

# COPING WITH NONCONCEPTUALISM? ON MERLEAU-PONTY AND MCDOWELL

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Does Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology matter to recent debates concerning nonconceptual content? Prima facie the answer might be no; the debate has been largely a matter for analytic philosophers, often following the basic terms set out in Gareth Evans's *The Varieties of Reference* and John McDowell's ensuing critique of Evans in *Mind and World*.<sup>1</sup> But despite its analytic roots, for some this debate provides fertile ground for combining Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. In particular, several scholars, including Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus, have argued that existential phenomenology, of the type found in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, supports Evans's idea that there is a nonconceptual component to human experience. Merleau-Ponty is thus also used to argue against McDowell.

It is not clear, however, that Merleau-Ponty's work has been presented correctly in the debate. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is pertinent to contemporary concerns, but it is (qualifiedly) wrong to put Merleau-Ponty with the supporters of nonconceptual content. Or so this essay will contend. While Merleau-Ponty would most likely disagree with McDowell on many issues, such points of disagreement are not really conveyed by the recent literature, and that literature also misses certain aspects of Merleau-Ponty's work that display an affinity with McDowell's aims. Ultimately, using Merleau-Ponty to make arguments in favor of nonconceptual content runs counter to the general aims of his phenomenology.

To frame the argument, I will briefly present an overview of the nonconceptualist position, with an eye to providing context for evaluating Merleau-Ponty's potential contribution. Then I will examine the most prominent arguments for interpreting *Phenomenology of Perception* as contributing to the nonconceptualist side. Following this it will be shown that those arguments misconstrue the differences between

Merleau-Ponty and McDowell by understating and overstating, respectively, the rationalism present in their views, and by missing the role that intersubjectivity, language, and culture play in the works of both.

## Evans and the Basis of Nonconceptualism

One initial way to link Merleau-Ponty to the debate over nonconceptual content (which is noted in the introduction to the recent *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*) is to draw a line from Merleau-Ponty to Gareth Evans through Charles Taylor.<sup>2</sup> Evans played a crucial role in introducing the notion of nonconceptual perceptual content back into contemporary philosophy. And in the middle of his most influential discussion of nonconceptual content, he draws crucial insights on perception from Taylor's essay "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments."<sup>3</sup> Taylor, in turn, takes Merleau-Ponty's conception of "embodied agency" to be central to his arguments.<sup>4</sup> So it seems that Merleau-Ponty played an indirect role in bringing about the current debate over nonconceptual content.

In the portion of *The Varieties of Reference* that contains the Taylor/Merleau-Ponty connection, Evans argues that there is an "information-link between subject and object, which provides the subject with (nonconceptual) information about the states and doings of the [perceived] object."<sup>5</sup> This information is not necessarily part of conscious experience, nor is it necessarily thought about. It may become "the input to a thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system," but it is important to note that such a conceptual system stands separately from the information system which provides the inputs.<sup>6</sup> As Evans put it:

I am not requiring that the content of conscious experience itself be conceptual content. All I am requiring for conscious experience is that the subject exercise some concepts—have some

thoughts—and that the content of those thoughts should depend systematically upon the informational properties of the input.<sup>7</sup>

So perception presents us with information that provides a kind of raw material to be conceptualized through our thinking and reasoning activities.

Such thinking and reasoning activities involve applying concepts, which Evans thinks must fit the so-called “Generality Constraint.” According to this view, conceptual thoughts are structured and thus decomposable and recomposable. So, for instance, having the thought “John is happy” means that we have the concepts “John” and “happy” and can use them to form other thoughts of the type “John is x” and “Y is happy” (wherein “x” is a concept that could be possibly predicated of John, like “sad,” and “Y” is a concept that could possibly be the subject of the predicate “happy,” like “Harry”).<sup>8</sup> Conceptual thought thus requires such structured elements, and this compositional structure and generality is not to be found in nonconceptual experience.

While Evans’s discussion of nonconceptual content is incomplete, several of his suggestions have become crucial for subsequent, more developed arguments.<sup>9</sup> Three of those suggestions are most important for the references to Merleau-Ponty: the “richness argument,” the “noncognitive disposition argument,” and the “animal/human continuity argument.”<sup>10</sup>

The richness argument holds that there is too much to the content of our perceptions for us to be able to parse it out conceptually. The root of the argument is Evans’s assertion that “no account of what it is to be in a nonconceptual informational state can be given in terms of dispositions to exercise concepts unless those concepts are assumed to be endlessly fine-grained.”<sup>11</sup> But this would seem to overly strain our perceptual abilities. As Richard Heck helpfully puts the point:

Consider your current perceptual state—and now imagine what a complete description of the way the world appears to you at this moment might be like. Surely a thousand words would hardly begin to do the job. And it is not just that the description would be long; rather, it seems hard to imagine . . . that you now possess all the

concepts that would be expressed by the words occurring in such a description, even if one could be framed.<sup>12</sup>

We presumably do not have a generalizable, compositional concept for every fine-grained aspect of experience, and we thus cannot involve such contents in active thinking.

