’ to the ‘things’ [including the human body] which they present, of the [lived through perceptual] perspectives to the ideal significations which are in intended through them”--- to the ideal significations which are the intersubjective attempt to express our perceptual contact with the real world in an objective language (SB 220, my bracket additions).

We have seen that the mind-body problem is a perceptual problem because of the ambiguity of structure and signification that is present in perception. We have seen that perception reveals concrete, stable structures where they are, existing in their own right, and yet also reveals a meaning that pre-supposes
a perceiver, reveals a structure that ambiguously presents itself as both objective and subjective, as body and mind. The resolution of the mind-body problem will thus involve an attempt to understand the relationship between the flow of perceptual profiles, as they are presented to the perceiving subject, and the existing things that are revealed through them, as well as an attempt to understand how this personal contact with an already existing world gets expressed in the intersubjective language of the “ideal” significations of objectivity. Or, using the language that Merleau-Ponty uses in subsequent texts, we can express the resolution of the mind-body problem in this way: we must attempt to understand how it is that we necessarily perceive the world through our own perception but that what we do perceive presents itself as existing in its own right.

Merleau-Ponty here indicates how to solve the mind-body problem, does so by pointing to the structure of perception, but he does not pursue the solution in detail here. He will sustain this pursuit until the end of his life, continually refining and deepening his answer. As we have just seen, an important part of this solution is intertwined with understanding how objects appear only through our perceptual experience yet also as existing in their own right and, in addition, with understanding the move from perception to the formation of abstract thought. As we will see, for Merleau-Ponty this latter point will involve understanding the movement of perception to language.

Phenomenology of Perception

In Phenomenology of Perception Merleau-Ponty continues the line of thought already established in The Structure of Behavior, now expressed in the form of a question. “How are we to understand both that the thing is the correlative of my experience, of the knowing body, and that it rejects the body,” that it exists in its own right (PhP 325)? As he did in The Structure of Behavior, Merleau-Ponty here rejects the idea that the mind or consciousness or perceptual awareness can be understood simply as the causal product of physical events, or, as he puts it, of the in-itself.10 Rather, he turns to the temporal structure of lived through experience to help enlighten the relationship. If we treat self-awareness (or the for-itself) not as a hole in being (as Sartre did11) but as a hollow, as a break in the density of being, as an embodied being that is aware of its being, of its being in a horizon of being (not outside of it), in which there is an awareness of the passing of time, and an awareness of this passing as a dimension of being, and if the for-itself is merely a present awareness that fans out toward the past and future that includes it, then we change the nature of the mind-body problem. If temporality is a movement that is centered in the present, in the present in a wide sense, in the sense that the present is not a discrete unit but the center of aware experience that gradually shades outward, with overlapping boundaries, toward the past and the future, then, again, we change the nature of the mind-body problem, for it is now reduced to the following form. “How is it that a being which is still to come and has passed by, also has a present—which means that the problem is eliminated, since the future, the past and the present are linked together in the movement of temporalization” (PhP 431).
Following Merleau-Ponty’s comments here, we must consider the for-itself as a present awareness that opens to a past and a future, to a temporality that it exists within, while treating the in-itself as the stable past and future horizon that the present opens upon and exists within. In other words, the for-itself and the in-itself are different ways to look at the structure of presence. They are different “sides” of the structure of presence: the aware present fanning out in a temporal horizon and the temporal horizon that includes this presence. Thus the subjective must be thought of as the aware opening out to a stable temporal world structure that the subject exists within, and the objective must be thought of as that which is woven out of this always already existing, stable, temporal, horizontal world structure that the subject opens upon. Or, again, the in-itself is this stable, temporal horizon that the experiencing subject exists within. The experiencing body subject is in it and it is given in this experience as existing prior to and as running beyond the experiencing body subject, and yet the experiencing subject is able to take up this temporal structure and carry forward its stable patterns. I open upon a world that pre-exists me, I bring it to awareness, and I take up its structures within my experience and carry them forward in time (for I am a member of the species that is aware of time, i.e., for I am a member of a species whose very structure of existence fuses with the temporality of nature, i.e., whose very structure of experience is temporal). This, then, is the relationship between subject and object: the subject opens out to a stable, temporal, worldly horizon that the subject exists within but also helps carry forward (with its awareness it helps carry forward, from the past, in the present, toward the future, the structures of experience, to which both the embodied subject and the world contribute), with the always already available worldly horizon subtending the aware subject. Again, this is the relationship between the subject and the world: the subject opens upon the field of the world that is always already there, a stable structure that is revealed in experience, that subtends the subject, that the subject carries forward in the temporal structure of experience. The objective, then, is woven out of this pre-existent field that the subject experiences, acts within, and helps carry forward, in experience, along with others.

Merleau-Ponty thus stresses here, as he has done in The Structure of Behavior, that in order to understand the mind-body relationship, that we must understand the relationship between our lived through embodied perceptual experiences of the moment and how these lived through moments are open to the horizontal field that they exist within. Merleau-Ponty also stresses here, as he has done in The Structure of Behavior, that bodily perception as a bodily function must be understood, at least in part, as a being formed existentially, i.e., as possessing an aspect of awareness, an operative awareness that is engaged in and entangled with the world, and that consciousness awareness must be understood as a bodily orientation. We must understand the human organism as an aware, functioning, gestalt whole, greater than a sum of its parts, with the subjective “side” and the bodily “side” working together as part of a single, more or less unified whole (PhP 431).
Also following the results of his study in his earlier work, Merleau-Ponty again stresses the following. “. . . the objective body is not the true version of the phenomena body, that is, the true version of the body that we live by: it is indeed no more than the latter’s impoverished image, so that the problem of the relation of the soul to body has nothing to do with the objective body, which exists only conceptually, but with the phenomenal body. What is true, however, is that our open and personal existence rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence. But it could not be otherwise, if we are temporality, since the dialectic of acquisition and future is what constitutes time.”

Again, “our open and personal existence,” which is centered in the present moment of experience, “rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence,” on the structures of past experiences, to which both the embodied subject and the world have contributed. The lived through moment of experience, the aware present, helps carry these along and into the future. The body mind relation must therefore be conceived within the context of this temporal structure, with the stabilized structures of past experience related to and given within the subject’s present openness upon the world (PhP 431-2).

In Phenomenology of Perception Merleau-Ponty also moves to address inter-subjectivity, which, of course, is necessary in order to move from one’s own experiences toward objectivity, and it is temporality that once again comes to Merleau-Ponty’s aid. In particular, the notion of presence, which links one’s presence to oneself to one’s presence in the horizon of the world, opens the embodied experiencing subject to a temporal field that the subject exists within and that the subject helps bring to greater awareness, that is open to other embodied subjects oriented toward this field in similar ways. While it remains true that no subject will ever fully know the lived through experience of another subject, when we understand that the subject’s experience is intertwined with the structure of temporality, then we understand that “two temporalities are not mutually exclusive as are two consciousnesses, because each one knows itself only by projecting itself into the present where they can interweave” (PhP 433). When we understand that the experiencing subject who is aware of him or herself, who is present to him or herself, is also present to the temporal horizon of the world, then we understand that one’s own experience necessarily opens to a broader structure, to a structure that one’s experience exists within, to a structure that others open upon as well, thus providing a basis for an intersubjective contact with the world (See PhP 432-433).12

For Merleau-Ponty a really existing world is given in lived through perceptual experience, but this is not the objective world of science. That world is a cultural construction. It is in front of us as a construction. The real world is given as behind us, or, rather, as existing before us in time, in the temporal horizon.13 When considering the existence of the world prior to (or without) perceptual consciousness, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is wrong for us to place Laplace’s nebula (from which the earth and the human species eventually evolved) before us in time. This nebula is a scientific product, a cultural product. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, it is based on our lived through perceptual openness upon a pre-existent world that presents itself as existing in its own right. The same could be said of the human body. The objective body is not
before us in time. It is a cultural product. Yet it is based on our lived through perceptual experience that opens upon a pre-existent body that presents itself as existing in its own right. When I see my own body, I do not experience a pure object but my body in my lived through current perception, and I am attached to it. I first live through it as my primary orientation toward the world. Then I am able to reflect upon or see it as a body that I have lived through, yet still not as a pure thing. It is always already there as my stable means of being in the world. It pre-exists my reflection, like the world and the objects within it, as a stable set of pre-existent orientations, not as a pure thing in-itself. This changes the nature of the mind-body problem. This relationship can no longer be construed as a relationship between a pure in-itself related to a pure for-itself. We must understand the relationship as the relationship between the body as perceived (by me and others) and the body as perceiving.

