ABSTRACT: This essay attempts to provide detailed evidence for Charles Taylor’s claim that both Hegel and Merleau-Ponty follow Kant’s refutation of idealism in an effort to take a stand against Modernism’s claim that human knowledge of the world is reducible to a conceptual representation of it. For both the Hegel of Phenomenology of Mind and Merleau-Ponty throughout his career, human consciousness and knowledge must embrace and make sense of a world that is always already there. This stand will be made against Postmodernism as well.

CHARLES TAYLOR POINTS OUT that the Modernist view of knowledge as the isolated individual’s conceptual representation of an already formed rational world has been significantly challenged by Hegel. In fact, he claims that Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein all arm themselves against Modernism by using an argument that has its origins in Kant’s work, more specifically in Kant’s refutation of idealism. Taylor succinctly expresses the core of this argument as follows: “We wouldn’t have what we recognize as experience at all unless it were construable as of an object.” I will here leave aside the question of whether or not Taylor’s interpretation of Heidegger and Wittgenstein is correct, but I will pursue this insight in the details of the works of both Hegel and Merleau-Ponty. I will also attempt to make the case that Merleau-Ponty’s use of Kant’s argument against idealism and his appropriation of Hegel’s descriptive methodology provide an alternative to Postmodernism as well as to Modernism and thus situate his philosophy between these more untenable extremes.

Before we proceed, an inconsistency in Kant’s thought should be noted. It is an inconsistency that Merleau-Ponty mentions explicitly and that Hegel implicitly uses against Kant. Both Hegel and Merleau-Ponty accept Kant’s argument against idealism, an argument that seeks to place consciousness in the world, and yet both reject Kant’s then inconsistent separation of knowledge from its object, separation of conceptual necessity from empirical fact. In the introduction of The Phenomenology of Mind Hegel assumes Kant’s argument against idealism, without mentioning Kant, and explicitly attacks Kant’s separation of knowing and its object. Merleau-Ponty,
however, is explicit about both his acceptance of Kant's refutation of idealism and his rejection of Kant's subsequently inconsistent turn toward the prioritizing of *a priori* thought.\(^3\)

Hegel's famous introduction to *The Phenomenology of Mind* asks how it is that we *truly know* what we know and does so by first considering two of the then most dominant means of critically arriving at knowledge, the approach of the Kantians and the approach of those adhering to Romantic philosophy. Hegel believes that the Kantian approach begins with a mistrust of knowledge, and he then proceeds to claim that this is Kant's most fundamental assumption, one that leads to skeptical results, since it leads to the separation of truth (the object as it is in itself) and knowledge (the object as it is possessed by human consciousness). Again, Hegel's claim here is that Kant *assumes* that the object that is ultimately possessed by knowledge is not the same as the object as it is in itself. Hegel thus accuses Kant of regarding knowledge as an instrument through which the object is revealed, as an instrument that can never reach the object and thus the truth, since the object is not grasped in itself but only through the filters and frames of the instrument. Moreover, this is what Hegel sees as the fundamental error of Kant (and of Modernism). In order for Kant to claim that knowledge does not reach the object in itself, he must have some experience of the object in itself, otherwise the distinction would never appear. Forgetting this ultimately leads to skepticism, to the separation of knowledge and its object.

On the other hand, the Romantic must be regarded as an intuitionist since the Romantic denies that knowledge is an instrument and holds instead that it must be regarded as the absolute union of consciousness and the in itself. This positions, Hegel claims, simply states that it is correct and does not properly argue for its approach. In fact, he argues that this is the case with both the Kantian and the Romantic positions, for both simply assume their starting point. We are thus left without properly established criteria for the consideration of the truth. Hegel here realizes that it does not seem possible to establish a standard or criteria by which we can judge the forms of knowledge because the standard itself would then need justification. It seems then that no criteria can be established, since every attempted justification of the criteria simply introduces a second set of criteria, themselves unjustified, to justify the first. Hegel's way of dealing with this infinite regress is to define the critic as one for whom no criteria at all are introduced. The critic will

