

Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction

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(Received **)

Abstract *It is commonly believed that Merleau-Ponty rejected Husserl's phenomenological reduction in favour of his existentialist account of être au monde. I show that whilst Merleau-Ponty rejected, what he saw as, the transcendental idealist context in which Husserl presents the reduction, he nevertheless accepts the heart of it, the epoché, as a methodological principle. Contrary to a number of Merleau-Ponty scholars, être au monde is perfectly compatible with the epoché and Merleau-Ponty endorses both. I also argue that it is a mistake to think that Merleau-Ponty's liberal use of the results of empirical psychology signify a rejection of the epoché. A proper understanding of his views on the relation between phenomenology and psychology shows that, at least in Merleau-Ponty's eyes, the methods of phenomenology and the empirical sciences are largely similar. I conclude that we have every reason to think that Merleau-Ponty accepted Husserl's demand that the phenomenologist place the world in brackets.*

Introduction

the incompleteness of the reduction [...] is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself¹

If there is one thing upon which the majority of interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy agree, it is that he rejects the phenomenological reduction. That the reduction, so central to Husserl's phenomenological method, is jettisoned in favour of a new methodology and an entirely new conception of phenomenology. On this question the majority of interpretations of Merleau-

Ponty's philosophy are mistaken.² There are no doubt a number of significant respects in which Merleau-Ponty departs from the orthodox Husserlian conception of the purpose and scope of phenomenology. But in the case of the phenomenological reduction, Merleau-Ponty's is a complex position. Whilst he does dispense with certain aspects of the phenomenological reduction, he accepts and puts into practice that which is at its heart, the epoché. Or so I shall argue.

There are two principal motivations for thinking that Merleau-Ponty rejects the whole of the phenomenological reduction. The first is the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he gives his difficult and notorious answer to the question, "What is Phenomenology?". The idea is that since Merleau-Ponty's conception of human being as *être au monde* is incompatible with the epoché he can find no room for it in his philosophy, hence his declaration of the "impossibility of a complete reduction"³. The second reason for taking this view is Merleau-Ponty's liberal use of the results of empirical science, in particular gestalt psychology. The phenomenological reduction, as practised by Husserl, involves relinquishing any claim to scientific knowledge, and Merleau-Ponty's use of science shows that he cannot be operating within the scope of the reduction. Neither one of these two lines of thought are compelling. The first falls down to the fact that *être au monde* is not inconsistent with the epoché in the way suggested. The second is the result of scant attention being paid to Merleau-Ponty's views on the relation between phenomenology and science, between eidetic intuition and inductive reasoning. Once we gain an adequate view of these matters, there is every reason to think that Merleau-Ponty accepts the heart of the phenomenological reduction, rejecting only what he, rightly or wrongly, sees as its unfortunate and inessential transcendental idealist aspects.

An account of Merleau-Ponty's attitude toward the phenomenological reduction would be inadequate without a discussion of Husserl. For as we turn to Husserl's notion of reduction, we find that there are competing interpretations to be dealt with. Nevertheless, it is Merleau-Ponty to whom we are primarily directed, and it is not the present purpose to offer an interpretation of Husserl's own position. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's assertion that in his rejection of the transcendental idealist

aspects of the reduction he is following the spirit, if not the letter, of Husserl's own thought is something that I will not address. On any interpretation of the phenomenological reduction the epoché is absolutely central to it, and the epoché is something that Merleau-Ponty fully accepts.

I. Existentialism vs. Phenomenology

The standard take on Merleau-Ponty's view of the phenomenological reduction is particularly clearly expressed by Zaner who claims that, "Merleau-Ponty simply rejects, without stating it, the Husserlian doctrine of epoché but not on phenomenological grounds".⁴ The idea is that Merleau-Ponty's commitment to an existentialist view of *être au monde* requires a rejection of the epoché, the central tenet of phenomenology. To see why Zaner and other, more recent, Merleau-Ponty commentators think this, we need to take a first look at the epoché, phenomenological reduction, and *être au monde*. We begin with the epoché.

In *The Idea of Phenomenology* Husserl introduces what he there refers to as "the epistemological reduction", according to which, "all transcendence [...] must be supplied with an index of indifference [...] the existence of all transcendent entities, whether I believe in them or not, does not concern me here".⁵ Husserl's thought is that whilst we continue to believe in the existence of the world, we hold a second-order attitude of indifference towards that first-order belief. Later, of course, this becomes the phenomenological epoché, the cornerstone of the phenomenological reduction. In *Ideas I* Husserl demands that,

We put out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude; we parenthesise everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being: thus the whole natural world which is continually "there for us" [...] If I do that, as I can with complete freedom, then I am not negating this "world" as though I were a solipsist; I am not doubting its factual being as though I were a skeptic; rather

I am exercising the “phenomenological” ἐποχή which also *completely shuts me off from any judgement about spatiotemporal factual being* [...] *Thus I exclude all sciences relating to this natural world no matter how firmly they stand there for me*⁶

This positing that belongs to the natural attitude is the positing of the “factually existent actuality” (*Ideas I*, §30) of the world. Thus, in the epoché we are to bracket or put out of action all of our judgements concerning the actuality of the world (although we do not cease to make such judgements), including all the judgements of the sciences insofar as they involve such actualities. We must refrain from making any use of these judgements, or positings. Husserl puts this by saying that we are to “parenthesize” the world, or more strictly, our judgements concerning it (*Ideas I*, §31).

