Re-reading Thomas Kuhn's important 1962 work *On Scientific Revolutions,* one is struck with how his "postmodern" view of scientific change as mere paradigm shift was dependent upon his conception of a rather narrow modernist view, one that claims that there is only one rational world. It is the works of the great European philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty that offers explanations that come between these two extremes, either one rational world or none at all, that comes between positions that are now prevalent in both Anglo-American and Continental philosophy. In this essay I will first provide a brief summary of the modernist view of science and scientific change, next I will offer a brief characterization of Kuhn's position, and finally I will present Merleau-Ponty's theory as coming between these positions and offering solutions that neither extreme can provide.

**Modernism and Scientific Change**

Bertrand Russell, at least during certain periods of his scholarly career, is often considered to be a prime example of a Twentieth-Century modernist. His modernism is associated with logical positivism and can be characterized as follows. All knowledge must rest upon acquaintance. We are acquainted with or are immediately aware of specific sense data and even of some universals. The world is composed of individual things that stand in relationship to each other and that display various properties—these relationships and properties are called facts. Propositions are composed of terms that refer to these facts, that is, to objects, their properties and their relationships to one another.

Logical positivism generally relied upon some form of sense data that individuals were thought to be immediately aware of, that represent an objective reality, and that are available to all perceivers. Universals, though thought to be reducible to sense particulars, were also thought to be immediately comprehensible (SC 144). Sensation therefore provides data about what is actually the case, and the universal principles of language and logic, since they abstractly mirror the structure of reality, provide the framework for what can possibly be the case.

Taking a longer historical view, modernism has its more distant roots in Descartes, often cited as its progenitor, for he develops the principles of analytic geometry that were thought to match the very structures of one rational reality. More distant yet, certain fundamental themes of modernism can be traced back to the Athenian birth of philosophy, to the Platonic idea that nature is rational, forms a taxonomy of classes that fit neatly into precise species and genera, and that even represents the rational mind of God.

Assuming this sort of view (at least in general, if not in all its specifics), scientific change was understood as more recent and more accurate theories incorporating earlier and less accurate ones. Since there was only one rational reality, change was thought to be cumulative, with each new theory adding to and advancing earlier ones and enhancing prediction and control over nature because of their greater accuracy (SC 134).

**Kuhn's Postmodernism**

In his influential *On the Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Thomas Kuhn argues that scientific change does not occur by the accumulation of knowledge of one rational world. He specifically argues that Newtonian physics cannot be regarded as a special case of the newer Einsteinian physics, that the former cannot be derived from the latter.
without significantly changing and narrowing the principles and predictability of the former. There is therefore no continuity of science. What we really have are paradigm shifts. At a particular point in history certain models or interpretive systems are used to frame and solve problems. When unsolved problems accumulate, these frameworks outlive their usefulness. New frameworks are called for, constructed, and often dramatically replace those left behind. Paradigms therefore cannot be translated into one another, Kuhn argues. In later works he borrows even more liberally from more recently developed postmodern themes, even accepting the claim that language is nothing but a system of differences. Within this view, terms are defined only by reference to other terms. Here we have terms defined within a paradigm, within a network of terms which laterally determine one another. This means that there are no isolated terms that refer directly to isolated objects, and that there are no isolated bare facts that are independent of the interpretive system. Paradigm shifts are like kaleidoscope shifts, for they dramatically change our perception of the world. This obviously means that there is no link between one representational system and another. Paradigms are incommensurable. They have no common measure, either the bare facts or some broader translation system that would facilitate the translation of one paradigm into another. Kuhn's position, as it is marked-out here, is certainly at odds with the modernist view that there is no unified nature or theories about it by diminishing the importance of our perceptual contact with the world. He accomplishes this with the claim that since we perceive the world through linguistic interpretive systems, and since these interpretive systems are often totally incommensurable, language cannot refer to a clearly perceived world of bare facts. Yet, we might object, to say that the perceived world is always interpreted through frameworks or paradigms is not to say that we have no contact at all with the perceived. Moreover, this perceived world displays patterns that remain stable over time, that appear to be accessible to all sentient, human subjects, and that appear to be accessible to a variety of interpretive sys-

Kuhn on the Unity of the World and the Continuity of Science

When Kuhn claims, in his earlier expression of his position, that scientific knowledge is not cumulative because classical physics cannot be derived from Einstein's physics, he in fact is assuming the modernist world view. If nature forms a precise rational system and if the expression of this system in an older theory cannot be logically deduced from the newer one, then the older theory must be totally discarded, for it is logically inconsistent with the newer, supposedly more accurate one, and therefore incompatible with nature itself.

