



FROM HUSSERL TO MERLEAU-PONTY: TRACING THE ARC OF PHENOMENOLOGY

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menelusuri perkembangan penting dalam pemikiran fenomenologis dari permulaannya di bawah pemerintahan Edmund Husserl hingga evolusinya di bawah pemerintahan Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Tujuan utamanya adalah untuk memahami kesinambungan dan perbedaan perspektif mereka, serta pengaruhnya terhadap perkembangan fenomenologi sebagai tradisi filosofis. Kajian ini menggunakan metode analisis konseptual dan tematik untuk menjelaskan perkembangan tersebut dengan mengkaji teks dasarnya. Temuan ini mengungkapkan pemahaman yang berbeda tentang evolusi ini, menyoroti pendirian fenomenologi transendental Husserl yang berfokus pada kesadaran murni dan perubahan transformatif Merleau-Ponty menuju pengalaman yang diwujudkan. Dengan mensintesis hubungan antara proyek-proyek mereka, analisis ini memberikan pandangan komprehensif tentang alur pemikiran fenomenologis.

Kata kunci: Fenomenologi, Husserl & Merleau-Ponty, Intensionalitas, Kesadaran, Perwujudan

Abstract

This research traces the key developments in phenomenological thought from its inception with Edmund Husserl to its evolution under Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The primary objective is to understand the continuity and divergence in their perspectives, and the influence on phenomenology's progression as a philosophical tradition. The study employs a conceptual and thematic analysis method to elucidate these developments by examining their foundational texts. The findings reveal a nuanced understanding of this evolution, highlighting both Husserl's establishment of transcendental phenomenology focused on pure consciousness and Merleau-Ponty's transformative turn toward embodied experience. By synthesizing connections between their projects, this analysis provides a comprehensive view of the arc of phenomenological thought.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Husserl & Merleau-Ponty, Intentionality, Consciousness, Embodiment

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology, a philosophical discipline rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl, has profoundly influenced modern thought. Born on April 8, 1859, Husserl, an Austrian-German philosopher and mathematician, founded the school of phenomenology with the aim of rigorously analyzing consciousness and granting



philosophy the character of a strict science.¹ Husserl argued that transcendental consciousness establishes the limits of all possible knowledge, redefining phenomenology as a transcendental-idealist philosophy.²

Husserl introduced the seminal concept of "Bewusstsein von Etwas" (consciousness of something), which challenged Descartes' inward-looking conception of consciousness (*Cogito ergo sum*) by asserting that consciousness is inherently directed outward, toward objects and the world.³ This idea overcame the Cartesian subject-object divide by emphasizing that consciousness is always consciousness of something outside itself.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty further developed and critiqued Husserl's ideas, making significant contributions to the evolution of phenomenology.⁴ As a leading French philosopher and exponent of Phenomenology in France, Merleau-Ponty was strongly influenced by Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is the foundational role of perception in human experience, emphasizing the body as the primary locus of world-knowledge and challenging the long-standing tradition of placing consciousness as the sole source of knowledge.⁵

Literature Review

Despite extensive individual scholarship on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, few studies have systematically traced the connections and tensions between their philosophical projects, revealing broader themes in the progression of phenomenological thought.⁶ This study aims to fill this gap by providing an integrated analysis of their primary texts, elucidating conceptual lineages and areas of debate between these foundational thinkers. By understanding the transition from Husserl's cognitivism to Merleau-Ponty's embodied view, this research aims to contribute to a deeper comprehension of phenomenology in its historical context and contemporary relevance.

Merleau-Ponty, while influenced by Husserl, significantly revised his core concepts. Regarding Husserl's central notion of intentionality as consciousness's directedness toward objects, Merleau-Ponty asserted a more embodied, world-involved understanding. As Priest (1998) notes, "For Merleau-Ponty, intentionality represents the meaningful orientation of one's whole being rather than just mental directedness". This interpretation widens intentionality into a more existential conception, foreshadowing Merleau-Ponty's explicit emphasis on the body as the primary site of knowing the world, as articulated in "Phenomenology of Perception": "Our own body

¹ David Woodruff Smith, *Husserl* (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203742952>.

² Merleau-Ponty Erdem Erciyes, *Three Pillars of Phenomenology*, n.d.