The precognitive disposition argument picks up on another aspect of perception. There are seemingly elements to our experience that guide or initiate action without our actively thinking about them. As Evans notes, “we do not have to *think* or *calculate* which way to turn our heads (say) in order to look for the source of [a] sound.” Thus, perception “consists at least partly in being disposed to do various things.”<sup>13</sup> And as Sean Kelly points out, Evans does not mean that there could be calculation happening non-consciously; rather, the perceiver is disposed to act when such perceptual content is encountered without any cognitive acts taking place.<sup>14</sup> This content may well be quite meaningful to us insofar as it motivates or solicits important actions, yet is not conceptual, insofar as it is not actively thought.

Evans also takes exception to philosophical theories that understand perception in terms of belief, because belief involves a sophisticated mental ability, while perception seems to be more primitive. Along these lines he notes that perception is something that, “after all, we share with animals . . . [we cannot] properly understand the mechanism whereby we gain information from others unless we realize that it is already operative at a stage of human intellectual development that pre-dates the applicability of the more sophisticated notion.”<sup>15</sup> If we assume that all human experience is marked by belief (as a conceptualist presumably would), we would then seem to deny that humans share aspects of their mentality with nonhuman animals (and human infants) that are not capable of such sophisticated cognitive states. Since we are continuous with nonhuman animals in that we share perception with them, it must be the case that the information system is not marked by concepts. So goes the animal/human continuity argument.<sup>16</sup>

These arguments do not necessarily canvas all Evans’s ideas. They represent, however, the primary areas where Merleau-Ponty’s work

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has been inserted into the debates over nonconceptual content. Thus they should help guide the next section, which will look at the recent scholarship on Merleau-Ponty's supposed nonconceptualism.

### Merleau-Pontyian Versions of Evans's Arguments

Various ideas developed in *Phenomenology of Perception* might be used to support the view that there is nonconceptual content in perceptual experience, and thus support Evans's views. We can get a good sense of this by examining Merleau-Ponty's perceptual holism, and the notions of context-dependence and indeterminacy that go with it.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the Gestalt figure-background framework "is the very definition of the phenomenon of perception," because the "perceptual 'something' is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a 'field.'"<sup>17</sup> This is not some kind of homogenous condition of possibility for any perceptual experience. Even if any perception in general must take on such a structure, the crucial point is that there must be a *particular* background present for a *particular* figure to emerge. Perception can only happen within a specific holistic context.

For Sean Kelly, this kind of context dependence shows that there is nonconceptual content.<sup>18</sup> And he takes Merleau-Ponty to present a strong argument in this regard. Consider Merleau-Ponty's discussion of perceiving a blue carpet that "would never be the same blue were it not a woolly blue."<sup>19</sup> The idea here is that perceived properties are dependent upon the objects of which they are perceived to be properties. To use an example suggested by Kelly, the blue of a shiny steel ball would be a different blue from the blue of the woolly carpet, even if they might in some sense be the same shade. Concepts could not grasp such qualities because they would have to be fine grained enough to specify every possible context. But then they wouldn't be concepts at all, because they would be so specific as to not be generalizable. So if Merleau-Ponty is correct about the holistic nature of perception, this would seem to imply that perceptual experiences are so context-sensitive that they must contain nonconceptual content. Thus Kelly

supports a specific version of Evans's richness argument, and finds that argument in Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty's holism raises another issue that can be used to argue for nonconceptualism. Often, defenders of holism attend to how their theories enable one to discern *determinate* content out of the holistic network. Counter to this aim, though, Merleau-Ponty asserts that "we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon." This discussion of indeterminacy is a part of a criticism of the idea that the "meaning" of objects in our visual field are "fully developed and determinate." If this were the case, the totality of objects perceived at any point would have to be determinate, and thus we ought to see a delimited area with clear borders. But our visual fields are not like that, rather "there occurs here an indeterminate vision, a vision of something or other, and, to take the extreme case, what is behind my back is not without some element of visual presence." Objects and qualities, as we experience them, are not actually distinct things which attract our attention singularly. They arise, Merleau-Ponty points out, in an atmosphere of indeterminacy and take on "an equivocal meaning" which has "an expressive value rather than logical signification."<sup>20</sup>

Lilian Alweiss has argued that this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought damages McDowell's conceptualist view. Because McDowell wants all experience to be conceptually ordered, Alweiss argues that he must hold that all experience is completely divided up into units of determinate content by that conceptual ordering. She thus claims that for McDowell, "what is given in experience are facts which are transparent. . . . Merleau-Ponty, in turn, questions whether perceptual experience is necessarily transparent."<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on indeterminacy keeps him from thinking that perceptual experience is transparent. Because of its holistic character, experience is full of "grey areas," so to speak, and thus cannot be made up entirely of objective, determinable, transparent content.

