Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Pre-Conceptual Generalities and Concept Formation

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Abstract:

In this paper, I provide an explication and defense of Merleau-Ponty's theory of concept formation. I argue that at the core of this theory is a distinction between concepts proper and the kinds of generalities characteristic of perceptual experience, which I call "pre-conceptual generalities." According to Merleau-Ponty, concepts are developed through a two-stage process: first, the establishment of such pre-conceptual generalities, and second, the clarification of these generalities into concepts. I provide phenomenological evidence for the existence of pre-conceptual generalities and explain how they can serve to ground concept formation. To motivate Merleau-Ponty's account, I consider objections raised by Husserl, Cassirer, and Sellars to the classical philosophical account of empirical concept formation, abstraction. I show that Merleau-Ponty's distinction between concepts and pre-conceptual generalities provides a philosophically viable account of the formation of empirical concepts while avoiding the problems faced by accounts that rely on abstraction.

At least some concepts seem to be formed through experience. Whatever may be the case with categorial concepts, like "causality" or "substance," it is unlikely that humans emerge on the cognitive scene already equipped, for example, with sortal concepts as basic as dog, fire, or house (much less terrier, grease fire, or bungalow). Not only are many such concepts culturally specific, but most

psychologists and philosophers think there is no sufficient reason – transcendental ("terrier" is not a condition for the possibility of experience), evolutionary ("bungalow" did not exist when the human cognitive architecture evolved), or otherwise – to suppose that all such concepts are innate.[1] Instead, these concepts seem to be formed through educative practices, and at some point, from experience itself.

How should we think about the process by which these concepts – empirical concepts – are formed through experience? Historically, philosophers have tended to answer this question through abstraction, namely, the claim that experiences of particulars put learners in a position to abstract the universal content that characterizes a concept.[2] Yet (as I will explain in section III) abstraction sustained a number of damaging philosophical critiques in the 20th century, and no longer appears so plausible.

In this paper, I argue that French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty develops a compelling account of the formation of empirical concepts, an account which has been largely overlooked or misunderstood in the phenomenological literature. My primary aim in what follows will be to provide an exposition of this overlooked but novel account, drawing together Merleau-Ponty's often disparate and fragmentary remarks on this topic. Secondarily, I aim to motivate this account by demonstrating that it meets important theoretical needs, namely, that it offers a theory of concept formation that avoids one major problem with theories of abstraction, as described by Husserl, Cassirer, and Sellars. As I will explain, Merleau-Ponty is able to avoid this problem because according to him experience is organized at the most basic level by what he calls "pre-conceptual generalities," and it is only on the back of these generalities that empirical concepts are formed. In what follows, I first explain Merleau-Ponty's view and argue that it is phenomenologically warranted. Then, I'll show how it avoids Husserl's, Cassierer's, Sellar's criticisms of abstraction.

1. Pre-Conceptual Generalities

Finding a theory of concept formation in Merleau-Ponty requires some justification, for he sometimes gives the impression that he means to do away with the notion of "concepts" altogether. For example, in one working note he exhorts us to "replace the notions of concept, idea, mind, representation, with the notions of *dimensions*, articulation, level, hinge, pivots, configuration" (The Visible and the Invisible, 224). Such remarks have led Priest, for example, to claim that Merleau-Ponty hoped to "renounce the vocabulary of 'concepts'" (Merleau-Ponty, 9). Certainly, if this were Merleau-Ponty's intention, it would be futile to seek in his work a theory of concept formation. But it seems to me that such passages overstate Merleau-Ponty's beliefs. His real intention is not to do away with the notion of "concepts" altogether, only to demonstrate that concepts are not the kind of generalities characteristic of perceptual experience. Concepts do have a proper domain: that of intellectual endeavor. Thus, Merleau-Ponty is comfortable retaining a distinction between fact and essence, for example, describing a passage from "horizontal generalities" to concepts (The Visible and the Insivible, 237), "common styles" to "essences" (*ibid.*, 111), and the construction of concepts (Phenomenology of Perception, 203). Merleau-Ponty's real intent, on my reading, is to redefine conceptuality by showing how it emerges within and remains bound to perceptual experience (The Visible and the Invisible, 113).

The basic move of Merleau-Ponty's account is to distinguish two steps within the process of concept formation: first, the establishment of pre-conceptual generalities, and second, the clarification of these generalities into concepts proper. Thus, on my reading, Merleau-Ponty is at odds both with accounts that would do away with concepts and with those that would take conceptual content to be a primary feature of experience.[3] I first provide a basic account of how this two-step process is meant to work, and then explain how it avoids the pitfalls of abstraction.

