1 Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture

Ein Bild *hielt uns gefangen.*
Wittgenstein[1]

Se demander si le monde est réel, c'est ne pas entendre ce qu'on dit.

Merleau-Ponty[2]

I

The second saying, by Merleau-Ponty, represents the culmination of an argument whose effect was to undo the state of thraldom described in the first saying, taken from the *Philosophical Investigations* of Wittgenstein.

The picture that held us captive was that of a mediational epistemology. I mean by that an understanding of the place of mind in a world such that our only knowledge of reality comes through the representations we have formed of it within ourselves. The initial statement of this structuring picture is found in Descartes, who at one point declares himself "certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me" (*assuré que je ne puis avoir aucune connaissance de ce qui est hors de moi, que par l'entremise des idées que j'en ai eues en moi*).[3] This picture sets up a certain distinction between inside and outside (we can call it the I/O picture), which continues to reverberate through the tradition. The basic idea of a mediational epistemology is expressed by the preposition "through" (*par l'intermédiaire de*, in this Cartesian formulation). We grasp the world through something, what is outside through something inner.

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What is remarkable is that this structure goes on influencing much of our thought and other elements of our culture, even though many of its elements are changed. Descartes is not in fashion these days. He is rejected as a dualist, as too rationalist, as clinging to an outmoded psychology, and for many other reasons. Yet even though his terms are repudiated, we frequently find the basic structure remaining in place.

Take the inner representations through which we know the outer world. Descartes saw these as particulate mental content, which he called "ideas." These hovered between little objects in the mind that could be seen as copies of external reality (a modern analogy would be photographs) and claims that something is the case, entities one could only describe in *that* clauses.

These intramental quasi-objects have been swept off the stage for some time now, and in more than one way. For some, all this was too dualistic, idealistic, too much accepting of nonmaterial mind-stuff. The whole mediational theory has to undergo a "drastic internalization," in Quine's expression. So instead of ideas, we should speak of "surface irritations," the affecting of nerve ends. From another point of view, Descartes's philosophy suffers from not having taken the linguistic turn. Instead of talking of ideas, we should talk of sentences held true. This at least has the advantage of disambiguating the original "idea" idea: it was now clearly seen as claim and not just as inert object.

Again, from a quite different direction, Kant transformed the mediational element. Instead of being seen as a unit of information, it is reconceptualized as the categorial form in which all units of information must obligatorily be cast. Only through the conceptual forms imposed by the mind does intuition acquire sight.

What goes marching on through all these changes is the basic mediational structure. Knowledge of things outside the mind/agent/organism only comes about through certain surface conditions, mental images, or conceptual schemes within the mind/agent/organism. The input is combined, computed over, or structured by the mind to construct a view of what lies outside.

The point of Wittgenstein's statement above is to stress how deeply this picture dominated our thinking. It wasn't just a particulate opinion that people happened to hold in great numbers. It was a

structuring framework understanding that guided their questioning and reasoning about these matters. Precisely because of its framework status, it was rarely consciously focused on; it just went on shaping the thoughts that were in the foreground, without our really being aware of its action. Or put another way, qua framework it felt obvious, unchallengeable, the necessary irreplaceable context for all thinking about these matters, hence not something one would ever need to examine. In this way, it worked insidiously and powerfully.

It follows that it is not enough to escape its captivity just to declare that one has changed one's opinion on these questions. One may, for instance, repudiate the idea of a representation, claim that one has no truck with this, that nothing lies between us and the world we know, and still be laboring within the picture. A striking example comes from the work of Donald Davidson. At the end of his article against conceptual schemes, Davidson explicitly rejects the representational view: "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but reestablish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false."[4] Yet one can see it operating in his work, for instance, in his theory of truth as reconciling coherence and correspondence.

Now the crucial point about the mediational picture is that it sees our knowledge of the outside coming through certain elements, call them "representations," on the inside. These elements have varied greatly in the tradition, but in the form in which Davidson takes them up, they are seen as beliefs. To buy into the picture is to hold that our knowledge is grounded exclusively in representations and that our reasoning involves manipulating representations. To speak the language of Sellars and McDowell, it is to hold that the only inhabitants of the space of reasons are beliefs.

In this sense, Davidson is still profoundly within the mediational picture. Thus Davidson says, "What distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief."[5] He makes it clear that in this sense he wants to endorse a coherence theory, albeit claiming that it is compatible with what is true in a correspondence theory. In the same passage, Davidson quotes Rorty approvingly: "nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there

is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence."[6] The two seem to be in agreement on this.[7]

This is clearly a representationalist view. Beliefs are the only accepted denizens of the space of reasons. But I want to note something more here. This view is not put forward as a surprising finding. It is articulated as a truism. *Of course* nothing can justify a belief except another one. Why is this so obvious? Because, they insist, the only way you could find an alternative would be to "get outside our beliefs and language," in Rorty's formulation. Davidson makes the same point in talking of the possible alternative of confronting our beliefs "with the tribunal of experience. No such confrontation makes sense, for of course we can't get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happenings of which we are aware."[8]

What I want to bring out here is the way that both philosophers lean on the basic lineaments of the mediational picture to show their thesis to be obvious. We can't get outside. This is the basic image of the I/O. We are contained within our own representations and can't stand somehow beyond them to compare them with "reality." This is the standard picture, one that by its through-structure attributes an ineradicable place to the role of representation, in some form or other (here, belief). That this is seen as related like a representation to something outside itself emerges clearly in the suggestion that we might be tempted to step outside of language and compare. Why would this temptation even come to mind unless beliefs were about things? Here, paradoxically, we find the picture invoked within an argument that is meant to repudiate that very picture. This is what it means to be held captive.

