



## Introduction: The Problem of Perception

The question of perception not only has a “technical” or “regional” scope, as we still often tend to think; it merges in reality with the ontological question in its simplest sense, namely as an inquiry into the meaning of the being of what is. In fact, if “perceiving is perceiving something,” as Pradines<sup>1</sup> writes, perception is indeed what opens us up to what “there is”—in other words, to being understood in the sense of what is given to us originally before any determination, as the basis and condition for any determinability; being first takes the form of “something,” and it is therefore indisputable that an inquiry concerning being refers back to perception as originary access to it. It is true that traditionally, and up to Heidegger himself, this originary is denied to perception. We can undoubtedly believe that it is on the level of sensory experience that something is given primitively, that every determination and every objectivation unfolds on a preexisting basis: that of the world given to us precisely through perceptual experience.

However, in this instance this would be a mere illusion of a reflection forgetful of itself, inasmuch as this relationship to the fact of the world that I judge as originary has itself, as a condition, the apprehension of a meaning that supposes in turn the contact of consciousness with itself. My encounter with the something would become lost in darkness if it were not underpinned by an activity that constitutes it by grasping its significance; in the words of Merleau-Ponty, “The brute and prior existence of the world I thought I found already there by opening my eyes is only the symbol of a

being that is for itself as soon as it is because appearing, and therefore appearing to itself, is its whole being—that is the being we call mind.”<sup>2</sup> However, to cling to this thesis—the true significance of which we must recognize—is to neglect the indisputable dimension of perceptual experience in the sense that, whatever its value of truth, it is unquestionably lived and, so to speak, *index sui*. Even if it is denounced after the fact as illusory, it can be denounced only *after the fact*, so that the reflection that brings forth a significant relationship at the heart of experience takes everything into account except the fact that the something is *given* to me and that this significant relationship was first ignorant of itself. Thus, in considering itself as the condition of the encounter with the given, reflection pulls the ladder out from underneath itself because it can denounce perception as dependent only after having relied on a perceptual experience in which the brute fact of the world was given to it. This is why, as Merleau-Ponty writes again: “The whole reflective analysis is not false, but still naïve, as long as it dissimulates from itself its own mainspring and as long as, in order to constitute the world, it is necessary to have a notion of the world as preconstituted—as long as the procedure is in principle delayed behind itself.”<sup>3</sup>

The decision to bring the question of perception to the fore involves a decision regarding being itself and therefore already represents taking a position within ontology; in effect, it comes down to admitting that the only possible access to being is our experience itself, that it is exclusively in what we live that we can discover its transcendence. This is what Merleau-Ponty becomes aware of, and clearly better than anyone prior to him. We could say indeed that his entire work aims at understanding what he calls “the basic fact of metaphysics” that resides in “this double sense of the *cogito* . . . I am sure that there is being—on the condition that I do not seek another sort of being than being-for-me.”<sup>4</sup> We find an echo of this, albeit simplified, in the first lines of the inaugural chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, entitled “The Perceptual Faith and Its Obscurity”: “We see the things themselves; the world is what we see.”<sup>5</sup> It is in and through our experience, primordially perceptual, that we are initiated into the thing itself, that is to say, into what there is; it is in the “immanence” of what we “live” that we find a path toward transcendence; the phenomenological return to the things themselves signifies ipso facto a return to perception. Moreover, this perspective itself makes reference to a Husserlian discovery that is thematized under the heading of “the universal a priori of correlation between the object of experience and its modes of givenness”—a fundamental discovery

since, Husserl writes, “my life’s work was dominated by this task of elaborating the a priori of correlation.”<sup>6</sup> Every being is the index of a subjective system of correlation, which signifies that any person imaginable can access being as such only through subjective data; the absolute character of being, in the sense that it is what relies on itself, does not form an alternative with the fact that its modes of access are relative to a finite subject.

Nonetheless, taken literally, the decision to search for the meaning of being in the being-for-me is so general that it cannot characterize only the phenomenological method *sensu stricto*, and if it can be qualified as “phenomenological,” it can be done so only in a nontechnical sense, a sense that in any case is not Husserlian but suits Descartes as well as Hegel. The access to being through the *cogito*, understood in its elementary sense, draws at the center of the history of philosophy a truly vast field, though one nevertheless determined, a field that constituted the conditions for the possible emergence of a phenomenology.

