Is Merleau-Ponty’s Position In *Phenomenology Of Perception* A New Type Of Transcendental Idealism?

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*Abstract:* It has recently been suggested that Merleau-Ponty’s position in *Phenomenology of Perception* is a unique form of transcendental idealism. The general claim is that in spite of his critique of “Kantianism,” Merleau-Ponty’s position comes out as a form of transcendental idealism that takes the perceptual processes of the lived body as the transcendental constituting condition for the possibility of experience. In this article I critically appraise this claim. I argue that if the term “idealist” is intended in a sufficiently similar sense to Kant’s usage of the term in naming his position as a “transcendental idealism” then it is a misrepresentation to subsume Merleau-Ponty’s position under that term. This is because Merleau-Ponty rejects the transcendental metaphysics of the reflecting subject that underpins transcendental idealism. In its place he advocates a methodological transcendentalism that, whilst being anti-realist, is not idealist. Thus to call his position “a new kind of transcendental idealism,” as Sebastian Gardner has, is to misunderstand the significance of his existentialist break with what he sees as the “intellectualism” of this position.

# Introduction

The status of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical position in *Phenomenology of Perception* has been the cause of debate in the reception of his work in the Anglophone world since its publication in translation in 1962. Throughout its reception it has repeatedly been claimed that Merleau-Ponty’s position represents a form of idealism. For example in 1967 in the initial phase of its reception, Marvin Farber characterised Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a “subjectivism” that, suffering from “unclarified motives and rational processes,” draws on “idealistic tenets of a bygone generation.”1 This sentiment has recently been echoed by John Searle, who claims that Merleau-Ponty is “an idealist in a rather traditional sense.”2

While pointing out that “it is no straightforward Kantian position that Merleau-Ponty affirms,”3 Thomas Baldwin has recently claimed that Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental approach to philosophy “is not that of a ‘pure’ subject of consciousness; instead it is an idealism which gives a special status to the body as that for which there is a perceived world.”4 A related but more detailed version of Baldwin’s claim has been argued by Sebastian Gardner.5 Gardner claims that in spite of his critique of “Kantianism,” Merleau-Ponty’s position comes out as a form of transcendental idealism that takes the perceptual processes of the lived body as the transcendental constituting condition for the possibility of experience.

Gardner argues that despite Merleau-Ponty’s provision of a profound critique of Kant’s version of transcendental idealism, it is not clear that he is “entitled to claim that his position is in *no* sense an idealism and is in *all* senses beyond realism and idealism,”6 and that, in fact, it is a “new kind of transcendental idealism.”7 This is because despite Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on phenomenological description, his philosophy relies on a version of a Kantian “transcendental turn,” in order to make theoretical claims using transcendental “explanation” and “conditions” in relation to a perceptual subject who is understood to play a “constitutive” role in relation to the world of experience.

In this article I will critically appraise the interpretation of Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental idealist focusing on Gardner, as opposed to Baldwin or Descombes, because his version of the claim is the most explicitly argued of the three. In section one I present an explication of Gardner’s view. In section 2, I go on to argue that if the term “idealist” is intended in a sufficiently similar sense to Kant’s usage of the term in naming his position as a “transcendental idealism” then it is, strictly speaking, a misrepresentation to subsume Merleau-Ponty’s position under that term. This is because Merleau-Ponty rejects the transcendental metaphysics of the reflecting subject that underpins Kant’s transcendental idealism.

# 1. Interpreting Merleau-Ponty as a Transcendental Idealist

In is his account Gardner focuses our attention on Merleau-Ponty’s belief that any theoretical claims that we make about perception and the world can be true only in so far as they are able to accurately capture the structure of pre-reflective, pre-objective lived experience. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty sought to consistently apply Husserl’s “principle of evidence”: the stipulation that all theoretical constructions be grounded by phenomenological evidence.8 What this phenomenological account of experience indicates, he contended, is that subtending the phenomena of explicit acts of judgement, as well as specific acts of perceptual attention, is a background of pre-reflective lived perceptual experience that is bound up with the fact of our embodiment and our capacity for action. This pre-reflective bodily intentionality is implicated in the constitution, not only of the objects, but also of the world that we experience. This brute perceptual world is “pre-existent” in the sense that it is not the product of any constituting acts of judgment but rather is experienced as always “already there,” as “already constituted,”9 and providing the context in which such judgements are undertaken.

What the phenomenological method reveals, argues Merleau-Ponty, is that we are not simply objects with the property of consciousness, as a scientific approach would suggest, but rather are what he calls a “lived body.” This term denotes the phenomenological concept of “the body as we live it.” As a “lived body” we are neither pure subject nor pure object but rather experience a richly meaningful intentional “world,” resting on our basic bodily level awareness of, and responsiveness to, our environmental context. This basic intentionality consists of unreflected-upon but nevertheless meaningful relationships that manifest themselves through the “phenomenal field” that takes shape as the context of our active exploration of the world. The phenomenal field is Merleau-Ponty’s term for the meaningful field of experience that is constituted and reconstituted for us in a progressive and ongoing way as a result of our *bodily* interactions with the world.

Our phenomenal field is structured through what he calls the “body schema.” The body schema refers to the necessary structure of the phenomenal field that derives from the concrete structure of our lived body. The necessary structural features of perceptual experience are: 1) the figure/ground structure in object perception; 2) our intrinsically perspectival orientation in space and time; and 3) the horizonal structure of the phenomenal field in general. It is these invariant structures of the phenomenal field that are the conditions of possibility for the contingent facts of perception.

Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that once phenomenological description has articulated the structure of our perceptual experience, any viable theory must be able to account for this or it will have failed to provide an adequate account of experience. And so Merleau-Ponty goes on to give an account whose objective is to provide the basic level of pre-reflective perception with the “philosophical status”10 it ought to have.

It is through the giving of “a philosophical status” to our pre-objective experience, he argues, that we will be able to adequately address persistent philosophical problems (for example, the problem of skepticism and knowledge, the mind/body problem and the problem of the mind/world relation). On Merleau-Ponty’s account these problems are not to be solved simply via discursive solutions. Rather, in referring them back to their basis in lived experience we can advance solutions via a strategy of dissolution that shows how they in fact arise due to the intrinsic structure and limitations of rational thought.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that the accounts of perception advanced by “Empiricist” and “Intellectualist”11 philosophies are internally incoherent because they presuppose a lived experience that supplies the meaningful basis for their claims, and yet which is not accounted for by those claims. Empiricists attempt to account for perception in terms of “sensation” as the basic unit of experience, supplementing it with “memory” and “association.” However, the concept of sensation is an abstraction that is not locatable in our lived experience. Instead, it is the product of abstracting away from our actual pre-objective experience in order to designate a content that can serve the dual function of both physiological cause and subjective experience—a dual function required by the presuppositions of Empiricist theory. As a result, Empiricism fails to provide us with an adequate account of perceptual experience.

Intellectualist accounts of perception also use the physiological concept of sensation. But they argue that perception is a cognitive process involving the faculty of judgement. On this type of view, to perceive an object is to supplement our sensations via an act of judgement that synthesises those sensations as a unified object. However, in viewing perception as an act of judgement in this way, the Intellectualists pay insufficient attention to what our perceptual experience is actually like—the way that objects and world are dynamically and progressively constituted in relation to an *active corporeal subject*. In connection to this, Merleau-Ponty also takes issue with the Kantian conception of transcendental subjectivity that posits mental faculties and processes that are taken to be universal to any perceiving and rational creature. This conception misses “the full problem of constitution,”12 he argues, because it ignores the phenomena and the process of perception involved in our uniquely human embodied experience, thus overlooking what is in fact the primary locus of constitution. Instead, it presupposes a disembodied “transcendental ego” as the subject of experience, a “universal constituting consciousness” without “thisness, location or body.”13

The internal incoherence that these philosophies suffer as they try to theorise perception rests on what Merleau-Ponty calls the mistake of “objective thought.” This mistaken conception takes as its ontological model the “world of objects.” This claim has two key components. The first is the idea that the world is comprised of mutually exterior parts. Merleau-Ponty, in reference to Descartes, often uses the Latin phrase *partes extra partes* as shorthand for the idea that the parts that comprise the wholes that we experience are understood as having an external independent existence—without interdependence. They are thus subject-independent and atomistic. “The definition of the object,” he says, “is ... that it exists *partes extra partes*, and that consequently it acknowledges between its parts, or between itself and other objects only external and mechanical relationships.”14

The other key component is what he calls “the prejudice of determinate being.”15 To hold the prejudice of determinate being is to unjustifiably presuppose the existence of a determinate world—a world consisting of a totality of determinate three-dimensional spatiotemporal objects with determinate properties and their relations. On this view, to use Joseph Margolis’s phrase, the world is both “determinate and knowable as such.”16 Merleau-Ponty argues that this is an unjustified “prejudice” about what the world is like that results from a mischaracterisation of the lived world of our perceptual experience. Gardner observes that Merleau-Ponty’s general strategy of argument in *Phenomenology of Perception* is

a novel development of Kant’s argument that transcendental idealism is uniquely capable of resolving philosophical problems which are otherwise insoluble.17

In his discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception Gardner points out several important respects in which Merleau-Ponty’s position derives from Kant’s. The first is the way in which Merleau-Ponty employs a version of the strategy of argument that Kant uses in the Antinomy of Pure Reason. This is the strategy whereby Kant addresses four topics in traditional metaphysics and argues that they each have a set of two opposing metaphysical theses that contradict each other, and yet which can both be shown to be arrived at through valid arguments. For example:

1. the thesis that the world is *infinite* in space and time and its contrary the thesis that the world is *finite* in space and time; and
2. the thesis that causality is in accordance with the laws of nature and freedom. And its contrary: “there is no freedom; everything in the world takes place solely in accordance with the laws of nature.”18

Kant argues that the antinomies instantiate a general form of theoretical conflict between the positions of empiricism and Rationalism. Kant’s strategy of resolving this conflict is to identify a proposition in each antinomy that is presupposed by both of the contradictory claims, and to then go on to deny this proposition. The denial of this shared presupposition then serves to eliminate the contradiction. What his antinomies have in common, Kant argues, is that when we ask, “what is the presupposition that they all share?” we find that they all assume that the “objects of our knowledge are things in themselves.” So, by pointing out that the contradictions are generated due to adhering to this key claim of transcendental realism, an indirect proof of transcendental idealism has thereby been presented, as it manages to avoid these irresolvable contradictions. In eliminating this shared presupposition regarding the nature of objects of knowledge, philosophy can proceed to produce a theory of knowledge that grounds the sciences whilst it simultaneously articulates the limits of reason. The principle methodological vehicle for this is what Kant called his “Copernican turn in philosophy”: the building of a philosophy out of the view that objectivity is an achievement of subjectivity.

