

Philosophical Attitudes to Body and Spirit, with particular reference to the works of Merleau-Ponty

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There has not been much discussion, at least in English-speaking philosophy, about the relation of body and *spirit*, though there has, of course, been a great deal of attention to the problems of the relation between body and *mind*. Probably largely for this reason, most English-speaking philosophers, including me, would naturally tend to think of the 'body-spirit' problem as just an aspect of, or a fancy way of talking about, the 'body-mind' problem, with which we are much more familiar. Talk about 'spirit', from this point of view, might indeed be regarded with some suspicion: one synonym for 'spirit', after all, is 'ghost', and ghosts are supposed to be non-material entities; so that talking about 'spirit' might be thought to be a way of supporting the Cartesian dualist position, according to which the 'mind' is a separate, immaterial substance, quite distinct in existence and character from anything physical, and so from anything else in the created world. We may be reminded of Ryle's sarcastic description, in *The Concept of Mind*, of dualism as 'the dogma of the ghost in the machine'.

There is something to be said for this way of thinking of the 'body-spirit' problem. Our spiritual lives, after all, do consist of thoughts, emotions, aspirations, desires, and so on, and in that sense are just an aspect of our mental lives. Whatever we say about the relation of thoughts etc. in general to our bodies should therefore, one might think, apply straightforwardly to 'spiritual' thoughts. But can it be quite as simple and straightforward as that? The thoughts, feelings, desires, aspirations and so on which make up our 'spiritual' lives are surely thoughts of a very special kind, and talk about the 'spirit' seems to carry different connotations from talk about the 'mind'. Shouldn't this affect how we think about the relations between the spiritual and the material?

What I want to try to do in this talk is, first, to expound, in what I hope will be a persuasive way, a certain general, non-dualist, account of the mind-body relation, derived essentially from the 20th century French philosopher Merleau-Ponty; then to examine what is special about spiritual thoughts, etc.; and finally to consider what this might suggest about the meaning of the rather vague word 'spirit' and about the relation of the 'spiritual' to the 'material'. But to begin with, I had better try to make it clearer what I mean by a 'dualist' account, and so what I mean, by contrast, by a 'non-dualist' account, of the human mind and its relation to the human body.

'Dualism' is a label for a certain philosophical position on mind and body – a position elaborated most fully probably by Descartes in the 17th century. But it is not a matter solely for professional philosophers. A less thought-out dualism lurks behind much of our everyday and scientific thought about human beings and their relationship to the world: even, as I shall try to show shortly, behind the thinking of people who would dismiss Cartesian dualism as primitive and unscientific. It is one of those pictures which, as one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein, put it, 'holds us captive' – a way of thinking from which we find it hard to free

ourselves but which leads us into deeper and deeper intellectual tangles if we pursue it.

What is the essence of dualism? At its heart is the idea of a radical separation between ourselves, as conscious beings, and the world of which we are conscious – between ourselves as ‘subjects’ of experience and the world of ‘objects’ that we experience (including even our own bodies as one of those objects). The world of objects (the objective world), according to this picture, goes on in its own sweet way quite apart from our experience of it, and independently of the way in which we experience it. It is just *there*, and our experience has to adjust to it, and, if we are being rational, to reflect or conform to what is objectively there, what is objectively *real*. Thus, a scientific account of any aspect of reality, which aims by its very nature at being completely rational, must simply describe the objective facts, without imposing on them any ‘subjective’ evaluations, that is, any value-judgements made by us as subjects on the objective state of affairs. On this view, for example, the rainbow is not ‘in itself’, or ‘objectively’, beautiful, meaningful, or mysterious: it is just the result of the way light-rays are bent when passing through water droplets in the atmosphere, producing certain effects on retinas, which are structured like ours. Any appearance of beauty, meaningfulness, or mystery in the rainbow would then be only in the mind of the beholder, in his or her subjective consciousness, not part of objective reality. So we have the radical distinction that I was talking about between our consciousness, or ‘mind’, which is the one and only source of values, meanings, and emotional attitudes, and the material or physical world, which is value-free and meaningless, and whose states and movements therefore need to be described and explained without reference to values or meanings. To express it in simple (perhaps too simple) terms, this means that they need to be described and explained ‘mechanistically’, as simple movements of matter through space, caused by other movements of matter through space. The objective world is thus the world as described and explained by the laws of physics and chemistry.