Merleau-Ponty fully realizes that by connecting the object to the experiencing body that some will claim that he is undermining the objectivity of the object. This critical view, he states, will likely claim, when considering a cube, that we never see the object with six equal sides, because of perspectival distortion, but that the idea of a cube with six equal sides, the cube as it is in itself, clearly has a meaning for us. Moreover, this critical view is also likely to claim that it is a system of objective relations between the perceiving body and the perceived object that determines the meaning of the object and not the collaboration of lived through perceptual experiences that does so. Merleau-Ponty responds to these criticisms by challenging the claim that the object can be meaningfully separated from the actual means by which it is presented to the perceiver. For example, concepts such as “enclosed,” “inside,” outside,” and “direction” would have no meaning without the oriented engagement of the aware embodied perceiver, since, for space in itself, a space without reference to the embodied perceiving subject, there is no orientation, no up or down, no left or right. The perception of space, or the perception of any visible object for that matter, presupposes a situated perceiver, a perceiver that nevertheless opens upon a pre-existent world. Thus, the objective conceptualization of the object in-itself bears a meaning because of our original perceptual hold on the world.14

How do we move from personal, perspectival perception to the world that is also given as public, as existing in its own right? First of all, the world is experienced as existing in its own right. Secondly, the world is experienced as something my experience exist within, as public. I thus experience my experience as opening upon a public field that is open to the experiences of others. Thirdly, language is able to sublimate my experience, my opening upon a public world. a.) As I watch others meaningfully gesturing toward the world, I am able to couple with their gestures. Since consciousness is not just a private interior awareness but an active opening out upon a world that is experienced as public, I am able to capture a glimpse of the other’s meaningful gestures toward the world. Moreover, since language is a gesture that opens out upon a field of already available linguistic significations, I am able to catch a glimpse of the
other’s meaningful gestures within and toward this field. b.) Moreover, since this field of linguistic significations is a sublimation of our perceptual openness upon the world, our common linguistic gestures open upon and reveal a common world. This, then, is how we can express our commonly experienced, public world. This is how we can articulate an “objective” world, that is, how we can correlate the intersubjective reports of perception. And this is how we can articulate our experience about an “objective” body. We correlate the intersubjective linguistic reports of perceptions of it from the outside, and, with regard to the mind-body problem, we must coordinate the linguistic reports of the perceptions of my body from the outside with my reports of my lived through embodied perception experienced from the inside. To understand the relation between the mind and body we must approach the human body from both sides. We must approach the human body as an intersubjectively, linguistically articulated object and as it is lived through experientially and articulated by the experiencing subject. These “sides” share a structure, i.e., my body seen from the outside as a meaningful orientation toward the world and my body experienced from the inside as a meaningful orientation toward the world.15

Nature Merleau-Ponty’s lecture notes published as Nature once again address the dualism of nature and consciousness, or, in the language he once again uses here, the dualism of the in-itself and for-itself. Here, in these lectures, while considering some of the best studies in biology, especially those of Jakob von Uexkull, he reports that the notion of Umwelt or animal environment cannot be understood as either a thing in-itself or as something that simply appears in the “consciousness” of the animal for-itself. Rather it must be understood as the animal’s openness out to a field with which the animal develops intimate relationships, with which it collaborates in the most intimate ways. As the active, interested organism meets the forceful and yet shifting perceptual patterns of the world, there is a sort of co-penetration of each “side” in the other (since each has a profound and simultaneous impact on the other), and thus a co-creation of meaning (NA, 174-178). Even more accurately, the animal subject and the environment form a whole that can be observed from two sides, that of the animal and that of the environment.

More relevant to the current topic at hand, Merleau-Ponty here proceeds to consider the relationship between the body and mind with great care. Numerous studies of the development and repair of a number of different species (including the human species) reveal that, while it true that living organisms are only physicochemical, and that, subsequently, we cannot appeal to another form of causality, as vitalism does for example, the understanding of the life, and of the development and repair of these species, cannot be fully framed in physicochemical terms. Living organisms cannot be understood simply as “the sum of instantaneous and punctual microscopic events,” but must be grasped as “an enveloping phenomena, with the macroscopic style of an ensemble in movement. In between the microscopic facts, global reality is delineated like a watermark, never graspalbe for objectivizing-particular thinking, never eliminable from or reducible to the microscopic . . .” It is thus from within that we see the development of a global and
oriented living structure, one that remains tied to its microscopic events but that cannot be reduced to them. Again, when we trace the development and repair of a living organism, the axolotl, for example, we see that it develops according to the demands of the organism as a functional whole (Na 140-145). We also see, for certain larvae at least, that casing repairs are variable and also made according to the demands of global functioning (Na 178-183), and we see, for certain injuries to the human eye, that the eye shifts to maintain the clearest vision in the center of its visual field (SB 40-1). We can thus conclude, along with Merleau-Ponty, that everything that happens with the development and repair of an organism occurs at the physicochemical level but that it is the global functioning of the organism (with the whole demonstrating properties greater than the mere sum of its parts) that guides development and repair, not physico-chemistry alone (NA 202-207).

When more specifically addressing the human species, Merleau-Ponty insists that “the concern is to grasp humanity first as another manner of being a body---to see humanity emerge just like Being in the manner of a watermark, not as another substance, but as interbeing [as being between or among beings, like the watermark, or like the Gestalt whole that is always greater than the mere sum of its parts], and not as an imposition of a for-itself on the body in-itself” (NA 208, my bracket addition). Merleau-Ponty states here, at the end of his Nature lecture notes, that his concern had been to trace the evolution of the human body. He reminds us that his study of nature, of living beings, of human beings, and of the evolution of the human body, has been carried out as a study of perceived beings. He believes that he has produced a better understanding of the human body through a perceptual study of nature up to and including the development of the perceiving human being. Yet, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, it is the study of the perceiving body that will also help us further understand what has preceded it. Just as nature is a part of and crosses into the perceiving being that it gives rise to, so also the perceiving body crosses back into and helps articulate that which gave rise to it. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “it is the same Ineinander [in one another] that we gradually approach from two ends, an Ineinander that is not that of a thing in a thing, not a de facto Ineinander, but rather one ratified by our lived, perceived Ineinander. Inversely, what precedes will clarify our approach to the human body as perceiving by showing us in what dimension the perceiving body must be sought, and how the invisible is divergence in relation to the visible” (NA 208, my bracket addition). The body as perceived and the body as perceiving (rather than the purely objective body and a transcendent or pure mind) will help clarify one another, for they fold into one another, with each helping to define the other, and this is certainly a new way to attempt to understand the relationship between the body and mind, for it is re-defines both, thus changing the relationship between them.

The Visible and the Invisible It is in The Visible and the Invisible that Merleau-Ponty develops his most complete answer to the mind-body problem. Here he once again states one of the primary issues associated with the mind-body problem and now more thoroughly addresses it. “What is...this singular
virtue of the visible that makes it, held at the end of the gaze, nonetheless much more than a correlative of my vision, such that it imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence?” (VI 131) He once again turns to perception for his answer, this time focusing on touch (because it is less prone to detaching itself from the body than visual perception), and more thoroughly expressing the intertwining of touching and the touched, of perceiving and being perceived.

