Can We Read Nietzsche as a Proto-Phenomenologist?

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Abstract

This thesis asks the question whether we can interpret Nietzsche as anticipating the phenomenological movement of the twentieth century in his own philosophy. I begin by exploring some of the deep connections between his philosophy and Husserl’s founding phenomenology, before looking at some irreconcilable differences between them. I then argue that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as it is laid out in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, bears the strongest relations to Nietzsche’s thought, and is the most promising way to consider whether Nietzsche really practiced a form of proto-phenomenology. With these connections established, I then consider two themes of Nietzsche’s philosophy that seem to contradict important aspects of phenomenology: his “falsification thesis” and his perspectivism. Regarding his falsification thesis – the thesis that our descriptions necessarily falsify experience – I show that Nietzsche had no reason to hold onto this by the time of his mature works, and indeed abandoned it and in doing so made something of a “phenomenological turn”, particularly regarding his position on metaphysics. Furthermore, I also show how Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on language in *Phenomenology of Perception* provide helpful insights that Nietzsche’s philosophy could accommodate and which would make his overall argument more phenomenological in nature. Regarding his perspectivism, I begin by showing how this is potentially problematic in considering Nietzsche as proto-phenomenological because of two reasons: firstly, it seems to say, like the falsification thesis, that our experiences are necessarily falsifications of reality. Secondly, it has often been interpreted in a way that leads Nietzsche towards relativism, whereby we have no notion of intersubjective truth. Again by showing how his metaphysical views changed throughout his career, I argue that his mature understanding of perspectivism rather than preventing access to an intersubjective truth, actually guarantees it, by arguing for our necessarily embodied perceptual access to the world, much in the same manner that Merleau-Ponty came to argue in his phenomenology of perception. With these potential conflicts resolved, this thesis shows that there are fundamental connections between Nietzsche and existential phenomenology – particularly via Merleau-Ponty – and that we should seriously consider the phenomenological credentials of Nietzsche’s philosophy.
Declaration

I declare that the following thesis comprises only my own original work towards the Master of Arts (Advanced Seminar & Shorter Thesis) degree in Philosophy.
I declare that due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. I declare that this thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length.

11 March 2016

[Signature]

11 March 2016
I would like to firstly thank all my friends and family for their ongoing and overwhelming support and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you for your willingness to aid in discussions, advice, and opinions – but also thank you for providing much needed distractions when required.

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Finally, I would like to give an especially large thank you to my supervisor, Dr Andrew Inkpin, for his incredible insights, patience, and assistance throughout this research. This work could not have been completed if not for your devoted efforts.
A Note on References
All citations refer to page numbers, except where a “§” is used to indicate a section number from one of Nietzsche’s works. Roman numerals refer to volumes/chapters and Arabic numerals refer to the number of the aphorism within the volume/chapter. When references are made to posthumously published notes, the convention of §1[2] is used, for example, to denote Notebook 1, entry 2.
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Introduction

In this thesis I pose the question whether or not we can read Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy as constituting something like an early form of phenomenology. Nietzsche – who has varyingly been interpreted as an existentialist, a post-modernist, an immorralist or a moralist, a relativist, a naturalist, and many other things beside – has been read by some as somewhat of a phenomenologist *avant la lettre*. Whilst such readings date back quite some decades, greater attention has been turned towards this in the English speaking world in recent years, and it remains an open and interesting question whether Nietzsche should properly be considered as a forerunner to the phenomenological movement, or if the similarities between the two philosophies are trivial and superficial. I aim to contribute to this discussion, by ultimately reconciling Nietzsche’s philosophy with phenomenology along certain lines that seem to demarcate them, thus allowing the connections that are there to shine forth more brightly.

In an introductory Chapter One I will expose some of the more significant phenomenological strands of Nietzsche’s philosophy, particularly as they relate to Edmund Husserl’s founding vision of it. However I will then highlight some unresolvable divergences between Nietzsche and Husserl’s thought which leads one to consider where the most encouraging connections between Nietzsche and phenomenology lie. I will show that they lie in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, specifically through his focus on our lived experience as experienced through embodied consciousness.

The next two chapters will deal with two aspects of Nietzschean philosophy that seem contradictory to critical elements of this existential phenomenology. Chapter Two will investigate Nietzsche’s occasional advocacy of the falsification thesis – that in describing our experience, we subsequently and necessarily falsify this experience. Chapter Three will consider Nietzsche’s perspectivism as another potential obstacle to interpreting him as some form of early phenomenologist. I will hope to show that, read correctly, Nietzsche’s
thoughts on these two issues are not anti-phenomenological, and indeed display some of his deep connections with Merleau-Ponty. We will thus be able to conclude that some of the main reasons for doubting Nietzsche’s phenomenological characteristics are not at all substantive, and thus we should consider wholeheartedly the idea that Nietzsche did anticipate a form of early phenomenology before it became actualized by Husserl.
Chapter One:

Why Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology?

Whatever challenge there is in evaluating whether Nietzsche belongs to, or can be placed within, the ancestry of the phenomenological tradition is exacerbated by a twofold problem, as perfectly encapsulated by Christine Daigle and Élodie Boublil: “There is not one Nietzsche confronting one phenomenology.”¹ The vast array of topics that Nietzsche’s philosophy dealt with, and its (self-proclaimed) openness to interpretation, as well as the particular, different practices of phenomenology across various authors – let alone the differences within any given phenomenologist’s body of work – means that a comprehensive study covering all of Nietzsche and phenomenology is not possible in a project of this size. We must therefore identify where lie the most compelling reasons for seeing Nietzsche as engaged in an early form of phenomenology, and indeed where the most promising connections for future philosophical inquiry are. In this chapter I will show that these connections are to be found in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Restricting the subsequent investigations to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty is not to say that there is no merit in examining other areas of intersection between Nietzsche and phenomenology. Research into the connections between Nietzsche and phenomenology began at least as early as Rudolf Boehm’s exploration into Nietzsche and Husserl in 1968,² and scholarship in the area (at least in English) has blossomed of late, with two collections of articles on the subject being published in the last decade,³ alongside numerous other explorations into this theme.⁴ Nor is it to say that Merleau-Ponty stands isolated and independent from the phenomenological tradition

as a singularity to be studied alongside Nietzsche; Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology developed out of a close reading and engagement with the works of Husserl and Heidegger, and so to be properly understood must be understood through this engagement. Yet for the purposes of this project, we must necessarily narrow our focus onto a particular moment of phenomenology that is most compatible with Nietzsche’s philosophy. In order to establish Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as this moment, let us first consider the connections between Nietzsche’s thought and the foundational phenomenology of Husserl – by assessing the similarities, and also the divergences, between Nietzsche and phenomenology as Husserl conceived it, we will be better placed to see the stronger resonances between Nietzsche and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology.

1. Husserl and Nietzsche’s Critical Philosophies

Despite an apparent tension between Husserl’s pursuit of a new rationalism that would restore the meaning of life, and Nietzsche’s disregard for reason, due to what he considered to be its life-denying nature, there are by no means insignificant areas of intersection between the two thinkers. Boehm, mentioned above, brought this to light, pointing out that despite taking up different sides in the contest between life and reason, both philosophers converged upon the thought that European rationalism, such as it was, had reached a point of crisis. Further, Boehm sought to resolve the apparent opposition between Husserl’s advocating a renewed rationalism and Nietzsche as foreseeing the utter ruination of rationalism, by highlighting the similarities between Husserl’s attempt to ground a new rationalism on absolute subjectivity, and Nietzsche’s much vaunted project of a transvaluation of values. The latter, Boehm suggests, arose out of Nietzsche’s realisation of the collapsing of the “real” and “apparent” worlds into one another (although he concedes that one can only speculate about this genesis). Husserl and Nietzsche are both led to this challenge of rationalism via their critical approach to philosophy, in the tradition of Descartes.

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5 Boehm, ‘Husserl and Nietzsche’, 14.
6 Ibid., 16.
7 Ibid.
and Kant, as Daigle persuasively argues in her paper *The Intentional Encounter with ‘the World’*. Suggesting that as early as *Human, All Too Human* (hereafter HAH) Nietzsche was exhibiting a phenomenological type of philosophy, she recognises that for him “the point is to go back to the fundamental experience of being a consciousness in the world and to dismiss the false judgements that pervert and mask it.” This is of course the Husserlian program, as it is perhaps most explicitly laid out in his *Cartesian Meditations*, where he speaks of “the demand for a philosophy aiming at the ultimate conceivable freedom from prejudice, shaping itself with actual autonomy according to ultimate evidences it has itself produced, and therefore absolutely self-responsible”. In the meditations that follow, Husserl outlines how his program of transcendental phenomenology adopts and improves on the Cartesian method of radical doubt, in order to produce an absolute grounding of science. In the first instance, then, phenomenology as it was prescribed by Husserl is a critical philosophy; a discipline of radical doubt or scepticism that attempts to articulate the most fundamental experience of life, on which all knowledge-seeking (and science) is implicitly founded.

We see an analogous commitment in Nietzsche’s own work in his ongoing critique of science and knowledge, a commitment which Babette Babich declares to be Nietzsche’s own phenomenology. Writing in the retrospective preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* (hereafter BT), Nietzsche declares his first book to be concerned with the “problem of science itself”. He elaborates on this problem by saying that it lies at the boundary of what is communicable, since the critical problem of science cannot be recognised within the space of science. This is a restatement of his ongoing derision of Kant’s attempt at “a critique of reason as a whole”, in one particular instance asking of Kant’s critical program: “was it not somewhat peculiar to demand of an instrument that it

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9 Ibid., 33.
should criticise its own usefulness and suitability? that the intellect should itself ‘know’ its own value, its own capacity, its own limitations? was it not even a little absurd?”

The problem with the problem of science is that the very tools that would seem most natural to deploy in the critique are the products of the very system that is undergoing the critique. Nietzsche’s perpetual concern with the possibility of knowledge leads him to ask whether science can truly lay claim to being the principal access to knowledge that it proclaims itself to be, and he realises that in order to faithfully answer this question, one cannot rightfully use the instruments of science itself in the process.

Throughout his writings we find attempts to bring to light the methods of doubt and scepticism that would reveal the nature of our access to knowledge. In HAH he embarks upon the method of “historical philosophizing” (an early indication of his genealogical method) that is needed in the face of the realisation that “there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths.” He then likens the required philosophical method to that of philology, saying one must try to understand nature (the world) with “the same kind of rigorous art of elucidation that philologists have now fashioned for all books: with the intention of comprehending what the text intends to say but without sensing, indeed presupposing, a second meaning.” Comparing Husserl’s pursuit of a “philosophy aiming at the ultimate conceivable freedom from prejudice”, which we mentioned above, with Nietzsche’s call here for comprehension without presupposing extra meaning, we see how the two philosophers were adjoined in their respective critical programs with regard to knowledge. In Nietzsche this finds expression again in Daybreak (hereafter D), which continually invokes the need for engaging in an experimental philosophy – that is, one that is open and without prejudice. For example, in an aphorism titled Investigators and experimenters he writes: “There are no scientific methods which alone lead to knowledge! We have to tackle things experimentally, now angry with them and now kind, and be successively just, passionate and cold with them.”

The very next aphorism is called Seeing with new eyes, and later on he says that those truly deserving of the

15 Ibid., §8.
16 Nietzsche, Daybreak, §432.
17 Ibid., §433.
label “genius” (e.g. Plato, Spinoza, and Goethe) are those who “possess the *pure, purifying eye* which seems not to have grown out of their temperament and character but, free from these and usually in mild opposition to them”.

All of this is to show that Nietzsche maintains his rejection of knowledge obtained through the *old eyes* of religion, metaphysics, science – that is, of modes of thought that withhold certain prejudices and that are not subjected to radical scepticism. Instead, in *D Nietzsche advocates for a contemplative philosophy of experimentation, where we attempt as far as possible to suspend judgements that prejudice our pursuit of knowledge*. And in *The Anti-Christ (hereafter AC)* he again refers to the discipline of philology as displaying an admirable model for obtaining knowledge, where philology is “understood here in a very wide sense as the art of reading well – of being able to read off a fact *without* falsifying it by interpretation, *without* losing caution, patience, subtlety in the desire for understanding. Philology as *ephexis* [indecisiveness] in interpretation”.

Whilst Nietzsche didn’t devise a method of suspension of judgement as systematically as Husserl did with his *epochê*, or “bracketing”, I argue that the above shows that central to both was a commitment to subject all knowledge to radical doubt or scepticism – to remove all false prejudices that effect what we claim as “knowledge”.

The progression of Husserl’s critical project on to his concept of the “life-world” [*Lebenswelt*] further emphasises the connections between himself and Nietzsche. In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl introduced the concept of the life-world, being something like the background of actual experiencable reality upon which all knowledge conveyed by the objective sciences is grounded. As Husserl puts it, “The life-world is a realm of original self-evidences. That which is self-evidently given is, in perception, experienced as ‘the thing itself,’ in immediate presence, or, in memory, remembered as the thing itself; and every other

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18 Ibid., §497.
manner of intuition is a presentification of the thing itself.”21 The life-world, then, is all of that which is given to us pre-scientifically, in its own self-evidentness, and “From objective-logical self-evidence (mathematical ‘insight,’ as it is being accomplished by the inquiring and grounding mathematician, etc.), the path leads back, here, to the primal self-evidence in which the life-world is ever pregiven.”22 For Husserl, then, the ultimate goal of his critical project is to develop a “science” of this life-world, in order to have a full comprehension of the very foundations of the objective sciences that are coming under scrutiny for their prejudices. This in itself accords with Nietzsche’s own critique of rationalism, and the problem of science, being that we cannot critically evaluate the worth of science using science; when Husserl says that “it is a new sort of scientific discipline that is required for the solution of the enigmas which now disquiet us…it cannot have already before it, as an available norm, a finished mathematics, logic, or logistic, since these are themselves objective sciences in the sense which is presently problematical and, as included in the problem, cannot be presuppositions used as premises”,23 is he not echoing Nietzsche’s own declaration that his task as a philosopher was “to look at science in the perspective of the artist, but at art in that of life”?24 Yet it is beyond this point that they begin to diverge on the question of what shape this new basis of scientific thought or rationalism will take. “Nietzsche”, Daigle observes, “does not aim to establish an absolute ground of science, he does want to ground it on new bases.”25 On the other hand this is precisely Husserl’s aim – to establish a science of the life-world that would thus serve as the absolute normative ideal of science. Or as Kristen Brown Golden more eloquently puts it, “whereas Husserl’s focus reveals the subjective sources of everyday experience in order to free subjectivity from irrational aspects of the modern everyday, Nietzsche’s emphasis reveals contradictions in celebrated ideals that limit subjectivity in surprising ways to the everyday.”26 Husserl would

22 Ibid., 128.
23 Ibid., 132.
24 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy; And, The Case of Wagner*, BT Preface §2.
ultimately, to borrow the formulation of Boehm, side with reason over life, whereas Nietzsche would side with the power of life.27

2. The Ego in Husserl and Nietzsche

This is not the end of the crucial differences between Nietzsche and Husserl. Daigle also highlights the incompatibility between Nietzsche and Husserl’s phenomenology based upon Husserl’s notion of the “transcendental”, or “pure”, ego: “Indeed the pure ego proposed by Husserl finds no equivalent notion in Nietzsche, for whom the notion of an ego is really problematic.”28 This latter point is most readily seen in Nietzsche’s attacks on the limitations of language and grammar, for example in Beyond Good and Evil (hereafter BGE), where he writes that it is “a falsification of the facts to say that the subject ‘I’ is the condition of the predicate ‘think’. It thinks: but to say the ‘it’ is just that famous old ‘I’ – well that is just an assumption or opinion, to put it mildly, and by no means an ‘immediate certainty.’”29 One is here reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre’s own disagreement with Husserl over the transcendental ego: “The Cogito affirms too much. The certain content of the pseudo-‘Cogito’ is not ‘I have consciousness of this chair,’ but ‘There is consciousness of this chair.’”30 Keith Ansell Pearson also investigates the connections that Nietzsche and Husserlian phenomenology share, specifically in relation to Leibnizian individuation, but concludes that “Nietzsche’s stress on the new law of individuality…means that his theory of individuation cannot establish itself on the basis of the personalistic consciousness of the transcendental ego”, and that ultimately “Nietzsche cannot readily be enlisted for the phenomenological cause (in Husserl’s founding sense)”.31 The point of contention is that Nietzsche rejects the idea that we first and foremost have immanent access to the inner world of our own consciousness, of a pure ego that remains even after we have suspended all other judgement on

what presents itself. “So, how many people know how to observe? And of these few, how many to observe themselves?”, Nietzsche asks in *The Gay Science* (hereafter GS), to which he responds: “‘Everyone is farthest from himself’...and the saying, ‘Know thyself’, addressed to human beings by a god, is near to malicious.”

