

Motives, Reasons, and Causes

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A measure of the remarkable influence of cartesian dualism is found in the fact that it often constrains even the ways in which it is rejected. Few accept, it is true, the basic picture of a dualism of mental and physical *substances*. But a dualism still shapes the philosophy of mind – for instance, in that almost everyone sees as central the task of figuring out the relation between mind and body. And it sometimes seems as if the only possible accounts of human beings consist in either giving a mental description, or a physical description, or explaining how the mental descriptions and the physical descriptions relate to one another other.

Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, argues that no such variation, played out on the cartesian register, will ever account for the human mode of being in the world. “There are two classical views,” he notes:

one treats man as the result of the physical, physiological, and sociological influences which shape him from outside and make him one thing among many; the other consists of recognizing an a-cosmic freedom in him, insofar as he is spirit and represents to himself the very causes which supposedly act upon him.¹

¹“The Battle over Existentialism,” in *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 71-72.

For Merleau-Ponty, “neither view is satisfactory”;² any adequate account of human existence will need recourse to a mode of explanation that is neither causal nor rational, and it will need to see the content of human states as neither physiological nor logical. Merleau-Ponty argues that the model for understanding human being can not be either that of the inferential and justificatory relations of explicit thought, nor that of the blind and mechanistic workings of material causality. Instead, he proposes that the paradigm should be the “perception of our own body and the perception of external things” which, when properly understood, “provide an example . . . of consciousness not in possession of fully determinate objects, that of a logic lived through which cannot account for itself, and that of an immanent meaning which is not clear to itself and becomes fully aware of itself only through experiencing certain natural signs.”³ The dualist assumption of minds in an objective, material world, in other words, mistakes both the objects of experience and the consciousness of those objects -- the former it treats as fully objective and determinate, the latter as self-evident and fully available for reflection. If we are to capture the true character of our experience of the world, Merleau-Ponty suggests, “a complete reform of understanding is called for” (49).

The complete reform requires consists in disrupting the dualism by introducing a “third term” that is irreducible to either of the other two – instead of mind and matter, the lived body; instead of causes and reasons, ‘motives’. A full account of this disruption would require that one show how so-called ‘motor intentional’ behavior, together with much of our experience of the world, is not reducible to a purely physical event, nor commensurable with mental predicates. While I

²Ibid.

³*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 49.

will say something in passing about this, I will not attempt such a demonstration here, as I want instead to focus on the latter issue – the way that relationships between experiential states and objects in the world are neither causal nor rational relationships. But an account of motives as a third term between reasons and causes is certainly relevant to justifying the claim that the lived body is outside of the cartesian mind/body dualism. For if it turns out that the body as we live it in experience and motor-intentional action can not be seen to stand in either rational or causal relations to thoughts and objects in the world, that will give some reason for refusing to treat it as itself essentially a mental or essentially a physical substance.

In what follows, then, I begin with a brief exposition of Merleau-Ponty's claim that the lived body resists treatment in the terms of the familiar and tired mind / body dualism, and a review of his phenomenology of motivations. I then explain Merleau-Ponty's account of motivations -- exploring what they are, how they work, and how they cannot be reduced to either logical or causal terms. I conclude by suggesting how such a view can explain the mind-to-world connection in a non-dualistic fashion -- that is, I explore how motives could ground our thoughts and experiences in the world.

I. The phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty's case for the body as a third term in between mind and matter, and for motives as a non-rational and non-causal means of grounding us in the world, is based on a

phenomenology of lived experience.

One half of overcoming the dualistic account of mind is to show that human experience is not (always) mental – that is, not conceptually articulated or constituted. Of course, one could hardly deny altogether that we entertain thoughts and hold beliefs; such acts and states have as their content propositions, and stand in logical relationships to other propositions. But such states are not the only modes of human comportment – indeed, they are relatively rare in the overall course of human existence.

