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Linguistic Philosophy and Phenomenology

At the core of Taylor's project is the conviction that human reality is structured, and in some sense constituted, by layers of meaning. This is the first principle of his philosophical anthropology. But how is it to be made compelling? What resources are available to Taylor for exploring, refining and vindicating this idea? When Taylor arrived at Oxford in 1953, he found himself in the midst of the 'linguistic revolution' in English philosophy. The revolutionary idea of the Oxford philosophers was the discovery of what they took to be the authentic method of philosophical enquiry. The cornerstone of the method was the mobilization, as P. F. Strawson put it, of 'a refined, thorough, and, above all, realistic awareness of the meaning of words'.[1] Such awareness would be secured by careful analysis of the ways in which words are used in ordinary language. The name given to the method was 'linguistic analysis' and the movement which practised it became known as 'ordinary language philosophy' and 'linguistic philosophy'. We have already seen that Taylor found the analytic style of Oxford philosophy to his liking. But what else did it have to offer him? Besides the manner of its philosophizing, what more was there to learn from the linguistic movement that flourished at Oxford in the fifties?

Linguistic Philosophy

The idea that philosophy was properly a matter of linguistic analysis seemed plausible given a certain conception of the objects of

human enquiry. The linguistic philosophers inherited from the British empiricist tradition the view that human enquiry divides into two great branches: the empirical and the conceptual. According to this distinction, empirical enquiry concerns 'matters of fact'. It generates knowledge of facts and in this way it is informative about the world. Conceptual questions, by contrast, concern the meanings that thoughts and sentences must have in order to be able to convey facts at all. The focus of conceptual enquiry is the medium through which things appear in the world rather than the world itself. To be sure, this medium – language and thought – can also be the subject of empirical investigation: philology, for instance, is concerned with certain facts about language; psychology with facts about the mind.[2] But conceptual enquiry is distinct in that it aims to elucidate the ways in which we are able to mean things even in such factual accounts. And it is this clarification of sense-making activity that demarcates philosophy, as well as logic, from the empirical sciences. For Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin and the other pioneers of linguistic analysis, philosophy was circumscribed as conceptual enquiry. The specific task of philosophy was to elucidate the 'logic of language', to clarify the ways in which language users are able to make sense.

The linguistic philosophers were not alone in thinking that the aim of philosophy was the clarification of 'meanings': the view was common to all the philosophers of the analytic movement, from Russell and Moore to Wittgenstein and the logical positivists. But the Oxford philosophers of the fifties had a distinctive conception of how that aim was to be achieved and why it mattered.[3] It was to be achieved in the first place by recognizing the diversity of the ordinary sense-making activities of language users. Such acknowledgement, they believed, was fatal to the belief that all meaningful expressions had something in common – an 'essence' of meaning – that analysis could serve to display. In the second place it was to be achieved by taking heed of the particularity of the ways in which meaning is conveyed in ordinary language. Just as previous philosophers tended to view meaning as if it possessed an essence, they were also inclined to believe that a single model of analysis would suffice for conceptual clarification. The models elaborated by Russell and the young Wittgenstein, for instance, had been inspired by the exacting clarity and precision displayed by the discourses of mathematics and formal logic. But as the later Wittgenstein – another key figure in the linguistic movement – had shown, they were inappropriate as tools for elucidating the meaning of many

ordinary linguistic expressions. Far from clarifying their meaning, such models ended up either obscuring or distorting them. The problem was even more evident in the approach to meaning taken by logical positivism. The logical positivists put forward a simple test for telling whether a proposition conveyed sense: if the proposition claimed to say anything about the world, it was either empirically verifiable or else literally nonsense. But again, this approach took a feature of one type of discourse – in this case natural science – and generalized it into a theory of meaning that rode roughshod over the particularities of ordinary language use.