Now, it is striking to observe that many philosophical currents that claim a method of access to being on the basis of experience fall short in this regard and do not succeed in accounting for experience as access to exteriority, as opening to something; perception in this context is always reduced to something other than itself and remains in a way “not to be found.”<sup>7</sup> The empiricist perspective, for example, begins with the decision to cling precisely to experience, to what is given as given. However, the determination of this given in terms of sensations (or of impressions, in Hume’s terminology) presents difficulties that paradoxically exhibit a disrespect for the given—in other words, a subjection of experience to categories that do not derive from it. The concept of sensation is in fact characterized by the confusion between the subjective state and what is experienced in it, between experiencing and that of which there is an impression. From this point on, the sensation remains an atomic datum and, so to speak, dead insofar as by itself it is incapable of representing or presenting something.

Punctuality and nonmeaning go hand in hand; because sensation cannot open to something, it finds itself cut off from other sensations, and since it does not disappear behind the object it is unable to communicate with other sensory moments. The relationship to the object, which defines the perceptual moment itself, depends then on a construct based on an association. We could easily demonstrate that the relationship to the thing—that is, the function of the manifestation—cannot be explained if it is not in some way inscribed beforehand in sensation. A sensation can recall the

other sensations with which it constitutes an object only if it is grasped in advance in the perspective of this object, as one of its moments; otherwise the selective and ordered character of association would remain incomprehensible. Association therefore becomes useless at the moment it becomes comprehensible; the associationist theory always presupposes what it purports to explain. Thus, despite the appearance of a proximity to the given, empiricism is as far as possible from it, and the sensation, which is supposed to represent the most concrete—which defines the very meaning of concrete—is in reality what is most abstract. In fact, the need for reduction from the complex to the simple, the empiricist formulation of the return to the things themselves, is compromised by the confusion between *logical* simplicity and *psychological* or *phenomenological* simplicity. The fact that sensation can be extracted as the simplest element because it is indivisible in the final analysis of the thing does not mean that our *experience* of the thing is originally constituted by sensations; here appears the confusion between what counts as the object of experience and what counts as the experience of which it is the object. Sensation proves to be the most abstract concept because it confuses the basis of an experience of the thing with the elements of an analysis of the object. Determination of perception based on sensation is unacceptable because it rests on a fundamental confusion and ultimately becomes part of a circular argument: it describes the conditions of the experience of the object on the basis of the object of which it is the experience.

Empiricism creates a subsistent world and then conceives of experience in a naïve manner as the effect of this world's action on the senses, whence the characterization of experience in terms of sensations, whose punctuality and multiplicity are merely the consequence of an implicit spatialization of sensitivity, conceived of as a kind of "sensitive cover" spatialization that is related to the exteriority of the parts of the body subjected to the world's action. Empiricism certainly has the virtue of emphasizing the dimension of *presence* that characterizes perceptual experience and distinguishes it from a conceptual—indeed imaginative—representation, but it constructs this presence from present data, sensations, thus not allowing itself to reconstitute presence in its true sense as presence of something. We must conclude from this that the access to the *cogito* that places us in the presence of being is not self-evident and is compromised by its subjection to the logic of being, by the projection of the categories of being onto the experience that gives it. Husserl refers to this fascination for the object that closes us off to the access to its conditions of manifestation as the natural attitude.

The return to perceptual experience therefore requires a concerted effort, a method; the shortcomings of empiricism consist in its undoubtedly not having understood that access to the immediate is anything but immediate. Cartesian doubt, the first attempt at phenomenological reduction, is motivated precisely by the consciousness of our subjection to the world in the form of blind belief in the validity of our perceptual judgments. It involves therefore an undoing of our immediate link with what appears, in order to clarify the very conditions of its manifestation, which means, in Cartesian words, making a conversion by negating the existence of the world toward an unquestionable being, a being that then appears as the conditional possibility of any manifestation. This being is none other than the thinking subject that is the absolute identity of being and appearance, or consciousness: to appear means to be for—but also “in”—a consciousness conceived as immediate relation to self, as immanence. In other words, perception is not an event of the world but an act of the subject, an act by which the latter enters precisely into a relationship with this world.

Perception is not constituted by sensations that would be present to consciousness as a thing is present in the world; it constitutes the world by representing it to itself. This is tantamount to saying that the encounter with something would not be if an act were not to intersect with it, an act that apprehends its meaning. However, the famous analysis of the piece of wax—which serves to eradicate on its own terms the naïve conviction that the sensory experience that gives us exteriority is the very model of evidence—reveals a misunderstanding of properly perceptual experience. Indeed, in describing our immediate experience of the wax in the form of an enumeration of distinct sensory qualities, Descartes subscribes to the empiricist approach. He fails to recognize that the color (as with the odor, and so on) of the wax not only is “its” color but *is given* as such. In effect, far from being a closed datum and for all intents and purposes neutral, color represents the wax, presents it, or incarnates it; it implies something “waxy,” so that it communicates at once with the other “sensory qualities,” such that the color foretells the softness of contact with it and the muted sound wax makes if we strike it, as well as the way it will react when it comes into contact with a flame. It follows that at the conclusion of this effective eidetic variation (that is, the exposure of the wax to fire) none of the sensory qualities supposed to constitute wax remain the same; hence the judgment of identity concerning wax can be based only on the apprehension of a “body,” of “something extended, flexible, and mutable,” an apprehension that, as we