Perhaps the most novel aspect of Merleau-Ponty's theory of concept formation is its description of the first step of this process: the formation of what I will call "pre-conceptual generalities."[4] This is also one of the more contentious aspects of the account, and much hinges on whether or not one admits such pre-conceptual generalities into one's phenomenology. For it is not obvious that one should: why not think of generalities at any level of experience simply as concepts? We must be clear, then, about what the term describes and why one should think that there are such things as pre-conceptual generalities. Of course, any understanding of pre-conceptual generalities goes hand in hand with an understanding of concepts, and this latter term is notoriously ambiguous. One way to begin disambiguating this term is with Smith's distinction between "low" and "high" theories of concepts (The Problem of Perception, 2000). On the former, concept possession entails only the ability to respond differentially to sets of objects, that is, to categorize. On the latter, concept possession entails the ability to deploy a concept in active thought, for example, in judgments like "That is a house" or in processes of reasoning. While the former understanding predominates in psychological or cognitive science literature, the latter is more characteristic of philosophical literature. The McDowell-Dreyfus debate, for example, tended to make use of a high theory of concepts, McDowell claiming that "it is essential to conceptual capacities, in the demanding sense, that they can be exploited in active thinking, thinking that is open to reflection about its own rational credentials" (Mind and World, 47). Moreover, it is toward this sense of "concept" that traditional philosophical approaches to concept formation have been oriented. Merleau-Ponty's theory of concept formation belongs in this tradition, for he understands concepts as general meanings which are phenomenally distinct from any particulars in which they are instantiated (Phenomenology of Perception, 123 and 129). To have a concept, then, one would have to attend to such a general meaning *in isolation* from any particular in which it is instantiated.[5] This is of a piece with the "high" theory of concepts articulated above, insofar as one can

only have a concept as an ingredient for a judgment if one has attended to it in isolation from the particulars in which it is instantiated.[6]

Given this understanding of “concept,” a pre-conceptual generality would be any general meaning that remains implicit or has not been attended to in isolation from particulars. Again, the point in distinguishing the two is that our experience is organized by general features that have never been attended to in themselves.[7] For example – as I will argue shortly – one needn’t phenomenally attend to the respect in which two particulars are alike in order to note that they are alike.

Still, while one might be willing to admit that there are such pre-conceptual generalities, it is not immediately clear why explicit attention to a universal – the phenomenal separation of a universal from particulars – is the marker of an important difference. There may be a phenomenal difference between pre-conceptual generalities and concepts, and it may be true that our perceptions are not phenomenally mediated by concepts, by why think that this phenomenal difference matters? Mightn’t concepts be implicitly operative in our perception, in which case pre-conceptual generalities would merely be implicit concepts? But, according to Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenal difference between implicit and explicit is not so innocent. Instead, he argues that attention is transformative, insofar as it introduces structural reconfigurations in the meanings to which it attends.[8] For example, one general feature of attention is its capacity to introduce determinacy into previously indeterminate backgrounds.[9] Consider the experience of a novice wine drinker sampling a novel wine. If she wishes to explicitly articulate the flavor of the wine (beyond superficialities like “This tastes like wine”), she will struggle to find the right words, not because she has some definite idea of the taste for which she just can’t recall the word, but because she isn’t even totally sure what the taste is or if there is a word for it: the taste is vague or ambiguous. She runs through the experience trying to fix just what she has experienced, until suddenly she strikes upon a proposition which suits the taste: "The wine is acidic." With this expression, she has given the once ambiguous flavor a definite profile, and with this category under her belt, she can now

move from wine to wine, determining some tannic and some not. And yet the present determinacy of her palette obscures the fact that previously the taste of the wine was far from determinate. It was not yet acidic or not acidic, tannic or not tannic, etc., because these determinations were not yet available to her. Granted, the indeterminate flavor normed and motivated the determinations, but this does not entail that it was itself already determinate. Thus, it would be wrong to think that conceptual determination in attention merely renders explicit the content already present in perception, and in this sense it would be wrong to think that pre-conceptual generalities are merely implicit concepts.[10]

With a first grasp on this distinction, we now need to do a little more phenomenology to get Merleau-Ponty's idea of "pre-conceptual generalities" in view. Assuming that there is a genuine difference between concepts and pre-conceptual generalities, why shouldn't we think that experience is conceptual all the way down? Why should we think, in other words, that a good phenomenology of experience leaves room for pre-conceptual generalities?