To show how this coherentist claim is so far from obvious as to be plain false, we need to step outside the mediational picture and think in terms of the kind of embedded knowing that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have thematized. Of course, we check our claims against reality. "Johnny, go into the room and tell me whether the picture is crooked." Johnny does as he is told. He doesn't check the (problematized) belief that the picture is crooked against his own belief. He emerges from the room with a view of the matter, but checking isn't comparing the problematized belief with his view of the matter; checking is forming a belief about the matter, in this

case, by going and looking. What is assumed when we give the order is that Johnny knows, as most of us do, how to form a reliable view of this kind of matter. He knows how to go and stand at the right distance and in the right orientation to get what Merleau-Ponty calls a "maximum grip" or "hold" (*prise*) on the object. What justifies Johnny's belief is his knowing how to do this, his being able to deal with objects in this way, which is, of course, inseparable from the other ways he is able to use, manipulate, get around among them, and so on. When he goes and checks, he uses this multiple ability to cope; his sense of his ability to cope gives him confidence in his judgment as he reports it to us. And rightly so, if he is competent. About some things, he isn't competent: "Is the picture a Renoir?" But about this, he is. Nor should we go off into the intellectualist regress of saying that Johnny believes that his view-forming here is reliable. This may never have been raised. He believes this no more than he believes that the world didn't start five minutes ago or that everybody else isn't a robot.

This shows how in certain contexts we can make perfectly good sense of checking our beliefs against the facts without swinging off into absurd scenarios about jumping out of our skins. The Davidson–Rorty truism is false. It also shows, I hope, how a picture can hold us captive, even when we think we are escaping it. It holds us by enframing our thought, so that the arguments we proffer and accept are conditioned by it; and we don't even notice because, in the nature of frames, it is invisible as long as we're operating within it.

II

I have already started on my main task, which is to show how Merleau-Ponty, following Heidegger, helped to break the thrall of the mediational picture. They didn't just deny it, they worked their way out of it, which meant that they articulated it and showed it to be wrong, to need replacing by another picture.

They started by taking seriously a point that Kant makes, his holism. The earliest form of mediational theory, Cartesian–Lockean foundationalism, breaks down because the certainty-producing argument would have to proceed from establishing elements (whatever else is true, I'm *sure* that *red here now*) to grounding wholes. But you can't isolate elements in the way you would have to for this to work.

In other words, a certain holism gets in the way. Here a confusion can arise. There are, in fact, a number of doctrines that take the name "holism." The idea I'm invoking here is *not* the Quine–Davidson holism. That is a holism of verification, first of all; it reflects the fact that propositions or claims can't be verified singly. It is only derivatively a holism about meaning, insofar as the attributions of meaning to terms in the observed agent's speech amount to claims that, like most others, can't be verified singly, but only in packages with other claims. In other words, Quinean holism is a thesis that applies even after accepting the classical Cartesian–empiricist doctrine of the atomism of the input, as Quinean talk of "surface irritations" and "occasion sentences" makes clear. The holism I'm invoking is more radical. It undercuts completely the atomism of the input because the nature of any given element is determined by its "meaning" (*Sinn, sens*), which can only be defined by placing it in a larger whole; and even worse, because the larger whole isn't just an aggregation of such elements.

To make this second point slightly clearer: the "elements" that could figure in a foundationalist reconstruction of knowledge are bits of explicit information – *red here now*, or "there's a rabbit" ("gavagai"). But the whole that allows these to have the sense they have is a "world," a locus of shared understanding organized by social practice. I notice the rabbit, because I pick it out against the stable background of those trees and this open space before them. Without having found my feet in the place, there could be no rabbit sighting. If the whole stage on which the rabbit darts out were uncertain, say, swirling around as it is when I am about to faint, there could be no registering of this explicit bit of information. My having found my feet in this locus, however, is not a matter of my having extra bits of explicit information – that is, it can never just consist in this, although other bits may be playing a role. It is an exercise of my ability to cope, something I have acquired as this bodily being brought up in this culture.

What is involved in this ability to cope? It can be seen as incorporating an overall sense of ourselves and our world, which sense includes and is carried by a spectrum of rather different abilities: at one end, beliefs that we hold, which may or may not be "in our minds" at the moment; at the other, abilities to get around and deal intelligently with things. Intellectualism has made us see these as

very different sites, but philosophy in our day has shown how closely akin they are, and how interlinked.

Heidegger has taught us to speak of our ability to get around as a kind of "understanding" of our world, and indeed, drawing a sharp line between this implicit grasp on things and our formulated, explicit understanding is impossible. It is not only that any frontier is porous, that things explicitly formulated and understood can "sink down" into unarticulated know-how, in the way that Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus have shown us with learning,[9] that our grasp on things can move as well in the other direction, as we articulate what was previously just lived out. It is also that any particular understanding of our situation blends explicit knowledge and unarticulated know-how.

