“Merleau-Ponty’s Enchanted Nature”
by Douglas Low
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“The [Cheyenne people] believe that everything is alive: not only men and animals but also water and earth and stone…and also the dead… This is the way things are. But the white men believe that everything is dead: stone, earth, animals and people, even their own people.”

The West, even with its unprecedented scientific, technological, and industrial accomplishments, and perhaps even because of them, has profoundly disenchanted the human relationship to nature. It treats nature as a machine, as raw material to be transformed into commodities and consumed, as inert matter to be controlled and dominated, and ultimately as a dead thing against which the subject stands in opposition. This treatment has occurred at least since Descartes and the modern industrial period and perhaps since Plato. In the process of treating nature as a mere thing, not only have most inhabitants of the West become alienated from our primordial, sensual, and aesthetic connection to the earth but we have also become increasingly alienated from ourselves and each other. Reversing this trend, rooted as it is in the Western tradition, and entrenched as it is in an industrial and technological economy, will not be easy. Moreover, there is certainly no intention here to make the Luddite suggestion to roll back the accomplishments of Western science and industry or to unreflectively limit their growth and development. The point, though, is to attempt to integrate science, technology and the growth of industry into the whole of human life, rather than have them dominate life to the exclusion of all else, and in order to do so we must also attempt to more thoroughly integrate humanity with nature. In fact, it is a more ontological integration of humanity with nature that will hopefully lead us to a more reflective and democratic guidance of the relationship between them, and it is in the works of Merleau-Ponty 2 that we witness an attempt at just such an integration. It is thus to his works that we should turn, at least for some sort of initial orientation.

Merleau-Ponty is deeply concerned with challenging both the empiricist and rationalist versions of the modernist, Cartesian, Galilean, mathematical, intellectualist, industrial representation of nature that has persisted for approximately four centuries. He is deeply concerned with our disenchanted relationship
with nature, with its treatment as a merely mechanical thing, and he seeks its “re-enchantment”, not by returning to earlier forms of anthropomorphism, not by projecting the human spirit into inanimate things, but by developing an ontology of overlapping regions, an ontology that escapes the dualism that sets a pure consciousness over against a pure in itself, an ontology that more thoroughly integrates humanity and nature. Moreover, he does so throughout his intellectual career, in his early *The Structure of Behavior,*³ in his classic *Phenomenology of Perception,*⁴ in his late lecture notes that were published as a book under the title of *Nature,*⁵ and finally in his posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible.*⁶ We should now turn to these texts, though in thematic order and not strictly in the order of their creation.

In the introduction of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty immediately addresses the modernist notion of sensation: a sensation that is supposedly the result of some external, mechanical cause, and that it is experienced internally as a state of consciousness. Here sensation is regarded as “the experience of an undifferentiated, instantaneous, dot like impact,” with experience corresponding exactly with the sensed. (PhP 3) Merleau-Ponty just as immediately dispenses with this characterization of experience, for he believes that the available research shows that it is inaccurate. As has been confirmed by psychological studies of human perception, the simplest element of perceptual experience is a figure against a background--not an isolated sense datum. Even the simple experience of a white patch on a white background shows that perception reveals a structure, a meaning for human consciousness, for the patch holds together, complete with boundary edges, while the background is experienced as precisely that, as a background upon which the patch rests, as a horizon that is not fully in focus. To perceive, then, is to experience a quality, is to experience sense information that is organized meaningfully, as a gestalt whole that is greater than a sum of its parts. Moreover, these qualities are experienced as manifesting the more or less inner reality of objects and not merely discrete units of data that must be associated. The red of the carpet, for example, is experienced as a “woolly red,” as belonging to the carpet. (PhP 4-5) Already here we witness a nature that is more “alive” and infused with meaning and quality.

Yet Merleau-Ponty continues his analysis and criticism of empiricism. If, as was just maintained, the gestalt figure already has a meaning that goes beyond the mere association of discrete units of data, then
we may legitimately ask: how do we account for this meaning? Empiricism has frequently argued that this meaning is constructed from the projection of past memories into the present perceptual event. Yet this explanation must fail because the only way that the past memories can be called up is if they are recognized as being similar to the present. Thus, this explanation presupposes what it attempts to explain. The present already has a meaning, and this is what allows us to understand the recall of specific memories. In addition, the attempt to construct a current or present perception by appeal to the association of discrete memories once again attempts to treat perceptual experience as if it were a mere sum or aggregate of separate data. We have already seen that the perceptual gestalt must be treated as a meaningful whole—and not seek to build it from the outside using bits of information in external relations. (PhP 13-22)

The modernist empiricist, like a bricklayer it seems, will always attempt to construct experience using discrete units in external relations, and, as Merleau-Ponty mentions, there seems to be no crucial experiment that will convince the empiricist to do otherwise. Since crucial experiments fail, because favored explanations can always be saved by adding auxiliary hypotheses, Merleau-Ponty adopts another strategy, one that is common to Continental and Anglo-American philosophers alike: to show, throughout Phenomenology of Perception, how many events empiricist theory cannot conveniently explain, thus rendering the theory incomprehensible under the weight of a multitude of auxiliary hypothesis. To offer one relevant example here (others will follow below), empiricism has difficulty accounting for both our “enchanted” natural world and our cultural world—since it tries to construct both out of chemical and neurophysiological bits of information. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “there is nothing in a landscape…or a body whereby it is predestined to look ‘gay’ or ‘sad’…”, since they are merely constructed from bits of information, the association of memories, and the projection of these memories into the perceptual present. (PhP 23) “If, however, we admit that all these ‘projections’, all these ‘associations’, all these ‘transferences’ are based on some intrinsic characteristic of the object…”, if they themselves are based on perception as an original gestalt whole, then human world ceases to be a merely
a constructed product and becomes the place from which we must begin, the place where meaning is first
formed. (PhP 24)

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of space in *Phenomenology of Perception* is relevant to the topic under
consideration, to our consideration of the inadequacy of the modernist conception of nature and its
replacement with a viable alternative. What research and analysis reveal regarding space is that there is no
view of space from nowhere. There is no view of space, like the idealized Cartesian coordinate system of
modernism, that is somehow able to view space from outside of it. We cannot conceive, or even imagine,
a perception of space from nowhere, since this would involve being everywhere at once, which would
eliminate all perspective and orientation, truly an impossibility for the human mind and within human
perceptual experience. This means, then, that the perception of space is always related to a situated
subject, is always related to the subject’s pre-objective engagement in the world, to the subject’s
embeddedness in a situation. Moreover, since we cannot conceive of a perception that is independent of
or prior to our situatedness in the world, every perception presupposes and utilizes a prior involvement in
the world. Since the perception of space is always related to our embeddedness in the world and thus to a
situation, space will always be related to a bodily orientation to the world that is always already there.
(PhP 281)²

More generally, objective thought itself must occur in a context, and, if reflection is to be
complete, objective thought must take this context into account. What the objective thought of modernism
tends to do however is deny this context, since it claims that for anything to be thought that it must fit its
objective categories. Do we have the right, however, to reduce all human experiences, such as dreams,
myths, and lived through perception, to only one dimension of it, to only one means of representing it, to
objective thought of modernism? Yet, if we claim that each of these experiences has its own unique form,
are we then moving toward relativism? Merleau-Ponty answers that “mythical or dream-like conscious-
ness…and perception are not, insofar as they are different, hermetically sealed within themselves; they
are not small islands of experience cut off from each other, and from which there is no escape.” After all,
he continues, even the anthropomorphizing myths of early cultures occur within the context of the
practical experiences that are necessary for daily life, such as hunting, fishing, etc., and we make sense of
dream experiences in waking consciousness. These experiences, then, are not isolated theaters without
relationships to one another but open upon one another. What allows these experiences to be related to
one another, however, is not the abstract thought of modernism. While it is true that myths are related to
the lived moment, that is to say, that they attempt to make sense of life as it is lived and do not stand
outside of life in an attempt to objectify it the way the Western sciences tend to do, they are not so closely
tied to the lived moment that they collapse into it without any perspective on it at all. Myth, then, is part
way toward objectification, and for this reason provides a link between the subjectivity of lived through
experience and the objectivity of reflective thought. It is to this link that Merleau-Ponty here turns his
attention. (PhP 292)

