Merleau-Ponty (1945a) argues that reflective life builds on unreflective life and, in doing so, that pre-reflection is primary to understanding. In this chapter, subjectivity is first comprehended through an inquiry into pre-reflection then affection, reflection, and understanding, that is, experiential features which pre-reflection gives rise to.

**Aspects of Pre-reflection**

It has been proposed that art works on the level or mode of experience which exists in between bodily materiality, consciousness, and language. This pre-reflective level is so diffuse that it is not given anything but a negative definition, i.e. it is defined in relation to that which it is not. Since it occurs before language, attempts at describing it have been scarce, and, perhaps due to its fleeting and ambiguous appearance, it has been transfixed as particularly present in the somewhat indefinite realm of art. The pre-reflective layer of experience has been seen as the most immediate of experiences; as ontologically and ontogenetically first, yet epistemologically last. It is also of outmost importance to phenomenology as the realm where we might have the most direct contact with the world; where objects appear as genuine, without interpretation and construction. For phenomenology the problem of immediacy versus distance, that of descriptive phenomenology versus a depth phenomenology, or a “constructive phenomenology” (Merleau-Ponty 1945a, p. vii) is one of the issues of its identity: is

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1 The term “affection” is used as an umbrella term for emotions, feelings, and moods. The term “affection” is employed here, as it is within the phenomenological tradition, as a motivating power which is feeling, and not in the common everyday language of “a feeling of strong regard and dedication.” Yet regard and dedication are also components of affection in the phenomenological tradition – affection as motivation contains a degree of care.
phenomenology committed to pure descriptions of pure phenomena or should it rather investigate how phenomena are experientially construed? Merleau-Ponty poses this issue as a still unresolved topic for phenomenology, present since its beginning.

Pre-reflection in Early Phenomenology

Phenomenology began, more or less, with Husserl’s famous dictum “auf die Sachen selbst zurückgehen” (1913, § 19). One of his main points was that the question of a metaphysical world was irrelevant and that relevance was to be found in phenomena as they appear to consciousness – the world can only appear to it. At the same time, direct access to the phenomena’s appearance occurs through several methodological steps, and is not immediately available, because, to Husserl, in the natural attitude, we see things as having an independent reality – as divorced from subjectivity. Through the methodological steps of the epoché and the reductions, he claims, we are able to reduce, or altogether avoid, personal interpretations of the phenomena. Consciousness – in the form of the transcendental ego – should arrive at “den Sachen selbst,” that is, their appearance, without layers of interpretative noise.

Although it remains contentious whether Husserl himself at the various stages of his authorship remained committed to a transcendental ego, Merleau-ponty (1945a) describes the consequence of the postulation of a transcendental ego as a pre-personal consciousness, one that is disembodied, common to all. It is a structure (which he rejects) wherein the subject-object relation is dissolved to one of identity and where there is, accordingly, immediate contact with the world. It could be seen as a universal feature of subjectivity, linked to particular subjectivities, in unity with the world. However, another interpretation of the transcendental ego presents it as the precondition for consciousness, where the mind contains mental representations. The point of direct contact through the transcendental ego is, therefore, much smaller, if not non-existent. The world and mind are ontologically independent, and the mind is noisy – because of the representations – to the extent that it is the precondition for a contact with the phenomena that is not direct. In this latter interpretation of Husserl, the transcendental ego is perhaps a point of direct contact, but one which is psycho-

2 Husserl (1900) discusses the possibility of arriving at the “things themselves” in volume ii, part two, chapter three, four, and five of Logical Investigations (e.g. p. 264), and says in Ideen I “But to judge rationally or scientifically about things signifies to conform to the things themselves or to go from words and opinions back to the things themselves, to consult them in their self-givenness and to set aside all prejudice alien to them” (Husserl 1913, § 19, p. 35).