The epoché, the second-order attitude of indifference towards the positing of the natural attitude, is the beginning but not the end of the phenomenological reduction. The parenthesis is also to be applied to God, formal logic, and the eidetic disciplines (*Ideas I*, §§58-60). But the reduction, even thus extended, does not exclude everything from the field of inquiry. For we are left with the “phenomenological residuum” of “absolute consciousness” (*Ideas I*, §50). Thus we are opened up to the world of *phenomena*, the world’s mode of givenness which is “the fundamental *field of phenomenology*” (*Ideas I*, §50). The task of phenomenology will then be to provide a science of phenomena, and the essential relations that bear between them.

To see why commentators have thought Merleau-Ponty’s conception of *être au monde* incompatible with the epoché and phenomenological reduction, we must make some preliminary remarks concerning *être au monde* itself. For Merleau-Ponty, to say that human being is *être au monde* is to say, at least, the following four closely interrelated things:

1. *Non-Cognitivism*. Perception, which is our most immediate and fundamental mode of access to

the world, is not a cognitive act. In Merleau-Ponty's words, "I cannot put perception into the same category as syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predications". (*PhP*, p.x).

2. *Externalism*. There is no sharp distinction between the inner and the outer, between self and world. Merleau-Ponty writes that, "Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself." (*PhP*, p.407).
3. *Operative Intentionality*. There is a level of intentionality below that of explicit acts, which manifests itself in an active bodily engagement that is our primary rapport with the world.⁷ He claims, for example, that, "a movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world', and to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call" (*PhP*, pp.138-139).
4. *Indeterminacy, Ambiguity and Opacity*. The world of lived experience is essentially indeterminate, ambiguous and opaque. It is not amenable to a complete and transparent analysis. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "ambiguity is of the essence of human existence [...] Existence is indeterminate in itself, by reason of its fundamental structure" (*PhP*, p.169).

We are now in a position to see the attraction of and motivation for holding the standard view, which takes Merleau-Ponty to reject the epoché and phenomenological reduction. This interpretation rests heavily on a well known passage from the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* in which Merleau-Ponty is discussing the reduction, and which I will quote at length:

It is because we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity [...] to put it 'out of play' [...] in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and [...] from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world. The most

important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction [...] If we were absolute mind, the reduction would present no problem. But since, on the contrary, we are in the world, since indeed our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux onto which we are trying to seize [...] there is no thought which embraces all our thought [...] Far from being, as has been thought, a procedure of idealistic philosophy, phenomenological reduction belongs to existential philosophy: Heidegger's 'In-der-Welt-Sein' appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction. (*PhP*, pp.xiii-xiv).

Returning to Zaner's interpretation, what is going on in this passage is the following. Any cognitive attitude that we take up will be founded upon, and hence presuppose, our *être au monde*. Amongst these cognitive attitudes is the attitude of the epoché itself. As a result, we cannot parenthesise our commitment to the world, for the reason that this very activity, this putting out of play, is but a particular mode of being related to the world. All reflection, phenomenological or otherwise, is founded upon an "unreflective life" (*PhP*, p.xiv), *être au monde*, which is the condition of its possibility. This, Zaner maintains, is what explains Merleau-Ponty's declaration of the "impossibility of a complete reduction". As he points out, "since every activity of consciousness is but another expression of its own *être au monde*, reflection is itself such an expression; hence consciousness cannot reflectively withdraw in order to consider itself, just because consciousness is just this reflective withdrawal." (Zaner, 1964, p.142).

Similar interpretations are given by a number of Merleau-Ponty scholars. Kwant writes that, "Merleau-Ponty has never [...] placed between brackets the reality of the world".⁸ Matthews holds that, "this loosening of our normal ties with the world can never amount to completely 'putting the world in parentheses', since radical reflection itself depends on the unreflective life from which it emerges".⁹ Carmen and Hansen maintain that, "Like Heidegger and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty rejected the transcendental and eidetic reductions as illegitimate abstractions from the concrete worldly

conditions that render it intelligible to itself”.¹⁰ Finally, Priest claims that, “the aspect of being-in-the-world that is logically inconsistent with the completion of the phenomenological reduction is the thesis that the subject’s relations to the world are essentially constitutive of the subject.”¹¹ In each of these cases it is claimed that Merleau-Ponty’s account of *être au monde* forces a rejection of the phenomenological reduction.¹² As the quotation from Priest makes clear, that aspect of *être au monde* that is often held to be incompatible with the phenomenological reduction is externalism. It is the fact that we are in the world, and that the world is in us, that means that we cannot retract from the world, performing the epoché and the subsequent reductions.

II. Merleau-Ponty on the Phenomenological Reduction

This view of Merleau-Ponty’s relation to the phenomenological reduction, as presented above, is at best misleading and at worst simply false. As we shall see, whilst some aspects of *être au monde* are incompatible with some aspects of the phenomenological reduction, all are compatible with the epoché itself. A better reading of Merleau-Ponty makes clear that he, in fact, accepted the epoché as a fundamental methodological principle, whilst simultaneously rejecting what he saw as the transcendental idealist context in which Husserl presented it.

The first point to bear in mind is that the standard interpretation of Merleau-Ponty accuses him of bad faith, of misrepresenting his own position. The standard view holds that Merleau-Ponty sees a conflict between his existentialism and his phenomenology, and opts for the former over the latter. But Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that, “the existentialist ‘dissidents’” misunderstand the reduction, and that “Heidegger’s ‘In-der-Welt-Sein’ appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction” (*PhP*, pp.xiii-xiv).¹³ That is, Merleau-Ponty claims that his existentialism is in fact consistent with the phenomenological method. Second, in the *Phenomenology* we find Merleau-Ponty rebuking empirical psychologists for failing to apply the

epoché. For example, he criticises a character he calls the *introspective psychologist* for his attempt to, “describe the givens of consciousness but without putting into question the absolute existence of the world surrounding it [...] he presupposed the objective world as the logical framework of all his descriptions” (*PhP*, p.59). This is an odd argument for Merleau-Ponty to make if it were really his view that the phenomenological reduction was to be rejected.