Merleau-Ponty has already suggested above that the objectifications of modernist science go too far
(since science tends to neglect the social, historical context within which it occurs and ignores the lived
through experience with which it must necessarily begin), while he suggests here that myth does not go
far enough toward theory and objectification. Even though we must recognize the originality of different
types of human experiences and human experiences of space, including mythical space, they do hover
around and remain secondary to the natural world and natural space. Human beings “never wholly live in
varieties of human space;” for we are “always ultimately rooted in a natural and non-human space.” (PhP
293) This rootedness occurs through what Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, refers to as “operative
intentionality.” What we see in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and not in Husserl’s, is a focus on operative
intentionality, a treatment of it as primary, and its integration into the body’s perceptual engagement with
the world. It is this intentionality that helps provide the unity of experience, for the perceived profiles and
perspectives blend as they open upon a stable world. “Natural and primordial space is not geometrical
space, nor, correspondingly, is the unity of experience guaranteed by any universal thinker arraying its
contents before me and ensuring that I possess complete knowledge of, and exercise complete power over
it.” The unity of experience “is merely foreshadowed by the horizons of possible objectification...” (PhP
294) As my perceptual experience opens upon the world, it is situated within a field and tied to a
perspective, but this perspective opens to others and the possibility of other perspectives. Thus, the basis for the unity of experience and the possible objectification of it is not provided by modernism’s transcendental rational ego but by the stable body’s perceptual openness upon a stable world of actual and possible perspectives that hold together and imply one another.

Moreover, even though our perceptions open to a stable world that holds together and presents itself as already there, illusions do appear in this world. If we hope to account for these illusions, if they are to remain possible for us, there must be an ambiguous relationship between appearance and reality, otherwise we would not confuse the two. Western philosophy since Descartes, i.e., modernist philosophy, has exploited this ambiguity, for it has frequently suggested that we cannot distinguish between appearance and reality because all we really know directly are our own subjective appearances. Here, in fact, appearances are treated as reality, since it is only to these that the transcendental rational subject has direct and immediate access, and since the appearances that do not adhere to the necessarily rational conditions of all existence are ignored. However, Merleau-Ponty, replies, since we are able to distinguish between perception and illusion, the distinction between them must be suggested within experience itself. “The truth of perception and the falsity of illusion must be implanted in them in the shape of some intrinsic characteristic, for otherwise the testimony of the other senses, of later experience, or of other people, which would remain the only possible criterion, would then become unreliable, and we should never be aware of a perception or an illusion as such.” The criteria for what counts as perception and what counts as an illusion must be present in the experiences themselves, for without this inherent distinction, a criteria introduced from the outside, by a transcendental and rational subject, would have nothing upon which to take hold. Merleau-Ponty proceeds here to positively characterize the act of perception in a statement that is worth our attention. (PhP 294)

“I say that I perceive correctly when my body has a precise hold on the spectacle, but that does not mean that my hold is ever all-embracing; it would be so only if I had succeeded in reducing to a state of articulate perception all the inner and outer horizons of the object, which is in principle impossible. In experiencing a perceived truth, I assume that the concordance so far experienced would hold for a more detailed observation; I place my confidence in the world. Perceiving is pinning one’s faith, at a stroke, in a whole future of experiences, and doing so in a present which never strictly guarantees the future; it is placing one’s belief in a world. It is this opening upon a world which makes possible perceptual truth and
the actual effecting of a *Wahr-Nehmung* [genuine capturing], thus enabling us to ‘cross out’ the previous illusion and regard it as null and void” (PhP 297, my bracket addition)

Even though he positively characterizes perception here as “a precise hold on the spectacle,” a hold that implies a whole series of future perspectives because of the stability of both the body and the world, he also admits that this hold is never absolute. It is not arbitrary, but is not absolute. And since it is not absolute, it must be possible for us to lose ourselves in illusions, at least temporarily; otherwise they would not be present in our experience. We are not faced here with mutually exclusive alternatives, with a philosophy of appearance, illusion, myth, on the one hand, and a philosophy of reality on the other, since we know something is an appearance or an illusion only because we inhabit a perception that we accept. Illusion appears only in the context of a perception that we accept as veridical. Yet what we experience as veridical is experienced as something which “presupposes questioning, doubt, a break with the immediate, and is the correction of any possible error.” This means that “any rationalism admits of at least one absurdity, that of having to be formulated as a thesis.” Any philosophy must begin from the prior conditions within which an embodied human subject is experientially engaged in the world. Moreover, as we have witnessed above, any philosophy of space, i.e., any philosophy of the spatial dimension of the world, including, of course, the Cartesian, geometrical representation of space, must begin with our prior involvement in the world and with our situatedness within it. Any philosophy, including the objectivism of modernism, either empiricist or rationalist, must admit to the prior conditions from which the thesis is formed. (PhP 295) (See also VI 3ff)

Turning to a consideration of lighting, we see that light is not something that we generally perceive in-itself, as modernists maintained, but something that directs our gaze, like someone who points toward an object we have not yet seen. Lighting reveals objects where they rest, in our visual field and does so as if it knows them already. (PhP 310) This leads Merleau-Ponty to make the following important claim.

“…perception presupposes in us an apparatus capable of responding to the promptings of light in accordance with their sense (that is, in accordance both with their direction and their significance, which amount to the same thing)...This apparatus is the gaze, in other words the natural correlation between appearances and our kinaesthetic unfoldings, something not known through a law, but experienced as the involvement of our body in the typical structures of a world. Lighting and the constancy of the thing illuminated, which is its correlative, are directly dependent on our bodily situation.” (PhP 310)
A form of light, then, including a shadow, is not something that we generally perceive as an object. It is rather something that we perceive according to. It is an atmosphere that we enter, like the yellow light of most indoor lighting. It is a setting that is assumed by the body, and the perceived objects within it are perceived according to it. Colors, then, are always seen in some light or another, natural, shaded, indoor light, etc. Colors, then, are not absolute, and color constancy is determined in part by how the color appears in particular forms of light and within certain bodily situations.

“Every color as a \textit{quale} is therefore mediated by a color-function, and becomes determinate in relation to a level which is variable. The level is laid down, and with it all the color values dependent upon it, as soon as we begin to live in the prevailing atmosphere and re-allot to objects the colors of the spectrum in accordance with the requirements of this basic convention. Taking up our abode in a certain setting of color…is a bodily operation, and I cannot effect it otherwise than by entering into the new atmosphere, because my body is my general power of inhabiting all the environments which the world contains…” (PhP 311)

My experiencing body is thus my way into the world and its objects. It finds the objects where they rest. Moreover, the object that we treat as real is the one that we can experience with the maximum of clarity and richness, which is “produced by the optimum balance in the process” of perception, a balance that is felt and accomplished by the experiencing body. Contrarily, I will not call a phenomenon real if I cannot inspect it further with one or more of the senses, or if it breaks up upon further inspection. A light breeze barely seems real if it caresses the surface of my skin only momentarily and if I do not see other signs of it in the environment that surrounds me. This indicates that the real thing is experienced as an existential unity. It does not present itself as some sort of empty metaphysical substance to which certain absolute properties adhere, as modernism generally maintained, but is experienced rather as an integral whole. It is experienced as a whole whose parts imply one another, as the visual appearance of glass implies its brittleness. This existential unity of the thing means that “there is a symbolism in the thing which links each sensible quality to the rest.” (PhP 319)

“…the thing achieves that miracle of expression: an inner reality which reveals itself externally, a significance which descends into the world and begins its existence there, and which can be fully understood only when the eyes seek it in its own location. Thus the thing is correlative to my body and, in more general terms, to my existence, of which my body is merely the stabilized structure. It is constituted in the hold which my body takes upon it;” (PhP 320)
The meaning of the object depends, in part, on how it meets the body and interacts with it. Yet, even though the object exists at the end of my gaze, and its meaning is partially dependent upon the body’s encounter with it, the object also runs beyond my gaze and presents itself as existing in-itself. This means that the thing is present before me, not like the modernist object posited according to abstract principles, but, rather, as “a ‘unity of value’ which is present to me only practically.” (PhP 321) “Natural perception is not a science, it does not posit the things with which science deals, it does not hold them at arm’s length in order to observe them, but lives with them; it is the ‘opinion’ or the ‘primary faith’ which binds us to a world as to our native land, and the being of what is perceived is the antepredicative being towards which our whole existence is polarized.” (PhP 321-22) Natural perception lives in a world of objects that display an independent existence but that also radiate a patina of practical and aesthetic value. Natural perception does not live in the modernist world of geometrical, mathematically, intellectually constructed objects.