Thus, on Alweiss's view, if Merleau-Ponty is right about the indeterminate, ambiguous, holistic nature of experience, experience must contain nonconceptual content. This argument trades on the same basic point as the richness argument: If we attend to what our everyday

experience is really like, we will see that a good part of it slips away from generalized concepts. In this case, the problem is not that our concepts are not fine-grained enough to grasp our experience, but that our experience is not, so to speak, divided into "grains" at all, whether fine or course.

In making her argument, Alweiss notes that "Merleau-Ponty argues that we have a 'pre-theoretical' or indeterminate understanding of the world."<sup>22</sup> "Pre-theoretical" here means not thought through or cognized; the idea is that our experience is rooted in a precognitive background. Alweiss's statement suggests that "pre-theoretical" and "indeterminate" are the same, but this is clearly false; one could, in principle, experience objects that are fully determinate but not have yet grasped that in thought (and thus the experience is "pre-theoretical"). Nonetheless, it is reasonable to link Merleau-Ponty's notion that our experience is rooted in a noncognitive background to his holism more generally, insofar as both points lead to the contention that our experience is not divided up into discrete thinkable contents.

One of Merleau-Ponty's primary aims in *Phenomenology of Perception* is to show how "consciousness must be faced with its own unreflective life in things."<sup>23</sup> The general point of such a claim is that our experience is not made up entirely of explicit mental acts. We take for granted an unreflective lived context that provides a background for our activities. In a critical discussion of McDowell's *Mind and World*, Charles Taylor argues that the notion of the precognitive background in Merleau-Ponty (and Heidegger) is close to the point that Evans is trying to make in describing the nonconceptual information system. There must be a pre-conceptual background out of which our actively rational activities emerge, and McDowell cannot account for this.<sup>24</sup>

In the process of linking Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Evans, Taylor also connects all three, unsurprisingly, to Hubert Dreyfus's discussions of "coping." In much of his work (including his recent discussions of Merleau-Ponty), Dreyfus has been most interested in describing the ways in which human beings, as embodied subjects, get along practically in the world. This everyday getting along in the world is what he calls "coping," and he argues

that everyday coping is generally noncognitive.

Descriptions of skill acquisition and skillful activity are used to make this point. Dreyfus first argues that the learner moves from rule-following, which has a cognitive basis, to having a noncognitive openness to the world. To progress, the student must learn to respond in appropriate ways to lived situations that are far too complex to be cognitively represented. This movement reaches its peak with the expert, who "thanks to a vast repertoire of situational discriminations . . . sees how to achieve his goal," and this "allows the immediate intuitive situational response that is characteristic of expertise."<sup>25</sup> Those at lower levels still need to occasionally make conscious decisions, but the expert has moved completely away from cognition to an intuitive openness to the world.

Furthermore, most everyday activity is in some sense what Dreyfus calls expert activity. This might seem like an odd claim when one thinks of being an expert at difficult tasks. The notion that standard activity is expert activity might make more sense, however, if we consider that the average person is "expert" at everyday activities like walking, drinking out of a glass, and sitting down in a chair. The majority of the things we do each day require little cognition. Merleau-Ponty links such everyday "background" coping abilities to something he calls the "intentional arc," and this is a concept that figures prominently in Dreyfus's work. Dreyfus describes it in terms of a "feedback loop"; as people deal with more practical situations, they "acquire more and more selective responses."<sup>26</sup> He commonly cites the following passage by Merleau-Ponty on the intentional arc:<sup>27</sup>

The life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life—is subtended by an "intentional arc" which projects round about us our past, our future, [and] our human setting.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between embodied actor and world forms a kind of circuit that becomes enriched as it develops, and this becomes the basis for most of our daily action. This is the sense in which life is "subtended" by the intentional arc; it provides the basis upon which specialized forms of action can take place. For Dreyfus, this conception of the intentional arc

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leads to a kind of foundationalism; there is a fundamental level of embodied coping which is "self-sufficient, constant, and pervasive," and thus separable from our higher-level "mindedness."<sup>29</sup> Though Taylor denies foundationalism, he asserts that "coping is prior and pervasive," thus echoing the sentiment that there is a constant element of our experience that supports, and is at least in principle separable from, our conceptual cognitive activities. Thus Dreyfus and Taylor provide, using Merleau-Ponty, a more fully developed version of Evans's noncognitive disposition argument.

Taylor further asserts that thinking about coping in the proper (nonconceptual) way helps us understand our connections with non-human animals in ways that McDowell's view cannot, and thus he takes up the animal/human continuity argument.<sup>30</sup> More directly Dreyfus states that if we side with McDowell, we must deny the "more basic perceptual capacities we seem to share with prelinguistic infants and higher animals"<sup>31</sup> Neither Taylor nor Dreyfus cites Merleau-Ponty on the link between humans and animals, but both take him to support the animal/human continuity argument at least indirectly, insofar as they take it to be supported by their theory of coping, which they in turn take to be Merleau-Pontyan.