\(^3\)For comments regarding Kant's refutation of idealism, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colon Smith (London UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. xviii; and *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphanso Lingis (Evanston IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968), p. 111. For the comment regarding the inconsistency in Kant's thought see *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 220–21, where Merleau-Ponty states the following: "Kant has already shown that the *a priori* is not knowable in advance of experience, that is, outside of facticity. Insofar as the *a priori* in his philosophy retains the character of what *must necessarily* be, as opposed to what in fact exists and is determinate in human terms, this is only to the extent that he has not followed out his program, which was to define our cognitive powers in terms of our factual conditions and which necessarily compelled him to set every conceivable being against the background of the world." *PhP*.

\(^4\)Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*. I here provide a brief exposition of the text's introduction, pp. 131–45.
HEGEL AND MERLEAU-PONTY ON MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

simply observe, will simply describe the process of knowledge as it goes through its own attempt to establish the truth. As we have already seen above, knowledge (and each form of it, Hegel adds) has within it what it believes to be the truth, the object in itself. Each form of knowledge, then, attempts to compare its object—i.e., the object for consciousness—with what it believes is the in itself. This solves the problem of introducing extraneous and unjustified criteria for Hegel, since each form of knowledge already contains its own criteria.

Hegel’s first step, then, in defining his own approach to critically examining knowledge, is to draw out clearly the already experientially present distinction between the object as it is in itself and as it is for consciousness. The most fundamental statement that we can make with regard to knowledge is that consciousness must be aware of something. If consciousness was not aware of something, then it would not appear as human beings normally experience their own experience. For Hegel this means that there are two fundamental conditions of knowledge: consciousness must be aware of something or other, something determinate, and this something must be known. Moreover, given this claim, Hegel can proceed to make the claim that consciousness or a form of knowledge can examine its own object without adding additional criteria; it can simply “look on.” It simply describes the attempt of a form of knowledge in its effort to grasp its own object. Hegel, of course, realizes that the in itself is frequently not reached, and subsequently that the object for consciousness and the object in itself do not correspond. The skeptic also comes to this realization and terminates the pursuit of truth. Since the criteria by which we judged our knowledge has been negated, the skeptic assumes that there are no criteria by which to judge knowledge. Hegel replies that this is a mistake since the negation is determinate negation. If we negate a form of knowledge, then at least we are left with this knowledge: that this form of knowledge is wrong. This is not nothing, for at least we now know what we do not know, at least we have determined what we do not know. Moreover, as has already been stated, the only way that we know that we have not reached the in itself is that we have some idea of what we have not reached. If the object was not somehow present to us, the claim that we are not reaching it would not make sense. It is this awareness of the object, and the awareness that we are not reaching it, that establishes Hegel’s method: the critical philosopher will simply describe the attempt of a form of knowledge to reach its object and the different forms of knowledge that develop as corrections along the way. At least as stated here, this is a phenomenological method that places the knower in the world, with really existing objects that the knower is aware of as such and is attempting to reach. This method consists of trying to reach or describe or interpret the object as clearly and accurately as possible.

By his own admission, Merleau-Ponty does not accept Hegel’s later works,^ which treat history and the individual as conceptual or even logical relations. Yet