Merleau-Ponty here, once again, asks the question that he will ask repeatedly throughout his philosophical works, including the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*: how is it that the object exists at the end of my gaze and thus through the avenues of my body, but also independently, in its own right? His answer to this question in his later work is similar to the answer given here, though deepened and expressed in a new language, the ontology of the flesh. In the later work he proclaims that it is because the human body is a two-dimensional being that both perceives the thing where it rests and sees it as an extension of its own flesh. The body is aware of the world and thus touches it from the inside, yet the only way it can touch is through a body that opens to a world that includes it, is to be touched from the outside. Here in *Phenomenology of Perception* he proclaims much the same thing, for the thing is perceived as transcendent within the “wake of one’s subjectivity.”

“To have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding... A thing is, therefore, not actually given in perception, it is internally taken up by us, reconstituted and experienced by us insofar as it is bound up with a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us, and of which it is merely one of many possible concrete forms. Although a part of our living experience, it is nevertheless transcendent in relation to our life because the human body, with its habits which weave round it a human environment, has running through it a movement towards the world itself.” (PhP 326)
Thus we perceive the world, both its actual and possible patterns, through the body, and we must understand the world as a pattern of “inter-sensory relations” that is a product of the coming together of the world and the human body, with the world however as the more primary and founding term. This pattern is not to be understood as a modernist intellectual synthesis that calculates the position of each object in a Cartesian coordinate system. “The world has its unity” and its profiles imply one another prior to the calculations of the intellect. (PhP 327) We must therefore grasp the world’s unity in the way we grasp the artistic style of a painter, by taking it up and letting it reveal itself in lived through experience rather than attempting to reconstruct it conceptually. Merleau-Ponty patiently reveals that a painter’s style is first lived through before it is known, and any intellectual description of it would mean little if we had not seen some example of the painter’s work, or something like it, or if we could not see at all. We can now say the same thing of the world and the patterns that it presents to us, since the only way into them is to live them perceptually. Language and abstract thought will take them up and help express them, but there is something there to express, something that will never be exhausted by any language or intellectual representation. Moreover, even though the world’s appearances may change in different environments and throughout my lifetime, it remains a permanent being and the permanent setting of all my experiences, even those that turn out to be wrong.

Merleau-Ponty also mentions here that time helps illuminate his preceding analysis because it discloses subject and object as two abstract “moments” of a unique structure which is presence. It is through time that being is conceived, because it is through the relations of time-subject and time-object that we are able to understand those obtaining between subject and world. If we try to understand this relationship, as modernism does, as some sort of connection between a pure in-itself, which is subject to physical, linear, mechanical causality, and a pure for-itself, which is pure meaning, we get nowhere. However, if we start with a lived through experience that is temporal (not with “objective” time that is a sequence of measured and discrete units), then the subject can be understood as a sort of hollow (not a hole or a complete absence) in being, as the place where time becomes aware of itself, as a presence that is a field that opens upon and includes a past and a future. The subject then is this openness upon or
awareness of the horizon of time and of nature, for time is a dimension of the world. (PhP 430-31) Yet we should still ask: how is the horizon of nature, the in-itself, related to the subject, the for-itself? How are the past and the future (the in-itself) related to the present (the subject)? They are related through the structure of temporality. Lived experience is temporal. It has a subjective side, an awareness, and, through this awareness, a presence in the wide sense of a field, a presence that gradually fans out into a past and a future that remain part of it yet which outrun it at their extremes, and an objective side, the horizon that outruns the subject but out upon which the subject and the present opens. The subject is thus part of a presence (in the wide sense) that it does not create, that runs beyond it, yet the aware subject must take up this field of presence to allow it to more fully reveal itself—to allow future perspectives on nature to disclose what they are. There can thus be no part of subjective life that does not open upon an already existing horizon, nor can there be any aspect of this horizon that does not point back to an embodied, situated subject. Thus the for-itself and the in-itself are intimately bound together through the structure of temporality.

We should here briefly turn to Merleau-Ponty’s consideration of Whitehead’s philosophy of nature, since it is also achieved by a critical re-evaluation of the modernist concepts space and time, and, subsequently, of the concepts of causality and probability. (Na 112) In fact, the view of Whitehead’s philosophy that Merleau-Ponty presents in *Nature* is strikingly similar to the one he has developed in *The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*, was concurrently developing in *Nature*, and will continue to develop in *The Visible and Invisible*.

According to Whitehead (at least according to Merleau-Ponty®) the modernist view of nature reduces time and subsequently all of reality, to a discrete moment, to a discrete point, to a “flash point.” For the modernist view, reality is necessarily reducible to the present as a discrete unit, leaving the past and the future to be revealed via memory or projection, i.e., by the mind. (Na113) Whitehead refuses to accept this view, for he believes that it does effectively reduce nature to an instantaneous flash point and subsequently makes the experience and conceptualization of nature impossible. In order to more accurately understand nature, Whitehead claims, it must be conceived as a process, as a “spatiotemporal
unfurling,” as a spatiotemporal gestalt of interconnected elements that human beings exist within, yet that is necessarily revealed through human experience. Time, especially, must be understood as a natural process that runs through the subject. (Na 113ff) “Just as in sensorial fields there is an exigency of quality, and our perception is never empty (that is, it is impossible to understand nothing), so too is the exigency for a future born of my corporal apparatus. The process of time is inscribed in our body as sensoriality.” We have, then, according to Whitehead, the experience of a nature and its temporality running beyond us as perceiving subjects, but for Whitehead this running beyond, this independence of nature and time, is only revealed in and through the perceiving subject. As Merleau-Ponty says summarizing Whitehead’s position, “time realizes the ‘joy of itself’ in the organism. The movement by which a bit of matter folds back on itself prolongs the ‘process of Nature.’” Thus it is impossible to conceive of nature, including the natural process of time, solely in-itself; nature in-itself is only a limit idea. (Na 119)

For Whitehead this nature that simultaneously reveals itself as running beyond and through the subject necessarily gives rise to two questions. First, how are we to define nature positively? To which Whitehead responds by quoting Schelling: “Nature-philosophy must not construct Nature but let it construct itself.” (Na 120, quoted by Merleau-Ponty) But, unlike for Schelling, for Whitehead nature is neither an object of thought nor a subject, “and for the same reason: its opacity.” It cannot be fully captured in thought and its unfolding is contingent and therefore not intentional. Nature “is what always appears as already containing all that appears.” (Na 120) Moreover, Whitehead argues nature cannot be thought of as composed of isolated things with absolute properties in passive, external, accidental relations with each other. Nature, rather, is a process, and as such all things within it necessarily play some role with respect to all the others.

“…the electron does not exist in the sense of absolute Being, which is all or nothing: the electron does not reside in a punctual and objective spatiotemporality; it is an ‘ingredient’ (this word also has the sense of making an ingression) in its whole vicinity, it is the hallway of certain ‘trace,’ of certain ‘roles’ observed by the observer. It is a transspatial and transtemporal being, but not any more separated from appearances.” (Na 115)
We thus encounter objects that cannot be explained by the modernist view of isolated things with absolute properties. The electron is what it is because of its spatial and temporal relations to its surroundings, just as a melody is experienced as a whole whose parts are what they are because of their relationship to each other.

With this Whitehead challenges the distinction between “action-at-a-distance and action-by-transmission,” and sides with neither. (Na 115) Rather, he proposes “overlapping relations” that are prior to the breaking of time and space into separate units. Now, instead of thinking of time and space as containers within which nature is packaged, nature must be thought of as an elemental whole with different manifestations. Yet, even if we think of nature as a whole that manifests itself in events, it may still appear to stand over and against these events. In this case it is still possible to regard the individual objects as possessing attributes that do not change, since they remain separate from the events that unfold around them. However, according to Whitehead, we must also think of objects as events, fundamentally changing our view of them. The object must no longer be thought of as a separate thing, with absolute properties existing through time but as unfolding in relationships to other objects both in time and space. In this case “the object is an abridged way of marking that there was an ensemble of relations.” (Na 116) The object is an abstraction. Yet this abstraction is not nothing, for it expresses really existing relations that tend to remain stable through time. Thus, the object and its ensemble of relations appear relatively stable through time; they do not exist independently of nature and time.