Gardner draws our attention to the following passage from Merleau-Ponty as an indication of his use of a Kantian Antinomy strategy:

It is true that we arrive at contradictions when we describe the perceived world. And it is also true that if there were such a thing as a non-contradictory thought, it would exclude the whole of perception as simple appearance. But the question is precisely to know whether there is such a thing as logically coherent thought or thought in the pure state. This is the question Kant asked himself. ... One of Kant’s discoveries, whose consequences we have not yet fully grasped, is that all our experience of the world is throughout a tissue of concepts which lead to irreducible contradictions if we attempt to take them in an absolute sense or transfer them into pure being.19

In relation to this passage, Gardner points out that Merleau-Ponty is centrally concerned with the fact that when we attempt to describe the perceived world a basic contradiction arises. This contradiction concerns the relation of the subject to the world and is expressed by Merleau-Ponty in terms of “the contradiction of immanence and transcendence.”20 This refers to the contradiction that arises as a result of the fact that the objects of perception are both immanent in acts of perception while also being transcendent to them. In seeing an object, what we see is never the whole or complete object; rather, we always see a given side (“profile”) of the object. Thus, despite the seen side of the object being immanent to our act of perception, the unseen sides are transcendent. So the object is necessarily both immanent to, and transcendent of, our perception as constitutive of what it is to “see an object.” Thus Merleau-Ponty says that the “perceived thing itself is paradoxical.” Likewise, he says that “the perceived world is paradoxical”21 because this same structure of transcendence in immanence applies to the perceived world in general: the perceived world is only immanent to a perceiver because it is simultaneously transcendent to them.

Gardner argues that

just as Kant shows in the Antinomy that contradictions can be avoided only if we deny identity between the given empirical world and the world *qua* an object of reason, so the *Phenomenology of Perception* shows that we must similarly deny identity between the perceived world and the world as conceived in objective thought. Kant’s argument is meant to establish that the given empirical world is a realm of mere appearances; in Merleau-Ponty, what is supposed to be shown is, by contrast, that the perceived world is a realm of pre-objective being.22

And so he concludes that although

the conclusions drawn are opposed—because pre-objective being specifically lacks the conceptual constitution of Kantian appearance—*the form and idealistic trajectory of the two arguments are the same.* In both cases there is an attempt to demonstrate a lack of fit between what is given in experience and what is represented by our concepts.23

Gardner draws out two implications from Merleau-Ponty’s antinomy argument. The first is that the argument is “taken to show that the objects of our experience lack the subject-independence which our concepts represent them as possessing, i.e., to show idealism.”24 And secondly, “it is taken to entail a limitation or demotion of the power of thought: in Kant, the conclusion drawn is that pure reason cannot grasp nature, and in Merleau-Ponty, that the perceived world eludes the objectification of thought.”25 Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s strategy results in

a new kind of transcendental idealism ... which not only denies that empirical reality can be grasped by concepts independent of intuition, but also affirms that the perceived world owes its reality exclusively to the intuitive component of cognition.26

Merleau-Ponty asserts that “the opposition of realism and idealism” being “an antinomy of objective thought”27 is a problem that we “leave behind” upon grasping that “the solution of all problems of transcendence” can be found “in the thickness of the pre-objective present.”28 That is, in understanding the fundamental role of temporality from an existential-phenomenological perspective. The “thickness of the pre-objective present” refers to the phenomenological view that an objectivist conception of time as a series of abstract “now-points” presupposes the lived experience of time that is constituted by the retention of an intended past and the anticipation of a projected future. Thus the phenomenological present is “thick” because it denies the possibility of a “pure” self-contained present as an abstraction of objective thought, and puts in its place the idea that we live a temporality that we do not constitute but rather which constitutes itself through us. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

“In” my present, if I grasp it while it is still living and with all that it implies, there is an *ek-stase* towards the future and towards the past which reveals the dimensions of time not as conflicting, but as inseparable. ... Subjectivity is not in time, because it takes up or lives time, and merges with the cohesion of a life.29

So the process by which a body-subject as a transcendence towards a world—an “*Ek-stase*” in Heidegger’s sense—is in a primordial process of co-constitution that is expressed by the ontological category “being-in-the-world,” is a fundamentally temporal process that is made possible through the primordial temporality that it “takes up or lives.” This stands in sharp contrast to the idea of the body-subject being in some sense “in” time, implying an abstract separation of objective time from “the subject” who exists “in” time. This understanding presents us, says Merleau-Ponty, with a crucial example of the way that the categories of objective thought are inadequate to the task of grasping pre-objective perceptual experience.

But Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist “solution,” says Gardner, is not genuinely “beyond realism and idealism.” This is because despite his critique of Intellectualism, he still retains a subject-centred and transcendental approach, where perception is not simply “an event of nature”30 in the empirical-scientific sense and therefore must be theorised using “transcendental explanation and conditions.” Further, given his Kantian perspectival conception of the transcendental (that is, any transcendental claims that he makes are always relativised to, and constrained by, the situated experience of a lived body-subject31), Merleau-Ponty’s antinomy strategy only entitles him to the claim that his position “subsumes the realism/idealism opposition in a restricted sense”32—a sense that results in the re-creation of idealism at another level. Gardner argues that Merleau-Ponty’s claim that perception is not a fact of nature but is that through which we experience facts of nature, coupled with his antinomy strategy designed to show that the perceived world is our mode of access to pre-objective being, entails “a transcendental idealism of pre-objective being.”33

# 2. Critical Assessment

My contention is that, although Gardner’s reading of Merleau-Ponty is very perceptive, and that Gardner’s reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Kant are for the most part illuminating, the “idealism” part of the term “transcendental idealism” is misleading when used to characterise Merleau-Ponty’s position. Gardner’s use of that term rests on his claim about Merleau-Ponty’s retention of a broadly Kantian subject-centred, antinomial and transcendental approach. However it misses an important point about the way in which these are retained in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology. Although Merleau-Ponty retains a transcendental methodology, in a phenomenologically restricted sense, he repudiates the transcendental metaphysics of the reflecting subject that underpins Kant’s transcendental idealism (as well as Husserl’s transcendental-phenomenological idealism).

# Transcendentalism: Metaphysical and Methodological

It was Kant who formulated the original program for a transcendental philosophy. The question that he sought to answer was epistemological in character. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* he systematically sought an account of the conditions that made a particular type of rational knowledge possible. This knowledge he termed “synthetic *a priori* knowledge” and it was transcendental in the sense that it “transcended” what could be given to us in sense experience (synthetic *a posteriori*). By undertaking the “Copernican turn” his philosophy thus rested on a conception of a universal transcendental subject that brings the organising principles to the matter of sensuous experience. In doing this it provides them with their necessary form. On this account the subject is a metaphysical entity, though of a purely formal kind. That is, as the empirical subject that each of us takes ourselves to be we do not experience our transcendental subjectivity. Rather, we come to know of it via a process of (transcendental) deduction through which we establish its (transcendental) necessity for an adequate philosophical account of experience.

Consistent with his phenomenological turn in transcendental philosophy, Husserl held that via the method of the *epoché* and transcendental reduction34 we are able to experience our own transcendental subjectivity—which is now individuated as ours, and not just a purely formal principle as in Kant. For Husserl, transcendental subjectivity must be understood through a comprehensive phenomenological exploration of intentionality, and in relation to an essential (*eidetic*) analysis of the thus revealed intentional structures.35 Merleau-Ponty also advocates a version of the *epoché* and reduction, and of *eidetic* analysis. However, a crucial distinction that needs to be drawn in order to make clear the nature of Merleau-Ponty’s position is that between a methodological transcendentalism and a metaphysical transcendentalism. Metaphysical transcendentalism entails the positing of a transcendental entity (according to Merleau-Ponty, a “transcendental ego” or “universal constituting consciousness”36), as the philosophies of Kant and Husserl do. The constituting power of this transcendental entity is understood to necessitate, in Kant’s case, a form of transcendental idealism with respect to the cognitive status of objects and the world that we take to be empirically real. In Husserl’s approach it is supposed to necessitate a transcendental-phenomenological idealism with respect to the status of the being of intentional objects and of the phenomenal world in general.

A methodological transcendentalism, on the other hand, consists in transcendentalism with respect to philosophical method. That is, the theorist undertakes an “investigation of the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience,”37 as Kant puts it, and makes substantive claims regarding those *a priori* conditions that involve an appeal to transcendental necessity in relation to a conception of the “subject” that is not simply the empirical subject. In other words, they take transcendental forms of argument as integral to their methodology. Notice that “transcendental forms of argument” is not equivalent to Kant’s “transcendental deduction.” Kant’s transcendental deduction is a form of transcendental argumentation used in the service of an epistemological project that inherits the terms of the problematic as outlined in Descartes’s project to refute the skeptic.

However in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s existential-phenomenological approach, Kant’s “investigation of the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of experience” as a means to address the problem of knowledge substantially morphs. Whereas Kant sought to lay bare synthetic *a priori* knowledge and the nature of such knowledge, Merleau-Ponty seeks to uncover *a priori* structures of being. Taking his lead from Heidegger, he rejects the restricted epistemological context of Kant’s transcendentalism, asserting that a transcendental methodology must be fully ontological in its philosophical scope. As Jeff Malpas and Steven Crowell have pointed out in relation to the Heideggerean ontological project:

To understand transcendental philosophy essentially as an answer to a certain kind of skepticism (that is, as primarily an epistemological enterprise) is to remain within the Cartesian framework in which alone such a problem can arise.38

The stepping-stone that allows Merleau-Ponty’s existential project to be realised is Husserl’s phenomenological method, based as it is on the concept of intentionality. The phenomenological concept of intentionality allows for a widening of the scope of the transcendental question precisely because it does away with the representationalist concept of intentionality that had animated early modern philosophers such as Kant. This conception holds that our intentional relation to objects is mediated by “mental representations” of those objects. Whereas on an existential-phenomenological conception the subject is necessarily embodied and “in-the-world,” and objects are under- stood in the sense of intentional “noematic” correlates that we encounter in and through our worldly context.39

Thus, on Merleau-Ponty’s view, the transcendental question goes beyond Kant’s question regarding the conditions of cognitive experience to include the conditions of all intentional experience. As such, it is widened to include the conditions of possibility for even the minimal intelligibility of the most basic pre-predicative, pre-objective perceptual experience. And, to reiterate, Merleau-Ponty does this because phenomenological description reveals this pre-reflective intentionality as subtending all explicit acts of reflective judgement, and even all consciously directed acts of perception. As such, it is incumbent upon the transcendental philosopher to account for this aspect of our experience.

