

Idealism Revisited: Merleau-Ponty's Early Critique of Science and Psychology

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SYNOPSIS

Merleau-Ponty's first text, *The Structure of Behavior*, contains a conception of the relationship between science, psychology and philosophy that is not repeated or overcome in later texts. This article takes up Merleau-Ponty's unique picture of the integral role of science that is absent in his later phenomenological works.

Nature and Mind Are Intertwined

In his 1925 lectures on phenomenological psychology, Edmund Husserl writes that an unnatural division between the 'mental' and the 'natural' exists in the sciences.

Psychology reigns over the mental, whereas the natural sciences have dominion over the external, material world.

Husserl notes that such a distinction does not exist:

The natural and the mental do not confront us clearly and separately so that mere pointing would suffice: here is nature, and here, as something completely different, is mind. Rather, what seems at first obviously separated, upon closer consideration turns out to be obscurely intertwined, permeating each other in a manner very difficult to understand. (Husserl, 1977: 39)

For Husserl, the point of departure and ensuing subject

matter of phenomenological inquiry constitute the world as lived and experienced. This is not the world reduced to scientific or psychological 'facts' or 'elements'. For Husserl, nature and mind, as scientific themes, are not originally separate. Instead, intellectual thought forms them artificially out of the 'underlying stratum of a natural, pre-scientific experience' (ibid.: 40). Phenomenology must begin with the intuitive unity of the pre-scientific experiential world in order to 'elucidate what theoretical interests and directions of thought it pre-delineates, as well as how nature and mind can become unitary themes, always inseparably related to each other, in it' (ibid.). Experience, as pre-scientific and primordial, is what underpins all subsequent scientific explanations.

Influenced by these Husserlian themes, Merleau-Ponty (2000) declares, in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, that phenomenology is from the start, 'a foreswearing of science' (viii). Throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he emphasizes that the point of phenomenology is not to stand above naive experience in the realm of transcendental truths, and nor should the phenomenologist mirror the scientist who thinks experience is irrelevant in his/her pursuit of the truth. The phenomenologist must remain within experience, seeking only to obtain an understanding of it.

The phenomenological reduction is thus not a scientific reduction. In Merleau-Ponty's view, science reduces the world to a series of objects with causal laws that connect them, thereby excluding experience. Phenomenology cannot be understood as a path to truths about something other than real, lived experience. Hence, Merleau-Ponty's

famous statement that, 'The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction' (ibid.: xiv). *Description* is the only method that can grasp the reality of experience without reductively bastardizing it – 'The real has to be described, not constructed or formed' (ibid.: x). Pre-scientific experience (and pre-philosophical experience) is the bedrock for all subsequent scientific truths about nature and philosophical truths about the mind.

Merleau-Ponty examines the relationship between perception and behavior as the epitome of how 'obscurely intertwined' nature and mind are. The dependency of behavior on perception demonstrates that the pre-scientific level of experience is not only something reductionistic accounts fail to comprehend, but also the very basis for all scientific explanations. Despite the similarity in their focus on perception, *The Structure of Behavior* remains opposed to the *Phenomenology of Perception* on the subject of science's validity. Instead of declaring science to be incapable of speaking meaningfully about perception, Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure of Behavior* locates the seeds of scientific statements at the heart of perception.

The Structure of Perception and Behavior

In his early texts, Merleau-Ponty works against the prevailing trend of transcendental idealism as promoted by Léon Brunschvicg and Alain, who dominated Paris during Merleau-Ponty's studies. Worried that perception will become merely a discussion of intellectual judgements abstracted from the body, Merleau-Ponty considers the biological sciences as perhaps saving perception by firmly rooting it in the body.