As I hinted earlier, and repeated just now, this kind of dualism is inherent in the scientific view of the world as it has developed over the last three or four centuries – though some twentieth century developments in physics itself, such as quantum theory, may be inconsistent with it. Be that as it may, there is a crucial problem in this dualism, which was already seen by some of Descartes’ contemporaries, and even by Descartes himself. The problem is this: on the one hand, dualism insists on an essential distinction between our experience of the world and the world we experience. But on the other, doesn’t the very concept of ‘experience’ itself imply that the experiencing subject is part of the world that he or she experiences? An experience, after all, is necessarily an experience *of* something, so experience involves a relation to objects, and this seems to mean that the subject interacts in some way with these objects, and is in that sense part of the same world as them. This is one way of expressing the problem of ‘mind-matter interaction’, which seems insoluble as long as we think, like Descartes, of the ‘mind’ as a separate substance from ‘matter’, and of a totally different kind.

Classical materialists tried to get over this problem by accepting that the mind is just part of the material world, that it is in effect identical with the brain, and that our mental or subjective lives are therefore identical with our brain processes. Brain processes, as phenomena that take place in the material world, are, like all other material phenomena, describable and explainable entirely in terms of the laws of physics and chemistry. So if our mental lives, our thoughts, feelings, sensations, desires, experiences, etc. are identical with brain processes, it follows that our thoughts and desires are entirely describable and explainable in terms of the laws of physics and chemistry. They are as meaning-free and value-free as any other physical process. When we experience something (say, a rainbow, to continue with the earlier example), this is simply a reaction to the stimulus presented to our senses by the light-rays impinging on them, as bent by the water-droplets in the atmosphere. We see the colours of the rainbow because of the structure of rods and cones in our sensory equipment and the ways in which they react to these stimuli of different wavelengths. If we find the rainbow beautiful, that is simply a conditioned response to this kind of phenomenon.

It is easy to see why this kind of materialism should have its appeal to so many people. It appears to get away from the dualist problem of subject-object interaction by collapsing the subject into the object – by making the experiencing subject just another kind of object in the single world. And it seems to offer the prospect of a unified scientific picture of the world, in which everything, including our own thoughts and experiences, can be completely explained in principle by a single set of laws. Appealing though it is, however, I want to argue that this kind of materialism faces insuperable problems, which are ultimately, paradoxical though it seems, not all that different from those that face Cartesian dualism. Materialists may think they have eliminated one of Descartes' two substances, namely, the 'subject' or 'mind', and retained only one, the 'object'. But don't the notions of 'subject' and 'object' logically *require* each other? Just as an experience requires an object, so to be an 'object' seeming to imply being an object *for* some subject, an object that is experienceable by someone. In both cases, the notions of 'subject' and 'object' necessarily require some kind of *interaction* or *relation* between the two terms.

One, perhaps less complex, way of expressing this is to say that the materialist leaves himself or herself out of the picture. The scientific conception of an objective world is one that has been formulated by human beings, by scientists, as a way of organising their experience. Merleau-Ponty makes the point like this, in his 1948 series of radio talks, published in English translation under the title *The World of Perception*¹: 'The physics of relativity confirms that absolute and final objectivity is a mere dream by showing how each particular observation is strictly linked to the location of the observer and cannot be abstracted from this particular situation; it also rejects the notion of an absolute observer. We can no longer flatter ourselves with the idea that, in science, the exercise of a pure and unsituated intellect can allow us to gain access to an object free of all human traces, just as God would see it'. The words 'just as God would see it' refer to the traditional concept of God as

¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, translated by Oliver Davis, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 44-5.

viewing the world from a position utterly outside it: the materialist (or, to use Merleau-Ponty's own term 'objectivist') conception pictures the scientist as, in effect, in a God-like position, able to describe the world, including the scientist him- or herself, just as it is in itself and without regard to any personal perspective on it.