By attending to the particular details of the diverse forms of speech, without prejudice about how language *must* be in order to be able to convey sense, the linguistic philosophers would avoid the errors of their predecessors. But Russell, the young Wittgenstein and the logical positivists were not the only ones to be misled by inappropriate models of the logic of language: the whole field of metaphysics had succumbed to them. Metaphysical discourse, as the linguistic philosophers understood it, begins with certain puzzles and paradoxes thrown up by the attempt to think generally and systematically about fundamental concepts such as 'truth', 'knowledge', 'mind' and 'reality'. In order to resolve the paradoxes, the metaphysician constructs a theory; say, a theory of Truth or a theory of Mind. But such theories invariably end up being 'shocking to common sense', and worse, they distort the very concepts that philosophy seeks to understand. There thus arises the need for vigilance: to identify and to correct the conceptual distortions that creep into metaphysical thinking. The linguistic philosophers did not suppose that alertness to the full range of meanings a concept ordinarily conveys would solve the problems that gave rise to metaphysics. The point was rather to 'dissolve' the problems, to remove the source of puzzlement and paradox by bringing the metaphysically troublesome concept back to its 'home' usage in ordinary language. Linguistic philosophy provided a kind of antidote to an intellectual disease – the construction of metaphysical illusions.

The revolutionary thrust of linguistic analysis owed much to this 'therapeutic' conception of the tasks of philosophy. The primary goal of Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949) – one of the classic texts of the linguistic movement – was to dispel a long-standing philosophical myth about the nature of the mind by showing how it arises from confusion over the function of mental concepts. The myth in question was mind–body dualism: the idea that the mind

is an entity, distinct from the body, which somehow resides invisibly within the body like a 'ghost in a machine'. According to Ryle, the myth was one of the main legacies of the seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes. In Ryle's view, it had since become so widely accepted that it even deserved to be called the 'official doctrine' of the mind. The dualist theory – or, as it is also called, 'Cartesian dualism' – maintains that every human being possesses both a mind and a body. The body belongs to the physical world, is open to external or public inspection, and is subject to the causal laws that determine the behaviour of physical objects. The body thus has an essentially machine-like existence. The mind, by contrast, has a spirit-like existence. The life of the mind is not accessible from the outside: it consists of a series of mental events or conscious episodes that are privately and incorrigibly witnessed 'from within', as it were, by whoever it is that experiences them. These mental events do not follow each other in the causally determinate way in which physical events unfold. They are not subject to mechanistic laws. The mind and body, according to the dualist doctrine, occupy different worlds and exist in fundamentally different ways. At the same time, they manage to interact and to be united in each individual human being. Each human being is an amalgam of the distinct entities of body and mind.

Ryle sought to show that the dualist theory of the mind was a paradigm case of metaphysical illusion. It is a commonplace of ordinary language, Ryle noted, to do things like communicate thoughts, express feelings, and ascribe intentions and motives to people. We do this without supposing that our interlocutor possesses an inner mental world, with its distinct mode of existence, in addition to a physical visible body. The idea that thoughts, feelings and intentions are properties of some invisible mental entity is a metaphysical construction designed to address questions like 'what kind of stuff is the mind made of?', 'what are its chief attributes?', or 'how does the mind enter into causal relations with other kinds of thing?'. But such questions, Ryle suggests, only make sense if we suppose that what we do when we ordinarily use mental concepts is describe states of affairs, or ascribe properties to things, or denominate particular kinds of object. And this is a mistake; a mistake in the categorization of the concepts we use, or as Ryle put it, a 'category-mistake'. It is a category-mistake because it involves allocating a set of concepts – in this case mental concepts – to the wrong 'logical type'. The mistake can be seen at work, Ryle argued, in a certain way of construing the difference between a statement that describes

an action and a statement that ascribes a motive to the action. The mistaken construal is to take the latter as reporting a further fact, or as describing a 'mental' event that takes place in addition to the physical, observed event reported in the former statement. The confusion misleads the philosopher, who unlike the ordinary language user builds theories on the basis of conceptual categorization, into thinking that there is an inner series of mental events accompanying the publicly observable series of physical events. It then seems natural to posit the existence of an invisible entity, the mind, as their locus. According to Ryle, the very idea of the mind as an inner entity could only occur to someone who had failed to get the 'logical geography' of motive-ascription and kindred concepts clearly in view. Once it is in view, the questions that give rise to the Cartesian theory disappear, and with them the temptation to believe in anything like a 'ghost in the machine'.

