# INTRODUCTION

Epistemology has traditionally operated on a dichotomy between two sorts of grounds: reasons and causes. According to this dichotomy, we can understand why we believe what we do either in terms of reasons that justify our beliefs or in terms of causal interactions that explain them. This, for example, is the dichotomy that Sellars and McDowell give expression to in distinguishing between a "logical space of reasons" and a "logical space of nature." In the logical space of reasons, according to Sellars, we are concerned with the *justification* of beliefs (i.e., with the giving and taking of reasons in favor of a belief). In contrast, in the logical space of nature we are concerned with *explanation*. In understanding how the interactions between our senses and the world cause us to have certain sensations, for instance, we do no more than *explain* our sensations. There is no question here of giving reasons that support our sensations, or of asking whether it is right to have just these sensations and not others, but only of understanding how we come to have them.

The first thesis of this book is that the dichotomy of reason and causality is a false one: these two forms of grounding, while genuine forms of grounding with respective and exclusive domains, are not exhaustive of the forms of epistemic grounding. A central contention of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is that neither reason nor causality correctly describes the sort of grounding relations characteristic of perception. To understand perception, he argues, we need to introduce a new way of thinking about grounds, namely, what he—following the phenomenological tradition—calls "motivation" (*PhP*, 51). Now, motivation has long been understood as a distinct form of grounding in the practical sphere (i.e., as playing a role in grounding the will, and a role not identical with reason or natural causality). But Merleau-Ponty argues that motivation, properly understood, names a form of grounding operative in various domains of human experience: motivation is also a perceptual and an epistemic ground.

In the following chapters, I take up this thought, arguing that there is a form of epistemic grounding that does not amount to justification, but that also does not merely explain our beliefs. Instead, perception *motivates* our belief. If we consider for a moment the actual character of our belief in the world, we find that we exist in the world long before there is any question of the world's existence. Indeed, perception convinces us so thoroughly of the world it presents that when a child first questions this conviction, she may experience this moment as a genuine event. At least in the first instance, perception does not give us reasons that justify our beliefs about the world, but simply gives us over to belief. It is in this difference between "giving over" and justification that skeptical projects take root. For when the question of the world's existence does emerge, it will seem as if perception, not justifying our faith in the world, merely explains it. Or, on the other hand, we might take perception as one reason among many that factor into our deliberations about the world's existence. But neither of these options describes the primary bond between perception and belief in the world, in which perception is not a mere consideration in favor of a belief nor a contingent fact that explains our attitudes. Instead, I will argue, first of all we find our belief motivated by perception.

Understanding the grounding relation between perception and knowledge in terms of motivation leads me to my second thesis: that all our knowledge is founded in perceptual experience. Perception and knowledge stand in what Husserl would call a *Fundierung* relation—as Merleau-Ponty would define it, a two-way relation in which the founded is inseparable from, or demands supplementation by, the founding, and the founding requires clarification and determination by the founded (cf. *PhP*, 128, 414). Merleau-Ponty's point, then, is not to dissolve any distinction between perception and knowledge, nor to reduce knowledge to perception; it is only to show how knowledge has its ground within perception. This is part of the thesis of, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, the "primacy of perception," namely, that "the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence"—a thesis that, he claims, "does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth" (*PrP*, 13). On the interpretation I will provide, it is only Merleau-Ponty's concept of motivation that will allow us to get this thesis of "the primacy of perception" properly into view. For, as we will see, the primacy of perception provides an essentially different account of knowledge than does either rationalism or empiricism—the philosophical options that cut to the core of modern epistemology—and only once we

cease to approach the relation between experience and knowledge in terms of causality and reason are we truly free to move past the various guises of the debate between these two.

In brief, we will see that motivation amounts to a new concept of epistemic ground. A careful phenomenology of knowledge will lead us to ground knowledge in motivation, and to distinguish motivation from justification and explanation. If these conclusions prove true, then we will also need a new account of knowledge, one centered not around justification or explanation, but around this new form of epistemic ground. The central aim of the present work is to provide an interpretation and defense of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of knowledge as giving us just such an account.

## METHOD

A few methodological points need to be made from the beginning. First, what I provide here is, primarily, a work of phenomenology. That is to say, my subject will not *primarily* be knowledge as a theoretical desideratum, a behavior (at least, as this term has traditionally been understood), a bearer of epistemic import, et cetera. Rather, my subject is knowledge as a kind of *experience*. That is, I take knowledge to be a distinctive type of intentional state, with a special phenomenal character that distinguishes it as a class from perceptions, imaginations, wishes, and so on. In other words, I take knowledge as a phenomenon, as a mode in which the world *appears* to us. *How* the world appears to us in knowledge is different from how it appears to us in perceptions, such that knowledge has a unique phenomenal character. My goal is to describe this phenomenal character—or, if one wants, my goal is to describe "what it is like" to know.[1] But, on the other hand, while this is primarily a work of phenomenology, the phenomenological framework that I develop will also allow me to intervene in epistemological debates. In each chapter, I resolve an epistemological debate precisely by moving past the phenomenologically inadequate terms on which that debate trades.

