

SELECTED WORKS  
*of*  
CORNELIO  
FABRO

VOLUME 5  
The Phenomenology  
of Perception

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**CORNELIO FABRO**

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# INTRODUCTION

## *A Look at the Gnoseological Thought of Cornelio Fabro:*

### **The Phenomenology of Perception and Perception and Thought *in context***

In order to introduce this English translation of Cornelio Fabro's *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, it would be useful to start, first, with an introduction to Fabro's gnoseological thought in general, and then some remarks that deal more directly with the work at hand.

In order to properly place both *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *Perception and Thought* (since they are, as will be seen, "sibling" works) in context, we should understand that Fabro's main focus was not gnoseology *qua* gnoseology. Writing in 1984, the Stigmatine would say:

It seems to me that there are three fundamental directions of research, certainly modest and perhaps destined to be soon forgotten, to which I have tried to remain faithful throughout the course of almost a half-century: 1<sup>st</sup> the deepening of the *metaphysical* notion of participation; 2<sup>nd</sup> the determination of the *metaphysical* essence of the modern principle of immanence as 'radical atheism'; and 3<sup>rd</sup> the recovery of the classical-Christian realism in Kierkegaard's existential *metaphysics* against the atheist anthropology of modern immanence.<sup>1</sup>

Note that the word *metaphysics* appears in all three areas of research. Fabro's focus is primarily metaphysics, and gnoseology, as philosophy of knowledge, receives attention only in relation to metaphysics and knowledge

of being. Indeed, an article published in *L'Osservatore Romano* remarks that:

The metaphysical positions expressed in the two celebrated volumes of 1939 and of 1961 on *Partecipazione* (in particular) and *Causalità*, find their gnoseological support in those on *Fenomenologia della Percezione* (1941) and on the relationships between *Percezione e Pensiero* (also from 1941). Father Fabro has dedicated the most prominent part of his theoretical life to Thomistic thought, compared in an ever more extensive form with the modern cognitive theories, even on the strictly epistemological terrain.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the relation between metaphysics and phenomenology, another text is insightful, a text found at the conclusion of *Perception and Thought*. There, Fabro writes:

It is true, then, as Aristotle wishes, that metaphysics is built and is steadfast in its absoluteness because it rests not on the principles of this or that form of being, but on that of being as being; but it is no less true that the mind would not arrive at any understanding of being as being if perception did not put the soul in immediate contact with the exercise of being. Hence, as a general theory of perception, phenomenology is a prolegomenon of the very foundation of metaphysics in general, as well as of metaphysical problems in particular. The phenomenological position of metaphysical problems does not pretend to give the solution in advance, but rather to suggest with its structural form, in which the phenomenal multiplicity appears unified, the possibility and direction of that comprehensive intelligible unification which is the metaphysical solution. ***Phenomenology and metaphysics, so understood, correspond as the exterior and interior of the same building: for us, who can penetrate reality only from the outside, phenomenology provides a first and indispensable point of support for the metaphysical interpretation of the real.***<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, that Fabro did not focus on gnoseology (understood as psychology, that is, the direct study of the soul and its faculties) is only to say that he did not dedicate as much time or as much writing to it as he did to

metaphysics, but not that he ignored it. Indeed, he wrote two large volumes with over 1,000 pages combined, namely, *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *Perception and Thought*, dedicated to the questions of knowledge and perception, and a number of articles.

However, after these two works, Fabro never returned to examine gnoseological issues in such detail; the scarcity of later articles and books on the topic show that, by and large, Fabro had decided to pursue other philosophical directions. We will return, in a short while, to this topic to see an example of one issue where his thought developed.

Now let us turn our attention to the book, or, rather, books at hand. The first editions of both *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *Perception and Thought* were published in 1941, when Fabro was only 30. We should recall some significant biographical notes, particularly regarding his studies of biology and psychology: Fabro received his first doctorate (in philosophy) in 1930, at the age of 19. As he continued his studies in theology:

[Fabro] also devoted himself to studying the natural sciences at the Universities of Padua and of Rome. [In] 1935, he obtained his licentiate in theology and, at the same time as he was studying, collaborated as an assistant professor of biology in the School of Philosophy at the Pontifical Lateran University. In 1937, he obtained his doctorate in theology from the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas [and] began his teaching career in two seemingly unrelated fields: biology and philosophy, as he was entrusted with professorships in biology, theoretical psychology, and the metaphysics seminars at the Pontifical Lateran University from 1937 until 1940; at the same time, he held a chair in biology (1938), teaching with his own notes, and served as an extraordinary professor of Metaphysics (1940), and finally as ordinary professor (1941) at the Urban Athenaeum of which he was also Dean (1947).<sup>4</sup>

Although Fabro would not dedicate his life exclusively to the study of the natural sciences, Fr. Elvio Fontana, IVE, notes that:

It is fitting to comment on Father Fabro's interest for the formation of the empirical sciences in his studies, experiments, and teaching in the field of biology; to the aforementioned studies, we should also add two semesters



of study in the psychology laboratory at the Catholic University of Milan (1938-1940) directed by his rector, Father [Agostino] Gemelli. Whoever has read *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *Perception and Thought*, both published in 1941, will admire the results of his investigations in the field of philosophical phenomenology that are poured out there.<sup>5</sup>