So the standard view seems at least problematic. A more subtle interpretation is presented by Gurwitsch. He suggests that while Merleau-Ponty retains the phenomenological reduction as it applies to the “true and exact” (*PhP*, p.53) world of science, because of his existentialism he fails to apply the reduction to the lived world of pre-objective experience. Gurwitsch maintains that, “No transcendental question is raised by Merleau-Ponty as to the constitution of the pre-objective world. On the contrary, he accepts it in its absolute factuality”¹⁴. Like Zaner, Gurwitsch maintains that Merleau-Ponty’s claimed discovery of *être au monde* can only serve to undermine the epoché and subsequent reductions, but that this is only the case in its application to “the pre-objective world as it appears in immediate perceptual experience” (Gurwitsch, 1964, p.171). In utilising this distinction between the life-world and the world of science, Gurwitsch is able to explain how Merleau-Ponty can consistently claim that the reduction is necessarily incomplete and nevertheless castigate others for failing to apply it. For the introspective psychologist is operating at the level of the “true and exact” world of science, not the pre-objective world of lived experience.

But Gurwitsch is wrong to suggest that the epoché is rejected by Merleau-Ponty. Let us look at each of the four aspects of *être au monde* to see which, if any, is in conflict with the epoché. Recall the epoché is a second-order act of parenthesising, or neutralising,¹⁵ which is performed on the first-order judgement of the existence of the world. The epoché is performed on the faculty of judgement. As such, the first aspect of *être au monde* does not appear to be relevant. The fact that perception is not a cognitive act simply goes to show that the epoché cannot be performed on the faculty of perception. Perception is not the sort of thing that can be parenthesised in this way.¹⁶ In fact, *être au monde* is considered by Merleau-Ponty to be quite generally a non-cognitive notion.

Our distinctive way of being is not supposed to be a matter of holding certain beliefs or making certain judgements. This suggests that there simply couldn't be a conflict between this and the epoché. Indeed, there seems no obvious way in which the thought that our primary mode of intentionality is a bodily grip on things (operative intentionality), or the idea that the life-world is essentially ambiguous, could serve to prevent us from making explicit and performing a certain action upon our *belief* in the existence of the world. Since these aspects of *être au monde* say nothing concerning the faculty of judgement, or belief, they do not stand in the way of the full application of the epoché.

Finally, what of externalism? Priest is explicit that it is this aspect of *être au monde* that rules out the possibility of effecting the epoché. Some have argued that the right kind of externalism can serve as a premise in a cogent argument against external world scepticism.¹⁷ But there is surely no convincing line of reasoning from externalism to the claim that we cannot put out of play or neutralise our judgements concerning the world. Externalism is a thesis concerning what determines content. The claim is that the content of one's intentional states is determined, in part, by one's relations to the environment. But externalism says nothing about whether it is an option for one to pay no heed to one's beliefs concerning the reality of that environment. Some forms of externalism maintain that to think about, say, water there must be water in one's environment. If this is the case, then thinking about water is not a possibility for a subject in a waterless world. But, given that there is water in our world and that we can therefore think about water, we are nevertheless perfectly capable of refraining from *using* or *relying upon* our belief in the actual existence of water in our descriptions of phenomena. The point is that, in and of itself, the epoché does not require or presuppose that our perceptions, thoughts etc. could remain as they are even though the world did not actually exist. Rather, the reduction merely asks us to put the belief in such existence to one side. There simply is no conflict between *être au monde* and the full application of the epoché. Given this fact, we should hesitate to attribute such a view to Merleau-Ponty¹⁸.

Our scepticism regarding the standard interpretation of Merleau-Ponty should be further

strengthened when we consider Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *phenomenological world*. Before asserting that Merleau-Ponty's conception of *être au monde* entails a rejection of the reduction, it seems sensible to inquire into what his understanding is of the *world* that we are *being-in*.

According to Merleau-Ponty, this world is the phenomenological world. He writes,

As a meditating Ego [...] I must even set aside from myself my body understood as a thing among things, as a collection of physico-chemical processes. But even if the *cogitatio*, which I thus discover, is without location in objective space and time, it is not without place in the phenomenological world. The world which I distinguished from myself as the totality of things or of processes linked by causal relationships, I rediscover 'in me' as the permanent horizon of all my *cogitationes* and as a dimension in relation to which I am constantly situating myself. The true *Cogito* [...] does away with any kind of idealism in revealing me as '*être au monde*'. (*PhP*, p.xiii).