It could be argued that by his later works, with his turn to focus on the life-world, that Husserl surrendered his insistence on the irreducibility of the transcendental ego – that the only pre-given certainty is the life-world itself, and not “I have consciousness” – the implication being that his later-views on phenomenology did not diverge from Nietzsche’s own thoughts on the existence of the ego. This may be the case, for as Husserl says in *The Crisis*: “It is naturally a ludicrous, though unfortunately common misunderstanding, to seek to attack transcendental phenomenology as ‘Cartesianism,’ as if its *ego cogito* were a premise or a set of premises from which the rest of knowledge (whereby one naïvely speaks only of objective knowledge) was to be deduced, absolutely ‘secured.’ The point is not to secure objectivity but to understand it.”

Here Husserl defends his position against those who say he places too much emphasis on the pure ego – it is not the foundation of all knowledge, as this could only embrace the naïve understanding of knowledge as objective, or scientific knowledge, when, as we have seen from Husserl, there is prior to this knowledge the pre-given life-world of all that is experiencable. Rather, the ego is something that is discovered through constant self-verification: “At the onset of the epochê the ego is given apodictically, but as a ‘mute concreteness.’ It must be brought to exposition, to expression, through systematic intentional ‘analysis’ which inquires back from the world-phenomenon.”

I will not pursue whether the transcendental ego is no longer problematic in relation to Nietzsche’s thought after Husserl emphasises the importance of the life-world, as this is a complex question beyond the scope of this project. It is still the case that, as we saw above, Nietzsche and Husserl ultimately stood opposed on the issue of reason as opposed to life, and that if they are to be compared favourably regarding the ego, it is via Husserl’s late development of the life-world. It

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33 Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 189.
34 Ibid., 187.
is in large part due to Merleau-Ponty’s exploration and expansion of the concept of the life-world that we will find him to be the most promising phenomenologist to involve in a discussion with Nietzsche. With having noted this need to identify Nietzsche with a phenomenology that emphasises and expands on the concept of the life-world, one may contend that the phenomenologist one should turn to now is Heidegger. His discussions of being-in-the-world no doubt influenced Husserl’s own thoughts on the life-world, and so Heidegger may appear as a prime target for the present purposes. However, we find nothing like the emphasis on embodied consciousness in Heidegger as we do in Merleau-Ponty, and as we shall see in the following sections, the primacy of the body plays such a significant role in Nietzsche's philosophy that Merleau-Ponty emerges as the more suitable candidate over Heidegger.

3. Merleau-Ponty on Phenomenology

In examining the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, we will largely restrict ourselves to the preface of his *Phenomenology of Perception* (hereafter PP). We do so firstly again as a matter of narrowing the scope of our investigation, and secondly because in it Merleau-Ponty offers a genuine attempt to outline the key elements of phenomenology as he saw them. Furthermore, the manner in which Merleau-Ponty proceeds through the preface – looking at apparent tensions that reside in Husserl’s own conception of phenomenology, and resolving these through his own contributions – serves to show that the disagreements between Nietzsche’s thought and Husserl’s phenomenology that we encountered above are themselves resolved by Merleau-Ponty’s style of phenomenology. This will emphasise that if we are to read Nietzsche as a kind of early phenomenologist, this is most readily done through the prism of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. In the following I will highlight and explore four key aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as given in the preface to PP, that most resonate with Nietzsche’s philosophy, namely: the existential, as opposed to idealistic, nature of phenomenology; a focus on pre-scientific description over scientific analysis; attention to lived experience; and the primacy of the body.
3.1 Phenomenology as Existential, Not Idealist Philosophy

Above we saw that Husserl’s commitment to the pure ego becomes a source of tension between his and Nietzsche’s thought, and it is with Merleau-Ponty that we see how the trajectory of phenomenology can be brought back into line with Nietzsche’s philosophy. In exploring some of the inherent paradoxes in Husserl’s conception of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty offers that “The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction.”\(^{35}\) Husserl’s concept of the reduction, Merleau-Ponty believes, was a constant source of perplexity for him (and a point of contention between him and “the existential dissidents”); a complete reduction to a totally pure consciousness would be a move towards transcendental idealism, where the problem of the world and of Others dissolves since they “are not trapped in the fabric of phenomena and have a value rather than an existence.”\(^ {36}\) Yet Merleau-Ponty rightly acknowledges that the Other is a problem for Husserl, and that the only way to make the Other meaningful for me is if I concede that through the reduction I do not discover just my own immanence to myself, but also the potential of the Other as an outside spectator. By extension, “my existence must never reduce itself to the consciousness that I have of existing; it must in fact encompass the consciousness that one might have of it, and so also encompass my embodiment in a nature and at least the possibility of an historical situation.”\(^ {37}\)

We should here recall Sartre’s Nietzschean realisation that the reduction doesn’t affirm that I am conscious, just that there is consciousness – for Sartre (as for Nietzsche) it is too much of an assumption to suggest that philosophical reflection reveals to us an irreducible, immanent, personal consciousness; all we are really given is that an impersonal, generalised process of consciousness exists. Merleau-Ponty also reaches this conclusion, precisely by utilising Husserl’s own adherence to the reduction, and his own puzzlement over its implications. “Far from being, as was believed, the formula for an idealist philosophy,” surmises Merleau-Ponty, “the phenomenological reduction is in fact the formula for an existential philosophy”.\(^ {38}\) It is noteworthy that Merleau-Ponty’s arguments

\(^{35}\) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxvii.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., lxxv.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., lxxvi.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., lxxviii.
against phenomenology as transcendental idealism, and for phenomenology as existential
philosophy, arise not just in spite of Husserl’s method of the reduction, but because of it as well:
“Heidegger’s ‘In-der-Welt-Sein’ [being-in-the-world] only appears against the background of the
phenomenological reduction.”39 It is precisely this being-in-the-world that steers Merleau-Ponty
towards a phenomenological explication of Nietzsche’s impossibility of a pure consciousness.
Merleau-Ponty traces the steps backwards along both the paths of Nietzsche and Husserl, back to
their point of departure, and recalibrates Husserl’s journey so that it reconverges on Nietzsche’s
thought – it is because Husserl’s reduction must necessarily be incomplete that, rather than refuting
Nietzsche’s views, we see how phenomenology aligns with them.

It is this division between Husserl’s focus on the absolute subjectivity of the pure ego and
Nietzsche’s rejection of such a concept that forms the basis for Frank Chouraqui’s own
investigation into the similarities between Nietzsche and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.40
In affirming the “necessary and absolute being” of consciousness, whilst condemning “reality” to
the “accidental and relative”, Husserl “determined the future (at least in the midterm future)
of…[his] phenomenology by launching it on the path to transcendental idealism”41 – the very path
from which we saw Merleau-Ponty try to defend and rescue phenomenology. Conversely,
Nietzsche (in a move that aligns him with Merleau-Ponty, thinks Chouraqui) concludes from the
contingency of reality, or the “thing-in-itself”, not that consciousness is absolute, but that
“consciousness and the world are of the same stuff.”42 Chouraqui develops a convincing argument
that in sharing an ontological framework that rejects the bipolar distinction of subject-object
(consciousness-reality/”thing-in-itself”) and instead favours a view “in which world and
consciousness are horizons of each other and appear as merely the two horizons of being”,43 both
Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty avoid Husserl’s transcendental idealism following the collapse of the
“thing-in-itself”. As evidence of this consider that, when contemplating the fallout of the

39 Ibid.
40 Frank Chouraqui, ‘Originary Dehiscence: An Invitation to Explore the Resonances between the
Philosophies of Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty’, in Nietzsche and Phenomenology, by Boublil, Élodie and Daigle,
41 Ibid., 178.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 179.
annihilation of the “thing-in-itself”, Nietzsche taunts “‘Everything is subjective,’ you say: but that itself is an interpretation, for the ‘subject’ is not something given but a fiction added on, tucked behind. – Is it even necessary to posit the interpreter behind the interpretation? Even that is fiction, hypothesis.”\[^{44}\] Likewise, Merleau-Ponty seems so intent on avoiding this bipolarisation that he would later come to reprimand his work in PP “because I start there from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction”.\[^{45}\] We will leave aside the details of Chouraqui’s argument due to its reliance on complex metaphysical concepts from both Nietzsche (e.g. the “will to power”) and Merleau-Ponty (e.g. the “flesh”) that extend beyond the scope of this thesis.\[^{46}\] It is enough for our current purposes to note that in opposition to Husserl’s phenomenology turning (at least for a time) towards transcendental idealism, Nietzsche’s and Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts were united in their opposition to this idealism in favour of an existential philosophy that emphasised the relations between subject and the world, rather than proclaiming the absolute being or the former, and the lack of such absoluteness in the latter.

### 3.2 Description, Not Analysis – A Pre-Scientific View of the World

Calling it the “first rule” of Husserl’s emergent phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that phenomenology is a disavowal of science, in the sense that it only seeks to describe phenomena, and not explain or analyse them.\[^{47}\] In strikingly similar terms Nietzsche wrote “We call it ‘explanation,’ but ‘description’ is what distinguishes us from older stages of knowledge and science. We are better at describing – we explain just as little as all our predecessors.”\[^{48}\] That they both mean the same thing by description and explanation is not immediately evident, yet I will show that both were arguing for the need of a philosophy that aimed to return to a pre-scientific engagement with the world.

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\[^{46}\] In addition to the article we have quoted here, see also: Frank Chouraqui, *Ambiguity and the Absolute: Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty on the Question of Truth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).


Following the quote above, Merleau-Ponty proceeds (as he does throughout the entirety of PP) to advocate his phenomenology as a way to move beyond what he considered to be the errant determinations of “objective thinking”, namely realism and idealism (we saw in the previous section an example of Merleau-Ponty using phenomenology to refute an idealist view of the world, and how this correlated to Nietzsche’s own philosophy). To this end, against the realist position on scientific explanation, he says that “Everything that I know about the world, even through science, I know from a perspective that is my own or from an experience of the world without which scientific symbols would be meaningless.” Thus science is useful and successful only insofar as it relates back to our originary experience as human beings – “we must first awaken the experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression.” This is precisely the argument Nietzsche advances in the above aphorism: “And how could we explain! We are operating only with things that do not exist – with lines, surfaces, bodies, atoms, divisible times, divisible spaces. How is explanation to be at all possible when we first turn everything into a picture – our picture! It is enough to view science as an attempt to humanize things as faithfully as possible; we learn to describe ourselves more and more precisely as we describe things and their succession.” Similarly, Merleau-Ponty argues that: “To return to the things themselves is to return to this world prior to knowledge, this world of which knowledge always speaks, and this world with regard to which every scientific determination is abstract, signitive, and dependent, just like geography with regard to the landscape where we first learned what a forest, a meadow, or a river is.”

For both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, scientific postulates such as bodies and atoms, or such as the geographical terms that depict a landscape, are secondary expressions of a pre-scientific life of experience, and both seek a philosophy that will return to this pre-scientific engagement with the world. Nietzsche brusquely makes this point when he admonishes the uselessness of “knowledge of the chemical composition of water…to the sailor in danger of shipwreck.” In trying to explain water through its chemical composition, science does not fully capture what it

50 Ibid.
52 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxii.
means to be confronted with the brute realities of everyday life. And for Merleau-Ponty, the
geographical description of a landscape is derivative of the actual experience of being in that
landscape, moving through its forests, lying in its meadows, or crossing its streams.

This pre-scientific world of which both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty aim to return to via
describing our primordial experience, and not explaining it using anthropomorphic, scientific
abstractions, of course resonates with the life-world of pre-givenness that we saw Husserl
acknowledge. (And we also note that the method of pure description also finds expression in
Heidegger: in outlining the method of phenomenology, he writes in Being and Time that “To have a
science ‘of’ phenomena means to grasp its objects in such a way that everything about them which is
up for discussion must be treated by exhibiting it directly and demonstrating it directly. The
expression ‘descriptive phenomenology’, which is at bottom tautological, has the same meaning.”)
Yet Merleau-Ponty’s attitude towards the pre-scientific world of experience is more in keeping with
Nietzsche’s own thoughts, in siding with life over reason, than Husserl’s, which ever sought to
subordinate life’s meaning to a rationalistic program. This becomes apparent when we consider
how both Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty emphasised in their respective philosophies a need to
return to lived experience, which we will turn to now.