Note that although the two volumes were published separately, Fr. Fontana mentions both together, and this is in accord with the way that Fabro saw these two works, as he himself writes: “The two volumes [*The Phenomenology of Perception* and *Perception and Thought*] form one treatise following a ‘compact and ascending order’: the first deals with an ‘analytic-descriptive’ subject matter, ‘dedicated to highlighting the fundamental and genuine contents by which the act of perception occurs,’ and the second is designed to carry out the ‘construction of a realist gnoseology of experience upon a functional base.’”<sup>6</sup> In other words, if we really want to understand what Fabro is trying to accomplish in *Perception and Thought*, we should start with a look at *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

*The Phenomenology of Perception* examines psychological and biological research regarding the act of perception. When the first edition was published, Gestalt psychology was exerting a great deal of influence (and generating no small amount of controversy) in Europe through the likes of Max Wertheimer (1880-1943), Kurt Koffka (1886-1941), and Wolfgang Köhler (1887-1967). The *new psychology*, as Fabro calls it, understood perception in terms of wholes, “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts,” whereas associationism, following the lead of English empiricists such as Locke and Hume, had understood perception as the mere reception of stimuli, and the association of such stimuli would produce complex ideas.

However, as with many new scientific movements, Gestalt psychology made some bold claims, and, in order to address them, Fabro dedicated himself to studying the literature and forming a critical judgment of Gestaltist thought. A quick look at the bibliography provided in *The Phenomenology* reveals that Fabro had read all the available literature on the topic at the time of publication. In her biography of Fabro, Suor Rosa Goglia summarizes the work in a few lines, noting: “*The Phenomenology of Perception* investigates the development of the ‘principle’ of consciousness from Descartes to contemporary psychology, and after the ‘process to modern thought,’ it

arrives at the new, i.e., to the fundamental concepts of perception and of 'pure' phenomenology, or rather, a description made apart from every 'theoretical presupposition'—it is a terminology that Fabro calls 'his [own].'"<sup>7</sup>

The importance of this work and the high regard in which it was held is attested to by the preface of the first edition, written by Fr. Agostino as he recounts the origins of the book:

In the laboratory directed by me, I myself have completed research studies since 1927, and I have had them carried out by my assistants (Galli, the late Gatti, Vacino, Cossetti, Zama), in order to study perception. With this research, which appeared in various magazines and were gathered together in the volumes of the *Contributi del Laboratorio di psicologia*, run by me, still combating the doctrine of the "Gestalttheorie," or rather, shedding light on its insufficiency, I made use of the phenomenological method of inquiry, which this doctrine put a high value on, in order to investigate some of the laws of perception that experimental analysis would not permit one to formulate. *However, a comprehensive book, which lays out the "Gestalt" doctrine and considers and examines it, above all in its extreme conclusions and extensions (both as a psychological construction and concerning its influence and its philosophical claims) is lacking in Italy.* To remedy this state of fact, I gave to an able youth, Dr. Fabro (who has already demonstrated himself, whether in other works or in teaching in the School of Philosophy at the Urban Athenaeum of Rome, to have the necessary philosophical preparation to assume the difficult task of presenting an evaluation of the new doctrine), the job of critically exposing the results, principles, and the doctrine of 'Gestalttheorie,' and above all, to demonstrate what value such doctrine has for whoever confronts the problem of knowledge. Dr. Fabro, in this first volume, limits himself to exposing critically the results of the 'Gestalt' doctrine. I believe that I can assert with certainty [continues Fr. Gemelli] that Fabro has discharged the not-easy task with such great concern for fidelity and with such breadth of vision and of information, so as to be able to write an original piece of work, and stand out completely from those above-mentioned works, which, however, represent an efficacious and exhaustive criticism of the "Gestalt" doctrine. I am anxious to attest

(because this is of great importance) that Fabro has taken direct cognizance of all the vast literature; he has repeated some of the more significant experiments; he has taken care to know the methods and results of the others. That is, he has put himself in a position to present to the Italian reader a faithful picture, complete and satisfying, of the factual data which are at the basis of the “Gestalt” doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

It is to be much lamented that neither Fabro’s text nor the Gestalt movement in general (in spite of its flaws) gained much traction in the English-speaking world. The difference in languages, the lack of the formation of a Gestalt school in the United States (where many of the researchers fled before the Second World War, but were subsequently relegated to small colleges without graduate programs in psychology), and the dominance of behaviorism on the psychological landscape have left both Fabro and Gestaltists out of the spotlight.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, for Fabro, *The Phenomenology of Perception* is only half the story. The current research in psychology might give some indications and insights, but what is really needed is a *realist gnoseology of experience*, a philosophy of knowledge that explains how we can know things and by what process. Indeed, as Gemelli continues, “But, since it is also necessary to evaluate this doctrine within the big picture of modern discussions on the problem of knowledge, Dr. Fabro has written a second volume with the title, *Perception and Thought* This will represent the logical continuation of the present work.”<sup>10</sup>

Fabro indicates the same towards the beginning of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, where he writes:

The exposition of psychological theories and of typical experiences is not, in my intention, an end in itself, but must prepare the reader for a setting out of the problems of knowledge that will be made in another work that is forthcoming [referring to *Perception and Thought*]. In my opinion, the two works must complete each other and certainly the second will lose a lot of strength in its speculative applications if it is left to itself, just as also the first will appear too complex and arduous if one wishes to forget the aims that I have proposed to achieve in the second. In my first intention, the two works were to form two volumes of a single work; they were later separated in order to take greater care in

the presentation of the two distinct moments of the research, and each of them in many respects can remain distinct and even sufficient from the point of view, analytic or synthetic, which inspires it.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the two books were originally thought to be published as two volumes of one book, to better show their unity. However, as it is, they were published separately, and can be read or studied independently, although it should be borne in mind that each only tells half the story.