Given this initial exposition of the arguments, it seems as though the link between Merleau-Ponty and Evans is, philosophically at least, even stronger than the indirect link noted earlier. It also seems as though in giving specific versions of the types of arguments marshaled by Evans in favor of nonconceptual content, Merleau-Ponty presents strong opposition to McDowell. As it turns out, though, the nonconceptualist reading of Merleau-Ponty ignores certain crucial elements in his work that speak against such an interpretation.

### Some Problems with the Foregoing Arguments

One might wonder, at this point, why McDowell would disagree with the idea that we are presented in perception with certain "information" that is at first nonconceptual. His rejection of nonconceptual content is driven by the fact that it is wrong to hold "that judgments of experience are 'based upon' ex-

perience even though these relations are supposed to hold across a boundary that encloses spontaneity."<sup>32</sup> Perception plays a role in justifying our beliefs, and our empirical beliefs can clearly be right or wrong. But if perceptual contents are nonconceptual, they would seemingly enter thinking as "a brute impact from the exterior," which would only "offer exculpations when we wanted justifications."<sup>33</sup> If perceptions play a role in truly justifying our beliefs, they must be somehow graspable in a conceptual manner, because our act of justifying beliefs involves conceptual thought. Evans's notion of the "information system" obscures this fact.

From a certain perspective, it might seem fairly obvious that Merleau-Ponty would disagree with McDowell. After all, Merleau-Ponty focused a good deal of his energies on describing how our engagement with the world is based in our embodied actions. McDowell's emphasis on concepts, on the other hand, might seem to forsake the body in favor of the mind. This difference would perhaps become even more pronounced when one considers the link McDowell makes between conceptualism and rationalism. For experience to be conceptually articulated is for it to be connected to rationality, such that for McDowell "another way of putting my claim is to say that our perceptual experience is permeated with rationality."<sup>34</sup> *Prima facie*, Merleau-Ponty's persistent attacks on "intellectualism" in *Phenomenology of Perception* speak against such rationalism.<sup>35</sup>

But looked at from another perspective, Merleau-Ponty and McDowell have a fair bit in common. In an essay on *Mind and World* of which McDowell generally approves, Richard Bernstein situates McDowell's work in the Hegelian tradition of overcoming Kantian dualisms, and notes that for McDowell "the essential relation that we, as thinking and knowing beings, have to the world is one of openness to the world with no fixed boundaries."<sup>36</sup> In describing McDowell in this (fairly uncontroversial) way, Bernstein means to connect McDowell's work to the Continental tradition that follows Hegel, and that is a tradition into which Merleau-Ponty obviously falls. Merleau-Ponty is clearly interested in establishing our openness to the world, as seen when he rejects St. Augustine's remark regard-

ing truth inhabiting the inner man, because "there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself."<sup>37</sup> And even Taylor links McDowell to Merleau-Ponty insofar as they both critique dualist epistemology, though he goes on to say that Merleau-Ponty, like Evans, improves on McDowell's work by rooting his view in our "preconceptual engagement" with the world.<sup>38</sup>

But connecting Merleau-Ponty's view with Evans's in this regard might obscure more than it illuminates. Consider McDowell's response to Taylor's criticism:

Taylor's worry is that . . . I deny myself insights from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, according to which conceptual capacities are embedded in a pre-intellectual mode of living in the world. But Evans portrays empirical judgments, not as *embedded* in a holistic background of pre-conceptual coping, but as *based on* nonconceptually received content. . . . Evans conceives empirical judgment as converting already particulate nonconceptual content into conceptual form.<sup>39</sup>

Evans's view includes a kind of dualism between the nonconceptual and conceptual, and this is precisely why McDowell rejects it; such a dualism leaves the transition between the two mysterious. Seeing perception and action as embedded in a holistic background, which is not Evans's view, would perhaps not imply such a mysterious dualism. And while he does not speak much of such embeddedness in a background, McDowell says that "I am not sure how much of a divergence this reflects from Taylor's 'continental' thought."<sup>40</sup> He does not say much more, but when one pursues this thought, it turns out that, between Merleau-Ponty and McDowell at least, there is not nearly as much divergence as some think. One only mistakenly sees a large divergence when one underestimates Merleau-Ponty's rationalism, and overestimates McDowell's.

Merleau-Ponty's way of describing our openness to the world is, crucially, not entirely devoid of rationalism. The rationalist strain in *Phenomenology of Perception* corresponds most directly to Merleau-Ponty's project of "radical reflection."<sup>41</sup> Such reflection is groundless and infinite, not based on postulates or aimed at a definite conclusion. It "re-

veals the world as strange and paradoxical," rather than rationally complete, but Merleau-Ponty still aims to engage in philosophical reflection, and speaks even of "making explicit our primordial knowledge."<sup>42</sup> In other words, his phenomenology aims to reflectively explicate our relation to the world which is initially noncognitive.

