

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

[PENULTIMATE DRAFT – PLEASE REFER TO PUBLISHED VERSION FOR CITATION PURPOSES]

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was born in 1908 in Rochefort-sur-Mer (France). He was schooled in Paris where he moved with his family after his father's death. Merleau-Ponty obtained his Agrégation de Philosophie in 1930 from the École Normale Supérieure. He then completed a year of military service, before taking up a post as a teacher. A bursary awarded by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique enabled him to pursue his research on perception from 1933 until 1934. In 1939, he was the first official visitor to the Husserl Archives in Leuven, where he read various texts that were formative for his thinking. During the Second World War, Merleau-Ponty served in the infantry until the French forces were defeated by the Nazis, and he was demobilized. Along with Jean-Paul Sartre, he was then involved in setting up *Socialisme et Liberté* – a small intellectual Resistance group. In 1945, Merleau-Ponty was awarded his Docteur ès lettres for the *Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty 1963), and the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Also in this year, he – together with Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre – founded the literary and political journal, *Les Temps Modernes*. Merleau-Ponty was appointed to the Chair of Child Psychology at the Sorbonne in 1949, then in 1952 he took up the Chair of Philosophy at the Collège de France. Merleau-Ponty was the youngest person to be appointed to the position, which he held until his death. During this same period, he quarreled with de Beauvoir and Sartre over their increasing political differences, and resigned from *Les Temps Modernes*. Merleau-Ponty was living in Paris when he died from heart failure in 1961, at the age of fifty-three.

Merleau-Ponty's work tackles a diverse range of topics, including perception,

action, memory, nature, intersubjectivity, madness, time, truth, and language. His philosophy is also informed by many different thinkers, such as René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl, the Gestalt psychologists, Ferdinand de Saussure, Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, Henri Bergson, Claude Levi-Strauss, amongst others. Although Merleau-Ponty's work is wide in scope, it is unified by its concern with one central question: how should we understand consciousness, the world, and their relation? Merleau-Ponty holds that our current way of thinking about these things – what he calls “Objective Thought” in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962) – is flawed and must be dismantled. It conceives of the world as composed of determinate entities that stand in external, causal relations to one another. On this conception, the world is reducible to its parts and causally determined. Objective Thought generates two apparently conflicting positions that both share this notion of the world: realism (“Empiricism” – note, Merleau-Ponty uses the term with its Kantian meaning; he does not use it to refer to the claim that all knowledge is based on sense experience), which conceives of consciousness as just one of many things in a world that exists independently of it, and idealism (“Intellectualism”), which conceives of consciousness as constituting the world, and thus lying wholly outside it. (These positions each take up one side of what Husserl (1970) calls the Paradox of Subjectivity – the paradox whereby the subject both constitutes the world and is a constituted part of it.) Merleau-Ponty sees our thinking as swinging between these alternatives, both of which are unacceptable. He takes them to generate many of the seemingly intractable problems faced by philosophy, such as the difficulties with accounting for intentionality, and responding to skepticism. He holds that these problems can be dissolved by developing a new ontology. We must think of the world and consciousness as mutually dependent parts of one whole. His work aims to

give such an account of the world and consciousness.

I will follow other commentators by identifying different phases in Merleau-Ponty's work by reference to three texts: the *Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty 1963) – originally published in French in 1942; the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962) – originally published in French in 1945; and the *Visible and Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968) – originally published in French in 1964. However, there is no implication that his other published works are less important. It should also be remembered that the division is somewhat artificial, since there is much continuity between Merleau-Ponty's different works, which explore and develop many of the same themes. Merleau-Ponty is usually identified as a phenomenologist. Some commentators see his thought as undergoing a radical shift, culminating in his last, unfinished work, the *Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Some also question whether the *Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty 1963) is properly classified as a work of phenomenology. Yet it is also possible to see these texts as parts of a single inquiry – they contend with the same issues, sometimes develop the same lines of argument, and in the case of the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962), and the *Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968), often rely on conclusions established in the earlier text(s). Thus despite their differences, it is helpful to view them as engaging with the same overarching project, which is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty saw himself as continuing the work of Edmund Husserl. Husserl held that phenomenology begins with the “Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction”, which suspends the belief that the things we see really exist (Husserl 1988). He claimed that by doing so, one could consider just what is given: the content of one's own experiences. In the course of his investigations, Husserl developed an