know, relies on an intellection, on the only faculty able to grasp the power of infinite variation that is a body. However, in defining the piece of wax as a body, Descartes confuses the perceived wax with the physical wax, the latter being quantifiable because it is devoid of sensory qualities. This confusion is present from the first description of the piece of wax; to separate sensory aspects of the object of which they are aspects is necessarily to conceive of the object as a reality that transcends its modes of appearing.

In other words, in separating each aspect from its ostensive function, Descartes excises the wax from its sensory incarnation. The empiricist's description of the wax's presence in terms of pure sensory multiplicity and the intellectualist determination of the wax as quantifiable object constitute two sides of the same decision. The lack of unity characterizing the felt wax is compensated for by the positing of a pure object, by an excess of unity; but this excess of unity is achieved at the cost of a lack of presence.<sup>8</sup> Thus when Descartes emphasizes the fact that every perception is perception of *something*, he observes the active dimension of apprehending a meaning that is inherent in it. However, he hypostatizes this perceptual meaning in objective signification (more exactly in physical ideality), thereby cutting it off from its sensory incarnation. The perceptual moment in the strict sense—presentation of a meaning in the sensory or incarnation of an object in partial aspects—is completely missed. It is replaced by the juxtaposition of an intellection and sensations that are ideas without datum, which have no value other than to indicate an external existence insofar as they are merely the expression of my incarnated existence—in other words, of the finitude of my experience.

Thus, in confusing perception with intellection, Descartes assumes in a sense the objectivist prejudice that underlies empiricism. He indeed recognizes the necessity of going beyond the naïve understanding of knowledge as the thing's action on me, which is to say as an intraworldly event, to the benefit of apprehending a meaning, but he does not go so far as to contest the determination of the world as an ensemble of objects; if the existence of the world is indeed considered doubtful, the fact that the subject of existence—what is susceptible to existing—must necessarily be a substance is never doubted. In Descartes's eyes, perceiving something signifies necessarily apprehending an objective meaning in the sense of what is ideally determinable, and the question of perception then becomes one of the faculty that gives us access to what is constant in an infinity of variations. Descartes goes beyond empiricism, which missed the objectual pole of

which sensory presence is the manifestation, but at the price of a blindness vis-à-vis the constitutive sensory dimension of perceptual appearance, vis-à-vis this abyss that separates the perceived thing from the conceived thing. The fact that the perception of the wax indeed requires the grasp of a unitary pole does not mean that this perception must be reduced to an intellection. In a certain way, the entire difficulty of a philosophy of perception resides in this distance, in the requirement that one conceive of an identity that does not depend on a positing, that one account for a *sensory* unity that does not differ from the diversity of which it is the unity.

We see that although recognizing that being-for-me is the only possible access to being, and although assuming therefore what Merleau-Ponty calls the fundamental metaphysical fact, the traditions that were just evoked do not succeed in developing a concept of experience that satisfies the nature of the problem; in short, they do not succeed in conceiving of perception for itself. However, their failure is helpful in that it indicates what the requirements are for a true thinking of perception. It is a question of reconciling the two dimensions that are alternately sacrificed by the traditions evoked here: the tradition of *presence* (which distinguishes perception from just any idea) and the tradition of *thingness* (which distinguishes it from the sensed and situates it in continuity with the thought). The task of a philosophy of perception is to conceive of the conditions of a profound unity between matter and form, diversity and unity, receptivity and activity. We already suspect that such a unity, if it must be something more than a mixture or a dialectical synthesis—in other words, a *primitive* unity inasmuch as it involves our originary relationship to what is—will unsettle the categories on the basis of which it has been characterized up to this point. On the other hand, critical examination of the classical conceptions of perception shows that their impotence in the face of its specificity derives from their subjection to the presupposition of the objective world. They consider as self-evident the existence of a reality in itself, one constituted by definite objects, and the fact that the existence of such a world can be doubted changes nothing regarding the certainty that if something exists, it will exist as a self-sufficient and fully determinable reality. In any case, the failure of the philosophy of perception stems from a confusion between the laws of this appearing reality and those that govern its appearance: the latter are immediately reduced to the former. It follows that one can conceive of perception authentically only on the condition that one not engage in this confusion, and consequently that one suspend this sponta-

neous ontology in order precisely to return to what makes it possible, to the structure of appearance. The characteristic difficulty of a philosophy of perception is that, to grasp in the act the movement by which experience initiates us to being, we must as it were refuse this initiation; we must cease to adhere to what is self-evident.