Yet over the course of the next few years, Merleau-Ponty's readings in experimental, behavioral, and especially Gestalt psychology convince him that physiological accounts are as reductive as the critical philosophy of Brunschvicg. Both accounts treat perceptions as locatable, distinct events, as either 'mental' judgements or 'natural' brain states. In fact, Merleau-Ponty notes, when we begin to question perception in others, we do not look at their perceptions, which is impossible, but at their actions, their behavior. In this manner, behavioral and experimental psychologies provide valuable insight into the nature of perception because they do not assume one can begin with solipsistic, armchair speculation. However, the error of scientific psychology is that it assumes it can move from the observable elements in the subject's visual field to particular behaviors. It construes the visual stimuli as 'causing' a particular behavior in a relatively unmediated, direct fashion.

Such causal accounts fail to grasp the highly complex nature of perception. Merleau-Ponty (1983) explains:

The relation of the perspectival aspects to the thing which they present to us is not reducible to any of the relations which exist within nature... All the difficulties of realism arise precisely from having tried to convert this original relation into a causal action and to integrate perception into nature. (p. 193)

Given perception's evident dependency upon both visual stimuli and mental states, an account that assumes that its nature is parallel to the behavior of objects ignores the subjective character of perception in the hope of creating a truly 'scientific' – i.e. experimental – practice.

First and foremost, perception is an experience, not an observable thing. In order to speak meaningfully about perception, one must speak of 'first-person' perceptual experience. Even though the psychologist sees the same objects as the subject of the experiment does, he/she must be careful not to assume that the perception is qualitatively the same. Scientific psychology makes the error of assuming that perception can be conflated with the objects visible to all. Descartes initiates an important break with naïve empirical realism because he does not draw attention to the objects, nor the perceptions of the objects themselves, but instead focuses upon the *act* of perceiving. Instead of taking perceptions as self-evident, Descartes calls into question their veracity and begins to inquire into *how* one perceives. For Merleau-Ponty, Descartes is primarily concerned with the experience of perception.

Scientific psychology integrates the 'experience' not by appealing to subjective states, but by explaining the nature of perception physically. Behavioral observation guides the scientist to locate where in the nervous system the given visual stimuli have 'caused' a particular behavior. Although no contemporary psychologists suppose that a perception is a direct transfer of images on to the soul, Merleau-Ponty argues that they have not overcome Descartes. The scientific psychologist, who reduces cognition to a neurological event, forgets that

it is the soul that sees and not the brain; it is by means of the perceived world and its proper structures that one can explain the spatial value assigned to a point of the visual field in each particular case (Merleau-Ponty, 1983: 192–3).

One cannot explain perception solely through recourse to the brain. One must posit consciousness. Science has been able to provide important insights into the operations of perception and cognition. However, no matter how deep it delves into physiology, it remains unable to explain how the connection functions between subjectivity and physiology.

In order to explain how perceptions are meaningful,

one must return to perceptual experience as Descartes does, who introduces the essential notion of consciousness, and, with it, the ability for the human order to reflect upon itself. Descartes' hyperbolic doubt points toward not just the experience of perception, but also how perceptions are always meaningful. Merleau-Ponty writes:

The Cartesian doubt necessarily carries its solution within itself precisely because it presupposes nothing – no realist idea of knowledge – and because – bringing attention back in this way from the vision or touch which lives in the thing to the 'thought of seeing and touching' and laying bare the internal meaning of perception and of acts of knowledge in general – it reveals to thought the indubitable domain of significations. (Merleau-Ponty, 1983: 195–6)

Descartes acknowledges that perceptions are determined by the manner in which they are understood. For Merleau-Ponty, an analysis of perceptions must not pass over their experiential qualities. A structural approach takes into account the larger network of significations at play in any one perception, and integrates the particular perception within the experiential structure of past perceptions. Merleau-Ponty understands the structure of perceptual significations to be a complex network of meanings that determines the manner in which each particular perception is registered. The perception itself cannot be isolated apart from this structure. Gestalt psychology's theory of the figure–field distinction demonstrates that only within a *field*, or in Merleau-Ponty's terminology, a structure, can a particular perception have any sense.