account of consciousness as essentially embodied and in the world, which Merleau-Ponty would later take up and extend. The later Husserl used phenomenology to dissolve a “crisis” in our thought, precipitated by the elevation of Galilean science to *the* rational form of inquiry (Husserl 1970). Merleau-Ponty further developed this idea: his phenomenology is designed to dissolve the problems generated by our conceptual scheme – Objective Thought. Just as Husserl conceived of phenomenology as a sort of science, so too, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological method is broadly scientific. We are to proceed by making observations, which will reveal the failures of Objective Thought, and then formulate a new conceptual scheme to describe them. Unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty does not restrict the phenomenologist to studying her own allegedly normal experience. *Any* descriptions of experience – including pathological cases, and those generated by scientific experiments – are potentially useful data.

THE *STRUCTURE OF BEHAVIOR*

In the *Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty 1963), Merleau-Ponty critically appropriates insights from Gestalt psychology to put pressure on Objective Thought. The notion of a *Gestalt* comes from the theory of perception. It is a unified perceptual whole that is not reducible to its parts. The Gestalt psychologists discovered that even the most simple visual experience has a *Gestalt* structure. Consider, e.g., the duck-rabbit. The picture is apt to “switch” between appearing as a duck and as a rabbit. But although its “look” changes, the shape, color, texture, and so on remain the same. The picture as a whole is thus not reducible to its components. Merleau-Ponty follows the Gestalt psychologists in arguing that the most basic unit of analysis in our understanding of the world is a *Gestalt* – a unified structure that cannot be reduced to

its parts. But he goes further than them to claim that this means that we can no longer think of the world as reducible to its components, and neither realism nor idealism are tenable positions.

Merleau-Ponty divides the world into three sorts of existence: the physical (inorganic existence), the vital (organisms of various sorts), and the human. In the case of the physical order, we understand it as governed by the laws of nature. But these only tell us what will happen in any given instance, on the assumption that many other conditions are met. We think of water as boiling at one hundred degrees centigrade, for example, but its boiling-point actually varies with air pressure. The interaction between the laws points to the fact that they describe processes that are not independent from one another, but form unified physical systems, which react as a whole to external forces. Merleau-Ponty suggests that physical systems tend towards some form of equilibrium. When subjected to external forces, the system redistributes them throughout its parts to maintain equilibrium; or – if the force is sufficient – the system undergoes drastic change. The Earth's climate, which is maintained by the delicately balanced interaction of a number of subsystems, such as ocean currents, wind patterns, and so forth, is an example of such a system.

Organisms comprise the vital order. Merleau-Ponty argues that the parts of an organism do not function independently from one another. Instead, they are coordinated in such a way that the organism must be thought of as a unified whole, irreducible to its parts. A dung beetle can still walk after a leg is removed, for example, but the remaining limbs do not move in the same way as before. The beetle adopts a new way of walking to compensate for the amputation. Moreover, an organism and its environment are mutually dependent parts of one whole. An organism cannot be properly understood without reference to the environment to

which it reacts. But the organism does not react to items with merely objective properties such as a particular size, shape, and chemical composition. It reacts to items that have a value for it in relation to its tasks – e.g., it reacts to fruit *as* food; a value it has in relation to the task of satiating hunger. The organism thus carves its own environment out of the world by conferring value on certain items, to which it then reacts. An organism's behavior is shaped by its environment, but its environment is also shaped by the organism.