^See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Hegel’s Existentialism” in Sense and Non-sense (Evanston IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 63–70, especially p. 64. Merleau-Ponty believes that Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind (1807) represents a philosophy of total experience, that Philosophy of Right (1821) begins to move away from a philosophy of total experience, and that the “Hegel of 1827 offers us nothing but a “palace of ideas”’” (p. 64).
he is sympathetic to the many existential themes that he finds in Hegel’s earlier *Phenomenology of Mind*, which he regards as not just a history of ideas but as a history of humanity’s total experience. Here, in the earlier work, even the absolute knowledge of the final stage of history’s movement, when reflective consciousness finally rejoins its more primary lived-through relationship to the world, involves life as a whole and not just as conceptual relations. The role of the philosopher here, Merleau-Ponty reports, is thus to give conceptual voice to situations that are already present in the world, not to conceptually construct these situations and their movement: “The question is no longer limited, as it was [for Kant], to discover what [conceptual] conditions make scientific experience [possible] but is [a question] of . . . describing man’s fundamental situation in the face of the world and other men.” Merleau-Ponty embraces this new role. In addition, throughout his philosophical works, Merleau-Ponty adopts and develops arguments similar to those found in the introduction of *The Phenomenology of Mind*. He articulates or operates with similar arguments, either explicitly or implicitly. His frequent refrain against both empiricist and rationalist forms of Modernism is that each begins with the world as it is already formed in abstract conceptual representations, with both by-passing the lived-through perceptual openness upon a really existing world that is the primary source of both meaning and evidence. He explicitly adopts Kant’s refutation of idealism and accepts the following: human experience is continuous over time; this continuity allows humans to unify experience in an open-ended and ongoing process; and this continuity would not be experienced without the stability of the world’s objects. As I walk around the library, for example, the moments and perspectives of experience cohere because the object is stable and because temporality is a dimensional field of the world, with its moments presented not as discrete units in need of outside synthesis but as themselves sliding into one another and overlapping.

Merleau-Ponty’s use of phenomenology’s *Fundierung* relationship is helpful here in the effort to understand his conception of time and the relationship of consciousness to the world that it involves. He does argue that human awareness is needed to account for time since without this awareness there would be no sense of the passing of time, only an eternal now. Yet he proceeds to insist that time cannot be constituted by the subject since this would also eliminate the passing of time; time would be fully present before the constituting subject. Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, embodied consciousness is *ek-stasis*, a leaping out of itself toward the world, toward the world as a temporal (and spatial) field that runs beyond the subject, but with which the subject remains in contact and blends. Human subjects experience time as a dimension of the world but, since we are aware of it, we can take it up as a meaning and cross back into it to more fully bring it to light through

---

9See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 127 and 394. Merleau-Ponty takes the *Fundierung* relationship to be a two-way relationship, with a primary term that suggests a secondary term that is nevertheless needed to fold back upon it in order to express it more clearly. The primary term can be understood as neither a cause nor a premise but must be understood as a power to motivate. While the secondary term must be understood as neither an effect nor a derived result but as an awareness that brings with it the power to both clarify and interpret.
our power of interpretation. Thus, the continuity of the different moments, aspects, or perspectives of experience is possible because time is a dimension of the world whose phases are given as a field of blending elements, not as discrete units that follow one after the other, yet the aware subject is needed to bring this continuity or synthesis more fully to light by an act of synthesis.

Moreover, it is this ability to experience and sustain the lived continuity of meaning over time, first accomplished in perception in the normal subject, that allows us to understand the fragmentation of experience in a number of brain-injured patients (see also PhP, pp. 131, 133). Or, conversely, it is the inability of brain-injured subjects to experience and sustain this lived continuity of the meaning through time that sets in relief and clarifies this function in normal subjects. When we consider number-blindness, for example, we are aware that it is the inability to experience the continuity of meaning through time that explains the inability to count. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "the true act of counting requires of the subject that his operations, as they develop and cease to occupy the center of his consciousness, shall not cease to be there for him and shall constitute, for subsequent operations, a ground on which they may be established" (PhP, 134). In other words, quite simply, if the subject's past acts were no longer available to him or her, then the simple act of counting would no longer be possible for this subject. The lack of this continuity in the patient, then, is what allows us to understand the patient's inability and gives us a glimpse into this capacity in the healthy subject. Yet, we can now also claim that no explicit act of reflective judgment is required to establish the continuity or (open-ended) unity of experience since bodily consciousness opens upon the temporal dimension of the world whose moments blend and bleed into one another of their own accord. Or, even more, conceptual acts (in this case numbers expressed as linguistic symbols) rest upon and would not be possible without the naturally temporal structure of the experience that opens upon and fuses with a stable world. However, we may still claim that some synthesis must occur in the subject, since the act of counting is a conceptual act that can occur, with the aid of linguistic symbols, even with one's eyes closed. Yet, still, as we have just seen, since temporality cannot be conceptually constructed from the point of view of a reflective subject outside of it (for this would bring temporality fully before the subject and thus eliminate the passing of time), the continuity of subjective experience must have its roots in the continuity of the perceptual experience that opens upon and blends with the temporality that is a dimension of the world. As Merleau-Ponty summarily expresses it, "what is called pure number or authentic number is only a development or extension, through repetition, of the process which constitutes any perception" (PhP, p. 134).