Merleau-Ponty's answer to this question is basically that the way we group particulars in perception shouldn't be characterized as the subsumption of a particular under a universal. When sorting a set of shapes, for example, I need not choose one, form a concept of this type of object, and then place others together with it by recognizing that they too instantiate this concept. Primitive grouping need not involve any such mediation through a central concept (not that grouping cannot take place in such a manner, it just need not), but only something like perceiving the belonging of a shape with these shapes but not with those.[11] Merleau-Ponty makes this point in terms of recognizing analogies. He argues that we don't normally recognize analogies by forming a central concept and then comparing the analogs to the concept (not that we *can't* proceed in this manner, just that this isn't how we normally do it). Instead, we normally recognize the analogy, and can then set about trying to articulate a central concept. Merleau-Ponty supports this claim by considering *abnormal* cases of analogizing. For example, he describes one patient who is notably clumsy with analogies, because this

patient does actually require recourse to a fixed concept to coordinate the analogs. This patient can complete the analogy "the eye is to color what the ear is to …" only by explicitly reasoning through the medium of the universal: sense organ is to sense medium. In contrast, the dexterity of the normal subject comes from the relatively immediate and inarticulate grasp of the functional likeness: often grasping the likeness without being able to state the rule of the analogy. Merleau-Ponty concludes that "living thought, then, does not consist in the act of subsuming under a category," an act which does however fix, stabilize, and extend the analogy (Phenomenology of Perception, 130). Thus, experience is normally organized according to generalities which are not explicit: pre-conceptual generalities.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argues not only that perceptual meanings need not be subsumed under concepts, but that such meanings *cannot* primarily be conceptual:

> The meaning which I discover [in perception] is not of the conceptual order. If it were a concept, the question would be how I can recognize it in sense data, and it would be necessary for me to interpose between the concept and the sense data certain intermediaries, and then other intermediaries between these intermediaries, and so on. It is necessary that meaning and signs, the form and matter of perception, be related from the beginning and that, as we say, the matter of perception be 'pregnant with form' (The Primacy of Perception, 15).

The important step in this argument, for us, is that if we understand perception as the subsumption of a particular under a concept, then we will be required to introduce a new, third term – something both non-conceptual and general – to explain how concepts map onto perception, for concepts cannot themselves specify sense data. For example, a person with prosopagnosia might know very well conceptually who Barack Obama is, might have been shown many pictures of him, and yet be unable to recognize his face. Certainly, shown a picture of Barack Obama, she might be able to identify him on the basis of conceptual knowledge, for example by context, other aspects of his person, etc., but she wouldn't be able to recognize his face; she might know who he is but be unable to *see* him *as* Barack Obama.[12] What is missing in this case is not sensation or conceptual meaning, but perceptual

significance; she lacks the means of perceptual mediation between available sense data and their conceptual knowledge. Moreover, the resort to conceptual knowledge such as context cues only defers the problem. Does she recognize Barack Obama because in this picture he is standing in front of the seal of the president of the United States or because he is at an international summit? Then one must explain how the seal or the summit is recognized. Referring to further conceptual cues results in a regress. At some point, there must be some perceptual meaning she recognizes because she does not suffer agnosia with respect to it, a perceptual meaning that is therefore distinct from conceptual meanings and enables their application to sensation.

But while particulars aren't primarily grouped by subsumption under a common concept – namely, through the medium of a universal distinct from both particulars – neither are they grouped through association of mutually indifferent particulars.[13] According to Merleau-Ponty, theories of association presuppose what they mean to explain. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "the signification of the perceived, far from resulting from an association, is in fact presupposed in all associations" (<u>Phenomenology of Perception</u>, 16). In other words, it is not by noting resemblances or contiguities between two indifferently given particulars that I can, after the fact, associate them in my mind. Rather, the community of the two is given, and this is why I can set about articulating their contiguities or resemblances. In other words, we will understand categorization neither starting from the autonomous universal nor from the isolated particular.

Perhaps what is most surprising in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of what I am calling pre-conceptual generalities is the way in which it seeks to move beyond the classical opposition of particular and universal.[14] It is not that Merleau-Ponty thinks there is *no* distinction between particular and universal (indeed, this article aims to explain how he thinks this distinction can be drawn), only that it is not phenomenologically primary and does not adequately describe perceptual experience. On his view, we are led to posit a domain of essences underneath experience only if we conceive experience as

composed of distinct, isolated objects, which must subsequently be organized into a coherent totality of experience according to essences: noting that several objects share in a common meaning, I am motivated to posit this meaning as non-individual (universal), as an essence (The Visible and the Invisible, 113). Yet, according to Merleau-Ponty, experience is not composed of such isolated individuals. The idea of an individual (a pure fact) opposed to an essence, like a sense-datum opposed to the form it will receive, is an abstraction from the actual content of perception. In fact, there is no experience which is not already contextualized within a field or horizon of other experiences, and which does not accordingly already participate in generalities. This is true ultimately in virtue of the fact that perception does not give us an object in-itself, but only an object correlate to the spatiality and temporality of a body. In other words, experience is a field, an open unity, in virtue at least of the open unity of space and of time, such that every object in being experienced is not isolated, but a part of a whole of experience.