Humans are organisms. Like other organisms, they are unified wholes that cannot be reduced to their parts, and which form a further unified whole with their environment. However, humans differ from other organisms in that they have a far greater capacity to create their environment. Humans can take on tasks that are not immediately connected with the satisfaction of basic bodily needs such as finding food or a mate. The ability to take on such tasks goes hand in hand with the ability to confer value on their environment in relation to these tasks. This enables humans to create a cultural world of artifacts, customs, and symbolic systems such as language.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the three orders of existence are characterized by different types of structure, but in each case, the most basic unit of analysis is the unified structure, which cannot be reduced to its components. He takes this fact to be at odds with Objective Thought. First, the notion of an irreducible whole is in conflict with the claim that the world can be reduced to its most basic parts. Second, Merleau-Ponty argues that the notion of structure cannot be properly accommodated by either realism or idealism. Structures cannot exist independently of consciousness because they are unities of *meaning*, and meaning only exists for consciousness. Thus the notion cannot be accommodated by realism. Consider a picture of a dog made up of dots. The dots are related to one another as parts of a pattern. But this pattern is not

possessed by the dots independently of consciousness. On their own, the dots merely stand in spatial relations to one another. For the dots to form a pattern, someone must look at them and discern it. This is not to say that the perceiver creates the pattern out of nothing; they find the pattern in the arrangement of dots. But the existence of the pattern requires consciousness. A similar point applies to structures. A structure is a “pattern” or “form” manifest by its elements. Earth’s climate system, for example, is a form constituted by its subsystems; the whole comprised by an organism and its environment is constituted by various entities and actions. For these disparate elements to partake in a form requires a consciousness to discern it. But consciousness does not create these structures; it finds them in the elements that manifest them. The consciousness that discerns forms is thus not a subject who lies wholly outside the world, and constitutes it from nothing. For these reasons, Merleau-Ponty thinks that the notion of structure cannot be accommodated by idealism.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

Merleau-Ponty further develops these themes in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962), which is arguably his most important work. A central component of his account is the notion of the subject as essentially embodied. Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is not a mere object, but a form of consciousness, and what we ordinarily think of as the mind is grounded on bodily subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty develops his account of bodily consciousness through an examination of perception and action. He endorses the Gestalt psychologists' claim that we perceive the world as offering us possibilities for action. Thus balls appear throwable, chairs as for-sitting-down, cups of tea as for-drinking, and so on. Merleau-Ponty also points out that perception has an affective dimension – the things we perceive

feel a certain way – and this contributes to the perception of them as “requiring” certain actions. An approaching tiger literally *looks* scary, and so demands that one move away. What a perceiver sees on any particular occasion is the result of what she can do, where this depends on both the nature of her surroundings, and her capacities for action. The perceiver's current task also plays a role so that possibilities for action that are relevant to it stand out as salient. Merleau-Ponty argues that one gains an ability to act – a “habit” or motor skill – through practice, which is the body's familiarizing itself with the activity in question. Once proficient, one can perform the relevant movements, and perceive appropriate environments as offering opportunities to do so. Thus a skilled climber can move her body up the rock face, and perceive fissures and cracks in the rock as handholds and footholds. Motor skills are flexible and can be adapted to a range of different environments – for example, one's skill at snowboarding can be employed to board on sand dunes. Furthermore, once one has gained a motor skill, one is able to exercise it without thinking about what one is doing. One simply perceives an opportunity to act, and then responds by acting, without the need for any intervening thought – such as an intention – to bring about the action.