It should also be mentioned here that Merleau-Ponty finds further support for this claim (that the continuity of natural duration allows us to understand the continuity of conceptual and symbolic experience) in studies of the global functioning of the brain. The evidence of a number of studies reveals that localized brain injuries dramatically affect the global functioning of the brain, even while mostly disturbing one region. Injuries to the occipital lobe, for example, clearly affect global functioning but mostly attack visual apprehension. This indicates that local excitations "undergo... a series of structurations which disassociate them from spatiotemporal
context... and orders them according to the original dimensions of organic and
human activity.” “Thus,” Merleau-Ponty concludes, “we are dealing less with two
types of localization then with an inextricable intersection of ‘horizontal’ and ‘ver­
tical’ localization—without the body being anywhere pure thing, but also without
it being anywhere pure idea.” Or, again, local excitations are integrated into the
global functioning of the human organism and are thus integrated with an original
or general meaning, yet this general meaning cannot be completely separated from
the specific region through which it was originally actualized. Modernist empiricism
fails to explain this global functioning since it cannot be viewed as a mere aggregate
of isolated moments or units. Modernist rationalism fails because it cannot account
for the specificity of the contingent aspects of experience since it fails to integrate
them into the global or general functioning of the human organism. Postmodernism
fails, as we will see in more detail momentarily, because temporality and the unity
of experience cannot be understood as the product of language since Merleau-Ponty
has shown that even the simple act of counting, which, it is true, requires language,
more deeply relies on the natural unity of lived-through experience. Counting and
language must rest upon this continuity of experience, otherwise they would not
be possible; otherwise they would be just flashes of awareness with no connection
to one another.

As Taylor suggests, Merleau-Ponty’s position here allows us to form a theory of
the subject that falls between Modernism and Postmodernism. For Merleau-Ponty
the sense of self is clearly tied to the human body, to a body that both opens to the
world and experiences itself as part of this world. The body touches (is conscious
of) the world only because it is capable of being touched by it, only because it is a
part of it. The sense of self is able to form, then, because the human body is aware
and because, due to its natural reflexivity, it is aware of being touched and perceived
from the outside. The sense of self is able to form because these experiences hinge
back and forth and cross one another. Moreover, as we have just seen, it is the body’s
aware relationship to a stable world that allows us to experience the continuity of
experience over or through time, and it is this experience that allows us to form a
singular sense of self since we are aware that our experiences over time flow into one
another and subsequently occur to one being, in one body. Thus the act of perceiv­
ing and the possibility of being perceived are held together because they occur in
one body, and because they held together in time, because the perceiving and being
perceived cross or temporally flow into one another. Yet, since time is always slip­
ning away, these two experiences will never completely coincide; the more primary
lived-through act will never be completely captured by the act of reflection and its
representations. In addition, it is because embodied perceptual consciousness is an
active orientation or gesturing toward the world that we are able to perceive other
 perceivers. Since perceptual consciousness is a body being toward the world, an ac­
tive gesturing or orientation toward the world and not a private experience enclosed
in one’s own mind, and since perceptual consciousness opens to a public space, it