For example, Merleau-Ponty notes that “just as we do not see the eyes of a familiar face, but simply its look and its expression, so we perceive hardly any object.”⁴ He explains: “in the natural attitude, I do not have *perceptions*, I do not posit this object as beside that one, along with their objective relationships, I have a flow of experiences which imply and explain each other both simultaneously and successively.”⁵ Acts of explicit perception – perception in which we see determinate objects in determinate relationships to one another – only emerge from “ambiguous perceptions.” By this, I take it, Merleau-Ponty means that a perceptual experience is articulated in a way that would lend itself to discovering rational relations only when a particular need arises – such as when the ambiguity of the situation resists any ready response, and thereby prevents us from proceeding transparently in the “flow of experiences.” As a consequence, such derived forms of perceptual experience should not be taken as paradigmatic: “they cannot be of any use in the analysis of the perceptual field, since they are extracted from it at the very outset,

⁴*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 281.

⁵*Ibid.*

since they presuppose it and since we come by them by making use of precisely those set of groupings with which we have become familiar in dealing with the world.”⁶ Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology leads him to the view that much of our experience of the world is articulated according to the “groupings” of our familiar, practical dealings with the world, and that this articulation is incommensurate with conceptual articulations.

But if experience in the natural attitude is not conceptually articulated, Merleau-Ponty argues, neither is it causally constituted. Such experience, and the comportment in the world which accompanies it, “remains inaccessible to causal thought and is capable of being apprehended only by another kind of thought, that which grasps its object as it comes into being and as it appears to the person experiencing it, with the atmosphere of meaning then surrounding it.”⁷ What a causal account cannot capture, Merleau-Ponty argues, is the way that we experience ourselves as always already inserted into a situation that is meaningfully articulated.

It is important to note, however, that for Merleau-Ponty (as for phenomenologists in general), it is not the case that all meaning needs to be understood in terms of linguistic meaning. Instead, linguistic meaning is a particular species of a more general class of experiences in which one thing arouses an expectation of another. Non-linguistic entities, too, can have meaning in this sense -- they lead us to anticipate something else -- and the meaning they hold is not necessarily a conceptually articulated one. Merleau-Ponty notes, for example, that if part of my visual field contains something that looks like “a broad flat stone on the ground,” then “my whole perceptual

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., p. 120.

and motor field endows the bright spot with the significance ‘stone on the path’. And already I prepare to feel under my foot this smooth, firm surface” (296-97). In this example, the significance of the object is a motor significance – that is, it arouses in me a bodily expectation.

In our normal experience of the world, then, we find the environment acting on our bodies, arousing expectations in our bodies. By the same token, our projects and intentions “polarize the world, bringing magically to view a host of signs which guide action” (112). That is, the way we are ready for the world and acting in the world readies us to experience particular kinds of things: “My body centres itself on an object which is still only potential, and so disposes its sensitive surfaces as to make it a present reality” (239). In anticipating the arrival of a friend, for instance, I find myself readied for an event – say, the noise of a passing car – which might otherwise go unnoticed.

What the phenomenology of lived experience teaches us, Merleau-Ponty believes, is that our primary way of being in the world is a bodily existence which, for its part, is experienced neither as a mental mode of comportment, with determinate conceptual contents, nor as a merely physical interaction with physical objects. In fact, the phenomenology of lived bodily experience shows that thoughts -- ‘mental’ states and events -- and ‘physical’ objects themselves actually bear on the body in ways that are meaningful but not rational. The phenomenon of motor significance makes this clear; there, we see that worldly objects speak to our body in a myriad of ways, drawing us into actions, while often remaining only tacitly present in our experience of things. The motivating object has “an ambiguous presence,” Merleau-Ponty notes,

“anterior to any express evocation It must exist for us even though we may not be thinking of it” (364).