Merleau-Ponty also characterizes bodily subjectivity as possessing a capacity he calls the “power to reckon with the possible” (1962: 109). This is the ability to go beyond the actual; it manifests in various ways. Humans can perceive more opportunities for action than just those that are relevant to what they are actually doing. They also see possibilities for action that correspond to other possible projects. Humans can also act with respect to environments that are not currently perceived. Sometimes the environment will be imaginary, as when someone mimes an action. More often, the environment is real, but the agent's activity is not habitual, and so he

does not perceive his environment as requiring it. In such a case, the agent mentally represents the requirement for action to which he responds. Before I have learnt to drive, for example, I perceive the pedals as for-pressing, but I do not yet perceive one as for-braking. Instead, I mentally represent the pedal's function, to which I can then respond by appropriately braking. The way in which I represent my environment is a possible value for action that it may have. My capacity to go beyond the actual allows me to act with respect to this possible environment.

We can see from this brief description that perception and action are not separate capacities, but two sides of the same ability to engage with the world. Since motor skills are essentially bodily, the subject of perception and action is embodied. Skilled engagement with the world does not involve thought (although thought may sometimes play a role, as in the last example). But it is nevertheless intelligent, as motor skills can be adapted to cope with physically dissimilar environments that share a common form, for example, the snowy mountain and the sand dune. It also exhibits spontaneity as the agent can exercise his motor skills with respect to the merely possible. The body should thus be conceived as a form of subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty also argues that the mind is essentially embodied. One's mental life includes emotions. Merleau-Ponty conceives them as modes of engaging with the world. Emotions are manifest in perception. Perception has an affective content that contributes to the sorts of actions the perceiver sees the world as requiring. Merleau-Ponty accounts for the "feeling" component of emotions in this way. To feel a certain way about something is to perceive it in that way. My dog, for example, literally appears lovable, and his lovable appearance constitutes my feelings of love for him. Emotions are also manifest in action. The affective content of perception contributes to the perceiver's sense of which actions are required, and so

influences which actions she performs. My dog's lovable appearance invites me to interact with him in a loving manner, which draws forth loving behavior from me. Since the subject of perception and action is essentially embodied, and emotions are, on Merleau-Ponty's account, ways of perceiving and interacting with the world, it follows that the subject of emotions is also essentially embodied.

One's mental life also includes thoughts. Thoughts have representational content, which allows one to have them in the absence of the things they are about. I can believe that my dog is hungry, for example, without perceiving my dog because a component of my belief represents him. Theorists usually conceive of thoughts as contained within the mind, either as non-physical representations, or as realized in physical matter, such as the brain. On this conception, thought has relatively little to do with the body, which merely provides input for thought, and sustenance for the brain. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty holds that thought is constituted by its expression, and expression is a bodily activity. Thought can be expressed in various ways, including: painting, gesture, music, and language. Merleau-Ponty accounts for private thought as *imagined* expression, so, for example, privately thinking that the teacher needs a haircut involves imagining an utterance of this claim. He holds that to imagine ϕ -ing is to exercise the same motor skills used in actually ϕ -ing. It follows that thinking is an essentially bodily activity.

Merleau-Ponty also offers an account of how expression gains its meaning. Expressions cannot gain their meanings by being associated with thoughts, since this requires thought to be independent of expression. Neither is it plausible to suppose that expressions have their meaning intrinsically. Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues that expressions gain meaning from the context in which they first arise. Suppose, for example, that the convention of beckoning with one's hand to call someone has not

yet arisen, and I want to summon my friend to show him a beetle. I perceive my friend as requiring summoning, and this perception of him draws forth a physical gesture from me. My friend and I share a way of life – we often show each other interesting insects, and he can see me looking at something on the ground. This allows him to perceive my gesture as requiring him to come to me. The gesture's role in this shared context confers its meaning on it. Once it has gained this meaning, it can be used again in other situations. Only embodied beings can be in meaningful situations like this, so again it follows that embodiment is required for thought.