³ Dermot Moran, *Edmund Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology* (Polity, 2005).

⁴ Hubert L Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being in Time, Division I*, vol. 1 (MIT Press, 1990).

⁵ Keith Whitmoyer, "Husserl and His Shadows: Phenomenology After Merleau-Ponty," *The Subject (s) of Phenomenology: Rereading Husserl* (2020): 311–326.

⁶ Isenyo Solomon Ogaba, "A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HUSSERL'S AND MERLEAU-PONTY'S CRITIQUES OF MODERN TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO EPISTEMOLOGY," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* ISSN, no. 4 (2021): 2630–7073.

is in the world as the heart is in the organism...it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive; it breathes life into them and sustains them inwardly".⁷

By examining these developments and engaging with primary texts like Husserl's "Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology" and "The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology," as well as Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception" and "The Visible and the Invisible," this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the arc of phenomenological thought from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty.

Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl, born on April 8, 1859, was an Austrian-German philosopher and mathematician who established the school of phenomenology.⁸ His philosophy was a method for the description and analysis of consciousness through which philosophy attempts to gain the character of a strict science.⁹ Husserl's phenomenology was not founded; it grew. His conception of phenomenology as a new method destined to supply a new foundation for both philosophy and science developed only gradually and kept changing to the very end of his career.¹⁰

Husserl's phenomenology is based on the concept of intentionality, the directedness of the consciousness toward an object.¹¹ He was preoccupied with the question of how something like the constitution of numbers ever comes about. His work contains the first traces of the concepts of "reflection," "constitution," "description," and the "founding constitution of meaning," concepts that later played a predominant role in Husserl's philosophy.¹²

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the German philosopher and mathematician widely considered the founder of phenomenology, developed his philosophical system gradually over an extensive career. Husserl was preoccupied with elucidating how consciousness constitutes meaning, pursuing this line of inquiry through meticulous descriptions of structures of consciousness.¹³ Central to his phenomenology is the seminal concept of intentionality, the directedness of consciousness toward objects, which overcomes Cartesian subject-object divides through intertwined meaning-making.¹⁴

Husserl's extensive oeuvre, spanning works like *Logical Investigations* (1900-01) and *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), contains the origins of foundational phenomenological concepts, including epoché, phenomenological reduction, and transcendental idealism.¹⁵ These frustrate straightforward summaries, as Husserl

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology of Perception," *Translated by Colin Smith* (1965).

⁸ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Routledge, 2002).

⁹ David Woodruff Smith, *Husserl* (Routledge, 2013).

¹⁰ Sebastian Luft, *Husserl's Phenomenological Discovery of the Natural Attitude*, *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 31, 1998.

¹¹ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹² Edmund Husserl, *The Shorter Logical Investigations* (Routledge, 2002).

¹³ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge university press, 2000).

¹⁴ Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*.

¹⁵ Smith, *Husserl*.

continually revised and expanded his architectonic system.¹⁶ Nevertheless, his account of transcendental consciousness, which constitutes the meanings through which we experience the world, forms the bedrock of his phenomenological project.¹⁷

Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty, born on March 14, 1908, was a French philosopher and the leading exponent of Phenomenology in France. He was greatly influenced by Husserl and expanded and critiqued Husserl's ideas. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology amounts to a radical departure from Husserl's theory of intentionality generally, and more specifically from his account of the intentional constitution of the body and its role in perceptual experience.¹⁸

Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), the French phenomenologist, assimilated and transfigured Husserlian motifs like intentionality and epoché through a radical rethinking of embodied experience. By foregrounding the body subject, Merleau-Ponty replaces transcendental consciousness with an immanent figure immersed in the sensible world it takes up. In this vein, his central works - like *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) - offer a philosophy of ambiguity that breaks down dualisms between body and consciousness, world and thing, visible and invisible.¹⁹

Developing a rich ontology of flesh and intertwining, Merleau-Ponty de-privileges vision, exploring new phenomenological ground through the tacit intentionality of the body schema. This overturns Husserl's characterization of the body as just another intentional object among others. Instead, the body becomes the primary site - the vehicle and vortex - of open-ended sense-making whose gestural vocabulary resists reduction into fully explicit meanings.²⁰