This has implications for the way we think about motivations. As a result of the fact that motor significations speak to our bodies, rather than through the mediation of thoughts, we cannot ever get completely clear about what moved us to act in a particular case. This is true even when we are moved to perform an intentional act like asserting. Merleau-Ponty observes that “we cannot ever array before ourselves in their entirety the reasons for any assertion – there are merely motives” (395). He explains: “If it were possible to lay bare and unfold all the presuppositions in what I call my reason or my ideas at each moment, we should always find experiences which have not been made explicit, large-scale contributions from past and present, a whole ‘sedimentary history’ which is not only relevant to the *genesis* of my thought, but which determines its *significance*” (ibid). That is to say, if we reflect on the way our body is actually moved by the world, we arrive at the phenomenon of *motivation*, in which we see ourselves as moved by things of which, in many cases, we are only vaguely aware (if at all). The objects and situations that we encounter in the world thus act on us through an ambiguous and indeterminate motor significance. Our natural encounter with a thing is “packed with small perceptions which sustain it in existence. It is an implicit and inarticulate significance. Confronted by the real thing, our comportment feels itself motivated by ‘stimuli’ which fill out and vindicate its intention” (339, translation modified).

II. The relationship of motivation

For this notion of motivation to do any work in explaining human existence, however, Merleau-Ponty needs to provide an account of how such motives, in working through our body, ground our thoughts and experiences in the world that we inhabit. To avoid backsliding into the problems associated with traditional dualisms, the account needs to show that the grounding is neither rational nor causal in nature. I will turn in a moment to explaining how experience in the natural attitude can ground propositional states and attitudes -- that is, states and attitudes with which it is incommensurable in content -- and how it can itself be grounded in the world. But first I would like to examine a little more closely what precisely a motive is, and how it differs from a reason or a cause.

It should be apparent by now that Merleau-Ponty's use of the term 'motive' diverges from the ordinary use. In the usual sense of the term, a motive is the intentional state which prompts or moves one to act. For example, a desire to avoid public embarrassment might motivate (that is, move or impel) one to lie under oath. But Merleau-Ponty's broader use of the term follows in the Husserlian tradition of phenomenology,⁸ and he draws on the work of Edith Stein,⁹ who defined a relationship of motivation as a connection between experiences and their antecedents, in which there is "an *arising* of the one *from* the other, an effecting or being effected of one *on*

⁸See *Ideas*, vol. 2, sec. 56 (?).

⁹"Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften," in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, vol. V., ed. Edmund Husserl (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1922), cited in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 31.

the basis of the other, for the sake of the other.”¹⁰ Stein is quite self-conscious about broadening the usual meaning of the term ‘motive,’ and Merleau-Ponty follows her in adopting this broadened sense.

Merleau-Ponty, like Stein before him, sees such motives as instances of the more general type. The more general characterization, of course, in no way distorts the description of motives in the ordinary cases. If one’s motive is the desire to avoid public embarrassment, then it is perfectly correct to say that the desire to avoid public embarrassment gives rise to the act of lying under oath for the sake of the desire to avoid public embarrassment. But the more general characterization of motivations allows Merleau-Ponty to extend the notion of motivation in important ways. For instance, motives need not be intentional states – that is, states characterizable with a proposition. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty also treats the objects, events, and states of affairs in the world as motives.¹¹ In addition, the more general characterization encompasses not just cases where one is moved to *act*, but also cases where something simply gives rise to an experiential state, or event, or disposition.

Because motives thus characterized extend beyond intentional relationships, the relationship of motivation cannot be reduced to a rational relation. We can easily see that not all reasons are

¹⁰“Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften,” pp. 35 ff.

¹¹See, for example, *PP*, pp. 29-30, where the object upon which attention is focused is the motive for the act of attention, or p. 31 where “various parts” of the visual field motivate “the enormous moon on the horizon.” Stein also observes that it is the lightning, and not my perception of it, which is the “motive of the expectation of thunder.” Likewise, “The motive of my joy is the arrival of the letter I have been longing for, not my cognizance of its arrival.” “Beiträge zur philosophischen Begründung der Psychologie und der Geisteswissenschaften,” p. 38.

motives, because I can have a reason to do something without being moved to do it. But neither is it the case that all motives are reasons. To recognize this, we need simply to see that in many cases we are moved or impelled to act by something which does not and cannot function as a reason for the action – either because it is not available to thought, or because it is not itself propositionally articulated as reasons must be (or both).