“…between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kindship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, open finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part.” (VI 133)

We witness here both the need for an aware perceiver and for an embodied perceiver that belongs to and participates in the embodiment of a greater world. We also witness the collaboration (undoubtedly achieved by the evolution of the human body) of the aware embodied perceiver and the world---so much so that they pass into one another. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange” (VI 133). We witness here a final push to overcome an intractable mind-body dualism, especially as it is expressed as a mind for-itself over against a body in-itself, that has made it impossible to relate them meaningfully to one another. In fact, it is their intertwining that creates meaning, and it is now, with this understanding, that Merleau-Ponty is able to supply an answer to the question of how the thing only appears at end of our gaze but as also as existing in its own right. “We can understand then why we see the things themselves, in their place, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than a being-perceived---and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and the body . . . It is that the thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity . . .” (VI 135) My hand can touch because it is simultaneously touched by the world outside of it. It is thus through my aware embodiment, my embodied sentience, that I connect with the embodied world around me, that is, with the world and its objects manifested in physical form. It is through this lived through blending of the aware embodied subject and the embodied world that meaning is formed and that a whole is created that is greater than, and even more real than, either of its parts (VI 139). In fact, it is this blending that allows us to understand how things are visible, for the world’s embodiment appears, in its own place, as existing in its own right, only through the awareness of one of its own embodied beings. And, it is this blending that allows us to understand the perceiver’s corporeity, for the perceiver has a sense of his or her embodiment only because his or her existence blends with the existence of an embodied world. Merleau-Ponty continues here to refine his answer. “It is the body and it
alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that, if it be possible, would coexist with them in the same world” (VI 136). Again, it is through our human *embodiment*, because it is our aware *embodiment* that allows us to participate in the *embodiment* of the world, that we are able to see the embodied things where they rest, existing on their own—because we experience our bodies as existing within this greater world. Yet, again, this world only appears to us in and through our aware embodiment.

Careful to avoid some sort of anthropomorphizing, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state the following. “When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our own projections, leaving aside what it can be under the human mask. Rather, we mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible.” (VI 136) Thus our understanding of human perception, its opening out, it gestalt structure, must come from an understanding of the very structure of Being. Perceptual structure is an example of, a manifestation of, the very structure of Being, not the other way around. Yet Merleau-Ponty proceeds to qualify the structure of Being and the relationship between the perceived and our perceiving. “To speak of leaves or of layers is still to flatten and to juxtapose, under the reflective gaze, what coexists in the living and upright body. If one wants metaphors, it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse . . . If the body is one sole body in its two phases, it incorporates into itself the whole of the sensible and with the same movement incorporates itself into a ‘Sensible in itself’ . . . There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other” (VI 138). Thus, it is through lived through embodied experience of the world that embodied experience and the world come together and blend. As I experience the world through my body, I meet and blend with the world’s thickness. It is given to me as embodied (like my body), as existent. It meets my flesh through my lived through embodied thickness with its embodied thickness that I live through. Again, the world is given to me in my lived through embodied encounter with the world. In this lived through embodied experience there is a blending of my embodiment and the world’s embodiment. The world is given to me through my embodiment but also as running beyond it, as possessing its own embodiment existence, which my embodied existence exists within and is a part of. Yet, again, even though Being is primary, the only way that it appears to us is through our embodied experience, our embodied perception. Being and the perception of being are given together, yet with Being as still the more primary term, for Being temporally slips away from the present moment of perception and is perceived as always already there.17
Chiasm It will be helpful here, in our effort to understand Merleau-Ponty’s late treatment of the mind-body problem, to trace his development of the idea of “chiasm” throughout The Visible and Invisible. This is what can be found. Turning specifically to the issue of the mind-body relationship, we see Merleau-Ponty claim that we must “define the mind as the other side of the body-----We have no idea of a mind that would not be doubled with a body, that would not be established on this ground-----” (VI 259). The mind, then, is certainly not another substance or even fully distinct from the body, for it is the body’s aware opening out upon the world. Furthermore, “the ‘other side’ means that the body, inasmuch as it has this other side, is not describable in objective terms, in terms of the in-itself—that this other side is really the other side of the body, overflows into it (Ueberschreiten), encroaches upon it, is hidden in it— and at the same time needs it, terminates in it, is anchored in it. There is a body of the mind, and a mind of the body and a chiasm between them.” It is doubtful that anyone else in the Western philosophical tradition has gone further than Merleau-Ponty in the effort to overcome mind-body dualism, in the effort to weave mind and body together, and in a way that overcomes the antinomies that mind-body dualism tenaciously presents.

Here we explicitly see that the mind is the body’s aware opening out upon the world. Or, again, the mind as the body’s other side is “to be understood not, as in objective thought, in the sense of another projection of the same flat projection system, but in the sense of Ueberstieg [overflowing a limit or boundary] of the body toward a depth, a dimensionality that is not that of extension, and a transcendence of the negative toward the sensible.” The mind is the body’s ek-stace, is the body’s aware “leaping out of itself,” an opening out upon the world with which it partially blends but that transcends or runs beyond it. The body, as mind, opens out upon the world with awareness, just as this world rebounds back upon the aware body to reinforce its existence as a body, as a body among other bodies of the world, as a body capable of being perceived from the outside. The mind is the body’s aware opening out upon the world, and the body is a being that is aware of itself as a worldly being existing among other worldly beings. The human body is aware of itself as an embodied being that is aware of other embodied beings, and it is aware that it can be perceived by other embodied beings. The mind and body fold into one another and define one another, i.e., the aware body, the sensing, and the body as sensed, fold into one another and define one another. Moreover, it is by means of this fold that the chiasm or crisscrossing into one another of the surface of the body and the surface of the world occurs. It is the blending of these two surfaces that Merleau-Ponty calls flesh (VI 259, my bracket addition).

Yet, as we have seen, even though the mind and body crisscross into one another, they never completely blend or coincide. The body as seer and the body as seen are not identical. They are the same, Merleau-Ponty says, only in a structural sense. They have the “same inner framework, the same Gestalthafte, the same in the sense of openness of another dimension of the ‘same’ being” (VI 261). Merleau-Ponty describes what he calls the “existentials” of experience as “the armature of the
transcendental field,” as a lived through perceptual (not conceptual) framework to which both the experiencing body and the world contribute. These “existentials” reveal and are meaningful gestalt forms, forms that are greater than the mere sum of their parts, forms that are meaningful wholes (See VI 171, 257). The experience of being, then, is “inflated with non-being or with the possible,” and this means that being “is not only what it is. The Gestalthafte, if one really wanted to define it, would be that. The very notion of Gestalt— if one wishes to define it in its own terms and not a contrario, as ‘what is not’ the sum of the elements— is that” (VI 180-181). Thus, when looking at the relationship between the mind (the body as seer) and the body (the body as seen), we must understand that they share the same Gestalthafte, that each is a part of the same “existential,” that each is a side (obverse and reverse) of the same “existential,” and that, in this case, each side of the “existential” resides in the same being. Yet they are different; they are different dimensions of the same being. The mind is the body’s aware opening out upon and active, meaningful orientation toward the world, and the body (as object) is this world (and other human beings in it) reflecting and looking back at the body as an active, meaningful orientation, with both poles of this experience (one more “subjective” and one more “objective”) manifesting in the same existential or orientational structure, yet in different ways (VI 261).