I am informed that a tiger has escaped from the local zoo, and now as I walk through the wood behind my house, the recesses of the forest stand out for me differently, they take on a new valence; my environment now is traversed by new lines of force, in which the vectors of possible attack have an important place. My sense of this environment takes on a new shape, thanks to this new bit of information.

So the whole in which particular things are understood, bits of information taken in, is a sense of my world, carried in a plurality of media: formulated thoughts, things never even raised as a question, but taken as a framework in which the formulated thoughts have the sense they do (for example, the never-questioned, overall shape of things, which keeps me from even entertaining such weird conjectures as that the world suddenly stops beyond my door), the understanding implicit in various abilities to cope. As in the multimedia world of our culture, although some parts of our grasp of things clearly fit one medium rather than others (my knowing Weber's theory of capitalism, my being able to ride a bicycle), the boundaries between media are fuzzy, and many of the most important understandings are multimedia events, as when I stroll through the potentially tiger-infested wood. Moreover, in virtue of the holism that reigns here, every bit of my understanding draws on the whole and is, in this indirect way, multimedia.

Now this picture of the background rules out what one might call a representational or mediational picture of our grasp of the world. There are many versions of this theory, but the central idea

in this picture, as we have seen, is that all our understanding of the world is ultimately mediated knowledge. That is, it is knowledge that comes through something "inner," within ourselves or produced by the mind. This means we can understand our grasp of the world as something that is, in principle, separable from what it is a grasp of.

This separation was obviously central to the original Cartesian thrust that we are all trying to turn back and deconstruct. On one side, there were the bits of putative information in the mind – ideas, impressions, sense data. On the other, there was the "outside world" of which these claimed to inform us. The dualism can later take other, more sophisticated forms. As I said earlier, representations will later be reconceived no longer as "ideas," but as sentences, in keeping with the linguistic turn, as we see with Quine. Or the dualism itself can be fundamentally reconceptualized, as with Kant. Instead of being defined in terms of original and copy, it is seen on the model of form and content, mold and filling. In whatever form, mediational theories posit something that can be defined as inner, as our contribution to knowing and which can be distinguished from what is out there.

We can see now the connection between mediationalism and the continuing force of skeptical questions, or their transforms: maybe the world doesn't really conform to the representation? Or maybe we will come across others whose molds are irreducibly different from ours, with whom we shall therefore be unable to establish any common standards of truth? This thought underlies much facile relativism in our day.

A reflection on our whole multimedia grasp of things ought to put paid to this dualism once and for all. If we stare at the medium of explicit belief, then the separation can seem plausible. My beliefs about the moon can be held, even actualized, in my present thinking even if the moon isn't now visible – perhaps even though it doesn't exist, if it turns out to be a fiction. The grasp of things involved in my ability to move around and manipulate objects can't be divided up like that, however, because unlike moon-beliefs, this ability can't be actualized in the absence of the objects it operates on. My ability to throw baseballs can't be exercised in the absence of baseballs. My ability to get around this city, this house, comes out only in getting around this city and house.

We might be tempted to say that it doesn't exist in my mind, like my theoretical beliefs, in my "head," but in the ability to move that I have in my whole body. That understates the embedding. The locus here is the ability to move-in-this-environment. It exists not just in my body, but in my body-walking-the-streets. Similarly, my ability to be charming or seductive exists not in my body and voice, but in body-voice-in-conversation-with-interlocutor.

A strong temptation to place these abilities just in the body comes from the supposition that a proper neurophysiological account of the capacities can be given that would place them there. This is one source of that weird, post-Cartesian philosophical dream, the brain in a vat. Once one really escapes Cartesian dualism, it ceases to be self-evident that this even makes sense. Unfortunately, I haven't the space to go into that here.

Living with things involves a certain kind of understanding, which we might also call "preunderstanding." That is, things figure for us in their meaning or relevance for our purposes, desires, activities. As I navigate my way along the path up the hill, my mind totally absorbed anticipating the difficult conversation I'm going to have at my destination, I treat the different features of the terrain as obstacles, supports, openings, invitations to tread more warily or run freely, and so on. Even when I'm not thinking of them, these things have those relevances for me; I know my way about among them.

This is nonconceptual; put another way, language isn't playing any direct role. Through language, we have the capacity to focus on things, to pick an x out *as* an x; we pick it out as something that (correctly) bears a description "x," and this puts our identification in the domain of potential critique. (Is this really an x? Is the vocabulary to which "x" belongs the appropriate one for this domain or purpose?) At some point, because of some breakdown, or just through intrinsic interest, I may come to focus on some aspects of this navigational know-how. I may begin to classify things as "obstacles" or "facilitations," and this will change the way I live in the world. Yet in all sorts of ways, I live in the world and deal with it, without having done this.

Ordinary coping isn't conceptual, but at the same time, it can't be understood in just inanimate-causal terms. This denial can be understood in two ways. Maximally, it runs athwart a common ambition of much cognitive psychology, for example, which aims precisely to

give one day a reductive account in machine terms. I would also bet my money that the denial will turn out right in this strong sense, and that the reductive ambition is ultimately a fantasy. For our purposes though, we just need to focus on a minimal sense – namely, that in the absence of this promised but far-distant mechanistic account, our only way of making sense of animals, and of our own preconceptual goings-on, is through something like preunderstanding. That is, we have to see the world impinging on these beings in relevance terms; alternatively put, we see them as agents.