Kuhn goes from one extreme to another: either there is a conceptual/logical unity of nature and of theories about it or there is none at all. But the unity conceived by modernism and the classics is not our only alternative, and we can circumvent the logic of the disjunction and the excluded middle by showing that more than two alternatives exist. In fact, it is Merleau-Ponty who has shown that we do not have to think of nature as either a precise system that we can grasp with complete clarity or as a jumble of chaos to which interpretive systems provide no access. As we will see for Merleau-Ponty the continuity of science and the unity of the world is not conceptual but perceptual.

Kuhn on Bare Facts

Kuhn's later work in fact accepts the latter term of the above disjunction (that there is no unified nature or theories about it) by diminishing the importance of our perceptual contact with the world. He accomplishes this with the claim that since we perceive the world through linguistic interpretive systems, and since these interpretive systems are often totally incommensurable, language cannot refer to a clearly perceived world of bare facts. Yet, we might object, to say that the perceived world is always interpreted through frameworks or paradigms is not to say that we have no contact at all with the perceived. Moreover, this perceived world displays patterns that remain stable over time, that appear to be accessible to all sentient, human subjects, and that appear to be accessible to a variety of interpretive sys-
terns that may well overlap." So here again there is an alternative to the perception of bare facts, on the one hand, and an interpretive system that creates all meaning independent of perception, on the other. This alternative has been developed by Merleau-Ponty, as we shall see.

Kuhn and Theory Development within Broader Cultural Frameworks

The philosophy of science has often conceived its task to be the evaluation of competing theories and the working-out of criteria that assists with making this evaluation. More recently the philosophy of science has focused less on choosing between theories and more on the historical progression of science, on how theories may be connected to one another in historical sequence (SC 133).

Kuhn is concerned with the latter but seems to remain at the level of the former. Kuhn's view is too narrowly framed, for when one scientific theory defeats another it does so in an apparent cultural vacuum, with no connection to the defeated theory or the cultural framework that surrounds them both (SC 150). He therefore fails to recognize that these theories often share and remain connected to an entire tradition. As Merleau-Ponty claims, even when one theory defeats another, i.e., explains events with greater accuracy, consistency and predictability, it often does so by benefitting from the errors of the defeated theory and could not have been developed without reference to it. No theory can stand alone, for it is always framed within the context of other theories, competing and otherwise. Moreover, no theory is ever fully present or articulated, for all theories are embedded in a shared linguistic and cultural framework that itself resists complete representation, for language and culture themselves are required to accomplish this task. This, in fact, is how scientific culture progresses, by theories borrowing and learning from one another and from each other's errors, within a culture, within a history, to develop a more accurate and predictive framework of interpretation, a framework that nevertheless remains open to future development.

Merleau-Ponty's work can be seen as framing issues in a way that is similar to more Anglo-American philosophy of science. In all of his works he is fully engaged in evaluating competing theories, usually those with a narrowly empiricist or a narrowly rationalist orientation, and offering his own theory of lived embodiment as an alternative. In addition, in a number of writings he is concerned with the historical development of science, philosophy, art and culture in general. As we have seen above, he claims explicitly that one theory may well defeat another but when it does so it often learns a great deal from the errors of the defeated theory, often relies upon them for its own development, and always shares a broader linguistic and cultural framework with this theory and others. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's works provide a detailed explanation of how this occurs, which we will soon see below.