The scientific psychologist counters such structural approaches by pointing out that the psychologist can replicate his/her findings, and suggests that this is proof that the method is valid. Gestalt psychology disagrees with a quick conclusion as to the validity of the laboratory by indicating the ease at which such conditioned behavior can be misinterpreted. For example, consider Gestalt psychologist Köhler's famous experiment on chickens, which Merleau-Ponty cites in *The Structure of Behavior*: one can train a chicken to choose grain that lies on a light gray sheet and, at the same time, to avoid grain that lies on a dark gray sheet. However, when one introduces a grain that lies on an even lighter gray sheet, the chicken will most likely choose this lighter color. One recognizes that the *comparatively* lighter color is what induces behavior. One does not train a chicken to choose a particular shade of gray. Rather, the chicken is trained to reorganize the perceptual world in such a way that the lightest gray is chosen. One finds that animals with as little complex behavior as chickens demonstrate a structuring of their perceptual world. The chicken's response

is not to a particular set of external variables, but to the relationship between variables.

Even in the most reduced study of animal behavior, where one is trying to treat the animal as a passive being who only responds to stimuli, one ends up implicitly referring to the motivation, or intentionality, of the animal. The monkey *wants* the banana; the monkey *doesn't want* pain. The structure of perception is drawn from the field in which the perception occurs. Moreover, the chicken experiment indicates that it is intentional behavior considered over time that indicates the structure of perception, not acts taken in isolation. Perceptions are structured by past perceptions, just as they are structured by the other visual elements in the perceptual field.

Experimental psychology's predilection for repeating small controlled behaviors in multiple subjects often passes over the intentional and perceptual structure of the animal. In fact, some recent work in neurogenesis suggests that brain cells in laboratory animals die off at an accelerated rate compared to animals in a natural environment, calling into question the validity of the results (Gould et al., 1997: 427–36). Although Merleau-Ponty did not, of course, consider such studies, his later work on Schneider, a brain-injured patient, demonstrates a continued interest in the impact of environmental and physical transformations on behavior (Merleau-Ponty, 2000: 98–154). Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasizes that taking into account the organism's general behavior will indicate the structure of perception. Witnessing isolated behaviors cannot reveal the complex interactions of significations that are at play in an entire range of comportment. Without appealing to multiple experiments with various shades with the same chicken, one cannot determine what constitutes the chicken's actions. Merleau-Ponty is not afraid of such inevitable anthropomorphizing in intuiting the nature of the animal's mental states. The very act of describing animal behavior points indirectly toward the phenomenon of perceptual structure.

Nothing would be served by saying that it is we, the spectators, who mentally unite the elements of the situation to which behavior is addressed in order to make them meaningful, that it is we who project into the exterior the intentions of our thinking, since we would still have to discover what it is, what kind of phenomenon is involved upon which this *Einfühlung* rests, what is the sign which invites us to anthropomorphism. (Merleau-Ponty, 1983: 125)

Anthropomorphism demonstrates that one must encounter the perceptual world as meaningful. Since animals offer no explanations for their acts, one is posited for them.

The laboratory setting often only serves to confirm

the groundless presuppositions of the scientists. In order to avoid such pitfalls, the organism must be approached within its own setting, with the observers taking into account the entire developmental spectrum of the given organism's behavior patterns. The general behavior of the organism better indicates what *its* (and not the scientist's) intentions are. A long-term investigation into the organism's global behavior raises greater barriers to *anthropomorphism* since the scientist must account for a variety of behaviors in a variety of situations. Often scientists understand that they approach objectivity by not positing any intentional behavior (i.e. states of consciousness) in the organism. However, this approach only serves to mislead the scientists into repeating past prejudices. 'Objective' and 'subjective' analyses are inseparable. One cannot approach behavior by appealing either to intentionality alone, or to the external 'signs' of the organism in an isolated, one-sided way. Thus, anthropomorphism, or providing a narrative explanation of the animal's activities, *is an essential component of any investigation*.