Merleau-Ponty Diverged from Husserl

Merleau-Ponty advanced Husserl's conception of intentionality by asserting that intentionality is not just "aboutness" but the aboutness of something. He argued that there is no hard and fast separation between bodily conduct and intelligent conduct; rather, there's a unity of behavior that expresses the intentionality and hence the meaning of this conduct.²¹

While influenced by his predecessor, Merleau-Ponty significantly revised Husserl's core concepts. Regarding Husserl's central notion of intentionality as consciousness's directedness toward objects, Merleau-Ponty asserted a more embodied, world-involved understanding. For Merleau-Ponty, intentionality represents the meaningful orientation of one's whole being rather than just mental directedness.²² This interpretation widens

¹⁶ Luft, *Husserl's Phenomenological Discovery of the Natural Attitude*, vol. 31, p. .

¹⁷ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*.

¹⁸ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (Routledge, 2019).

¹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Visible and the Invisible: The Intertwining-the Chiasm," *The visible and the invisible. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic writings* (2004): 130–155.

²⁰ Stephen Priest, *Merleau-Ponty* (Routledge, 2002).

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology of Perception."

²² Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*.

intentionality into a more existential conception, foreshadowing his explicit emphasis on the body.

Likewise, Merleau-Ponty challenged Husserlian phenomenology's characterization of the body and perception. Contra Husserl's account of the body as just another intentional object presented to consciousness,²³ Merleau-Ponty foregrounds bodily engagement as the vehicle through which one inhabits and knows the world.²⁴ Perception is therefore an inherently carnal phenomenon—the body and world co-defining through dynamic, open-ended meaning-making.²⁵

Comparing Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

Despite significant commonalities, there are several respects in which Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's accounts of the world differ. Both Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's accounts of our experience of the world challenge Husserl's assertion of the possibility of a wordless consciousness.²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, in particular, puts pressure on Husserl's account of the necessary structure of the world.

While both phenomenologists sought to describe the essential structures of experience, salient points of divergence arise between Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's systematics. Husserl's contention that an absolute transcendental consciousness could, in principle, be detached entirely from the world comes under pressure from Merleau-Ponty's world-immersed ontology. Relatedly, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment and habitual body memory troubles Husserl's arguably overly cognitive model of experience. In these ways, continuity replete with productive tensions exists between their respective philosophical projects.²⁷

RESEARCH METHOD

The research methodology employed in this study is a combination of Conceptual Analysis and Thematic Analysis, which are particularly suited to the study of philosophical concepts and their evolution over time.

Conceptual Analysis

Conceptual analysis begins with a detailed examination of the key concepts put forth by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. This includes concepts such as intentionality, consciousness, and perception. The aim is to understand these concepts in their original context, as well as how they have been interpreted and expanded upon by subsequent thinkers. This involves a close reading of primary texts.

The primary texts analyzed in this study include Husserl's seminal works 'Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology' and 'The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology', along with Merleau-Ponty's major treatises 'Phenomenology of Perception' and 'The Visible and the Invisible'. These foundational

²³ Smith, *Husserl*.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology of Perception."

²⁵ Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Being and Time (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.)" (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology of Perception."

texts were selected due to their central role in elucidating the key philosophical concepts examined in this analysis. While not exhaustive, they represent the major perspectives and developments that characterize each thinker's phenomenological project.

The primary texts analyzed include:

- Husserl's "Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology", which outlines his foundational phenomenological method centered on the concept of intentionality.
- His "The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology", which frames phenomenology as a response to epistemological crises in modern science.
- Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception", which argues for the body as the primordial site of knowing the world.
- His "The Visible and the Invisible", is an unfinished work exploring a radical "ontology of flesh" that sought to overcome mind-body dualism.

These works represent the major developments that characterize each thinker's contributions and were thus selected as essential for this conceptual/thematic analysis.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis, on the other hand, involves identifying key themes that emerge in the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. These themes may include the role of the body in perception, the relationship between the individual and the world, and the nature of phenomenological experience. Once these themes are identified, they are analyzed in terms of how they contribute to the overall arc of phenomenology from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty. This involves a detailed examination of how these themes are presented and developed in their respective works, as well as how they interact with each other to form a coherent philosophical system.