To say this is not to denigrate science in any way. On an earlier page in the same work, Merleau-Ponty is at pains to emphasise the value of science, both as 'a means of technological advancement' and as 'an object lesson in precision and truth'. 'The question which modern philosophy asks in relation to science', he says, 'is not intended either to contest its right to exist or to close off any particular avenue to its inquiries. Rather, the question is whether science does, or ever could, present us with a picture of the world which is complete, self-sufficient and somehow closed in upon itself, such that there could no longer be any meaningful questions outside this picture'². The scientific, objective, picture of the world is constructed by human beings, who are part of the very world they are picturing, but at the same time capable of detaching themselves sufficiently from it to be able to picture it, rather than simply passively respond to it.

So if neither a two-substance dualism nor a reductionist materialism give an adequate account of subjects and objects and their relations to each other, what alternative view looks more promising? Merleau-Ponty belongs to the 'phenomenological' tradition in philosophy, and that is the source of his alternative picture. For him, roughly speaking, 'phenomenology' means setting aside any preconceived ideas derived from abstract theorising, and returning to what we find in our immediate, pre-theoretical, experience itself, in which those theories must ultimately be rooted if they are to have any meaning for us. That is what he attempts to do in relation to this problem. If we do this, he suggests, we see that 'To be a consciousness or rather *to be an experience* is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them'³. If we forget for now the construction which certain philosophical theories place on the findings of science, and just consider what it is like to be a subject of experience, we see that it is not like looking out on a world from which one is completely detached, and from which one can only passively receive signals; rather it is a matter of being actively involved with, communicating with, things, people, situations around one.

Merleau-Ponty is fond of the Hegelian (and earlier Platonic) term 'dialectical' to describe our relation to the world we experience. 'Dialectic' literally means 'conversation': our relation to the world, he is saying, is a kind of conversation between ourselves and the objects of our experience. In such a conversation, each party is both independent of and dependent on the other. I say something, to which you respond, and my next statement is a response to your response, and so on. There is a two-way interaction between the speakers, not just a passive reaction by one to the other. That is how Merleau-Ponty pictures our experience of objects. We are subjects, not objects; but our subjectivity is a response to objects, modulated by how they impact on us, but also by the meanings that we attach to them.

² Merleau-Ponty, *op.cit.*, pp.42-3.

³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p.111.

In this dialectical picture, our own body plays a crucial role. 'The body', Merleau-Ponty says,⁴ 'is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is for a living creature to be involved in (French: *se joindre à*) a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them'. The heart of Merleau-Ponty's view is that human beings are essentially *embodied subjects*: that is, their subjectivity is necessarily that of embodied beings, living creatures, and at the same time, the kind of living creature that human beings are is necessarily one that has subjectivity. This is how, he would claim, we actually experience ourselves before we begin to philosophize or to do science – our most fundamental conception of ourselves, in other words. And it differs both from dualism, which sees us as pure consciousness without any necessary connection with a body, and from the kind of classical materialism discussed earlier, which sees us simply as a very complex kind of biological organism, whose behaviour can be explained, ultimately, purely in physico-chemical terms, without the need to invoke consciousness or the subjective meaning we find in our world.

Only such a view, Merleau-Ponty would say, can account for the two-way dialectic that we experience between ourselves and the world. Because we are embodied, we can act on and respond to the world around us; and because we are subjects, the nature of that acting and responding is determined by our own view of the world, by what the world means to us. To take a simple example: I want to write a letter to a friend. I look for a pen and some sheets of paper, and use the pen to write the letter on the paper. I can see the pen and paper only because I have eyes; I can handle them only because I have hands – in short, I can interact with the world in this way only because I have the kind of body I do. But what I am doing is not explainable as a passive response to these external stimuli. It is my *decision* to write the letter that explains what I do: making that decision involves having the concept of writing a letter, of communicating in this way with this other person whom I regard as a friend. It involves seeing pen and paper as instruments for realising this purpose, and knowing ways in which they can be so utilised. And so on: in other words, it involves my subjective sense that these elements of the world have a *meaning* for me in relation to my purposes and my feelings. Of course, I can have this sense of meaning only because my brain functions in the way it does, which is a matter of certain electro-chemical processes taking place in my head; and these processes can be explained by physico-chemical laws just like any others of the same type. But it is not my brain processes or the laws that govern them which explain my letter writing: how could they do that? The brain processes certainly explain the hand-movements, but they do not explain what those hand-movements are *for*. What explains the latter is what I want to achieve by making those hand-movements – their meaning for me as 'writing a letter'.

