

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

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In Merleau-Ponty's "Preface" to his *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), he asks "What is phenomenology?—and he suggests that it is still in a process of being defined. Not so untimely, this remains true today, and understandably so, since any philosophy which is still alive continually transforms itself. Yet Merleau-Ponty's own response to the question remains true: that phenomenology is "a philosophy which places essences back into existence and does not think that human beings and the world are comprehensible except on the basis of their 'facticity'" (i; vii¹). In this work he is concerned with showing that an explication of the facticity of the body, the medium that we are, and that puts us in-the-world, is central for understanding human existence. Precisely in this way Merleau-Ponty's text continues to be relevant for contemporary thought, not only in the area of the phenomenology and philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science, but also in regard to ethics in the most general sense.

The *Phenomenology of Perception* was influenced by the work of Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, but Merleau-Ponty puts phenomenology to use in a way they did not. He carries phenomenology across new boundaries, as, in his attempt to understand perception, he considers the results of empirical psychology, neurology, and studies in psychopathology. He sees no problem in using phenomenological philosophy to reinterpret the results of empirical studies. This is all the more significant in contemporary

debates about naturalizing an approach that lays claim to being transcendental, and whether such an enterprise is possible, or even justified. "Phenomenology is a transcendental philosophy which indeed suspends the affirmations characteristic of the natural attitude. But it does so only in order to shed light on them ..." (Ibid). To the extent that phenomenology is capable of shedding light on our everyday existence, it is not in opposition to the sciences that are concerned with the same phenomena, even if these disciplines approach the subject-matter from a different perspective. Merleau-Ponty gives a certain methodological primacy to phenomenology, however, insofar as science can only ever begin with an already experienced perceptual world.

The *Phenomenology of Perception* begins with a Preface that critically comments on what phenomenology had started to become and what it continued to be in several decades following this book's publication. Succinctly put, phenomenology as a philological commentary on text goes nowhere; we need to engage in phenomenology as it arises in our own experience. As it arises in our own experience, however, phenomenology is not a narrowly conceived subjectivism or idealism; it rather reveals a two-way dynamic process that Husserl attempted to capture in his noesis-noema distinction. By way of noematic reflection we find that "the world is there prior to every analysis" (iv; x). Moreover, the world is not something that can be traced back to the constructive powers of the pure transcendental subject; nor is it the product of a synthesis of sensations. Merleau-Ponty rejects both the idealist and the empiricist

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¹ Pagination is from the French Gallimard edition, followed by the page number from the English translation by Colin Smith. All translations used here, however, are from a new unpublished translation by Richard Rojcewicz.

accounts as abstractions from what he calls the “finely textured fabric” of the world ($v; x$). In effect, Merleau-Ponty begins with a radical phenomenological reduction: he brackets not only common-sense explanations, and empirical science; he also brackets any recourse to transcendental idealism. At the same time he reminds us that “bracketing” in this sense does not eliminate whatever these kinds of analyses might deliver; and in any case, the phenomenological reduction is always incomplete.

Merleau-Ponty thus practices an *impure* phenomenology, where anything like transcendental unity is already disrupted by the transcendence of the experiencing subject who is embodied and is thereby “out there” in a world, in the perceptual field, and most importantly, in the perceptual field of others. Not unlike Sartre’s analysis of the gaze of the other, for Merleau-Ponty, the fact that others can see us, and touch us, and interact with us makes it impossible to reduce them, or our own bodies, to constituted unities in our own consciousness; it puts flesh on the noema and makes the noetic correlation something more than an intra-individual occurrence. The motivation for taking the phenomenological attitude of the reduction is just this fact that we are immersed in the world—we need to step back a bit to try to discover the lines that draw our connections; at the same time our being-in-the-world—our facticity—is also precisely the issue that prevents the reduction from being complete. We can never step back completely. The acknowledgment of this facticity and this finitude is in part why we consider this work to be existential as well as phenomenological.

If *Phenomenology of Perception* is a book about perceptual consciousness, it is also about the fact that consciousness is embedded in the physical world, the social world, in time, and in history, and such insights force us to rethink the large concepts of intentionality, language, and rationality, but also the very specific conceptions that have shaped philosophical discourse about perception: sensation, association, attention, the phenomenal field. The real beginning, for Merleau-Ponty, however, is the body, which he deals with in great detail in Part I. Here he offers a critique of mechanistic physiology and classical psychology. After treating topics such as phantom limb and kinesthesia, he turns to the pathological case of Schneider, a patient of Gelb and Goldstein’s who has suffered traumatic brain damage. This case helps to clarify the notions of movement and spatiality—not Cartesian geometric space, but the space within which we live and act—as well as the concept of sexuality. Merleau-Ponty’s analyses lead us out of the abstract cul-de-sacs where philosophy often leaves us, and back to what we already knew and simply lost sight of. One should wonder that we have to be reminded that “sexuality is not a mixture of ‘representations’ and reflexes” (528; np) but philosophers, psychoanalysts, and

scientists alike understand how we can be misdirected into such conceptions. That’s right, an instinctual drive plus a belief does not add up to a desire.