Needless to say, humans behave (and thus, to Merleau-Ponty, perceive) in a much more complex manner than animals. Yet human perception is not a matter of mental judgements combined with visual stimuli. The ability to learn the significance of particular objects requires a certain level of organization. Formerly blind persons may be able to recognize that a certain set of visual data composes an object, but they are unable to immediately intuit its relationship to other objects and to their own behavior. A high level of cognitive ability is not a sufficient condition for perceptual organization. The visual stimuli itself must be intuitively structured by the subject.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty is not arguing that perceptions are solely a matter of intellectual organization and judgment. Descartes' error lies in his *overlooking* the important *existential* quality of perceptions. For Merleau-Ponty, all intellectualism contains a repressed empiricism: perceptions are given to us, but they are not controlled by us. Unlike an idea, which can be spontaneously and willfully constructed, perceptions have an otherness that is part and parcel of their uniqueness. The alterity of perception demonstrates that the *cogito* cannot exhaust the contents of perception. It does not create perceptions. The *cogito* is also unable to find within itself, and within various images, the meaning of perceptions.

Similar to his critique of reductionism, Merleau-Ponty (1983) notes that, 'One does not construct perception as one does a house' (p. 198). Kant's transcendental idealism goes beyond Descartes by recognizing that experience cannot

be eliminated from the discussion of perception. Kant does not need to prove the existence of the world, because one cannot speak of the world as inseparable from the subjective experience of it. It is experience in general and not just perception that demonstrates the inseparability between subject and object.

By maintaining the need for a *cogito*, or consciousness, Merleau-Ponty retains an essentially modern notion of the subject. In hindsight, one can see that his first book is not simply a precursor to structuralism, since structuralism, in general, denies or reduces the importance of the subject and its experience. However, this insertion of the importance of consciousness and his appropriation of Kant seem to indicate that Merleau-Ponty himself engages in transcendental idealism. His definition of phenomenology as 'an inventory of consciousness' (Geraets, 1971: 90) indicates that phenomenology and transcendental idealism are, if not identical, at least parallel enterprises.

Yet the subject of transcendental idealism is not the chicken or monkey of Gestalt psychology's experiments. When speaking of the human order, the structure of perception is over-determined by the socio-cultural world. Thus, one is put in the position of trying to simultaneously explain the surrounding trans-individual situation as well as engage in a psychological description. In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty engages in what he calls a 'human dialectic' to account for the special status of the subject.

The Human Order

Henri Bergson, a philosopher who inspired much of twentieth-century French philosophy, attempts to liberate human perception from the confines of critical philosophy by viewing perception not as a matter of a reified intellect possessed only by man, but as a natural extension of man's instinctual relationship to the world. Merleau-Ponty sympathizes with Bergson's move away from both critical philosophy and scientific psychology's understanding of perception, but he does not tie the human order too closely to the vital order. Contrasting himself with Bergson, Merleau-Ponty indicates that the human order is not merely a response to the same existential problems that animals face. Bergson writes that intelligence and instinct do indeed distinguish human from animal action. Yet animals and humans use instinct and intelligence for the same purpose. Bergson (1944) writes: 'Instinct and intelligence therefore represent two divergent solutions, equally fitting, of one and the same problem' (p. 158). To Bergson, instinct and intelligence both use instruments towards ends. Even though the human situation is unique, it still remains an evolutionary

product arising from the instinctual level. Therefore, intelligence must build upon instinct's ability to effectively engage with objects in the world. The relationship to the world for animals and humans differs in degree, not in kind.

In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty moves away from an understanding of human existence and human behavior as developments of animal comportment. Bergson understands human action as 'always vital action, that by which the organism maintains itself in existence. In the act of human work, in the intelligent construction of instruments, he sees only another manner of attaining the ends which instinct pursues in its way' (Merleau-Ponty, 1983: 163). By not problematizing the uniqueness of consciousness, Bergson fails, in the end, to understand human behavior. He 'sometimes returns to a purely motor notion of action' (ibid.: 164) and passes over conscious activity. Intelligence becomes a merely complicated conduit for action.

