Study Project on the Nature of Perception (1933)
The Nature of Perception (1934)

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY
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Translator's Preface

On April 8, 1933, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who was then teaching at a lycée in Beauvais, applied to the Caisse National des Sciences for a subvention, which he received, to undertake a project of study on the nature of perception. In 1934, he requested a renewal, and submitted an account, which he titled 'The Nature of Perception,' of what he had already accomplished and of what he proposed to do next. The renewal request was not granted.

Apart from three book reviews and some remarks made at a philosophy conference, La Structure du Comportement, which was completed in 1938 and published in 1942, is generally considered the first evidence of Merleau-Ponty's major philosophical concerns. In a sense, that is so. However, the two earlier texts translated below, relatively short and schematic though they are, may never the less be of interest to students of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. As can be shown, I think, by a brief analysis of their contents, Merleau-Ponty had articulated fairly clearly, some four years before the completion of Structure, a number of motifs that proved to be fundamental throughout his intellectual career. Naturally, his ideas were to expand and develop from 1933 to the drafts for Le Visible et l'invisible on
which he was working at the time of his death in 1961. Therefore, it is also interesting to notice themes of his later work that were not envisaged at the outset. Professor Susanne Langer remarked in *Feeling and Form* that thinking at its best tends to develop, not by starting with the ultimate questions ("the problem of beauty," "the problem of Being," "the problem of mind," and the like), but by attacking an issue both specific and fecund. "A single problem," she wrote, "doggedly pursued to its solution, may elicit a new logical vocabulary, i.e., a new set of ideas, reaching beyond the problem itself and forcing a more negotiable conception of the whole field." A brief look at these earliest of formal philosophical statements by Merleau-Ponty, with the subsequent development of his views in mind, suggests indeed that he had taken a firm grip by 1933 on a specific set of issues in the field of psychological research that were to prove philosophically fertile and that were to lead to vaster questions.

Although the concerns expressed by Merleau-Ponty in 1933-1934 clearly anticipate much of his first book (*Structure*), and some of *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, their philosophical horizon was certainly far narrower than that which he ultimately offered to modern phenomenology. Thus, although Merleau-Ponty stressed the problem of "perception of one's own body," a theme which was eventually to lead to his distinctive notion of "bodily intentionality," its real importance in his thought is apparent to us only with the advantage of hindsight. There is no hint of the "bodily reversibility" which he fastened upon more and more in his later works, where the phenomenon of the touched becoming the touching is a bodily anticipation of the reflexivity of thought. Consequently, we find also no indication of the limitations which he later placed upon intellectual reflexivity because of the limitations he experienced in the "touched-touching" state of affairs, namely, that the wonted coincidence is ever imminent yet never realized; like Apollo in pursuit of Daphne, one might say. In the 1933 text, he was not yet speaking of Edmund Husserl and phenomenology, and in neither text is there any sign of the subsequent importance of the work of Martin Heidegger. Consequently, there is no apparent readiness to take on the epistemology and metaphysics of the "object" which later challenged him more and more (notably, of course, in the drafts and working notes for *Visible*). That the philosophical crisis posed by "le Grand Objet" was not yet evident to him was surely due in part to the more or less non-historical approach of these early statements. His eventual concern with language is not anticipated; nor can one guess the relevance to the study of perception of the arts, e.g., painting. Much less could one