That we are *être au monde phénoménologique* is revealed by the cogito. The world, relations to which are constitutive of us, is the world *as it appears to consciousness*, as *phenomenon*. But the world as phenomenon, the phenomenological world, is precisely that which survives the phenomenological reduction. As Husserl writes, "As long as the possibility of the phenomenological attitude had not been recognised [...] the phenomenological world had to remain unknown" (*Ideas I*, §33). Thus, Merleau-Ponty's existentialist account of *être au monde* does not signify an adherence or prior commitment to the actuality of the world, it does not represent a rejection of the epoché even as regards the pre-objective world. Rather, *être au monde*, our non-cognitive, pre-objective relation to the world is to be understood—can only be understood—as a relation to the phenomenologically reduced world – the world as it appears. The object of description in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is the phenomenological world. This, of course, is

perfectly consistent with the demand that when we are pursuing phenomenology, we bracket the judgements concerning the actuality of the world that are constitutive of the natural attitude.¹⁹

In response to what I have been arguing, it will be pointed out that, according to at least some commentators, Husserl was an internalist. Furthermore, this internalism was thought, by Husserl, to be supported by the phenomenological reduction. This much is true, Husserl has indeed been thought an internalist. Husserl's claims concerning the phenomenological residuum, the absoluteness of consciousness and its independence from the world have been read as a form of internalism.²⁰ And, whilst this interpretation of Husserl is controversial,²¹ it would indeed signal a respect in which Merleau-Ponty departs from Husserl. For if anything is certain, it is that internalism is inconsistent with externalism. So, if the epoché leads to internalism, and Merleau-Ponty is an externalist, we have found a conflict between *être au monde* and the reduction.

But the internalism (arguably) present in Husserl's talk of the phenomenological residuum, is seen by Merleau-Ponty to be part of the transcendental idealist *context* of Husserl's presentation of the reduction, one which both can and should be jettisoned. In fact, one of Merleau-Ponty's bolder claims is that this was the very direction in which Husserl himself was moving.²² Whatever the merits of that view of Husserl, it seems correct to think that one can retain the epoché as a methodological tool, and yet reject the internalism that has sometimes been thought to be associated with it.²³ For, as I suggested above, the epoché is perfectly consistent with externalism. The ability that we have to parenthesise our beliefs is orthogonal to the debate between internalists and externalists. Therefore, the combination of Merleau-Ponty's externalism and Husserl's supposed internalism does not give us reason to think that Merleau-Ponty rejected the epoché itself. What it gives us reason to suppose, and this is precisely how Merleau-Ponty presents the matter, is that *être au monde* is incompatible with a certain transcendental idealist and internalist reading of the epoché.

There is, however, another respect in which Merleau-Ponty's conception of *être au monde* conflicts with Husserl's presentation of the phenomenological reduction in *Ideas I*. This is that the

ambiguity, indeterminacy and opacity posited by Merleau-Ponty is in conflict with what Merleau-Ponty, rightly or wrongly, takes to be the Husserlian thought that we can give a complete, transparent account of phenomena. Indeed, this fact can help us to see why Merleau-Ponty speaks of “the impossibility of a complete reduction”. Merleau-Ponty writes that, “For a long time [...] the reduction was presented as a return to a transcendental consciousness before which the world is spread out and completely transparent” (*PhP*, p.xi). But this transcendental idealist interpretation of the purpose and significance of the phenomenological reduction is one that Merleau-Ponty evidently rejects. He points out that, “logically consistent transcendent idealism rids the world of its opacity and its transcendence” (*PhP*, pp.xi-xii). And this is not accurate to the phenomenological facts.

At this point it is necessary to distinguish between the opacity claim and the indeterminacy/ambiguity claim. The claim that the world is opaque is the claim that, phenomenologically, we cannot grasp the whole of the world of experience in one go. There is always more to be explored in the world. The world is presented as containing places, or aspects, that are not available to me. The world is not transparent in the sense that I do not and cannot possess it in its entirety. This opacity, “the unmotivated upsurge of the world”, is considered by Merleau-Ponty to be a serious stumbling block for transcendental idealism. As he says, “the phenomenal field [...] places a fundamental difficulty in the way of any attempt to make experience directly and totally explicit [...] If a universal constituting consciousness were possible, the opacity of the fact would disappear.” (*PhP*, pp.60-1).

So Merleau-Ponty’s objection to the transcendental idealist conception of the phenomenological reduction stems from his claim that the epoché reveals a fundamental, non-cognitive and pre-reflective subject-world relation that is opaque. In addition, however, this relationship is, according to Merleau-Ponty, ambiguous and indeterminate, it is not amenable to the kind of reflection supposedly demanded by Husserl. Husserl sometimes writes that properly undertaking the phenomenological reduction will allow us to grasp phenomena in perfect clarity, in

such a way as to make a science of phenomena possible,

That which floats before us in fluid unclarity, with a greater or less intuitional remoteness, must therefore be brought into normal nearness and *made perfectly clear* before it can be used as the basis for a correspondingly valuable eidetic intuition in which the essences and eidetic relationships intended to attain perfect givenness. (*Ideas I*, §67).

The incompleteness of the reduction is the incompleteness of this kind of reflective elucidation. Real life experience is unreflective and analytical reflection cannot grasp it *as such*. This is partly for the reason that reflection actually alters the character of that which is reflected upon. For an example of this, consider the following passage, “I am sitting in my room, and I look at the sheets of white paper lying about [...] If I do not analyse my perception but content myself with the spectacle as a whole, I shall say that all the sheets of paper look equally white. However, some of them are in the shadow of the wall. How is it that they are not less white than the rest? I decide to look more closely [...] provided that in the latter case I assume the ‘analytic attitude’, the sheets change their appearance” (*PhP*, pp.225-226). Here we see analytical reflection actually altering the character of experience.²⁴ When one attends to one’s experience, that experience is thereby firmed up and made more determinate, “attention is...the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon” (*PhP*, p.30).²⁵

So, Merleau-Ponty’s declaration of the impossibility of a complete reduction is directed not toward the reduction considered as the demand to bracket the world, the epoché, but considered as a preliminary to an idealist explication of the constitution of the phenomenal world. His claim is not that we cannot bracket the world. Rather it is that we cannot give a fully transparent account of our experience and the world of ordinary life, for there is an opaque, indeterminate and ambiguous

unreflective experience of the world, upon which the determinate and objective world of science is founded. The impossibility of a complete reduction is the impossibility of making this transparent. As Merleau-Ponty says, “our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux onto which we are trying to seize” (*PhP*, p.xiv). Analytical reflection cannot reflect upon its own unreflective grounds without falsifying the character of that experience.²⁶