is now possible to see how we can perceive other perceivers. We do not have direct access to another person’s private thoughts but we can perceive another person’s oriented acts of perception. We can perceive other perceivers, and we can to some extent perceive what others perceive because our perceptual consciousnesses meet at the same objects in the same world. All perceptual consciousness, then, involves seeing a common world and the possibility of being seen by other human subjects. Furthermore, since the relationship between perception and language can be understood as a *Fundiierung* relationship, with perception suggesting certain interpretations that in turn fold back on the perceived to help articulate it more precisely, the formation of the sense of self will involve the crossing of what is expressed about the subject by others back into the subject’s lived-through experience. Language (and other social institutions) certainly plays a role in the effort to articulate or even “construct” a sense of self. Yet without the lived-through sense of the continuity of experience over time that we have seen Merleau-Ponty outline above, this socially constructed self would be impossible. This sense of self is thus neither Modernist nor Postmodernist, neither a Cartesian rational subject fully present to itself nor a linguistic subject completely constructed by language. It is a sense that is able to form because the aware body-subject opens upon a public world that temporally holds together and folds back into it.

It should be noted here that Merleau-Ponty also explicitly argues against Descartes’ doubt, i.e., that we cannot be sure of the existence of the thing seen but can be sure of the existence of our thought of seeing the thing. If we are true to our perceptual openness upon the world, then when we state that we are sure of our perceptions, we are stating that we are sure of reaching the perceived. Being sure of our perceptions means being sure that we are reaching the objects within them (PhP, p. 374). Again, embodied perceptual consciousness is primarily being toward the world; it is primarily a relationship to a world that runs beyond it yet with which it remains in contact. Embodied perceptual consciousness is in touch with the world because it is a part of the world and because the world touches it. True, we experience the world through the avenues of the body. True, we experience the world as it is phenomenalized through the body. But this does not mean that we experience just phenomena that have no relationship to the world. Just because being reveals itself through phenomena does not mean that its meaning is only phenomenal since part of the meaning of the phenomena is certainly the *being* of the object. And here, once again, we would have no idea of the distinction between the appearance and being of the object if this were not somehow already given in our experience.

Given what Merleau-Ponty has argued and has been able to establish, when he explicitly considers the best epistemological method, it comes as no surprise that he explicitly challenges Modernist forms of both empiricism and rationalism. The empiricist approach of simple induction is unacceptable because by definition perception grasps particulars and not general patterns—which must be accounted for in some other way, since they are clearly present in human experience (CAL, pp.

---

The rationalist method is unacceptable because it begins with an introspective consciousness that is in full contact with conceptual relationships but fails to connect with and account for the contingent relationships outside of consciousness (CAL, pp. 3–6). The phenomenological method overcomes the shortcomings of each of the above. For the phenomenologist, the simplest element of perception is a figure against a background. Perception always already involves a patterned meaning, yet this perceptual starting point or perceptual given remains open to different interpretations. These different interpretations remain rooted in the perceptual act but can be made more precise when expressed in language. This means that different interpretations always remain possible but some will be better than others, since something measures them: the perceived. Moreover, this also means that the phenomenological method is complex since it both describes lived-through perceptual experience and attempts to interpret this experience—this means that “the criteria for this method will not be a multiplicity of facts which will serve as proofs for predefined hypothesis. The proof will be in the fidelity to the phenomena, i.e., in the precise hold which we will have of the material used and, to some extent, our proximity to pure description” (CAL, p. 8). We accept the theory, then, that describes/interprets experience and its objects with the greatest clarity.

We can perhaps even use the word “alienation” here, for Merleau-Ponty is trying to describe experience in a way that is less alienating than the descriptions of both empiricist and rationalist forms of Modernism. He is trying to offer a description that accurately describes/interprets human experience as we actually live it—not as it is misconstrued or mis-constructed by Modernist theory. We might even say that Merleau-Ponty is trying to describe human nature as accurately as possible. The terms “human nature” and “alienation” perhaps imply a fixed and precise human essence from which the alienation occurs. Yet, since this “essence language” of Modernism is precisely part of what Merleau-Ponty seeks to overcome, he argues that we can no longer think of human nature as a fixed essence, that is, as an abstract class concept projected back into nature. However, for Merleau-Ponty this does not mean that there is no human nature at all or that it is can be arbitrarily constructed by linguistic interlocutors. Just as we find stable perceptual patterns in the world, we are able to identify similar behavior patterns among the individuals that we come to label as human beings. The frequently ignored The Structure of Behavior contains what remains a profound and original characterization of three general structures of existence: matter, life, and humanity. These general structures are revealed as gestalt perceptual forms, overlapping yet as distinct. Since we are embodied beings, our personal life and free choices rest upon the relatively stable structures of the human body. As embodied beings, human beings are similar to each other, though not identical, and these similarities allow us at least to develop some meaningful and provisional norms for the species—meaningful generalizations that, granted, are not exact and that allow for individuality and difference. Human beings are poorly described (in a way that is alienating) by either rationalist