In fact, for Merleau-Ponty, what is really primary in experience are not facts or essences, but such generalities or fields. Individuals are formed out of such generalities through a process of individuation or differentiation, rather than being the pre-given out of which we construct generalities. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> The space, the time of things are shreds of [the one who grasps the world], of his own spatialization, of his own temporalization, are no longer a multiplicity of individuals synchronically and diachronically distributed, but a relief of the simultaneous and of the successive, a spatial and temporal pulp where the individuals are formed by differentiation (*ibid.*, 114).

This is, of course, related to the claim that living thought is not essentially the act of subsuming a particular under a category: we are not given a bare individual, for which we must after the fact construct a general context, and on the other hand, in sorting or analogizing, a community or continuity

of sense is recognized without mediation through any sense outside of and separate from the continuity.

By claiming that we have before us individuals only through a process of differentiation or individuation, Merleau-Ponty does not mean that two instances of a type aren't perceptually distinct: rather, that they only acquire a unique sense (i.e., a sense that distinguishes them from other instances of the type) through a process of attending to or articulating the distinctive features of the particular.[15] The point is that individuals are given meaningfully through belonging to typical horizons of sense, from which they can stand out more or less distinctly by being attended to as unique individuals. For example, in a melody, each note has its meaning through the indefinite community of sense that is the melody. To apprehend the melody, I need not separately apprehend each note in its uniqueness, subsequently to synthesize them into the melody: rather, it is the particularity of the note that must be achieved, through my power to pause for myself the melody on this note and apprehend it uniquely.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty often uses the term "element" to name this sort of perceptual generality, writing, "Perception is not first a perception of *things*, but a perception of *elements* (water, air …) of *rays of the world*, of things which are dimensions" (*ibid*., 218). By element, Merleau-Ponty means, "a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being" (*ibid*., 139). An element is thus a field of sense, which is prior to the separation of individuals from each other, ultimately qua condition of possibility.[16] Here, elements do not figure as material principles of the composition of substances, but rather as meaningful principles of the perception of things: as such, they are not that material out of which substances are born and into which they perish, but that significance out of which they are articulated and attended to as particulars and into which they will be disarticulated.[17]

Consider how Merleau-Ponty uses color as an example of an "element" in a working note.[18] As soon as I perceive red for the first time, he writes, I am initiated into a way of perceiving the world, a field of meaning that can come to represent diverse contents:

> A punctuation in the field of red things, which includes tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, certain terrains near Aix or Madagascar, it is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops, and advocate generals, and also in the field of adornments and that of uniforms (*ibid*., 132).

In this moment of initiation, the red before me is neither quite particular nor universal, not being particular because it is a horizon of meaning that exceeds the particular, and not being universal because it is nothing other than a certain juncture of red things. Here, the red is an element of meaning, which will henceforth collect meaning like snows clumps with snow, and not by adhesion to the medium of an abstract central concept. For this reason, as Merleau-Ponty notes, perceptions have a pluripotency by which they readily become either particular or universal: a note functions as either a particular note within a melody or as the keynote which establishes the parameters for a melody; a color functions either as a particular color alongside a group of other colors or as the color of illumination, which determines the parameters for each illuminated color. Merleau-Ponty writes that, "This particularity of the color, of the yellow, and this universality are not a *contradiction*, are *together* sensoriality itself: it is by the same virtue that the color, the yellow, at the same time gives itself as a certain being and as a *dimension*, the expression of *every possible being*" (*ibid.*, 218).

2. Concept Formation

Merleau-Ponty thus distinguishes between concepts and pre-conceptual generalities, and supplies some phenomenological evidence for doing so. With this distinction in view, let us return to the

question of how concepts are formed. I've claimed that Merleau-Ponty's full account includes two steps: the establishment of pre-conceptual generalities, and the refinement of such generalities into concepts. I'll start by considering the first of these. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's concept "institution" can be used to describe the formation in question.

Institution is a general structure of experience, according to which meaningful wholes or generalities are established.[19] Merleau-Ponty defines institution as the "establishment in an experience … of dimensions … in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and will make a *sequel*, a history" (Institution and Passivity, 8-9). In other words, institution describes that aspect of experience according to which meanings are not isolated, but cohere into certain wholes or unities of sense: fields or dimensions. Take again the example of a melody. A melody begins with the first note, and every note after that is determined in its meaning by the first note. The fifth note, for example, is founded on the first note. This is how an identical note can sound different in different melodies, for the sense of the part is from the first determined by the whole. And yet the meaning of the first note, in itself, is highly indeterminate. The first note is capable of inaugurating any number of works, any number of emotions – it can bear many different senses. Thus, the fifth note simultaneously serves to explicate, to determine, the first note, such that the first note will retrospectively never again be what it was before the fifth note. We might then say that the first note institutes a field within which the first and every subsequent note acquires its sense, and the melody is itself just this determinate field or whole.