Merleau-Ponty on the Unity of the World and the Continuity of Science

Merleau-Ponty spent much of his academic life criticizing the traditionalist/modernist starting point: that nature is composed of discrete objects that stand in external relationships to one another and that can be placed into neatly defined categories. He criticizes the traditionalist/modernist view that begins with an objective world that is already precisely defined. Yet in rejecting the traditionalist/modernist view, he does not accept what is currently being labeled as postmodernism: that we have no access to the stable world but only to interpretive systems, to systems that do not refer beyond themselves. For Merleau-Ponty the unity of
the world is not conceptual but neither is it impossible. The unity of the world is perceptual. Or, rather, there is one world because perception opens upon one real world. This world is not a plenum that is fully defined, for perception is replete with ambiguity, gaps, blind spots, fissures and breaks. Perception is necessarily embodied, and as embodied is necessarily perspectival, partial, and incomplete. This incompleteness, of course, will be reflected in our systems of knowledge, which will also remain partial and incomplete. Yet because each perspective opens out to something that includes it, because there is one world, our knowledge can gradually move toward a more complete expression of it.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty identifies with a philosophy that seeks to describe the world that is always already there, that seeks to put the philosopher back in touch with this world, and that seeks to endow this “contact with a philosophical status.” His later works continue this quest. We must describe the “there is” of the world, he says, and this description necessarily involves the recognition that it is perception that opens us to this world. As we have just seen, perception is not indubitable, for it is incomplete and errors and more accurate perceptions always remain possible, but it offers us access to and contact with the world in a way that is not possible with either the imagination or the abstract thought of language. Moreover, the distinction between these modes of experience is present prior to reflection and intellectual evaluation (VI 39–40). Within perception and through the avenues of the body the world is yet presented as existing independently of human experience (VI 123–25). If we doubt this fundamental experience, there is nothing that we can do to win it back, for it can be provided in no other way. We should reflect on this fundamental experience, to consider what it is and how it can sometimes go wrong, but we should not simply sweep it away, as, for example, Descartes does. For, in fact, it is present as a form of evidence and is perhaps our most fundamental form of evidence. True, one perception may well be doubted, but this always and only occurs when another perception is there to take its place. We may well doubt a particular perception but not perception in general, for what cannot be doubted is that each perception, even if it turns out to be wrong, belongs to one and the same world. The world is the ever present background for all perceptions (and for all thought and language). It is its presentation as such that helps explain the unity of nature and the unity of our experience of it. And it is clear from what Merleau-Ponty says here that it is the unity of nature and the real that helps unify experience, not the other way around.

The real is coherent and probable because it is real, and not real because it is coherent. (VI 40)

It is true that it gives rise to mistakes or illusions, whence the conclusion is sometimes drawn that it therefore cannot be a difference of nature, and that the real, after all, is only the less improbable or the more probable. This is to think the true by the false, the positive by the negative — and it is to ill-describe indeed the experience of disillusion, wherein precisely we learn to know the fragility of the “real.” For when an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first. (VI 40)

Thus perception opens upon one real world, and it is not the world of already articulated and precise categories, not the world as thought but rather the world as perceived. There is the unity of the perceived world because the world is the always already present background for all my perceptions. My different perspectives on an object hang to-
gether because they are held together by the stable structures of the world and by the stable structures of the body. As I walk around a building, for example, the view of the front, the side, and the back cohere and blend, not because a reflective judgment associates similar experiences but because the lived-through profiles are held together by the object and the stable structures of the body, by the fact that the aware body pulls its past experiences with it into the present and toward the future. And just as the body opens to and remains in contact with a world that runs beyond it, so also incarnate awareness opens to and remains in contact with a temporality that runs beyond it. Even though Merleau-Ponty accepts a time that is independent of human experience, he subsequently argues that some form of awareness is needed to account for the passing of time, for without this awareness there would only be an eternal now (PhP 426). Yet time is certainly not constituted by this awareness for then it would once again only be present, in this case fully present to a constituting consciousness. Embodied awareness opens to an independently existing world and to a temporality that is a dimension of this world, opens to a temporal reality that runs beyond it and within which all experience occurs. Thus, the unity of the world is explained by the fact that all our perceptual experience occurs within it, even those that are incommensurable, while the synthesis of perception is explained by the fact that perception occurs in one world and within one temporality, which is a dimension of the world’s structure. The synthesis of perception is also explained by the fact that it occurs in one body, a body that is aware that it opens upon a present that extends into the past and moves toward a future, into a past, present and future that hold together, as a dimension of reality.