# Merleau-Ponty’s Lived Body-Subject is a “Subject for a World” and, thus, a Long Way from Kant’s Pure Subject of Reflection

In his claim that it is the pre-objective perceptual processes of the lived body that play the role of transcendental subject, Gardner is definitely identifying the locus of Merleau-Ponty’s key transcendental move. However, in emphasising the Kantian dimensions of his position, Gardner loses sight of the way in which the notion of “the subject” undergoes a radical reconception in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology. For example, when he makes statements such as: it is “therefore as if Merleau-Ponty had applied to the faculty of *understanding* the strategy of argument which Kant applies to the faculty of reason, and subjected Kant’s idealism to the sort of critique to which Kant subjects transcendental realism,”40 he implies that the term “pre-objective perceptual processes of the lived body” could be taken to simply slot into an otherwise relatively intact Kantian framework, replacing the term “transcendental ego.” This is very misleading because it implicitly characterises the notion of the perceptual body-subject as being-in-the-world as broadly congruous with the rest of the Kantian framework. But this is not the case because Merleau-Ponty repudiates the metaphysical notion of the subject as transcendent to the world (transcendental ego) and replaces it with *a strictly phenomenological account of a fully embodied subject*.

Connected to this, he rejects the Kantian Intellectualist account of perception modeled on judgement, again for strictly phenomenological reasons. Merleau-Ponty argues that Kantian “reflective analysis” fails to give an adequate account of the subject of perception because it

starts from our experience of the world and goes back to the subject as to a condition of possibility distinct from that experience, revealing the all- embracing synthesis as that without which there would be no world. To this extent it ceases to remain part of our experience and offers, in place of an account, a reconstruction.41

A phenomenological approach, on the other hand, criticises Kant’s reconstruction of experience and the “faculty psychology” that instantiates it. For example, the phenomenological approach urges in place of Kant’s analysis of the object of experience—“which bases the world on the synthesizing activity of the subject”—the phenomenologist’s conception of the object *as it is experienced*. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, a “‘*noematic reflection*’ which remains within the object and, instead of begetting it, brings to light its fundamental unity.”42

Here Merleau-Ponty is using the Husserlian terminology of the “*noesis*” and the “*noema*” to draw a contrast between a Kantian reconstruction of experience and the phenomenologist’s descriptive account. What he emphasises is the way that the phenomenologist “remains within the object” (i.e., “the perceived” *as* perceived), bringing to light its “fundamental unity” as an actual, phenomenologically encountered “object.” Whatever unity the object can be said to contain is revealed through the way that we progressively encounter the object in our interaction with it. For example, our conscious experience of a table involves a flow of successive perceptual “profiles” that are progressively synthesised and unified in such a way that we grasp the multiplicity of successive profiles as presenting a numerically identical object. Thus the concept of unity involved is that of a synthetic “phenomenal unity” because it does not exceed that unity which is revealed through the procedure of phenomenological investigation.

In recapturing the fundamental unity of the object the emphasis on *noematic* description, argues Merleau-Ponty, serves to block the Kantian move to unjustifiably over-emphasise the constitutive role of the subject at the expense of objects and the world. For what the emphasis on *noematic* description helps us to see is that the world is fundamentally not, and could not possibly be, the construct of the ego’s cognitive “constituting power.” Rather, the world is “always already there before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence.”43 As such, he argues:

[I]t would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality.44

Kantian philosophy of this kind for Merleau-Ponty involves a “reflective analysis” that “loses sight of its own beginning.” As such it proceeds through an overly abstracted reflection that is “carried off by itself” and that “installs itself in an impregnable subjectivity, as yet untouched by being and time.”45 Merleau-Ponty argues that what it fails to see is the crucial way in which, “when I begin to reflect my reflection bears upon an unreflective experience.”46 What this means is that our very capacity to abstractedly reflect in the fashion of Kantian philosophy rests upon our more primary capacities of perception and action—capacities we have in virtue of being *essentially embodied subjects*.

So the Intellectualist approach misunderstands perception because it attempts to model perception on judgement, where to perceive an object is to synthesise a set of sensations under a category. With Kant, it holds the view that “intuitions without concepts are blind.”47 However, this model makes it is impossible to see how there could ever be a perceptual error of the kind that we actually encounter in our lived perceptual experience. This is because by building thought (judgement) into the very constitution of the perceptual object *as an object* Intellectualists in effect collapse the distinction between our perception and our beliefs about our perception.48 As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

[I]f we see what we judge, how can we distinguish between true and false perception? How will it then be possible to say that the sufferer from hallucinations or the madman “think they see what they do not see”? Where will be the difference between “seeing” and “thinking one sees”?49

Fundamentally then, Intellectualism is mistaken because it tries to conceptually “construct the shape of the world ... perception [and] the mind, instead of recognizing as the immanent source and as the final authority of our knowledge of such things, the experience we have of them.”50