The second question that is raised by a nature that runs both beyond and through the subject is the question of the nature of self awareness. What is this self awareness, Whitehead asks, and he offers the following answer: it is an openness upon the temporal and spatial. “The positing of being in perception is simultaneously the positing of a spatiotemporal matter by our body, and defined such as it appears to us who perceive.” (Na 117) Perception thus has an ontological value. When I perceive, I am aware that this perception occurs in me, in my body, and thus in nature, and that it thus necessarily opens upon nature. Sense experience puts us in contact with a nature that remains distant from it because nature “rests in-itself,” for it has a thickness and opacity that sensation cannot penetrate. (Na 118) Immanence and
transcendence are thus given together and even as integrated, since nature is presented as transcendent within the embodied perceiver.

Moreover, since nature is in the process of unfolding, perception always reveals something new but that is also always already there. “Past and future meet each other and are mixed together in a poorly defined present. The process of Nature…does not have narrow edges, instantly defined present, within which its potency operates. Its operating presence…must be sought in totality, in the most distant past, as in the present…Maybe also in the unrealized future.” (Na 121) If this is true, that is, if the present moment of the experience of nature does open simultaneously toward a past and a future that are already a part of it, then all attempts to conceptualize or measure time must start from a process that is already there. Moreover, this is constantly confirmed by our continuous attempts to make sense of the temporal process of nature, for we would not keep trying to makes sense of it if it wasn’t experienced as already being there. We continually experience the process of nature as “a treasure from which all our perceptions arise.” The role of philosophy, then, must be to express nature as a process and to avoid, at all costs, substantialist thinking. (Na 121-122)

We can conclude Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of Whitehead with the following comments about nature, comments that will appear again in the posthumously published The Visible and the Invisible, comments that layout his own view of nature and set it against that of modernism. Nature just is. It is there from the start. It is a horizon within which we exist, as a homeland. It is not, as modernism claimed, a mechanical thing or a collection of isolated things merely in mechanical, efficient causal relations to one another. It is not an abstract idea or merely a conceptual system whose parts are connected by internal relations of meaning. Moreover, time represented as discrete units marching in sequence one-by-one and space represented as a Cartesian grid system must be regarded as abstractions, abstractions from a lived horizontal temporal/spatial whole. Nature is the spatial/temporal whole or field within which or upon which we open by way of an embodied perceptual awareness. My body is part of the world; it experiences itself as part of a whole within which it exits. My hand touches because it is touched from the outside by the world, by something that runs beyond me and that is experienced as independent of me. Yet the body
and the world cross into one another. The hand touches because it is touched from the outside, and this touching would not be known without the touched, without the world, and vice versa. They must therefore be treated as two sides of a more organic whole, yet with nature as the more primary term, as that within which the body exists. Embodied human perception must therefore be regarded as nature becoming aware of itself through one of its own. The body is connected to the world around it through its worldly embodiment, through its flesh. In lived through embodied experience my embodied flesh blends or overlaps with the embodiment of the world, yet does so without complete fusion or identity. Since my lived through embodied experience partially blends with the embodiment of the world, it feels that it is part of the world, part of the world’s embodiment. It feels that both the body and the world are a part of a common embodiment, even part of the common flesh that is formed through their inseparable cohesion. Yet this does not mean that the flesh of the world is self-sensing, as my body is. It means that the experienced world is experienced as a system of open ended and possible relations. The world is not experienced as a discrete mechanical thing but as an open ended environment, as an (embodied) homeland of future possibilities (based on the openness of the present to the past and future) to which my body belongs, as an opened ended possibility of future experiences.

We should also here briefly consider Merleau-Ponty’s discussion in Nature of the relationship between science and philosophy, since the move by science away from modernist frameworks, even though it may not be completely conscious or fully articulated, helps us understand the need to move away from them philosophically as well. First, since nature is all encompassing, since it outruns all attempts to express it in conceptual formulas, we should not start, as modernism does, with and attempt to derive nature from concepts or first principles. We should begin with the richness of experience, with an experience that is rich with perceptual patterns, and, Merleau-Ponty says, it is contemporary science, when it is at its best, that is this experience in its most regulated form. Moreover, he proceeds to point out, even though science is not philosophy, it does frequently ask significantly philosophical questions, and this has been especially true in the 20th Century. (Na 87) The 20th Century physics of quantum mechanics, for instance, offers a serious philosophical challenge to its classical predecessor. The classical/modernist
physics of Laplace claims that discrete units of matter exist with absolute properties, in space, and in determinate external relations to one another. Consequently, Laplace argues, if we know the place and motion of all things, then we should be able to predict all natural events. We should be able to know nature completely. Probability, in this context, merely expresses our ignorance and can be overcome by the accumulation of more knowledge and more accurate factual information. (Na 88-89) Quantum mechanics seriously challenges these claims. First of all, at the quantum level of nature, we cannot predict both the position and velocity of atomic and sub-atomic particles, since the very act of observation interferes with the structure of the atomic event. In this case, our observation does not just see what is there but actually helps bring it about, since the energy of the light involved in the observation interacts with the dynamics of the energy being observed. Yet the state that does come about is just one among many possible states, one state which we cannot predict with certainty but only with a degree of probability. Moreover, the probability that is spoken of here is not just a result of knowledge that we lack but must be understood as part of reality itself. Probability here thus becomes a part of the very fabric of reality, and as such seriously undermines the certainty of the Laplacean view of the universe. In addition, Merleau-Ponty proceeds here to claim that neither the atomic particle theory nor atomic wave theory can make complete sense of the atom’s behavior. The particle theory, which is consistent with classical theory, with its discrete elements in external relationships, no longer explains the behavior of the atom, since atoms frequently act as if they were part of a field or a wave, and consequently cannot be quantified or measured as separate units. Yet in some cases, as, for example, with monochromatic light waves, energy seems to curl in on itself to form particles, thus negating the explanations of wave theory. (Na 90ff) However, Merleau-Ponty insists that simply because probability leads us away from absolute certainty does not mean that it ends in a complete indeterminism. Probability lies between the completely determinate and the completely indeterminate.

What all this means is that 20th Century physics helps us reveal, in opposition to classical/modernist physics, and in agreement with natural perception, that no perception is absolutely certain, fully present, and totally determinate. Yet, it also means that even though physics can never fully determine what is the
case (since no perception is complete, and since the perceived itself is not fully determinate), it helps us determine what is *probably* the case, and, conversely, what is probably not the case, since it does provide us with enough information to recognize stable and predicable patterns. In a sense, then, the “internal critique” of classical/modernist physics by quantum physics helps us be more aware of our natural perception, of a perception that is not fully determinate but that nevertheless is still meaningful, of a perception that is not conceived but lived through. (Na 100) Yet, Merleau-Ponty is fully aware that the information supplied by immediate perception is not enough, to account for human knowledge. True, we need to first perceive, but then we must pause, reflect, compare and contrast, test and retest, as science does, in order to move toward a less personal, more public, and more abstract knowledge of the world. Yet, simultaneously, what we must remember is that this more abstract knowledge is based in perception and that we should therefore not use abstract formulas to construct the perceived but look back from our formulas toward the perceived to verify them.

Physics, then, helps us move beyond the modernist world of Laplace, the world of isolated individuals to which we may affix absolute properties, the world of Cartesian space within which we may place these individuals, who are then to be subjected to the relationships of linear, external causality, resulting in a world that is fully determinate and predicable. Physics helps us move toward a world of entities that we must now understand as “structures in an ensemble of operations” and toward a determinism that must be understood less as a rigid and fully determining framework and more as a temporally unfolding system of shifting relations, more as a temporally unfolding surface of shifting crystallizations.⁹

In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty has already argued (long before his treatment of Whitehead and the sciences above) that we must regard physical nature as a *structural balance of forces*. He offers planetary orbits around the sun as just such a balance and claims generally that physical nature must be understood as revealing partial structural wholes in the context of greater structural wholes, wholes whose parts tend to travel pathways of the least physical resistance to maintain structural equilibrium. (SB 139-140) He finds an even more pressing need to move away from the Laplacean and
modernist world view, including its view of causality, when he turns toward the study of life and attempts to understand living organisms.