or empiricist forms of Modernism since both assume a mind/world dualism, with rationalism reducing everything to the ego's pure thought and the internal relations of ideas, and with empiricism reducing everything to discrete perceptions in external relations. Merleau-Ponty insists that we must speak of "a new meaning of the word 'meaning'"—one that is neither the formal relations of ideas nor the mere association of isolated units of data, but one rooted in the body's lived-through encounter with the world (PhP, p. 146). Meaning is formed as the world's structures and patterns have an impact upon the aware embodied subject who simultaneously takes them up and interprets them. Meaning is formed as the aware human body opens upon and intersects with a public world. Rationality, then, must be understood as an agreement of perspectives, of the individual's own perspectives as he or she actively relates to the world, and of the individual's perspectives with those of others as they actively relate to the world together.

When Merleau-Ponty takes up politics and the philosophy of history, he characterizes historical rationality in much the same way: as an agreement of perspectives, of the individual's own with one another, of the individual's with those experienced by others, of a group's with those experienced by other groups, and of a society's with those of its past. There is no pre-established rationality, either in nature or human societies, and there are no pre-determined paths in history. This does not mean, however, that history has no sens, no meaning or direction. History follows neither a formal logic nor a mechanistic causality, with the future derived from or caused by the past. Yet, it is certainly true, based on the specific patterns of the present, that some future patterns are more probable than others. By claiming that this is the case, Merleau-Ponty's political philosophy is thus able to escape the pre-determination of both the Natural Law politics of the capitalist tradition and the mechanistic materialism of communist tradition. Since Merleau-Ponty's human subject is not the isolated rational subject already in possession of inalienable rights, as the Natural Law theory of Hobbes and Locke states, and since his subject is not the mere result of material forces, as mechanistic materialism states, and since his subject is aware of this world and can act meaningfully upon it, he outlines a theory of politics, including a theory of the political subject, that is a plausible alternative to each of these other more alienated extremes. Rationality and rights are not already established but are established as an outcome of action, dialog, and debate. Human individuals are aware beings who are practically engaged in concrete situations, in situations that tend to be governed by laws, rules, customs and habits. Individuals negotiate these situations as whole persons with the full range of human concerns (from salary to dignity to care for others) usually in an effort to get these concerns addressed. This is frequently done at the lived level, without complete awareness of the entirety of the institutions within which the specific situation rests, and yet often with a keen awareness of the respective power and authority of the situation's participants. Again, rationality and rights here appear as a result of action and dialog; they reflect human experience as a whole, and often reflect both an imbalance and balance of power. If the imbalance is too great, conflict will likely emerge, but if a balance is felt and perceived by all, the structure of the situation will likely be confirmed. This, says Merleau-Ponty, is how we should attempt to make sense of
politics and the movement of history, and not as a manifestation of abstract ideas or the mere outcome of material or economic events.¹¹