Husserl's philosophy is unquestionably the first that fully gauged the demands of a philosophy of perception and placed them at the center of its thinking. This is why we contend that there can be a philosophy of perception only as a phenomenology of perception. To understand the meaning of perception in Husserl's work, we must situate it at the center of a sort of typology of acts that constitutes the general framework put in place at the time of the *Logical Investigations*, at the center of which static phenomenology will completely unfold. Beyond the specific determination of psychic phenomena as intentional, Husserl borrows from Brentano a second characterization that Brentano himself, quoted by Husserl, formulates this way: "they are either presentations or founded upon presentations,"<sup>9</sup> which signifies that "nothing can be judged about, nothing can likewise be desired, nothing can be hoped or feared, if it is not presented."<sup>10</sup> What is significant here is the affirmation that a relationship not representative of the object—for example, an affective or volitional object—cannot be direct, cannot possess a type of object in the broadest sense that would correspond to it characteristically and be constituted in this relationship. In other words, there is givenness of object only in a theoretical sense, so that a nontheoretical relationship must be supported by a preexisting object constituted in a representation. The object of desire is not constituted in desire; it must first be constituted as an object in order to be desired. After a long discussion, Husserl takes up this thesis again for his own purposes and formulates it quite clearly: "An intentional experience only gains objective reference by incorporating an experienced act of presentation in itself, through which *the object is presented to it*. The object would be nothing to consciousness if consciousness did not set it before itself as an object, and if it did not further permit the object to become an object of feeling, of desire, etc."<sup>11</sup>

Whence the current topical distinction between objectivating acts and nonobjectivating acts that are founded on the former. It is undoubtedly in Husserl's Sixth Logical Investigation that we find the most complete definition of the objectivating act, a genus of which perception is a species: "We may say of this class of acts which alone concerns us here, *that in them unity of fulfilment has the character of unity of identification*, possibly the narrower



character of *a unity of knowing*, i.e., of an act to which objective identity is the corresponding correlate.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus the objectivating act sets us in relationship with a determined object, whether this object is or is not, strictly speaking, a cognitive object—in other words, whether it is effectively present or not. It should be pointed out that this weighty decision, which appears at first glance to be hardly questionable, commits the phenomenology of perception to a move in a direction that will prove—as is shown in what follows—fatal, so to speak. Does not defining perception right away as an objectivating act subject it in advance to conditions and categories of knowledge, thereby compromising the very possibility of considering its specificity? Does it not, at the same time, prevent us from accounting for its constitutive character—the access to an authentic transcendence? What is put into question here is the pseudo-evidence that any perception is perception of object. Moreover, to take these difficulties seriously implies understanding perception as a nonobjectivating act, which leads purely and simply to inverting the foundational relationship established by Husserl and, simultaneously, to finding oneself confronted by the difficult problem of the possibility of knowledge and objectivation on the basis of an originary givenness that is not oriented toward the object.

The division of acts within the category of objectivating acts is in a way required by their cognitive finality. Since the function of each is to refer to the object, the acts will be ordered according to their more or less effective aptitude for adequately presenting this object. The fundamental distinction in this regard, a distinction that Husserl advances in the First Logical Investigation and to which he devotes a significant part of the Sixth, separates signitive acts from intuitive acts, which include both imagination and perception. The former focus on the object “emptily”; they “conceive” of it without anything from the object being present in them. Husserl grasps them by means of the privileged example of the linguistic expression that refers to the object as absent. The latter are fulfilling acts in that they bring forth something of the object that was only focused upon, which they render present. As Husserl writes:

A signitive intention merely points to its object, an intuitive intention gives it “presence,” in the pregnant sense of the word, it imports something of the fulness of the object itself. However far an imaginative presentation may lag behind its object, it has many features in common with it, more than that, it is “like” this object, depicts it, makes it “really present” to us. A signitive presentation, however,

does not present analogically, it is “in reality” no “presentation,” in it nothing of the object comes to life.<sup>13</sup>