With regard to vital structures, Merleau-Ponty insists that we should not consider the structures of life as sharply breaking with physical structures, since this would leave an implausible gap of indeterminacy between them. (SB 159, Na 263-264) Life is part of nature and is continuous with its structures, even if we must begin to recognize the new qualities that appear with the emergence of living organisms. Just as we must regard nature as a holistic process, as a natural whole (not as an ideal or conceptual one) composed of real elements defined in unfolding relationships (rather than as isolated material units with absolute properties), so also (and even more so) we must regard the living organisms as a natural wholes.

“The organism, in which every event is cause and effect of all others, and in this sense cause of itself, raises the problem of an auto-production of the whole, or, more precisely, of a totality which…works upon materials which are its very own and, so to speak, emanates from them. It seems that within an entity that is in the world one encounters a mode of liaison which is not the connection of external causality, that is, an ‘interior’ unlike the interior of consciousness…” (TFL 71)

The organism, then, cannot be regarded as “a sum of instantaneous and punctual microscopic events; it is an enveloping phenomenon, with the macroscopic style of an ensemble in movement. In between the microscopic facts, global reality is delineated like a watermark,” a global reality that is neither reducible to the microscopic nor separable from it. Or more specifically, studies of flatworms reveal that the regeneration of a damaged flatworm from its specific parts aims at restoring its functioning as an organic whole and does so by variable means. Thus the global functioning of the organism seems capable of guiding its repair and does so by non-mechanical and non-reductionistic means. Yet it is also clear that the organism’s global functioning would not occur at all without its physicochemical substrate. (Na 207)

Furthermore, we also know that living organisms respond selectively and variably to patterns in the environment and respond to them in ways that are consistent with the organism’s internal norms. These norms are not blind, as they are in physical events, but reveal the organism’s attitudinal orientation, as, for example, flexion movements of mammals reveal the animal’s alertness and even aggressiveness. Moreover, these norms are clearly observable, and they are observable as preferred attitudinal
orientations, orientations that appear with statistical regularity with certain forms of behavior. Thus, if we seek to understand certain forms of behavior, we must relate them to these norms and not just to the neurological and physical structures that act as the necessary substrates of the organism’s existence and behavior. (SB 159) First, then, the living organism must be understood as an organic whole, as a whole whose parts influence each other simultaneously, not as an aggregate of isolated parts in external relationships, as in a machine. And secondly, the relationship between the organism and the environment must also be understood structurally, since the organism and the environment simultaneously influence and determine one another. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it in a fragmented lecture note, “the living being…is a structure of the spatiotemporal field since the organism has an external circuit, integration of a spatial divergence and of a temporal interval.” The living being cannot be understood as an isolated entity, to which we may attribute absolute properties, but must be understood as bound up with an environment that helps make it what it is and that unfolds in time. Yet the living being is not just a chaotic collection of relationships, but must be understood as “an accumulation which is not that of a random distribution: the organism is ‘capable of suspending the spontaneous case of the random mixture in particular points of the universe, and of assuring a curious protection against disorder for the subtly organized and hierarchical elements’…The organism shows itself as a trap of fluctuation.” (Na 263)

Living organisms present, and even are, stable patterns, but they are stable patterns of change and fluctuation. They are more than a mass of chaotic relations, but they are certainly not the stamped out manifestations of eternal species essences of the classical and modernist views (at least some of the modernist views). In sum, then, even though these stable patterned organisms are capable of being understood, we cannot understand them by appealing either to mechanistic causal relations or to the internal relations of conceptual meaning, or by appealing to the intentional/conceptual aiming at future goals that the latter implies. Just as nature must be understood without appeal solely to mechanism on the one hand or finalism on the other, so also living organisms, as a part of nature and as natural wholes, and not as a mere collection of isolated parts, must be understood as coming between these ontological extremes.
Again, if living organisms must be understood as organic wholes, and if they form a lived connective tissue with their environment, as appears to be the case, then neither classical/modernist causality nor finality will explain the behavior of these organisms. Upon the horizontal plane of physical events a vertical plane is opened up. Living organisms are not mere machines but have dimensional environments, fields to which they open, within which they act, and even that they help form and create. Living organisms thus are not merely subject to the mechanical impact of physical events, since they are able to meet these events, are able to “interpret” and manipulate them in various ways, and, subsequently, even act back upon and within these environments to help define them. Moreover, living organisms cannot be understood as merely aiming at some sort of abstract entelechy, for their behavior unfolds in relationship to specific environments that continue to influence and guide them. We must again conclude that we must move beyond modernism “because we no longer have the alternative finality--causality but rather macro-micro-totality-part. Causality is blurred to the profit of some sort of ‘phenomenal topology.’” (Na 264) The world that presents itself to us perceptually or phenomenologically, presents itself as a field of stable gestalt patterns, figures, structures or forms. These forms are in flux but they are stable enough to reveal an at least temporary balance of forces, and, if we expect to understand these forces, we should turn not to classical/modernist causality or finality, but to a perceptual or phenomenological description/interpretation. Moreover, this is equally true when studying biological evolution, since we now know that “there is a plurality of factors in evolution” or even that there is a “plurality of evolutions (miro-macro-mega evolution)—with mirco changes at the level of genetics, macro changes at the level of continuity/discontinuity of groups or species, and mega changes at the level of the sweeping historical developments studied by paleontology. (Na 248) We also now know that “between the organism and nature, relations interior to population intervene according to their volume. Hence the idea of a pressure of mutation opposed to the pressure of selection. The pressure of mutation is not simple chance of ‘fluctuation.’ There is a tempo of mutation depending on the amplitude of populations.” (Na 252) Thus, “with this plurality of factors, the causal explanation by selection disappears…” We must instead look for a series of evolutionary biological patterns, a series of patterned
groups revealed through a perceptual, phenomenological approach, a series of patterned groups that must be seen as intimately bound to their biological and physical environments, and a series of patterned groups that lend themselves to statistical groupings and analysis. (Na 247) But let’s give the last word to Merleau-Ponty here, since his notes succinctly summarize all of these points.

“A truly statistical conception of evolution would…attempt to define vital being starting from the phenomena; it would impose the principles of an ‘evolutionary kinetic’ free from any schema of timeless causality or constraint from microphenomena, and would openly admit a scalar structure of reality, a plurality of ‘space-time levels’. Organisms and types would then appear as ‘traps for fluctuations’, as ‘patterned jumbles’, as variants of a sort of ‘phenomenal’ topology…, without any break with chemical, thermodynamic and cybernetic causation.” (TFL 127-128)

Proceeding more specifically to the structure of human behavior, Merleau-Ponty again regards this structure as continuous with both vital and physical structures. These structures are the necessary conditions of human existence and behavior. Yet human behavior cannot be understood as reducible to these structures alone. Just as some animals are capable of varying their view of an object (chimpanzees, for example, are able to use a box as a seat or as a ladder), humans are capable of varying perspectives but even more so (since the chimpanzee’s perspectives are more strictly bound to practical need then are human perspectives). Moreover, the human ability to form abstract and general meanings, which is tied to this capacity to vary perspectives, means that human behavior must be understood as possessing the capacity for integrated meaningful behavior and the ability to aim at abstract meaningful goals. Human behavior, then, can be understood as neither a collection of physical, chemical, biological, or mechanical events, since human behavior is meaningful, nor the result of a purely intellectual intentionality, since abstract meaning is generated from situated perspectives and must, at some point, relate back to them. Here again we must practice a perceptual, phenomenological method in search of meaningful patterns of behavior and in search of how these patterns are bound up with a multitude of mutually influential natural, biological, and social forces. Discussing the best methodology for the understanding of human behavior in his earlier Phenomenology of Perception, including the appropriate use of induction and causality, Merleau-Ponty states that “the ‘cause’ of a ‘psychic fact’ is never another ‘psychic fact’ capable of being disclosed in straightforward observation…[P]sychological induction is not a mere inventory of
facts. Psychology does not provide its explanations by identifying, among a collection of facts, the invariable and unconditioned antecedent. It…comprehends the facts…” It creates theories capable of coordinating them. In addition, “since an explanation is not discovered but created, it is never given with the facts, but is always simply a probable interpretation.” Here, as in physics, there is no crucial experiment because we are not merely describing but explaining, and auxiliary hypotheses can always be added to save one’s favored theory. We are consequently left to determine the most probable explanation, the theory that explains the greatest number of facts (PhP 115) and that explains them with the greatest clarity. A perceptual, phenomenological topology, then, describes but also interprets, and does so in the sense that it reads the world’s perceptual patterns in a way that is most clarifying—Fundierung.¹⁶