The justification of the linguistic method did not lie solely in the therapeutic exposition of conceptual confusion. It also pointed the way to a new, constructive philosophy based on an appreciation of the semantic nuances at play in ordinary language. But enough has been said now to consider how Taylor situated himself in relation to his Oxford professors. In 'Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis' (1959), an article Taylor published while preparing his dissertation at Oxford, he expresses ambivalence towards them.[4] The main lesson to be learned from the linguistic movement, he thinks, is the need for caution in adopting *reductive* modes of analysis. Reductive analysis attempts to translate the items of one language into those of another, in a way that brings out the true meaning of those items more fully, while eliminating the actual terms used in the original language. Clearly, the procedure is more likely to work if the meaning of the original terms is fairly straightforward. But the more complex, subtle and diverse the range of meanings conveyed in the original language, the less plausible the reductionist programme starts to look. By revealing the complexity of ordinary language, the linguistic philosophers helped to uncover deep problems facing reductionist theories of meaning, such as the one advanced by logical positivism. And as we shall see later, Taylor would deploy the same strategy when dealing with reductionist analyses of human action put forward by behaviourism. More generally, Taylor applauds the linguistic philosopher's reluctance to use *a priori* models of analysis. Rather than assuming in a dogmatic manner that language *must* be constituted in a certain way – that is, in accor-

dance with some *a priori* model or requirement, like the capacity to name things or designate objects – we are properly enjoined by linguistic philosophy to look without fixed preconceptions at the language itself, at how it actually works. Linguistic philosophy rightly recommends alertness to the multiplicity of ways in which language is used and guardedness against the tendency to impose a single, homogenizing model. Taylor also has sympathy for the linguistic philosopher's diagnostic thesis that ill-conceived, theoretically motivated constraints about how things *must* be can be a grievous source of error. The identification of such *a priori* constraints, Taylor agrees, gives philosophy an important therapeutic role. It enables us to see how implausible philosophical theories go wrong. Finally, Taylor emphatically concurs with Ryle that the Cartesian theory of the mind is one such theory. That is, he agrees with Ryle that the 'ghost in the machine model' is popular yet wildly implausible, and that the way to tackle it is to expose, through a kind of therapeutic reflection, the source of the error that makes us vulnerable to it.

On the other hand, Taylor had at best a sanguine view of what the linguistic method alone could achieve. In the first place, the grounds of its anti-metaphysical stance seemed shaky. Taylor observed that if linguistic analysis were to deliver a genuine alternative to metaphysics, it would have to proceed in a manner that was free from metaphysical presuppositions itself. It might meet this requirement in one of two ways: either by being neutral with respect to substantive conceptions of the world, or by justifying – and not just leaving to dogma – the view of the world it does favour. It was clear to Taylor that linguistic analysis was not free from metaphysics in the former sense, as Ryle's account of the mind demonstrated. Ryle's method licenses him to discount conceptions of the mind that are inconsistent or absurd by the standards of ordinary linguistic usage. But it only makes sense to do this, Taylor pointed out, if it is already assumed that the use of mental terms in ordinary language provides the framework for a consistent theory. And this itself is a metaphysically loaded, and far from self-evident, conception of language. Moreover, even if a consistent theory could be extracted from ordinary language, there is little reason to think it would be a neutral one in the required sense. The idea that ordinary language clothes a neutral, common-sense view of the world that can serve as an arbiter between theories simply ignores the ways in which common sense is marked by traces of substantive

scientific, metaphysical and theological belief. Common sense is not a repository of neutral or 'natural' beliefs and practices. It is a historically contingent way of interpreting and dealing with the world. The fact that it is a contingent product of history does not of course make it false. But it does make it metaphysically partial. Taylor concluded that the linguistic method was not free of presuppositions as the Oxford philosophers claimed. It was not without prejudice on the issue of how the world is constituted.