It should be remarked that this relation of emptiness and fulfillment possesses a dynamic importance that corresponds to the fundamental orientation of intentionality toward knowledge. To say in effect that the signitive act focuses on emptiness is to say that it refers already to the object but in the mode of emptiness. As Levinas has shown, the signitive act does not involve a kind of mental image that would be equivalent to the object, as opposed to direct contact that characterizes intuition; he focuses on the object itself. Thus, as a test for a determined absence the signitive intention tends necessarily toward fulfillment; it opens the horizon of a givenness in fullness. Empty intentionality does indeed have the character of a lacking, and as a consequence intuition possesses an element of satisfaction; it “fills.” Indeed, as Husserl writes:

To every intuitive intention there pertains, in the sense of an ideal possibility, a signitive intention precisely accommodated to its material. This unity of identification necessarily has the character of a unity of fulfillment, in which the intuitive, not the signitive member, has the character of being the fulfiller, and so also, in the most authentic sense, the *giver* of fullness.

We only express the sense of this last statement in a different way if we say that signitive intentions are in themselves “empty,” and that they “are in need of fullness.”<sup>14</sup>

It is appropriate however, to distinguish at the heart of intuitive acts between imagination that achieves the object only in image (thus representing it) and perception that reaches the object itself (thus presenting it). In perception we are concerned with the object “in flesh and blood” (*Leibhaftig*) or in person; in fullness, Husserl says, “our experience is represented by the words: ‘This is the thing *itself*.’”<sup>15</sup> Henceforth, perception is defined by Husserl as “originary giving intuition” because “to have something real given originally and ‘attentively to perceive’ and ‘experience’ it in an intuiting simpliciter are one and the same.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, to the extent that knowledge is a search for adequacy, originary giving intuition (insofar as it places the object in presence) is a “legitimizing source of cognition”; such is the tenor of what Husserl does not hesitate to call “the principle of all principles.”<sup>17</sup>

We see that, in Husserl’s work, perception acquires a primordial status since, in affirming that it is an originary giving intuition, he indicates that it provides us access to being itself; perceiving is being put in presence

of what is, and the only way of attaining what is in person is to perceive it. To be authenticated as being and to be perceived are reciprocal. It follows that any inquiry into being must pass through an inquiry into perception, that the sense of being of what is can be attained only in an eidetic of perception. Moreover, beyond the fact that it places perceptual experience at the center of phenomenology, this characterization of perception profoundly renews its meaning. In effect, insofar as it is defined as the fulfillment of a signitive focus, as presence "in the flesh," perception comes to exceed the level of empirical perception—strictly speaking, sensory perception. In other words, "The essential homogeneity of the function of fulfillment, as of all the ideal relationships necessarily bound up with it, obliges us to give the name 'perception' to each fulfilling act of confirmatory self-presentation . . . of 'object.'"<sup>18</sup>

To the extent that the category, as well as an *eidōs*, can be presented in themselves, we must speak of perception with regard to the act that attains them. Perception appears clearly in this context as a specific mode of intuition, one that places us in the presence of the thing itself (and not only of its image), and it can, in this regard, encompass intellectual intuition. Nevertheless, categorial intuitions remain founded acts in that they are necessarily supported by a sensory individual and that the fullness of categorial intuition derives from the individual's intuition. The originary meaning of perception refers indeed to the intuition of an empirical individual, and it is by extending the type of evidence that comes to light in sensory perception that we can speak of perception with regard to accessing a category.

This explains why, when it involves categorial intuition, Husserl speaks of perception "in a larger sense"; he distinguishes thematically between a narrow or *sensory* concept of perception and a broad or *suprasensory* concept. This broadening of perception is extremely significant even if it does not concern us directly for the moment. In fact, it opens the way to a definition of perception detached from any reference to sensory data. For Husserl it is indeed the sensory moment that ensures the dimension of presence in the flesh that distinguishes it from the perception proper to imagination; to speak of a thing as it is there in person, or "corporeally present," is to say that I sense it, that it manifests itself through sensory aspects. The ultimate fulfillment, which defines originary givenness, is ensured by the datum of sensation.<sup>19</sup> The fact remains that the definition of perception does not rely on sensation, and this is why the perceived escapes

the prejudicial cut from the sensory and the suprasensory; to be perceived is to be present in person. In other words, it is to fill a deficient aim, and it is only because the sensory dimension ensures the full presence of the object, inscribes it spatiotemporally, and realizes as it were an optimum of presence that it can come to characterize perception.