This view, then, sees human beings as essentially *unified* creatures, beings whose subjectivity is necessarily expressed in bodily forms, and whose bodily movements are, for the most part, guided by their own subjective thoughts, emotions, wishes, desires, and so on. Merleau-Ponty expresses this thought very succinctly in these words: 'Man taken as a concrete being is

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op.cit.*, p.94

not a psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form and at others moves towards personal acts ... there is not a single impulse in a living body which is entirely fortuitous in relation to psychic intentions, not a single mental act which has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological tendencies'⁵. The most 'personal' aspect of human beings – what Merleau-Ponty, interestingly from our present point of view, sometimes distinguishes as 'le spirituel' (which the English, or rather American, translator rather misleadingly translates as 'the rational')⁶ – emerges out of the merely 'psychological' ('le psychique'), which in turn emerges from the purely biological. (I'll come back to this distinction at the end of the talk). These are not, Merleau-Ponty emphasises, distinct 'substances' or 'new worlds', but stages in a development, and indeed in a development which may take place to a greater or lesser degree, and perhaps in some people hardly at all. 'Mind' or 'spirit' cannot, he says, 'stand by itself'.⁷ It is an aspect of our essential embodiment that human beings develop over time from biological creatures, little different from other animals except in degree of complexity and in their potentiality, into 'persons', conscious subjects able to find meaning in their worlds.

It is important also that our engagement with our worlds, as embodied creatures, is not primarily cognitive or contemplative. We interact with the world - we do things to things, and we have feelings about things. Indeed, part of the reason for the Cartesian separation between subject and object, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, was that Descartes was concerned entirely with what we could *know* about the world, and the concept of knowledge is of something essentially detached and impersonal: what I know is what anyone else can know, however different from me they may be in their feelings, their backgrounds, their cultural or historical setting, or whatever. If I can know, for example, that $2 + 2 = 4$, that is because it is true; and its truth doesn't depend on who apprehends it – man or woman, ancient Greek or twenty-first century Liverpudlian, French or Swahili speaker, and so on. But if Merleau-Ponty is right, then this cognitive relation to reality cannot be primary. We can know what is true about the world only because we first engage with it at a more fundamental level, in practical and emotional ways. And these more fundamental ways of interacting with our environment are rooted ultimately in biology: it is because we are members of a particular biological species, structured in certain species-specific ways, that we relate to the world in the way we do, at the most fundamental level. '...biological existence', Merleau-Ponty says, 'is synchronized with human existence and is never indifferent to its distinctive rhythm. Nevertheless, [he goes on], we shall now add ...we must eat and breathe before perceiving and awakening to relational living, belonging to colours and sights through sight, to sounds through hearing, to the body of another through sexuality, before arriving at the life of human relations. Thus, sight, hearing, sexuality, the body, are not only the routes, instruments or manifestations of personal existence: the latter takes up and

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op.cit.*, p.101.

⁶ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, translated by Alden L. Fisher, London, Methuen, 1965, p.180.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, *op.cit.*, p.181.

absorbs into itself their existence as it is anonymously given'⁸. The very forms that our mental life takes, in short, are shaped by the kind of embodiment we have. This is why, he thinks, we can make sense of the idea that mental illness may be linked to bodily disease or lesions. 'Consciousness', he says, 'projects itself into a physical world and has a body ... because it cannot be consciousness without playing upon significances given either in the absolute past of nature or in its own personal past, and because any form of lived experience tends towards a certain generality whether that of our habits or that of our 'bodily functions''⁹