Merleau-Ponty importantly distinguishes institution from what Husserl called "constitution" (*ibid*., 8). Whereas, according to Merleau-Ponty constitution is a thetic act of consciousness, institution is passive, non-thetic, and need not be explicit.[20] No conscious act is required to assimilate the notes of the melody to each other: as soon as there is a first note, there is readiness for a sequel. Such coherence

does not require the mediation of a central concept – such as "this kind of melody" – any more than does the coherence of simple temporal processes like the rolling of a ball.[21]

According to Merleau-Ponty, concepts proper are formed out of these instituted pre-conceptual generalities: "*every concept is first a horizontal generality, a generality of style*" (The Visible and the Invisible, 237).[22] But how do we move from generalities to concepts? Given my definition of "concept," it will be no surprise that the essential step in the formation of a concept is the isolation, out of a community of sense, of a universal: a concept is formed when attention is turned from the grouping to the universal feature of the grouping. Thus, on this model, a concept amounts to a modified grasp of a pre-conceptual generality, in which the generality is attended to as such. Our oenophile, for example, might well experience a new wine in light of more familiar wines – the similarities and differences between them – but she forms *concepts* about the flavor profile of the wine only when she attends to the qualities that make these wines alike or dislike, even if these concepts are as yet only "this type of flavor" or "that style of wine." In attending to the general style as such, she isolates it for the first time from the particulars which it permeates and, in attending to the general style in isolation, treats it as a universal. Such a universal is now the sort of content that could figure in a judgment, and thus can be termed a concept proper.

Merleau-Ponty invokes Husserl's description of acts of "ideation" to clarify this transition from pre-conceptual generality to concept proper (*ibid*., 111). On Husserl's account, the relevant transition is from an associatively linked group of individuals to a universal core: I form or use a concept when I explicitly *identify* the aspect of two or more individuals that unites them.[23] In association, I merely note the similarity or coincidence at a distance of a subject, S, with its property, p, to another subject, S', with its property, p', to another subject, S'', with its property, p''. In contrast, I form a universal, *p*, when I identify S, S', and S'' as all being *p*, that is, when I attend to the property not as a distinct moment of each particular, but as the identical species which is particularized in p, p', and p''. Subsequently I can go

on to define “S” or “p,” or to analyze them into constituent features that would be requisite for membership in those categories. Thus, just as for Merleau-Ponty, the essential feature in the transition from a pre-conceptual grouping to a concept proper is the act of attending to a universal in isolation from its instantiations.[24]

As I claimed above, Merleau-Ponty is not eliminating the distinction between particular and universal, but redescribing it by rooting both in a phenomenologically prior term: pre-conceptual generality or the elemental. Consequently, the theory of concept formation that I have been articulating describes a foundational bond between pre-conceptual generalities and the concepts formed from them. First, the thetic act of grasping the universal is a modification or re-apprehension of the pre-conceptual generality. This act of re-apprehension isolates as a static meaning what was previously a diffuse community of sense. As such, the act of re-apprehension depends upon the original apprehension of the community. Second, the acts of explicitation are responsible to the inarticulate and indefinite generality; it is the generality that guides and norms acts of attention, determining them as “good” or “bad” (accurate or inaccurate) articulations. But, for Merleau-Ponty, this foundational bond between pre-conceptual generality and concept does not negate the originality of the concept with respect to the pre-conceptual. The concept is not contained in the pre-conceptual, for as we have seen, conceptualization marks a transformation of the pre-conceptual.

3. One Problem with Theories of Abstraction

I’d now like to motivate Merleau-Ponty’s account of concept formation by showing how it avoids a key problem faced by theories of abstraction. First, I’ll explain the problem, and then show that Merleau-Ponty’s account is not threatened by it.

According to the theory of abstraction, concepts are formed by attending to a property of a particular object, and removing from this property everything that individuates it over against other instances of the property. Locke, for example, defines abstraction as follows:

> If every particular *idea* that we take in should have a distinct name, names must be endless. To prevent this, the mind makes the particular *ideas* received from particular objects become general, which is done by considering them as they are in the mind such appearances, separate from all other existences, and the circumstances of real existence, as time, place, or any other concomitant *ideas*. This is called abstraction, by which *ideas* taken from particular beings become general representatives of all of the same kind (Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 64).[25]

While there are other accounts of abstraction, Locke's version contains all the essential features: that the primary elements of experience are individuals, and that these individuals possess content such that if all its differentiating features are removed, what remains is the universal content of a concept.