In contradistinction to the whole tradition—which merges both perceived and sensed, whether this be to identify them purely and simply or to bring forth after the fact the presence of an intellectual activity at the center of perception—Husserl succeeds in characterizing the perceived in an autonomous way instead of reducing it to the sensed, all the while integrating and in a way justifying the constitutive character of the sensory dimension. The richness of this approach to perception is to my mind considerable, even if it is not certain that Husserl took full advantage of it. In effect, to the extent that perception is essentially sensory even while being defined other than by pure-and-simple merging with sensation, it will be possible to redefine the sensory in the light of perception, particularly to go beyond the naïve and abstract idea of sensation as atomic datum. On the other hand, the presence in the flesh to which perception is reduced is itself conceived of as the fulfillment of a preliminary intentionality; the ultimate status of perception therefore depends on the nature of this fulfillment, which is to say on the nature of the relationship between emptiness and fullness. If it were to turn out that this structural relationship between emptiness and fullness refers to a deeper mode of being instead of being reduced to the presence or the absence of the definite object, the characterization of the perceived would be profoundly shaken by it.

If it is true that perception attains the thing itself by virtue of its being an intuition, it is nevertheless distinct from an adequate knowledge; the perceived presents what was aimed at only as empty but does not present it integrally and therefore does not succeed in filling this aim fully. Husserl indicates this at the outset in the paragraph of the Sixth Logical Investigation that is specifically dedicated to perceptual fulfillment:

Perception, so far as it claims to give us the object “itself,” really claims thereby to be no mere intention, but an act, which may indeed be capable of offering fulfillment to other acts, but which itself requires no further fulfillment. But generally, and in all cases of “external” perception, this remains a mere pretension. The object is not actually given, it is not given wholly and entirely as that which it itself is.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the fact that the thing is given *itself* does signify that it is given *such as it is in itself*; but the fact that perception gives us the object in person

does not imply that it is an exhaustion of it. On the contrary; it attains it only partially. It is this situation that Husserl thematizes in the theory of adumbrations, only suggested in the *Logical Investigations* but carefully developed in book I of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. It should be added however, that this theory of adumbrations is the opposite of a theory since it does not go beyond a description of the perceived as it is given "without ever going beyond the limits in which it is given." The power of the Husserlian theory of perception stems from the fact that it is guided by intuition as the legitimizing source of knowledge, which is tantamount to saying that it attempts to understand perception from (and as) the manner in which the perceived is given. The revindication of intuition means in this context that thinking must take shape from contact with perception instead of imposing its own demands on the latter.

Take, for example, this table I am looking at. I can walk around it, approach it, walk away from it, touch it with my hand; I am always conscious of a single, identical table, of a thing that in itself remains unchanged. Such is the elementary situation that characterizes perception. In a way, there is nothing more to think about; yet this is undoubtedly what is most difficult to understand. In fact, although the perceived table is always given as the same, the perceptions of the table (such are at least the words Husserl used), as the positions of my body as well as the uses of my senses that these perceptions presuppose, do not cease to vary. A same moment of the thing therefore appears through a diversity of manifestations,<sup>21</sup> which Husserl calls adumbrations: "Of essential necessity there belongs to any 'all-sided', continuously, unitarily, and self-confirming experiential consciousness [*Erfahrungsbewußtsein*] of the same physical thing a multifarious system of continuous multiplicities of appearances and adumbrations in which all objective moments falling within perception with the characteristic of being themselves given "in person" are adumbrated by determined continuities."<sup>22</sup>

Each manifestation of the table is indeed a manifestation of the table; it is the table itself that is presented in each manifestation and not a sign nor an image. Nevertheless, this manifestation remains an adumbration in that the table is presented from a certain point of view, from a certain angle, and not at all integrally, so that this manifestation is inscribed in an infinite series of other possible manifestations. On the one hand, the manifestation is nothing more than the table it presents; it is completely presentation, the very presence of the thing. On the other hand, the table

itself is not distinct from this manifestation in which it appears and is given as this very manifestation.

We find ourselves therefore in a strange situation since the manifestation presents an object that is none other than that in which it is presented; the manifestation is surpassed toward the object, but this surpassing gives rise to nothing more than another manifestation. Thus it disappears, being replaced by the object that is erased simultaneously by its manifestation; unveiling the object, it veils it, since the latter is never grasped as distinct from what reveals it. In short, the manifestation presents the object as what itself remains unrepresentable. This is why Husserl can speak of adumbration. The adumbration already gives what it outlines; it presents it, but insofar as it is only an adumbration it sidesteps what is outlined and postpones the full manifestation of it; in the adumbration, the object is presented rigorously as what requires formulation, and it has no other tenor beyond the adumbration than this requirement itself. Thus in perception the adumbration and the adumbrated object, the manifestation and what appears, are affected by a double constitutive ambiguity. The adumbration is simultaneously itself and the object it presents; it is the identity of itself and its surpassing (in other words, its obliteration). As for the object, it is simultaneously present in the sense that it is attained in person and indefinitely absent in the sense that no series of adumbrations can exhaust the tenor of being; it is the identity of a coming to presence and a retreat into the unrepresentable.