Merleau-Ponty's account of perception implies that certain perceived properties result from interaction between the world and consciousness. Footballs are only kickable, for example, in relation to agents that can kick them. Merleau-Ponty also advances a stronger thesis: *all* perceived properties result from interaction between the world and consciousness. He takes the rejection of Objective Thought to establish this claim. If all perceived properties are generated in perception, it makes no sense to talk of an experience either matching, or failing to match the world. Thus an alternative account of perceptual normativity is required. Merleau-Ponty explains this by appealing to the notion of "maximum grip" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 302). One has maximum grip on something when one is in the best context for viewing it. One has a sense of deviating from the best context, which manifests as a sort of tension. One moves to reduce tension, and so get a better grip on the thing one perceives. If I look at a picture in a gallery, I can immediately see whether I am too far away or too close, and I adjust my position accordingly to get the best view of it. A thing's real properties are those it appears to have when one is in the best context for viewing it. The best context varies for different properties. A veridical experience of that thing is one that is consistent with how it appears at maximum grip, whilst an illusory

experience is one that is inconsistent.

The perceived world results from the interaction between consciousness and the world. Since bodily consciousness has perceivable properties, the embodied subject must also result from the interaction between consciousness and the world. Thus for his account to be complete, Merleau-Ponty must show that the world and consciousness that *precede* perception are mutually dependent parts of one whole. This task may seem in conflict with phenomenology, which takes the perceived to be the most fundamental object of investigation. However, Merleau-Ponty holds that what precedes perception may nevertheless figure in experience. He argues that perception necessarily has a figure-background structure. The figure is the focus of attention. It is seen clearly and in detail. The background is perceived less determinately. The further it is from the figure, the less determinate the appearance, until at the limits of one's perceptual reach, the level of indeterminacy is so great that one perceives no qualities; one is simply aware of a vast presence. This is an awareness of the world that precedes perception. Although one does not perceive it as having any qualities, one is nevertheless drawn to perceive it – it exerts a “pull” on the perceiver. The experience of something pulling is simultaneously the experience of being pulled. Thus the experience of the world that precedes perception is simultaneously an awareness of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty thus accounts for the world and consciousness that precede perception as opposing poles of a system of forces.

An important aspect of conscious existence is the existence of others. I experience myself as just one of many selves who share a common world. Merleau-Ponty holds that for this to be so, experience cannot present me as in some way privileged, or it will tend towards solipsism: the experience of being the only self, or

of being the only one a special kind of self. I must experience others as subjects in the same ways that I experience myself. His account reveals many ways in which my experience has this reciprocal character. One example is having a conversation. Merleau-Ponty holds that one sometimes thinks in speech. In a good conversation, one's utterances do not merely translate thoughts; they constitute them. What each participant says is drawn forth by the preceding dialogue. Thus each is partly responsible for the other's thoughts. Merleau-Ponty holds that the dialogue is a single train of thought with two subjects. The participants experience each other as subjects, jointly thinking about the topics they discuss.

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty points out that experience cannot present me and others in *exactly* the same ways. I am *self-conscious*, and so must experience myself differently to how I experience others. Moreover, since – for Merleau-Ponty – perception is simultaneously awareness of the world and self-conscious awareness of oneself, whenever I perceive, I experience myself differently to how I experience others. Thus the very act of perception seems to bring with it the threat of solipsism. Merleau-Ponty dissolves this threat by showing that there is an experience of others that precedes the perception of individual selves. As we have seen, he holds that I can experience the world prior to perceiving it: I am aware of it as a vast, indeterminate presence, which draws me to perceive it in certain ways. One dimension of the “pull” is social – I am drawn into situations involving others. In this way, I have an awareness of others in general before I explicitly perceive them. It follows that although I never experience others in entirely the same ways that I experience myself, we should understand this as the experience of separateness from others, which has as its background, the experience of a social world.