As we've already noted, Merleau-Ponty argues that our motivations include objects or states or events which are present only tacitly in our experience. To see how this undermines that idea that motives could be analyzed as reasons, let's look at one of Merleau-Ponty's examples of a non-thetic or not-explicitly-experienced motive. Merleau-Ponty notes that

Only after centuries of painting did artists perceive that reflection on the eye without which the eye remains dull and sightless as in the paintings of the early masters. The reflection is not seen as such, since it was in fact able to remain unnoticed for so long, and yet it has its function in perception, since its mere absence deprives objects and faces of all life and expression. The reflection is seen only incidentally. It is not presented to our perception as an objective, but as an auxiliary or mediating element. It is not seen itself, but makes us to see the rest.¹²

My seeing a live person standing in front of me, it turns out, has its roots in a variety of features of the visual field of which I am usually only tacitly aware. One of these is the reflection of light in the eye of the person. Such tacit or 'non-thetic' elements are a part of what I see, but not present in such a way that they are available for use as a *reason* for my seeing that there is a person there. The fact that the reflection remained unnoticed, even in the face of centuries of

¹²*PP*, p. 309 (translation modified).

efforts to faithfully capture what it is that we *do* see, provides prima facie evidence that what we saw was not available to thought, and thus could not ground an inference (from the fact that I see a reflection on the eye to the conclusion that I see a person, for instance), or could not serve to justify the belief that I see a person. The role the reflection plays, instead, is to dispose me to seeing a person there in front of me (rather than, say, a mannequin). A motive does not necessarily function as a reason, then, because we need not have an “express experience of it” (258).

Generalizing on such examples, Merleau-Ponty argues that all our conceptually articulated perceptual experiences are motivated by the existential grasp we have on the world around us – that is, by a preceding familiarity with the world and how to act in it. Because this familiarity with the world is itself the condition of our ability to see that anything is the case, and hence, of our ability to reason, it is not itself generally available for use in inference and justification. To take another example, our ability to see objects in the world is motivated by our bodily familiarity with space. “A poplar on the road which is drawn smaller than a man,” Merleau-Ponty notes, “succeeds in becoming really and truly a tree only by retreating towards the horizon.”¹³ That we see it as a tree (and thus as conceptually describable) depends, in other words, on our ability to situate it spatially. But there is no *reason* for situating the tree spatially in the way that we do; we can appeal to no conceptually articulated feature of our experience of the drawing which justifies the spatial organization we find in it, if only because everything we see in the picture is equally a consequence of, and thus not a basis for, the spatiality into which it gets organized. If there is no reason for seeing the tree as receding toward the horizon, and

¹³Ibid., p. 262.

hence as a tree, then what makes us see it in this way? As we shall see, it is motivated by the fact that seeing it in that way gives us the best practical grip on the scene. Our way of being in the world is one in which we are ready for objects to be situated at varying depths. This readiness, no doubt, is ingrained into our bodies by the fact that the world itself is arrayed about us in three dimensions. As a result, our mode of being in the world motivates us to see objects as arrayed three-dimensionally. Our mode of being, in other words, grounds our perception by motivating our seeing of the object at the appropriate depth.

We can thus see that, because motives *move* us rather than necessarily giving us a reason for what they motivate, they cannot be reduced to a species of reason. Indeed, we are often motivated to have experiences or to act in ways for which we not only lack reasons, but have good reasons to reject, as when our bodily readiness impels us toward beliefs that we know are wrong.¹⁴ As examples of such a phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty discusses perceptual illusions like the way that the moon looks bigger when low on the horizon than when directly overhead, or Zöllner's illusion. Although we can demonstrate to ourselves that the moon is always the same size, still the "various parts of the field interact and *motivate* this enormous moon on the horizon" (*PP*, p. 31). Likewise, we can easily convince ourselves that the lines in Zöllner's illusion are in fact parallel, but the overall configuration of lines "motivates the false judgement" by producing a bodily readiness that disposes us to the contrary beliefs (*PP*, p. 35).