There are some principled worries about whether one can legitimately connect phenomenology and epistemology in this way. On the one hand, one might wonder whether phenomenology can be used to answer epistemological questions. For example, as Pietersma has pointed out, the sort of externalist who thinks that justification has nothing to do with what is phenomenally available to subjects might deny that phenomenology can

help us with epistemological questions.[2] On the other, one might wonder whether phenomenology is properly interested in epistemological questions. For example, perhaps phenomenology is not really concerned with skeptical questions, since phenomenology seems to aim not at the justification of knowledge, but at the description of it.

Nevertheless, phenomenology *is* interested in the phenomenon of knowledge: in how knowledge is possible, how it is grounded, and what it is. Already in *Logical Investigations*, Husserl claimed to be concerned with "an objective *theory of knowledge* and . . . the *pure phenomenology of the experiences of thinking and knowing*."[3] In my view, there is no necessary distinction between the projects of grounding knowledge and of describing the grounds of knowledge, depending on how one undertakes them: if the labor of description, responsible just to the thing itself, leads one to characterize knowledge as well-grounded, then one also will have completed the project of grounding knowledge. Further, even were phenomenology not properly interested in epistemological debates, the debates into which I will intervene in the following chapters are stymied by an inadequate phenomenology of knowledge. Once the phenomenological backdrop of these debates is clarified, there is room for the debate itself to be reconfigured. Consequently, a phenomenology of knowledge at the very least has important consequences for epistemology.

Second, one might have concerns about whether the kinds of evidence I adduce in this work—which include psychology, literature, and the history of science—are admissible in a work of phenomenology. I don't see a sufficiently compelling principled reason for refusing these kinds of evidence. In my view, the projects of these fields are not utterly disjoint from the phenomenological project: these projects allow us to notice essential features of experience to which everyday experience may be blind, precisely because everyday experience aims not at itself, but at the world. For example, Knausgaard claims, "Writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows. That is what writing is about. Not what happens there, not what actions are played out there, but the *there* itself."[4] Literature, then, is a means of opening up the world by breaking through common experience's understanding of itself. Similarly, psychology allows us to loosen the bond between the subject and the world so as to attend to the ligaments of this bond. Of course, literature describes the particular and not the universal, and psychology treats the subject as "mundane" (i.e., as a piece of the world). Thus, the former seems to lack the eidetic reduction and the latter the phenomenological reduction. But these distinctions can-

not be so firmly drawn. Precisely at the heart of the particular, literature opens a world in which we find ourselves to varying degrees involved, expressed, challenged, and alienated. That is to say, in immersing us in the particularities of another life—both when it expresses our own lives and when it challenges the universality of our experiences—literature invites us into a truer understanding of the universal or the essential. Similarly, psychology illuminates our *experience*. It is true that psychology delivers results on the basis of particular, contingent cases. And yet contingency has the power to illuminate the necessary, which is why Merleau-Ponty can form conclusions about essential features of normal experience by analyzing non-normal cases. We see the value of "attention" in experience, for example, if we turn to cases of "neglect," as when patients who have functional visual systems cannot become aware of objects in some portion of the visual field. There is a sort of empirical eidetic variation at play in these cases: psychology makes manifest what results for perception if certain factors are altered. On the other hand, psychology is (in the phenomenological sense) "mundane": it treats the subject as a constituted fact within the world. Yet psychology does not fail to link up with our experience of the world; what psychology discovers of perception in operation allows us to reflect on the implicit structures of perception as lived.[5] Of course, there are essential differences between the scopes and methods of these fields, but this does not prevent phenomenology from learning from them, since each amounts—for phenomenology—to a distinctive manner of "drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows."