But embodied subjectivity is, as already indicated, a double-sided condition. Not only does embodiment help to shape our subjectivity, but also our capacity for subjectivity helps to shape the significance of our bodily structures. As Merleau-Ponty sees it, the sense in which human beings are not, indeed can never be, the same as other animals (and thus, one might say, can never be regarded purely as biological organisms) is that '[human] life is always more or less integrated than that of an animal'¹⁰. The process of becoming a subject in the human sense (which amounts to the same as becoming an adult human being, or 'person') consists in a progressive integration, or 'structuration', as he also calls it, of behaviour. A human being, in the course of development, confronts various problems in dealing with her environment, including of course her human environment – relations with other people, initially her parents and siblings, later extending to a wider community. The environment is present to her, Merleau-Ponty contends, not simply '*de facto*' – that is, as a set of objects causally acting on her – but as people and things that have a *meaning* for her. 'Consciousness', he says, 'is not comparable to a plastic material which would receive its privileged structure from the outside by the action of a sociological or physiological causality'¹¹.

The emphasis here, as always, in his thought is on an *interaction* between the human being and her environment, a 'dialectical' relationship, in which the human being acts on her environment, as well as being acted upon by it – much in the way, as I suggested earlier, that two parties to a conversation interact with each other. In this way, as an earlier quotation says, personal existence 'takes up and absorbs into itself their existence [the existence of sight, hearing, sexuality and other 'bodily functions'] as it is anonymously given'¹².

Normal human development is thus pictured as a progressive integration of behaviour, so that initially meaningless and 'anonymous' (impersonal) bits of behaviour come to form part of a network of personal meanings. This process is seen by Merleau-Ponty as identical with the process of socialization, since he regards being with others, being a member of a society and so a culture as part of the distinctive nature of human beings as a species – something which arises necessarily from our very biology. There is a very striking quotation from his first published book, *The Structure of Behaviour*, which brings this out very well. Unfortunately, it is rather a long

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op.cit.*, p.185.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op.cit.*, p.158.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, *op.cit.*, p.181.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, *op.cit.*, p.169.

¹² See above note 8.

quotation, but I think it is worth setting it out in full: 'From this point of view one realizes that, although all actions permit an adaptation to life, the word 'life' does not have the same meaning in animality and humanity; and the conditions of life are defined by the proper essence of the species. Doubtless, clothing and houses serve to protect us from the cold; language helps in collective work and in the analysis of the 'unorganized mass'. But the act of dressing becomes the act of adornment or also of modesty and thus reveals a new attitude toward oneself and others. Only men see that they are nude. In the house that he builds for himself, man projects and realizes his preferred values. Finally, the act of speaking expresses the fact that man ceases to adhere immediately to the milieu, that he elevates it to the status of spectacle and takes possession of it mentally by means of knowledge properly so called'¹³.

I'd like to reflect for a moment on that passage. What Merleau-Ponty is saying is that the word 'life' has a different sense when we speak of 'human life' from when we speak of 'animal life'. Other animals too (even, to take one of his own examples, the humble dung beetle) are active beings who interact with their environment, rather than simply being passively acted upon by it. But the difference in the human case, he suggests, is that the 'meanings' which human beings express in their behaviour are more than merely biological, that is, to do with achieving survival and reproduction, but are what one can only call 'human' (or perhaps we should say, in the present context, 'spiritual'). They may, of course, as Merleau-Ponty says, serve biological purposes – as clothes and houses protect us from the cold. But they also embody human meanings: clothes are worn for adornment and modesty as well as for keeping warm, houses are built to express certain values of the builder – aesthetic or cultural. Above all, our capacity for language-use expresses our ability to detach ourselves, at least to some extent, from our simple involvement with survival and look at the world in a different way, simply as a 'spectacle', as we do when we pursue objective knowledge, in science or other fields.