In interpreting Merleau-Ponty in this way, I agree with Madison, who maintains that, “by means of the reduction we experience the *failure* of a total reflection, the failure of the attempt to make ourselves transparent to ourselves; we experience the *opacity* of our being” (1981, p.302). What it is important to acknowledge, however, is that this claim is entirely consistent with an acceptance of the epoché as a central principle of phenomenological method. Given Merleau-Ponty’s explicit endorsement of the phenomenological reduction, it seems that we should reject the idea that his existentialist conception of *être au monde* forced him to revise his commitment to the epoché.

III. Phenomenology and Psychology

According to Husserl, when we put the epoché in place, we exclude all the claims of the sciences insofar as those sciences are founded upon the natural attitude’s positing of the world, “all theories and sciences which relate to this world, no matter how well they may be grounded positivistically or otherwise, shall meet the same fate” (*Ideas I*, §32). As is obvious, however, to anyone reading *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes use of a large number of results of the empirical sciences, in particular gestalt psychology. It seems a short step from this observation, to the thought that even if Merleau-Ponty *claims* to perform the epoché, in practice he does nothing of the sort. Merleau-Ponty’s use of gestalt psychology shows that he is not committed to any part of the phenomenological reduction. To evaluate this line of thought, we need to look at Merleau-

Ponty's remarks on that other pillar of Husserlian phenomenological method, the eidetic reduction and the associated notion of eidetic intuition. Husserl writes that, "*along with phenomenological reduction, eidetic intuition is the fundamental form of all particular transcendental methods* (that both of them determine, through and through, the legitimate sense of a transcendental phenomenology)".²⁷ Once we have a proper understanding of Merleau-Ponty's account of these matters, it will become clear that, at least in his own eyes, his use of gestalt psychology is perfectly consistent with the epoché.²⁸

The purpose of the eidetic reduction in Husserl's writings is to bracket any considerations concerning the contingent and accidental, and concentrate on (intuit) the essential natures of the objects and acts of consciousness. Phenomenology is concerned with essence, and the task of the Husserlian phenomenologist is to seize upon essences. As Husserl writes, in *Ideas I*,

An individual object is not merely an individual object, a "This here," an object never repeatable; as qualified "*in itself*" thus and so, it has its own *specific character*, its stock of *essential* predicables which must belong to it (*Ideas I*, §2).

An "essential predicable" is something which must belong to an individual object, something it could not lack. As Levinas makes clear, "The essence of an object is its necessary structure: what makes it what it is"²⁹. On Husserl's account, the intuition of essences proceeds via what he calls free variation in imagination. In attempting to determine an essence, we imagine variations on an object, and ask, "What holds up amid such free variations of an original [...] as the invariant, the necessary, universal form, the essential form, without which something of that kind [...] would be altogether inconceivable?"³⁰ The idea here is that by varying, in imagination, the features of an object, we will eventually come up against something that cannot be varied without destroying that object as an instance of its kind. It will be inconceivable that an object of that kind might lack a given feature and thus, taking inconceivability as a guide to impossibility, we will have seen that the feature in

question is a part of the essence of objects of that kind. Thus, eidetic intuition is an a priori method of gaining knowledge of necessities, to be distinguished from the a posteriori methods of the empirical sciences.³¹

Merleau-Ponty's remarks on the eidetic reduction in *Phenomenology of Perception* are less than transparent. As we shall see, whilst Merleau-Ponty accepted the core of the phenomenological reduction, merely rejecting its idealistic interpretation, the eidetic reduction is subjected to a more serious critique. However, it is wrong to say that Merleau-Ponty completely abandons the eidetic reduction and its associated method of imaginative variation.

To begin with, in line with his view of our pre-reflective *être au monde*, Merleau-Ponty claims that, "Looking for the world's essence is not looking for what it is as an idea once it has been reduced to a theme of discourse; it is looking for what it is as a fact before us, before any thematisation... The eidetic reduction is... the determination to bring the world to light as it is before any falling back on ourselves has occurred, it is the ambition to make reflection emulate the unreflective life of consciousness" (*PhP*, p.xv-xvi). Here, Merleau-Ponty maintains that the essences that phenomenology seeks are going to be the structures of the pre-objective level of experience that underlies all else. As he puts it, "Philosophy descends into the flux of our experience".³² This is arguably, although not obviously, a departure from Husserl, but certainly does not signal any move away from the eidetic reduction itself. There are, however, some puzzling remarks that Merleau-Ponty makes with regards to the eidetic reduction, and a proper understanding of his view requires a perspective on these. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty suggests that imaginative variation is a form of induction,

when we try to comprehend, in direct reflection and without the help of the varied associations of inductive thought, what a perceived moment, or a circle are, we can elucidate this singular fact only by varying it somewhat through the agency of the imagination, and then fastening our thought upon the invariable element of this

mental experience. Thus it is questionable whether thought can ever quite cease to be inductive” (*PhP*, p.63).

Why does Merleau-Ponty liken imaginative variation to induction, and in what way does his conception of this method differ from that of Husserl? To best answer this we need to turn to “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man”, in which this issue is made an explicit theme. Understanding Merleau-Ponty’s position in this work can help us to understand some otherwise puzzling passages in *Phenomenology of Perception*. According to the Husserlian conception of the epoché, we are to bracket all purely scientific knowledge so that we may, via the eidetic method, arrive at a priori and essential knowledge. Phenomenological and empirical methodology are sharply distinguished. But Merleau-Ponty questions this picture. He interprets both induction and imaginative variation in such a way that they turn out to be variants on essentially the same procedure.³³ The result is that the sharp distinction between psychology and phenomenology, held on to by Husserl, is blurred.