A more detailed discussion of the nature of our access to the world and the foundation of human knowledge is called for here, for it is in this way that we will see Merleau-Ponty distinguish his position from that of both the modernist and the postmodernist. Against the kind of modernist empiricism that is formulated by Russell and others, he argues that the discrete sense datum that is supposedly the primary building block of all knowledge occurs no where in perception. First of all, the idea of discrete sense data is the product of analysis. Here the empiricist as modernist starts with a world already conceptually defined rather than the world as it is lived in perception. Lived through perception always occurs as a gestalt, with a figure against a background (PhP 3–4). And secondly, there is no evidence that sense data travel directly along isolated pathways to be registered point-by-point and associated one with another in some central receptor, as was often assumed by this sort of position (PhP 7). There is certainly a physical component to perceptual form, for perception is of the world and occurs within the body, but perception cannot be understood simply as separate elements or perceptual parts mechanically associated with one another. If a figure, say the well known duck/rabbit, is drawn on a piece of paper before a perceiver, the physical structure of the figure, as it is received by the sentient subject, certainly contributes to its perceived form. Yet it is the integration and interpretation that is accomplished by the aware perceiver that transforms these lines into something meaningful, either a duck or a rabbit. Moreover, these gestalt figures are recognized all at once and are therefore not the result of calculation, the association of memories, or reflective judgment (PhP 17). In addition, the experiments conducted by the empiricists themselves disprove the claim that there is a point-by-point correspondence between the stimulus of the sense data and the perceptual field. For example, in experiments dealing with the perception of color, the field appears homogeneous even though the stimulation of the parts of the retinal vary from red to orange and even to neutral (PhP 7). To understand the quality of perception we must understand how it functions as a gestalt whole and not
attempt to construct it point-by-point out of discrete sense data.

There are also experimental cases that show that perception can still be meaningful even though it is far from being clear and precise. In the example of the Muller-Lyer illusion modernist science wants to make the confused perception of unequal length the result of inattention, since for the scientist the two lines of the objective world are equal and must be categorized as such. Yet as Merleau-Ponty points out, the figures as perceived phenomena are not “precise objects.” They are perceptual patterns and they are patterns that are different, not necessarily of unequal length (PhP 11). He therefore concludes that “we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomena” (PhP 6).

The determinate is an ideal, it comes with language and reflection, and the modernist tends to project it back into the world, into a world that subsequently comes to be conceived as a collection of precise objects or sense data (PhP 6). Perceptual structure cannot be understood as the association of isolated and precisely defined sense data. First of all, as we have seen, there is no isolated sense datum. The perceptual something always occurs in a context, at the center of an implied background that is not fully defined. Secondly, the empiricist construction of experience out of the association of past and present sense data fails because the present data must first be recognized in order to recall the past experience that supposedly explains it (PhP 18–19). It is not the past that explains the recognition of the present. As we have seen, recognition happens all at once. It is not the sum or association of isolated parts. It presents itself as a gestalt whole.

Human perception therefore cannot be understood using the assumptions of the modernist empiricist. Yet neither can it be understood as the rationalist’s recognition of eternal intelligible forms in the object, the recognition for example of the geometric circle in the dinner plate (PhP 27). As was already mentioned, there is a great deal of imprecision and indeterminacy in the perceptual field, and knowledge and perception tend to move from the imprecise and indeterminate to the more precise and determinate. In addition, the corrections that our perceptual glances must make in order to focus on a perceptual form or structure occur much too rapidly to be intellectual adaptations. As the perception of gestalt figures demonstrates, the meaning of the perceived form precedes reflective intellectual judgment but is more than the simple association of sense impressions. Merleau-Ponty thus concludes that “there is . . . a perceptual syntax constructed according to its own rules” (PhP 36).