We may now say that we can recognize a number of similarities between Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. (1) Both accept Kant’s refutation of idealism: there would not be what we call human experience if it were not directed toward a stable object in the world. (2) Both accept the related point that human experience and human knowledge involve a relationship to an object in a really existing world and an *awareness* of this object. (3) Both reject knowledge conceived as an instrument that represents the world using abstract categories that appear to a purely disembodied subject that is separate from the world and the whole of lived-through experience. (4) Both reject the radical separation of the subject and the object in human experience. (5) Both recognize the problem of unjustified criteria or foundations for human knowledge and both solve this problem by arguing that these foundations are to be given in experience itself, rather than by saying, like the skeptic, that there are no criteria or, more recently, that they are based merely on the conventional agreement of interlocutors. (6) Both subsequently recognize that the distinction between appearance and reality is given within experience itself, and that it is experience itself that informs us that we have not reached the object. Each negation, i.e., each realization that we have not reached the object, occurs within experience and attempts a correction. Or, to put it differently, we judge that one experience is not correct only from the point of view of another that we accept. (7) For both the movement of history involves the human being’s total, and not just conceptual, experience. (8) For both the human subject is a social subject, a subject related to the natural and social world, and not the alienated subject of Modernism’s isolated individual. In sum, both reject and provide an alternative to the Modernist philosophy of the isolated rational subject who enjoys full possession of his or her own rational representations but of little else.

We should conclude by also briefly considering what this alternative philosophy means to Postmodernism, or at least to the way Postmodernism is formulated by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition*.¹² First, we must recognize that the answer to the problem of foundations and criteria for human knowledge that has been sketched out in the name of Hegel and Merleau-Ponty bears some similarity to the one outlined by Lyotard since he also reports that traditional Western attempts to justify its knowledge claims are no longer feasible (*PC*, p. xxiii). Empirical justifications themselves need to be proven since empirical observations are deceptive and limited, and rationalist means of justification can no longer be


maintained since Gödel has shown that logical systems include propositions that they should be able to prove but cannot and are thus incomplete. In a word, we cannot regard them as self-justifying. Thus we can no longer justify a theory by appeal to empirical support or by appeal to the meta-theoretical criteria of logic such as consistency, completeness, etc. The best we can do, Lyotard claims, is to adopt Wittgenstein's language game theory. Each science, he asserts, should develop its own language game, with its own terms and rules for their use, and the "justification" for these terms must now be regarded as simply the agreement among the expert interlocutors of a given field (PC, pp. 38–44). While it is not clear to what extent Lyotard himself adheres to this view, what is clear is that many who now accept the label of Postmodernism accept something like it. What is expressed here by Lyotard is not too far from what we have just seen expressed by Hegel and Merleau-Ponty. As we have seen, all three reject the mere assertion of criteria that would themselves pass without justification. In addition, a case can be made that the works of Merleau-Ponty and the later Wittgenstein are comparable. While Merleau-Ponty seems to argue that the origin of language must be found in perception, he also argues for the anonymous (public or social) character of perception and that the meaning of words must also have their origin in social activities and social situations. This bears some resemblance to the later Wittgenstein's language game theory, with its claim that a word's meaning is related to how it is used in a social context. While I believe that this general comparison is legitimate, I also believe that the emphasis that Merleau-Ponty places on perception exceeds that of those who generally take up the Postmodernist point of view. Even if we grant that the language game theory involves both a lived-through perceptual situation and the linguistic construction of this situation, for the Postmodernist it appears that it is the latter that is emphasized and not the former. For the Postmodernist it is the conventional agreement among interlocutors that most determines the meaning of these terms. For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, it is the body's perceptual and practical encounter with the world, along with others, that determines the meaning of expressions. Words take on meaning by how they are used in specific public situations, but linguistic use rests upon something more primary, on a perceptual world that is experienced as a public space. In addition, the public space provided by perception must be taken up and adequately framed, otherwise the human attempt to adapt to the world and to each other would be impossible, or at least highly problematic. While it is possible that successful ideas, i.e., those that assist with our...
adaptation to the world, are really no indication that we are reaching the world as it really is, this seems highly unlikely. Yet, even beyond this statistical improbability, we know that certain ideas, certain linguistic expressions, work precisely because they help clarify the world as we actually experience it. Ultimately, then, it is our perceptual openness upon the world that is the measure of the clarity.