With that in mind, let us turn to examine the half of the story, i.e., *Perception and Thought*.

Sister Rosa Goglia reports a description of the volume<sup>12</sup>:

Volume II [*Perception and Thought*] researches the metaphysical structure of the act of knowing, its forms, the objects, and its value for the purposes of a foundation of the metaphysics of concreteness. Part I is dedicated to the study of sensorial organizations [*primary* (common sense and imagination) versus *secondary* (cogitative power and memory)]: continuing the investigation of the preceding volume on the level of theoretical research, it shows how the more recent *Gestaltist* and unitary theories of perception culminate in interpreting space and time as functions deriving from the very genesis of movement within the act of the imagination (the *Einbildungskraft* of criticism and of idealism, which on this point, coincide with Aristotelianism). Space and time, principles of primary organization, are followed by the concrete structures of ‘meaning’ which constitute the passage from the merely sensorial sphere to the rational one— in Thomism, this mediation is the task of the cogitative power, a noetic function in which the contents and functions of both spheres converge, and which forms the originality of the Thomistic position of objectivity. This is the foundation of that hinge of Thomistic gnoseology, which is the *conversio ad phantasmata* according to which he has attempted a comparison with the transcendental schematism of Kant.

Thus, in Thomism the knowledge of the real is likewise a knowledge of the concrete thing, which precedes and coexists with the contents of the abstraction, reserved to the special technical cognitions so that knowledge arises and proceeds by means of a tension between the concrete and the abstract. In this part, too, the scholastic tradition, due to

internal polemics, bypassed the authentic requirement of concreteness, of the Thomistic position, which extends the Aristotelian solution. Finally, the way of dividing the psychological, critical and metaphysical problems for an adequate interpretation of the meaning which the problem of being [*essere*] in its principle moments (reality, substance, cause...) assumes for the human consciousness, and the possibility of a critical foundation of metaphysics are proposed from a more synthetic point of view. The extensive analysis of the book does not at all intend to present a Kantian or Hegelian *ante litteram* St. Thomas (as a certain scholastic critic has insinuated), but rather to discover him in his original physiognomy, in that direct derivation from Greek realism, with respect to which, Thomism can initiate the dialogue with modern thought as a pure analysis of the “being [*essere*] of man.”

It is a rather dense description, but, in essence, what the book does is, while bearing in mind all the psychology research of *Gestalttheorie*, structuralism, etc., to attempt to build a philosophy of knowledge, based on Aquinas, that explains how we can know the things in the world, real things, and know them as concrete, singular things, but also, through abstraction, know their essences. From this knowledge of things, metaphysics as a science becomes possible: it is this that is the goal of these texts.

Lastly, since these two volumes are early works (1941), we should consider if there were any significant changes made to the second editions which could represent a change or development of Fabro’s thought. A brief timeline can be of some use here:

The period of greatest production and metaphysical research in Fabro’s life comes in the twenty years from the publication of *The Metaphysical Notion of Participation to Participation and Causality*. Thus we have:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Publication</b>
<b>1939</b>	First edition of <i>The Metaphysical Notion of Participation</i>
<b>1941</b>	First edition of <i>The Phenomenology of Perception</i>
	First edition of <i>Perception and Thought</i>
<b>1950</b>	Second edition of <i>The Metaphysical Notion of Participation</i>

1957	First edition of <i>From Being to the Existent</i> [ <i>Dall'essere all'esistente</i> ]
1960	First edition of <i>Participation and Causality</i>
1961	Second edition of <i>The Phenomenology of Perception</i>
1962	Second edition of <i>Perception and Thought</i>
1963	Second edition of <i>Participation and Causality</i>
	Third edition of <i>The Metaphysical Notion of Participation</i>

What is important here is to note that the first editions of both *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *Perception and Thought* were published around the same time he published the first edition of *The Metaphysical Notion of Participation*, thus at the beginning of his concentrated studies on metaphysics and participation, while the second editions of both come out around the same time as the definitive versions of *The Metaphysical Notion of Participation* and *Participation and Causality*, the zenith of Fabro's metaphysical research. In other words, if Fabro were to have realized during his years of study and research on metaphysics that his gnoseological vision needed correction, those corrections could easily have been incorporated into the second editions.

Yet, it seems that Fabro found his early vision to be correct, since, in the preface to the second edition of our text, he notes what has changed: "With respect to the first edition, this new edition has been updated in the critical part, and shortened in the expositive part by a whole chapter (ch. VI). The properly theoretical part has been kept in its original presentation, even if today—after the dissolution of idealism by the Marxist-existentialist problem—those principles have been brought back more decisively to the 'foundation.'"<sup>13</sup>

The chapter that has been omitted was dedicated to problems that were of interest to contemporary Italian thinkers (the *Opere Complete* version of Fabro's text reproduces the chapter in an appendix, and it deals with *abstract thought and lived thought*, considering the writings of Bernardino Varisco, Armando Carlini, and Francesco Orestano). What is of interest, though, is that last point: the theoretical exposition has been left as it was; there is nothing wrong in it, but today the problem of being and knowledge of

being has been brought back to the foundation, back to something even more originary.