3.3 Lived Experience

Again by entertaining himself with an area of tension in Husserl’s phenomenology,
Merleau-Ponty declares “Phenomenology is the study of essences, and it holds that all problems
amount to defining essences, and “yet phenomenology is also a philosophy that places essences
back within existence”. As such phenomenology, as Merleau-Ponty envisages it, is an attempt at
an “exact science” that is nonetheless dedicated to providing a “direct description of our experience
such as it is – the experience of ‘lived’ space, ‘lived’ time, and the ‘lived’ world.” Later he clarifies
this notion by discussion of Husserl’s eidetic reduction: in philosophically reflecting on our own

Row, 1962), 59.
55 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, lxx.
56 Ibid.
perception of the world, we must pass over from the fact of our existence to the nature of our existence – that is, from our existence to our essence. Yet importantly this essence is not an end in itself but a means for getting back to our existence in a purely descriptive form – “Seeking the essence of the world is not to seek what it is as an idea, after having reduced it to a theme of discourse; rather, it is to seek what it in fact is for us, prior to every thematization.”

I suggest we find the very same commitment in Nietzsche’s own philosophy. We have already seen that as early as BT Nietzsche believed he was attempting to critically examine science through the gaze of art, and again art through the gaze of life. Whatever else this poetic declaration might mean, it is clear that in his critique of science Nietzsche found it imperative to return to the experience of life. Then in GS, in an aphorism titled In media vita (In mid-life), he writes: “No, life has not disappointed me. Rather, I find it truer, more desirable and mysterious every year – ever since the day the great liberator overcame me: the thought that life could be an experiment for the knowledge-seeker – not a duty, not a disaster, not a deception!...‘Life as a means to knowledge’ – with this principle in one’s heart one can not only live bravely but also live gaily and laugh gaily.”

Nietzsche’s opinion of philosophy, or knowledge-seeking, is that it must investigate or experiment with life only in order to return to life or lived experience itself. William McNeill makes the astute point that by framing life as an experiment of the knowledge-seeker implicates oneself as both the subject and object of enquiry. In conjunction with this aphorism’s double-entendre title this indicates Nietzsche’s appreciation that all knowledge-seeking – all philosophising – takes place within life as experienced. We are thoroughly in the middle of our own experiment as experimenter, and we are experimenting on the experimented. That Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology takes on this form of experimental philosophy is evident when he invokes unpublished materials of Husserl’s that suggest the true philosopher is a perpetual beginner, and as such “This means that he accepts nothing as established from what men or scientists believe they know. This also means that philosophy itself must not take itself as established in the truths it has managed to utter, that

57 Ibid., lxxviii.
58 Ibid., lxxix.
philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment of its own beginning, that it consists entirely in
descriving this beginning”. And again, at the end of the preface, he says that “philosophy is not
the reflection of a prior truth, but rather, like art, the actualization of a truth”, and that “True
philosophy entails learning to see the world anew”. Given that he has said philosophy must begin
perpetually, when Merleau-Ponty says that to do true philosophy (or phenomenology) is to learn to
see anew, we can be assured that this does not mean there is a way of seeing anew that his
phenomenology uncovers; rather, philosophy must always be seeking for new ways to see, for new
ways to play and experiment with the world. This is because phenomenology is not a reflection on
given truths, but truths are realised in the very act of doing phenomenology. In this way, by doing
phenomenology, as Merleau-Ponty sets it out, is to experiment with life in the pursuit of
knowledge, just as Nietzsche suggested.

Yet more than this affirmation of “life” or “lived experience” in Nietzsche’s and Merleau-
Ponty’s thought, I also suggest that Nietzsche’s genealogical method is precisely the kind of
philosophy that “places essences back within existence”, that is, the kind of philosophy Merleau-
Ponty first offers in answer to the question: “What is phenomenology?” Nietzsche’s genealogical
method is most readily recognised, and most rigorously undertaken, of course, in his On the
Genealogy of Morals (hereafter GM), but it often played a significant role in his other works. Recall
that we have already seen his talk of a “historical philosophising” in HAH, which employs the
genealogical method of tracing concepts through their histories to the origins of their meaning,
albeit in a less developed manner than in GM. In his genealogies, Nietzsche is not concerned with
revealing the origins of a concept – for example morality – in order to retrieve the eternal,
unchanging essence beneath it; instead he wants to illuminate how contemporary understandings
have developed to where they are now. Genealogy is a matter of transposing the supposed origins
of identities into current lived experience, and not a matter of dedicating lived experience to an
eternal doctrine of abstract thought. This is a thoroughly phenomenological aspiration, as

61 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, lxxviii.
62 Ibid., lxxiv-lxxxv.
63 Ibid., 70.
64 See, for example, Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, §§I:1-2 for a discussion of tendency of people to
ignore the question of origins; §§I:16, 18 for a discussion on a history of the genesis of thought; and all of
Chapter 2, On the History of the Moral Sensations, §§I:35-107, to name but a few instances.
highlighted by McNeill, who argues that Heidegger appropriated Nietzsche’s notion of critical history into his own “destructuring” (Destruktion) of the history of ontology. Importantly, McNeil explains, “The essential past – i.e. having-been – is that dimension of experience and/or of heritage that gets thrown forward, ‘metabolized’, or folded into the future.” In other words, Nietzsche’s genealogy, just like Heidegger’s phenomenological Destruktion, retrieves the past to throw it into the future as possibility – it discloses past systematic modes of thought and rules in order to reconnect with and reconceive how life is experienced in the present. Or, similar to what we saw in Merleau-Ponty’s own phenomenology in the previous paragraph, genealogy is a method which makes the philosopher a perpetual beginner. In seeing that there are no eternal essences and that one must philosophise historically by attending to the ever-evolving nature of our concepts, Nietzsche’s genealogy adheres to Merleau-Ponty’s directive that “our actual commitment in the world is precisely what must be understood and raised to the concept, and this is what polarizes all of our conceptual fixations.” The “master-morality” from before the slave-revolt was different to the “slave-morality” that succeeded it, and “morality” years from now will again be different, and it will be the role of the genealogist to see anew in tracing back through the histories of “morality”. That is, it will be the role of the phenomenologist to place the “essence”, or “conceptual fixation” of morality back into the actual existence of it; of seeing how “morality” evolved in humanity’s lived experiences, and becomes a concept out of our actual lived commitment in the world.

3.4 The Primacy of the Body

The final moment of connection between Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty that we will examine here is the emphasis that each places on the role of the body in conscious experience. Although Merleau-Ponty rarely makes explicit reference to the notion of the body in the preface to PP, one of the book’s major achievements lies in its attention to revealing the primacy of perception and consciousness as necessarily being embodied. Above we discussed that Husserl, in

66 Ibid, lxx.
67 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, lxxviii.
deploying the phenomenological reduction, allowed himself to conclude: “I have consciousness of this chair”, and that in response Sartre countered: “There is consciousness of this chair” – well we now might say that Merleau-Ponty specified even further, and revealed that “There is perceptual consciousness of this chair.” Whilst this might sound too impersonal a characterisation of the perceptual field for Merleau-Ponty, we should recall that he believes: “In order for the word ‘other’ not to be meaningless, my existence must never reduce itself to the consciousness that I have of existing; it must in fact encompass the consciousness that one might have of it, and so also encompass my embodiment in a nature and at least the possibility of an historical situation.” The point is, I suggest, that in carrying out as complete a reduction as Merleau-Ponty sees possible, what remains evident cannot be “I have perceptual consciousness”, as this would be to enter into solipsism – “The Cogito must find me in a situation, and it is on this condition alone that transcendental subjectivity will, as Husserl says, be an intersubjectivity.” This is not to say that we are not for the most part (i.e. in the natural attitude) aware of our own perceptual consciousness, just that when we fully bracket the world we must be left with this impersonal “there is perceptual consciousness”, as this is what, paradoxically, guarantees the intersubjectivity of the world. We have already said that Nietzsche echoes throughout Sartre’s “there is consciousness”, but we will now see the Merleau-Pontian emphasis on perceptual, or embodied, consciousness strikes a louder chord with Nietzsche’s views.

Merleau-Ponty’s argument for the primacy of perception via the body as starting point of our intentional encounter with the world is far too detailed and thorough to properly cover here, and indeed occupies much of the work undertaken in PP. In the preface we are told that “Perception is not a science of the world, nor even an act or a deliberate taking of a stand; it is the background against which all acts stand out and is thus presupposed by them.” So we see that for Merleau-Ponty perception is the utmost condition of possibility of any act, and therefore any conscious activity – if there is consciousness, it must be perceptual consciousness. This is reinforced later in the preface where we are told that “To seek the essence of perception is not to

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68 Ibid., 76.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 74.
declare that perception is presumed to be true, but rather that perception is defined as our access to the truth.” For Merleau-Ponty, our experience of the real is grounded upon perception. Again, that Merleau-Ponty simultaneously grounds perception upon the body, or upon us as embodied consciousnesses, cannot be adequately treated here, but we might, for example, consider the statement in *The Structure of Behaviour* that “the body must be the necessary intermediary between the real world and perception, which are henceforth disassociated from one another.” If perception is our access to truth, and that upon which all conscious activity is derived, and if the body is that which mediates between our perception and the real world, we see that any conscious activity demands an embodied perspective; that is, for Merleau-Ponty, insofar as the phenomenological reduction establishes that there is consciousness, it establishes that there is perceptual consciousness.

Nietzsche’s own argument for the primacy of embodied consciousness is evident in *Twilight of the Idols* (hereafter TI) where he dedicates a chapter to arguing that it is with our perceptual sense that we have access to “truth”, as opposed to the “lies” of “Reason”: “‘Reason’ is the cause of our falsification of the evidence of the senses. In so far as the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie.” And in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in a section titled *On the Despisers of the Body*, he argues that our individuation – our notion of self and identity – must find its motivation in the body, and not in a pure, inner consciousness; “‘Body am I and soul’—thus talks the child. And why should one not talk like children? But the awakened one, the one who knows, says: Body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is merely a word for something about the body.”

We are also told, in a series of notes from late-1885, that it is “Essential to start from the body and use it as a guiding thread. It is the far richer phenomenon, and can be observed more distinctly”, and “Starting point the body and physiology: why? – What we gain is the right idea of

71 Ibid., lxxx.
75 Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 40[15].
the nature of our subject-unity". Nietzsche prioritises the body precisely because it provides a
more accurate account of our individuation than does the traditional emphasis on our mental, or
inner, self; insofar as we are individuated as conscious beings, we are embodied conscious beings, just
as Merleau-Ponty would come to argue. Also in that year Nietzsche wrote: “There must have been
thinking long before there were eyes: ‘lines and shapes’ were thus not originally given. Instead,
thinking has longest been based on the sense of touch: yet this, if it is not supported by the eyes,
only teaches degrees of pressure, not shapes…There is no doubt that we can think in pictures, in
sounds: but we can also think in sensations of pressure.” We see here a genealogy of the
development of the thinking (or consciousness) that we are familiar with in modern-times, that is,
the optic-centric consciousness of “lines and shapes.” Notably, Nietzsche does not trace this
modern consciousness back to a less-embodied form of conscious activity – pure thought or
intellect, etc. – but instead to another (arguably more) embodied form of consciousness; the
consciousness of sensations of pressure.

In fact, Nietzsche’s genealogical method in general tends to emphasise how in the past we
understood the world via the body, yet this gets eroded over the course of history in favour of
“internal” understandings of the world. Lars Petter Storm Torjussen points this out when he
recognises that the story given in GM of the genealogy of the words “pure” and “impure” shows
they derived their original meaning from habits relating to hygiene, diet, sexual practices, and
reactions to blood – i.e. all from embodied phenomena – and it is only late in the piece that purity
has taken on the moral, “internal” connotations of today that can appear divorced from the body.
In using his genealogical method to reveal how concepts come to mean what they do, Nietzsche
highlights the primary role that the body plays in the development of our understanding and
thought. So we see that for Nietzsche, just as for Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is first-and-
foremost an embodied act, and if phenomenology is to show, via the reduction, the immutability of
conscious access to the world, it will show that this must be perceptual conscious access.

76 Ibid., §40[21].
77 Ibid., §40[28].
We said at the outset of this chapter that there is not one Nietzsche, nor one phenomenology, and that for the present purposes we would have to demarcate just what we would mean when we talk about phenomenology. In what followed I have argued that for the purposes of reading in Nietzsche something like a proto- or anticipatory-phenomenology, we are best served in focussing on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. That is to say, the phenomenology we are concerned with throughout this thesis, whilst entailing the critical aspect of Husserl’s phenomenology in its desire to subject all knowledge-seeking to extreme doubt and radical scepticism – to drive off prejudices that mask and distort our attempts at acquiring knowledge – diverges with his views on subjecting the life-world to investigation in order to re-establish the primacy of rationalism. Instead, we are looking at a phenomenology that builds upon the notion of the life-world, and focuses on a return to our lived experience, particularly as embodied agents, given that all our conscious activity is at bottom a perceptual or embodied conscious activity.

Once more, there are obvious limitations in subscribing to just this view of phenomenology, yet they are necessary limitations to accept in order to uncover the best fit between Nietzsche and a phenomenological philosophy. Now that we have established these initial connections between Nietzsche and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, we can now turn our attention to potential objections of reading Nietzsche in this phenomenological way, and offer a response to them.
Chapter Two: 
Nietzsche’s Falsification Thesis 

Although we argued in the previous chapter that common to Nietzsche’s philosophy and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is a focus on the description of lived experience, there is a concern that significant features of Nietzsche’s philosophy seem to argue that all our descriptions of primary experience actually falsify that experience – what is sometimes called his “falsification thesis”. There is a tension between this claim and any portrayal of Nietzsche as a phenomenologist, as he seems to malign the central methodological project of this kind of philosophy. We saw that Nietzsche, like Merleau-Ponty, was committed to describing our pre-theoretical experience of the world, rather than seeking to explain it, and that the experimental and historical elements of his philosophy emphasise the importance of our lived experience. Yet if Nietzsche also thought these descriptions, as important as they were, were mere falsifications of our lived experience, this would seem to put him at odds with Merleau-Ponty, who said of phenomenology that it is “the disclosure of the world”,79 and that “The real is to be described, and neither constructed nor constituted.”80 

This chapter will examine the arguments Nietzsche puts forward that seemingly subscribe to the falsification thesis in describing primary experience, and determine how severe the conflict is between his views on this issue and phenomenology. There are two moments of particular concern, coming roughly at either end of Nietzsche’s career as a philosopher, and so this chapter is divided in two sections, each dealing with one of these moments. Section 1 examines the early essay On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense (henceforth TL), and proceeds by looking at the various arguments Nietzsche puts forward here that seem to claim description is a falsification of experience. These can be divided into an argument from language and an argument from metaphysics. I will show that the argument from language is not irrecoverably non-phenomenological, and indeed we find echoes of its thoughts in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.