But this point should not be overstated; Merleau-Ponty also tells us that if one unfolded "all the presuppositions in what I call my reason . . . we should always find experiences which *have not been made explicit* . . . which determines its significance."<sup>43</sup> So philosophy aims to reflectively explicate our experience, but that experience can never be made completely explicit. Rational reflection thus takes on a special task:

The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.<sup>44</sup>

The task of reflection is not rational in a narrow sense, because it is not merely the unfolding of a "pre-existing reason." It is also a creative act which involves wading through indeterminacy and making sense out of ambiguity. But this is still broadly an act of rationality, insofar as it involves a kind of making sense of the world. And this should not be underestimated in Merleau-Ponty's thought.

This conception of reflection connects well with some of McDowell's main concerns, though that can be difficult to see. When McDowell says that our experience is "permeated with rationality," it might sound as though he is denying the indeterminacy that Merleau-Ponty thinks goes hand in with reflection. If rationality touches all points of our experience, everything should be made clear to our thinking, and Alweiss's comments regarding McDowell's views on the "transparency" of experience would hold. But the rhetoric of the phrase "permeated with rationality" perhaps does a bit of injustice to McDowell's view.

First, McDowell is clear that rational thought, in the form of the *active* conceptualizing of experience, is not always on the scene. This is seen in his discussion, in *Mind and World*, of the passivity of experience. One should not conflate the act of thinking with the

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content of thinking, and we need to keep the two separate to understand the interplay of passivity and activity in McDowell's theory. Insofar as there is passivity, there is a claim that the world taken up in receptivity is independent of acts of thought. We do not actively construct the world through thinking, judging etc. But we also do not need to go so far as to separate the world from thinkable contents. As McDowell puts it:

[Passive, empirical] constraint comes from outside thinking, but not from outside what is thinkable. When we trace justifications back, the last thing we come to is still a thinkable content; not something more ultimate than that, a bare pointing to a bit of the Given. But these final thinkable contents are put into place in operations of receptivity, and that means that when we appeal to them we register the required constraint on thinking from a reality external to it.<sup>45</sup>

So receptivity is passive insofar as the contents given to our thought come from outside our active thinking and judging, but they come in a form that makes them a content of thought that can be taken up actively.

This part of McDowell's view clearly poses a problem for the arguments built on Merleau-Ponty's discussion of indeterminacy. In response to Alweiss, McDowell argues that one need not believe that all experience is determinate in order to think that it is conceptual; one could minimally believe that all experience is in some sense *determinable*.<sup>46</sup> He makes the same claim in response to Taylor, and conjectures that Taylor mistakenly sees a gulf between *Mind and World* and Merleau-Ponty's thought because "Taylor works with a notion of conceptual capacities according to which they are in play only when things come into focus." And he continues to say that "I do not see why we should accept this connection between conceptuality and determinacy."<sup>47</sup> All McDowell is asserting is that experience comes in a form that can be taken up in active thinking and judging, and this is where his rationalism should not be overestimated. His view does not do away with the possibility of indeterminacy, it only does away with the possibility that experience is so intractably indeterminate that it cannot become the content of a judgment.

Merleau-Ponty clearly does not think indeterminacy is so intractable. He aims to show how experience can be taken up in active thinking; he also stresses that such thinking must be creative and go beyond the bounds of (without forsaking) logic and science.<sup>48</sup> This is the point, for instance, of his discussions of Cézanne; like philosophical and scientific thinking, Cézanne's painting is driven by the "will to seize the meaning of the world."<sup>49</sup> Clearly, "seizing the meaning of the world," cannot, for Merleau-Ponty, mean dividing the world up entirely into discrete thinkable contents; as the discussion above notes rational explication is never complete in this way. But it is just as clearly the case that for Merleau-Ponty indeterminacy and determinacy go hand in hand, and he does not thus mean to argue that indeterminacy excludes conceptual thinking. Cézanne is, in his own way, bringing the world into active thinking.

The foregoing also weakens Kelly's use of the richness argument. One would not have to think that a specific color concept could completely determine the content of any and all color experience, irrespective of context, in order to agree with McDowell's general point.<sup>50</sup> One would only have to think that the experience of the specific context is always already thinkable and judgeable. In this case, what was said above about Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on indeterminacy playing a role in determining the perceptual figure holds as well. The context of a perception plays a dynamic role in our ability to discern perceptual content in a way such that it can actively be taken up in thought. This is a part of what "seizing the meaning of the world" is meant to accomplish.