Third, the scope of this book is both historical and systematic. My aim is to provide an interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and in doing so to discover a phenomenological account of epistemic grounding that can resolve epistemological debates. What I will try to do throughout this book is to provide an exposition of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of knowledge, to do so in an idiom that should make it available to a relatively broad philosophical audience, and to forward a nontrivial interpretative claim: that Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception ought to be understood in terms of motivation. However, the purpose of this exposition is not only to understand more deeply Merleau-Ponty's thinking, but in so doing to present Merleau-Ponty's rich epistemological insights—which have not been adequately appreciated—as affording us a live and compelling epistemological option, one that can contribute even to contemporary debates in analytic epistemology. I do not see these historical and systematic aims of this work as separable, since in my view the value

of providing an exposition of Merleau-Ponty's epistemology is inseparable from the strength of its insights: I have undertaken this study because in my view the more deeply we understand Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of knowledge, the more deeply we can understand our epistemic situation. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that to demonstrate the enduring value of Merleau-Ponty's thought, I carry his thought into contemporary debates that Merleau-Ponty himself, of course, did not consider. In these cases, my intent is to develop a position in these debates that is faithful to Merleau-Ponty's own work; my intent will be to establish what position Merleau-Ponty *should* take, given his existing commitments. What results from this project is, I believe, a genuinely Merleau-Pontian epistemological program.

Given the historical scope of this book, three notes on my interpretative method must be made. First, I will treat Merleau-Ponty's work throughout his career as relatively continuous, borrowing freely from different eras of his thinking. In the few cases where I find a potential problem in transposing concepts and terminology between works, I argue on the basis of those specific cases and not in terms of any general interpretative framework. Concern about such liberality is not wholly out of place, for there is a question about the continuity of Merleau-Ponty's thinking. Barbaras, for example, pursues a developmental hypothesis, according to which Merleau-Ponty's thinking makes an ontological turn from a "phenomenology of perception" to a "*philosophy* of perception, discovering in perception a mode of being that holds good for every possible being."[6] Or, Gardner argues that the *Phenomenology of Perception* is read along two lines, one psychological, more in conformity with Merleau-Ponty's early work; and another transcendental, in conformity with Merleau-Ponty's later work.[7] And there are other such distinctions one could draw.[8] Certainly, Merleau-Ponty's thinking changes over the course of his career, but I tend to think that it deepens, rather than reverses itself, from the *Phenomenology* to *The Visible and the Invisible*—at least with reference to the questions that will concern us.[9]

Second, I should say something about how I understand Merleau-Ponty's method. Of course, debates about Merleau-Ponty's method get quite involved, and this is not a place for a decisive contribution. While I want to avoid idle classification of Merleau-Ponty's project—especially since Merleau-Ponty's philosophy puts classifications like "phenomenological" and "transcendental" in question—I should at least sketch the contours of how I will read Merleau-Ponty. In brief, I interpret Merleau-Ponty as employing a form of phenomeno-

logical method throughout the material that I draw on. I think Joel Smith's analysis in "Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction" is basically right in its argument that Merleau-Ponty adopts a form of the phenomenological reduction—put crudely, he is concerned to describe the world *as it appears*—though not an idealist metaphysics.[10] There is a related question about whether Merleau-Ponty is undertaking a transcendental project. In my view, there is no simple answer to this question. But basically—and while I don't wish to hinge my analyses in this book on this answer—I believe something like Gardner's reading of Merleau-Ponty as a transcendental philosopher (i.e., as investigating the conditions for the possibility of experience) is correct, with the proviso that transcendental philosophy isn't left unchanged by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy (in some sense, as we will see in chapter 6, Merleau-Ponty is also concerned with the conditions for the possibility of transcendental philosophy).[11]

Third, in illustrating or arguing in favor of Merleau-Ponty's ideas, I will often draw freely from the phenomenological tradition. Generally speaking, this move does not seem problematic to me, given that Merleau-Ponty himself draws much of his thinking relatively freely from the phenomenological tradition. This is not to assume that Merleau-Ponty's thinking is in every respect compatible with Husserl's, Stein's, or Heidegger's, only that Merleau-Ponty relies to a considerable extent on arguments and descriptions provided by this tradition, and so it is reasonable to invoke these arguments and descriptions to understand Merleau-Ponty's own arguments.

Finally, my interest in the thesis of the primacy of perception is narrower than Merleau-Ponty's. In this book, I will be concerned with the primacy of perception as an epistemological thesis. But I take it that for Merleau-Ponty, this thesis is not only epistemological, but also ontological.[12] I will, in general, avoid the ontological dimension of Merleau-Ponty's project. I do not mean to imply that these two dimensions are ultimately separable, but I do suppose that the epistemological dimension can be treated in relative isolation from the ontological one.[13]

## OVERVIEW

This book falls into three main parts. In the first, I define the two theses I intend to advocate, namely, that motivation is an epistemic ground and the primacy of perception. I take up the first of these in chapter 1, explaining

what it means to consider motivation as an epistemic ground and showing that motivation is not reducible to either causality or reason. In brief, I define motivation as a form of grounding that is spontaneous, operates in virtue of implicit meanings, and is normative. This allows me to argue that motivation is not a species of reason, because whereas reason is active and explicit, motivation is spontaneous and implicit. Further, motivation is not a species of causality, because causality is passive, does not operate in virtue of meanings at all, and is not normative.