79 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, lxxxv.
80 Ibid., lxiii.
The argument from metaphysics is a more troubling prospect, however, since it strongly opposes the metaphysical commitments of phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty. It is quite evident, however, that by the end of his career Nietzsche abandoned these views and adopted a metaphysical position in greater accordance with Merleau-Ponty. Section 2 then considers §354 of GS, a late contribution after his views on metaphysics had shifted that still appears to consider our descriptions as falsifications of experience. I will argue, however, that having altered his metaphysical views, Nietzsche is in a position where talk of the falsification of experience means something wholly different than it did in TL, and can ultimately be reconciled with phenomenology.

1. On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense

1.1 Descriptions as Falsifications

Written in 1883, TL raises the question: “Is language the adequate expression of all realities?” in anticipation of finding a disconnect between “realities” and how the human intellect tries to express these realities in its use of language. Nietzsche goes on to specify how this disconnect arises in our processes of describing how the world relates to humankind: “To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one.” He himself draws upon a metaphor of leaping and disconnected spheres to highlight that by the time a nerve stimulus has been expressed in a linguistic expression we are already twice removed from the original experience of that nerve stimulus. This is made explicit a short while later: “we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities.”

82 Ibid., 82.
83 Ibid., 82–3.
Nietzsche goes further than this lack of correspondence between our descriptions and our experience, by examining the specific case of the formation of concepts. Concepts, Nietzsche points out, arise when we derive a word that “is not supposed to serve as a reminder of the unique and entirely individual original experience to which it owes its origin”, but rather is used to circumscribe a range of cases “which are never equal and thus altogether unequal.”

Taking the example of how no two leaves are entirely identical, Nietzsche highlights how the word, or concept, “leaf” is formed specifically by discarding all the differences and inimitabilities between sets of leaves, and instead focussing on their similarities. A more illustrative example of this phenomenon can be seen by considering snowflakes, of which it is commonly said (albeit somewhat erroneously) that no two are alike. If part of this (colloquial) definition of the set of objects known as snowflakes is that no two members are equal, we can see that the use of concepts involves a conflation of distinct items, and thus a conflation of distinct primary experiences. The idea here is of course not that we are in some normative error by using concepts and metaphors to describe our experiences – it would be absurd to require that we abolish the words “snowflakes” and “leaves” because no two items of these sets, no two experiences of items in these sets, are identical. The point Nietzsche brings to bear is simply that it is a necessity of communication amongst human beings that we use concepts and metaphors to generalise across individuated experiences.

We thus see two different modes in which Nietzsche thinks our descriptions falsify our primary experience. Firstly he denounces our descriptions as twice-iterated metaphors of actual experience: nerve stimuli beget images, images beget words (sounds). Secondly, these words themselves, as concepts, Nietzsche points out, necessarily delete information from the primary experience. It is the role of a concept to coalesce similarities between items, and dispose of the differences; differences which are nevertheless encountered in the experience of reality. The first of these claims appears to be metaphysical in nature – Nietzsche opposes our knowledge of “metaphors” with the unknowability of “the mysterious X of the thing in itself” – whereas the second claim makes a linguistic assertion – by using concepts to talk about the world, we inherently

84 Ibid., 83.
85 Ibid.
discount features of our experience. The metaphysical and the linguistic explanations for the falsifying nature of describing experience produce two slightly different confrontations with the phenomenological method of describing lived experience, and subsequently bear different responses. I will first turn to exploring the tension between Nietzsche’s linguistic claim and the phenomenological method, before turning to his metaphysical claim.

1.2 Linguistic Argument: Merleau-Ponty on Language

Considering for the moment just the linguistic argument Nietzsche puts forward, we have to ask whether phenomenology’s descriptive project would, for Nietzsche, simply be doomed to begin with. If descriptions of reality are false, why should this be the focus of philosophical endeavour, as phenomenology claims it should? The point of emphasising description over analysis is to steer philosophical inquiry towards a pre-theoretical account of experience, rather than letting our prejudices and preconceptions steer our investigations. Dermot Moran characterises this by saying that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology “aims to teach us to view our experience in a new light, not relying on the fully formed categories of our reflective experience, but developing a method and a language adequate to articulate our pre-reflective experience, specifically the world of perception.”86 Nietzsche, I suggest, is in agreement with such an aim; for him concepts translate this pre-reflective experience into something overly categorised, and thus are not adequate expressions of pre-reflective experience, that is, they falsify that experience. For both Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche we have direct access to experience prior to our “knowledge” or “rationalisation” of it, and the faith that it is only with these faculties that we reach actual reality is mistaken – they actually distort reality, and it should be philosophy’s task to lift this obfuscating veil. The problem is, however, if we accept Nietzsche’s views on the linguistic falsification of reality found in TL, such pre-reflective, or non-dispositional philosophy, seems impossible — all description, insofar as it is conceptual, falsifies the originary experience.

I will now show that the problem considered above is not insurmountable in two ways. Firstly, I will show that Merleau-Ponty’s views on language were markedly similar to Nietzsche’s, and he still advocated his phenomenology of perception as the way to describe primary, lived experience. Even if Nietzsche thought that his linguistic analysis makes such description unattainable, we can look to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as a potential bridge that makes it attainable. Secondly I will argue, following Maudemarie Clark, that Nietzsche’s linguistic argument in TL is actually quite inconsequential; that the more substantial argument he is making is based on a commitment to a metaphysical correspondence theory of truth. This presents problems of its own, which I will then address.

Merleau-Ponty, like Nietzsche, was troubled by the tendency language has for fixing meanings and thus presenting an illusion of absoluteness. In a chapter of PP devoted to language, called *The Body as Expression, and Speech*, he says that “to name an object is to tear oneself away from what its individual and unique properties are in order to see it as the representative of an essence or of a category” and he elsewhere also says that “it is true that [words] do not directly intend my experience”. This resonates with Nietzsche’s own attitude towards concept formation. Merleau-Ponty then, in the chapter on language, considers an examination of psychological patients experiencing an inability to name colours presented to them, analysing that “it is because [they have] lost the general power of subsuming a sensory given under a category, it is because [they have] fallen back from the categorial attitude into the concrete attitude.” For Merleau-Ponty the categorial attitude – the ability to subsume things under categories – is an important instrument within human experience that can become impaired. So it is as not as straightforwardly a concern for Merleau-Ponty that language and concepts necessarily remove something of the actual experience in their employment. Yes, we must be aware of the congealing function that our use of concepts formation plays, but to totally reject this attitude’s occupation within human experience is itself ignoring our experience. Indeed Merleau-Ponty presents the claim regarding this occasional loss of the categorial attitude as a reason to reject empiricist theories of language; if words were

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88 Ibid., 424.
89 Ibid., 181.
simply generated as responses to stimuli, we shouldn’t observe these cases of colour amnesia. If the stimuli are perceived normally, the correct word should always be generated.

Merleau-Ponty therefore reaffirms the existence of the categorial attitude that Nietzsche reveals in TL, yet is more nuanced and less dismissive in his treatment of it. Later in the chapter he returns to the case of amnesia regarding colours, and explains that psychological experiments have revealed the problem “has less to do with judgement than with the milieu of experience in which the judgement is born,” leading him to conclude that “The categorial act is thus not an ultimate fact, it is constituted in a certain ‘attitude’ (Einstellung).”90 Merleau-Ponty’s point is that the studies show that patients suffering this particular form of amnesia do not simply adopt an incorrect principle of classification, nor do they oscillate between various principles, they simply do not adopt any kind of principle whatsoever. Thus, it is not an error of their knowledge or judgement that is in question, but rather something in their experience of colour itself. They lack what he calls the “manner of relating to the world”, or the “style” or “configuration of experience”, required in order to perform the categorial act.91 The categorial attitude is thus not a transcendental faculty that provides access to knowledge; rather it is part of our lived experience, a mode of existence that is predisposed to phenomenological inquiry.

1.3 Nietzsche and the Categorial Attitude

This categorial attitude or activity is what is under attack from Nietzsche in TL, namely the conceptual and categorising nature of our language. Nietzsche pairs this categorial activity with claims such as that all truths are illusions, and he also says that it leads us to a creation of a new world of “laws, privileges, subordinations” that “now confronts that other vivid world of first impressions as more solid, more universal, better known and more human than the immediately perceived world, and thus as the regulative and imperative world.”92 These claims suggest that Nietzsche locates a certain decadence in the categorial activity of humankind that strips away our

90 Ibid., 198.
91 Ibid., 197.
access to primary experience. We would be better off – in terms of phenomenologically describing experience – if we had not “fallen” into the categorial attitude, and thus mutilated the nature of our lived experience. Such condemnation of the categorial act is not found in Merleau-Ponty; we saw earlier that he thinks the categorial act cannot entirely account for language – if it did the patients experiencing colour amnesia, and thus lacking the categorial attitude, could not use language at all – but he does not treat the categorial act as necessarily falsifying the “vivid world of first impressions” as Nietzsche does. One of his most significant revelations is that “Language does not presuppose thought, it accomplishes thought”, meaning that language is not subsequent to some inner, mental process, but is an integral part of the thinking process itself. Merleau-Ponty cites familiar examples that illustrate this fact that “the word has a sense”: an object seems indeterminate, no matter how familiar, until it is named; when thinking we feel somewhat ignorant of our own thoughts until the moment we have formulated them into words; children only properly know objects once they can name them; pre-scientific humans thought naming something brought it into existence; God created beings by naming them. All of this would not be the case, according to Merleau-Ponty, if we thought of speech as an external accompaniment to concepts, and, in positively anti-Nietzschean terms (staying with the Nietzsche of TL) says “the word, far from being the simple sign of objects and significations, inhabits things and bears significations.” Whereas TL argues that a word is the second iteration of a metaphorical transposition of originary experience, and is thus a sign for that experience, Merleau-Ponty argues that words carry a signification themselves: “their conceptual signification must be formed by drawing from a gestural signification, which itself is immanent in speech.” It is with this gestural signification that we see an interesting similarity with Nietzsche, who in HAH wrote that “Older than language is the mimicking of gestures, which takes place involuntarily…The imitated gesture leads him who imitates it back to the sensation which it expressed in the face or body of the person imitated. That is how people learned to understand one another: that is how a child still learns to understand its mother.”

93 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 182.
94 Ibid., 182–83.
95 Ibid., 183.
96 Ibid., 184.
97 Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, §1.216.
point is that vocal language has developed out of the imitations of gestural language – out of
gestural significations; “As soon as the meaning of gestures was understood, a symbolism of gestures
could arise”. This is remarkably similar to an argument Merleau-Ponty advances in order to
establish the existence of the other, where he says of infants that they open their own mouths in
response to being playfully bitten on the finger: “His own mouth and teeth such as he senses them
from within are immediately for him the instruments for biting, and my jaw such as he sees it from
the outside is for him immediately capable of the same intentions.” Whilst not making a point
specifically regarding language, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty sees our coming to understand our
experiences of the world, and by extension our eventual articulation of those experiences, as
originating in an intersubjective mimicking of embodied intentions, just as Nietzsche did. And it is
these gestural significations that are immanent in speech.

Ultimately Merleau-Ponty extends this thinking to argue that we should not think of
speech as being formed purely by “natural signs” or purely “cultural signs”. Firstly, there is no such
thing as a purely given “human nature”, since via our embodied engagement with the world we are
always imparting our own meanings and significations on what is received from nature. Secondly,
however, this does not imply that we receive nothing from nature, that there is not some
significance in the world that human beings find themselves confronted to. “The term ‘world’”, he
explains, “means that ‘mental’ or cultural life borrows its structures from natural life and that the
thinking subject must be grounded upon the embodied subject.” The result of this reciprocal
sedimentation between natural and cultural signs shows that language, rather than merely
expressing thought, “presents, or rather it is, the subject’s taking up of a position in the world of his
significations.” As always, Merleau-Ponty strives to go beyond the objective thought of
empiricism (that there are only natural perceptions that we interpret) and intellectualism (that all
signs are a product of our own mental life or of “culture”), and searches for a third way where we
see the dialectical relationship between our motricity and our intelligence in operation.

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98 Ibid.
100 Ibid., 199.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., 200.
Nietzsche sharing with Merleau-Ponty the idea that language has developed out of gestural imitations, the story given in TL doesn’t appear to agree with this reciprocity between natural and cultural signs. Instead he argues that we receive sensory stimuli (a “natural perception”, or a “natural sign”) that we then modify via our uniquely human categorial act (concept formation) to form illusory cultural signs. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, places the categorial acts on the same level of being in the world as embodied subjects: “It is the body that shows, that speaks, and this is what we have learned in this chapter.”

1.4 Representational and Pragmatic Functions of the Categorial Attitude

It thus seems as though Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty are somewhat at odds over the function of the categorial attitude in human experience. Is there any room in what Nietzsche says in TL that allows for this positive function of the categorial attitude that we find in Merleau-Ponty? I argue there is some reason to consider that Nietzsche, like Merleau-Ponty, would identify the categorial act (in his terms, the construction of an edifice of metaphors) with an existential manner of being. He raises the issue of our metaphorical reproduction of experience as the specifically human trait, separating us from animals, and thus his analysis lends itself to the kind of phenomenological investigation of primary experience that Merleau-Ponty himself offers. And indeed, Nietzsche juxtaposes our way of knowing the world through “the relations of things to men”, which leads to our concept formation, with the “thing in itself”, which is “something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for.”

This finds a strong echo in Merleau-Ponty’s own thoughts: “Speech, too, is established upon this attitude [of the categorial act], such that there could be no question of basing language upon pure thought.” For both thinkers, I suggest, the conventional nature of language – the fact that we take up the categorial attitude in order to formulate concepts to designate similar items, for the ease of intersubjective communication – is not reducible to an “absolute fact” or “pure truth”, but is

103 Ibid., 203.
105 Ibid., 82.
simply something we perform in human experience, and therefore bears phenomenological
investigation.

Furthermore we see in Nietzsche a distinction between two functions of the categorial
attitude based upon the declaration that the thing-in-itself is, for the language creator, not worth
striving for. I suggest Nietzsche sees the conventional, or conceptual, use of language as
performing both a representational function and a pragmatic function. In the first case, conceptual
language is used as an actual means to represent the actual experiences we undergo; in the second it
is merely used in a pragmatic fashion to converse with other language users in a way so that one can
understand others and be understood oneself. Of course this pragmatic use of language in practice
will always involve an aspect of the representational – in trying to converse with others in a
pragmatic sense we no doubt are trying to converse about certain experiences, and so we use
conceptual language to convey or represent these experiences. Yet this doesn’t detract from the fact
that Nietzsche sees the categorial attitude as helpful in the pragmatics of conversing, even if its
representational role falsifies reality. This is why he criticises the idea of creating language in order
to reach the thing-in-itself, which would be part of the representational function of language, and
says instead that language is created only in order to designate the relations between humans and
their world, that is, the pragmatic function of the categorial attitude.