This is certainly a way of overcoming the mind-body problem presented as a dualism of substances or as a property dualism, with substances or qualities that are so different from each other that they cannot possibly be related to each other. Merleau-Ponty has redefined mind and body in such a way that their relationship to each other is not so problematic. His definitions here even help us overcome another problem: the recognition of the other. Since I am no longer a pure mind, given privately only to myself, and since I am no longer just a body in-itself, since I am now intentionally oriented toward the world through my active body, as the other is as well, when I see another human being, or when the other perceives me, we both perceive another bodily orientation toward the world that is meaningful. Moreover, since our similar orientations open upon a public field in similar ways, we are able to capture a glimpse of what the other perceives. Again, I am here able to recognize the other’s meaningful orientation toward the world as similar to my own but I also recognize it as existing in its own right. In fact, this is just what the recognition of the other requires, the recognition of sameness, of a common humanity, and the recognition of difference, of an aware human being that is not just a projection of my own interior (or, rather, that is not just the introjection of my interior into the interior of the other). In the same way, just as there is a lateral overlapping of the self and other, of my experience as it is oriented toward the world with the other’s experience as it is oriented toward this same world in similar ways, so also there is an overlapping of my embodied experience and my embodiment as it is experienced by others. They are not separate, but fold in upon one another. They are better understood as different sides of the same being.
Flesh Tracing Merleau-Ponty’s development of the idea of the flesh in the posthumous text, we are able to find additional comments relevant to the overcoming of mind-body dualism. We have seen numerous times that Merleau-Ponty asks the following question: how is it that the world only appears at the end of my gaze and yet also presents itself as existing in itself? As we have already seen, here in The Visible and Invisible he provides a direct answer: “it is that the look is itself incorporation of the seer into the visible” (VI 131). Our only access to the world is through our bodies, through our bodily perception of it, and yet the only way the human body can see or touch is to be seen or touched. To be able to touch, one must be capable of being touched. To be capable of being touched, one must have or rather be a body, and be a body in a world of other embodied beings. “The body,” Merleau-Ponty says, “unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation . . .” (VI 136)

We have seen that “it is the body and it alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves” (VI 136). As we have also just seen, the body is a sensible mass, it is a thing (a thing that can be seen, like the things of the world) and it is a mass that is sensible, a mass that can sense, a mass that opens out upon a field of sensible things of which it is a part. This mass that is sensible (i.e., that senses) is aware of itself by segregation from that upon which it opens, by a reflexivity of the body that touches because it is aware of being touched from the outside, that is aware of its existence in the “outside” world, but that is also segregated from it because of this awareness, because it is not just a thing, and because it is aware that this outside is aware of it, can see and touch it. “We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself . . . [the human body is a] double belongingness to the order of the ‘object’ and to the order of the ‘subject’ . . .” (VI 137, my bracket addition). It is this double belongingness that helps us understand the “unity” of the embodied subject and the world.

“There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself surrounded by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact— as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them.” (VI 139)

Because of the body’s ontological structure, it is able to experience itself as perceiving and as part of the perceived world, and it is aware of the former because it is aware of the latter. The body can touch because it is aware of being touched, because it is aware of being part of a world that touches it. Moreover, it is at the juncture of the body as touching and the body as touched by the world that meaning is formed. In
addition, as we have just seen, it is this “unity” of the embodied subject and the world that allows us to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by the flesh. He continues. “It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh, and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it. The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings . . . Nor is it a representation for a mind: a mind could not be captured by its own representations; it would rebel against this insertion into the visible which is essential to the seer.” (VI 140) Here, again, we see Merleau-Ponty eschewing typical dualistic explanations, or, in this case, answers typically given by what might be construed as reductionistic materialism, on the one hand, and an omnipresent rationalism, on the other. He continues to emphasize his alternative to these views. “The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatiotemporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.” (VI 140-141) The flesh, then, since it is an intertwining of the embodied subject and the world, is an oriented world, yet we also see here that it is the world that remains primary.

“For if there is flesh, that is, if the hidden face of the cube radiates forth somewhere as well as does the face I have under my eyes, and coexists with it, and if I who see the cube also belong to the visible, I am visible from elsewhere, and if I and the cube are together caught up in one same ‘element’ . . ., this cohesion, this visibility by principle, prevails over every momentary discordance. In advance every vision or very partial visible that would here definitively come to naught is not nullified (which would leave a gap in its place), but, what is better, it is replaced by a more exact vision and a more exact visible, according to the principle of visibility, which, as though through a sort of abhorrence of a vacuum, already invokes the true vision and the true visible, not only as substitutes for their errors, but also as their explanation, their relative justification, so that they are, as Husserl says so aptly, not erased, but ‘crossed out’. . .” (VI 141)

There is no definitively correct perception, yet the visible remains an ever-present horizon that particular perceptions always remain within, even when shown to be wrong. Moreover, even though a particular perception may be called into question, this occurs because another perception has shown it to be so. Thus when a particular perception is called into question, this does not mean that all perceptions (or perception itself) should be doubted, for, as we have just seen, it is on the basis of a clearly given perception that another is dismissed and, it should again be stressed, every dismissal of a particular perception always occurs within the context of the always already present field of the visible. Furthermore, as we have also just seen, the world’s existence, its existing in its own right, appears through the visible. Or, in other words, we necessarily experience the world though our own embodied perception. The world that appears is the visible world, which presupposes a perceiver, yet what appears through the visible appears as existing in its own right.
Here we should once again mention, as Merleau-Ponty does, the attempt to avoid anthropomorphizing, even while introducing the notion of “flesh of the world.” Here we should stress that when he uses the term flesh to describe the world, he does not mean to say that the world is self-sensing, but that it is intertwined with the flesh and embodiment of the human body, while still remaining primary, and that the world is an open horizon, is a Gestalt structure, with stable but also open-ended and implied meanings, a global whole that is greater than a mere sum of its parts, an open structure that provides a multitude of possibilities. Again, the world is an open (Gestalt) being, yet this being requires an embodied, open subject to more fully reveal and realize it (VI 136).

Given the topic at hand, i.e., the possible resolution of the mind-body problem, we should ask if the concept of the flesh gets us any closer to this resolution. We have seen that it was explicitly developed to overcome the subject/object dualism prevalent in Western philosophy, for embodied awareness and the surface of the world cross into one another, and to overcome the self/other dualism also prevalent in Western philosophy, for, since embodied awareness opens upon a worldly field of which it is already a part, individual awareness is experienced as part of a common field that is open to the experience of others. This notion of the flesh thus provides a plausible way to think of mind and worldly bodies, as well as self and others, in non-dualistic terms.

“Working Notes” Finally, we should turn briefly to “Working Notes” of The Visible and the Invisible. Merleau-Ponty states that in his “Working Notes” that he must “disclose little by little— and more and more—the ‘wild’ or ‘vertical’ world,” and this means that he must “show the intentional reference of Physics to Physis, of Physis to life [or biology], of life to the “psycho-physical” [or the human]… (VI 177, my bracket additions). Two points should be stressed here. First, when Merleau-Ponty states that he is concerned with moving from Physics to Physis, he means that he wants to move from the study of physics as a study of physical being as it is in-itself to the study of physical being as it is revealed via lived through perception, and he makes the same claim with respect to the study of biology and humanity, that each much be approached by way of lived through perception and not studied merely as an object in-itself. (See VI 166-167) Secondly, he argues that each “level” (nature, life, and human life) anticipates (pre-figures and develops towards) the others, with the latter “levels” taking up the former, developing them further, and in such a way that helps clarify the preceding levels, creating a sort of circularity of understanding. (VI 177-178) Again, each of these “levels” will require the use of Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenological method of understanding, each “level” will require our lived through perceptual, sensual, empathic embrace of that which is being studied (VI 178). To a very large extent we have already seen this accomplished in his lectures that came to be published under the title of Nature. (See above) He adds here as well, though, that he will also have to take into account the role of language—which we have also seen briefly above. Here, in the “Working Notes,” he states that speech envelops the alleged silent coincidence. In other words,
there is no complete coincidence of linguistic description and lived through perceptual experience, for speech is being used to creatively express our perceptual encounter with the world. We realize that our linguistic descriptions of our lived through experience uses language creatively, and as such influences the articulation of what is being described, but we also realize that these linguistic descriptions are describing something, something that is really there and that presents itself as existing in its own right. This is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s use of the fundierung relation in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where perception acts as the motivation for the linguistic interpretation that is nevertheless needed to bring the perceptual suggestion to a more precise expression (PhP 127, 394). In both the earlier and later text, then, language plays a role in bringing perceptual meaning more fully to light. There is no pure perceptual meaning with which language and reflection simply coincide. Yet there is perceptual meaning, there is something there for language to try express. Because of the open-ended ambiguity of perception, many different linguistic interpretations are possible, and, yet, because perception also presents stable perceptual forms (not fixed, precise essences, which are, in fact, a product of abstract thought accomplished by the use of language) some interpretations are better than others, those that help us clarify the perceptual forms before us and that help articulate them more precisely.