We find it impossible not to extend this courtesy to animals, as I have just indicated. In our case, however, the reasons are stronger. When we focus on some feature of our dealing with the world and bring it to speech, it doesn't come across as a discovery of some unsuspected fact, like for example the change in landscape at a turn in the road or being informed that what we do bears some fancy technical name (Monsieur Jourdain in Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme* speaking prose). When I finally allow myself to recognize that what has been making me uncomfortable in this conversation is that I'm feeling jealous, I feel that in a sense I wasn't totally ignorant of this before. I knew it without knowing it. It has a kind of intermediate status between known and quite unknown. It was a kind of proto-knowledge, an environment propitious for the transformation that conceptual focus brings, even though there may also have been resistances.

I have thus far been drawing on Heidegger, as well as Merleau-Ponty. We find in both this idea that our conceptual thinking is "embedded" in everyday coping. The point of this image can be taken in two bites, as it were. The first is that coping is prior and pervasive ("*zunächst und zumeist*"). We start off as coping infants and only later are inducted into speech. Even as adults, much of our lives consists in this coping. This couldn't be otherwise. To focus on something, we have to keep going – as I was on the path, while thinking of the difficult conversation; or as the person is in the laboratory, walking around, picking up the report, while thinking hard about the theoretical issues (or maybe about what's for lunch).

The second bite goes deeper. It's the point usually expressed with the term "background." The mass of coping is an essential support to the episodes of conceptual focus in our lives, not just in the infrastructural sense that something has to be carrying our mind around

from library to laboratory and back. More fundamentally, the back-ground understanding we need to make the sense we do of the pieces of thinking we engage in resides in our ordinary coping.

I walk up the path and enter the field and notice that the goldenrod is out. This is a particulate take on the world, rather of the kind that boundary events are supposed to be on the I/O, except that under the pressure of foundationalism, they sometimes are forced to be more basic – *yellow here now* – and only build up to goldenrod as a later inference. One of the errors of classical epistemology was to see in this kind of take the building blocks of our knowledge of the world. We put it together bit by bit out of such pieces. So foundationalism had to believe.

One of the reasons that Kant is a crucial figure in the (oh so labo-rious) overcoming of the I/O – even though he also created his own version of it – is that he put paid to this picture. We can't build our view of the world out of percepts such as "the goldenrod is out," or even "yellow here now," because nothing would count as such a percept unless it already had its place in a world. Minimally, nothing could be a *percept* without a surrounding sense of myself as perceiv-ing agent, moving in some surroundings, of which this bit of yellow is a feature. If we try to think all this orientation away, then we get something that is close to unthinkable as an experience, "less even than a dream," as Kant puts it.[10] What would it be like just to expe-rience yellow, never mind whether it's somewhere in the world out there or just in my head? A very dissociated experience, and not a very promising building block for a worldview.

So our understanding of the world is holistic from the start, in a sense different from the Quinean one. There is no such thing as the single, independent percept. Something has this status only within a wider context that is understood, taken for granted, but for the most part not focused on. Moreover, it couldn't all be focused on, not just because it is very widely ramifying, but because it doesn't consist of some definite number of pieces. We can bring this out by reflecting that the number of ways in which the taken-for-granted background could in specific circumstances fail is not delimitable.

Invoking this undelimitable background was the favorite argu-mentative gambit of Wittgenstein in both *Philosophical Investiga-tions* and *On Certainty*. He shows, for instance, that understanding

an ostensive definition is not just a matter of fixing a particular; there is a whole surrounding understanding of what kind of thing is being discussed (the shape or the color), of this being a way of teaching meaning, and the like. In our ordinary investigations, we take for granted a continuing world, so that our whole proceedings would be radically undercut by the "discovery," if one could make it, that the universe started five minutes ago. Yet that can't be taken to mean that there is a definite list of things that we have ruled out, including among others that the universe started five minutes ago.

Now this indefinitely extending background understanding is sustained and evolved through our ordinary coping. My recognition that the goldenrod is out is sustained by a context being in place, for example, that I'm now entering a field, and it's August. I'm not focusing on all this. I know where I am because I walked here, and when I am because I've been living this summer, but these are not reflective inferences; they are just part of the understanding I have in everyday coping. I might indeed take in certain geographic locations of the earth's surface in a certain season, and so on, just as I might lay out the environment I normally walk about in by drawing a map. This wouldn't end the embedding of reflective knowledge in ordinary coping. The map becomes useless, indeed ceases to be a map in any meaningful sense for me, unless I can use it to help me get around. Theoretical knowledge has to be situated in relation to everyday coping to be the knowledge that it is.

In this way, embedding is inescapable; in the stronger sense, all exercises of reflective, conceptual thought only have the content they have situated in a context of background understanding that underlies and is generated in everyday coping.

This is where the description of our predicament in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, the analyses of *In-der-Welt-sein* and *être au monde,* connect to the powerful critique of dualist epistemology mounted by John McDowell.[11] The dualism McDowell attacks, following Sellars, is the sharp demarcation between the space of reasons and the space of causes. The accounts of *In-der-Welt-sein* and *être au monde* also have no place for this boundary. They are meant to explain, as McDowell's also attempts to do, how it can be that the places at which our view is shaped by the world in perception are not just causal impingings, but sites of the persuasive acquisition of belief.