It must certainly be added that if the presence of an object relies on the self-obliteration of the adumbration, the presence of the adumbration as such has as a correlate the object's retreat. This is an extremely difficult situation to conceive of since each of the terms exists only as passage to its opposite. Thus if there is a difference between an adumbration and that of which it is the adumbration, it is by no means a difference between two terms, since it is only due to its very adumbration—in other words, due to perception—that something such as a term can appear. This difference therefore does not differ from the identity; the difference or the distance from the object vis-à-vis the adumbration is summed up in the consciousness that “something” is present in or with the manifestation.

Affirming that the perceived thing is adumbrated in the course of manifestations (“lived experiences,” in Husserl's terms), Husserl conceives of perception as a synthesis of identification that, on the basis of concordant adumbrations, apprehends the object as one and the same. We are therefore confronted with a consciousness “of the *one* perceptual physical

thing appearing ever more perfectly, from ever new sides, with an ever greater wealth of determinations." Moreover, Husserl adds, "the spatial thing is nothing other than an intentional unity which of essential necessity can be given only as the unity of such modes of appearance."<sup>23</sup> In other words, perception as givenness by adumbrations is characterized by ambiguity, or rather the cobelonging of the one and the many. The thing is adumbrated in a plurality of manifestations, but its unity does not refer to any positive datum beyond this diversity; it is a unity that is constituted directly within the diversity of which it is the unity and that is in truth nothing more than this diversity itself. The one and the many pass in this instance into one another; if the diversity of the adumbrations refers to a unity that orders it, this unity itself is born at the center of diversity and always leads back to it. The adumbrations are therefore given as the manifestation of a unity that is constituted only in them, as a theme that would exist only in the form of its own variations. The unification of the diversity of the adumbrations does not constitute an alternative to the diversification of the one—in other words, their multiplication. It follows that if the unity of the thing is constituted only in and through the diversity of the adumbrations, *this unity itself is only an adumbrated unity*. It is not only the thing but its unity that is adumbrated in the flux of the manifestations.

We must specify the status of this description in order to gauge its full scope. In this instance, this does not involve a description that accounts for how the spatial thing appears to us in fact; rather, it represents a thematization of an eidetic necessity: the way in which transcendent being appears to us gives its essence. As Husserl expresses it, "It is neither an accident of the own peculiar sense of the physical thing nor a contingency of 'our human constitution,' that 'our' perception can arrive at physical things themselves only through mere adumbrations of them. Rather is it evident and drawn from the essence of spatial physical things . . . that necessarily a being of that kind can be given in perception only through an adumbration."<sup>24</sup>

This eidetic determination is grasped by a difference with the being of the lived experience, of the *cogitatio*, directly given to itself and such that it is in itself, without distance or depth, characterized by the identity of being and appearance. There is thus an eidetic abyss between experience and reality. The distinct manner in which they appear expresses a radical difference with regard to their being. Assuming this thesis, Husserl breaks radically with the tradition of philosophers of perception, a tradition that recognizes implicitly the possibility, at least in principle, of access to the thing that

would dispense with adumbrations and that therefore explains this specific mode of givenness by virtue of our finitude. We perceive the thing through a flux of manifestations, but God—the subject with absolutely perfect knowledge—would naturally perceive the thing in itself. Such a perspective transcends the eidetic difference between lived experience and the perceived; it acts as if there were only a single manner of existing and therefore a single adequate modality of access to existing. To affirm that God could attain the perceived thing directly is to blur the border between the transcendent and the immanent, between the adumbrated and what is adequately given. Above all, it means that one misses the primary eidetic characterization of the perceived as intuition.

In effect, to postulate the possibility of perception without adumbrations is to consider the adumbration as that which compromises the access to the thing itself instead of giving it presence; in short, it amounts to confusing it with a sign or an image. Moreover, in perception the thing is attained “in flesh and blood”; the adumbration gives access to the thing itself and not to its image. Thus the transgression of the eidetic difference between the lived and the perceived refers on a deeper level to the ignorance of the fact that “between *perception*, on the one hand, and *depictive-symbolic* or *signitive-symbolic objectivation*, on the other hand, there is an unbridgeable essential difference.”<sup>25</sup> It is now easier to understand the scope of the distinction between signitive intentionality and intuitive intentionality: by conceiving of perception as givenness in the flesh, Husserl provides himself with the means of distinguishing between *manifestations* (through which the thing is given) and simple *appearances*. The adumbration is not the thing, but neither is it an appearance since it is the thing itself that it adumbrates. The whole difficulty, then, is to conceive of the place of manifestation, between the appearance that it is not and the thing itself of which it is *only* the manifestation. The difference between adumbration and appearance names the constitutive ambiguity of the adumbration, which is brought together with the appearance by its difference from the thing and differs from the latter equally by virtue of its power of presentation, which is to say, its identity with what it adumbrates.