Given that theories of abstraction aim to explain the existence of empirical concepts, one obvious reason for rejecting these theories would be if the process of abstraction in fact presupposes possession of the concepts to be explained. Indeed, just this sort of reason is common to several 20th century rejections of abstraction.[26]

First, consider Husserl's objection to abstraction in the *Logical Investigations* (Investigation II). There, Husserl argues that empiricist theories of abstraction conflate a property as an individual moment and a property as a universal (e.g., Logical Investigations, 253). Even when we remove every distinguishing feature of a particular instance of a property – even when we abstract the property from the particular to which it belongs – it yet remains a particular instance of that property. For example, the green of this particular leaf is differentiated from the green of that particular leaf even independently of the particulars to which they belong and their distinct properties, because they remain numerically distinct instances of green. As Soffer puts it, even if one used the word "green" to describe the abstracted particular quality, it would function as a proper and not a common name ("Language and the

Formation of General Concept," 46-7). Thus, abstracting this property moment from the individual does not yield a universal property, only an individual instance of the property. Only if the universal is already organizing, or present within, experience could abstraction yield a universal property.

Second, take one of Cassirer's criticisms of abstraction in *Substance and Function*. Cassirer argues that abstraction presupposes what it means to explain. Abstraction depends on grouping together particulars in such a way that one can subsequently identify the common element according to which one grouped them. But, Cassirer points out, this grouping itself depends on a law of arrangement, according to which the group is ordered and not merely a set of disconnected particulars. Cassirer claims that only the concept to be abstracted from the particulars could function as such a law, perhaps not in its complete form, but at least in function. As Cassirer writes

> What lends the theory of abstraction support is merely the circumstance that it does not presuppose the contents, out of which the concept is to develop, as *disconnected particulars*, but that it tacitly thinks them in the form of an ordered manifold from the first. The concept, however, is not deduced thereby, but presupposed … (Substance and Function, 17).

Third, in *Science and Metaphysics*, Sellars argues that abstractionist theories fail to recognize that the particulars which figure in abstraction are in fact already conceptually articulated, and thus these particulars presuppose the possession of the concept they are meant to explain. According to Sellars, abstractionist theories have traditionally suggested that our possession of general concepts such as "cube" is based upon the intuition of particular "this-such nexuses," such as "this-cube" (Science and Metaphysics, 4-7). Sellars seems to me correct in this regard: only if the intuition of a particular has a "such" as part of its content could abstraction from the particularities of a "this" plausibly yield a "such." According to Sellars, what makes theories of abstraction plausible is that perceptual experience really is primarily of a "this-such" rather than of a bare "this." On the other hand, it is clearly implausible to think that, for example, the representation "this-cube" is genetically prior to the representation "cube,"

insofar as the latter figures in the meaning of the former. Thus, Sellars has written in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* that “instead of coming to have a concept of something because we have noticed that sort of thing, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, and cannot account for it” (87).[27]

These three lines of argument all share the idea that for abstraction to work, the particulars from which the universals are supposed to be extracted would have to be already organized by the relevant universal, and thus abstraction as an explanation falls flat. If these arguments against abstraction are strong – and it seems to me they are – then Merleau-Ponty’s account of empirical concept formation must not fall afoul of them.

To see how his account avoids this danger, consider first what generally differentiates Merleau-Ponty’s account from theories of abstraction. According to theories of abstraction, concepts are formed by attending to a property of a particular object and removing from this property everything that individuates it over against other instances of the property. This account, then, relies on the distinction between particular and universal, such that experience initially yields particulars, from which universals may subsequently be abstracted. Consequently, it differs from Merleau-Ponty’s theory, which argues that both particular and universal are preceded by what he calls pre-conceptual generalities (fields or elements). Recall that the common problem with theories of abstraction is that they tacitly presuppose the generality they mean to explain. But Merleau-Ponty agrees with the critics of abstraction that experience is from the first organized by generalities. However, he also distinguishes between concepts and pre-conceptual generalities, which allows him to describe a process by which experience can lead to the formation of concepts without presupposing them.

Consider Husserl’s objection that abstracting a property moment from an individual does not yield a universal property, only an individual instance of the property. If, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the particular is best understood as a differentiation of a generality, then there is no problem of moving

from the particular property moment to the property as a universal, only of attending to, articulating, and fixing as universal, the generality through which the particular is perceived. And while Merleau-Ponty would agree with Sellars and Cassirer that the perception of particulars is shaped by generalities, Merleau-Ponty's theory avoids their objections to abstraction, because it distinguishes between concepts and pre-conceptual generalities. For Merleau-Ponty, the generality by which the perception of a particular is necessarily shaped is not conceptuality – in Sellars terms, the perception of a particular is not essentially characterized as the representation of a "this-such nexus" – but pre-conceptual generality. What are presupposed, on Merleau-Ponty's account, for the formation of concepts are pre-conceptual generalities, and consequently there is no problem here of presupposing what is to be explained.