In making a case for pre-conceptual perceptual structures here, Merleau-Ponty is not trying to challenge the principles of logical structure or logical argument. What he is trying to do is broaden the boundaries of the rational (with its precise and thematic distinctions) to include the perceived world (with its lived through and nonthematic significations), which in fact is the source of more precise and abstract judgments. When I perceive a circle, for example, the logician argues that I perceive it as possessing equal diameters. But Merleau-Ponty argues that these are properties of abstract judgment. It is true that the object possesses these characteristics, but it is also true that they awaited reflection and the development of geometry to be fully expressed and recognized. Moreover, when the object was perceived prior to this development, or is perceived without explicit calculation in mind, it possesses neither equal nor unequal diameters. True, it is recognized as a physiognomy, as a shape distinct from other shapes, but as a perceived object it does not yet possess the precise calculations of abstract thought. Merleau-Ponty is not appealing to the illogical here, for he is not denying the principle of excluded middle; either the diameters are equal or they are unequal. Merleau-Ponty is not
denying that the circle possesses equal diameters. He is simply saying that in spontaneous perception they are not yet measured, they are not yet precisely defined in the perceptual field. Thematic significations must be placed back within the field of lived-through perceptions which are not yet thematized and are the source of all signification. This, of course, is not to deny the contributions of abstract thought and language, for they can help move us beyond specific perceptions. Language is the human species' most ductile and creative instrument, but its meanings are rooted in the body's perceptual encounter with the world and if it does not relate back to it in some way it will be meaningless. Thus there is a perceptual meaning that is original, that cannot be reduced to isolated sense data that are blindly associated or to abstract forms of judgment. There is a perceptual sense or gestalt that is lived, that does not break the world into already formed and precise objects and that is not a matter of abstract judgment (PhP 273–75).

Nature, then, as it is accessed through perception, cannot be understood as being composed of types of things with identical essences which form a precise taxonomy of classes in which the most general can be used to deduce the least general and its concrete particulars. Perceived things do not fit into precise categories, essences or class concepts. This, however, does not mean that there are no patterns at all in nature. Things of a particular type are perceived as similar, but not identical. There are family resemblances, not essences or class concepts generalized from sense particulars that are identical in some fundamental way. We have already witnessed the difficulty of trying to construct experience out of isolated particulars: if meaning is to be constructed out of isolated sense data, it is difficult to see how these sense data themselves can be recognized as meaningful and how they can ever be related to form recognizable particular objects. Likewise, if general meaning is to be constructed out of the perception of isolated particulars, it is difficult to see how the particulars themselves first possess this general meaning. If, on the other hand, as Merleau-Ponty claims, perception is already a gestalt, then it is already meaningful, then it already contains a meaningful structure or idea. The foreground articulated with the help of an implied background constitutes the perceptual meaning or idea. This meaning is not necessarily constructed from isolated particulars, for, as we have seen, this meaning can appear all at once, can be read in the concrete perception. Of course, for Merleau-Ponty this is not an uncritical reading. He begins with an already meaningful concrete perception, pauses, reflects, compares and contrasts this perception to those that are similar, and using a sublimated language expresses this similarity as a general guiding idea, as a guiding idea that must continually be checked against ongoing perceptions. We must not begin with perception and move back to the conceptual and logical conditions that make them possible. The concrete is not based on the abstract. The abstract is based on the concrete. The structure of logic and abstract concepts are guiding ideas that flow from our concrete perceptual encounter with the world. The abstract principles of logic are not arbitrary, but neither are they necessary. They are privileged because they help stabilize the temporal and spatial ebb and flow of the perceptual world (VI 213). They help us make sense of the albeit shifting but also stable patterns of our perceived world, patterns which the principles must always revisit in order (1) to make sense, and (2) to adjust and refine themselves. Thus abstract concepts are formed with the help of reflection and language, but for Merleau-Ponty they reflect a much more fluid and imprecise field then that envisioned by modernists. The perceptual field is a gestalt and it is composed of more specific gestalts that refer imprecisely to still others, and so on ad infinitum. Contra postmodernism, the perceptual field displays...
perceptual patterns, and these patterns share family resemblances with other patterns, but contra modernism they also possess ambiguity, imprecise boundaries, and gaps between them.

Merleau-Ponty’s position is thus highly critical of the modernist view of science because it begins with sense data and with a world already clearly defined and logical delineated. Merleau-Ponty describes lived through perception more accurately, even according to the observations of the modernists themselves, for he reveals a perceptual field that is always present yet which remains open, contains gaps, and has parts that continuously vie for attention. He would also be critical of the modernist view of scientific change, for nature does not form or fit into a clearly defined system of class concepts. There is a continuity of science because perception opens upon one real world, because even if one theory is rejected, it is displaced by another that is more accurate, that expresses the world more clearly. But the ideal of a clearly articulated world remains just that, an ideal, one that will never be achieved, only more or less approximated.