Going beyond the classical distinction between thing and appearance, Husserl invites us to understand perception directly from a movement of adumbration in which the thing itself and the moment of manifestation never fall outside one another. However, to the extent that the division between the appearance and the thing is no more than the division between



the subjective and the objective, a coherent conception of perception undoubtedly requires that we question this duality more radically than Husserl did. Be that as it may, the eidetic abyss that separates the signitive from the intuitive must be respected; to say that the adumbration attains the thing itself is equivalent to saying that the thing itself is *given only by adumbrations*, and this is true for God himself. In reality such an affirmation is hardly surprising; if the thing is indeed transcendent, it can be given only by retreating under the gaze to a distance that could not be the reverse of proximity. Perception of the thing itself and givenness by adumbrations do not constitute alternatives if we understand transcendence to be a mode of existing and not an obstructed immanence; a truly transcendent reality can be given itself only on the condition of not being entirely given. One might as well say that the finitude expressed in the perspective character of our perception is an aspect of being and not the testimony of our limitation.

It is clear that Husserl goes resolutely beyond the limits of classical approaches to perception and thus situates himself beyond the alternative between empiricism and intellectualism. Speaking of adumbration, he abandons the idea of closed sensory data out of which the object would be constructed. The adumbration is not a component of the object, but its manifestation; the datum is itself only insofar as it incarnates a form. Nevertheless, this recognition of the function of manifestation or apprehension inherent in perception does not lead Husserl to exploit for his purposes intellectual analyses that succeed in explaining the access to something only by sacrificing its sensory dimension. It is true that perception is access to the thing itself and not reception of data, but there is precisely access to the thing itself only in sensory adumbrations; to perceive the thing itself is to grasp it in the flesh. The capacity of perception to open upon a pole of identity is not achieved at the price of a degradation of sensory moments in appearances. Due to the double discovery of the difference between empty intentionality and fulfillment on the one hand and of givenness by adumbrations on the other, Husserl succeeds—and undoubtedly he is the first philosopher to do so—in subscribing to the requirements of a philosophy of perception; in other words, he succeeds in conceiving of the conditions of an experience that initiates us into being. That is why a philosophy of perception must consider this perspective and why its primordial task must consist in assessing Husserl's insights in order to draw all the consequences from them. Indeed—and such is the guiding thesis, or rather the problematic that nourishes this work—the conceptual framework set forth by Hus-

serl to establish and elaborate his theory of perception (at least in the context of static phenomenology) remains in the background vis-à-vis what the doctrine of adumbrations promises. Put differently, there is an undeniable tension between the descriptive moment of the theory of perception and the interpretive moment that carries out presuppositions to which the description actually stands in opposition. Even though he succeeds in establishing grounds for perception strictly speaking and therefore possesses the means to elaborate a conceptual framework that is his own, Husserl draws on categories that originate from a tradition that misunderstood the specificity of perceptual experience—whence a series of tensions, gradual evolutions, and displacements that ultimately lead him to compromise the project whose theory of adumbrations was so promising. Briefly, instead of sticking to perception just as it is given, he advances a thought that goes beyond the limits within which the perceived is given. The aim here is therefore to attempt to pursue what is suggested in this Husserlian doctrine of perception, at the very least to gauge the shocks that such a description cannot help but create within this field of philosophy and in its most fundamental categories—in short, to take the first steps toward a philosophy of perception. However, in this context it must be understood in a renewed sense. It does not in fact involve approaching perception as one segment of being among others regarding which our philosophical instruments could again be put to work. It involves reforging our instruments by testing the singularity of perception.

It seems in fact (and this becomes clearer in what follows) that the philosophical tradition was constituted on the basis of a fundamental experience or an astonishment that leaves no room for the specificity of perceptual experience and in which it was ultimately concealed. The task of a philosophy of perception is therefore not to attempt to appropriate perception by means of categories at its disposal but to allow itself to be reformed through contact with perception; it must not conceive of perception so much as conceive *according to* it. Moreover, if it is true that Husserl did not succeed in avoiding the recourse to a conceptual framework that remains awkward vis-à-vis its object, such an undertaking must begin by attempting to elucidate the presuppositions that underlie Husserl's analysis.