But there is a further dimension to this. These human meanings are not merely distinct from purely biological functions, but 'surpass' or transcend them. 'What defines man', according to Merleau-Ponty, 'is not the capacity to create a second nature – economic, social, or cultural – beyond biological nature; it is rather the capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create others'¹⁴. To clarify what he means, he uses the familiar example of Kohler's apes, which were observed to be using broken off tree branches as tools, to get at bananas that were beyond arm's length. The non-human animals, Merleau-Ponty says, may use the branch in this way, but will then discard it once it has served its purpose. A more typically human behaviour, by contrast, is to *conceptualize the tree-branch as a 'tool'*. 'For man, on the contrary,' as he puts it, 'the tree branch which has become a stick will remain precisely a tree-branch-which-has-become-a-stick, the same *thing* in two different functions and visible *for him* under a plurality of aspects'¹⁵.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not say so here, it is clear that this ability to conceptualise essentially depends on our possession of language: we can

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, *op.cit.*, p.174.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, *op.cit.*, p.175.

¹⁵ *loc.cit.*

refer to the branch as a 'tool', abstracting from its particular physical properties to treat it as a member of a class of similar objects, marked out by their common *function for us*. Language in this way enables human beings to detach themselves from their immediate environment, to see what is before them in the light of general possibilities rather than concrete actualities. The essential feature of human beings is, as he goes on to say, 'the capacity of orienting oneself in relation to the possible, to the mediate, and not in relation to a limited milieu'¹⁶. By conceptualising our world in this way, we can subject its present state to criticism in the light of our sense of possibilities, which we can then seek to realise in the future. We can see, for instance, how the branch might be improved as a tool to make it more effective in its function of reaching objects, or perhaps to enable it to serve other functions – keeping away flies, for example. Humans live in a world of possibilities as well as actualities: our experience, or perception, of the world around us may necessarily be primarily a response to its immediate properties, but by virtue of our sense of possibilities, it expands into a sense of this immediate milieu as part of a wider 'universe'. Our immediate perception is not in itself a kind of primitive science: but for human beings it contains always the potentiality of being developed into a science, in which what we see before us is also seen as an instance of some general truth (or more than one general truths). This is the case not only, Merleau-Ponty emphasises, of the development of a scientific picture of the world, but also, importantly, of artistic representations, which are not, by their nature, merely responses to what happens to be before the artist's senses, but the imposition of a human meaning on what is there.

I have to say that I find this account of human beings are like extraordinarily convincing: it seems to me to fit what anyone would say about humanity if they were simply reflecting on experience and were not unduly under the influence of some pre-conceived philosophical theory – if they were, that is, approaching the question 'phenomenologically'. Human beings are 'ambiguous' in their existence, neither wholly biological creatures nor disembodied 'persons', but beings whose existence is a constant movement between the biological and the personal. But more than that, their biological existence is from the start, and increasingly as they develop, endowed with personal meaning, while their personal life emerges only gradually and fitfully by structuring their biological nature.

Having said all that, we are now, perhaps, in a position to see what all this has to do with the relation between 'body' and 'spirit'. Merleau-Ponty, as said earlier, distinguishes between what he calls 'le psychique' and 'le spirituel'. The French words *esprit* and *spirituel* don't normally mean exactly the same as the English words 'spirit' and 'spiritual', but in their use in this context I think there is reason for interpreting Merleau-Ponty as distinguishing between what we would call 'mind' (le psychique) and what we would call 'spirit' (le spirituel). For what he seems to mean by 'le spirituel' is the most complex, and most distinctively human, forms of thought and mental life; while what he seems to mean by 'le psychique' is the less complex forms of mental life, more closely tied to the biological or to our direct responses to our immediate environment. He distinguishes three 'orders', the 'vital' (or purely

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, *op.cit.*, p.176.

biological), the 'psychological' (le psychique) and the 'spirituel', and sees each as emerging from the one before as a result of structuration of it. The vital, or biological, order is something we share with other living creatures. Even the biological order, however, is not seen by Merleau-Ponty as purely mechanistic – as intelligible simply in terms of the laws of physics and chemistry. To be a living organism, for him, is already to have something of a dialectical relationship with one's environment. For a living organism *acts* upon the world, as well as being *acted upon by* it. An organism, for example, *seeks out* food for itself – it has a need for food, and therefore a purpose of wanting to eat, which explains some of its behaviour in a way in which it could not be explained by physics and chemistry alone. In this sense, it sees the world as *meaningful* for it (some things have the meaning of 'good to eat'): we can even speak of it as 'having its own world', or its own 'scheme of things', in the sense of seeing its milieu as unified by a set of meanings, related to its own purposes.