4. Conclusion

As per Merleau-Ponty's general strategy, his theory of concept formation avoids both an empiricism and an intellectualism about concepts. On the one hand, it avoids the sort of intellectualism which, starting from the universal, makes the possession of concepts a precondition of perception. Taken most rigorously, such an intellectualism would make it impossible to see how concepts could be learned or acquired through perception. On the other hand, it avoids the sort of empiricism which presupposes the generality it means to explain through reference to the particular. Merleau-Ponty provides a plausible theory for the formation of concepts through perception, by moving beyond the dichotomy of particular and universal in articulating a domain of experience that grounds both: pre-conceptual generality.

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Notes

[1] Not all philosophers think this way, Jerry Fodor (1975) being a notable exception. I won't address these exceptions here – assuming instead that we have ample motivation to seek an account of empirical concept formation – but see, for example, Margolis and Laurence (2011) for a response to them.

[2] See, for example, Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter XII, or Kant's *Jäsche Logic* §§ 5-6.

[3] If one admits that there are pre-conceptual generalities, then one is committed to the existence of a certain kind of non-conceptual content in perception, and it is certainly contested that there is such content. However, the point of this paper is not primarily to show that Merleau-Ponty has a theory of non-conceptual content, but to provide an exposition of his description of the generalities characteristic of pre-conceptual experience and the process by which these generalities are developed into concepts proper. For the purposes of this paper, I presuppose that Merleau-Ponty does think that perception has non-conceptual content. Note that not all agree to this presupposition. Berendzen – contra Dreyfus (2007) for example – has contested the role Merleau-Ponty ascribes to non-conceptual content in perception (2009). It seems to me that while the non-conceptuality of perceptual content in Merleau-Ponty may at times be overstated in the literature, a careful reading of Merleau-Ponty cannot ignore his description of certain kinds of non-conceptual content, for example, in his claim (to be examined shortly) that "living thought … does not consists in the act of subsuming under a category" (1945, 130).

[4] See, for example, *Prose of the World*: "Style as preconceptual generality – generality of the 'axis' …" (44). Merleau-Ponty uses many different terms to express this phenomenal structure (for example, field, dimension,

level, hinge, joint), but "pre-conceptual generality" is most precise and apt for my project. Note that while I am describing such generalities as extra-conceptual, an alternate strategy would be to describe them as belonging to a level or stage of conceptualization more fundamental than we usually think of in referring to concepts. Carbone, for example, has described Merleau-Ponty's attempt to locate a non-explicit, non-rule based generalities within experience as a "resignification" of the term concept, rather than as something extra-conceptual (2000). But Merleau-Ponty evidently wants to maintain some distinction between concepts proper (the sorts of things we employ in judgments) and the generalities characteristic of perception – for example, he contrasts concepts with what he calls "dimensions" (1968, 224). It seems to me that both Priest's reading above (on which Merleau-Ponty does away with concepts) and Carbone's (on which Merleau-Ponty is proposing a resignification of the term "concept") will not allow us to maintain this distinction clearly.

[5] It is important, for Merleau-Ponty, that universals are not *ultimately* separable from the particulars that instantiate them (1968, 149). In writing that a concept is *attended to* in isolation from particulars, I do not mean that concepts are in an ultimate sense separable from particulars. If, as I will argue, concepts are formed out of preconceptual generalities, and such generalities are inseparable from particulars, then in an ultimate sense concepts *depend* on particulars (i.e., the former have an *existence* and *meaning* only in virtue of the latter), even while they can be attended to in isolation from particulars. Thus, to think of an indexical or sortal concept, I needn't think of any particular instantiation of that concept. Nevertheless, according to Merleau-Ponty, such concepts have their existence and meaning *only* as modifications of generalities that are inseparable from particulars, namely, pre-conceptual generalities.

[6] Notice that this definition of concepts as a kind of meaning is so far relatively neutral with respect to the *ontology* of concepts. To give an account of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of concepts would presuppose a further discussion of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of *meaning*, which would take us beyond the scope of the present paper. Though I cannot provide such an account here, there is a significant literature on this topic. See Besmer (2008), Barbaras (2004) chapter 16, and Carbone (2004). Further, I will not in this paper distinguish between concepts and universals or essences, because I think this would ultimately distort Merleau-Ponty's view, though admittedly at times this lack of distinction risks ambiguity. Correlatively, when I speak of particulars, or of universals attended to in isolation from particulars, I really have in mind particular *meanings*.

[7] Once I have formed a concept, I can use it to judge of particular experiences in ways that are not separable from that particular, for example, "This is red." But such judgments have as constitutive elements (they could not exist without) meanings that have been attended to in isolation from particulars, and so these judgments are not pre-conceptual meanings.