Returning to the “Working Notes,” we should take note of Merleau-Ponty’s comments about Albert Michotte’s work, for they further clarify what Merleau-Ponty means by the flesh of the world. Michotte states (consistent with the perceptual principles of Gestalt psychology) that the appearance of volume in a flat, two-dimensional image is a common feature of perceptual experience: “. . . there can be no question that we do see the depicted objects as extended in depth, that there is the appearance of relief in a perspective picture.” While it is true, that when some subjects are shown flat figures drawn on a page before them, they sometimes see only flat, two-dimensional patterns. Yet it is also easy for them to see these lines, now in perceptive, as a parallelepiped, as a figure with apparent volume in three-dimensional space. Moreover, he proceeds, this happens at the level of perceptual experience itself and is not the result of the rationalist’s intellectual judgment or the empiricist’s projection of memories. It is thus relatively easy to see that in general perception opens out to a voluminous field, to a field that includes open-ended and referential perceptual patterns, to a field of possibilities in an unlimited horizon.20

Merleau-Ponty proceeds. “My body is a Gestalt and it is co-present in every Gestalt.” The human body displays, or rather is, a Gestalt structure. As we have seen, it is a whole greater than the sum of its parts. It is an aware functioning system, a global whole, an ensemble in movement. My body “also, and eminently, is a heavy signification, it is flesh;” The human body displays, or rather is, a signification that is heavy, that has weight, substance, flesh---because it is formed in the lived relationships between the sensing, sensual body and an embodied world. “[T]he system [the human body] constitutes is ordered about a central hinge or a pivot which is openness to . . . .” The Gestalt structure of the human body is formed in
relation to the field of the world as it helps form, along with the world, the Gestalt structure of experience. Since these structures are open to the possibility of change, and, yet, since they are also bound to the human body as it is bound to the world, the freedom of future possibilities are bound possibilities. Again, since the human body participates in every Gestalt, “the flesh of the Gestalt (the grain of the color, the indefinable something that animates the contour or which, in Michotte’s experiments, animates the rectangle that “creeps”21) is what responds to its inertia, to its insertion in a ‘world’ . . .” The Gestalt structure is meaningful; it is even animated; it is “alive” with meaning, and this “implies the relation between a perceiving body and a sensible, i.e. transcendent i.e. horizontal i.e. vertical and not perspectival world.” Perception is not a simple collection of discrete sense data passively received, or a simple summed up collection of discrete perspectives, but, rather, is an active, lived through, needful, sensual, aesthetic opening out upon a sensual world that can be both pleasurable and painful. This being the case, we must see that the Gestalt “is a diacritical, oppositional, relative system whose pivot is the Etwas [something], the thing, the world, and not the idea.” Yet this perceptual something is the basis for the idea, for that which comes to be sublimated by language. “The idea is the Etwas upon which the body is centered no longer qua sensible but qua speaking.” Moreover, perception must be understood not as an intellectual representation before a detached, pure mind but as the body’s opening out upon, and relationship to, the world. Again, this means that the perceiver, i.e., the perceiving body, i.e., that to which the perception appears, must not be understood as a pure mind, or as a pure nothingness, but as “an inscription in an open register,” as a structured orientation in a field of possible orientations (VI 205-206, my bracket addition).

Further on in the “Working Notes” Merleau-Ponty again stresses that “the feeling that one feels, the seeing one sees, is not a thought of seeing or of feeling, but vision, feeling, mute experience of a mute meaning . . .” (VI 249) Even more, “the reflexivity of the body, the fact that it touches itself touching, sees itself seeing, does not consist in surprising a connecting activity behind the connected, in reinstalling oneself in this constitutive activity; the self-perception…or perception of perception does not convert what it apprehends into an object and does not coincide with a constitutive source of perception . . .” Once again, we witness here the attempt to avoid the representational view of consciousness of Descartes and the Modernist philosophy that he helped create. The awareness of one’s own experience, the awareness of oneself as an experiencer, certainly does not necessarily imply a detached mind or intellect that constitutes all experience. There is no need here to posit a transcendental ego that rationally constructs experience. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the awareness of one’s own experience, the awareness of oneself an experiencer, is never complete, for the reflected upon always slips away in time. As he puts it, “I do not entirely succeed…in seeing myself seeing, the experience I have of myself perceiving does not go beyond a sort of imminence, it terminates in the invisible, simply this invisible is its invisible . . .” (VI 249) The awareness of oneself is still primarily a perception, not an act of abstract intellectual reflection. The perception reveals,
or even *is*, an original presentation of an absence, reveals “a non-visible, myself.” In the lived through act of perception, human beings have the capacity to be aware of the perception, have a sort of fringe or marginal capacity to *perceive* the act perceiving. Yet, this is not yet an intellectual act of reflection that turns the act of perceiving into an object held fully before consciousness *and* that posits this consciousness as a constituting activity behind the perceptual activity that is responsible for it (VI 249-250). Here again we see Merleau-Ponty redefining or, rather, providing a more accurate description of mind. “My invisibility for myself does not result from my being a *positive* mind,…an existence as consciousness (i.e. as pure *appearing* to self), it comes from the fact that I am he who: 1) has a visible world, i.e. a dimensional body, and open to participation; 2) i.e. a body visible for itself; 3) and therefore, finally, a self-presence that is an absence from self.” (VI 250) The experiencer (i.e., the mind) is not a positive thing, is not describable as a noun, but is a lived through act, a lived through act that we can never fully capture as a reflected upon object precisely because its primary mode of existence is that of a lived through act. True, reflection is aware of the awareness in the original act, of the experiencer who is aware, but it can never *fully* capture this experiencer in its lived through act of awareness. Thus, the awareness of the experiencer always remains partially absent, even from our mute awareness of it. Moreover, the mute awareness of one’s own mute experience is also aware that this experience is embodied, or, even more, that the primary mute awareness is the body’s aware opening out upon the world, and is thus aware of itself as a part of this world and, subsequently, is visible within it. Here again we have a rather radical redefining of the mind and body. Rather than being a for-itself set over against a completely different in-itself, mind *is* the body’s aware opening out upon the world, while the body is seen as an aware orientation toward the world.

Further discussing the role of the experiencing body, in place of the transcendental, rational ego of Modernism, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make one of his most important claims in *The Visible and Invisible*. “The progress of the inquiry toward the center is not the movement from the conditioned unto the condition, from the founded unto the *Grund*: the so-called *Grund* is *Abgrund*. But the abyss one thus discovers is not such by lack of ground, it is upsurge of a *Hoheit* [highness] which supports from above (*tient par le haut*) (cf. Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*), that is, of a negativity that *comes to the world*” (VI 250, my bracket addition).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, we are not to move, as Kant did, from the experience of the world back to the formal conditions that make this experience possible. We are to understand our *experience* of the world, as Heidegger suggests, as an *opening out upon and being within this world*. Our experience provides a vertical openness upon the voluminosity of the world, an openness upon the fullness of being that we exist within, rather than upon the flattened out geometrical representation of the world of the Cartesian coordinate system or the logical representation of the world of Kant’s transcendental categories, both of which appear
in consciousness. This openness out to and participation in the fullness of being is what language, when properly used, should attempt to express.

