Handout 1st lesson 'Philosophy of perception'

- What is phenomenology? It may seem strange that this question has still to be asked half a century after the first works of Husserl. The fact remains that it has by no means been answered. Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to f inding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'. It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins—as 'an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science', but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London-New York, Routledge 2002, p. VII)

- It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analysing. Husserl's first directive to phenomenology, in its early stages, to be a 'descriptive psychology', or to return to the 'things themselves', is from the start a foreswearing of science. I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psycho logical make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. (Ibid, p. IX)

- At the outset of the study of perception, we find in language the notion of sensation, which seems immediate and obvious: I have a sensation of redness, of blueness, of hot or cold. It will, however, be seen that nothing could in fact be more confused, and that because they accepted it readily, traditional analyses missed the phenomenon of perception. I might in the first place understand by sensation the way in which I am affected and the experiencing of a state of myself. The greyness which, when I close my eyes, surrounds me, leaving no distance between me and it, the sounds that encroach on my drowsiness and hum 'in my head' perhaps give some indication of what pure sensation might be. I might be said to have sense-experience (sentir) precisely to the extent that I coincide with the sensed, that the latter ceases to have any place in the objective world, and that it signifies nothing for me. (Ibid, p.3)

- When Gestalt theory informs us that a figure on a background is the simplest sense-given available to us, we reply that this is not a contingent characteristic of factual perception, which leaves us free,

in an ideal analysis, to bring in the notion of impressions. It is the very definition of the phenomenon of perception, that without which a phenomenon cannot be said to be perception at all. The per ceptual 'something' is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a 'field'. A really homogeneous area offering nothing to be cannot be given to any perception. The structure of actual perception alone can teach us what perception is. The pure impression is, therefore, not only undiscoverable, but also imperceptible and so inconceivable as an instant of perception. If it is introduced, it is because instead of attend ing to the experience of perception, we overlook it in favour of the object perceived. A visual field is not made up of limited views. But an object seen is made up of bits of matter, and spatial points are external to each other. An isolated datum of perception is inconceivable, at least if we do the mental experiment of attempting to perceive such a thing. But in the world there are either isolated objects or a physical void. (Ibid p.4-5)

- We commit what psychologists call 'the experience error', which means that what we know to be in things themselves we immediately take as being in our consciousness of them. We make perception out of things perceived. And since perceived things themselves are obviously access ible only through perception, we end by understanding neither. We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world. If we did we should see that the quality is never experienced immediately, and that all consciousness is consciousness of something. Nor is this 'some thing' necessarily an identifiable object. There are two ways of being mistaken about quality: one is to make it into an element of conscious ness, when in fact it is an object for consciousness, to treat it as an incommunicable impression, whereas it always has a meaning; the other is to think that this meaning and this object, at the level of quality, are fully developed and determinate. The second error, like the f irst, springs from our prejudice about the world. Suppose we con struct, by the use of optics and geometry, that bit of the world which can at any moment throw its image on our retina. Everything outside its perimeter, since it does not reflect upon any sensitive area, no more affects our vision than does light falling on our closed eyes. We ought, then, to perceive a segment of the world precisely delimited, sur rounded by a zone of blackness, packed full of qualities with no inter val between them, held together by definite relationships of size similar to those lying on the retina. The fact is that experience offers nothing like this, and we shall never, using the world as our starting-point, understand what a field of vision is. Even if it is possible to trace out a perimeter of vision by gradually approaching the centre of the lateral stimuli, the results of such measurement vary from one moment to another, and one never manages to determine the instant when a stimu lus once seen is seen no longer. The region surrounding the visual field is not easy to describe, but what is certain is that it is neither black nor grey. (Ibid p. 5-6)

- The two definitions of sensation which we have just tried out were only apparently direct. We have seen that they were based on the object perceived. In this they were in agreement with common sense, which also identifies the sensible by the objective conditions which govern it. The visible is what is seized upon with the eyes, the sensible is what is seized on by the senses. Let us follow up the idea of sensation on this basis,4 and see what becomes of this 'by' and this 'with', and thenotion of sense-organ, in the first-order thinking constituted by sci ence. Having shown that there is no experience of sensation, do we at least find, in its causes and objective origins, any reasons for retaining it as an explanatory concept? Physiology, to which the psychologist turns as to a higher court of appeal, is in the same predicament as psycho logy. It too first situates its object in the world and treats it as a bit of extension. Behaviour is thus hidden by the reflex, the elaboration and patterning of stimuli, by a longitudinal theory of nervous functioning, which establishes a theoretical correspondence between each element of the situation and an element of the reaction. (Ibid p. 7-8)