The final aspect of existence is time. Again, Merleau-Ponty denies that it is an

objective feature of reality. Instead, he holds that it is constituted in experience, which is the interaction between the world and consciousness. There are two essential features of time for which he must account: the peculiar ontological status of the past and future, and the way in which time goes by. The past and future are real, yet *absent* from the present. Merleau-Ponty holds that to account for absence, one must appeal to a perspective, which is essentially manifested in experience. Thus the absence of the past and future is absence from my current experience. But although they are absent, they nevertheless figure in my current experience. Merleau-Ponty explains this by appealing to the horizontal structure of experience. Perception explicitly presents the perceiver with what is currently in view, but it has horizons that *implicitly* present what is currently hidden. Thus when I look at a chair, I explicitly see its front, and I am implicitly presented with its back. Similarly, my experience has temporal horizons that implicitly present me with what has been and what is yet to come. In this way, the past and future are constituted in experience as real yet absent. To account for time's going by, Merleau-Ponty points out that the life of consciousness is essentially characterized by possibilities. At each moment, I perceive possibilities for action, some of which I take up by acting. Merleau-Ponty holds that time's going by is constituted by this movement from the possible to the actual.

THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE

An unfinished manuscript, published as the *Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1968), was found with Merleau-Ponty's papers when he died. In it, Merleau-Ponty redescribes the relation between subjectivity and the world. He still thinks of them as mutually dependent parts of one whole, but he seeks new ways to capture this

relation. Merleau-Ponty is also interested in the relation between perceivable reality (the visible), and the abstract realm of ideas (the invisible). He seemingly intended to offer an account of truth – a topic he had not fully examined previously. The enigmatic chapter entitled “the Intertwining – the Chiasm” has generated the most discussion. In it, Merleau-Ponty claims that the world and the subject must be of the same stuff – “Flesh” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 127). Flesh is neither a substance nor an idea, but an element, in the same way that earlier peoples conceived of earth, water, wind and fire as elements. Flesh is visibility. The act of perceiving introduces a division into Flesh, cleaving it into perceiver and perceived. In perception, the Flesh becomes self-aware. Merleau-Ponty offers little argument for this vision. Indeed, he died before he had finished articulating it. But he suggests that his account provides an answer to the following problem. As he argued in the *Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty 1963), to perceive something requires one’s body to anticipate that thing. Thus to perceive textures, I have to move my hand the right amount and in the right direction. My hand must “know” in advance how to move. Merleau-Ponty suggests that this is made possible by the fact that the world and the subject are both Flesh. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the Flesh may also be related to his rejection of a Transcendental Ego, which lies outside the world and is wholly separate from it. Merleau-Ponty holds that the Transcendental Ego is an Intellectualist concept, which cannot be endorsed. The Transcendental Ego is sometimes described as the point from which things are seen, which cannot itself figure in experience. Clearly, if the perceiver is of the same stuff as the perceived, they can themselves be experienced. Merleau-Ponty makes this point by appealing to the reversibility of the body – its capacity to perceive itself. However, he maintains that the parts of one’s body cannot simultaneously perceive and be perceived. If my hands are touching each other, for

example, each alternates between being perceived and perceiving.

The perceiver and the perceived are not independent from one another, but neither are they identical. Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of the chiasm – two strands that are intertwined – to describe their relation. He uses the same metaphor to describe many other relations, including the relation between the different senses, which are not identical with one another, but neither do they coincide; the relation between my body conceived as an object that can be studied by science, and the phenomenal body as it is lived; the relation between myself and others. Although he uses the same metaphor to describe these relations, it is not clear that it is the same relation at issue in all of these cases. Indeed, it would seem not, as his detailed analyses in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962) show. We are left to wonder how Merleau-Ponty would have developed these ideas if he had lived longer.

Merleau-Ponty's work is not easy to read, and his thought is often challenging. But his philosophy is a rich source of ideas. His work has, for example, inspired the development of enactive theories of perception, which emphasise the ways in which the perceiver's embodiment contributes to perceptual content, and embodied accounts of cognition, which take certain forms of bodily activity to constitute thought. Merleau-Ponty's ideas also promise to further illuminate contemporary debates. They have yet to be fully explored.

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