We have witnessed above that a theory of perception, especially if we consider Michott’s contributions, must include an awareness of the contributions of the perceiving subject, for we are now aware that the perceptual field “lights up” with meaning, that it is “alive”, that the world has a meaningful surface, that it has a sensual surface, that it has flesh. Yet, again, Merleau-Ponty is careful of anthropomorphizing the flesh of the world. “The flesh of the world is not self-sensing (se sentir) as is my flesh-----It is sensible and not sentient. I call it flesh nonetheless (for example, the relief, depth, ‘life’ in Michotte’s experiments in order to say that it is a pregnancy of possibles, Weltmoglichkeit (the possible worlds variants of this world, the world beneath the singular and the plural) that it is therefore absolutely not an ob-ject, that the blosse Sache mode of being is but a partial and second expression of it” (VI 250, my bracket addition) We must not regard the world as a bare or pure thing (for this an abstraction from our lived through, embodied encounter with the world) but, rather, as a horizon alive with possibilities, as a horizon with which my body always remains in contact even as it runs beyond me both temporally and spatially. In my lived through embodied experience of the world, my embodiment blends with the embodiment of the world. Within my lived through embodied experience of the world, with both the world and my body contributing to the meaning of experience (for they meet and partially blend), the flesh of my embodiment blends with the embodiment (the “flesh”) of the world. Again, Merleau-Ponty is careful to distinguish his view of the flesh of the world from a position that attributes life to all forms of matter, hylozoism. “This is not hylozoism: inversely, hylozoism is a conceptualization------A false thematization, in the order of the explicative-Entity, of our experience of carnal presence.” It is our lived through sensual blending with the world that gives the impression of flesh of the world. It is thus inaccurate to project, from an abstract conceptual level, the concept of life into all forms of matter, for this goes well beyond what is given in our lived through experience. Moreover, it is being as it is lived or experienced that finally provides us with our understanding of our body as lived.

“It is by the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body (corps propre)--- The flesh of the world is of the Being-seen, i.e. is a Being that is eminently percipi [perceived], and it is by it that we can understand the percipere [perceiving]: this perceived that we call my body applying itself to the rest of the perceived, i.e. treating itself as a perceived by itself and hence as a perceiving, all this is finally possible and means something only because there is Being, not Being in itself…but the Being that also contains its negation, its percipi [its being perceived] . . .” (VI 250-251, my bracket additions).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, Being is perceived Being, it is an open horizon (not a discrete thing) that includes the perceiver, that the perceiver experiences itself as being within. Perceived Being and the perceiving that reveals it are given simultaneously, yet, Merleau-Ponty says, there is a slippage of perceived Being beyond the act of perceiving, for perceived Being slips beyond, both temporally and spatially, the act of perception.
The investigation of the “Working Notes” fully confirms Merleau-Ponty’s move away from mind-body dualism and toward a new ontology of both the human body and the world. The world must be understood as a multifaceted being that reveals itself in multifaceted ways and in different levels, yet in ways and through levels that overlap and cross into one another. Moreover, the human body must be understood as a prototype of being, a typical model of being. It cannot be understood as just a thing but must be grasped as a dimensional this, as a body that is also an opening out upon and directedness toward the world. The human body as mind is this aware opening out and directedness toward the world (and not a pure for-itself), while the human body as body is seen as a meaningful orientation toward the world and others (and not as a thing purely in-itself).

**From Perception to language** We will see the relationship between perception and language addressed thoroughly below, in the next chapter, yet it should be briefly treated here in the context of the mind-body problem. How, we should here ask, does language express our perceptual contact with the world? To answer this question, we must first address the possibility of intersubjectivity. It has often been said, Merleau-Ponty reports, that we cannot experience another person’s experience. Yet, he proceeds, this is not entirely true, for if we treat consciousness not as a private awareness of an internally given representation but as the body’s openness out upon the world, then our experiences meet and overlap to in the world, like two searchlights illuminating a single field (See SB 185-186). True, I can never literally live what another lives in the first person, but our respective lived through experiences can overlap in the world, at the object, at the foreground of an object presented within a common field. My perceptions are not mine alone, for they open upon, participate within, and are a part of a common public field. Thus, just as there is a crisscrossing of the perceiver and the perceived, so also there is a crisscrossing of my perceptions with those that are lived through by others. Also, just as there is a crisscrossing of an act of perception and the perceived, so also there is a crisscrossing of speaking and hearing. My vocalizations open upon a shared world of sound, which echoes back upon my speech. In other words, my vocalizations are a part of a public world that I live and participate within. Moreover, just as my vocalizations can be heard by others in the common field of sound, so also the other’s speech has a vocal, motor echo within me. It is this crisscrossing of acts of speech, of mine with those articulated by other and of theirs with mine, that shared thoughts can appear as sublimated from the world of perception. “Speech,” Merleau-Ponty says, “prolongs into the invisible, extends unto the semantic operations, the belongingness of the body to being . . .” (VI 118). This, of course, means that speech is not generated ex nihilo but that it sublimes our embodied, perceptual encounter with the world and our interactions with each other as we attempt to adapt to it together. How does this occur? Here is Merleau-Ponty tentative answer. “However we finally have to understand [the relationship between perceptual ideality and the “pure” ideality of thought], the ‘pure’ ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things, and, however new it is,
it slips through ways it has not traced, transfigures horizons it did not open, it derives from the fundamental mystery of those notions... that lead their shadowy life in the night of the mind only because they have been divined at the junctures of the visible world..." (VI 152-153, my bracket addition) Again, speech and abstract thought are a sublimation of our active, practical, embodied, perceptual, sensual encounter with the world. Yet, we must still ask, as Merleau-Ponty does, “what, across the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects, wishes, speaks, and finally thinks” (VI 176). Merleau-Ponty’s answers this question with an appeal to (his own rather unique) understanding of Saussure’s linguistics, for this understanding allows us to grasp how the social institution of language crosses into the lives of individuals and well as vice versa, rather than treating social institutions as objective social facts set in opposition to the pure consciousness of isolated individual subjects. Language as a system of meaningful symbols is taken up by the individuals who are born into it. The system is composed of already available symbols and significations but these significations would not exist without the aware individuals who take them up, carry them forward, and sometimes reinterpret them according to their own immediate experience, immediate needs, and future goals. We must insert ourselves, Merleau-Ponty says, into a social situation if we wish to understand it. We must be sensitive to it and try to live it as others are attempting to do. We must try to grasp the relationship between the individuals within it and the social institutions and symbolic systems (social rules, sanctions, norms, conventions, etc., usually expressed in language but sometimes only implied) that governs their interaction. We must try to understand how individuals interact with each other within the confines and constraints of various social institutions and symbolic systems, how individuals negotiate with each within the constraints of various social institutions, which contain expressed rules and roles for interaction and change. More generally, we must try to understand society as a system in movement, as a gestalt whole that is composed of individuals but that is more than just a sum of individuals, as a meaningful whole within which individuals interact, that individuals take up, to express themselves and be heard, and sometimes to bring about change. Here again, because language crosses into and exists within the mind of the individual, and because the individual exists within various social institutions, especially the institution of language, Merleau-Ponty believes he has found and expressed a way to overcome the dualism of subject and object, mind and body.