**Merleau-Ponty and Bare Facts**

As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty there is a world. My perception opens upon a public world that is always already there and that presents itself in experience as such. The world also presents itself in stable patterns of perception. A pattern of spaced dots are always perceived as six pairs (PhP 440). Other perceptual figures stubbornly present themselves as three dimensional cubes, while similar figures, with the addition of only a few lines, are invariably perceived as flat figures on a two-dimensional plane (PhP 263). Certain gestalt figures (say, for example, the well known figure that can appear as a vase or as two faces in profile) present themselves in a variety of ways (either as a vase or as two faces) but not infinitely so (not as a Rolex watch, a safety pin, or a palm tree, etc.). And while it is true that the choice of a certain project confers upon the perceived world a certain framework, interpretive schema or meaning, and that a variety of such choices can be made, it is also true that for the interpretive system to make sense and succeed, it must grasp and express the perceived world as it is. My choice to climb a certain mountain range, for example, sets out a project through which I interpret the world, through which the world has a certain meaning, yet whether a certain crag, hill, or mountain is climable is largely determined by its actual structure and by its relationship to the human body (PhP 439–40). I cannot confer any meaning I wish upon a perceived object. Certain interpretive or linguistic systems simply will not fit, while others help make sense of our encounter with the world and ease adaptation to it.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, there are no bare facts. There are no facts that are not interpreted through the avenues of the body, language, and culture. This of course does not mean the perceived world is neutralized or provides no meaning at all. I perceive the world through the avenues of the body, but the world simultaneously runs beyond me, is independent of me, and I experience it as such. There are stable patterns in the world that influence me as I simultaneously take them up and organize them as perceptual wholes. The shapes of the gestalt figures provide information to me, yet they are also interpreted in various ways. In addition, as we have just seen, to say that all perception is already interpretation does not mean that all interpretations are equal or that the world can be interpreted in anyway at all. First of all, some perceptions are better than others because they provide both a clarity and richness of detail. My body is capable of responding to the world, of gearing into it, and of grasping and articulating its patterns. When it does this well, with clarity and detail, adjustment and adaptation to nature are
enhanced and eased (PhP 250). Secondly, since perception is already a gesture, since it already stylizes, since it takes up and expresses more clearly, language is in all likelihood a prolongation of this orientation." Merleau-Ponty argues that the conventional use of terms develops rather late in the history of language and that language probably first expressed our needful and emotional encounter with the world (PhP 187, 403--04). A word’s meaning in all likelihood refers to the aspect taken on by the object in human interaction with it (PhP 403). If I am trying to cross the Sierra desert, its name will undoubtedly be associated with dryness, heat, and an infirm walking surface. Moreover, if we look at language as it is used in poetry and in song, we see that it bears or expresses a certain emotional content, that it bears our human encounter with the world and others. Words sing our encounter with the world and others (PhP 187). And just as the perceptions which are clearest are also the most accurate, so the speech that is able to more fully express our perceptual encounter with the world should be taken as the most truthful. Perception acts as the founding term for a language which it requires to bring it more fully to expression (TFL 4). Even the abstract formulas of geometry, for example, help articulate with great precision the characteristics of the triangle, yet the abstract formulations would be meaningless without the body’s perceptual hold on the world, without the perceptual encounter with a triangular figure (PhP 386). Merleau-Ponty’s theory, then, describes a perception that is a product of the stable structures of the world and the body, that reveals a stable perceptual sense, a sense that needs to be taken up by language to be more fully expressed. The body and the world exist in a relationship of non-reciprocal reversibility, with the world as the primary term. Language takes up the perceived world and articulates it more fully, yet this articulation is suggested by the perception itself. And if language were not rooted in perception and did not refer back to it in some way, language would have little or nothing to say. For Merleau-Ponty there are no bare uninterpreted facts. The body meets the information it receives from the world and simultaneously organizes it. But there is a relatively stable world there to interpret and some interpretations fit better than others. Thus there is an alternative to the modernist notion of already present bare facts that are clearly represented by a clearly defined language and the postmodernist notion (at least as it is expressed by Kuhn) that there is no perception that can adjudicate between interpretive systems. This alternative is expressed by Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty on the Continuity of Science and Culture