For Merleau-Ponty, the idea of the world as being correlative with the acts of consciousness—the idea of intentionality—is now interpreted to mean that the world neither determines consciousness (Empiricism), nor is it simply constructed by the transcendental ego in the sense of giving form to the matter of experience (Intellectualism). He argues that the world has “priority over” the operations of a reflecting “I” but nevertheless that “the world ... is given to the subject because the subject is given to himself.”51 The subject is “given to himself” not as an absolute reflecting ego but as a “relative and prepersonal”52 bodily subject who, by virtue of his concrete embodiment, is “a subject destined to the world.”53 Merleau-Ponty observes: I am a bodily subject who is “from the start outside myself and open to [a] world”54 that is “always already there” before “any possible analysis of mine.”55

We are open to the world through our basic pre-reflective perceptual experience—our bodily intentionality—which is our fundamental access to the real. Given this, only those “forms” (“structures”) that are discernible phenomenologically are to count. It follows from this approach, Merleau-Ponty argues, that the Intellectualists are mistaken to “put perception into the same category as the syntheses represented by judgements, acts or predications.”56 The Intellectualists claim that the fact that we see objects as unified things, and not simply mere clusters of qualities, is a result of the application of the concept of substance to the “manifold” of sensation provided passively by the senses. Kant, for example, says that

all synthesis, through which even perception itself becomes possible, stands under the categories, and since experience is cognition through connected perceptions, the categories are conditions of the possibility of experience.57

But Merleau-Ponty counters this with his phenomenology of the structure of our actual lived perceptual experience. And this exploration indicates, as he puts it, that “perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.”58

# A Position Beyond Transcendental Idealism

Given his critique of the Intellectualist account of perception and of metaphysical transcendentalism (embodied in the metaphysical notion of the transcendental ego), coupled with his phenomenological conception of the lived body-subject as being-in-the-world, the inadequacy of referring to Merleau-Ponty’s position as a transcendental idealism begins to appear. Failing to recognise the full significance of what Merleau-Ponty takes existentialism to mean, Gardner mistakenly interprets its *anti-realism* and its *transcendental methodology* as signifying transcendental idealism. When Gardner claims, in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s antinomy strategy, that “the objects of our experience” lacking the “subject-independence which our concepts represent them as possessing” shows “idealism,”59 he is interpreting Merleau-Ponty through the lens of a Kantian framework that Merleau-Ponty rejects. In order to make this clear we need to ask the question as to what it means to call a philosophical position an “idealism,” rather than an anti-realism.

In the modern period the notion of idealism is connected to a representationalist theory of perception. This theory holds that the content of our perceptions are mere representations of the objects that we perceive. Kant’s theory of perception retained this empiricist notion holding that what are brought under the categories of the understanding in an act of outer perception are representations (*Vorstellungen*).60 Therefore an idealism, strictly speaking, involves something more than a denial of realism, an assertion that the objects of our experience lack subject-independence. This is anti-realism and anti-realism does not entail idealism. The term “idealist” itself is connected to the “way of ideas” initiated by the philosophy of Descartes and taken up in the early modern tradition. The contents of the mind, on this account, are “ideas” (simple and complex) and it is through these that we have access to reality, argue empiricists like John Locke.61 But idealists such as George Berkeley argue instead that it is actually these ideas that truly exist, and not some mind-independent material reality underpinning them. Thus, on his account, “to be is to be perceived.” It is due to the conception of “ideas” operative in “the way of ideas”—shared by empiricists and Rationalists alike—that it makes sense to label Berkeley’s denial of Locke’s thesis of a mind-independent reality “idealism.”

Kant, for his part, called this “empirical idealism” and understood himself to have refuted it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The position he advanced in its stead he called “transcendental idealism.” The Cartesian notion of the pure subject, a version of the representationalist view of perception (where representations are brought under the categories) and the epistemological problematic that it engages are the vital ingredients that make Kant’s philosophy a transcendental *idealism*. For it is in attempting to resolve this problematic that he introduces his transcendental methodology.

Additionally, the notion of the transcendental ego is crucial here because it is via the *a priori* categories of the understanding that this self-subsistent reflecting entity brings sensible intuitions (i.e., what is given in perception) under concepts in acts of judgement about the experienced world. Thus, his idealism is idealist because it holds that we cannot know the things in them- selves but rather only that which can become an object of experience. And something becomes an object of experience by being brought under the *a priori* forms of intuition and *the categories* of the understanding—cognitive structures of a transcendental subject that give form to the matter of experience. What we know are appearances. So on Kant’s view it is the ideal—the *a priori* cognitive structures—that is playing an essential role in giving form to the world that we experience and can potentially know. Merleau-Ponty refers to this type of view as *Intellectualism* precisely because “blind” intuitions are only intelligible by being brought under conceptual categories.

# Conclusion

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty rejects Kant’s Intellectualist theory of perception, his Intellectualist conception of the subject and the epistemological problematic of Kant’s transcendental approach to philosophy. That is, Kant’s attempt to answer the skeptic via a philosophical justification of *scientific knowledge* that he grounds in a transcendental ego. Merleau-Ponty powerfully critiques Kant’s account of perception on the model of an act of judgement. He uses the phenomenological concept of intentionality in order to demonstrate the way that perception is not an act of judgement but rather is a pre-reflective openness to the world that provides the background against which any explicit act of judgement stands out.