So if the linguistic method was really free of metaphysics, it had to be because the substantive views it does favour are not posited dogmatically. But this is just what does seem to happen when common sense or ordinary language usage is summoned to arbitrate disputes. The point of linguistic analysis is to uncover conceptual confusions, which it does by identifying discrepancies between ordinary usage and the revisionary one. But why assume, Taylor remarks, that conflict with common sense amounts to confusion? *Prima facie* arguments can be given for siding with common sense: for instance, that ordinary language has to prove itself in countless acts of communication, or that it embodies the practical knowledge of past generations. But such arguments themselves have to be proved against other rival claims and theories. And then, as Taylor points out, we are no longer engaged in linguistic analysis, but in some other form of argumentative discourse. Whether common sense can be vindicated at this level or not, the point is that linguistic analysis alone will not provide the answer. We have to move beyond the standards of argument warranted by the linguistic method itself. Without such argument, common sense is taken on trust, and the method rests on a dogma. With such argument, the method has recourse to other, non-linguistic forms of reasoning. But linguistic analysis tells us little about how such reasoning proceeds.

This is a serious weakness, in Taylor's view, because we ought to be concerned not just with the meaning of fundamental concepts but with their *validity*. It is a major concern of Taylor's that, in limiting itself to the description of the use of concepts in ordinary language, linguistic analysis is insufficiently *critical*. By leaving language 'as it is', it made it impossible to assess the concepts embedded in given linguistic practices or 'language games'. Neither the mere description of the varieties of linguistic usage, nor the 'dissolution of paradox' that the proper classification of concepts is supposed to bring, allows us to focus on the decisive issue of validity. Consequently, as Taylor put it, the linguistic method generated

a 'strange permissiveness and tolerance as to the content of belief'.[5] Any violation of ordinary usage – say, of 'the language of religious worship in its appropriate place in the proper "language game"' – is left 'not above, but beyond reproach'.[6] But validity that is earned so easily – by simply having its own place in a linguistic practice – is 'hardly an interesting kind of validity'. For it simply bypasses the fundamental problem that many of the concepts and beliefs that feature in different forms of linguistic usage are incompatible with each other. It is here, with *competing* bodies of doctrine about the constitution of reality, with *rival* models of knowledge, and the inflection of such doctrines and models in common-sense belief, that most philosophical problems arise. They do not typically arise, as the linguistic philosophers maintained, from paradoxes arising from the misunderstanding of the logic of language as such. If philosophy has a therapeutic role – and the widespread grip of Cartesian dualism suggests it does – then it will have to take these features into account and not just confused models of conceptual anatomy.

The linguistic method was thus hardly well suited for Taylor's project. First, it made the question of human subjectivity accessible only indirectly through what we are entitled to say about it in ordinary language. It therefore imposed arbitrary limits on how the constitution of human subjectivity could be explored. Second, it failed to think historically. This flaw was evident in the naturalization of common sense. Third, its model of argumentation was insufficiently precise. It was implicitly committed to a certain ontological or metaphysical view but was unable to justify it. Moreover, the linguistic method left it a mystery how argument over such issues is to proceed at all. It seemed to leave them in an argumentative limbo: they were neither purely conceptual questions (and so philosophical) nor purely factual questions (and so scientific ones). In Taylor's view, these drawbacks were all symptoms of a fundamental 'lack of reflection' about method. To be sure, linguistic philosophy had taken some steps in the right direction. It avoided the hasty reductionism and apriorism of earlier models of analysis. And it had identified deeply mistaken interpretations of philosophical concepts, such as the Cartesian account of the mind. But it was unable to identify the proper source of the mistaken conception – its diagnosis was inaccurate – and it failed to provide a viable, convincing alternative. If Taylor was to make good his own project he would have to draw on richer resources than the linguistic method could provide.

Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

He found one such resource in existential phenomenology. Taylor was especially drawn to the work of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Here, the young Taylor found a philosopher addressing the issues that most concerned him with a directness and profundity unlike anything coming from the analytic school. In his first published philosophical article, Taylor attempted to convey to an audience acquainted with linguistic philosophy the neglected insights of Merleau-Ponty's masterpiece, *Phenomenology of Perception*.[7] In doing so, Taylor sketched an approach to the theory of human subjectivity, or philosophical anthropology, that would go on to serve him throughout his writings. While this approach is arrived at largely by way of an exegetical reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty's text, it is also not without criticism of certain general claims made on behalf of the phenomenological method. Taylor is convinced that once it is freed of these questionable methodological assumptions, phenomenology is a vital resource for the theory of subjectivity.

The phenomenological method is the name Merleau-Ponty gives, following Edmund Husserl, to a set of procedures aimed at reaching an undistorted description of experience. The first principle of the method is the 'phenomenological reduction', otherwise known as the 'eidetic reduction' or *epoche*. The phenomenological reduction addresses the following problem: how are we to reflect in a manner that is true to the experience being reflected upon? It is important, if we are aiming at a description of experience as it is prior to reflection, that the model our reflection brings to the experience comes from the original experience itself, and not some extraneous source. But such sources are what we do rely on when we ordinarily engage in reflection: we draw, for example, on common sense, on everyday uses of language, and on what we deem prevailing scientific theories entitle us to believe. If we are to be genuinely open to the content of original experience, if we are to arrive at an undistorted or 'pure' description of it, we have to be prepared to 'bracket' or 'suspend' the natural assumptions of ordinary reflection. And this is what the phenomenological reduction enjoins: we are to put on hold our 'natural attitude' in order 'to make reflection emulate the unreflective life of consciousness'.[8]

According to the phenomenologists, the *epoche* yields a fundamental principle about the nature of conscious life – its intention-

ality. The intentionality thesis is often formulated as the idea that consciousness is always consciousness 'of' something. Consciousness, according to this formulation, is essentially 'directed towards' something. It is about some object, and this relation of 'aboutness' gives content to specific conscious states. Phenomenologists do indeed propound such a thesis, but as Taylor notes, they give it a distinctive twist by further claiming that 'whatever is an object of consciousness has "significance"'.[9] To say that consciousness is intentional is thus to say more about it than that it is directed towards an object: it implies a relation not just of mere aboutness, but aboutness 'for' something. This interpretation of intentionality – we might call it 'intentionality-as-significance' – is elaborated in detail by Merleau-Ponty. In the unreflective life of the perceiver, Merleau-Ponty observed, objects and events appear in a 'phenomenonal field'. The phenomenonal field is not just whatever is present to consciousness, like shapes, sizes, sounds or colours. It also includes things that, in the very act of being perceived, 'refer' beyond themselves. So, for instance, we perceive objects or events as 'hiding' others or 'bringing them into view', as being 'in front of' or 'behind' other things, as 'the beginning of' or 'end of' some object or event. Such percepts refer to or 'announce' other things that are not actual or present. The mere fact that we are able to use such terms as 'announce' and 'refer' to describe percepts suggests that perception has intentionality-as-significance. Taylor is fond of citing Merleau-Ponty's formula that 'each part (of the phenomenonal field) announces more than it contains and . . . thus is already laden with significance'.[10] But a further crucial determinant of the 'logic' or 'syntax' peculiar to the phenomenonal field is the purposes of the perceiver. A phenomenonal object will appear, for example, as 'a means to' or 'in the way of' an end desired by the perceiving subject. In this sense, perception is closely tied to the way in which perceivers are 'at grips' with their environment. Perception is thus intimately connected to behaviour. Indeed, according to Taylor's interpretation of the intentionality thesis, 'perceptual and behavioural space are one . . . our behavioural know-how enters into what we see' and this too 'invests the phenomenonal field with significance'.[11]

Merleau-Ponty's intentionality thesis attempts to capture an essential structure of lived experience. He proposes it as a corrective to the two classical accounts of perception found in empiricism and Kantianism. He first considers the empiricist theory. According to this theory, the basic units of experience are sensations, or, as they

are also called, 'impressions' or 'sense-data'. Sense-impressions are allegedly discrete atoms of experience that provide the raw material for our empirical knowledge. When we see something like a red patch, or smell the odour of a petal, we seem to be in touch with a primitive realm of 'mute' experience furnished directly by the senses. Such sense-data seem to present themselves immediately – the perceiving subject seems quite passive in relation to them – and they seem to give to the perceiver self-contained, fully determinate pieces of sensory information. According to the empiricist theory, the perceptions we commonly experience are combinations of sense-impressions processed by complex psychological mechanisms, such as memory, learning and association. So, for instance, I may perceive the red patch as a flag on account of its combination with other sense-data, such as shape and movement, which, through psychological association, memory and the like, I have learned to identify and respond to in certain ways.