**Summary** Merleau-Ponty certainly does not accept mind-body dualism in the sense of a dualism of substances. Nor would he accept the Behaviorist’s reductionistic claim that the mind should be treated only as a third-person reading of another’s overt behavior. In fact, this third-person observation, for Merleau-Ponty, reveals a bodily orientation that helps us gain access to the interior, intentional orientation of an aware body subject. We have seen that, to understand human behavior, some appeal must be made to the lived through awareness of the experiencing subject, and that, even though conscious perceptual events are rooted in neurophysiological events, the conscious perceptual events bear qualities that are irreducible to
them. Moreover, this means that, in the context of the mind-body problem, mind cannot be understood as a simple causal product of neurophysiological events. Furthermore, rather than adhering to the dualism of the mind for-itself and the body in-itself, rather than defining them as totally distinct categories, Merleau-Ponty argues that we must see them as different but also as overlapping. The mind (especially perceptual consciousness) must be understood as the body’s aware orientation toward the world, while the human body must be understood as an embodied orientation toward the world (an embodied orientation that is aware). The mind and body are the same in the sense that they share an orientational structure, yet each from its own side. We have seen that this leads us to the concept of the flesh, to the idea of the flesh as that which is formed as the aware, active, oriented body opens out to and meets the forceful patterns of the world. It is this flesh that is greater than either of its parts, even though it requires both to exist, and it is this flesh that helps us overcome the mind-body dualism. For we can see that they are fundamentally related, since each is one side of the other, i.e., each is a part of a greater (gestalt) whole.

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty first addresses the mind-body problem in The Structure of Behavior, but he refines his treatment of the topic throughout his academic career and in subsequent philosophical texts, particularly in Phenomenology of Perception, Nature, and The Visible and the Invisible. We are now in a position to provide a brief summary of what we have learned from each of these texts.

In The Structure of Behavior we saw the mind-body problem can be expressed as follows: “consciousness is [understood to be] a function of the body,” and yet we also realize that “all external events are known by consciousness,” or, to put this in the form of a question, how is it that consciousness is understood as the result of external physical events, and yet that these external events can only be known via consciousness? Ultimately the mind-body problem is a perceptual problem, for perception reveals a duality of structure and signification. Perception reveals the concrete structure of the perceived and reveals it where it rests, in its place, and yet perception also reveals a meaning that can become the basis for more abstract thought. We solve the problem of this duality by grasping the relationship between the flow of perspectives, within which the world is given as existing on its own, as they appear to the perceiver, by grasping the relationship between these perspectives and that which is given within them, and by grasping the relationship between the meanings formed in an individual’s perceptual perspectives with those formed in the perceptual perspectives experienced by others, and by grasping the relationship between the meanings formed in an individual’s perceptual perspectives with those formed in the perceptual perspectives experienced by others, including those experiences of the first individual seen from the outside. Obviously, this is no small task, but at least the parameters for the task have been set before us.

In Phenomenology of Perception we observed that the subjective is not to be treated as a pure for-itself, and that the objective is not to be treated as a pure in-itself, for by defining mind and body so “exclusively” we are unable to relate them to one another; we cannot bring them together in any meaningful
Rather, the subjective must be understood as the human body’s aware perceptual opening upon a world that is always already there, while the objective must be woven out of perceptual perspectives, out of perspectives that reveal a world as existing in its own right, out of perceptual perspectives which are given within me as my perception opens actively upon the world and which are given to others as we actively open upon the world and attempt to adapt to it together.

This means that bodily perception must be understood existentially, i.e., it must be understood as an aware, operative orientation toward the world, while consciousness must be understood as a meaningful bodily orientation toward the world. The human body has two dimensions or two sides, a subjective side and an objective side, that cross into one another and work together. Again, the relationship between the mind and body cannot be grasped as a pure in-itself related to a pure for-itself but must be seen as a relationship between the body as perceiving and the body as perceived, and, as we have already seen in The Structure of Behavior, these experiences must be correlated. Here in Phenomenology of Perception, though, this correlation is integrated with the experience of time, for Merleau-Ponty now asserts that the relationship between the mind and body must be understood within the context of a temporal structure. The stabilized structures of the past that were given in my perceptual experiences of a really existing world, and the perceptual experiences lived through by others (including their experience of my body), must be carried forward toward the future in my experience in the present (the “subjective”) and coordinated with the present experiences lived through by others (the intersubjective or the “objective”). To relate the mind and body, we must correlate the experiences lived through by the embodied subject from the inside with the intersubjective reports of the perceptions of this experiencing embodied subject seen from the outside, over time, with the realization that the two experiences will never completely coincide. Moreover, we must attempt to do this by assessing the greater or lesser clarity and adaptability of the perceptions in question.

In Nature we observed that the living organism and its environment must be taken together, must be seen as mutually or co-determining. Also, when considering the global life of the species, we realize that nothing happens without a physicochemical foundation but also that the physicochemical alone cannot explain global function and species repair. Rather than a pure in-itself causally determining what appears in the mind for-itself, we must grasp perceptual experience as rooted in the body’s physicochemical functions but as also being irreducible to them. We must thus attempt to understand human experience globally, as gestalt whole, if you will, as a whole that is an integration of body and mind. Merleau-Ponty had already outlined a sort of emergent materialism in The Structure of Behavior, but goes further here in Nature, for the latter text very carefully considers the evolutionary development of the human body. The human body is a unique species and possesses a unique way of being-in-the-world. True, the human species shares many features with other animal and living species, including those from which it evolved, yet its features include capacities unique to it. The human species manifests a new way of being embodied. The
human species manifests a body that is able to more fully perceive itself perceiving. Moreover, it is the body as perceiving and the body as perceived (rather than a pure mind for-itself and a pure object in-itself) that will help us solve the mind-body problem, for the mind and body are no longer defined in a way that makes them mutually exclusive. Mind and body are two halves of a whole, with mind understood as the body’s aware relationship to the world and with the body now grasped as an oriented, and thus aware, relationship toward the world.

And finally, we observed the following in *The Visible and the Invisible*: vision reveals an object where it rests, as existing in its own right, and yet this object only appears through our perceptual gaze. How is this possible? We have witnessed Merleau-Ponty earlier work moving toward the answer that he now provides more fully developed. It is possible because the body as touching and the body as touched, the body as perceiving and the body perceived, cross into one another, and this is possible because we now fully understand that the body is a “two-dimensional being.” As we have seen, *The Visible and the Invisible* expresses this point as follows. The body is a sensible mass (a mass that can be sensed), and as such is at one with all things, is one of them, and the body is a mass that senses, is the embodied being that opens out upon (because it senses) a field of beings within which it exists, is the embodied being that is aware that it is a part of this field of beings, a field that exists in its own right, a field of beings that reflects back upon it because it is aware that it can be seen as one of them. The human body is aware of its own embodiment as it is aware of and is in contact with the embodiment of other beings. It is because of the ontology of the human body that it is capable of uniting these two properties within itself: it is aware of itself as an experiencing being existing among other beings, and it is aware that it is in contact with these beings where they rest. In fact, the human body is this double belongingness, a belongingness to the world and to that which reveals it, to the “objective” and the “subjective.” It is a “two-dimensional being.”

It is through this double belongingness, this lived through blending of the experiencing embodied subject with the embodiment of the world, that a meaning is formed that is greater than either of the two primary parts. Again, as the perceiving body actively opens upon the world, and as the world’s open, ambiguous, and yet also stable patterns (or structures) fold back upon the perceiving body, meaning is formed. This meaning, which has an embodied weight, because of the embodiment of both the perceiver and the world, Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh. It is defined as a sort of element, as a sort of field halfway between the concrete individual and abstract ideas, that both the individual and the idea exist within. It is an oriented field, and it is so because it is created by the coming together of the perceiver and the perceived, by the cohesion of the perceiver and the perceived, by their working together. This cohesive working together overcomes the mind-body dualism that sets the pure mind for-itself over against a pure thing in-itself, for mind and body are now understood as intertwined, for the mind is now understood as the body’s aware openness upon the world, while the body is grasped as an oriented (and thus an aware) being, as a
being that displays an operative intentional relationship to its surroundings. The body as a meaningful subjective orientation toward the world and the body as an oriented bodily structure are two sides of the same being.

Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, when discussing a general theory of truth, we approach the truth (as an approximation of what is) with an agreement of clarifying perceptual perspectives or profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon and engage with the really existing world, and of mine with those perceptual perspectives lived through by others as we actively open upon and adapt to the world together, and do so, over time, with the assistance of a language that is more clarifying than the alternatives and that more clearly assists our adaptation to nature and each other. We must attempt to develop a theory that more accurately articulates (using language, of course) our mutual attempts to more clearly perceive the world and that more clearly assists our attempts to adapt to it together. Thus, when discussing the relationship between mind and body within the context of this theory, we approach the truth with an agreement of clarifying perceptual perspectives or profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon and engage with the really existing world, and of mine with those perceptual perspectives lived through by others as we actively open upon and adapt to the world together, and an agreement of my perceptual perspectives of my own body as I perceive myself with those who perceive me from the outside, over time, using the most clarifying language that we can find and develop.

**Consequences and applications:** We should again stress that Merleau-Ponty regards nature as multifaceted, that he argues against reductionistic materialism, as well as a nature flattened out in the abstract categories of rationalism. His position can perhaps be characterized as an emergent materialism, with quantitative changes giving rise to new properties or new ways of being, or, better yet, as a “double aspect” theorist, for the unified human body reveals a subjective and objective side, with, more generally, the flesh appearing as the flesh of the world, which is primary and is always found to be already present, and as the flesh of the human body, whose awareness is needed to more fully articulate the world’s being. These general labels can be useful . . . but also abstract and subsequently misleading. Thus, let us set them aside, stressing rather that Merleau-Ponty certainly does not argue for a unified theory of nature, i.e., that all of nature (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) be explained by a single theory with a single set of basic principles or algorithms, but, instead, that it must be regarded as revealing itself in a wide variety of ways. To this point, Robert Vallier, the translator of Merleau-Ponty’s *Nature*, mentions that he usually translated the French feuillet as “leaf” but that feuillet also means “folio-leaf”, i.e., a large sheet of paper folded in half multiple times to create the pages of a book. As Vallier expresses it, it seems that Merleau-Ponty understood nature as “a kind of endlessly productive doubling of the basic ‘stuff/powers/structures’ of ‘nature’ into many kinds and orders” (*Nature*, 305, note7). By tracing the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, we have seen, culminating in *The Visible and the Invisible*, that nature or Being is that which is
revealed through one of its own, through an embodied perpetual awareness, that nature presents itself as always already there but also as an open-ended, ambiguous, multifaceted horizon, as a horizon that is nevertheless replete with stable and regular patterns (not essences, which are abstract products of language and thought). We have seen that nature manifests and reveals itself in a variety of ways, yet in ways that can still be framed and grasped theoretically. In both *The Structure of Behavior* and *Nature* Merleau-Ponty argues that we must understand nature as revealing itself as three general structures, structures that reveal different qualities that are irreducible to one another. These general structures are: physical, vital, and human.24

Let us turn momentarily to Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of causality in each of these three structures, since this will give us a greater sense of the “practical” implications of his multifaceted theory of nature and his dimensional theory of the human body, and since uncovering casual patterns in nature, life and human behavior makes an important contribution to our attempt to understand them.

First of all, we have seen that he, like the empiricist, roots human knowledge in our perceptual contact with the world. Moreover, he even draws heavily from the sciences, yet even while doing so he remains critical of the typical ontology of the sciences, which is usually reductive, treating everything in nature as reducible to discrete things (or units, or atoms, or subatomic particles, etc.) in external relationships to one another, and of the typical epistemology of the sciences, usually tabula rasa empiricism, with its passive collection of bits of discrete data to be associated externally, which (most generally and even unconsciously) assumes that things are already formed by intellectual abstraction into discrete categories. The ontology typically adhered to by the sciences can thus generally be characterized as post-perceptual and pre-dialectical, since it tends to ignore perception as our lived through, primordial openness upon the world, and to ignore what appears in the world as embedded in a system of relations and overlapping levels. Yet, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, at least some in the sciences are finding their way beyond at least some of these limitations. For some “physical action is no longer conceived as a trace in absolute time and space, passed on from one absolute individual to the other equally absolute individuals. Physical entities…are no longer seen as ‘natures,’ but as ‘structures in an ensemble of operations’” (TFL 91). And some insist on the use of hypotheses rather than generalizations merely generated from discrete individuals by enumerative induction.

The understanding that is provided by Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenological perception reveals that the simplest perception is a figure against a ground, is a meaningful figure that appears within the context of a meaningful field. Perception reveals meaningful patterns that appear within meaningful contexts, and not just isolated units of matter in external relationships. More specifically, when considering causal patterns in *nature*, Merleau-Ponty believes that we should look for a balance of mechanical forces, rather than singular chains or sequences of isolated events. Here, he states, when attempting to understand
nature, we should call upon the typical methodologies of the sciences, specifically the construction of hypothesis to help frame and understand nature’s balance of forces, the articulation of dependent and independent variables and their relationships, the use of quantitative measures, and so on. It should be stressed, though, that given what Merleau-Ponty has said above about the *fundierung* relationship between perception and language (and, of course, the language used to articulate hypotheses and, subsequently, theories), i.e., that perception motivates certain interpretations but that these interpretations are needed to express the perceived more precisely, means that hypotheses are definitely needed to grasp and articulate the patterns of nature, and that simple induction by enumeration is unsatisfactory (SB 130-132).25

When considering *vital* or *living* structures, Merleau-Ponty does not want to attribute pockets of “indetermination” to the physical universe to explain the appearance of structures (living organisms) that “behave” differently. Rather, he argues, since we clearly see qualitatively different types of structures in the world around us, we must account for them. Living things tend to respond to their environment, not mechanically, but according to the norms of their species. Moreover, we can uncover a species norm simply by “an observation of a preferred attitude, statistically more frequent, which gives a new kind of unity to behavior” (SB 159). In addition, these norms tend to reveal flexible behavioral *attitudes* (such as or aggression or complacency) and not just pre-established biological or neurophysiological mechanisms (SB 149).

Finally, to address *human* structure, we have seen above that the structure of perceptual experience must be understood within the context of an interested embodied subject actively meeting the forceful patterns of the world. Human beings are certainly influenced by physical and vital structures, yet the *meaningful structures* of our perceptual field reveal that we must also recognize the contributions of the *aware*, oriented, embodied subject. When studying human behavior, Merleau-Ponty once again insists on developing hypotheses to do so adequately. For example, while studying the relationship between eye movement exercises and the reduction of anxiety while thinking about an anxiety producing event, a hypothesis must be used to frame the relationship between these variables, with the eye exercises as the independent variable and the anxiety as the dependent variable. A hypothesis must be used when studying human behavior for the same reason that it must be used when studying nature, for the field of study is oriented by an aware, embodied perceiver, in this case by the aware orientation of the psychologist as a third-person observer. Yet it is also clear, certainly in this example, that the subjective state of the research subject, the subject’s stated anxiety as he or she experiences and reports it, must also be taken into account and must be coordinated with the objective third-person observations. (See Low 2015, Bernstein 1994: 19-26) Moreover, we should finally add, the meaning that is experienced by the subject must first be treated as lived-through and only subsequently as that which the subject grasps conceptually.
Merleau-Ponty explicitly stresses that nature, life, and humanity should not be treated as “three orders of events that are external to each other,” as has been done in the Western philosophical tradition. Rather, he has revealed that these regions interact, intertwine and even overlap. (SB 190) Moreover, it is phenomenological perception (rather than some other method, either empiricist or rationalist) that has been able to reveal this overlapping with the greatest clarity and that has been able to reveal, nevertheless, the dominant traits of each region, with quantity dominantly displayed in nature, order (or species norms) displayed in life, and meaning displayed by humanity. Here again, when trying to understand each of these regions, and casual relationships within them, we should keep in mind that they overlap and fold into one another, but also the qualitative differences between them (SB 132-133), and this is true of Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the mind and body as well, as we have witnessed above.