Of course, it is true that we can treat a motive as a reason. But in doing that, Merleau-Ponty notes, "I crystallize an indefinite collection of motives" (295). In other words, because motives

¹⁴I am indebted to Hubert Dreyfus for bringing this point home to me.

are functioning on a bodily level, in ways of which we are only barely, if at all aware, any attempt to transform them into a reason ends up focusing on some narrow subset of a rich and complex set of motives. In the process, it may end up treating the selected motive as more determinate and prominent than it actually was in our experience of it. Sexual motivations are, for Merleau-Ponty, a clear example of this: “It is impossible to determine, in a given decision or action, the proportion of sexual to other motivations” (169).

But if motives don't function as reasons, could they function as causes? Merleau-Ponty offers a number of arguments to show that they could not, most of which turn on the fact that motivated experiences or events occur ‘for the sake of’ the motive. M-P calls this the ‘reciprocity’ of motives – the fact that motive and motivated are each sensitive to the meaning or significance of the other. This gives motivational relationships a characteristic typical of intentional relationships – namely, a lack of extensionality. Causal relationships, by contrast, are extensional in the sense that the relationship holds between the relata regardless of the mode by which the relata are presented to us. A test for this is the fact that sentences describing causal relations preserve their truth value through substitutions in the sentence of co-referring singular term. If the sentence:

The stimulation of hair cells in my cochlea *caused* the firing of neurons in my auditory cortex

is true, then substitution of coextensive predicates or singular terms should not change the truth value of the sentence. That is because causal relations are relations between events or states of affairs in the world. While it might be that some descriptions of the relata are better than others

in illuminating a law which governs the causal relation, no particular description is necessary for asserting that the causal relation holds.¹⁵ Thus, if it turns out that the stimulation of hair cells in my cochlea is identical to the sounding of the trumpet, and the firing of neurons in my auditory cortex is identical to my hearing the trumpet, we could equally well state the causal relationship by noting that:

The sounding of the trumpet *caused* my hearing the trumpet.

But it is a different matter when we are trying to capture a motivational relationship like:

The death of Polyneices *motivated* Antigone to defy Creon

Here, the relationship we are naming is not the relationship that holds between events in themselves, but the relationship in terms of which an antecedent operates on an agent to dispose her to a particular act or experience. That means that we cannot be indifferent to the way that the relationship is described; instead, we only capture the motivational relationship if we describe the relationship as it exists for the agent. As Merleau-Ponty observes, a motive “is an antecedent which acts only through its significance” (259). Thus, even if Polyneices is the would-be tyrant of Thebes and Creon is the rightful ruler of Thebes, it might well be the case that the death of the would-be tyrant of Thebes in no way served as a motive for Antigone to defy the rightful ruler of Thebes.¹⁶

¹⁵See Donald Davidson, “Laws and Cause,” *Dialectica* 49 (1995): 263-278.

¹⁶Another way to see this reciprocity is in the fact that, in many motivational relationships, it is only possible to become aware of the motive through consideration of the event which it motivated. Such is undoubtedly true in cases like those discussed above, where the motive is not explicitly featured in our experience. It is only because we experienced the moon as big on the horizon that it can become clear upon reflection how different parts of the perceptual field and our bodily disposition were cooperating to dispose us to certain experiences and judgments (like ‘the moon looks big’).

This notion of reciprocity might seem to be in tension with the fact we observed above – namely, that motives often operate tacitly. Because we are in many instances unaware of them, just as we are unaware of the causal processes that give rise to a conscious experience, it might seem that tacit motives are readily assimilable to causes. But there is an important difference in the way that we lack awareness of motives – namely, motives have a motor significance for us that we inhabit, and thus we *can* become (at least imperfectly) aware of them, even though we often pay no express attention to them. That is to say, as we are moved by motives, our actions or experiences are shaped in such a way that we can only understand ourselves as working out the significance of the motives for us.