The extensive studies of nature, animal biology, and human behavior that we have glimpsed here in Merleau-Ponty’s works have sought to provide explanations that avoid the inadequacies of modernism, in both its materialist and idealist forms, in both the form of reductionistic materialism and idealistic finalism. We have seen that the theoretical explanations that he offers bear a striking resemblance to those offered by Whitehead yet develop a unique form of emergent materialism and move toward a philosophy of the flesh. Since we have already witnessed the organic/process view of nature above, as well as the emergent development of life and humanity within nature, we should briefly consider Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the flesh.

We should approach this later philosophy of the flesh by mentioning that Merleau-Ponty’s brief description of Heidegger’s philosophy is applicable to his own.

“It is beyond such correlatives [of Being and Nothingness]...that philosophy takes it start, namely, in the ‘there exists’, in an ‘opening’ toward ‘something’, toward ‘that which is not nothing’. It is this preobjective Being, between the inert essences or guidditas and the individual localized at a point in space-time, that is the proper theme of philosophy.” (TFL 110)

Yet, of course, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, the body must be emphasized. It is in the body’s lived through encounter with and openness upon the world with which it is intertwined that is the proper theme of philosophy, since it is in the meeting point, where the passive-active human body (and these are barely distinguishable within the human body) encounters the imposing yet fluid patterns
of the world, that meaning is formed. It is in the body’s lived through openness upon the world, with which the body intertwines, that is the proper theme of philosophy. Yet, how does this intertwining take place?

“How does it happen that I give to my hands, in particular, that degree, that rate, and that direction of movement that are capable of making me feel the textures of the sleek and the rough? Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship, 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, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. 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)

Shifting from vision as the prime model for human knowledge, since it too easily imagines human experience soaring above and even outside both the world and the human body, Merleau-Ponty’s last work emphasizes touching, since touching requires both embodiment and immersion in the world. Touching requires a body, and to touch from the inside of the hand requires that the hand be touched from the outside. Human experience is embodied, and yet the body is not an obstacle; it is not a veil that screens the perceiver from the world; it is the means to be in and to thus become more familiar with the world’s embodiment. We are not simply aware of phenomena, since embodied being phenomenalizes, i.e., is given in the phenomena as an existent embodied being. Its existence 1.) is presented in experience as such and 2.) would not appear without the embodiment of the perceived objects and the embodiment of the act of perception. We may say, then, that “the thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh” (VI 135), and this means that “…each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh…” (VI 137)

Moreover, this also means that abstract “knowledge and communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation.” Abstract thought “recaptures our corporeal existence and uses it to symbolize…” It is, in fact, the double functioning of the human body that makes this sublimation
possible, for the human body, as body, can relate to the embodiment of the world and is thus “predestined
to model itself on the natural aspects of the world.” Yet, since the human body is actively engaged in the
world, and since the human body is consequently capable of gestures and expressions, “it turns back on
the world to signify.” To help explicate this power to signify, as briefly indicated above, Merleau-Ponty
will claim that the individual’s experience of space immediately opens to a field that includes the subject.
The subject’s perspective thus opens to other perspectives that include it and refer back to it. This allows
us to understand the simple act of pointing, which animals do not understand, since it refers to possible
positions, and thus to a sort of situated generality, to a generality that moves beyond a specific situation
but remains rooted in situations. And again, this pointing or “mimic usage of our body is not yet a
conception, since it does not cut us off from our corporeal situation; on the contrary, it assumes all its
meaning. It leads us to a concrete theory of the mind which will show the mind in a relationship of
reciprocal exchange with the instruments which it uses, but uses only while rendering to them what it has
received from them, and more.”17

Again, I experience space from my embodied location within it. I see it from a specific location, yet
my perception opens out to other possible perspectives, implies them and is included in them. “It is this
Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously
called flesh.” (VI 139) The flesh is thus not a thing. It is that upon which embodied perception opens. It is
that within which embodied perceivers exist. It is a field or an atmosphere or an element that surrounds and
engulfs the embodied perceiver. Yet the embodied perceiver is not totally overcome, or absorbed, or
eliminated, since it is the embodied perceiver that creates the opening and does so from the point of view
within nature, does so from the point of view of a specific time and location. The flesh, then, is “not a fact
or a sum of facts, yet adherent to location and to the now. Much more: the inauguration of the where and
the when, the possibility and exigency for the fact; in a word: facticity, what makes the fact be a fact. And,
at the same time, what makes the facts have a meaning, makes the fragmentary facts dispose themselves
about ‘something.”’ (VI 139-140) While it is true, then, that Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, characterizes
human experience as ekstasis, as being in and at the world, Merleau-Ponty does not as completely ignore
the subject, its embodiment, and its situatedness in the world. For Merleau-Ponty the subject is not just a result or reflection of the “clearing” that the subject exists within. True, the embodied subject opens to a world that includes it, that is more fundamental, that it reflects, but, since human awareness is indeclinable, and since this awareness is the body’s situated openness upon the world, the clearing of the world necessarily appears through this situated openness.

As we have witnessed above, there is an ontological blending of experiencing with the experienced, of touching with the touched. This blending occurs because of the body. Touching can occur because the aware body is touched from the outside by the embodied world. The body can touch because it is touched by other embodied beings, and this touching and touched cross into one another without becoming one. There is a chiasm, a crossing into one another that holds apart, a reflection of one another without complete unity. My body experiences the world that appears at the end of my touch (or gaze), but that is also experienced as running beyond my experience and as including it. My flesh opens to the flesh of the world in the sense that my embodied touching opens to an embodied world with which it only partially blends, since the world is also experienced as running beyond it. This running beyond the subject allows Merleau-Ponty to avoid a complete identification of the embodied subject with the world when speaking of the flesh of the world, and subsequently allows him to avoid earlier forms of animism.

“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 nevertheless…in order to say that it is a pregnancy of possibles, Weltmöglicherheit…that it is therefore absolutely not an object…This is not hylozoism: inversely, hylozoism is conceptualization—...It is by the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body (corps proper)—The flesh of the world is of the Being-seen, i.e. a being that is eminently percipie, and it is by it that we can understand the percipere: 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, identical to itself, in the night, but the Being that also contains its negation, its percipie…” (VI 250-51)

The perceiving human body and the world are so intertwined that they define each other, yet with the advantage given to the world. We understand the world as Being-seen, and this means that we understand the world as Being-seen, as perceived through the human body and not as purely in itself, and as Being that is seen, since its primary characteristic is to possess an existence that is capable of being perceived. We thus find here a transcendence that is given within immanence. The world appears as possessing an
existence that runs beyond embodied human awareness, yet this existence appears in and through this awareness. Moreover, since the world is experienced as running beyond the perceiver, as a temporal/spatial horizon that runs beyond the perceiver, even while remaining in contact with the perceiver, the world does not appear as a discrete thing, like a container or box, or as a mere collection of discrete things, like a container filled with machines, as in the modernist tradition. True, the world is experienced as an individual, but as an individual with open-ended boundaries. The world is experienced as Being not as a being. The world is experienced as possessing an openness, like the ever open horizon that nevertheless remains the always present background for all articulated foregrounds, even those that are negated. The world is experienced as a publically perceivable field that includes me and other perceivers and that is open to a range of future possibilities.