In this regard, the doctoral dissertation of Fr. Pablo Rossi, IVE, entitled “La fundación teórica del valor del conocimiento en el realismo tomista de Cornelio Fabro: Evolución de la gnoseología fabriana entre las obras *Percezione e Pensiero* y *Dall’Essere all’Esistente*” [The Theoretical Foundation of the Value of Knowledge in the Thomistic Realism of Cornelio Fabro: Evolution of Fabrian Gnoseology between the works *Perception and Thought* and *From Being to the Existent*], can shed light on this movement. In it, Fr. Rossi’s thesis is that Fabro’s thought does not change, *per se*, from *Perception and Thought* to *From Being to the Existent*, but that rather he delves more deeply into the “foundation” of metaphysics, with topics such as *ens* as *primum cognitum*, and the like: how do we know being? Is it a judgment? Or does it impose itself on the perceiving subject?

A quick look at the table of contents of *From Being to the Existent* confirms what we said in the beginning: Fabro is a metaphysician, and his concern is primarily being. In the two works we considered at length, Fabro has laid out a realist gnoseology in such a way that the principles have been firmly established. Some points remain to be developed, as we see in *From Being to the Existent*, where he considers: “The Truth of Being and the Beginning of Thought” (ch. 1), “Protestant Spirituality and Modern Thought” (ch. 2), “Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard’s Dialectic” (ch. 3), “Reason and Faith in the Dialectic of [Karl] Jaspers” (ch. 4), “The ‘Communication of Truth’ in the Thought of Kierkegaard” (ch. 5), “The Ambiguity of Kierkegaardian Christianity” (ch. 6), “Ontology and Metaphysics in the [latest works] of Heidegger” (ch. 7), “Being and action in the development of the philosophy of Maurice Blondel” (ch. 8), and “The Truth of Faith as the Synthesis in act of the ‘Person’” (conclusion).

However, the gnoseological structure as given by Aquinas and studied, enhanced, and developed by Fabro, remains essentially valid. At the age of 30, Fabro could see clearly enough to produce the two masterpieces of gnoseology that, even after years of further study, he felt no need to revise, but rather to build upon, in order to answer the questions that weighed down on man.

We can conclude with no better recommendation than that offered by Gemelli:

It is not up to me, who have helped Fabro in his difficult task, to praise the work that I am presenting. It is enough for me to say that the proposition of being useful to the psychological culture of our country has moved me in spurring Fabro on in his exhausting labor and in his arduous task. I hope not to delude myself in affirming that Fabro has succeeded in the task confided to him and that he has given a volume to the Italian psychological literature that will be of great utility for whoever wants a sure direction in a field fraught with uncommon difficulty.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Elvio Fontana in his introduction to Vol. 3, *Articles on Atheism and Freedom*.

<sup>2</sup> A. Rigobello, *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 6, 1995, 3, cited in Rosa Goglia, *Cornelio Fabro: Profilo Biografico Cronologico Tematico da inediti, note di archivio, testimonianze*. (Segni, Italy: EDIVI, 2010), 56.

<sup>3</sup> C. Fabro, *Percezione e Pensiero*, vol. 6, *Opere Complete* (Segni, Italy: EDIVI, 2008), 452–453.

<sup>4</sup> Elvio Fontana, *Introduction to Cornelio Fabro* (Chillum, MD: IVEPress, 2015), 15–16, citing *Phenomenology of Perception*.

<sup>5</sup> Fontana, 16

<sup>6</sup> Fontana, 16–17.

<sup>7</sup> Goglia, 53.

<sup>8</sup> A. Gemelli, “Presentazione” in C. Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, vol. 5, *Opere Complete* (Segni, Italy: EDIVI, 2006), 424–425.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Duane P. Schultz and Sydney Ellen Schultz, *A History of Modern Psychology* (Boston: Cengage, 2016), 263–289.

<sup>10</sup> A. Gemelli, “Presentazione” in Fabro, 424–425.

<sup>11</sup> Fabro, *La Fenomenologia della Percezione*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> A description given by the board of examiners for Fabro to receive his *permission to teach*. Cited in Goglia, 54–55.



<sup>13</sup> Fabro, *Percezione e Pensiero*, 13, n. 2. Here the note from the introduction to the second edition is reproduced.

<sup>14</sup> A. Gemelli, “Presentazione” in Fabro, 425.

# **The Phenomenology of Perception**

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# INTRODUCTION

*SUMMARY.* — *The immediate fact of perception.* — *The content of perception.* — *The “objectual levels” of perception* — *Perceptive unification and the “psychic maturation.”* — *Objectual levels and functional degrees.* — *Psychologism, logicism, and gnoseological dualism.* — *The realist position.* — *Formal gnoseology and material gnoseology or “phenomenology.”* — *Kantianism and phenomenology: the reaction of Wilhelm Dilthey and Carl Stumpf.* — *Phenomenology and gnoseology: division of the argument.*

## I

### 1. THE IMMEDIATE FACT OF PERCEPTION

A theoretical foundation of the value of knowledge can only be given by an examination that the spirit, from within, makes of the acts, contents, and forms of knowledge that it produces and by which it also lives. Among the complete forms of knowing, *perception* and *judgment* immediately impose themselves: in the one, the concrete objects of lived life make themselves present by a *de facto* presence: in the other, the objects and their values make their presence explicit by a reference to the absolute contents and principles of being accomplished by the intellect.