In making this point, Merleau-Ponty notes that “to experience a [motivational] structure is not to receive it into oneself passively, it is to live it, to take it up, assume it and discover its immanent significance” (258). Thus, one has not captured a motivational relationship if one has described it in a way that it cannot or does not bear on my mode of life. For example, a sound might motivate me, because it operates in my experience as something toward which I can direct my attention, even if I am not aware of it in all its detail. But the vibration of hairs in my cochlea caused by sound waves cannot motivate me to do anything, because that vibration is not something for the sake of which I can act, or the significance of which I can explore.

It might well be, of course, that the motive, redescribed in a suitable way, might be identical with the cause of a conscious experience. Likewise, it might be possible to describe a motive in such

a way that it serves as a reason for an action -- indeed, we often do precisely this. But this doesn't reduce motivation to either a causal influence or a rational justification, because the relationship that holds between motive and motivated is different in kind from causal or rational connections. Non-phenomenological approaches to explaining the way conscious experience is grounded in the world fail, Merleau-Ponty argues, because they "can choose only between reason and cause." With the introduction of the "the phenomenological notion of *motivation*," however, "we get back to the phenomena. One phenomenon releases another, not by means of some objective efficient cause, like those which link together natural events, but by the meaning which it holds out -- there is a *raison d'être* for a thing which guides the flow of phenomena without being explicitly laid down in any one of them, a sort of operative reason."¹⁷ A motive, in other words, does not blindly and mechanistically produce the motivated, because it only gives rise to it in virtue of its significance. But the motive often only tacitly guides or gives rise to the motivated (and there is always some tacit motive at work), so that it functions as an '*operative reason*' -- a pre-predicative basis according to which phenomena are organized and made sense of -- but not a justification. Thus, the motive also does not provide the sort of inferential or justificatory connection that a reason gives to a thought.

To summarize this account of the relationship of motivation, we can say that the fundamental workings of motivations are found in the way that our environment and body work together to dispose us to experience and act in particular ways. The world works by acting on our skillful bodily dispositions: "We do not think the object, and we do not think ourselves thinking it, we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are

¹⁷*Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 49-50.

about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal for synthesizing it” (238). Thus, to return to the example of the stone in the path, the different parts of the visual field act directly on my body in order to draw out of it the proper responses for coping with the situation. The disposition of the visual field as a whole “suggest[s] to the subject a possible anchorage” (280) – that is, it helps me know what to fix on in making the most sense of the situation. Each part of the visual field can be seen, in this way, to motivate a certain significance for the rest, in the same way that each line in a perspective drawing motivates the way we see each of the others: “The field itself . . . is moving towards the most perfect possible symmetry . . . the whole of the drawing strives towards its equilibrium” (262). This equilibrium, I take it, consists in our having the proper disposition for fluidly responding to what the situation presents to us.

III. Motives as grounds.

We are now ready to discuss how the grounding function performed by motivational relationships differs from that performed by either reasons or causes. Let us first compare a motivation relationship to a relationship of rational grounding.

An experience is able to provide rational grounding to the extent that it is available for use in inference and justification. Thus, we can conclude that if the experience that gives rise to the thought is not available for use in inference and justification, then the thought is not rationally

grounded. As we have seen, it is often the case that we are motivated by some features of our perceptual experience which are not available for use in thought, but which nevertheless dispose us (rather than cause us) to have the thoughts that we do. Thus, motives stand to the thoughts they motivate, not in a way that justifies or supports them, but rather in that they impel us toward having them.

If motives don't ground thoughts in the world by providing a rational connection between thoughts or experiences and what they are experiences of, neither do they establish a merely causal link between thoughts or experiences and what occasions them. This becomes clear when we consider that motives can connect propositional states to particular features of the world that give rise to them, and do this in a way that causes can't.