In chapter 2, I explain and argue for my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception. Here I define key elements of my account, such as how I understand perception and knowledge, and what it means to read the "primacy of perception" thesis in terms of motivation. Once these ideas are in place, I attempt to provide a definition of knowledge that is compatible with my Merleau-Pontian account of epistemic grounding.

Part 2 of the book, composed of chapters 3 through 5, argues for this view. First, in chapter 3, I consider the relation between experience and judgments of experience. The existing debate about perceptual grounding tends to hold that perception either causes our beliefs, implying some sort of coherentism, or justifies them, entailing a kind of foundationalism. I argue that this debate is rooted in an inadequate phenomenology of the relation between experience and judgment. In fact, neither reason nor causality properly describes this relation, for this relation is spontaneous (and not active, as it would have to be if it were relation of reasoning) and normative (and so cannot be merely causal). Motivation, I conclude, does a better job of describing the grounding relation between experience and empirical judgment. This leaves us with an account that accommodates some of the insights of both coherentism and foundationalism.

In chapter 4, I turn to the relation between experience and *a priori* judgments (by which I mean judgments that no particular experience directly fulfills, that is, universal and necessary judgments). While it is obvious that experience in some sense grounds our empirical judgments, it is not at all obvious that it grounds our a priori judgments. Indeed, rationalists have long held that experience is just not the sort of thing that *can* ground a priori judgments, because experience delivers particular and contingent facts, while a priori judgments must hold universally and with necessity. Empiricists, in contrast, have argued that our "a priori" knowledge must be derived from experience. In chapter 4, I argue that thinking the relation between experience and the a priori in terms of motivation, as Merleau-Ponty does, allows us to

accommodate both these insights. On the one hand, I suggest, against empiricism, that the content and evidence of our a priori knowledge cannot be definable in terms of experiential content and evidence. On the other, against rationalism, I propose that there must be some sense in which experience *can* ground a priori knowledge. In my view, an account of a priori knowledge in terms of motivation meets both these desiderata, since it explains how experience, though contingent and particular, can ground universal and necessary judgments.

Then, in chapter five, I consider Merleau-Ponty's response to skepticism, namely, in terms of his notion of perceptual faith. I argue that we cannot understand perceptual faith—our belief in the connection between appearance and being—in terms of either justification or causality. Instead, we should think of perceptual faith as motivated. Doing so will allow us to understand Merleau-Ponty's claim that "the primacy of perception . . . is the remedy to skepticism and pessimism" (*PrP*, 26), while avoiding any sort of dogmatism about perception.

Chapters 6 and 7 compose part 3, in which I consider some major consequences of the view I develop. I do this by engaging Merleau-Ponty's position with Kant's. Doing so not only brings into focus the originality of Merleau-Ponty's epistemological views, but allows me to investigate a major consequence of Merleau-Ponty's account, namely, where it leaves metaphysics. In my view, Kant provides the major alternative resolution to the rationalism-empiricism debate. He does this by developing a novel form of justification: transcendental justification. Kant's whole critique of metaphysics centers around his claim that the ground of a priori synthetic knowledge is *experience*, considered with respect to its possibility. Transcendental method justifies certain judgments a priori by showing them to be conditions for the possibility of experience. In chapter 6, I consider this type of a priori justification.

My contention is that, contrary to appearances, the projects of Merleau-Ponty and Kant are largely compatible. This is because the two projects operate on different levels: they are concerned with different senses of experience and so approach experience with different standards. Whereas Merleau-Ponty is concerned with experience understood as perception, and so approaches experience with the standard of motivation, Kant is concerned with experience in the sense of empirical judgment, and so approaches experience with the standard of justification. The many seemingly opposed conclusions they reach are consequences of their pursuing investigations on different levels with different standards. If I am right that the two differ in focus, then we

shouldn't think of Kant's conditions for the possibility of experience as conditions for the possibility of perception in Merleau-Ponty's sense. However, I will argue, transcendental justification *does* ultimately rely upon an a priori that is not transcendentally justified, but instead motivated in the course of experience, in the manner I describe in chapter 4.

In chapter 7, I consider where these results leave Kant's critique of metaphysics. I argue that, given my account of knowledge, Kant must be right that no synthetic a priori judgments can be justified through reason alone. However, this does not mean that experience cannot *motivate* synthetic a priori judgments, ultimately, in a manner that we will have to analyze in terms of Merleau-Ponty's concept of "reversibility," entailing a sort of dialectical approach to metaphysics. I make this point with respect to a particular metaphysical question discussed by Kant, that of the Third Paralogism, namely, self-identity.