But is this what perception is really like? Merleau-Ponty first pointed out – as, incidentally, did J. L. Austin over in Oxford – that it is hard to identify anything in our perceptual experience with the properties allegedly possessed by the sense-data. Sense-data are supposed to be discrete and determinate, but it is extremely difficult to establish the precise boundaries of our perceptions. We perceive particular objects against a background with no definite limits. The perceptual field is not rigidly framed like a tableau. It is bounded more in the manner of a horizon: indeterminate, out of focus, shifting with the eye of the viewer and never quite caught up by it. At the centre of the perceptual field, where we are able to focus, we find objects with hidden aspects, objects that present themselves as open to perceptual exploration, and so as not fully *present* to any one point of view. Taking these points into account, the sense-data theory seems to distort the quality of the phenomenon in two basic ways. On the one hand, it distorts by making the phenomenon an element of consciousness rather than something before consciousness (treating the phenomenon 'as a mute impression when it always has a meaning'); and on the other hand, it misconstrues the object or meaning as 'always fully determinate'.[12]

Merleau-Ponty then considers the classical alternative to empiricism – the so-called 'intellectualist' or 'rationalist' theory of the Kantian school. The Kantian view grants that the objects we perceive possess meaning, in the sense that they stand in logical, and not just contingent psychological, relations to each other. In per-

ception, we apprehend objects, properties and events *as* something. But the ground of the meaning-bearing quality of perception, on the Kantian view, is our faculty of *judgement*. Perceptions possess meaning because they display the logical form of judgements. According to this view, a perception has sense in the same way a proposition does. We grasp objects and events *as* something on account of the fact that whatever is given in perception is submitted *a priori* to the conceptualizing activity of the mind – a view Kant expressed in the famous formula 'intuitions without concepts are blind'.[13]

But while Kantianism marks some advance on empiricism, Merleau-Ponty is far from satisfied with it. One obvious weakness with the theory is that we often perceive, and perceive 'as', without being able to put what we perceive into words. So it would seem that prior to any conceptualization of experience, prior to experience assuming the form of a judgement 'that', perception gives us access to a world, a pre-predicative or pre-objective world. But the problem with the Kantian view is not just that it rules out the possibility of such access to the world. It overlooks the radically perspectival nature of perception, on account of which it differs fundamentally from judgement. Percepts, like propositions, convey information about what we perceive. But unlike judgements, they are also essentially informative about where the subject stands in relation to what is perceived. Furthermore, the propositional model of perception – like the sense-data account – fails to appreciate the richness of the phenomenonal field, a richness and diversity 'that no finite series of statements can do justice to'.[14] There is always an excess, surplus or remainder to the described content of a perception. The perceptual field provides a 'background' against which particular perceptions can be thematized or predicatively described. But that thematization and predicative description cannot be extended to cover the background itself. Descriptions of the predicative world are based on a never fully describable, never fully explicit, perceptual, pre-predicative or pre-objective world. This failure to acknowledge the dependence of the explicit on the implicit, of the predicative on the pre-predicative, is a serious shortcoming of the intellectualist theory.