Insofar as Nietzsche, in TL, allows for a positive role for the categorial attitude, it appears
as though this can only be in the case of the pragmatic function of concept formation. We use
concepts to simplify communication between speaking agents, as we saw in the case of leaves and
snowflakes, and this is pragmatically useful. However Nietzsche still seems to suggest that in using
the categorial attitude to represent our experiences we are falsifying the original, complex nature of
these experiences into a simplified, conceptual form. This remains problematic in attempting to
associate Nietzsche with phenomenology, so I will now argue that Nietzsche only sees the
representational function of language as leading to the falsification thesis due to the metaphysical
views he held in TL. If we can account for the metaphysical argument, we can thus allow that the
issues with the representational function dissolve.
1.5 Argument from Language, or from Metaphysics?

Nietzsche’s TL has almost unanimously been read as asserting that description falsifies reality because language is a falsification of reality.\textsuperscript{107} I have presented above what this amounts to: that Nietzsche thought language was a falsification of reality because language inevitably descends into concepts. Clark presents a similar reading in \textit{Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy} – albeit with a focus on Nietzschean theories of truth, rather than a phenomenological description of lived experience – and contends that if Nietzsche was making his argument purely on a point of language he stands on tenuous ground.\textsuperscript{108} If Nietzsche advocated the falsification thesis on the basis that language is always performed in the categorial attitude, and thus accrues similar objects of experience under concepts whilst ignoring their differentiation, his position amounts to nominalism, that is that nothing is universal except designations.\textsuperscript{109} This certainly appears to be the case when we consider that in TL Nietzsche chastises the human tendency to voice propositions such as “‘the stone is hard,’ as if ‘hard’ were something otherwise familiar to us, and not merely a totally subjective stimulation!”\textsuperscript{110} Here “hard” should only be used as an \textit{abstract term}, and Nietzsche thinks that the declarative “the stone \textit{is} hard” implies a false identity between the concrete entity “the stone” and a universal entity “hard”. He later presents the same kind of argument regarding the character trait of honesty: “We know nothing whatsoever about an essential quality called ‘honesty’; but we do know of countless individualized and consequently unequal actions which we equate by omitting the aspects in which they are unequal and which we now designate as ‘honest’ actions.”\textsuperscript{111} Nietzsche’s point is that it is a misnomer to say “the stone \textit{is} hard”, or that “Lisa \textit{is} honest”, and even “these things \textit{are} leaves”; more faithful representations of reality would be to say “the stone is \textit{harder} than the feather”, “Lisa \textit{often behaves} honestly”, and “these distinct things \textit{share similar properties} that we might \textit{categorise} as leafiness.” Clark has shown to this stage that Nietzsche must hold, even when he says all truths are illusions, that a statement such as “‘these things are leaves’ \textit{is} false” implies “‘these things are not leaves’ is \textit{true}” – to not do so is to abandon all logic, and

\textsuperscript{107} Maudemarie Clark, \textit{Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 64.
\textsuperscript{108} Clark considers other ways in which Nietzsche denies truth on linguistic grounds, yet concludes that the most charitable reading of him must be the one I have considered here. For a discussion on these other potential linguistic claims see Ibid., Chapter 3 (particularly pp 63-77).
\textsuperscript{109} Clark, \textit{Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy}, 77.
\textsuperscript{110} Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lies’, 82.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 83.
render the attempt to make ourselves understood and to understand others impossible.\textsuperscript{112} Propositions such as “these things are leaves” are not strictly speaking false, it is just that they are reductive sentences that stand in for more complex truths, for example that “these distinct things share leafiness”. “These things are leaves” is a metaphor for a more complex reality.

Clark then shows that Nietzsche, if he is to adhere to this nominalism, would need to extend it to the very use of concepts: “Consider his nominalistic insistence that the same word is used of countless ‘more or less cases.’ What makes different occurrences of ‘red’ the same word? Surely Nietzsche must admit that what he calls the ‘same word’ is only different occurrences of a similar sound or inscription.”\textsuperscript{113} That is, if Nietzsche thinks by using language, and thus concepts, we are only ever approximating similarities and not identifying equalities, this should encompass the use of these concepts themselves – when you and I refer to two distinct objects as a “leaf” we are, strictly speaking, and sticking with Nietzsche’s own arguments for the individual character of all experiences, not using the same word, just a similar word. Moreover it is one thing to say that our speech simplifies and abbreviates experience (which, of course, is extremely helpful, if not absolutely necessary, in communicating accurately yet conveniently with others), but it is a further step to argue that description falsifies that experience, that all our truths are illusions. If Nietzsche’s sole argument for saying that our descriptions of experience falsify reality is based upon the practicalities of language and concept formation, Nietzsche’s position is either making a facile point about the condensed nature of speech, or he is making a strong claim that leads to an absurd and inconsistent nominalism. In the first case, Merleau-Ponty provides sufficient evidence that we can still describe primary experience in a phenomenological manner. It is true that we do often communicate in what Nietzsche terms “linguistic conventions”,\textsuperscript{114} yet Merleau-Ponty points out that “conventions are a recent mode of relation between men, they presuppose an earlier means of communication, and language must be put back into this communicative current.”\textsuperscript{115} In other words, language could not have been born as a ready-made system of conventions, rather

\textsuperscript{112} Clark, Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy, 66. 
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 77. 
\textsuperscript{114} Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lies’, 81. 
\textsuperscript{115} Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 193.
designations had to develop and become conventional through an extended process of intersubjective agreement, and indeed through embodied gestures. This means that there must have been a mode of communication prior to conventional language, and if it seems that, in Nietzsche’s day, all language is conventional “this is because we remain for the most part within constituted language, we provide ourselves with available significations, and we limit ourselves – like the dictionary – to indicating equivalences between our definitions.”\textsuperscript{116} This does not mean that the originary means of communication has perished, it has just become diluted through the process of sedimentation between natural and cultural signs. Nietzsche may argue that language has descended into mere categorial activity at the expense of paying close attention to the actual experiences, yet Merleau-Ponty sufficiently argues for the persistence of this originary “communicative current” of which language must be, as it were, put back into. In the second case, Nietzsche’s claim that description really does \textit{falsify} experience must rely on something more than his argument from language, and indeed it appears that it does.

\subsection*{1.6 Metaphysical Correspondence Theory}

Clark provides compelling evidence that the point Nietzsche is really making in TL regarding truths as illusions is a result of him subscribing to a representational theory of perception and a metaphysical correspondence theory of truth. Most commentators read TL’s “denial” of truth as indicative that Nietzsche did not subscribe to any positive theory of truth – how can Nietzsche have a positive theory of truth if he is effectively saying it doesn’t exist? Yet Clark incisively points out that it is precisely \textit{because} Nietzsche sees truth as being equal to correspondence with some metaphysical reality that he can then go on to deny that our “truths” \textit{are} truths. Let us summarise that argument before proceeding.

Clark takes Nietzsche’s comment regarding Chladni’s sound figures, that “In the same way that the sound appears as a sand figure, so the mysterious X of the thing in itself first appears as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound”,\textsuperscript{117} to be concerned with perception and

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 194.
\textsuperscript{117} Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lies’, 83.
not necessarily language.\footnote{Clark, \textit{Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy}, 78.} Yes, Nietzsche does refer to our knowledge as being nothing but metaphors in this passage, but the emphasis is certainly on the fact that our words are representations of images, which are themselves representations of nerve stimuli, which are representations of the “mysterious X of the thing in itself.” Nietzsche concludes the paragraph saying that human access to reality “if not derived from never-never land, is at least not derived from the essence of things.”\footnote{Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lies’, 83.} I wholly agree with Clark that what is at stake here is not “that percepts state or present an identity where there is only similarity” – the linguistic point that we have already treated – but that “Perception gives us only appearance, not things-in-themselves.”\footnote{Clark, \textit{Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy}, 79.}

That is, our access to the world comes via perceptions, which are only representations of something else, namely the “things-in-themselves.” Reality, for Nietzsche, is the Kantian thing-it-self, which, in its very definition, is inaccessible to humans. Whereas most take Nietzsche to believe in TL that there is no metaphysical reality for our truths to correspond to, and that is why “truths are illusions”, Clark correctly realises that he thinks it \textit{is because} there is a metaphysical reality that our perceptions can only \textit{represent} and never actually \textit{correspond} to that Nietzsche denies the existence of truths.\footnote{Ibid., 89.} What we take to be truths are in fact illusions because they don’t correspond to non-anthropocentric reality; a reality which the Nietzsche of TL thinks is \textit{existent}, but entirely \textit{unattainable}. “Nietzsche concludes that truths are illusions not because he understands truth as correspondence to reality,” says Clark, “but because he believes the reality to which truths correspond must be completely independent of human beings”.\footnote{Ibid., 88.}

If we return briefly to the argument from language, we see that even if Nietzsche argues that concepts reduce our primary experiences to generalised categorial acts, and thus falsify reality, this becomes superfluous once one sees that our \textit{experience} of reality is itself a falsification of true reality. This is why, whilst positive in the pragmatic sense, Nietzsche sees the representational function of the categorial attitude to be distortive. Even if our language could completely and accurately encapsulate the experiences we have – or even if we accept Merleau-Ponty’s story about

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Clark, \textit{Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy}, 78.}
\item \footnote{Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lies’, 83.}
\item \footnote{Clark, \textit{Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy}, 79.}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 89.}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 88.}
\end{itemize}
the inherent sense and meaning that is always in language, and that language accomplishes thought – Nietzsche argues in TL that we are still not directly experiencing reality, or the things-in-themselves. As Clark puts it, “Nietzsche’s claims about language play quite a secondary role in his denial of truth. They function only to extend to the realm of theory or science the subjectivity he claims to find in perception.”\textsuperscript{123} Clark uses theory and science here since “the concept is the medium of all theory”,\textsuperscript{124} and her point is simply that it is perceptions as representations that are metaphors for reality, and hence illusions, and since our use of concepts shares an analogous structure of being metaphorical, they too are illusions.

The fundamental point is that, for Nietzsche in TL, whatever we can describe about our experience, whether done so conceptually or somehow more uniquely and precisely, is an illusion and not actually true. Such a position clearly runs against the emphasis on describing lived experience that existential phenomenology advocates. In fact it contests one of the bedrocks of phenomenology, namely, the reduction – the process of suspending judgement about the existence or otherwise of the world and instead focussing on what is evidenced in experience. Phenomenology in this sense aims to be ontologically neutral, whereas we see Nietzsche in TL argue not only for the existence of the external, empirical world, but also for a transcendent metaphysical reality, of which the empirical world can only ever degenerately represent. Moreover we see Nietzsche argue that it is beginning with our perceptions that we begin to represent the things-in-themselves, and therefore falsify this metaphysical reality. Yet Merleau-Ponty tells us that the problem of phenomenology is “to make explicit our primordial knowledge of the ‘real’ and to describe the perception of the world as what establishes, once and for all, our idea of truth. Thus we must not wonder if we truly perceive a world; rather we must say: the world is what we perceive.”\textsuperscript{125} Similarly that, “To seek the essence of perception is not to declare that perception is presumed to be true, but rather that perception is defined as our access to the truth.”\textsuperscript{126} Whereas in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[123] Ibid., 83.
\item[124] Ibid.
\item[125] Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, lxxx.
\item[126] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
TL. Nietzsche argues that our perceptions falsify reality, Merleau-Ponty identifies phenomenology with the realisation that perception just is our access to reality.

The metaphysical position of Nietzsche in TL is, I concede, entirely contradictory with the aims of phenomenology. Yet Nietzsche clearly overcame these metaphysical commitments by his late career. Indeed, as I have already noted in agreement with Clark, the metaphysical argument of TL has often been missed or ignored with exegetical emphasis placed on the argument from language. I suggest that one of the reasons for this may be that the representational and metaphysical correspondence theories latent in the essay, as highlighted by Clark, are so incompatible with his later thoughts that they have not been given their due attention. If it is the case that Nietzsche abandons the metaphysical correspondence theory of TL in his later works, and if we can show that his later positions do not reject our capacity to describe our lived experience, then we have no need to consider the arguments in TL as ruling out the possibility that Nietzsche was something of a phenomenologist avant la lettre. So I will now show how his metaphysical views changed, and how his later thoughts aligned with the phenomenological method of description.

1.7 Nietzsche’s “Phenomenological Turn”

Nietzsche continuously developed his position on the distinction between the world of appearances or perception and a “true” world of things-in-themselves since the time of TL. In HAH he progressed from affirming the existence (yet unattainability) of a metaphysical world, to merely viewing it as a possibility: “It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it is hardly to be disputed…but one can do absolutely nothing with it…knowledge of it would be the most useless of all knowledge: more useless even than the knowledge of the chemical composition of water must be to the sailor in danger of shipwreck.”127 Our perceptions may be falsifying some transcendent reality, but it hardly matters since “We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head; while the question nonetheless remains what

127 Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, §1:10.
of the world would still be there if one had cut it off.”  

So whilst downgrading the world of things-in-themselves from existent and actual to merely possible, HAH still holds it a matter of interest as to what this world would be like.

By the late publications of TI and AC (both published 1888), however, Nietzsche has advanced a step further and treats the metaphysical world as altogether meaningless and non-existent. This is most readily demonstrated in TI, particularly the section titled How the “Real” World at last Became a Myth: History of an Error. Here Nietzsche takes his audience through the six stages of history that culminate in the declaration: “We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps? … But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!”

This abolition of both the real and apparent worlds has led to various interpretations, yet I argue it is clear from the surrounding context that Nietzsche simply means that if there is no transcendent and metaphysically “real” world against which to measure appearances, we must do away with the notion of an “apparent” world because of the connotations such a word has, namely that such a world is secondary to, and derivative of, some higher world. Immediately prior to this section Nietzsche lists four propositions that establish as much, the first pertinently stating that “The grounds upon which ‘this’ world has been designated as apparent establish rather its reality – another kind of reality is absolutely undemonstrable.” As John Sallis aptly puts it, “What has been abolished is not the world that hitherto has been taken as apparent but only its character as apparent.” Nietzsche’s argument for putting reality, and all of reality, back into “this” world, this apparent world, is based upon his faith in the senses. Whereas we saw in TL that Nietzsche ultimately located the source of the illusory nature of our descriptions in our perceptions as representations of things-in-themselves, he has now come to argue that “[the senses] do not lie at

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128 Ibid.  
129 Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols; And, The Anti-Christ, TI §IV.  
130 Ibid., TI §IV:6.  
131 Ibid., TI §III:2.  
all. It is what we make of their evidence that first introduces a lie into it”.\textsuperscript{133} We should be reminded here of Merleau-Ponty’s dictum that “perception is defined as our access to the truth.”\textsuperscript{134}

If TL exhibited an argument against our ability to accurately describe our experience in a phenomenological manner due to our disconnect from the metaphysical world, the foundation for this argument has eroded by the end of Nietzsche’s publishing life. I will call this change in his views his “phenomenological turn”. This is obviously not to indicate that Nietzsche himself proclaimed to have reached some phenomenological position. Rather it is with this change in his metaphysical views that we can say he began to consider descriptions of experience as adequately reflecting this experience, and therefore his views are compatible with this essential aspect of phenomenology. We have thus seen that TL’s argument from language against describing primary experience is either not incongruous with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, or it depends upon a metaphysical argument that Nietzsche would later abandon. There remains one important passage, GS §354, to consider that seems to commit Nietzsche to saying that our descriptions necessarily falsify reality. In order to consistently maintain that Nietzsche’s project is compatible with an early form of phenomenology we must show that this is not the case.