Now, when considering the human body, we only fully understand the perceiving body when we are aware of its being perceived (its being-seen), which is Being’s primary characteristic. The body is fully aware of its existence because it borrows its sense of existence from the world (nevertheless brought more fully to light by its being perceived). It perceives the world’s existence; it perceives that the world is existent. Moreover, since it is aware that its existence is bound up with the world’s (the only way that it can touch is to be touched from the outside) and can be perceived from anywhere within it (since the world is experienced as an open horizon) it is aware of its existence, and it is aware of its own existence as an open existence. Thus, rather than anthropomorphizing, rather than retreating into a subject whose existence is the basis of all else, à la Descartes and the modernist tradition, it is the world’s more fundamental existence (an open and public existence) that is lent to the human body. We are aware that the perceiving body exists in the world because the perceiving body opens upon or experiences the world as a public field that reflects back upon it, almost as if the world perceives the perceiving body as existing from its (the world’s) point of view of existence, since other perspectives are always implied as the body opens upon a horizontal world, a horizontal world that includes it and is thus capable (possibly, not actually) of looking back at it.
Merleau-Ponty’s earlier *Phenomenology of Perception* helps us understand this experience in four ways: 1.) As we have seen, he has already made the case that perception is embodied and thus perspectival. It occurs from a situated point of view, from a point of view however that opens to other possible points of view. When I perceive the lamp on the table across the room, I see it from the point of view of my specific location in the room. Yet this point of view is also aware of other points of view, the lamp and table (and even my own situated body) seen from the other side of the room. The room, or more generally, the world, seen from one point of view includes within it the awareness of other (possible) points of view, including those that can look back at the initiating point of view. In Merleau-Ponty philosophy, the particular opens to the general, and the general is always connected to the particular. Personal experience opens to a public and anonymous field, but this field would not open without the experience of the situated personal subject. The above quote drawn from the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible* thematizes this and pushes it towards an ontological expression, since here the opening of the personal, situated, embodied perceiver upon the world crosses into and partially blends with it, forming a union more real than its parts. This union however is never complete, and this is why it is referred to simultaneously as “the anonymity innate to myself,” (since my body, by its very nature, exists within, opens to, and crosses into the world as a public field) and as “the generality of the sensible in itself” (with this generality still in need of human awareness to bring it more fully to light). 2.) He has already made the case for the *Fundierung* relationship when trying to make sense of various relationships, including, for example, the relationship between perception and thought. (PhP 394) Perception acts as the founding term of the relationship in the sense that it motivates (but does not cause or logically require) the interpretations that come to be expressed in language and thought. Language and thought are needed to fold back upon the imprecise perceived in order to help articulate it more precisely, in order to bring it to expression in the full sense, yet there is something already there for the language and thought to express. Thus, even though different linguistic interpretations are always possible, and even though there is no definitively correct interpretation that eliminates all others, certain interpretations may well be better than others, may be more clarifying than others, again because there is something already there to interpret.
Applying the *Fundierung* relationship to the perceiver and perceived, we realize that perception is needed to bring the perceived to light but also that it is the perceived that remains the primary term, since even though different perceptual interpretations are possible, there is always already something there to be perceived and interpreted. 3.) He has already made the case that the structure of temporality helps us make sense of the relationship between the subject and the world. Time is a dimension of the natural world. Yet the passing of time is brought to greater awareness with the presence of the aware perceptual subject. There is thus a subjective side to the passing of time. Yet the dimension or horizon of time is not created by the subject but is something the subject exists within and only brings to greater awareness. Here, again, we can make use of the *Fundierung* relationship, since time must primarily be understood as a natural dimension, as having a natural side, yet also requires the awareness of the perceptual subject to more fully bring it to expression. 4.) Finally, Merleau-Ponty has argued frequently and profoundly that the simplest perception is not of a discrete unit of sense data but a meaningful figure on a ground. Perception always occurs in a temporal/spatial field, within a horizon, whose background structures help present a meaningful figure, even though they are never fully present and even though they continually slip away.

Now, we can relate Merleau-Ponty’s earlier treatment of these four topics, space, the *Fundierung* relationship, temporality, and the gestalt nature of perception, to the flesh of the later work, since the flesh is defined primarily as the temporal/spatial horizon of the world, as a public horizon of future possibilities, that is formed as the embodied subject and the world fold into one another, with the world remaining the primary term. The embodied subject opens upon, and exists within, and yet also helps bring more fully to light, the temporal/spatial dimension of the world, helps bring more fully to light the world as a temporally and spatially differentiated field. Or to put this in another way, it is the “collaboration” between the perceiving embodied subject and the world, the dimensional world that the perceiving embodied subject exists within, yet also helps bring more fully to light, that Merleau-Ponty refers to as the flesh of the world.
Michel Haar’s essay comparing Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy with Heidegger’s should be briefly considered, since Haar offers a number of criticisms of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the flesh that are inaccurate and should thus be addressed. Hopefully, this consideration will help further clarify Merleau-Ponty later position. According to Haar, even though Merleau-Ponty doesn’t radically challenge the personal subject of Western philosophy, “there is a radicalization…of the theme of ‘generality’ and of the anonymity of perception: ‘Every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and gives itself to us anonymously…’ This radicalization”, Haar maintains, “consists in attributing—by a jump from regional ontology to a universal Ontology—properties described on to the perceiving body to a ‘sensible in general’, designated as Being.” (Haar, Jn 25, Bk173, PhP 250) Haar, throughout his essay, frames what he regards as a variety of issues facing Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy by using a number of dichotomies or dualisms (such as specific vs. general, personal vs. anonymous, just mentioned immediately above, but also the following, perception vs. language and culture, perceiving vs. perceived, passive vs. active). That is to say, Haar repeatedly claims that Merleau-Ponty shifts (or “jumps”) from one perspective to another (from the personal to the general, for example) or that he focuses exclusively on one point while ignoring another (perception creates meaning, for example, not language or culture). Haar apparently misses the main thrust of Merleau-Ponty’s entire philosophical effort: the attempt to overcome traditional Western dualisms. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, does not seek to “jump” from the personal to the anonymous but seeks to more fully understand how they are related to one another and even how they cross into one another and overlap, even while holding or drifting apart. As we have seen above, for human beings there is no God’s eye view of space, there is no experience of space from nowhere. The experience of space always occurs to a situated embodied perceiver, always occurs from the point of view of a particular perspective, yet this perspective opens out to others, opens out to a horizon that includes a multitude of perspectives, including the perceiver’s. These perspectives are thus not mutually exclusive but cross into each other even while they remain apart. Nor does Merleau-Ponty focus exclusively on perception’s creation of meaning while completely ignoring the contributions of language, since he repeatedly seeks to understand how perception and language influence and cross into one another (even while holding apart),
granted with perception as the primary term, but also with a consideration of the constructive power of language.¹⁹

Haar again appears to fall into this same sort of dichotomous thinking when he quotes the following passage already cited more completely above: “The flesh of the world is not a sens-ing as is my flesh. It is sensible and not sensing…” and proceeds to offer the following criticism: “But in this case, if it senses nothing,…how can we read it as a matrix and a universal ‘milieu,’ an ‘element’? How can we maintain that ‘my body is made of the same flesh as the world’, if this flesh is infinitely poorer than my own?” (Haar, Jn 29, Bk 177) Haar is again adopting a dualism by framing the body and the world as exclusive categories, with the body’s flesh as subjective and the world as a pure in itself. Yet Merleau-Ponty is struggling here, and throughout his professional career, to move beyond this dualism (and others), in order to find new ways to describe how the embodied subject and world overlap and fold into one another, even while they hold apart. As mentioned above, it is because the perceived (the embodied world as Being-seen) and the perceiving body cross into one another and borrow from each other, with the perceived remaining the more primary term, that we are able to form the notion of a Visibility, of a generality of the sensible in itself, of a Tangible in itself, of a flesh that is more real than its couplet terms. This flesh that has characteristics that are the result of their coming together and partially blending, but with the world as the more primary term. The flesh of the world can thus be experienced as a universal milieu because it is experienced as that within which all experience occurs. It is the world that is experienced as a general milieu because, even though perceptual awareness is needed to bring it more fully to light, it is the world’s embodied environment that is the most primary and that temporally and spatially surrounds the perceiver.