Merleau-Ponty’s subject is not a self-transparent subject of reason, the cognitive structure of which provides the eternal conditions of possibility for the truths of empirical sciences in a trans-historical set of categories. Rather, his subject is a lived “body-subject” that is opaque to itself, concretely culturally and historically situated, not a “pure” subject but a lived process of transcendence towards a world. And thus it is simultaneously engaged in a “co-constitution” of the phenomenological perceived world—or, ontologically, *being-in-the-world*.

Kant’s notion of the subject and of perception modeled on an act of judgement involving representation is nowhere to be seen. Connected to this, the epistemological problem of knowledge that underpins Kant’s transcendental idealism is not what motivates Merleau-Ponty’s existentialism. If the subject is not separate from the world but rather is necessarily primordially and intentionally related to it, and only comes to know itself via bodily participation with the world, as an “*Ek-stase*,” a subject-for-a-world, then the problem does not arise. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “we must not ... wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive.”62 Thus, to call Merleau-Ponty a transcendental idealist in a sufficiently similar sense of the term as it applies to Kant is a mistake. He does not have the right conception of “subject,” “objects” and “the world,” and of the relations between them, to justify this usage.

So when Gardner (and Baldwin and Descombes) talk of Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental idealist they fail to grasp the full dimension that the term “existentialism” has for him. When Gardner says that Merleau-Ponty’s position is a “transcendental idealism” that “not only denies that empirical reality can be grasped by concepts independent of intuition, but also affirms that the perceived world owes its reality exclusively to the intuitive component of cognition,”63 there is an interpretation problem at work. Although Gardner’s analysis is very helpful in teasing out the kind of moves that Merleau-Ponty is making *vis-à-vis* Kant, he is doing it in a way that at times interprets Merleau-Ponty’s view through the notion of Kantian faculties, such as “intuition,” which have no place in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Thus, he tends to distort Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological-existentialist claims making him appear to be closer to Kant than he is by reconstructing his claims in a Kantian language rather than in the existential-phenomenological idiom in which Merleau-Ponty expresses them.

And if, in response, it is pointed out that the term might simply be taken to draw attention to the fact of a “subject-dependence” of “objects” and “the world” in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, as well as the transcendentalism in his method, it might be suggested that this could be more accurately captured by the neologism “transcendental perceptualism.” However, the problem with this is that it is also misleading because it suggests that a direct contrast with Intellectualist transcendental idealism is appropriate. However, given that Merleau-Ponty’s existential-phenomenological concept of perception is so different from the Kantian one this will likely just serve to compound the confusion. This is because if Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a “transcendental perceptualism,” it is so in the context of an existential ontology that seeks to articulate *a priori* structures of being (existential structures)—a project fundamentally at odds with a transcendental idealism that seeks to justify knowledge in the face of radical scepticism. Surely then the claim about “subject-dependence” is more accurately characterised by the term anti-realism. The term “transcendental anti-realism” is more accurate still, as it captures Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of realism coupled with his transcendental methodology. This distinct theoretical space between realism and transcendental idealism is understood by Merleau-Ponty to be occupied by existential phenomenology.

The purpose of this article has been exegetical. The argument has not been necessarily in favour of Merleau-Ponty’s position as such, but rather in favour of the view that he can legitimately claim that his version of a philosophical position that denies realism and that uses a transcendental methodology is sufficiently different to Kant’s such that calling it “transcendental idealism” is exegetically inaccurate and courts conflation and, thus, confusion. However, my claim is not only that Merleau-Ponty understands his work this way. It is also that this view is defensible on the grounds that his use of the pre-reflective intentionality of the lived body as part of his consistently phenomenological account of experience results in a position that, although it may look like “a new type of transcendental idealism,” actually pushes that position to breaking point and bursts through into a new type of transcendental position that has the distinct name “existential phenomenology” or “phenomenological ontology” for good reasons. Unsympathetic opponents may wish to lump “these types of idealist views” together for convenience and for the purpose of focusing debate around the preferred terrain of issues framed in terms of “the existence of the external world” or “the mind-independence of objects.” However, this “lumping” can only be achieved at a substantial exegetical cost. That Baldwin instinctively does this is evidenced in his claim that “the intellectualist and the existential phenomenologist” are at base “both idealists,” thus implicitly setting Kant and Merleau-Ponty up on one side of a dichotomous debate framed in traditional terms. Likewise, Gardner observes when comparing Merleau-Ponty’s antinomy strategy of argument in *Phenomenology of Perception* to Kant’s Antinomy, that “the form and idealistic trajectory of the two arguments are the same.” Now that the form is broadly the same is non-controversial, however the claim that the idealistic *trajectory* is the same is. If we stand far enough back then the trajectory does indeed look the same (denial of realism, transcendental methodology). But if we look more closely we see that even though they share the claim that “the objects of our experience lack the subject-independence which our concepts represent them as possessing,” what Merleau-Ponty morphs Kant’s “Copernican” claim that “objectivity be understood as an achievement of subjectivity” into is unlike any conception of “subjectivity” that operates in Kant. This is because it is strictly phenomenological, with a focus on pre-reflective lived experience as providing the ground for any meaning that talk of subjectivity and objectivity might have. Thus, regardless of one’s ultimate verdict, there can be no justification for inaccuracy in the exegesis of Merleau-Ponty’s claims. For it is on the basis of this exegesis that a conscientious appraisal of those claims necessarily rests.