Merleau-Ponty’s rich chapter on language, gesture, and embodied expression continues to offer inspiration to contemporary theorists (e.g., McNeill 2005; Johnson 2007). His analyses of sense perception, spatial perception, depth, size, color, the constancy of sounds, temperatures, weights, and his discussion of hallucinations are all informed by Gestalt psychology. Merleau-Ponty could have easily stopped there and we would still call the book a classic. But he goes on to explore the philosophical implications of these analyses for the topics of intersubjectivity, self, temporality and freedom. This is why I suggested that this is also a book that addresses ethical issues in the most general sense. In this respect it is no surprise that the last lines of the book consist in a quotation from de Saint-Exupéry: “You yourself *are* your act.... You have exchanged yourself for your act.... Your meaning *is* what shows itself for all to see. Your meaning *is* your deed, your hatred, your love, your fidelity, your discoveries.... A man (*L’homme*) is nothing but a web of relations; with regard to man, only relationships count” (520; 456). Perhaps the principle that guides these investigations is best expressed at the beginning of his chapter on temporality:

Our existence cannot be anything – spatial, sexual, temporal – without entirely being such, without appropriating and assuming its ‘attributes’ and turning them into dimensions of its very being. Accordingly, even a minimally insightful analysis of any of these ‘attributes’ will actually disclose subjectivity itself. There are no dominant and subordinate problems: all problems are equally central (469; 410).

Let me raise two critical issues that are in some ways tied to the facticity of Merleau-Ponty’s own situation, and specifically to the time period in which he wrote. We cannot fault Merleau-Ponty for the state of art that science itself was in at the time he wrote the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). Merleau-Ponty knew the scientific literature (especially neurology, experimental and developmental psychology) very well. Some of his specific conclusions, consistent with that science, may not be consistent with views informed by current scientific knowledge. No doubt future commentators will say the same thing about the current generation’s understanding, if we’re remembered at all. Most current views concerning the body schema, for example, agree that ontogenetically it exists much earlier than Merleau-Ponty and the science of his day suggested. This would seem to have some interesting implications for questions about the onset timing for imitation, for claims about pre-linguistic experience in infancy, and possibly about the basis for intersubjective

understanding (see Gallagher 2005). Again, we could easily claim that if we were trying to sort out the case of Schneider today, we would know a lot more about his brain via contemporary brain-imaging technology, and that might better inform our analysis. Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Schneider is creatively insightful, and often guided by Goldstein's first-hand accounts. Yet neuroscience had some distance to go to get to what we consider today to be an improved but still inadequate understanding of brain processes; and Merleau-Ponty was also at a certain remove from a first-hand examination of Schneider.

This last point raises an issue about the limitations of Merleau-Ponty's methodology. Although he studied the empirical and clinical literature, Merleau-Ponty worked in a traditional philosophical way, in his case employing phenomenological analysis to guide his critical reinterpretations. His reinterpretations clearly supported the philosophical position he was developing, but in most cases they remained untested. Merleau-Ponty read across disciplines, but did not work in an interdisciplinary way; he was not in contact with Goldstein, for example, and never observed Schneider, and one wonders what he might have learned if he had, or if he could have tested out his conclusions. Today it is not unusual for philosophers to team up with scientists, to learn from them and to contribute to their experimental efforts. The important point is that there needs to be some way to test out any philosophically inspired reinterpretations of empirical data, and those tests are missing in Merleau-Ponty.

Despite any limitations imposed by the contemporary science or his lack of interdisciplinary methodology, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception holds up well. For example he had an excellent understanding of what the study of pathologies can tell us about non-pathological behavior. In a case as complicated as Schneider, for example, as Tony Marcel (2003) has suggested, we need to carefully distinguish between normal functions that manifest themselves more clearly in pathological cases, and functions that emerge as compensatory within the pathology. Merleau-Ponty was careful in just this way not to claim that the more concrete "motor intentionality" (128; 110) remained intact when, in the case of Schneider,

abstract movement was stripped away. Rather, he saw the odd character of Schneider's movements as compensatory for a loss of the lived spatiality of action.

In addition, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of embodied perception anticipated and helped to inspire much of the recent embodied and enactive accounts that are redefining good portions of research in the cognitive sciences, starting with Varela, Thompson, and Rosch's *The Embodied Mind* (1991), and running through a number of recent works (e.g., Berthoz and Petit 2008; Clark 1997; Gallagher 2005; Noë 2004; Shusterman 2008).

For these reasons Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* remains an important book and not so untimely. Throughout his analysis there are rewarding detailed phenomenological descriptions of embodied action; there are insightful criticisms of traditional philosophy and contemporary science; and within his often flowing and flowery French, there are revelatory passages that can only be called philosophically beautiful.

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