Does the critical foundation need to begin with perception or judgment? It is first of all certain that a “complete” foundation has to embrace both, because each of the two functions has its foundation, almost its gnoseological projection, in the other, and either one is insufficient without the other. As for beginning, many are inclined to precede perception with the critical analysis of judgment, which certainly comes first in importance. But as this analysis has been done many times and has often ended up suppressing the former, I have thought it well to proceed in the opposite direction, which is the more natural, because reality is first lived rather than classified, and concrete

contents also have abstract ones as immanent, even if only inexactly, while the opposite cannot be true.

The starting point will therefore be the *fact* of perception.

I stand at the window and see a house, trees, sky.

Theoretically I might say there were 327 brightnesses and nuances of colour. Do I have “327?” No. I have sky, house, and trees. It is impossible to achieve “327” as such. And yet even though such droll calculation were possible and implied, say, for the house 120, the trees 90, the sky 117—I should at least have this arrangement and division of the total, and not, say, 127 and 100 and 100; or 150 and 177.

The concrete division which I see is not determined by some arbitrary mode of organization lying solely within my own pleasure; instead I see the arrangement and division which is given there before me. . . .

Or, I hear a melody (17 tones) with its accompaniment (32 tones). I hear the melody and accompaniment, not simply “49” and certainly not 20 plus 29. And the same is true even in cases where there is no stimulus continuum. I hear the melody and its accompaniment even when they are played by an old-fashioned clock where each tone is separate from the others.<sup>1a</sup>

The description is by Max Wertheimer, the head of the *Gestalttheorie* school, which has radically renewed the methods of phenomenal analysis, in opposition to traditional psychology.

Close to Wertheimer’s description in its objectives and even in its terms is the description by Thomas REID, the founder of the School of “Common Sense” to whom is owed the first attempt at a reaction against the dissolution of the objects of experience operated by the Humean skepticism. Reid states: “I perceive a tree that grows before my window; there is here an object which is perceived, and an act of the mind by which it is perceived. The object [the tree] is made up of a trunk, branches, and leaves; but the act of the mind by which it is perceived, hath neither trunk, branches, nor leaves. [In this act] I find nothing that [physically] resembles it [the object] so much as the remembrance of the tree, or the imagination of it.”<sup>2b</sup> This description tends to highlight the original way of being that the object assumes in the knower; here there is the recognition, something extremely important

gnoseologically, of the essential contribution that the subject brings to the act of knowing. It is accentuated, in relation to the whole general problem of objectivity, even in a description of a contemporary idealist, in which it is interesting to note how the presentation of the facts can be overwhelmed by systematic concerns.

Looking outside his window, a man sees the house in front of him, and he says, without even suspecting that he expresses a questionable opinion: I see the house in front of me: the house in which other people live, in which he himself entered several times to visit a friend, etc.; the *real house*. This feature that constitutes objectivity is so dominant in sight, that everyone is inclined almost to put in second place another feature, also very well-known and important: that the house is seen by him. To recognize this, the common man does not consider that, on certain occasions, for instance, to one who were to doubt the exactness of certain details, he would answer: But, I have seen them myself with my own eyes! Similarly, he would not fail to object to one who, while in front of the house, were to deny some particularity: Do not you see?, a word from which it turns out that everyone has awareness of seeing, and everyone supposes it in everyone else. Well, between these two characters of the vision there is an opposition . . . : that my sight, whether I have a sensation, which belongs to me alone, only under certain conditions, is unquestionable. This being the case, that is, my consciousness being entirely occupied in a psychic fact of mine, how can it be said that I see the real house, that is, that I am aware and have consciousness of it? The house and the image are not the same, nor similar; there is only a relationship of correspondence between them, by which the image serves us to direct our actions with respect to the house. This is expressed by saying: the psychic fact of which we are conscious is the image of the house.<sup>3c</sup>

Scholastics and Thomists are inclined to accentuate the critical priority of judgment, and from reflection on its functioning they think they can succeed in justifying the *content* of knowledge in general: they risk mistaking the problem of *value* with that of content, and sometimes they make one suspect that perhaps they unconsciously adhere to some form of absolute empiricist or rationalist syntheticism. According to Fr. Maréchal:

The synthetic product of judgment is the true *immediate data* and the natural starting point for critical reflection. However, within the whole object, which the judgment presents to the conscience, our inner perspective discerns about partial and secondary aspects, which it is isolated by a kind of abstraction. Thanks to this analysis, more elementary objective units emerge, corresponding to the *simple concept*, and in a lower level, to *pure sensation*. . . .

Our psychological experience knows, in its purest state, neither simple apprehension nor sensation: always the sensation is seen through a concept, and the concept through a judgment. Judgment is the true centre of observation of our human psychology, as it is also the main information of our human critique of knowledge.<sup>4d</sup>

That judgment is the center of observation for a *critique* of human knowledge, may pass; that it is also such for the phenomenological analysis, I do not believe and in fact it seems dangerous to me. Judgment poses a double problem and a double need for objectivity, according to whether we speak of its *content* or its *value*. Can the problem of value be founded entirely a priori without regard to the “phenomenal presentations” of the object? The answer, precisely because it is human knowledge, is not clear and should not be exclusive. The answer to the second problem, that of the foundation of the content, is even less clear. Judgment fulfills its function in the categorematic act: therefore it presupposes the content, not only of the terms, but also of the object itself with respect to which the judgment affirms (or denies) the identity of the terms and of their respective contents. In this way, then, it is rather the opposite that is true: it is the judgment that is reduced to a form of abstraction insofar as it captures a particular aspect in the richness of an object, present in perceptual apprehension: as when I say that “Peter is a man,” I abstract, and I must abstract, whether he is a musician, a father, a son, and so on; similarly when I say “I see a house,” I abstract from the “sky” and the “trees,” so much so that in order to keep them present in the judgment, I need a threefold affirmation: “I see the house, the trees, the sky,” and so on.<sup>5e</sup>