The phenomenological writers go beyond McDowell, however, in holding that we are only able to form conceptual beliefs guided by our surroundings because we live in a preconceptual engagement with these surroundings, which involves understanding. Transactions in this space are not causal processes among neutral elements, but the sensing of and response to relevance. The very idea of an inner zone with an external boundary can't get started here, because our living things in a certain relevance can't be situated "within" the agent; it is in the interaction itself. The understanding and know-how by which I climb the path and continue to know where I am is not "within" me in a kind of picture. That fate awaits it if and when I make the step to map drawing. Now, however, it resides in my negotiating the path. The understanding is in the interaction; it can't be drawn on outside of this in the absence of the relevant surroundings. To think it can be detached is to construe it on the model of explicit, conceptual, language- or map-based knowledge, which is of course what the whole I/O tradition, from Descartes through Locke to contemporary artificial-intelligence modelers, has been intent on doing. Just this is the move that recreates the boundary and makes the process of perceptual knowledge unintelligible, however.

III

This ought to ruin altogether the representational construal. Our grasp of things is not something that is in us, over against the world; it lies in the way we are in contact with the world. This is why a global doubt about the existence of things, which can seem quite sensible on the representational construal, shows itself as incoherent once you have taken the antifoundational turn. I can wonder whether some of my ways of dealing with the world distort things for me: my distance perception is skewed, my too great involvement with this issue or group is blinding me to the bigger picture, my obsession with my image is keeping me from seeing what's really important. All these doubts can only arise against the background of the world as the all-englobing locus of my involvements. I can't seriously doubt this without dissolving the very definition of my original worry, which only made sense against this background.

We can see this if we look at the whole complex of issues around realism and antirealism. The mediational view provides the context

in which these questions make sense. They lose this sense if you escape from this construal, as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have done. Or perhaps better put, one awakes to an unproblematic realism, no longer a daring philosophical "thesis."

It has often been noticed how representationalism leads, by recoil, to skepticism, relativism, and various forms of nonrealism. Once the foundationalist arguments for establishing truth are seen to fail, we are left with the image of the self-enclosed subject, out of contact with the transcendent world. This easily generates theses of the unknowable, of the privacy of thought, or of relativism. More particularly in this last case, the picture of each mind acceding to the world from behind the screen of its own percepts, or grasping it in molds of its own making, seems to offer no way of rational arbitration of disputes. How can the protagonists base their arguments on commonly available elements when each is encased within her own picture?

From skepticism or relativism, the move is obvious, and it is tempting to adopt some mode of antirealism. If these questions can't be rationally arbitrated, then why accept that they are real questions? Why agree that there is a fact of the matter here about which one can be right or wrong? If we can never know whether our language, or ideas, or categories correspond to the reality out there, the things in themselves, then what warrant have we to talk about this transcendent reality in the first place? We have to deny it the status of the "real."

The crucial move in these nonrealisms is to deny some common-sense distinction between reality and our picture of it: the world as it is versus the world as we see it, what is really morally right versus what we think right, and so on. The irony is that this denies distinctions that were first erected into dichotomies by the representational construal.

Now it is obvious that foundationalism is in a sense in the same dialectical universe as nonrealism, that set up by mediational theories. These raise the fear that our representations might be just in the mind, out of touch with reality (even that we might be the victims of a *malin génie*). Foundationalism is an answer to such fears. This is why there is often such an indignant reaction in our scientific-philosophical community to various relativist or nonrealist theories: the whole culture is in the grip of a mediationalist perspective and

therefore can entertain the nightmare of being irremediably out of touch with the real. Science, however, seems to depend on our not being so out of touch; so whoever flirts with such theories is against science, giving aid and comfort to the enemy, destroying our civilization, and so on.

The conception of the knowing agent at grips with the world opens quite different possibilities. There may be (and obviously are) differences, alternative takes on and construals of reality, which may even be systematic and far reaching. Some of these will be, all may be wrong; but any such take or construal is within the context of a basic engagement with or understanding of the world, a contact with it which cannot be broken off short of death. It is impossible to be totally wrong. Even if, after climbing the path, I think myself to be in the wrong field, I have situated myself in the right county, I know the way back home, and so on. The reality of contact with the real world is the inescapable fact of human (or animal) life and can only be imagined away by erroneous philosophical argument. As Merleau-Ponty put it, "To ask whether the world is real is not to know what one is saying" (*Se demander si le monde est réel, c'est ne pas entendre ce qu'on dit*). It is in virtue of this contact with a common world that we always have something to say to each other, something to point to in disputes about reality.

So the view of the agent as being-in-the-world has room for a distinction between reality and our grasp of it; we invoke this distinction every time we knowingly correct our view of things. It can distinguish between different, mutually untranslatable cultural "takes" on reality, but it cannot allow that these are insurmountable or inescapable.

IV

My thesis, relating the two quotes at the head of this essay, has been that the picture that "held us captive," which I have identified as mediational epistemology, can ultimately be overcome or escaped through a deeper understanding of the background of our thinking, which has been provided in the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Further light can be cast on why this is so, if we consider some of the motivations underlying this dominant epistemology from its inception.

I want to concentrate on the recurring structural element in all mediational theories, that through which knowledge of the world takes place, be it conceived as idea, sentence, form of understanding, stimulation of nerve ends, or whatever. The positing of this element, be it impression, or sense datum, or minimal input, is overdetermined.