First consider the method of seizing upon the essence of F by imaginative variation. We do not deduce the essence of F from the set of real and imaginary examples that we have considered. For we cannot possibly consider all possible examples in their infinite variety. Neither, however, do we notice that all considered Fs have been G (and all non-Gs have been non-F) and then go on to infer that the essence of F is G. For that would be an inductive generalisation of the most basic kind. Rather, eidetic intuition is something between these two. Merleau-Ponty claims that, “insight into essence is an intellectual taking over, a making explicit and clarifying of something concretely experienced” (*PSM*, p.68). The essence is not deduced or inferred, but actually intuited in, or through, the examples considered. This is in line with the interpretation of Husserl offered by Zaner, who claims that, “whatever is thereby made salient, the exemplified, is never given except through, in or by means of the range of individuals which exemplify it [...] *the individual-as-exemplifying, and the invariant-as-exemplified* are necessarily present simultaneously”³⁴. That is,

the essence (invariant) is intuited through the examples, not inferred (either deductively or inductively) from them.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to present a particular interpretation of the method of induction. He rejects the Millian definition of induction as the inference of a general fact from a number of observed examples.³⁵ Science, he claims, does not proceed in such a manner, and the true nature of induction is quite different.³⁶ Merleau-Ponty writes that,

the method actually used by physicists [...] is rather *a reading of the essence*.

Through certain impure and imperfect phenomena, such as the fall of a body on an inclined plane, I read off the free fall of the body, which is theoretically conceived, or forged, by the intellect. That which gives its probable value to the induction and which finally shows that it is truly founded on things is not the number of facts invoked to justify it. No! It is rather the intrinsic clarity which these ideas shed on the phenomena we seek to understand.” (*PSM*, p.69)

Merleau-Ponty's account of induction is perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic, however it can immediately be seen that, if accepted, it blurs distinction between the inductive and the eidetic methods. Each consists of a certain grasping of the essence of a type of phenomenon. The main difference appears to consist in the fact that the scientist grasps the essence by means of real empirically observed examples, whilst the phenomenologist is free to use examples that are merely imaginary. In fact, however, even this distinction is dissolved, since both scientist and phenomenologist are perfectly free to use either real or imaginary examples as and when they see fit (*PSM*, pp.70-71). According to Merleau-Ponty, the inductive and eidetic methods are essentially similar, science (in particular psychology) and philosophy are engaged in the same endeavour: to shed light, by means of essential understanding, on the facts of experience.³⁷ So, in “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man” Merleau-Ponty finds himself in the position of blurring

the distinction between phenomenological and psychological methods.

This assertion might appear implausibly strong. Have I not gone too far in claiming that Merleau-Ponty sees no significant difference between the phenomenological and psychological method? It might be suggested that Merleau-Ponty's use of real, psychologically founded, examples differs in purpose from the use of examples to found generalisations about perception. For isn't Merleau-Ponty's use of psychological examples, most obviously the much discussed case of Schneider, an attempt to *undermine* widely held objectivist, empiricist and intellectualist dogmas concerning perception? That is, is not Merleau-Ponty's use of science purely negative?

It is true that a number of examples that Merleau-Ponty draws from psychological sources are used to such an end. It would be fruitless to deny it. However, by no means all of Merleau-Ponty's psychological examples can be understood on this model. A cursory glance at *Phenomenology of Perception* reveals a widespread reliance on the results of empirical psychology precisely in order to found generalisations concerning perception. As an example, during his discussion of attention, Merleau-Ponty's claims that, "it has long been known that during the first nine months of life, infants distinguish only globally the coloured from the colourless; thereafter coloured areas form into 'warm' and 'cold' shades, and finally the detailed colours are arrived at [...] The first perception of colours properly speaking, then, is a change of the structure of consciousness, the establishment of a new dimension of experience, the setting forth of an *a priori*" (*PhP*, pp.29-30). This statement quite clearly shows Merleau-Ponty using the results of empirical psychology to help found general truths about the nature of perception.

This incorporation of the empirical sciences is not restricted to psychology. In "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man", Merleau-Ponty writes in a general way concerning anthropology and history, stating that "There must be a joining of effort between anthropology as a mere inventory of actual facts and phenomenology as a mere thinking through of possible societies. It is essential that this abstract phenomenology should come into contact with the facts [...] The eidetic of history cannot dispense with factual investigation" (*PSM*, 91-2).

The explanation of such claims in the face of the phenomenological reduction is, I maintain, that Merleau-Ponty blurred the distinction between induction (properly conceived) and the phenomenological method. Indeed, concerning this Merleau-Ponty is explicit, “In presenting the matter as I have, I am pushing Husserl further than he wished to go himself. He never expressly recognised the fundamental homogeneity of these two modes of knowledge, the inductive and the essential [...] Nevertheless his notion of the experienced essence, or an eidetic experience, contains in germ the consequence that I have just drawn from it” (*PSM*, 72).