2. Gay Science §354

2.1 Consciousness as Falsification

Notably the section in question was an addition included in the second edition of GS, published in 1887, thus placing it in a timeframe whereby Nietzsche had relinquished his metaphysical correspondence theory. Yet in GS §354, in talking about the development of human consciousness out of an evolutionary need to communicate, he says that “At bottom, all our actions are incomparably and utterly personal, unique, and boundlessly individual”, but that “as soon as we translate them into consciousness, they no longer seem to be”.\textsuperscript{135} Therefore, “due to the nature of animal consciousness, the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface - and sign-world, a

\textsuperscript{133} Nietzsche, \textit{Twilight of the Idols; And, The Anti-Christ}, TI §III:6.

\textsuperscript{134} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, lxxx.

\textsuperscript{135} Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, §354.
world turned into generalities and thereby debased to its lowest common denominator...[and so] all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization.”136 This sounds remarkably similar to the argument from language provided in TL, yet Nietzsche no longer holds onto the representationalism and metaphysical realism that backed up those claims – he says here that he is not concerned “with the opposition between ‘thing in itself’ and appearance: for we ‘know’ far too little to even be entitled to make that distinction.”137

If Nietzsche here is saying that our conscious thoughts falsify our experience of the world, and he is not relying on our consciousness as being a mere representation of things-in-themselves, we need to come to grips with the argument he is making and whether it is compatible with phenomenology. Particularly, we need to address the fact that Nietzsche thinks that “conscious thinking takes place in words, that is, in communication symbols”, so that if consciousness involves a corruption of experience, then descriptions themselves would appear to falsify experience.138 We may wish to explain away this point by appealing to the arguments we made earlier that Nietzsche’s views on language in TL are not entirely divorced from the kind of phenomenology as practised by Merleau-Ponty. This seems a plausible avenue to take considering some of the remarks here, such as consciousness’ dealing with just a “surface- and sign-world”, that is, that our conscious thoughts translate the primary experience (surface) into generalisations (signs). Notably Nietzsche does also state that “One might add that not only language serves as a bridge between persons, but also look, touch, and gesture”.139 This again highlights the focus that Nietzsche places on the embodied, gestural significations that are inherent in language, just as Merleau-Ponty does.

2.2 Signs and their Abbreviations

The question remains, however, whether Nietzsche can still be considered to have anticipated phenomenology when he believes that our conscious thoughts, as expressed via language, do not accurately describe our lived experience. Nietzsche writes that the inorganic world is void of any misunderstanding or miscommunication, and it is only the organic world that

136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
introduces error, and then asks about the “Problem of the possibility of ‘error’?”, and responds, “The opposition is not between ‘false’ and ‘true’ but between the ‘abbreviations of signs’ and the signs themselves.”\textsuperscript{140} By setting up an analogy between truth-falsity and sign-abbreviation of sign, I argue that Nietzsche concedes that all communication in the organic world, and thus the human world, can only be in the form of signs. Remembering that Nietzsche by this stage is at least wary of the notion of a metaphysical world, and at the most entirely dismissive of it, the point is not that these signs are a derivative representation of some higher reality, but that signs and our perceptions of them are all reality is. The equivalent of “error” as failure to correspond to this reality, then, is the abbreviation of our perception of these signs, rather than the signs appreciated in their fullness. Language and human consciousness may need to always abbreviate these signs in some sense, yet there is good evidence to suggest that Nietzsche thought this could be mediated, and that we could use descriptions that at least approximate the reality of our experience to an accurate degree.

We saw above that in AC §52 Nietzsche talks of philology as being the act of reading off facts without falsifying them with interpretations, and he here also declares theologians to have an “incapacity for philology.”\textsuperscript{141} So we have a negative thesis that some types of human (e.g. the theologian), do falsify reality. If not through description \textit{per se}, Nietzsche does suggest some ways of reading off of primary experience are falsifying. A few sections later he then provides the positive thesis, stating that in the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome “the incomparable art of reading well had already been established…the sense for facts, the last-developed and most valuable of all the senses, had its schools and its tradition already centuries old!”\textsuperscript{142} Then, in strikingly Merleau-Pontian language, he says that “What we have won back for ourselves today with an unspeakable amount of self-constraint…was already there!…as body, as gesture, as instinct – in a word, as reality.”\textsuperscript{143} Nietzsche himself, it seems, had to win back this realisation after his views in TL; we do not falsify some metaphysical reality because of our perceptual and embodied access to the world, this access to the world is reality.

\textsuperscript{140} Nietzsche, \textit{Writings from the Late Notebooks}, §1[28].
\textsuperscript{141} Nietzsche, \textit{Twilight of the Idols; And, The Anti-Christ}, AC §52.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., AC §59.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
Thus in order to describe primary experience faithfully, as phenomenologists like Merleau-
Ponty would later come to advocate, one must practice the philological skill of reading off of facts
without falsifying them with interpretations. Abbreviating the signs, I suggest, could be one such
interpretation that Nietzsche thinks we should strive to avoid. Nietzsche’s point in GS §354 then is
not that we cannot in principle describe experience accurately; it is rather that we tend not to describe
our experiences accurately, and we do so in a very particular manner, according to Nietzsche. It is
precisely our communication of conscious experience that Nietzsche warns against, because
“consciousness actually belongs not to a man’s existence as an individual but rather to the
community- and herd-aspects of his nature”. One of the central tenets of Nietzsche’s philosophy
was a call to individuality and self-becoming as opposed to what he called the herd-mentality.
Whilst a detailed discussion of this is beyond the limits of our current investigation, we can note the
implication that if the human consciousness is an instrument of our anonymous existence in the
herd, in calling us to forgo this herd-mentality for our own self-realisation, Nietzsche is also
imploring us to forgo the communicative gestures of consciousness, and return to a more originary
account of our experience.

2.3 “The Problem of Consciousness”

That Nietzsche has an issue with describing conscious experience also makes sense when
we recall that his philosophy rejected notions of subjectivity that lead to the Husserlian (or
Cartesian) claim that “I have consciousness”, and this appears to be the notion of consciousness
that he is attacking in GS:

The problem of consciousness (or rather, of becoming conscious of something)
first confronts us when we begin to realize how much we can do without
it…For we could think, feel, will, remember, and also ‘act’ in every sense of the
term, and yet none of all of this would have to ‘enter our consciousness’…All of
life would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in the mirror; and still

today, the predominant part of our lives actually unfolds without this mirroring
– of course also our thinking, feeling, and willing lives, as insulting as it may
sound to an older philosopher.\(^{145}\)

This attacks an altered notion of consciousness compared to the standard conception of it as being
something like phenomenal awareness; Nietzsche specifically attacks *self-aware* phenomenal
awareness, hence the talk of life seeing itself in a *mirror*. This view is not surprising considering his
rejection of an absolute subject, or absolute consciousness, that we discussed in Chapter One. For
Nietzsche, recall, it is not an *I* that thinks, feels, wills, remembers, and so forth, but rather just the
*acts* of thinking, feeling, willing, remembering, etc. When Nietzsche attacks “becoming conscious”
here, he specifically means, I argue, turning these originary acts of lived experience into a subject-
action structure which he thinks is itself a falsification of experience. He explicitly states towards
the end of the passage in question: “it is not the opposition between subject and object which
concerns me here; I leave that distinction to those epistemologists who have got tangled up in the
snares of grammar (of folk metaphysics).”\(^{146}\)

Nietzsche also attacks consciousness specifically in the sense of a *herd*-consciousness, that
is a consciousness that takes our “incomparably and utterly personal, unique, and boundlessly
individual”\(^{147}\) experiences and translates them so that they become “shallow, thin, relatively stupid,
general, a sign, a herd-mark.”\(^{148}\) Here Nietzsche’s concern is directed at the loss of first-personal
experience of conscious activity. Again, we can feel, will, and act in all the usual manners, and this
may be “conscious” in the sense of a non-self-aware phenomenal experience, but when we make
this “conscious” in the sense of translating into herd-marks we again lose our originary, lived
experience.

\(^{145}\) Ibid.
\(^{146}\) Ibid.
\(^{147}\) Ibid.
\(^{148}\) Ibid.
This chapter has considered elements of Nietzsche’s philosophy that have often been read as dismissing our ability to accurately describe our lived, primary experience. In TL Nietzsche provides an argument from language that says communication must occur via the use of concepts, which are reductive designations that only consider similarities and ignore differences, and also a metaphysical argument that our perceptions are only representations of a reality that they can never directly correspond to. We saw that whilst exhibiting some tension with the phenomenological doctrine of describing experience, his argument from language was not dissimilar to some of Merleau-Ponty’s considerations on language and speech. The question ultimately is what positive role Nietzsche saw for the categorial attitude, which Merleau-Ponty sees as fundamental in phenomenological experience. Whilst Nietzsche does not have as positive a story for the categorial attitude as Merleau-Ponty, there are aspects of what he writes in TL that suggest he did also view it as an existential phenomenon that allowed for a positive pragmatic function, even if its representational role he saw as implying the falsification thesis. Also, both have decidedly similar things to say about how the understanding of our own experiences of the world originates in the intersubjective imitation of bodily gestures, such that throughout its development language is laden with gestural signification.

Then, following the arguments of Clark, we noted that the metaphysical argument is actually the more substantial claim Nietzsche makes in TL, and the language argument largely follows as a result of it. This is also a more significant problem for considering the phenomenological character of Nietzsche’s philosophy since it presents an ontological view that is vastly at odds with the views found in phenomenology. Yet it is largely uncontroversial that Nietzsche abandoned these metaphysical views by his later career, and thus even if one is concerned that earlier on Nietzsche thought our descriptions falsified reality, it does appear he reversed his position on this issue.

GS §354 then presents a unique problem since it is a late-passage that seems to reaffirm the language claim from TL, and in a more forceful fashion, despite the fact that we can be sure that Nietzsche has radically altered the metaphysical position he held in TL. In it Nietzsche specifically
attacks the falsifying nature of our consciousness thoughts, and whilst he argues that this develops in accordance with the development of communication (language), his overall concern is that consciousness still deals with surfaces and signs. We found, however, that Nietzsche – having surrendered his metaphysical realism – associated truth and error precisely with signs and how faithfully we describe or recount these signs. We only falsify reality or our experience of it when we abbreviate these signs, or distort them with presuppositions and motivated interpretations. Surrendering to our herd-instincts to the detriment of our own self-becoming is why he particularly sees conscious thought as “false” in the sense of “abbreviating”.

Chapter Three:

Perspectivism

The other considerable obstacle that might prevent us from reading Nietzsche as an early-phenomenologist arises out of his views on perspectivism – the idea that all knowledge is knowledge from a particular perspective, and that no knowledge is obtained from a “neutral” perspective. Nietzsche’s perspectivism, as it is frequently interpreted, leads to two claims that potentially conflict with phenomenology. Firstly, much as we saw in the previous chapter, Nietzsche’s perspectivism can be understood as arguing that all of our knowledge of reality is actually a distortion of our experience of reality. If all knowledge, rather than being neutral, is influenced by the perspective of the knower, then we can have nothing like knowledge of the world as it is actually experienced, and therefore the phenomenological task of describing lived experience accurately, once again, seems futile. Secondly, Nietzsche’s perspectivism has also been taken to imply a solipsistic relativism, whereby any knowledge claim is as epistemically valid as any other, and thus all we can ever know is our own particular perspective; yet we saw Merleau-Ponty say that we must see, through the phenomenological reduction, that we are not reduced to the consciousness I have of existence, but of the consciousness “one might have of it.” 149 If Nietzsche can be said to have been practising an early form of phenomenology, we must show in this chapter that his perspectivism does not imply either of these claims about knowledge.

This chapter will begin by outlining more explicitly how Nietzsche presented his views on perspectivism, and how these presentations have often lead to suggestions that either our perspectives falsify reality, or that perspectivism implies an epistemic egalitarianism across all knowledge claims. I will then argue that if by the end of his career Nietzsche had abandoned any notion of a metaphysically “real world”, as we saw in the previous chapter, then we should also expect his view of perspectivism to not entail that our perspectives falsify reality; such a position would indeed be inconsistent with his metaphysical views. Yet in order to show this, we must deal

149 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, lxxvi.
with the eminent presentation of it in GM §III.12, which, if we follow Clark's timeline of Nietzsche’s philosophical development, came at a time when Nietzsche had abandoned the idea of a “real world”, yet which is often read as suggesting that perspectives are falsifying. By showing that this is a misreading of what Nietzsche argues in this passage we will show that once Nietzsche overcame his early metaphysical views, he subsequently overcame any doctrine of perspectivism that suggests all cognition falsifies experience. Finally, I will consider the charge that Nietzsche's perspectivism argues for a naïve relativism, and show that rather than presenting an argument for epistemic egalitarianism, it is precisely his perspectivism that leads him to an intersubjective understanding of truth that aligns him with the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, who said that it is because we discover our transcendental subjectivity to be in a situation that there is intersubjectivity.\textsuperscript{150} I will thus have shown Nietzsche’s perspectivism, rather than being seen as an obstacle for relating Nietzsche’s philosophy to phenomenology, is actually a key moment in connecting the two, and thus allows us to suggest Nietzsche could well be read as an early phenomenologist.