On one hand, it is encouraged by a picture of the subject as one item in a disenchanted nature, understood by post-Galilean science. This is the condition, at least of the subject's body. But the interaction with outside reality that we call experience must occur in this realm; it happens between the things that surround us and the body, hence it must be understood in terms of naturalistic laws. If you trace through the process whereby, say, light impinges on the eye, you come naturally to posit an end point where the resulting input enters the "mind" (dualist version) or becomes available for computation (updated materialist version). This transition point defines the particulate item of information "through" which the world is known. We could call this the "ontological" motive.

This structural element was also generated by the demands of the foundationalist enterprise. Myles Burnyeat has, I believe, an interesting point about the novelty of Descartes's invocation of skepticism in the First Meditation, in relation to his ancient sources.[12] Through it, Descartes manages to parlay a doubt about our everyday certainties into a certainty about the nature of doubt. Instead of remaining in the incurable uncertainty that rehearsing the sources of error was meant to bring on, the solvent of doubt is made to hit one irreducible kernel, namely, our experience of the world. Perhaps I am not really sitting before the fire, clothed, but it is clear that I think that I am so situated. The nature of this item of experience is quite clear and indubitable. Modern phenomenology has argued that Descartes didn't have the right to help himself to this clear delimitation of doubt, but the rights and wrongs are not to my purpose here. What is relevant is the role of this distinctly demarcated "adventitious idea" (*idée adventice*) in Descartes's foundationalist strategy.

Doubt reaches its limit at the existence of a mental item that purports to be about the external world and presents a determinate content. The issue of skepticism can therefore be exactly stated; we can be certain about the nature of doubt. The issue is, do these purported contents really hold of the external world, or do these ideas

lie? A case in which the latter unhappy condition might hold would be one in which a malign spirit had set out to fool us. But now this, and any other such systematic cause of error, can be ruled out by our demonstrating that we are the product of a benign, veracious Creator.

How convincing the argument is doesn't concern me; what is important is that the foundationalist argument required the stabilization of doubt in a clearly defined issue. We can't be left reeling under the cumulative effect of all the possible sources of error, where the ancients abandon us with the injunction to cease the fruitless quest for certain knowledge. The reasons for doubt have to be shown to come down to a single clear issue, which we can then hope to handle. This requires the invention of the strange boundary event, the dual nature of which causes the trouble that I have been discussing here.

On one hand, it has to be about the world, present a unit of information, be a small item of knowledge, and hence belong to the space of reasons. On the other, it has to be prior to all interpretation; its having the content it has must be a brute fact, not in any way the result of thought or reasoning activity on our part. This latter feature emerges in the argument in the Sixth Meditation about possible sources of error, like the round tower that looks square in the distance. In order that this mistake, though the result of a general feature of appearances at a distance, not be laid at God's door, thus refuting the thesis of his goodness and veracity, we have to argue that the erroneous conclusion here results from some (in this case sloppy, unfocused) inference on our part. For this we are responsible, and we ought to have been more careful. What God stands surety for are the genuine cases of interpretation-free appearance. The system starts from these.

I have been discussing the motives for believing in this notion of a brute input within Descartes's philosophy, but it is clear that we can detach it from his idiosyncratic arguments and see how it has to figure in all foundationalist epistemologies. The aim of foundationalism is to peel back all the layers of inference and interpretation and get back to something genuinely prior to them all, a brute Given – then to build back up, checking all the links in the interpretive chain. Foundationalism involves the double move, stripping down to the unchallengeable, and building back up. Unless at some point we hit bedrock, if indeed interpretation goes on forever ("all the way

down," in Dreyfus's apt expression), the foundationalist project is ruined.

My thesis is that an important motive behind the I/O picture, which generates all the aporiai of the sense datum, is the foundationalist project itself. It is not just that the picture of the mind in disenchanted nature generates the notion of the brute input, a site for insoluble philosophical problems, as an unfortunate side effect. I think this is true; that is indeed one motive. But it is also true that the foundationalist drive generates this unfortunate notion for its own purposes.

What takes place is a kind of ontologizing of proper method. The right way to deal with puzzles and build a reliable body of knowledge is to break down the issue into subquestions, identify the chains of inference, dig down to an inference-free starting point, and then build by a reliable method. Once this comes to seem the all-purpose nostrum for thinking, one has an overwhelming motivation to believe that this is how the mind actually works in taking in the world. Because if it isn't, one has to draw the devastating conclusion that the only reliable method is inapplicable in the most important context of all, in which we build our knowledge of the world.

Hence the notion of the brute input, under different names, goes marching on. Locke argues for something of this sort in his metaphor of building materials. We start with simple ideas, as builders start with their given materials. Construction is not an activity that can go on "all the way down." It has to start somewhere with things we just find lying around. So must it be with knowledge.

Again, the vogue in cognitive psychology for AI-inspired models of the mind was powered by the same double set of motives: on one hand, ontological – the mind is set in disenchanted nature, it is a product of the brain which is itself a piece of this nature, therefore it must work fundamentally like a machine; on the other hand, methodological – what is thinking, anyway? It is building chains of inference from minimal starting points. These starting points are givens. So that's how the mind must work.