In the empiricist tradition, thoughts are grounded by discovering their causal connection to the world. In other words, the content of our thoughts is more or less directly "keyed," as Quine says, to causal stimulations of our sensory surfaces. "Two cardinal tenets of empiricism remain[]," according to Quine, "unassailable": "One is that whatever evidence there *is* for science *is* sensory evidence. The other . . . is that all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence."¹⁸ In Quine's case, the content of our observation sentences is tied to "the temporally ordered class of receptors triggered during the specious present."¹⁹ But, as Quine made clear in the course of his attack on the "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," the causal triggering of a thought is insufficient to establish any tight connection between sentences or

¹⁸"Epistemology Naturalized," in *Ontological Relativity*, p. 75.

¹⁹>*From Stimulus to Science*, 17.

thoughts on the one hand, and particular causal interactions with the world on the other.

More recently, Davidson has developed this point by noting that any theory that attempts to ground our thoughts in causal intermediaries – things like sensations, which are supposed to mediate the causes of our thoughts with our thoughts about them – must be able to explain “what, exactly, is the relation between sensation and belief that allows the first to justify the second?”²⁰ The problem is that “the relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes.”²¹ If Davidson’s argument is correct, we’re left with two potentially incompatible assumptions: first, that our perceptual encounter with the world is a causal transaction; and, second, that thoughts, being propositional in content, are rationally responsive only to other propositional entities. The assumptions are incompatible if we can see no way to move from a causal transaction to a propositional content. One obvious way to avoid the incompatibility is to see the causal transaction as generating in us a propositional state – a belief about the world. And this, in fact, is Davidson’s view: “What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs.”²² Once we’ve acquired a language, Davidson claims, the world can cause us to have beliefs. Davidson calls this kind of interaction with the world “propositional perception.” With language, he argues, comes the capacity for propositional thought. In virtue of this capacity, the world can cause us directly to have perceptual beliefs. But then there is no need to give perceptual experience itself a

²⁰“Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 310.

²¹Ibid., p. 311.

²²Ibid.

justificatory role in relation to those beliefs:

Of course, our sense-organs are part of the causal chain from world to perceptual belief. But not all causes are reasons: the activation of our retinas does not constitute our evidence that we see a dog, nor do the vibrations of the little hairs in the inner ear provide reasons to think the dog is barking. 'I saw it with my own eyes' is a legitimate reason for believing there was an elephant in the supermarket. But this reports no more than that something I saw caused me to believe there was an elephant in the supermarket.²³

Thus, on Davidson's view, we are, as physical organisms, interacting causally with the world, and this interaction bears no information with a propositional content. But it does, in virtue of our linguistic capacities, causally give rise to perceptual beliefs.

This is a coherent story to tell, but it does nothing to secure the connection between thoughts and particular occasions of those thoughts in the world. As long as the world acts only causally in the production of our beliefs, and causes can not serve as reasons for holding beliefs, it follows that we can be indifferent about which causes we correlate with which beliefs. The result is an indeterminacy of reference – that is, an inability to find any unique correlation between a particular object as causally constituted, and a particular belief.

The consequence of this indeterminacy is that we can put down no fixed linkages between our beliefs about the world and the particular features of the world. As Quine explained, "the total field [of beliefs] is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary

²³"Seeing through Language," p. ?.

experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole.”²⁴

But without fixed linkages, John McDowell has argued, we undermine our confidence that our ideas are about the world at all: “we can make sense of the world-directedness of empirical thinking only by conceiving it as answerable to the empirical world for its correctness, and we can understand answerability to the empirical world only as mediated by answerability to the tribunal of experience, conceived in terms of the world's direct impacts on possessors of perceptual capacities.”²⁵ As McDowell explains, “if we do not let intuitions stand in rational relations to [thoughts], it is exactly their possession of content that is put in question. When Davidson argues that a body of beliefs is sure to be mostly true, he helps himself to the idea of a body of beliefs, a body of states that have content. And that means that, however successfully the argument might work on its own terms, it comes too late to neutralize the real problem.”²⁶