It seems likely that Merleau-Ponty held this view as early as *Phenomenology of Perception*. For if we suppose as much, we gain an understanding of some rather obscure remarks concerning both the *a priori/a posteriori* and the *necessary/contingent* distinctions. For example, Merleau-Ponty claims that, “The *a priori* is the fact understood, made explicit, and followed through into all the consequences of its latent logic; the *a posteriori* is the isolated and implicit fact [...] distinctions between the *a priori* and the empirical [...] have been done away with” (*PhP*, p.221). Concerning necessity and contingency, he writes that, “Everything in man is a necessity [...] On the other hand, everything in man is contingency [...] Human existence will force us to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because it is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking it in hand.” (*PhP*, p.170). To understand these perplexing statements, first bear in mind that the two distinctions, epistemological and metaphysical, are taken by Merleau-Ponty to stand or fall together. Second, recall that the eidetic method is supposed to bring with it *a priori* knowledge of necessary truths, as the inductive method produces a *posteriori* knowledge of contingent truths. Third, Merleau-Ponty takes himself to have dissolved the distinction between these two methods. Rather than concluding either that phenomenology is empirical, or that science is *a priori*, Merleau-Ponty concludes that these traditional distinctions cannot stand up. That is, the distinctions between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, and between necessary and contingent truths, are both rejected. In their place, Merleau-Ponty sets up a new distinction, between the isolated fact that has not been subjected to eidetic/inductive analysis, and the explicit fact that has been “taken in hand”, i.e. has

had light shed upon it by the eidetic/inductive analysis. We can see, then, that Merleau-Ponty's conception of the eidetic reduction, and his blurring of the distinction between it and the inductive method (properly understood) means, for him, the rejection of the sharp distinction between phenomenology and science, and also the traditional a priori/a posteriori and necessary/contingent distinctions. An understanding of this is quite obviously vital for an understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole.

How then can Merleau-Ponty square his use of gestalt psychology with his acceptance of the phenomenological epoché? It should be clear what answer we are to give. After having performed the epoché, we are to engage in the variation of examples in order to intuit the essence of a phenomenon. But it makes no difference, in Merleau-Ponty's view, whether those examples are gained via our faculty of imagination or are rather brought before our eyes by the empirical psychologist. No doubt the psychologist will not himself engage in parenthesisising the world, but we do. As long as we are careful to accept only those scientific claims which do not essentially rely on the positing of the natural attitude, we are free to adopt the results of the empirical sciences. For example, from within the phenomenological epoché we will not accept the claims of the physicist concerning unobservable entities, but we can happily accept certain results of, for example, gestalt psychology, adding them to our stock of examples that we use to intuit an essence. If a scientific claim does not rely essentially on the positing of the natural attitude, or involve a problematic objectivism, then there is no bar to our accepting it and putting it to work in a phenomenological account of perception.

IV. Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, there is a convincing case to be made for the claim that Merleau-Ponty accepted the fundamental moment of the phenomenological reduction, the epoché. His conception of *être au monde* is not something that could prevent us from bracketing the world, but it is

inconsistent with what Merleau-Ponty saw as the transcendental idealist interpretation that Husserl gave to the epoché. It is this interpretation that Merleau-Ponty rejects. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty does not consider his use of empirical psychology to be in conflict with the epoché. On the contrary, he is at pains to show that phenomenology and psychology cannot be sharply distinguished. The standard view of these issues, that Merleau-Ponty simply rejects the phenomenological reduction and carries out his philosophy whilst accepting the existence of the world, must be revised. In this respect, if not in others, Merleau-Ponty is actually closer to the orthodox Husserlian position than has commonly been acknowledged.³⁸

- ¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p.178. Hereafter referred to as *VI*. In all cases, references are to the English translations.
- ² Not all, however. A notable exception is, S. Heinämaa, “Merleau-Ponty’s Modification of Phenomenology: Cognition, Passion and Philosophy”, *Synthese* 118:1 (1999), pp.49-68; and S. Heinämaa, “From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty’s Interpretation of Husserl’s Reduction”, in T. Toadvine and L. Embree (eds.), *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), pp.127-146. For readings similar to mine see, H. Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd Edition (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969) p.534; and G. B. Madison, *La phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty: une recherche des limites de la conscience* (Editions Klincksieck, 1973); *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, trans. G. B. Madison (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), p.302.
- ³ N. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p.xiv. Hereafter *PhP*. I leave “*être au monde*” untranslated in order to make clear that we are dealing with a notion that differs from Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world”. Just as there are obvious affinities between the two, there are also important differences.
- ⁴ R. M. Zaner, *The Problem of Embodiment: Some Contributions to a Phenomenology of the Body* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p.142.
- ⁵ E. Husserl, *Die Idee der Phänomenologie. Fünf Vorlesungen* (1907), *Husserlania II*, ed. W. Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950); *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. L. Hardy (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), p.30
- ⁶ E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* (1913), *Husserlania III*, ed. K. Schuhmann (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976); *Ideas Pertaining to A Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), §32. Hereafter *Ideas I*.
- ⁷ This is what Dreyfus calls “absorbed coping”. See, for example, H. Dreyfus, “A Merleau-Pontyian Critique of Husserl’s and Searle’s Representationalist Accounts of Action”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100:3 (2000), pp.287-302.
- ⁸ R. C. Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963), p.164.
- ⁹ E. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002), p. 34.
- ¹⁰ T. Carmen and M. B. N. Hansen, “Introduction”, in T. Carmen and M. B. N. Hansen (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.8.
- ¹¹ S. Priest, *Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.24.
- ¹² A similar view is expressed in, R. McClamrock, *Existential Cognition: Computational Minds in the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp.187-188.
- ¹³ Also see the quotation from *VI* with which I began the present paper.
- ¹⁴A. Gurwitsch, *The Field of Consciousness* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1964), p.171.
- ¹⁵ M. Brainard, *Belief and its Neutralization: Husserl’s System of Phenomenology in Ideas I* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).
- ¹⁶ This point is well made in S. Heinämaa, “Merleau-Ponty’s Modification of Phenomenology”.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, G. McCulloch, *The Life of the Mind: An Essay on Phenomenological Externalism* (London: Routledge, 2003), Ch.7.
- ¹⁸ Although it is frequently claimed, it might in fact be questioned whether Merleau-Ponty really is an externalist in the

contemporary sense, since those ‘external’ items that are partly constitutive of the subject are the *phenomenal* body and the *phenomenal* world – things within experience. This is an interesting question, but not one that I need decide here. I just note that if such an interpretation is correct, there is even less reason to think that *être au monde* is incompatible with the epoché.