V

In the light of this, we can see how theories of this range generate the classical dilemmas, puzzles, and aporiai, some of which have

been mentioned earlier in the chapter. On one hand, the picture of our having access to the world *through* something inevitably suggests various skeptical or antirealist moves. At a first stage, we can wonder whether we are right to put confidence in our belief in "transcendent" objects, when all we have to go on are immanent ideas. Descartes's heroic proof via God's veracity couldn't go on convincing everyone, particularly as belief in a Providential order began to be shaken. But then the skeptical question in turn suggests another twist: if we can't say anything for certain about this realm of the transcendent, why are we talking about it at all; can we not just restrict ourselves to appearances, or sense data, or what seems right to us?

At the same time, mediational epistemology seemed to make experience problematic. We reason, argue, make inferences, and arrive at an understanding of the world. Yet our framework understanding, which most of these theories try to retain, is that we also learn from the world; we take things in, come to know things, on the basis of which we reason. It was this dual source of our knowledge that mediational epistemologies were meant to capture in their basic structure: receptivity produces the basic elements of input, and then reasoning processes these into science.

Yet the very boundary set up by the mediational element seemed to make it hard to conceive how these two sources could work together. What seemed like obvious solutions just enhanced the first problem, that of skepticism and nonrealism. These would amount to the idea that receptivity is to be understood in purely causal terms, that it just delivers certain results that we can't get behind; reason then does what it can to make sense of these.

Beyond this, the very idea of a boundary can be made to seem highly problematic. Critical reasoning is something we do, an activity, in the realm of spontaneity and freedom. As far as knowledge of the world is concerned, however, it is meant to be responsive to the way things are. Spontaneity has to be merged somehow with receptivity, but it is hard to see how this can be if we conceive of spontaneity as a kind of limitless freedom, which at the point of contact has to hit a world under adamantine, post-Galilean "laws of nature." The schizophrenic nature of boundary events, inexplicably partaking of both nature and freedom, is an inevitable consequence of this way of seeing things.

Indeed, the very idea of a boundary event, between a realm of causes and a realm of reasons, begins to seem problematic. This event would have to be in a sense amphibious, belonging to both. Yet are their natures not contradictory – on one hand an object, or a factual state of affairs, the causal upshot in our receptors of outside stimulation; on the other hand certain *claims,* to the effect that so-and-so, which could figure as reasons to adopt some broader view or other? This is the consideration that has led some philosophers to denounce the myth of the purely given, the brute, uninterpreted fact.[13]

The problem has been to account for experience, in the sense of a taking in of information from the world. In a sense, we have to receive this information; we are the passive party. In another, we have to know how to "grasp" it; we are active. How do these two combine? This has been the notorious problem of the tradition of modern philosophy, which has been defined by modern epistemology. In certain well-known classical writers, the absence of any plausible theory of experience was patent. Leibniz in the end denied it altogether and saw a picture of the world as present in its entirety within the monad. Hume seemed to go to the other extreme and allow that all our knowledge comes to us through experience, hence the vaunted title "empiricist." This was at the cost of denying the active dimension altogether, so that the deliverances of experience were unconnected bits of information, and what seem to ordinary people to be the undeniable connections were denounced as projections of the mind. Even the self disappears in this caricatural passivism. Kant notoriously tried to unite both Hume and Leibniz. At least he saw the problem, how to combine spontaneity and receptivity. Nevertheless, he was still too caught up in the mediationalist structure to propound a believable solution.[14]

VI

We can now see better what is needed to resolve these aporiai and escape from the picture:

(1) To breach the hard boundary between the spaces of causes and reasons, we need to allow for a kind of understanding that is preconceptual, on the basis of which concepts can be predicated of things;

something, in other words, that functions in the space of reasons below concepts.

(2) For this, we need to see this understanding as that of an engaged agent, determining the significances (*sens, Sinne*) of things from out of its aims, needs, purposes, desires. These significances arise out of a combination of spontaneity and receptivity, constraint and striving; they are the ways the world must be taken in for a being defined by certain goals or needs to make sense of it. They are thus in one way imposed on us by reality; what happens is a victory or a defeat, success or failure, fulfillment or frustration; we cannot (beyond certain limits) just choose to deny or alter this meaning. At the same time, this significance is only disclosed through our striving to make sense of our surroundings.

(3) The original, inescapable locus of this constrained, preconceptual sense making, however, is our bodily commerce with our world. This is where Merleau-Ponty's contribution, enlarged and developed more recently by Samuel Todes, has been so crucial. The most primordial and unavoidable significances of things are, or are connected to, those involved in our bodily existence in the world: our field is shaped in terms of up and down, near and far, easily accessible and out of reach, graspable, avoidable, and so on.

(4) Our humanity also consists, however, in our ability to decenter ourselves from this original engaged mode; to learn to see things in a disengaged fashion, in universal terms, or from an alien point of view; to achieve, at least notionally, a "view from nowhere." Only we have to see that this disengaged mode is in an important sense derivative. The engaged one is prior and pervasive, as I mentioned earlier. We always start off in it, and we always need it as the base from which we, from time to time, disengage.

A four-step view of this kind can enable us to overcome the Myth of the Given and get beyond the paradoxical boundary of mediational theories. But it also dissolves the temptations to antirealism, and this particularly in virtue of Step 3. If we see that our grasp of things is primordially one of bodily engagement with them, then we can see that we are in contact with the reality that surrounds us at a deeper level than any description or significance-attribution we might make of it. These descriptions and attributions may be wrong, but what must remain is the world within which the questions arose to which

they were the wrong answers, the world from which I cannot escape because I need it in a host of ways, in the final analysis even to know who I am and what I'm about[15] – even if what I'm about is renouncing the world to go into the desert. My first understanding of reality is not a picture I am forming of it, but the sense given to a continuing transaction with it. I can be confused about it, but its inseparable presence is undeniable. That is why, as Merleau-Ponty says, even to frame the denial, I have to have lost touch with what the words really mean.