Rather, the human order must be defined by the role of *consciousness*; therefore, human action is not merely an outcropping of vital action. Bergson is right to point out that empirical psychologies often take perception to be something that is 'immediately contemplative, as if the primary attitude of man were that of a spectator' (ibid.). However, Bergson is unable to clarify how human consciousness is an extension of vital action. He fails to appreciate the uniqueness of the human situation. Furthermore, by remaining with a conception of action strictly in terms of the vital, Bergson is unable to explain how objects of nature are constituted and 'whether or not it is indeed to objects of this kind that human action and perception are first addressed' (ibid.: 165). Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid categorizing perception as either an intellectual faculty or as an instinctual response. By characterizing Bergson as a type of materialist, Merleau-Ponty treats perception as something evidently tied to action and consciousness, but not in the same manner one might conclude apropos of animals.

Partly as a continuation of his move against materialism and still somewhat under the influence of a Kojévian-inspired Hegelianism, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that perception cannot be understood as either a physical-psychological function of the human body or as a natural response to various conditions. This first claim is argued at length against in the opening sections of *The Structure of Behavior*. The 'anti-naturalist' claim is more complicated to understand, since it seems a logical solution to overcoming the problems of materialism and scientific psychologism without entirely destroying their validity. Merleau-Ponty's repeated emphasis on analysing the global setting of the animal (and thus not

overestimating the ability of the laboratory to find 'essential' responses) would appear to be consonant with Bergson's thinking. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty, in his appraisal of critical philosophy, begins, not with the nature of a transcendental subject or the nature of the Good, but, rather, with subject matters such as animal behavior and studies of perception. One could conclude that Merleau-Ponty would not want to reify human experience as if it had an innate, universal quality that can only be known through an idealist philosophy. However, Merleau-Ponty considered his theory of the human dialectic to avoid the follies of both naturalism and idealism.

All conscious thought is caught up in the relationship between subjective experience and the objective world of others, a relationship which, following Hegel (and Kojève), Merleau-Ponty (1983) calls a dialectic – 'Every form of consciousness presupposes its completed form: the dialectic of the epistemological subject and the scientific object' (p. 201). The epistemological subject is the perceiving/behaving subject as discussed above, and the scientific object is the symbolized object. The distinction between the human order and the vital (animal) order is symbolization. Animals have objects, or *instruments* in Bergson's terms, such as sticks which are utilized to obtain food. Yet animals are always using instruments in respect to the situations. Humans name instruments and refer to them independently from the locale in which they are first encountered. More importantly, symbolic objects often receive their meaning not from experience but from the intersubjective world of symbolic systems. This is particularly the case with scientific objects. This process of relating to objects symbolically is unique to humans. Since it dictates a decisive alteration in the manner humans perceive the world, human use of objects is not merely an outgrowth of animal use of objects.

Consciousness is the intersection between the perceptual/experiential structure discussed above and symbolic objects. Merleau-Ponty invokes the Gestaltist figure–field distinction yet again, with the epistemological, perceptual structure as the field and the symbolic objects as the figure. The symbolic object itself is determined by another 'field' – a structure of intersubjective significations passed down by language and culture. Yet, it is still unclear why the human order *must* be symbolic. Why can't the human subject be directed toward natural objects in the manner animals are? In order to explain his train of thought, one must turn to the picture of consciousness and dialectic that Merleau-Ponty imports from Kojève.

Although Merleau-Ponty does not cite Kojève in *The*

Structure of Behavior, his picture of the Hegelian dialectic is distinctly Kojévian. The attendance registers from the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* for Kojève's seminars on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* show Merleau-Ponty is cited in attendance during the 1937–8 year, the last year he was writing *The Structure of Behavior*. For Kojève, to speak of human reality is always to speak of a social world. This is not to say that humans are not also fundamentally animals, or that animals have no social world. Rather, it suggests that what is specifically human as regards *consciousness* is self-consciousness, and this type of consciousness is present only in the *human* social world.