Seen in this light, these supposed Merleau-Pontyan arguments against McDowell seem to be attacking a straw man who believes that the world is always present in human experience in discrete thinkable contents. Neither McDowell nor Merleau-Ponty thinks this. They also both do think that the contents of human experience can be somehow seized and understood. While they might disagree over how one comes to seize the meaning of experience (McDowell does not speak of art in the same way that Merleau-Ponty does, for instance) they are allied in that they believe this act in general to be a crucial aspect of being hu-

man, as will be further shown in the next section.

### Merleau-Ponty and McDowell on Second Nature and the Human World

The foregoing discussion does not fully address Dreyfus and Taylor's claims regarding our noncognitive relation to the world, or the continuity between animals and humans. These arguments also lose their force when one looks more closely at *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this case, it is important to note the similarities between Merleau-Ponty's early work and McDowell's discussion of *Bildung* and second nature.

McDowell's impetus for discussing second nature is to show that one can account for our rational activities as being both *sui generis* and a part of nature. Rationality (the "logical space of reasons") is *sui generis*, insofar as it cannot be reduced, as "bald naturalism" would have it, to the "logical space in which natural scientific investigation achieves its distinctive kind of understanding."<sup>51</sup> But rationality is still natural, insofar as a particular part of nature, the human animal, is, by its nature, initiated into rational capacities. McDowell describes this initiation by using the German term *Bildung*, which refers to the ways in which humans are raised into a particular culture and tradition, and see themselves as taking up a part of that tradition. Language is, further, taken to be the repository of that tradition, such that initiation into rationality involves initiation into language use and the cultural institutions that are carried on through that language use.<sup>52</sup>

Merleau-Ponty stresses something similar, and this point can be seen in various references to the uniqueness of the human world or human order. Prior to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argued in *The Structure of Behavior* that "the word 'life' does not have the same meaning in animality and humanity."<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, this discussion makes clear that language plays a crucial role in forming what Merleau-Ponty calls there the human order. First, he stresses that children must in some way be predisposed to engage in linguistic activity. He also stresses in this section that we should not "forget the role which language plays in the constitution of the perceived world."<sup>54</sup>

This discussion of the human order suggests that Merleau-Ponty agrees with McDowell to some extent on the idea that by taking up a linguistic tradition, human life is transformed. This is echoed in *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, which contains notes from a lecture course of the same name given at the University of Paris a few years after the publication of *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>55</sup> There, while Merleau-Ponty stresses that babies have certain expressive abilities prior to language (for example, he notes facial expressions and babbling), he also emphasizes that the baby's normal environment is already filled with the language of the adults around it. In this regard he repeats the claim of another psychologist that "the child bathes in language."<sup>56</sup> Not only is language always present in our experience, but it transforms our experience:

Language is the indissoluble extension of all physical activity, and at the same time it is quite new in relation to that physical activity. Speech emerges from the "total language" as constituted by gestures, mimics, etc. . . . *But speech transforms*. . . . Language introduces itself as a superstructure, that is, as a phenomenon that is already a witness to another order.<sup>57</sup>

For those of us who, since birth, have "bathed" in language, experience is transformed, and brought to another order.

This same point regarding the special nature of the human world, and the importance of language in shaping this world, is repeated in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This is stated most clearly in the following passage from the chapter on speech:

It is impossible to superimpose on man a lower layer of behavior which one chooses to call "natural," followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world. Everything is both manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behavior which does not owe something to purely biological being—and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life.<sup>58</sup>

This is close to an explicit rejection of Dreyfus's foundationalism. There is no "natural" lower layer that we might share with non-human animals. There are certainly elements



that we share, but no shared *layer*. Because “everything is both manufactured and natural in man,” that supposed bottom layer is transformed for human beings.

Immediately after the just-quoted passage, Merleau-Ponty notes that linguistic meaning does not exhaust all forms of meaning-giving activity we have at our disposal. But he goes on to say language justly seems special to us, because “alone of all expressive processes, speech is able to settle into a sediment and constitute an acquisition for use in human relationships.” And he further notes that “there is one particular cultural object which is destined to play a crucial role in the perception of other people: language.”<sup>59</sup> It is important that he says language plays a role in the *perception* of the other; this implies that language is not layered on top of our basic perceptual activity, but is a crucial part of it.

In keeping with the assertion of the uniqueness of the human order, the human relationships that are shaped by language are emphasized time and again in *Phenomenology of Perception*. For example, very early in the text, before the chapters that explicitly discuss language or intersubjectivity, Merleau-Ponty criticizes empiricism in the following way:

It is, then, desirable to point out everything that is made incomprehensible by empiricist constructions. . . . They hide from us in the first place “the cultural world” or “human world” in which nevertheless almost our whole life is led. . . . There is nothing [for empiricism] in the appearance of a landscape, an object or a body whereby it is predestined to look “gay” or “sad,” “lively” or “dreary,” “elegant” or “coarse.”<sup>60</sup>

This passage comes in the midst of an argument that is meant to show that empiricism cannot account for the sense in which our encounter with the world is meaningful. And as this passage shows, the kind of “meaning” goes beyond coping. The human world is not just the world of pragmatic coping. It is the world of culture, the world wherein things can be elegant or dreary. A proper conception of fully human experience shows that through culture and language, that experience takes on contents that move beyond our precognitive dispositions to act.