How is the continuity of culture possible? By summarizing the previous sections on Merleau-Ponty we are now in the position to attempt to explain. First of all, as we have seen, meaning is created in the encounter between the active human body and the world. As an analysis of gestalt figures has shown, the body receives information from the world as it simultaneously organizes and integrates it. Perception is already a gesture, an active, engaged movement in and probing of the world. Perception thus already stylizes, already presents a “coherent deformation” of a public world.

Active human perception opens upon and connects with a world that exists prior to it and also runs beyond it. Human perception opens upon one sole world, one permanent horizon for all human perception, even those that become negated. As we have seen above, even when one perspective is called
into question and negated, this is only accomplished from the standpoint of a perception that is accepted. There is a meaningful continuity to experience because all experience takes place in this one world, which cannot be negated.

My gestures thus cohere because they open upon a relatively stable world and because the stable structure of the body carries with it earlier moments of experience. My intentional engagement in the world is able to unify the seemingly disparate elements of an action, present and past, because it opens upon a transcendent time with which it partially fuses. My bodily awareness opens to a temporal present that has the characteristics of a gestalt figure, with the foreground in the present and the past and future gradually shading into the background, not as discrete moments but within a continuous flow. Thus my bodily awareness opens to a time that runs beyond it yet with which it remains in contact, to a past, present and future that are held together, as a dimension of reality. My perspectives and gestures thus blend because they open upon one world and one temporality.

Not only do my perceptions and gestures flow into one another but they flow into those experienced and enacted by others. They are able to do so because the personal expressions of my life rest upon anonymous and therefore shared functions of the body, functions that subsequently carry me into and open upon a public world. I, in fact, experience my experience as opening upon a public field. My perceptions can therefore overlap with those of others because our perceptions open upon and illuminate a common world. Moreover, since my awareness is primarily an active gesturing into the world, my intentions to a certain extent can be read in my gestures, just as I can catch a glimpse of the intentions of others in their active involvement in the world. Since we are actively engaged in the same world in common ways, and since our gestures can to a certain extent overlap and interpenetrate, we can to a certain extent experience a unity of meaning. The meaning of my gestures connects with those of others because our bodies are similar and because they open upon one world in similar ways. And as we have already seen, not only can I connect with those of the present but I can also connect with those of the past. While it is true that I perceive the world from the perspective of the present, this present is experienced as part of the flow of the temporal world. It experiences itself as existing within a time that includes it. So, just as I am aware perceiving and interpreting the past from the point of view of the present, I am also aware that the present has been influenced by the past and has subsequently inherited at least some of its point of view. If this is the case, if my perceptions and gestures open upon a public and temporal world, if my perceptions and gestures blend within me as I actively open upon the world, and if they blend with those experienced and enacted by others, then some continuity of experience and culture is possible. This continuity is not that of the modernist, with their one rational world. The continuity of culture and history, as it is conceived by Merleau-Ponty, does not mean total unity of thought. Society and history are like a great gestalt structure that is composed of a variety of smaller gestalt structures, just as the world of music is composed of everything from Beethoven to hip hop. They are all a part of the sonorous, rhythmic world and often respond to one another either favorably, by borrowing, or unfavorably, by attempting to set off in a different direction, a direction in part formed by their conflicts and negations. As it is with
music, in their respective fields, so it is with science, philosophy, politics and art.

Merleau-Ponty comes between the modernist and the postmodernist view of science and the continuity of culture over time. Against the former he argues that the perceived world is not composed of discrete particulars that fit neatly into a taxonomy of classes, and that the perceived world forms a gestalt whole that contains gaps and openended possibilities. Against the postmodernists he argues that just because there is no single rational world does not mean that the world displays no patterns at all. Merleau-Ponty loosen and broadens the concept of rationality, he does not eliminate it.

ENDNOTES

11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" in Signs, p. 54.