McDowell thus, by contrast to Davidson, argues that the idea of intentional content is only coherent if we can see our way to attributing to things in the world a more-than-causal role. McDowell proposes that we avoid the incompatibility between the causal structure of perceptual interactions with objects and the rational relations between perceptions and beliefs by supposing that, in causally interacting with us, the world draws on our conceptual capacities. Thus, the

²⁴“Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in *From a Logical Point of View*, pp. 42-43. See McDowell’s discussion of this and the indeterminacy thesis at *Mind and World*, pp. 129 ff.

²⁵*Mind and World*, p. xvii.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 68.

world is presented at the outset as being propositionally articulated. The difference is thus that for McDowell, and not for Davidson, in our experience of the world itself, we can see the world as bearing the kind of content to which our thoughts can be responsive. In other words, McDowell's approach would redeem the idea of intentional content by explaining how our thoughts can be directly responsive to experience.

This disagreement illustrates the continuing influence of dualism. Despite their differences, McDowell and Davidson are both in agreement that if the content of perception is not conceptually articulated then it can stand at best in a merely causal relationship to intentions. They differ only on whether the world presents itself to us in perceptual experience as conceptually articulated. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, avoids the whole dilemma by holding that what ties thoughts to the world is neither a merely causal link nor a reason, but rather a bodily motivation. This motivation isn't a mere cause, because it has a meaningful structure. The motor significance of motivations means that the particular readiness for the world that we have in our pre-thematic involvement with the world is a direct response to specific features of the world.

Dualism is directly responsible for the puzzle over the way thoughts are grounded in the world, because the heteronomy of reasons and mere causes means that we can be indifferent about the way we correlate particular thoughts with particular objects causally defined. "No appeal to causality can affect the determinacy of reference," Davidson notes, "if the only significant effects are responses to whole sentences."²⁷ This is because sentences can only be interpreted

²⁷"Replies to Seventeen Essays," in *Reflecting Davidson: Donald Davidson Responding*

within the context of a whole pattern of beliefs which, in turn, is given content only by being mapped on to truth conditions. The current pattern of causal stimulations of the agent being interpreted are, of course, important features to take into consideration while carrying out the mapping. But they will be much too sparse as points of reference to fix the whole context of beliefs. As long as different mappings are equivalent in terms of preserving the overall truth and coherence of the beliefs being mapped, there is no basis for distinguishing between them.

But the world as experienced in natural perception and the bodily readiness that motivate both natural and propositional perceptions are not indifferent to each other in the same way. A bodily readiness, while not necessarily responsive to conceptually delineated features of the world, nevertheless operates in a meaningfully ordered world, and, as a consequence, will only respond to a meaningfully rather than causally delineated object. Because a particular kind of being ready is always a current involvement with particular things in a particular context, it can't be mapped arbitrarily onto whatever feature of the environing world we choose. A particular readiness will only be motivated by particular situations, and will only uncover particular features of the world to us. Thus, it follows that motivational relationships are not merely causal influences on perception. Instead, they serve in an important sense as a ground of propositional thoughts, because they connect our thoughts to particular objects or states of affairs. They succeed in doing this because we are motivated to have those thoughts by the meaning the object or state of affairs holds for our bodies – that is, its motor significance. Causes on the other hand, can't ground our thoughts in particular objects or states of affairs. Therefore, we can conclude

to an International Forum of Philosophers, ed. Ralf Stoecker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), p. 55.

that motives are not causes.

The phenomena of motivation, Merleau-Ponty believes, shows us how our mental life is directly grounded in a world that is not necessarily conceptually constituted -- something not possible as long as it looked like our thoughts could only hook up to the world either rationally or causally. The phenomenology of motivation thus promises to move us beyond the Cartesian picture with all that it implies.