Merleau-Ponty sees this as applying even to very simple organisms, such as insects. He gives the example¹⁷ of an insect that has had a limb cut off, and which, in performing an instinctive action, substitutes a sound leg for the one that is missing. He contrasts this with the case in which the limb has not been cut off, but merely tied: in that situation, the insect does not substitute another leg. 'The tied limb', he says¹⁸, 'is not replaced by the free one, because it continues to count in the insect's scheme of things, and because the current of activity which flows towards the world still passes through it'. The difference between the two cases, he maintains, can be explained only if we see the insect's behaviour, not simply as a mechanical response to an independent stimulus, but part of a *purposive* reaction to the insect's 'scheme of things', to the surrounding world seen as *meaningful* in relation to the insect's purposes.

Merleau-Ponty does not, of course, mean by this that an insect makes a conscious *choice* to substitute a sound leg in one case but not in the other. Rather, in the case of such a simple organism, belonging entirely to the 'vital' order, it is part of what he calls (*ibid.*) 'an *a priori* of the species and not a personal choice'. I take this to mean that its having such purposes, and giving things such meanings, flows from its very nature, as a member of its particular species. In the same way, human beings are, in one respect, members of a particular biological species, with its own character: its most basic needs are the result of the kind of biological organism it is.

This biological character is present throughout life, but it is most evident in early infancy: a human baby is vulnerable simply because he or she is completely dependent on what comes from outside. Even in infancy, however, there is something distinctive about human beings. Part of the '*a priori* of the human species', one might say, is a certain potentiality for developing beyond that '*a priori*'. A human baby has the beginnings of a personal life. The baby responds to other human beings, most notably of course to his or her mother or father, in ways that contain the seeds of fully personal relations. 'Mother' is not merely the external source of milk and other foods, but increasingly a *person* to be recognized and responded to as

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op.cit.*, p.90

¹⁸ *loc.cit.*

having a certain personal meaning for the baby. Human development is, in large part, the steady growth of recognition of certain individuals as distinct and especially important for the growing person. Through interaction with other human beings in these ways, the child acquires language, and so *concepts* in terms of which, first, the world acquires a personal meaning for the child and, secondly, behaviour can be structured in new and more complex ways. Even the pursuit of one's biological needs can take on a new character as a consequence: to refer to the earlier quotation, for instance clothing can become, not merely a protection against the cold, but also a means of adornment, or of preserving modesty. And this in turn generates new kinds of needs, which are not purely biological, but cultural or psychological. This is the psychic order of which Merleau-Ponty speaks, and which he regards, as we have seen, as distinctively human. In this sense, the normal course of human development is essentially a progressive 'humanization' of the members of our biological species.

The characteristic of the psychic in general is that it is the realm of *personal meaning*. But to have a conceptual grasp of something is, as we have seen, necessarily to have the ability to criticise one's existing concepts and so move beyond them. The human dialectic, he says, 'is ambiguous: it is first manifested by the social or cultural structures, the appearance of which it brings about and in which it imprisons itself. *But its use-objects and its cultural objects would not be what they are if the activity which brings about their appearance did not also have as its meaning to reject them and to surpass them*'¹⁹. In this sense, the integration never ceases: it is a continuing reaching-out towards new possibilities, beyond immediate reality to what Merleau-Ponty calls a 'universe', which we perceive in art and science, to which we might also add religion.

This is what he seems to mean by the 'spiritual' order, *le spirituel*: something that is ultimately rooted in the body, in the sense that it arises from the attempt to structure and integrate our biological life, which is ultimately concerned with the struggle for existence, into a personally meaningful order. But it also necessarily transcends the bodily or biological, since in integrating it into a meaningful structure it makes it into something new, something distinctively human, in which the goals are such things as goodness, truth, beauty and understanding.

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¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, *op.cit.*, pp.175f.