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## Notes

1. Farber, *Phenomenology and Existence*, 237, 198.
2. Searle, “The Phenomenological Illusion,” 125.
3. Baldwin, “Editor’s Introduction,” 5.
4. Ibid., 6. Vincent Descombes makes a similar claim in *Modern French Philosophy*, 76. Stephen Priest also tends toward this interpretation. See, for example, his arguments regarding Merleau-Ponty’s “idealist phenomenology of time” in *Merleau-Ponty*, 254.
5. Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,”
6. Ibid., 26 n39.

7. Ibid., 25.

1. Merleau-Ponty’s approach derives from Husserl’s, who, in a bid to bring transcendental philosophy to full fruition, argued that it is necessary to do detailed phenomenological analyses of the constitutive acts of consciousness. Husserl argued that Kant had failed to do this in *Critique of Pure Reason* and thus had failed to provide an adequate justification for his account of transcendental subjectivity.
2. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 526.
3. Ibid., vii.
4. I follow Gardner in capitalising these terms in order to indicate that I am referring to Merleau-Ponty’s technical usage. “Empiricism” refers to classical empiricist philosophy, psychology that draws on it, and scientific realism. “Intellectualism” denotes Kant’s philosophy, psychology that draws on it, seventeenth-century Rationalism and twentieth-century French neo-Kantianism.
5. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 73.
6. Ibid., xiii.
7. Ibid., 84.
8. Ibid., 59.
9. Margolis, *Pragmatism’s Advantage*, 26.
10. Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,” 23.
11. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A445/B473.
12. Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,” in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, 18.
13. Ibid., 13.
14. Ibid., 16.
15. Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,” 24.
16. Ibid.; italics added.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 25.
19. Ibid.
20. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 17. See, e.g., 500–503.
21. Ibid., 503.
22. Ibid., 491.
23. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, 145.
24. For example, he characterises the philosophical problem of understanding the nature of visual perception as that of understanding “how vision can be brought into being from somewhere without being enclosed in its perspective”. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 78. As Gardner observes: “vision must be relativised to something that is not a point *in the world*, that could itself become an object of vision or be located in objective, geometrically determined space, but that is nevertheless ‘somewhere,’ i.e., that has the perspectival character of a *point*.” Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,” 20.
25. Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,” 26 n39.
26. Ibid. Cf. Thomas Baldwin’s view. Merleau-Ponty’s retention of a subject-centred and transcendental approach attempts to work out a unique version of an idealist position “that does not detach the subject of perception altogether from the world and thereby end up treating the world and his own body merely as objects for consciousness” as Intellectualist transcendental idealism does. His attempt to characterise his existential phenomenology as a “synthesis” that “transcends” the opposition between the unsatisfactory positions of Empiricism and Intellectualism is not actually a genuine synthesis: “There is no question that Merleau-Ponty’s position is in fact a good deal closer to intellectualism than empiricism.” And this is because “the intellectualist and the existential phenomenologist” are at base “both idealists.” Baldwin, “Editor’s Introduction,” 13.
27. Husserl’s version of the phenomenological reduction consists in a methodological demand for a “change of attitude,” a change from what he calls the “natural attitude” to that of the “transcendental-phenomenological attitude.” This shift in attitude is intended to take us from the perspective of viewing the world as we normally do as a mind-independent “real world,” to viewing this self-same world in terms of a constitutive achievement of subjectivity. This procedure involves what he calls an “*epoché*”. To perform the *epoché* is to “bracket” the “general thesis of the natural attitude” (Husserl, *Ideas 1*, 56). The phenomenological reduction is called a “reduction” because we are said to be “reducing” our awareness, focusing it on the “pure” phenomenal content of experience. This change in attitude “leads our attention back to the subjective achievements in which the object as experienced is disclosed in a determinate manner” (Drummond, *Historical Dictionary of Husserl’s Philosophy*, 12).
28. For Husserl, *eidetic* analysis is the phenomenologist’s procedure for ascertaining the “essence” or “essential structure” of a particular set of phenomena. It involves a methodical reduction to only the essential necessary elements that go into making those phenomena what they are. Husserl’s *eidetic* method relies on a procedure of “imaginative variation”, which consists of the imaginary addition and subtraction of the properties of an object or content in order to focus and isolate its essence.
29. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 170.
30. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A93/B126.
31. “Introduction: Transcendental Heidegger,” in *Transcendental Heidegger*, 3.
32. In *Ideas 1*, Husserl characterises the act of consciousness (e.g., perceiving) as the “*noesis*”, or the “*noetic*”component of the intentional phenomenon, while he refers to the intentional object (e.g., the object as perceived) as the “*noema*”, or the “*noematic*”component of the intentional phenomenon.
33. Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,” 25.
34. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, x.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., xii.
37. Ibid., x.
38. Ibid., xi.
39. Ibid.
40. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 75.
41. For a particularly clear reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Empiricism and Intellectualism, see Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 34–61.
42. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 40.
43. Merleau-Ponty quoted in Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 53.
44. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xi.
45. Ibid., 322.
46. Ibid., xii.
47. Ibid., 530.
48. Ibid., x.
49. Ibid.
50. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B161.
51. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* xi.
52. Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,” 24.
53. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B34/A20.
54. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged and edited by A. S. Pringle-Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), E II.2.1.
55. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xviii.
56. Gardner, “Merleau-Ponty’s Transcendental Theory of Perception,” 25.

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