The phenomena of perception are thus poorly described by both the classical accounts. If we attend to the phenomena, we see that the perceptual field presents meaningful relations, a world, to the perceiving subject prior to any non-perceptual input. Drawing on its *own* resources – and not by relying on some non-perceptual

mechanism of psychological association, conceptual schematization or interpretation – the perceiving subject finds itself *in* a world, that is to say, in the midst of phenomena that bear meaningful relations to each other and to the subject of perception. The classical accounts can miss all this, Merleau-Ponty suggested, because they allow considerations that are appropriate for scientific *theorizing* about perception to intrude into and to distort the description of perception itself. They take it for granted that perception will deliver knowledge of itself in the same way it reliably delivers knowledge of physical objects, without noticing that physical objects and percepts have very different appearances. This is particularly evident in the empiricist theory. Our physiological knowledge suggests that visual perception involves a causal process by which light strikes the retina, triggering a neural response transmitted via the optic nerve to the visual cortex, where it is decoded and 'experienced' as, say, a patch of white. Impressed by this, the sense-data theorist is then led into depicting the percept as possessing properties belonging to causal processes generally. But it only takes a moment of 'pure' reflection to see that our experience does not possess these properties. Blinded by the natural attitude, the classical account freezes the perception of a meaning – which in its essence is indeterminate, multiply expressible, and in normal cases practically orienting for a subject – into a discrete, inert, self-contained sensory datum. As Taylor puts it in a formulation I shall return to in the next chapter, the empiricist theory *reifies* the mind. Not only is this false, but to the extent that it helps shape the experience it purports to describe, it is oppressive.

Taylor is wholly sympathetic to Merleau-Ponty's critique of theories of perception that unwittingly objectify, and thereby falsify, lived experience. He also shares Merleau-Ponty's view that a phenomenology of perception is needed as a reminder that lived experience is intelligible as a field of meanings and not, as the standard accounts maintain, as a series of causally related entities or events. Taylor agrees that the pre-objective world of lived human experience has a different kind of intelligibility from the objective world presented by scientific theory, a point that the dominant modern philosophies of perception overlook. But Merleau-Ponty goes further by saying that the objective world, or the world disclosed to common sense and scientific reflection, has its *genesis* in the pre-objective world. He claims that the pre-objective or pre-predicative mode of being in the world is in some sense originary

or primordial. The objective apprehension of things, including scientific representations, is in this sense conditioned or derivative. The phenomenological reduction suggests we should see objective representations as one amongst many ways of making human experience explicit, rather than as the primary or essential mode of experience. One of the tasks of Merleau-Ponty's genetic phenomenology, then, is to show how the idea of an objective fact or experience, the kind of fact and experience made explicit in everyday discourse and the theoretical languages of science and philosophy, presupposes the pre-predicative, pre-objective experience of the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, the pre-objective world is the 'condition of possibility' of the known world. It functions, as Taylor puts it, as the 'transcendental implicate' of objective discourse.[15]

Taylor is wholly sympathetic to this idea too. Indeed, much of Taylor's own work on epistemology will simply recapitulate, from various angles, Merleau-Ponty's thesis that objective experience is only intelligible when set against a background, pre-predicative disclosure of the world. But he will also try to overcome a difficulty he sees in Merleau-Ponty's construal of the status of phenomenological descriptions. Ideally, the phenomenological reduction would bracket everything that does not belong to the original experience itself. The phenomenologist aims at a 'pure' description of the original experience, that is, a description of the pre-objective, pre-propositional, presuppositionless world inhabited by the pre-reflective subject. Only such a putatively pure and presuppositionless description would be able to give voice to the world as it is prior to objectification. If we are really to reach back to the origins or genesis of the structures that underwrite ordinary language and scientific discourse, we would seem to require a kind of *self-authenticating* descriptive vocabulary, one that owed nothing whatsoever to the everyday and scientific languages that presuppose it. But as Taylor notes, there is something inherently paradoxical about the very idea of a presuppositionless description. Certainly, Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenological descriptions are by no means presupposition-free: 'they are inescapably on the predicative side of the "predicative"–"pre-predicative" boundary line'.[16] They therefore take for granted the applicability to experience of at least some categories. The fact that they do take certain categories for granted should not be interpreted as a fault in Merleau-Ponty's *application* of the phenomenological method. For the suspension of one set of categories for the sake of describing an original experience will always put into

play other modes of expression, which in turn can be submitted to a phenomenological reduction. It follows that no description is ever immune from revision, a point affirmed by Merleau-Ponty himself when he writes that 'no phenomenological reduction is ever complete'. But if descriptions of original experience are never complete, if they are always revisable in the light of a further phenomenological reduction, then no description of original experience is ever really 'pure'. 'Applied to itself', Taylor remarks, 'the theory of phenomenological reduction underlying the claim that description can be "pure" leads to a vicious regress.'[17]