Haar’s point regarding the primary difference between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty perhaps needs to be clarified here. For Heidegger, Being is the clearing within which the subject appears but to which the subject barely contributes, if at all. Merleau-Ponty maintains Heidegger’s opening upon Being as the most primary relationship but rejects this clearing as an abstraction, as we have already witnessed above, and as Haar accurately reports. (Haar, Jn 20-21, Bk 168-169) Since Merleau-Ponty is more focused on the
body than Heidegger is, the clearing that appears and that the embodied subject exists within is bound up with the situatedness of this subject. Thus, as we have already witnessed, there is no God’s eye view of nature for human beings. There is no perspective that is from nowhere, and this means that the clearing or temporal/temporal horizon upon which the embodied subject opens would have no orientation at all without the situated observer. Thus some contribution must be made by the embodied perceiver to the differential structures that appear on the horizon and within the perceptual field. The structures belong primarily to the embodied, worldly field, and to the relationships within the field that are formed by the embodied perceiver’s position within it, but they must be brought more fully to light by the embodied perceiver. Here again, this means that the embodied subject is bound up with the differential temporal/spatial field or horizon upon which or within which it opens. The embodied subject contributes to this field, but it is the field or horizon that remains more primary. The subject’s experience is needed to fully make sense of the flesh as a differential field of public generality, but it is the world as a temporal/spatial field or horizon that remains primary. The world, then, is experienced as a public field of embodiment, as a dimensional field of embodiment within which all experience must occur, and this is how we are to read it as a universal milieu.

The reference to Heidegger is relevant to the discussion of the enchantment of nature because the pendulum of his philosophy, highly critical of the disenchantment of nature, to its technological manipulation as a mere thing, seems to swing back to an almost complete mystification of it. We have just seen that Heidegger’s clearing and mystical call of Being leaves the embodied individual behind, or at least downplays it to a point of insignificance. While Merleau-Ponty, contrarily, seeks to more thoroughly connect nature and embodied individuals, to the point where they cannot be considered apart, since we now know that they must be understood as overlapping ontological regions, still with nature as the more primary ontological term and the human species as emerging from and within it. Thus we now know that what happens to the world happens to the embodied individuals bound up with it, and what happens to embodied individuals, their degradation, for example, will in all likelihood result in the degradation of the world around them. Merleau-Ponty’s view is thus less alienating and more integrative than Heidegger’s. It
is a view that intimately connects individuals, through their embodiment, to the world and, through their embodiment in the world, to each other and all living things. It does not focus exclusively on isolated individuals apart and above nature (as modernist did) or on a mystical Being that seems to leave individuals behind (as was Heidegger’s tendency). Yet it is a view that does not achieve this integration by simply projecting the human spirit into inanimate objects or other living things. It is clear that when Merleau-Ponty uses the word “spirit” that he uses it in an Aristotelian and not a Cartesian sense, in the sense of a quality of animation or life and not in the sense of a separate mental substance. This means, at least for Merleau-Ponty, that the property of animation or life is a quality that emerges from and continues to rest upon nature itself, that emerges as a quality that, while common to all living things, manifests itself differently in different species. Since human life, as *life*, overlaps with all living things, and human embodiment, as *embodied*, overlaps with all embodied beings, animate or otherwise, we can speak of integrated and general aspects of life and being. Yet since human life and embodiment manifest properties that are different from other living and embodied beings, we cannot eliminate differences. There is some overlapping, some integration, some union, and thus some generality, and this is what allows us to speak of the flesh of nature (its “enchantment”, if you will), yet there is also difference, separation, conflict, and specificity, and this is what prevents us from saying that the flesh of nature is human flesh, or even that it is self-sensing flesh. It is embodied and sensible, like my flesh, and this is what allows me, along with the natural emergence of human awareness, to form a *sense* of an embodied and general public world. The world is experienced as a general atmosphere of embodiment, as a general atmosphere within which all embodied things exist, but it is not experienced as possessing the self-sensing nature of my body.

Ontological regions do overlap, but not completely. In saying this, Merleau-Ponty does not deny the value or usefulness of abstract intellectual formulas or taxonomies, but recognizes that they must be placed in the context of embodied perceptual experience as a whole. Rather than intellectually construct an abstract taxonomy of nature that is composed of exclusive categories or mutually exclusive class/species concepts, we must develop a taxonomy of overlapping and unfolding regions, since this is what is revealed to us in the context of our lived through embodied perceptual experience. Instead of blindly adhering to and
imposing the abstract logical principle of the excluded middle, we must recognize the gray areas of perception, the overlapping regions that share some characteristics while still remaining distinct. Nature cannot be understood as a rigid hierarchical taxonomy, as a rigid hierarchy of machine-like species that fit into mutually exclusive classifications, as a geometrical container filled with machines. It is our homeland. The world is the natural horizon within which we dwell, of which we are a part, from which we have evolved, and to which we remain intimately bound. It is the homeland for all things, for all living beings, and for the great jumble of overlapping species that seek to survive and grow within it. The careful balance of this philosophy of nature, as we have seen it developed here, and with this careful balance its increased explanatory power, seems to favor Merleau-Ponty’s position over Heidegger’s exaggerated mysticism. Yet it also seems to favor his position over pre-modernism’s absence of boundaries as well as modernism’s omnipresence of them, and it does so for a number of reasons: since it is not only able to make sense of both the chaos and stable patterns in nature but also how they overlap; since it is able to account for the “spirit” in nature by the evolutionary emergence of living beings; and since it is able to articulate how an embodied human consciousness remains connected to and even overlaps with the nature from which it has evolved. Moreover, since Merleau-Ponty has made a compelling case that the region of the human overlaps with other ontological regions of nature, and that what we are as human beings is intimately bound up with the natural environment within which we live, then we must now fully recognize that what we do to nature we do to ourselves and all other living beings, and this opens the door to a principle of environmental ethics.

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2. As we shall see below, Merleau-Ponty’s works bear a striking resemblance to those of Whitehead.
Only a brief summary of the rich and detailed analysis that is provided by *Phenomenology of Perception*’s chapter entitled “Space” can be offered here, along with the recommendation that the reader personally visit the chapter’s four main sections; A.) Is Space a Form of Knowledge?, pp. 243-254, B.) Depth, pp. 254-267, C.) Movement, pp. 267-280, and D.) Lived Space, pp. 280-299. Also, more detail analysis regarding the embodied subject’s involvement in the orientation of space will be offered below.

It is Merleau-Ponty’s view of Whitehead, as it appears in *Nature*, that is presented here.


Merleau-Ponty’s primary reference here is not to plant life but to *animal life* of all sorts, from amoeba to chimpanzees.

Or is not just a blind balance of physical forces.

“Problem: To place something between chance and the idea, between the interior and exterior. This something is the suturing organism-milieu, organism-organism...In this suture, something happens which is not an actual fact—a jointure which is the articulation of the vertical order on the horizontal order. The idea of being as *dimensionality*, the above dimensions of which are only the realization and abstract aspects. Place the orders in this ontological milieu.” (Na 251)


A crab, for example, may use an object as a shelter, as a shield, as camouflage, etc. (Na 176)

“Abandon ‘causality’ and ‘finality’: both are ‘actualist’...Both envisage only the actual equilibrium of the milieu and the organism, not the inscription of this equilibrium in a ‘theoretical curve’ which expresses sometimes a random mixture, sometimes patterned mixed-upness. This abandonment of causality and finality is an overcoming of the *Homo faber* and encompassing Being, grasped from within, and not surveyed, fabricated.” (Na 264)

“Thus every truth of fact is a truth of reason, and vice versa. The relation of reason to fact, or eternity to time, like that of reflection to the unreflective, of thought to language or of thought to perception is this two-way relationship that phenomenology has called *Fundierung*: the founding term, or originator--time, the unreflective, the fact, language, perception--is primary in the sense that the originated is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from reabsorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.” (PhP 394) “Visual contents are taken up, utilized and sublimated to the level of thought by a symbolical power which transcends them, but it is on the basis of sight that this power can be constituted. The relationship between matter and form is called in phenomenological terminology a relationship of *Fundierung*: the symbolical function rests on the visual as a ground” —not as a cause but as a power to motivate. (PhP 127) See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, trans. Hugh Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1979), pp.3-8.