Therefore, the “true” starting point of a psychology, and at least to a certain extent also of a critique of knowledge, is that form of the “whole” initially given to consciousness in which the intellect may find present, or in some way hidden, the contents and also the very forms of connection that will then be affirmed in judgment. In other words, judgment is indeed a synthesis,

but a synthesis that presupposes an analysis and a separation of the object into its parts and into its aspects, one of which, in the affirmation of the judgment, is returned to the object; and it is inasmuch as the judgment is an explicit synthesis (*in actu signato*) of an implicit synthesis (*in actu exercito*) that it is the bearer of truth (or of falsehood). Where is this implicit synthesis found? Certainly not in the single ideas of the terms of the judgment, each taken by itself, as rationalism wishes, which must necessarily proceed from this affirmation to the apriority and the constructivity of the object of knowledge. At least for the most fundamental judgments in the real order, things are rather in the opposite direction:<sup>6f</sup> a global content of the perceptive order is originally given, neither purely amorphous, nor completely organized, but more or less vaguely delineated. Within it and from it depart the two directions of cognitive assimilation, sensible experience and intelligence, proceeding neither in a straight line nor in a purely parallel one, but according, we could say, to the relations of convergence and mutual complementarity. This brief intimation may seem obscure, and in fact the majority of this work is dedicated to its development: hence, a little patience is required before accepting or rejecting it. Meanwhile, I note that the laying out of the problem, as it might result in some forms of Scholasticism and also from the expressions reported above, betrays an understanding of sensible experience that can no longer be defended. The “pure sensation,” of which Fr. Maréchal speaks, is truly a product of reflection that is extremely difficult to carry out, and it cannot provide any starting point for either a psychological reflection, or even for a critical reflection: this point is now well-established.<sup>7g</sup> The essential problem remains that of establishing upon what contents the reflection at issue is exercised. If on the pure ones of the judgment as such, then one wonders from where they have come to the judgment, and likewise with the connections that are predicated of them, and this doubly: namely, whether on the ideas taken singularly, or taken in their connection. On the ideas taken singularly? Then the judgment is perfectly useless and tautological. In their connection? Very well, but then on what foundation is this same connection affirmed? It will be said: on that of the first principles. We might also agree on this, but these same principles only serve to confirm in the order of values what is otherwise evident in the order of facts and of the immediate presentation of the objects: that is, in the contents of the immediate perception.

In what follows in the treatise, the principle that we wish to advance will receive clarifications and explanations that I hope will dispel the doubts and reservations that the first, necessarily drastic and exclusive, statement can give rise to. However, its intent is solely that of giving the intellect a valid foundation for its object in the realm of human life.

## 2. THE CONTENT OF PERCEPTION

“I see the house facing me”: let us take a look at this very simple proposition which in its grammatical form reveals an immediate meaning.

First of all, there are two concrete “positions”: the subject (I), and the object (the house); two positions that are no longer disparate, but correlated by the relation by which the subject is the one who knows and the object is what is known, and on account of which there is that relation of correspondence affirmed by Varisco. All this presupposes that both the subject and the object, in a certain instant, *pass*—really or at least logically—from the absolute to the relative position, so that the knowing subject becomes—he moves towards—the object known, and the known object becomes part of the actualizations of the subject, moving, in turn, towards, or rather into, the subject. The problem of the knowledge of the concrete demands that the conditions that make possible this mutual convergence of the object and the subject be made clear.

A first explanation—perhaps the most spontaneous—is that which could be referred to as *attention*: I see the house, the tree, standing at the window; I see some books, a pen on the study table; I see a car in the street, because I look, I pay attention. Many psychologists have found this a consistent explanation. However, to it can be addressed—and has been addressed—a radical difficulty, that of ignoring the problem of the object: it does not explain the object in its content, let alone in the relation that it has towards the subject; and of the subject, in the relation he has towards the object, it highlights only one of the factors—the most conspicuous, but certainly not the constitutive one—that make the subject present to the object. It explains—if it does explain—more the contingent fact that, among many objects that are physically present, one, and not another, becomes psychically present, rather than the fact, which is much more important and general, of how the subject may at a certain moment open his assimilative capacities towards the object as such. Let us then leave this explanation aside, and to ease the difficulties a



little let us try to become more closely aware of the characteristics of the perceptive fact.

“I see a tree . . .”; “the tree is such and such an object which consists of a trunk, of branches, of leaves and, if the season is right, of flowers and fruits.” This complexity, rather than undermining, strengthens my persuasion that I have of apprehending, *hic et nunc*, a well-defined object: the tree. Thus we say that “*perception is the apprehension of a unified object.*”

The tree consists of trunk, branches, leaves. As an object of perception, the tree has its own *configuration* that is more or less symmetrical but characteristic of its species, and the trunk, the branches, and the leaves also have their own particular configuration, and it is by means of this configuration that I realize that I am in front of a tree and each of its parts. Perception is therefore *the apprehension of a configured complex*. Configuration and unity are perhaps one thing: for now, they seem as two distinct phenomenal moments.