Culture may be a vague or diffuse idea generally, but no matter what it means, it has to refer in some way to something that is created by and shared amongst a human group, and sedimented through language. Merleau-Ponty continues his critique of empiricism in this vein:

Empiricism excludes from perception the anger or the pain which I nevertheless read in a face, the religion whose essence I seize in some hesitation or reticence, the city whose temper I recognize in the attitude of a policeman or the style of a public building. There can no longer be any *objective spirit*: mental life withdraws into isolated consciousness . . . instead of extending, as it apparently does in fact, over human space which is made up by those with whom I argue or live.<sup>61</sup>

That Merleau-Ponty approvingly uses the Hegelian notion of objective spirit against empiricism is quite telling. For Hegel, “objective spirit” refers to social, cultural, and political formations and institutions. Crucially, what makes these institutions what they are is intersubjective interaction. What Merleau-Ponty is telling us here is that one of the most important elements of our everyday lives, that existential phenomenology can properly grasp but empiricism cannot, is our existence within intersubjective institutions. This is, crucially, a human space wherein we not only *cope* with others, but *argue* with others. As mentioned above, it is language which enables such human institutions to arise; any life which is truly human is replete with linguistic meaning.

McDowell focuses more on an individual’s initiation into conceptual capacities than on the intersubjective character of *Bildung*. But intersubjectivity is implicitly crucial to McDowell’s view, as he notes in response to some criticisms (put forth by Robert Pippin) to the contrary:<sup>62</sup>

If we need to talk about answerability to each other, when we make sense of the normative setting in which free intellectual inquiry takes place, answerability to each other must be an essential element in the conception of objective purport I envisage. I am not reluctant to acknowledge that a social framework matters to the very idea of the conceptual. . . . In my pic-

ture, answerability to the world and answerability to each other have to be understood together.<sup>63</sup>

Both thinkers, then, argue that human experience is fundamentally altered by the fact that human beings grow up and develop within intersubjective, cultural institutions that are formed through linguistic activities. It is this aspect of human life that leads both thinkers to argue that, while still connected with non-human animals (insofar as we share, as it were, first nature), humans are importantly different from those animals.

So it is wrong to argue, as Taylor and Dreyfus do, that Merleau-Ponty's discussion of our precognitive relation to the world supports Evans's claims for nonconceptual content, either on grounds of the precognitive disposition argument, or the animal/human continuity argument. Because Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects their conception of coping as separable from linguistic and rational activities, the precognitive disposition argument loses much of its force. Of course, Merleau-Ponty believes that much of our bodily activity involves a kind of noncognitive ability to cope with the world around us, but this coping is always still a part of a human life that is marked by intersubjectivity, and the cultural and lin-

guistic activities that go along with our relations to others. And because Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that human life moves beyond more simple animal life (while still being connected to that animal life, as McDowell also asserts),<sup>64</sup> the animal/human continuity argument does not hold.

It is perhaps the case that when one isolates a particular practical activity, as Dreyfus does in his discussions of skill acquisition, it might seem as though it has no connection to conceptual activities. And one can argue then that human experience contains nonconceptual content, in the sense that its parts are not always already divided into discrete conceptual units. But such an investigation involves taking one narrow aspect of human experience and rending it asunder from its larger, human context, whereas Merleau-Ponty's aim is to understand human experience in the richness of its total context. So while decontextualized *parts* of Merleau-Ponty's work might still be used to support nonconceptualism, such an activity is not properly Merleau-Pontyan, and I do not think it is terribly fruitful. The phenomenologist would be better off to focus on the infinite task of explicating, with proper attention to the ambiguous, indeterminate, and creative aspects of our lives, what Merleau-Ponty calls "the logic of the world."<sup>65</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. See Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, John McDowell, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), and John McDowell, *Mind and World: With a New Introduction by the Author* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) especially Lecture III.
2. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, "Introduction," in *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Carman and Hansen, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.
3. Evans, *Varieties*, 156.
4. Charles Taylor, "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 79 (1978-79): 151-65.
5. Evans, *Varieties*, 144.
6. *Ibid.*, 158.
7. *Ibid.*, 159.
8. *Ibid.*, 100-01.
9. On this point see Richard G. Heck Jr., "Nonconceptual Content and the 'Space of Reasons,'" *The Philosophical Review*, 109 (2000): 483-523.
10. The names for the second and third arguments are my own. The name for the first is common in the literature, and is used, for example, in Heck, "Nonconceptual Content."
11. Evans, *Varieties*, 229.
12. Heck, "Nonconceptual Content and the 'Space of Reasons,'" 489.
13. Evans, *Varieties*, both quotes from 155.
14. Sean D. Kelly, "What Makes Perceptual Content Nonconceptual?" *Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 6 (1998): <http://ejap.louisiana.edu/EJAP/1998/kelly98.html>.
15. Evans, *Varieties*, 124. On this point, see Kelly, "What Makes Perceptual Content Nonconceptual?"
16. Much is made of this line of thought in prominent criticisms of McDowell, with perhaps the most famous example being Crispin Wright, "Human Nature?" in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. Nicholas H. Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 140-59.