- ¹⁹ Of course, this is not the full story. Merleau-Ponty goes on to identify the real world with the phenomenological world. He bases his argument on an account of the roots of meaning, and concludes that, “We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive” *PhP*, p.xvi. However, this in no way impugns the above argument. It is, rather, a sign of Merleau-Ponty’s conviction that the phenomenological reduction gives no aid to the sceptic.
- ²⁰ See, for example, H. Dreyfus, “Introduction”, in H. Dreyfus and H. Hall (eds.), *Husserl, Intentionality and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982).
- ²¹ For a recent statement of dissent, see D. Zahavi, “Husserl’s Noema and the Internalism-Externalism Debate”, *Inquiry* 47:1 (2004), 42-66.
- ²² See, D. Zahavi, “Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: A Reappraisal”, in T. Toadvine and L. Embree (eds.), *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), pp.3-29.
- ²³ On this point I agree with T. M. Seebohm, “The Phenomenological Method: A Tradition without Method? Merleau-Ponty and Husserl”, in T. Toadvine and L. Embree (eds.), *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), p.62.
- ²⁴ For a contemporary cognitive psychologist who is sensitive to this concern, see A. J. Marcel, “Introspective Report: Trust, Self-Knowledge and Science”, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10 (2003), pp.167-186.
- ²⁵ It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty describes a new mode of reflection, phenomenological, or radical, reflection, “Consciousness must be faced with its own unreflective life in things and awakened to its own history which it was forgetting: such is the true part that philosophical reflection has to play, and thus do we arrive at a true theory of attention.” (*PhP*, p.31).
- ²⁶ It may well be that Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of Husserl concerning both opacity and indeterminacy are rather unfair, especially given Husserl’s frequent emphasis on both passive synthesis and on morphological essences. It is, however, not my present purpose to judge the plausibility of Merleau-Ponty’s view, but to get it right.
- ²⁷ E. Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vortrager*, Husserlania I, edited by S. Strasser (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950); *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. D. Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), p.72.
- ²⁸ It must be admitted that Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of science sometimes adopts the perspective of science itself, with its attendant belief in the existence of the world. In this way Merleau-Ponty attempts a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of that viewpoint, “we shall take objective thought on its own terms and not ask it any questions it does not ask itself. If we are led to rediscover experience behind it, this shift of ground will be attributable only to the difficulties which objective thought itself raises.” (*PhP*, 71-71). This in no way undermines the claim that in his own positive phenomenology Merleau-Ponty accepts the epoché.
- ²⁹ E. Levinas, *Théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Alcan, 1930; Vrin, 1963); *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, Second Edition, trans. A. Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), p.109.
- ³⁰ E. Husserl, *Phänomenologische Psychologie, Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1925*, Husserlania IX, edited by W. Beigel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962); *Phenomenological Psychology, Lectures Summer Semester 1925*, trans. J. Scanlon (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), §9a.
- ³¹ D. Bell, *Husserl* (London: Routledge, 1990), Ch. III, takes a rather dim view of eidetic intuition. On the other hand R. Sokolowski, “The Theory of Phenomenological Description”, in D. Ihde and H. J. Silverman (eds.), *Descriptions*

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), and D. Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp.38-39, take a more positive view, suggesting that the method is simply a version of what philosophers do all the time under the heading "conceptual analysis". Eidetic intuition is defended against a number of common objections in J. N. Mohanty, *Transcendental Phenomenology: An Analytic Account* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp.25-38.

³² M. Merleau-Ponty, *Les Sciences de l'homme et la phénoménologie* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1975); "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man", trans. J. Wild, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. J. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.49. Hereafter *PSM*.

³³ For a similar view of the relation between induction and eidetic method, see D. M. Levin, "Induction and Husserl's Theory of Eidetic Variation", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 29:1 (1968), pp.1-15

³⁴ R. M. Zaner, "Examples and Possibilities", *Research in Phenomenology* 3 (1973), p.38.

³⁵"Induction...consists in inferring from some individual instances in which a phenomenon is observed to occur, that it occurs in all instances of a certain class", J. S. Mill., *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*. Eighth Edition (London: Longman's, Green and Co, 1906), p.200.

³⁶ Of course, *some* scientific reasoning does proceed along the lines of Mill's definition. Merleau-Ponty's claim must be seen as normative. He sees his own account of induction as the proper method of the empirical sciences.

³⁷ This is perfectly consistent with the obvious fact that Merleau-Ponty spends a great deal of effort arguing that a wide variety of phenomena cannot be adequately understood via the scientific viewpoint. Merleau-Ponty's critique of science is a critique of the tendency of science to engage in objective thought. See, J. Rouse, "Merleau-Ponty's Existential Conception of Science", in T. Carmen and M. B. N. Hansen (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.265-290.

³⁸ Thanks to Ann Whittle, Mike Martin, Rob Mossop and two anonymous referees for *Inquiry*, all of whom have provided me with insightful comments.