VII

This doesn't mean that words can't trip us up. I have been trying to give an account of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of antirealism, but this latter term, and others I have used, are my own and find their place in the contemporary philosophical debate. This doesn't mean that he used the same terms, and from this can arise possible confusion.

Thus when Merleau-Ponty says, in his discussion of the *cogito* in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "there is no question of justifying realism, and there is an element of final truth in the Cartesian return of things and ideas to myself" (*il n'est pas question de donner raison au réalisme et il y a une vérité définitive dans le retour cartésien des choses et des idées au moi*) (*PP* 423/369/430), is he relapsing into a species of idealism? To see that this is not so, we have to understand that "realism" for him designates the view according to which everything, including human thought and perception, can be explained in terms of objective, third-person processes. This reductive view, exemplified by various mechanistic accounts of human action and thinking, but also by certain accounts of reasoning in terms of ideal essences, is what he has been arguing against throughout the book. Indeed, he holds that it shares with idealism the inability to think the kind of opening to the world exemplified by our embodied agency.

"Realism" is to be rejected, then, because we would never be able to understand our experience of things if we tried to explain it in terms of such objective entities. The point here is similar to Heidegger's when he refuses to understand Dasein on the model of occurrent entities. The human agent doesn't just exist alongside entities; it has an understanding of its world, and this is something that can never be simply equated with any objective processes of exchange between

agent and surroundings. Moreover, this understanding is never complete, or absolute. That is, there is always more to be grasped, and even what we have grasped depends on modes of understanding whose bases we can never fully render transparent to ourselves.

Thus, in the rest of this chapter on the *cogito,* Merleau-Ponty tries to define this kind of opening to the world. He vigorously combats the idea that we could ever define an inner zone of mental contents of whose nature we might be certain, independently of how they relate to the reality beyond them. This inability to fix a boundary between the indubitable inner and the unproblematic outer is argued not only for the case of perception, but also in relation to feelings like love, and even in the case of "pure thought" (*pensée pure*), as with geometrical reasoning (*PP* 439/383/446ff). The inner and the outer can't be separated in this way: "The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself" (*Le monde est tout au dedans et je suis tout hors de moi*) (*PP* 467/407/474).

"The tacit *cogito,*" that is, the fundamental dimension of our experience, which the *cogito* as explicit argument tries to articulate, is "myself experienced by myself" (*une épreuve de moi par moi*), "the presence of oneself to oneself" (*la présence de soi à soi*) (*PP* 462/403–4/469–70). It is, indeed, independent of any particular thought, but it is also in its unformulated state not really a bit of knowledge. To become this, it must be put into words. "The tacit *cogito* is a *cogito* only when it has found expression for itself" (*Le* Cogito *tacite n'est* Cogito *que lorsqu'il s'est exprimé lui-même*) (*PP* 463/404/470).

This predicament rules out absolute, that is, complete and self-evidently incorrigible knowledge. The nature of our opening to the world, of our contact with it, makes this impossible. But this contact also rules out total error. It can turn out that our grasp on things was wrong in this or that respect. Yet it cannot be entirely wrong, and for the same reason that it can't ever be guaranteed to be totally right. The inseparability of inner and outer means that there is no realm of inner certainty, but it also means that perceiving, thinking, feeling cannot be totally severed from the reality it bears on.

Consciousness, if it is not absolute truth or *a-lêtheia,* at least rules out all absolute falsity. . . . The truth is that neither error nor doubt ever cuts us off from the truth, because they are surrounded by a world horizon in which the teleology of consciousness summons us to an effort at resolving them. (*La*

conscience, si elle ne'est pas vérité ou a-létheia absolue, exclut du moins toute fausseté absolue. . . . Ce qui est vrai, c'est que l'erreur ni le doute ne nous coupent jamais de la vérité, parce qu'ils sont entourés d'un horizon de monde où la téléologie de la conscience nous invite à en chercher la résolution.) (*PP* 456/398/463)

It is this inexpungeable contact with the world that sweeps away forever the myriad forms of antirealism engendered in the thraldom of the mediational picture.

NOTES

1. "A *picture* held us captive." *Philosophical Investigations,* §115.
2. "To ask whether the world is real is not to know what one is saying" (*PP* 396/344/401).
3. Letter to Gibieuf, 19 January 1642. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* Vol. III; AT III 474.
4. Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," 198.
5. Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," 141.
6. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 178.
7. See also Robert Brandom, *Rorty and His Critics,* Introduction, xiv.
8. Davidson, "A Coherence Theory," 312.
9. H. L. Dreyfus and S. E. Dreyfus, *Mind over Machine.*
10. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* A112.
11. McDowell, *Mind and World.*
12. Burnyeat, "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed."
13. See McDowell, *Mind and World,* Lecture 1.
14. I have drawn on the extremely insightful work of Samuel Todes, whose doctoral dissertation has recently been published, many years after, as *Body and World.*
15. See the illuminating discussion in *Body and World,* Chapter 4.