But I could not perceive the configuration of the tree and its parts, if I did not see the parts of the tree laden with a certain color tone: clear, dark, and the different color variations, because the eye only sees colors. Perception, then, is the *apprehension of a qualified object*.

The tree that I see, standing at the window, is a given object in the field of experience; it has a certain “configuration,” which becomes present with certain shades of color. It is a matter of knowing, however, why the tree is a tree, that is, that determinate object, which is different from a stone, from a rainbow, from a dog and from the many other objects that can present themselves in experience. To stop at the colors, or even at the configuration, seems insufficient, or at least this cannot be a criterion to be applied in an absolute way. For the tree that I see can change in color; it can lose leaves, flowers, and fruit; it can be deprived of its branches in part or even in whole; it can even be mutilated in the trunk . . . and I can still say that I see a tree, which is certainly an unhealthy tree, but that is still a tree. And despite this extreme “reduction” and poverty, it has more value than my richest imaginations, because, at the coming of spring, it can regain its vegetation, sprout new buds, gain its branches, and establish itself again in space and in time, hold a place in reality as before. Therefore the tree that I see is a *real substance*, that is, clearly differentiated in the world of objects. And it is a *really existent* substance; it is not a painted tree or one seen in a dream; painted trees or those seen in dreams do not sprout buds in spring, nor do

they produce flowers or fruits; or, if they do bear them—painted and dreamt, may it be understood—they are buds that do not grow, and flowers that do not smell or mature, fruits that do not satisfy.

The object of perception, then, is not so much a quality, although it is not given without the company of qualities; it is not even the configuration, although this is also indispensable for its appearing. Rather, it is the concrete [thing] in a certain characteristic completeness that must be understood under two aspects. *One*, more interior, flows from the very structure of the object, as such and such an object; and this *structure*, if, at first, is revealed by the tones of color and the external configuration, in a second moment it is understood to be prior to them and indeed the reason for them, both in their being as in their variation. *Another* aspect, more exterior, is the *actual exercise of existence*<sup>8h</sup> that pertains to the object of perception and which does not pertain—or at least we do not know immediately whether it pertains—to the objects of other forms of knowing, whether they be inferior or superior. In other words, it is proper of perception to bear on being and on *real* being, both under the aspect of the essence as well as under that of existence, and in such way—note it well—that one and the other do not remain separated, but appear to mutually bring about each other.

### 3. THE “OBJECTUAL LEVELS” IN PERCEPTION

Holding that the object of perceiving has that density of content that has been described, let us now direct our observation no longer to particular qualities, but to the qualities and general determinations which are more clearly differentiated. Let us therefore say that when we look again at the phenomenological description, placed as the starting point of the investigation, it is not difficult to realize that the content of the object is not absolutely homogenous. Even if in the immediacy it presents as an actual whole, it is usually organized as a “complex” in which we can identify “objectual levels” of varying consistence. The determinations of a concrete object, like ours (the tree), which represent the classical type of objects of experience, are not all placed on the same field: after all, if this were the case, the organization of which we speak would no longer be possible; for there would be no criterion of subordination as is required for the realization of any order and structure, and which therefore cannot be absent in knowing.

a) First of all, *the most exterior qualities* are noted: colors, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile qualities, and, in general, the qualities to which a particular peripheral organ corresponds in the psychic receptor system, and for which Müller's "law of specific nerve energies" is said to be valid. Although such qualities may also be characteristics of the objects, they are not always such for all, or they are not necessarily such, and can vary in classes of objects of the same species (variety) and even in the same object, which may come to find itself in a new state of circumstances, although compatible with the maintaining of the fundamental identity of its being.

b) Other qualities appear more adherent and more stable: size, shape, position in space. Qualities such as these—though, as we have seen, the criterion is not absolute—present a greater degree of "belonging" with the object and also acquire a greater psychological consistency due to the fact that they do not fall within the exclusive ambit of a single organ, but they can be grasped by several senses, at least by two (sight and touch).

c) There is, finally, the object, as such, namely: (1) as something determinate in the field of the objects of experience, not only because it is colored in this way or has such a shape, but because it is such a being, from which precisely it has such color and such shape and such real relations with the other objects; (2) as having in fact the act of existing. Adopting MUSATTI's terminology,<sup>9</sup> we can indicate these three levels as *the sensory field*, *the perceptive field*, and *the objective field*, provided that these terms are not drawn within too exclusive meanings: for example, the perceptive field also has—for us—a broader meaning than the one indicated, because it can extend both to the first and also to the third. Perhaps to speak, as I prefer, of "objectual levels" lends itself less to misunderstanding.

With the explicit admission of "objectual levels," perceiving cannot be left simply as a pure fact, but necessarily poses itself as a "problem." In fact, what can remain of the unity of the object in its structure and in its unity, with the admission of these three levels? One could avoid the consequence, interpreting said division as a purely formal artifice, due to analysis and abstraction, while the object, in its actuality and in a higher order, preserves a unitary structure. But this hypothesis, if it claims to hold on the field of facts, ignores the problem; if instead it appeals to systematic principles—as is the most frequent case in idealism—it does so in an arbitrary way, or at least it is not known how it can now, right at the beginning of the discussion, be recognized as legitimate. The only things left to do is to openly recognize

that the three planes are heterogeneous, that is, underivable, in their order such that it is not permissible to understand them as organized in a continuous way. Colors are colors, and shapes are shapes; nor is it possible to have colors mixed in with the shapes, and vice versa; and colors and shapes are not the same as substance, since, within certain limits, the latter can be preserved and recognized even if the former vary, as in the tree deprived of branches and mutilated in the trunk.