The combination of conceptual and thematic analysis allows for a comprehensive understanding of the development of phenomenology. It enables the tracing of the arc from Husserl's original ideas to Merleau-Ponty's expansions and critiques, highlighting both the continuity and divergence in their thought.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Key Developments from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty

Husserl's phenomenology was centered around the concept of intentionality, which he saw as the directedness of consciousness towards an object or phenomenon. As he states in "Ideas," "Intentional consciousness is solely a consciousness of something".²⁸ This notion of intentionality sought to overcome the Cartesian subject-object divide by positing that consciousness is always consciousness of something outside itself.

However, Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception" represented a significant shift in phenomenological thought by emphasizing the body's primacy over

²⁸ Edmund Husserl and Dermot Moran, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (p. 199) (Routledge, 2012).

consciousness in perception and knowledge acquisition. He argued that "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism...it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive; it breathes life into them and sustains them inwardly".²⁹ This marked a departure from the long-standing philosophical tradition of placing consciousness as the sole source of knowledge.

In his later work, "The Visible and the Invisible," Merleau-Ponty further developed his critique of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, proposing a radical "ontology of flesh" that sought to overcome the mind-body dualism. He wrote, "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire".³⁰ This ontology of flesh challenged Husserl's notion of pure, transcendental consciousness by grounding perception and knowledge in the lived, embodied experience of being an incarnate subject.

Meanwhile, in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, Husserl diagnosed modern science's alienation from the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) and need for the phenomenological epoché: "This primal life-world...has become alienated" yet remains the "operative intentional accomplishment" grounding knowledge.³¹

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis table below summarizes these key developments:

Theme	Husserl	Merleau-Ponty
Intentionality	Husserl introduced intentionality as the directedness of consciousness towards an object, laying the foundation for phenomenology.	Merleau-Ponty expanded on Husserl's concept of intentionality, asserting that it is not just "aboutness" but aboutness of something, marking a key development in phenomenological thought.
Consciousness	Husserl argued that transcendental consciousness sets the limits of all possible knowledge, establishing phenomenology as a transcendental-idealist philosophy.	Merleau-Ponty critiqued Husserl's focus on consciousness, arguing for the body as the primary site of knowing the world, representing a significant shift in phenomenological thought.
Perception	Husserl's phenomenology was a method for the	At the core of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a sustained argument for the foundational role that perception plays in the human

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (p. 235) (Routledge, 2002).

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Visible and the Invisible (p. 139)" (1968).

³¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (p.155-158) (Northwestern University Press, 1970).

	description and analysis of consciousness.	experience of the world, reflecting a key divergence from Husserl's original concepts.
Body	Husserl's focus was more on consciousness and less on the body.	Merleau-Ponty emphasized the body as the primary site of knowing the world, a corrective to the long philosophical tradition of placing consciousness as the source of knowledge, marking a transformative contribution to phenomenology.
Phenomenological Reduction	Husserl proposed the phenomenological reduction, a method for gaining insight into phenomena as they are given to consciousness.	Merleau-Ponty critiqued the phenomenological reduction, arguing that it overlooks the embodied and situated nature of human experience, representing a significant critique of Husserl's ideas.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis

Merleau-Ponty's Continuity and Breaks with Husserl

While building upon Husserl's foundational concept of intentionality, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology also represented a significant departure from his predecessor's ideas. Husserl's characterization of the body as just another intentional object presented to consciousness was challenged by Merleau-Ponty's foregrounding of bodily engagement as the primary vehicle through which one inhabits and knows the world.³²

In "Phenomenology of Perception," Merleau-Ponty argues, "The body is our general medium for having a world".³³ This marks a shift from Husserl's cognitivist model of experience towards an embodied, existential understanding of intentionality and perception. As Merleau-Ponty elaborates, "It is the body which points out, and which tends towards, the thing".³⁴ This emphasis on the body's intentional arc and motor intentionality challenged Husserl's characterization of intentionality as a purely mental phenomenon.

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's later work, "The Visible and the Invisible," developed a rich ontology of "flesh" and "chiasm" that sought to overcome the Cartesian dualism between subject and object, mind and body. He writes, "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance... It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body".³⁵ This notion of flesh as a reversible, intertwining of seer and seen, toucher and touched, further diverged from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology by grounding perception and knowledge in the lived, ambiguous experience of being an embodied subject.³⁶

³² Edmund Husserl and Dermot Moran, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (p. 165) (Routledge, 2012).