1. Nietzsche’s Perspectivism

Nietzsche’s interest in our perspectival access to the world is found throughout most of his corpus. In TL he writes that “the insect or the bird perceives an entirely different world from the one that man does,” and moreover that “the question of which of these perceptions of the world is the more correct one is quite meaningless, for this would have to have been decided previously in accordance with the criterion of the correct perception, which means, in accordance with a criterion which is not available.”\textsuperscript{151} Despite Nietzsche raising the first point in order to talk of human’s difficulty in realising the different perspectival access to the world that different species must have, we can nowadays appreciate it as almost a mere platitude. No one would seriously contest that our access to the world is not at least partially formed by our particular perceptual access to the world, and that surely this differs across species, if not individuals within a particular species. This was

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{151} Nietzsche, ‘On Truth and Lies’, 86.
notably shown by Thomas Nagel in his article *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*, where he argues that a bat’s experience of the world via sonar is incommensurable with any human experience of the world: “bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine.”

The world perceived by the bat is certainly different to the world perceived by humans, as are the worlds of the insect or the bird. The more remarkable aspect of Nietzsche’s early discussion of perspectivism, therefore, is to be found in the latter comment that there is no question of “correct” perceptions, since the criterion required to measure perspectives in such a way is inaccessible.

Thus Nietzsche’s declaration here of the perspectival nature of our experience of the world leads to the two theses we introduced above as contrary to the phenomenological project. Firstly, since we can’t have access to the thing-in-itself (the criterion of correctness), all our perceptual access to the world is a distortion and falsification of external reality: “the correct perception”—which would mean ‘the adequate expression of an object to the subject’—is a contradictory impossibility.”

The external world (object) is never adequately expressed by humans, nor insects, birds, or bats (subject); it is only expressed *inadequately*. Secondly, if even the question of correct perception is meaningless, it is hard to see how Nietzsche is offering any view of truth and knowledge beyond a crude relativism. Truth, for Nietzsche writing in *TL*, is merely an aesthetic relation between subject and object that takes hold via repeated generation. This was the case, as we saw, in the transposing of nerve stimuli into images, and images into sounds (words) through metaphors, and it is the case, Nietzsche argues, in our faith in the laws of nature, which can only take hold since our mode of perceptual access to the world is as uniform as it is. Here Nietzsche twice explicitly identifies himself as arguing against the common distrust of idealism, instead favouring that truth – insofar as we have no access to the thing-in-itself – is merely a product of our subjective constitutions of reality. This distortive nature of perspectives is also explicitly referred to in HAH: “You shall learn to grasp the sense of perspective in every value judgement – the

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displacement, distortion and merely apparent teleology of horizons and whatever else pertains to perspectivism” and learn to grasp “life itself as conditioned by the sense of perspective and its injustice.”

Again, not only does perspectivism appear to entail a falsification of lived experience, but this experience is “conditioned” by our perspectival access to it.

Then in GS §354, where Nietzsche talks about consciousness as transposing our experiences into the herd perspective, it is this process of “corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization” that Nietzsche labels “true phenomenalism and perspectivism”. Once again it is hard to draw any conclusion from this construction of perspectivism other than that it involves a distortion of reality, and Nietzsche’s lamentation of truth being assigned to a herd-perspective rather than individual experiences further suggests a relativistic framework of truth. Shortly after, perspectivism is given one of its most famed presentations, in a section called “Our new ‘infinite’ ”, where Nietzsche talks of “the perspectival character of existence” entailing that “the world has once again become infinite to us: insofar as we cannot reject the possibility that it includes infinite interpretations.” And in opposing his own doctrine of will to power to the physicists’ interpretations that rely on conformity of nature to law, Nietzsche condescendingly concedes “Granted, [the will to power] is only an interpretation too – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well then, so much the better.”

This focus on interpretation, and the infinite expanse of possible interpretations, has also lead commentators to read Nietzsche as endorsing some kind of relativism where nothing can ever said to be truthful knowledge.

Observing Nietzsche’s discussion of perspectivism from TL up until BGE, one gets an overwhelming feeling that Nietzsche is arguing that all knowledge is a falsification of reality, and that any perspective is therefore “as true” as any other, since we never have anything like “objective” truth. I will proceed to show that Nietzsche cannot have thought perspectivism entailed a falsification of reality beyond what I have earlier called his phenomenological turn (which is first

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156 Ibid., §374.
displayed in GM). Clark makes a similar argument by showing that the only instance where Nietzsche explicitly references perspectivism from the publication of GM onwards, if read correctly, does not imply this distortive nature of perspectival knowledge. With this problem dealt with, we will turn to the other concern, namely that perspectivism entails a relativism that essentially leads to solipsism: since all knowledge is perspectival, the only thing I can be sure of are my own perspectives, and thus there is no basis for an intersubjective reality. I will show that Nietzsche cannot have endorsed such a version of perspectivism, and indeed his perspectivism – at least as it is offered in GM – specifically reveals how Nietzsche thinks we can commit to something like intersubjective truth once we have abandoned the idea of a metaphysical reality.

2. Does Perspectivism Entail Falsification

2.1 Perspectivism in GM

The only discussion of perspectivism that occurs in Nietzsche’s published works from GM onwards happens to also be one of its most substantial mentions, and is perhaps the most heavily commented on by Nietzsche scholars. It comes in GM §III:12 and bears quoting at length:

Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject”; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective “knowing”; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,” be. But to
eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposing we were capable of this—what would that mean but to castrate the intellect?—\(^{158}\)

In effect, Nietzsche raises the traditional philosophical concept of knowledge in itself, and uses an analogy of eyes and vision to argue for its absurdity, as well as using the same visual analogy to argue that our “objectivity” increases in much the same way that with the more visual profiles we take of an object the more complete a visual picture we have of it.

We see in this passage then that there is no specific mention that perspectivism entails that our knowledge falsifies experience, unless one thinks that without “knowledge in itself” whatever knowledge we do have is a distortion of reality. If Clark is right – and I agree that she is – in that GM corresponds with Nietzsche having reached his own “stage six” in the history of the “real world” as an error, then knowledge in itself, according to Nietzsche, is nonsensical since the concept of the thing-in-itself is nonsensical and certainly non-existent. Clark suggests that in successively denouncing “pure reason”, “absolute spirituality”, and “knowledge in itself”, he is denouncing the would-be faculty of knowing things-in-themselves, intelligence unaffected by human capacities such as the senses, and self-justified knowledge respectively.\(^{159}\) If Nietzsche is only saying in this passage that perspectivism implies we never have access to this metaphysical conception of knowledge of things-in-themselves, it does not appear as though he is saying anything like that perspectivism implies a falsification of reality, as his earlier works seemed to suggest. By surrendering his earlier belief in the thing-in-itself, there is no longer anything that our perspectives fail to correspond to that would make them a falsification of reality. Perspectivism simply is our access to the only real world of appearances, just as for Merleau-Ponty perception is to be defined as our very access to the world and to truth.\(^{160}\) However for this argument to be correct, we should like to have a better understanding of just what perspectivism as it is presented in GM entails – after all, his earlier discussions of it did suggest that our perspectives are falsifications of reality, as we saw in the previous section. If perspectivism was earlier used by

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159 Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 132.
Nietzsche to describe our perceptions as falsifications of true reality, why would he continue to appeal to this notion once his views on metaphysics developed to a point where he no longer thought this to be the case?

### 2.2 The Metaphor of Vision

The key to understanding perspectivism as it is detailed in GM is to notice that Nietzsche almost exclusively talks about perspectival knowledge by using the metaphors of perspectival vision and eyes. As Clark notes, Nietzsche swiftly transitions from talking about a “knowing subject”, “pure reason” and “knowledge in itself” to an unthinkable eye turned in no direction, and as such “The concepts in question concern cognition, and demand no particular beliefs about sight”, so that the passage must be read as “an attempt to get us to note certain similarities between the cognitive aspects in question and the absurd idea of a nonperspectival seeing.”

In other words, according to Clark Nietzsche sets up a metaphorical analogy between knowledge in itself and a directionless eye that is literally false, but is meant to indicate significant similarities nonetheless. To understand Nietzsche’s use of perspectivism in GM, we must understand what work the metaphor of vision is doing here; we must first understand perspectival seeing, and then identify the analogous elements in cognition that make it perspectival.

That all seeing is perspectival is a largely uncontroversial claim. We always see an object (or any kind of visual background) in a certain spatial relation – that is from a certain distance and at a certain angle. Moreover our view can be enhanced or inhibited by conditions of light, and myriad other factors, such as our physical and emotional health at the moment of perception. In other words, vision always involves a spatially situated and conditionally affected eye, turned in a particular direction. The notion of a directionless eye is, as Nietzsche suggests, quite absurd. Or as Clark says, “A nonperspectival seeing would be a view from nowhere.”

The epistemological equivalent of a view from nowhere is not so intuitively grasped, however. Clark offers that “a cognitive perspective must be something on the side of the knower that affects the intellectual ‘look’ of the object…an obvious candidate for this role is our corpus of beliefs, what we believe at a

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161 Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 129.
162 Ibid.
particular time.”163 She then later expands this to include “those factors on the side of the subject responsible for beliefs, such as cognitive capacities and practical interests.”164 Brian Leiter, agreeing with Clark’s overall story, also proposes that we should treat “particular interests and needs” as the direct cognitive analogue to the idea of distance, angle and conditions in the case of vision that will that makes “knowledge from nowhere” as absurd as its visual counterpart.165

I largely agree with these submissions from Clark and Leiter. Nietzsche doesn’t here talk explicitly of beliefs, interests, or needs; instead he refers to our “affects”, and the “will”, but these certainly could be said to contain the concepts Clark and Leiter suggest. Yet I argue that we should extend the scope of how Nietzsche uses this metaphor. I argue that the difficulty in expressing the correspondence between perspectival vision and its cognitive counterpart is precisely Nietzsche’s point; “a view from nowhere” is analogous to “knowledge from…”? Or, in Nietzsche’s own terminology, “an eye turned in no particular direction” is analogous to “a mind…” – what exactly? The use of metaphor shouldn’t be read as a typically Nietzschean literary flourish inserted for purely aesthetic reasons; rather it is doing the real argumentative work because hitherto the only conception of nonperspectival knowledge has had to do with knowledge of the thing-in-itself. Once this concept is jettisoned we have no way of even talking about nonperspectival knowledge, yet we have a perfectly natural way of talking about nonperspectival vision, and we readily recognise this concept’s absurdity. Nietzsche is thus explicitly saying the best model we have for thinking of nonperspectival knowledge is nonperspectival seeing – just as we can never have a view without being in a spatial location, we can never have knowledge without being in an “epistemic location”.

The point he makes, I suggest, is that cognition should be thought of itself as a form of sensory perception. Whereas we followed Clark earlier in saying Nietzsche uses the metaphor to draw similarities between two things that are not literally equivalent, I now argue that Nietzsche is precisely arguing for the literal equivalence between visual and cognitive perspectivism in the sense that both should be read as two non-substantially different modes of perception.

163 Ibid., 130.
164 Ibid., 133.
2.3 Knowledge as Perception

This makes further sense when we recall Nietzsche’s ideas about the organic formation of consciousness and intellect, such as we saw in GS §354 (e.g. “consciousness in general has developed only under the pressure of the need to communicate”).\(^{166}\) Also recall here Nietzsche’s argument that thinking developed out of the sensations of pressure.\(^{167}\) Cognitive processes, according to Nietzsche, have developed out of our perceptual access to the world; thus the argument about nonperspectival seeing is not meant to compare to nonperspectival knowledge in just a metaphorical sense, but very much in a physiological (or literal) sense. Thinking is a mode of perceptual access to the world, and just as no one would take seriously the notion of nonperspectival perceptual access to the world if we think of perceptual access in terms of the sensations of vision and touch, neither should we conceive of nonperspectival knowledge of the world as possible. Cognition is perceptual access, built upon the foundations of sensations such as vision, hearing, and touch, and as such is inherently perspectival. Cognitive perspectivism understood in this way does not suggest a falsification of reality, instead it just makes the point that all knowledge – insofar as it is built upon perceptual access to the world – is mediated by human capacities. If this is the correct way to understand Nietzsche’s perspectivism, the connections to be drawn with Merleau-Ponty are irresistible, who dedicates PP to arguing how we always think through perception, and we always perceive as a body. These connections will be elaborated on in the following section, for now let us conclude what we have so far discovered regarding Nietzsche’s perspectivism as it relates to a falsification of our experience of the world.

Many statements Nietzsche makes regarding perspectivism tend to suggest that because all knowledge is perspectival, it necessarily falsifies reality. If true, we again see Nietzsche at odds with the phenomenological program of accurately describing lived experiences. We can, just as in the previous chapter, explain this via what I have called Nietzsche’s phenomenological turn, or what Clark identifies as him reaching his own sixth stage regarding the history of the “real world”, whereby he abandons the idea of a metaphysical reality which our perspectives can correspond to.


\(^{167}\) Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, §40[28].
As Clark notes, however, the famous discussion of perspectivism in GM §III:12 betrays this timeline, and thus prompts us to consider whether Nietzsche still intended perspectivism to indicate something like a distortion of reality. Following Clark I argued that there is no such element of falsification within this discussion of perspectivism, and instead it should be read as confirming that subsequent to realising the absurdity of the thing-in-itself, we should still retain the perspectival elements of knowledge. No longer being the distortion of a metaphysical truth, these perspectival elements are now to be seen as analogous to the perspectival nature of vision, namely that objects are seen in a spatial relation, and under given conditions. Ultimately I suggest that, for Nietzsche, cognition evolved organically out of prior sensations and modes of perception, further indicating that when Nietzsche talks of knowledge being perspectival like vision is perspectival, he means this in a physiological and not just wholly metaphorical sense.

3. Does Perspectivism Entail Relativism?

We still have the issue confronting us of whether a Nietzschean perspectivism leads us into relativism and solipsism where “truth” is just what any individual takes it to be under their own perspective. That such a position would be problematic for seeing Nietzsche aligned with the phenomenological tradition is articulated by Merleau-Ponty’s declaration that “we must not wonder if our evident truths [nos évidences] are really truths, or if, by some defect of our mind, what is evident for us would actually be revealed as illusory when measured against some truth in itself…To seek the essence of perception is not to declare that perception is presumed to be true, but rather that perception is defined as our access to the truth.”168 Rather than perspectivism entailing that whatever one perceives is to be considered as true, if it is possible for Nietzsche to be read alongside Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology we instead need it to be the case that perspectivism is just how we have access to the truth.