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17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 3–4.
18. Sean D. Kelly, “The Nonconceptual Content of Experience: Situation Dependence and Fineness of Grain,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 (2001): 601–08.
19. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 365.
20. All quotes in this paragraph are taken from Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 6–7.
21. Lilian Alweiss, “On Perceptual Experience,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 31 (2000): 264–76.
22. Ibid.
23. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 36.
24. Charles Taylor, “Foundationalism and the Inner-Outer Distinction,” in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, 110–11.
25. Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Intelligence without Representation—Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Mental Representation,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1 (2002): 367–83.
26. Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Merleau-Ponty and Recent Cognitive Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, 132.
27. For example, the passage is found, as written here, in *ibid.*, 132, and in Dreyfus, “Intelligence Without Representation.”
28. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 157.
29. Hubert L. Dreyfus, “The Return of the Myth of the Mental,” *Inquiry* 50 (2007): 352–65. Dreyfus is happy, in this text, to refer to his view as foundationalist, though he claims it is free of the problems of “traditional foundationalisms.” He ends his response to McDowell, which comes later in the same exchange, with the claim that one should, with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, see the relation between coping and mindedness as “horizontal” rather than vertical, however. But he does not pursue this idea, nor discuss how it would likely change his overall view. See Dreyfus, “Response to McDowell,” *Inquiry* 50 (2007): 371–77.
30. Taylor, “Foundationalism and the Inner-Outer Distinction,” 114.
31. Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79 (2005): 47–65.
32. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 53. In this passage he cites Evans, *Varieties*, 227.
33. *Ibid.*, 8.
34. John McDowell, “What Myth,” *Inquiry* 50 (2007): 338–51.
35. For a concise discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s attack on intellectualism (which does not, however, link it to McDowell) see Taylor Carman, “Sensation, Judgement, and the Phenomenal Field,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, 58–67.
36. Richard Bernstein, “McDowell’s Domesticated Hegelianism,” in *Reading McDowell on Mind and World*, ed. Nicholas H. Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 11. In his “Responses” to the essays in this text, McDowell calls Bernstein’s essay “generous,” and fears that “it might seem ungrateful to pick on his objections, which are few and muted” (269).
37. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xii.
38. Charles Taylor, “Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, 37–38.
39. McDowell, “Responses,” in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, 283.
40. *Ibid.*, 283.
41. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, the first instance of the term “radical reflection” is at xvi.
42. *Ibid.*, xv, xviii.
43. *Ibid.*, 459.
44. *Ibid.*, xxii–xxiii.
45. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 28–29.
46. John McDowell, “Comments,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 31 (2000): 330–43.
47. McDowell, “Responses,” 283.
48. For a brief discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on science, and its relation to other ways of explicating our view of the world (such as painting), see his lectures in *The World of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2004).
49. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxiv.
50. I say “McDowell’s general point,” because I do not think that McDowell’s specific discussion of color concepts is adequate, and it goes far beyond what is discussed here. But one would not have to accept McDowell’s specific discussion of color perception to agree that all experience is conceptual.
51. This quote is taken from McDowell, *Mind and World*, xix. Section 8 of the preface (pages xix–xx) provides a good overview of McDowell’s aims in the discussion of second nature.
52. See McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture VI.
53. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* trans. Alden L. Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press: 1983), 174.
54. See, for example, *Ibid.*, 167.
55. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, trans. Hugh J. Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press: 1973). *Phenomenology of Perception* was originally published in 1945, while the *Consciousness and the Ac-*

- quisition of Language* course was given in the 1949–50 school year.
56. *Ibid.*, 11–15. The quote is from Henri Delacroix, *Le Langage et la pensée* (Paris: Alcan, 1924).
  57. *Ibid.*, 12; emphasis added.
  58. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 220.
  59. *Ibid.*, the quotes in this paragraph are on 220 and 413, respectively
  60. *Ibid.*, 27.
  61. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
  62. Robert Pippin, “Leaving Nature Behind: Or Two Cheers for Subjectivism,” in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, 58–75.
  63. McDowell, “Responses,” 274–275.
  64. McDowell sometimes expresses incredulity at people disregarding his claims about our points of continuity with non-human animals; see, for example, his response to J. M. Bernstein (who he thinks was misled by Crispin Wright) in “Responses,” 299.
  65. That phrase is used in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, at 380 and 471.

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