INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that phenomenological thinkers urge a return to the origins of phenomena. An investigation into the origins of man's quest for psychological knowledge reveals this phenomenon to have a two-fold source. One aspect is the desire to conquer human nature. Underlying the surface motive for psychological inquiry—e.g., "psychology attempts to apply the rules of scientific method to its subject matter: to discover the lawful relationships that govern behavior" (Postman & Egan, 1949, p. 1)—is the tacit recognition that all lawful formulations of causal relationships are sought in order to manipulate human reality, to control, and to master. Hopefully, this endeavor is for admirable reasons, but admirable or not it is directed towards control and mastery. This conception of the impetus behind psychological science need not be rigorously defended simply because it is not expressly conveyed in the formal literature of psychology: one need merely examine the results of the science of psychology to witness its validity. Nor is this attempt at mastery true only with respect to practical research, for even pure research is guided by the vision that eventually its findings can be employed to further the mastery goal regardless of how remote this possibility may appear at the time this research is actually conducted. On the other hand, it does not prove difficult to find among the writings of
psychologists explicit statements in support of this interpretation. Bachrach (1962) unhesitantly declares mastery to be the goal of all science, and George Miller, speaking as the president of the American Psychological Association, asserts that “our stated aim (is) the understanding, prediction and control of mental and behavioral phenomena” (Miller, 1969).

If this is the source of man's quest for psychological knowledge, then it must be admitted that there does not seem to be much value in an approach to psychology which is not primarily explanatory (i.e., lawfully formulating causal relationships). In particular, the essentially descriptive approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, aiming less at explanation than understanding, would not be of much, if any, practical (pragmatic, mastering, or conquering) value. However, if the above conception does not exhaust the source of man's quest for psychological knowledge and is but one aspect of this source, then perhaps there is more than ample room for Merleau-Ponty's understanding approach. Commenting on the type of work generated by this approach, the phenomenological psychiatrist Erwin Straus makes a trenchant distinction worth reporting:

Such (understanding) investigations have, therefore, probably much less practical application than natural scientific research. But perhaps they may claim another kind of usefulness. The knowledge they seek is not meant for mastering the world, but, rather, for unlocking it and making a world that is mute into one which speaks to us in a thousand places. The fullness and depth of our world is to be heard wherever, til now, it has been silent (Straus, 1963, p. 395).

and:

Should we ever again regain the clearing in this forest of problems, then we will have returned from our long wanderings not with a new answer but with a new kind of questioning (Straus, 1966, p. 100).

With this understanding approach constantly in mind, we shall seek to provide not a new answer to an old problem, but to