[8] See Merleau-Ponty (2012), Introduction, Chapter III, "Attention and Judgment."

[9] See Alweiss (2000) for a more complete account of this point.

[10] Susan Carey's recent research (2010) on the transition from infant numerical capacities to the explicit number concepts possessed by children provide another good example of how attention to a universal in isolation from particulars is structurally transformative.

[11] Hannah Ginsborg has similarly argued that sorting does not depend on concept possession, but allows it: "Six-year-olds learn the concepts *solid, liquid, and gas*, say, by being presented with objects that they are asked to sort into kinds. … [The child's] appreciation of the appropriateness of her sorting inclinations – that is to say, of her associative dispositions – does not presuppose possession of the concept *solid*, but it provides the basis of which that concept can be acquired" (2006, 55).

[12] Note that while my example seems to assume that this identification through conceptual knowledge occurs explicitly, the argument works just as well if were to think of it occurring implicitly. Thus, one should not worry that this argument depends on the assumption that concept application only occurs at the personal level.

[13] That grouping or the formation of meaningful wholes should not be explained by association is perhaps one of the better comprehended of Merleau-Ponty's arguments. See, for example, Carman (2005 and 2008), or Romendh-Romluc (2011). Carman helpfully points to both the obscurity (that it fails to clarify anything) and circularity (that it presupposes what it is meant to explain, in part because what we in fact associate are not significations but already meaningful wholes) of associationism (2005, 56-7). Romendh-Romluc parses Merleau-Ponty's arguments in two ways: first, while association depends on the perception of proximities and likenesses, the perception of things is *experientially* prior to the perception of proximities and likenesses; second, the perception of proximities and likeness *conceptually* cannot be prior to the perception of things. This latter is to be the case insofar as a) sensations can only be perceived as proximate if they are perceived within a common whole (namely, the spatial world), and thus insofar as at least one thing has already been perceived, and b) the only

property shared by all and only those sensations that will be associated as a thing is precisely their being associated as that thing, and consequently this property cannot serve to ground the association (Romendh-Romluc 2011, 50-52).

[14] See Barbaras (2004), chapter 7, and Carbone (2004), chapter 3, for more on Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of the distinction between particular and universal.

[15] Consider Merleau-Ponty's distinction, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, between originary and second-order perception, according to which we ordinarily perceive objects solely in virtue of general meanings and only through attention succeed in differentiating these objects through individual meanings (46).

[16] Cf. Merleau-Ponty's claim that elements are "not objects, but fields, subdued being, non-thetic being, being before being …" (1968, 267).

[17] For the idea of disarticulation, see for example Merleau-Ponty's discussion of forgetting as "undifferentiation" (1968, 193-7).

[18] See Merleau-Ponty (1968, 218). A very similar discussion can be found already in *Phenomenology of Perception* (32).

[19] For a more complete presentation of Merleau-Ponty's idea of institution, see Vallier (2005).

[20] Note that Merleau-Ponty's distinction between passivity and activity is more accurate than his distinction between his idea of institution and Husserl's idea of constitution, for Husserl certainly speaks of passive and non-thetic acts of constitution (for example, in Ideas II).

[21] For example, Merleau-Ponty writes, "There is a strict ideality in experiences that are experiences of the flesh: the moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field, adhere to one another with a cohesion without concept, which is of the same type as the cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of my body with the world" (1968, 152).

[22] For more on the concept of style, see Singer (1981).

[23] See Husserl 1973, Part III, ch. 1.

[24] There is some difficulty with appealing to Husserl here, because Merleau-Ponty seems to be rejecting Husserl's ground-level story about the association of isolated individuals. But I think this part of the account doesn't disqualify the relevant idea here (Husserl's description of the act of ideation as the identification of a

universal) from helpfully clarifying Merleau-Ponty's position. Moreover, it isn't immediately clear how to interpret Husserl's position, because he also makes it clear that particulars are not initially given in mutual indifference, insofar as they are from the beginning experience according to an "external horizon of co-given objects" and "familiar types" (1973, 31-39 and 321).

[25] Note that for Locke, "idea" means any "object of thinking," namely, any mental representation, not necessarily particular or universal (1689/1996). Thus, in Locke's terms, all concepts would be ideas, but not all ideas would be concepts. Further, for Locke, ideas are not initially general, because they are derived from sensation of or reflection upon particulars.

[26] Other lines of criticism are available, and have been made use of. For example, P. T. Geach, in *Mental Acts*, mounts a series of well-known arguments against abstraction, though I think the best of these are mounted against the claim that *all* concepts are acquired by abstraction, rather than the claim considered here, namely, that *some* are.

[27] This objection can also be found in McDowell (1998).

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