Taylor is thus sceptical of the very enterprise of pure presuppositionless description. It seems to presume that some self-authenticating descriptive vocabulary is there to be found if only the phenomenologist looks hard enough. It is as if there were some foundational, self-evidently true way of talking about experience that can be settled, with certainty, once and for all. Admittedly, Merleau-Ponty himself typically turns away from such a foundationalist understanding of the phenomenological enterprise. He speaks, for instance, of the phenomenologist's predicament as that of a perpetual beginner. And this would suggest there is no way of reaching some final purity. But the concession has implications which Taylor – at least in his early writings – claims Merleau-Ponty does not adequately address. For if the originary content given to the pre-objective experience is intrinsically open to revision, what entitles us to reach any philosophical conclusions about the nature of the subject who experiences? It is one thing to say that the pre-objective world is a necessary presupposition of objective descriptions. But it is quite another to say that the concrete description of the pre-objective world offered by the phenomenologist itself enjoys philosophical necessity. For it to have such necessity, it would have to possess a finality and purity it can never obtain. We should therefore not look to phenomenology for the 'authentically true categories' in which human reality is described once and for all. Simply in virtue of being possible objects of a further phenomenological reduction, the descriptive categories are revisable and corrigible. And if they are always open to revision they have no strictly necessary status.

Furthermore, the phenomenological method does not provide us with a guide for dealing with *conflicts* of description. If several different and conflicting descriptions can plausibly be given of some phenomenon, how are we to choose between them? The phenomenological method as such does not seem to offer much help here. It

does not clarify how the validity of competing basic descriptions is to be determined. The argument will be 'genetic', it will involve tracing categories back to phenomenologically more primitive ones. But again, it is not clear what *ontological* conclusions can be established by such argument. Phenomenology may be well-suited to clarifying the structure of lived experience. But it does not make it clear why the structures of experience it discloses should be the ultimate consideration for determining what the experiencing subject really *is*.

We might recall that Taylor expressed a similar reservation about linguistic analysis. By attending to the details of actual language use, the linguistic philosophers had demonstrated the irreducible diversity of meaning-making activity. This was an important correction to the homogenizing tendency of previous theories of meaning, especially logical positivism. But the downside of this approach was that having shown the plurality of language games it was unable to say how we can arbitrate between them. This is no small drawback from Taylor's point of view, for if philosophical anthropology is to have any credibility it must have something to say about what makes one theory of subjectivity better than another. We must have some standards for accepting or discounting rival accounts. Likewise, the phenomenological method rightly enjoins us to attend to the rich and inexhaustible details of lived experience. In doing so it corrects the implausibly static constructions of experience found in the classical empiricist and Kantian accounts. But it fails to make clear how the purity or primordiality of phenomenological categories is to be decided. It too fails to reflect adequately on how validity is possible in the theory of subjectivity.

This problem would not be so pressing if it were not for the fact that a powerful rival to *all* accounts of subjectivity that deploy categories of meaning has emerged in modern times. The rival theory insists on the one hand that our ontological commitments should be decided by what is ultimate at the level of *explanation*. On the other hand, it claims that what is ultimate at the level of explanation is not at all like the way things appear either in ordinary language or in primordial lived experience. Rather, it is the way things look to the modern natural scientist. Modern science explains nature without taking into account the 'meaning' nature appears to have from the standpoint of common sense or phenomenology. And why, proponents of the rival account argue, should human nature be different? Are not the meanings objects have for us redundant from a scientific point of view? If they are, they have no

place in the ultimate order of explanation and so no role to play in an ontology of the human or philosophical anthropology. This is the central thesis of mechanism. Taylor's chief philosophical preoccupation in the sixties was to be a kind of settling of accounts with mechanism.