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (p. 146) (Routledge, 2002).

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (p.159) (Routledge, 2002).

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (p. 146).

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Visible and the Invisible (p.146)" (1968).

For Husserl in *Crisis*, likewise, philosophizing regains the primal lifeworld preceding abstractions: "The lifeworld...is already there...an operative intentional accomplishment".³⁷

Influence and Limitations of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

Husserl's work laid the foundation for phenomenology as a rigorous philosophical discipline, establishing key concepts such as intentionality and the idea that transcendental consciousness sets the limits of all possible knowledge. His extensive oeuvre, including seminal works like "Logical Investigations" and "Cartesian Meditations," provided the origins of foundational phenomenological concepts such as epoché, phenomenological reduction, and transcendental idealism.^{38, 39}

However, Husserl's focus on consciousness as the source of knowledge has been critiqued for overlooking the embodied and situated nature of human experience. As Merleau-Ponty argued in "Phenomenology of Perception," "The body is our anchorage in a world", highlighting the body's foundational role in perception and knowing the world.⁴⁰

Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodied experience marked a significant contribution to the evolution of phenomenology, challenging the long-standing tradition of placing consciousness as the sole source of knowledge. However, his focus on the body has also been critiqued for potentially reducing all knowledge to bodily experience, thereby overlooking other aspects of human experience and consciousness.

Additionally, while Merleau-Ponty's later work, "The Visible and the Invisible," offered a rich ontology of flesh and intertwining, some scholars have argued that his emphasis on ambiguity and the primacy of lived experience risks undermining the possibility of systematic philosophical inquiry.

Connections Between Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's Projects

Despite their differences, there are notable connections between the projects of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, highlighting the continuity in phenomenological thought. Both philosophers sought to understand the human experience of the world, albeit through different lenses. Husserl focused on consciousness as the source of knowledge, while Merleau-Ponty emphasized the body as the primary site of knowing the world.

Furthermore, both thinkers grappled with the concept of intentionality, though their interpretations differed. Husserl introduced intentionality as the directedness of consciousness towards an object, while Merleau-Ponty expanded this concept to include the "aboutness of something" and the body's role in intentionality.⁴¹

Moreover, both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty employed phenomenological methods such as epoché and phenomenological reduction to suspend ordinary attitudes and gain insight into the essential structures of experience. However, Merleau-Ponty's

³⁷ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (p.158) (Northwestern University Press, 1970).

³⁸ Smith, *Husserl*.

³⁹ Husserl, *The Shorter Logical Investigations*.

⁴⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (p.144) (Routledge, 2002).

⁴¹ Husserl and Moran, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (p. 199).

application of these methods was more attuned to the lived, embodied nature of perception and experience.⁴²

These connections, along with the differences between their projects, provide a nuanced understanding of the arc of phenomenology, reflecting both the foundational role of Husserl and the transformative contributions of Merleau-Ponty. By synthesizing their perspectives, this study offers a comprehensive view of the evolution of phenomenological thought and its enduring relevance in contemporary philosophical discourse.

CONCLUSION

This research has traced the progression of phenomenological thought from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty, elucidating key developments between these important thinkers. Husserl established the foundation of transcendental phenomenology, focused on pure consciousness and intentionality. However, Merleau-Ponty greatly expanded on Husserl's ideas by emphasizing embodied experience as the primary way of knowing the world.

Examining how concepts shifted from Husserl's cognitive focus to Merleau-Ponty's view of embodied perception renews perspectives in current debates regarding the relationship between mind and body. Additionally, this arc highlights methodological critiques about the limits of Husserl's transcendental project. Therefore, mapping the continuity and divergence from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty remains relevant for understanding unresolved issues in modern phenomenological discourse.

In summary, this examination enriches comprehension of phenomenology by elucidating the connections alongside tensions between these two pivotal thinkers. It underscores Husserl's foundational contributions while demonstrating Merleau-Ponty's transformational expansions of phenomenological thought. Further analysis of this conceptual progression will provide more insight into the complex development of this philosophical tradition.

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⁴² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, 2002).

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