3.1 The Problem of Perspectivism

The problem perspectivism poses here is that if all knowledge is affected by our subjective positioning or situation is not all knowledge then relativistic? Then we are led to wonder, as David

Schenck does in his discussion of perspectivism in Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty, “Will not all perspectives and all appearances have equal claim to truth?” \(^{169}\) Leiter is concerned with this very reading of Nietzsche believing one of the key claims of what he calls the “Received View” (being the essentially accepted interpretation of Nietzsche since the 1960s) to be that “no perspective can enjoy an epistemic privilege over any other, because there is no epistemically privileged mode of access to this characterless world.” \(^{170}\) If Nietzsche thinks “facts are just what there aren’t, there are only interpretations”, \(^{171}\) surely he must be saying there is no such thing as “truth”, and thus insofar as any perspective may be more valuable than another it cannot be so on epistemic grounds. Without the “facts”, what could one compare differing perspectives to in order to evaluate their epistemic merit? Yet of course, this serves to re-establish the appearance-reality distinction that Nietzsche believed himself to have overcome by his mature works. The point Nietzsche makes in saying there are no facts-in-themselves, only interpretations, is simply that there is no such thing as knowledge unmediated by our own perspectival access to reality. As we saw above, just as there is no view from nowhere, there is no non-interpreted knowledge. That we cannot have non-interpreted knowledge in this sense does not imply that we cannot have epistemically better (or worse) interpretations, in the same way that just because all vision is perspectival does not imply that all visual perspectives are as valuable as any other.

3.2 Visual and Epistemic Privilege

For Nietzsche it is a matter of naïve expectation that knowledge, in order to be “truthful”, must be non-perspectival when no such presumption is made relating to perspectival vision. Again, by constructing the metaphor of vision to talk about perspectival knowledge in GM, Nietzsche is imploring us to see the two faculties of knowledge and vision as more alike than these assumptions tend to have us believe. If we draw the proper connections between sight and knowledge, we will understand, so thinks Nietzsche, that the interpretive aspect of knowledge is by no means a


\(^{170}\) Leiter, ‘Perspectivism in Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals’, 334. For a substantial list of authors and publications that espouse this “Received View”, see p. 352, note 2 in Leiter’s paper.

\(^{171}\) Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, §7[60].
shortcoming. Leiter is awake to the need to understand this metaphor in the robust sense Nietzsche intended; he draws four conclusions regarding perspectival seeing: i) we always see an object in a spatial relation, and under certain conditions ("perspectivism claim"); ii) the more perspectives we have of the object, the more complete our view of it is ("plurality claim"); iii) we cannot exhaust all potential perspectives of an object ("infinity claim"), and; iv) there are factors which could distort our perspective, such as the distance we view it at and unfavourable conditions, for example poor lighting ("purity claim").

Leiter then constructs the analogues in the case of perspectival knowledge: i) we know an object from a certain perspective, i.e. according to “particular interests and needs”; ii) the more of these perspectives we take up, the better our knowledge of the object is; iii) we cannot exhaust all these perspectives on an object of knowledge, and; iv) certain perspectives will alter and distort the object of knowledge. Importantly Leiter notes that nothing in these four conditions leads to the claim of the Received View that we highlighted earlier, namely that there is no epistemically privileged access to the world, and therefore no epistemic hierarchy in our knowledge claims. In fact, it is entirely the opposite; we are intuitively aware of privileged visual perspectives of an object, and by creating an analogy between sight and knowledge, Nietzsche is arguing that there are similarly privileged epistemic perspectives of an object. That this is counterintuitive (i.e. that we seem hardwired to believe that without "objectivity" our knowledge claims are distortive of reality, if not blatantly false) is exactly why Nietzsche needs to employ the sight metaphor to convince us of our mistaken views.

If this is the correct way to read Nietzsche’s conception of perspectivism as it is presented in GM, we have strong evidence to read Nietzsche as pre-empting an important aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. In PP Merleau-Ponty writes “For science and for objective thought, an object seen a hundred paces away with a very small apparent size is indiscernible from the same object seen ten paces away and at a greater angle; and the object is in fact nothing other than this constant product of distance multiplied by apparent size. But for me who is perceiving, the object

173 Ibid., 345–46.
at a hundred paces is not present and real in the sense that the object at ten paces is”.\textsuperscript{174} This leads
him to argue that “For each object, just as for each painting in an art gallery, there is an optimal
distance from which it asks to be seen – an orientation through which it presents more of itself –
beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack.”\textsuperscript{175} This
notion of optimal distance is, again, easy to grasp intuitively. A circle viewed at an extremely close
distance will lose all curvature and appear as a straight line; viewed at too far a distance it appears as
a single point. To see the circle as a circle, there are a range of better visual perspectives; there are
optimum distances.

If we are to read Nietzsche’s metaphor as strongly as I have suggested here, he is explicitly
stating that there are optimum perspectives that give us the greatest level of epistemic validity. In
HAH §279 it seems that Nietzsche presents his own case for this notion of optimal distances, and
he specifically suggests that it applies beyond our typical sensory perspectives to our supposedly
non-sensory cognitive perspectives. “The painter desires that the viewer shall not observe too
precisely, too sharply, he compels him to retreat a certain distance and view the painting from
there”, he writes, then saying “Everyone who wants to idealize his life must therefore not desire to
see it too precisely, he must always banish his view of it back to a certain distance away.”\textsuperscript{176} That he
raises this concept of optimal distance in terms of an optimal distance to \textit{obfuscate} the perspective
rather than \textit{clarify} it is not a problem; presumably in acknowledging that certain distances are
suitable for \textit{removing} precision, Nietzsche intends that certain distances will be suitable for \textit{obtaining}
precision. The notion of optimal epistemic perspective may relate to the concept we have
encountered previously regarding “the \textit{sense for facts}”\textsuperscript{177}. That is, reaching a position of epistemic
privilege will require purifying the cognition from distortive interpretations, just as a privileged
visual perspective requires purifying bad lighting conditions, etc. That Nietzsche identifies this
sense for facts as “body, as gesture, as instinct – in a word, as reality”\textsuperscript{178} gives further weight to the
argument I have offered previously that for Nietzsche knowledge, or consciousness, should not be

\textsuperscript{174} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, 315.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 315–16.
\textsuperscript{176} Nietzsche, \textit{Human, All Too Human}, §I:279.
\textsuperscript{177} Nietzsche, \textit{Twilight of the Idols; And, The Anti-Christ}, AC §59.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.
seen as radically distinct from perceptual sensations, but rather as an extension of them. To emphasise that this kind of perspectival knowledge does not lead to a solipsistic relativism I will now show how Merleau-Ponty’s visual perspectivism actually guarantees the intersubjective world and the truth and reality of it. If we accept Merleau-Ponty’s argument, and maintain that Nietzsche’s visual metaphor is intended to draw this physiological similarity between sight and knowledge, we can claim that Nietzsche’s perspectivism actually guarantees us reality and truth, rather than challenging it. We will then show that Nietzsche has indeed met Merleau-Ponty’s own requirement of phenomenology – that perception (or perspectives) are our access to truth.

### 3.3 Merleau-Ponty on Perspectivism

Rather than being a deficient mode of access to the world, the perspectivism of perception is what actually guarantees the reality that we take for granted every day. If perspectival access to objects was not possible, and indeed necessary, two perceivers could not observe the one and the same object simultaneously and be convinced of its sameness. If we thought we had non-perspectival access to the world, we must think that both subjects occupied the exact same position at the exact same time, or we could not be sure of an intersubjectively existent world. As Merleau-Ponty says, “If all the sides of the cube could be known at once, I would no longer be dealing with a thing which offers itself for inspection little by little, but with an idea which my mind would truly possess.”

In such a case, another person’s perspective of an object observed by us would be quite meaningless since, in Schenck’s words, it is the “possibility of continued exploration, by a mobile subject or by several subjects...that distinguishes the weight of reality from the mist of hallucination.” Crucially Merleau-Ponty shows the connection between this “view from everywhere” and a “view from nowhere”; if we could wholly complete a synthesis of the different perspectives of an object – if we could know all the sides of a cube at once – and thus have a “view from everywhere”, we would in actuality have a “view from nowhere”. It is our embodiment as a body-subject in a particular place and time that gives us reality as we normally conceive it, and “If I

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179 Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 212.
am always and everywhere, then I am never and nowhere. Thus, there is no choice between the incompleteness of the world and its existence”. Merleau-Ponty realised that there is no difference between having full determinacy (i.e. non-perspectival access to any given object) and having an entirely vacant perspective; to synthesise all possible perspectives and thus have a “view from everywhere” would actually be the directionless eye or “view from nowhere” that we saw Nietzsche denounce as unthinkable.

Perspectivism according to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, does not suggest that we could only have reality and truth if we could synthesise a totality of potential perspectives of a given object, and indeed insists the opposite. We should mention here a potential tension with Nietzsche’s own version of perspectivism, namely his apparent claim that the more perspectives we amass the greater our “objectivity” will be. This seems to oppose Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of the “view from everywhere”. However it fits Nietzsche’s broader philosophy to think that although we may increase our “objective” knowledge of a given object of perception by accumulating as many different perspectives of it as possible, in practice certain objects, depending on our projects with them, will have optimal perspectives we should take up. We saw this above when Nietzsche alluded to idealising one’s life (albeit in a decadent manner that he would disapprove of) by viewing it at particular distance, just as we view an artwork at a particular, optimal distance. Also, Nietzsche never pursued “objectivity” at the expense of all other considerations, and so we should not take him here to say we should sacrifice purity for the sake of objectivity. This is given expression when Nietzsche directs psychologists to “Never observe for the sake of observing! That produces a false perspective, a squint, something forced and exaggerated.” For Nietzsche the value of knowledge is not found in reaching some affectless, neutral position – through adding more and more eyes, for example – but rather to acknowledge the subjective, interpretive nature of every perspective and to try to understand what these perspectives say about the perceiver – how have they read off the facts, and what does this say about their directedness towards the world? As Nietzsche says, the “incomplete presentation of an idea, of a whole philosophy, is sometimes more effective than its

exhaustive realization: more is left for the beholder to do”. For Nietzsche knowledge-seeking does not involve a passive encounter with a wholly preserved, determinate truth, but instead involves our perspectival engagement in establishing what the truths of our experiences in the world are – as Merleau-Ponty says, “philosophy is not the reflection of a prior truth, but rather, like art, the actualization of a truth”. So whilst we might approach “objectivity” by accumulating more and more varied perspectives, there is nothing inherent in this that guarantees epistemic privilege; it is far more important to be active in the realisation of truth than it is to be passive in trying to reflect on a “prior truth”.

Finally, returning to the discussion on relativism, Schenck also combats the relativist assertion that consequently all perspectives might have an equal claim to truth, via the notion of the body-subject. It is the body-subject for Schenck which gives rise to what we saw Merleau-Ponty describe as the optimal distance to view an object: “the lived body moves in a world of privileged perspectives organized around the projects of that body and the given significance of its milieu”, and thus, “For the body each situation, each location has a distinct kinaesthetic significance.” If we can agree with Merleau-Ponty that perceptual perspectives have claims to epistemic validity based upon this kinaesthetic significance, and we read Nietzsche’s metaphorical description of knowledge as perspectival just as vision is perspectival – as well as the notion that consciousness and knowledge grow organically out of perceptual contact with the world – we must conclude that for Nietzsche our knowledge claims can be truthful, or epistemically valid, only insofar as they are perspectival.

In this chapter I have looked at the potential issue that arises in a phenomenological understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophy in relation to his views on perspectivism. The problems to be faced were twofold: firstly, his perspectivism often seems to re-establish the distortive nature of our engagement in the world that we dismissed in the previous chapter, and secondly, it is often not that we have a passive encounter with a wholly preserved, determinate truth but rather, like art, the actualization of a truth. For Nietzsche knowledge-seeking
taken to imply a relativism whereby any perspective is as true as any other. In order to dismiss the first problem, we again showed, following Clark’s story of Nietzsche’s philosophical evolution, that perspectivism only seems to imply that all knowledge is a falsification of reality if one holds onto the metaphysical correspondence theory of truth that Nietzsche did in his earlier works. The only concern with this reading arises in the famous passage, GM §III:12, which was written at a time when Nietzsche had supposedly overcome this metaphysical view. Yet via a close reading of this passage and his telling use of vision as a metaphor for knowledge, we can see that it doesn’t commit Nietzsche to the view that perspectivism implies a falsification of reality. Knowledge is perspectival in just the same way that vision is, in that it will always be mediated by the knowing agent. Furthermore if we accept that for Nietzsche knowledge and consciousness are very much products of our perceptual capacities, we see the argument is not metaphorical, but physiological.

Regarding the second issue – that perspectivism is sometimes read as entailing an epistemic egalitarian relativism – we saw that the metaphor established in GM does not at all appear to make this claim. Rather, just as we recognise in visual perspectivism the fact that we have privileged perspectives – or as Merleau-Ponty says, optimum distances to view objects – we see that Nietzsche’s metaphor argues for an analogue in the cognitive sphere. Just as objects have privileged visual perspectives, Nietzsche’s argument for the literal similarities between vision and cognition as modes of perception indicates that we can indeed ascertain privileged epistemic perspectives. And so the problem that Nietzsche’s perspectivism presented for reading him as a proto-phenomenologist has also been resolved.
Conclusion

There is much more that could and should be said regarding the connections between Nietzsche and phenomenology. In this thesis I have merely tried to answer potential criticisms that can arise that may prevent one considering such an area of research to be promising. We began by observing the key similarities between Nietzsche and Husserl’s conception of the phenomenological program. Whilst both were dedicated to a critical philosophy that sought to address the problem of the foundations of rationalism, ultimately Husserl placed faith in being able to restore rationalism on absolute foundations – an idea that Nietzsche always rejected on the grounds that it undermined the vital power of life. Similarly Husserl’s commitment to the transcendental ego bears no resemblance to Nietzsche’s thoughts, which considered the notion of the ego to be absurd. We thus saw that it is through Merleau-Ponty and his development of Husserl’s concept of the life-world, the subsequent return to focusing on lived experience, and our existence as embodied consciousnesses and the primacy of perception that this implies that we find the most favorable connections between Nietzsche and phenomenology.

I then considered two positions in Nietzsche’s philosophy that seemed at odds with this phenomenological program: his falsification thesis, and his perspectivism. In both cases, once we see Nietzsche having undergone what I termed his phenomenological turn, his later-works do not appear to be incongruous to a Merleau-Pontian style of phenomenology, and indeed were uncovered to resonate even more strongly with it. Though a commitment to returning to the pre-scientific world of experience that we find evidenced through our perceptual engagement with the world as body-subjects, Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty emerge as concordant philosophers.

We are not left with a definitive statement that Nietzsche explicitly did anticipate phenomenology in its general principles, nor that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is necessarily a direct descendent of Nietzsche’s philosophy. What we did see are undoubtable, profound and structural similarities between the two philosophers that promise significant
rewards for further investigation. Whether it be the development of conceptual language out of bodily gestures, or the similarities between visual and cognitive perspectives, through awakening our pre-theoretical, bodily engagement in the world, Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty remind us that all aspects of our experience, no matter how much they might seem rooted in pure thought or rationalism, are ultimately founded upon our existence as an embodied conscious, in and destined toward the world.
Bibliography


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