We will perhaps have a better sense of the difference between Merleau-Ponty and most postmodernists if we conclude with a brief consider of the works of Jacques Derrida, one of Postmodernism’s leading proponents. Derrida argues that language is a trace of a trace, that is to say, language is a simulacrum that erases its origin in perception, in a perception that itself erases its origins, since each present refers beyond itself in the spatial/temporal horizon of experience. The present, insofar as Derrida discusses it, is thus self-deferring; it is always referring elsewhere. As Derrida puts it, “an interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself.” He refers to this interval as “spacing” and proceeds to name this spacing “archi-writing, archi-trace, or difféance,” which, he claims, is without origin. For Derrida, then, difféance, or the reference of the present to other herein and nows, which first appears as a trace of perception, is separated from its origins by the power of writing and seems to finally reserve the power of deferring solely for itself. Rather than the power of language resting upon the inherently gestalt structure of perception, with a spatial/temporal foreground (or presence) that inherently refers to other places and times on the spatial/temporal horizon, and simultaneously holds them all together, it now seems to be the very origin of this “spacing.” Derrida’s difféance becomes a form of linguistic idealism since it leaves perception behind with its power to create meaning without origin, including, apparently, the meaning of time and space, since it is the constant deferring of language that now creates or rather is the spacing by which we refer to other times and places. This is not to say that Derrida denies the existence of the world or perception but rather that he claims that they are sublimated in a language that eventually leaves them completely behind. He does deny, though, that propositions expressed in language are confirmed or denied by perception. Perception is not a separate form of knowledge that can confirm or deny linguistic propositions or expressions. Rather, perception itself is really only a linguistic expression. For Derrida, then, there is nothing outside the interpretive linguistic system that can confirm or deny it. Derrida’s skepticism about reaching the world is thus similar to Kant’s: we interpret and frame the world through language rather than through categories but in either case we do not reach the world in itself.16

We answer Derrida's skepticism in the same way that we answer Kant's: we cannot account for human experience without reference to the world since it is the stability of the world and the natural cohesion of the moments of time that allow us to account for the cohesion of human experience. We have seen Merleau-Ponty argue this above. In addition, we have seen him argue that even intellectual acts expressed in language (such as counting) would not be possible without the cohesion of the subject's experience that derives primarily from the subject's perceptual openness upon a stable world. For Merleau-Ponty human experience and the human subject are not just an expression of language. Language may help us articulate them more clearly and precisely, but language rests upon them and not vice versa. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of phenomenology's *Fundierung* relationship makes this clear: it is our perceptual being in the world that appears first and that is the most primary. Perception can certainly be sublimated in language, and language is even required to express the perceptual with greater clarity and precision, yet some expressions are clearly more accurate than others, and this can only be so because there is something there to measure the interpretations, the perceived world. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy thus recognizes the power of language to interpret and sublimate our perceptual experience, and even though he recognizes the creative power of language, at some point, if it is to be meaningful, or, even more, if it is to be true, it must refer back to our perceptual experience as we live it.

I have attempted to reveal in detail here what Charles Taylor outlined in his essay, that Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, along with others, stake out a claim against the excesses of Modernism, particularly against the claim of an isolated individual in complete possession only of rational representations. They do so by arguing, with Kant, that human experience as we know it would be impossible without the engagement of consciousness in a really existing stable world, and, beyond Kant, that our primary relationship to the world is not conceptual but lived-through and adaptive. Moreover, the skepticism to which Modernism leads (since its conception of an isolated consciousness provides no way of regaining contact with the world) seems in one way at least to be embraced by Postmodernism. While Postmodernism no longer accepts a rational subject in complete possession of itself, it does accept the claim that we have no access to the world outside our interpretive frameworks, now linguistic systems rather than conceptual categories. The alternative to Modernism outlined by Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, particularly to the claim that human knowledge does not reach the world, can thus be used to stake out a claim against Postmodernism as well. As we now begin to move our way through a new century, and as we leave behind Modernism's mixture of arrogant certainty and skeptical uncertainty, we would do well to adopt the philosophy that has been so sensibly and profoundly outlined by Hegel and especially by Merleau-Ponty, since it puts us in contact with a really existing world, solves many of the problems of Modernism, and does so without committing the errors of Postmodernism.