But the heterogeneity of content in the levels does not mean a real extraneity and incompatibility. On the contrary, in perception they are always given “together” by the constitution of a single object because there is no body that is not shaped in some way; nor is possible for a shape to appear without color: by definition, it would not be visible. And what is even more surprising is that in perception I become aware that I grasp all three of these levels immediately and all of them together according to an objective unification that is a real belonging of real contents to an object. The two terms strongly underline the tension of principles, that is, the dilemma that emerges in this more accurate consideration of the perceptive fact. The multiplicity and heterogeneity of the levels requires that the objective unity indeed be a “unity of multiplicity,” and not of simplicity, and so implies, alongside some section of facts, some *constructive process* that leads to the unification.<sup>10i</sup>

On the other hand, the unity of the real object and the belonging of the levels to such an object do not allow us to think of a random or free creation. It is therefore necessary to suppose that the layers are integrated into the object according to laws that are intrinsic to the presentation of the object to the subject and to the mode of actualization of the subject by the object. The difficulty consists entirely in explaining how an understanding of integration is compatible with the consistency and unity, which seems underivable, of the object.

This compatibility has good evidence. First of all, the two levels of sensibility, found to be inseparable in fact, are also such by right as much *ex parte obiecti*, as *ex parte subiecti*, since there are no pure shapes outside of geometry. Indeed, the shapes of nature are always qualified; the subject assimilates both genres of corporeal manifestations and in the unity of one and the same apprehensive work: sensibility. From this, it is inferred that the two levels are found in *functional dependence* on each other in the perceptive unification, not only without any damage or impediment to the

unity of the object, but rather that unity is constituted by it. A relationship of similar—but not identical—dependence must also be affirmed between sensibility and the third level, in which objectivity is definitively constituted within the ambit of reality. As I do not see colors that are not shaped, so also the things I see all have certain shapes and colors, and although things cannot be reduced to colors and shapes, I cannot identify anything except by referring to some shape and color or sensible qualities: only then can I say: it is a man, a tree, a hen. This is so true that if the sensible quality or the shape becomes equivocal or uncertain, it may happen that the process of perception stops; and if the disposition of the stimulus leads to the production of two shapes, I have the conviction of perceiving *two* people, *two* trees. . . ; and it is an authentic perception, even if in fact it is an illusion that, for the purposes of life, I am interested in correcting.

#### 4. PERCEPTIVE UNIFICATION AND “PSYCHIC MATURATION”

To have found in the objectual levels the belonging of multiple contents to a single object, and a functional *dependence* of the subject with respect to the object within the same act of perceiving, undoubtedly constitutes a positive contribution to the search for a solution; however, this is only a first step. In fact, together with the problem of “*how*” the three levels can be integrated and unified, it must also be asked *how* the levels themselves—once their heterogeneity has been recognized—are established first in themselves and then how each of them participates in the realization of the object in its entirety. This search is imposed by the fact that the perceptive attitudes at the beginning of conscious life are very different from when the experience has become developed and differentiated.

An apparently logical and sensible first solution could consist in admitting that the three levels are differentiated not only in content, but also because each one becomes part of the conscious life at a given moment, which is anterior or posterior to the one in which the others enter; each stratum would then be actualized by degrees, passing successively from objects of minimum content to those of denser content, which, in a certain sense, would be nothing more than the *summation* of the previous experience.

Just as in the physical world the natural union of the elements does not happen by chance, but obeys determinate laws of composition, so it also

happens in the psychic syntheses that the development of experience comes to constitute itself gradually. The most logical or extremist form of this theory, which is commonly referred to by the term “Associationism,” holds that the laws of synthesis must explain the perceptive fact in all its degrees and forms: they do not limit themselves to each level in particular, but must explain also—and above all—the passage from one level to another. For the “elementary” theory, then, the three levels follow each other in rigorous linear continuity, in the direction that goes from *the bottom to the top*. At the beginning, there is only the isolated appearance of elementary qualities (first levels); in the course of the experience, these qualities are associated into complexes; as a result of the privileged position that one of the elementary properties present in the group comes to have in the complex (e.g. the sensation of tactile movement, on the first level), the complexes carry out the “perceptive transformation,” which is the perception of a new quality: extension, shape, distance (second level). Let the same be said for the passage from the second to the third stratum, and, in fact, Associationism falls within Empiricism, for which the intellect is not an original faculty, but a more complex form of sensibility.

Under the pressure of criticism and the progress of experimental investigation, “Associationism” underwent frequent and profound changes at the hands of very worthy thinkers and psychologists, so much so that it cannot be summarized in a formula that embraces a nucleus of doctrines essential to all the schools. Instead, all of them agree in the program of explaining the development and rise of the facts of consciousness as effect, let us say, of an “*equivocal generation*.”

For this reason, despite the remarkable successes achieved at the beginning, Elementarism never succeeded in imposing itself, and it had to share the field with the antagonistic current, called apriorism, or, more generically, *Rationalism*. It presupposes that the universal and every order and structure in knowledge are of an immediate and “given” nature, not constructible from below; for this reason, the lower processes are not the reason for the higher ones, but rather the former do not actualize themselves except after and in dependence on the latter. The gnoseological development here takes place *from the top down*: thus, one should not speak of “development,” but rather of regression, of degradation of the intelligible into the sensible, of the universal into the particular, of the luminous

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