Self-consciousness is symbolizing oneself as an object. However, any symbolized object is only meaningful within a structure of significations. Instead of a situation, as in animal life, that constitutes the meaning of an object, the intersubjective structure of significations is the condition of possibility for any one symbolized object. In Kojève's terms, a sense of self requires the objectification of other human subjects in order to be a meaningful sentiment. Kojève explains:

In order that Self-Consciousness be born from the Sentiment of self, in order that the human reality come into being within the animal reality, this reality must be essentially manifold.

Therefore, man can appear on earth only within a herd. That is why the human reality can only be social. (Kojève, 1991: 6–7)

For Merleau-Ponty (1983), perception cannot be conceived of outside this social reality: 'Perception is a moment of the living dialectic of a concrete subject; it participates in its total structure and, correlatively, it has as its original object, not the "unorganized mass", but the actions of other human subjects' (p. 166). One's own behavior is not just a matter of the field of past and present perceptions, but is also dependent upon the perception of others' behavior, including others' linguistic, cultural, and social influences. In so far as one is a conscious subject, one relates to symbolic objects, objects that are part of the intersubjective structure of symbolic meanings. In his later work, Merleau-Ponty will return to speaking of habit formation and infant experience as 'natural' and pre-conscious, and thus prior to self-consciousness and symbolization. In later texts, he also emphasizes a more fundamental layer to perception that precedes the symbolic order. Although not the instinctual level of Bergson, Merleau-Ponty argues that perception does carry with it its own meaning independent of human symbolizations.

However, in *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty engages in a strong constructivist argument in declaring that even infant perception is engaged in the symbolic realm. One interpretation of infant experience is to suggest that

humans do not enter into a world of dialectical relationships with other subjects; they initially exist as instinctual beings with unformed senses of self. The infant does not naturally transcend its situation so as to give it meaning. Originally, infant perception would not be 'symbolic', and in order to discuss it one would turn to the language of sensation, rather than the language of symbolization. Since infant perception is the evident ground for adult perception, any sharp distinction between animal and human consciousness would be eroded.

Contrary to such a thesis, Merleau-Ponty writes that perception is symbolic for children as well as adults. If perception is the primary relationship the subject has to the world, and if human perception is innately dialectical, then there is no such thing as natural perception abstracted from a symbolic order. How can this be the case for infants? For Merleau-Ponty, a type of unorganized mass of visual data (such as exemplified by the studies of the newly-sighted) might be considered to be independent of a human dialectic. The moment the infant has a perception – a figure in a field – the infant is engaged in a relationship with the world of symbolic objects. At the same time that perceptions become solidified in the figure–field format, infants begin to have self-consciousness. Likely influenced by Wallon's mirror-stage study that Merleau-Ponty mentions in later works, Merleau-Ponty writes that self-consciousness and consciousness of others occur roughly at the same time.

Consequently, infants are not natural perceiving beings who learn artificial symbolic languages in early childhood. Rather, the human subject begins very early to divide up the perceptual field into symbolic objects. Language only confirms an already earlier form of perceptual symbolic structuration. At this stage, infants are not engaging fully in a social world, and thus are neither fully conscious nor self-conscious. But they have already begun to relate to the world via symbolization.

Yet, one can quickly conclude that this is an obvious equivocation between two different types of symbolization. The first type is the ability to distinguish objects from a visual field. Being able to distinctly perceive an object within a mass of visual sense-data is not a uniquely human possession. In fact, the entire discussion of animal perception was to emphasize this fundamental insight of Gestalt psychology. In this sense, it would seem as if infant perception indicated that, in fact, human perception is a natural outgrowth of an instinctual kind of perception.

Merleau-Ponty evidently also wants to speak of symbolic objects of a much more abstract, and uniquely human, nature, such as those epitomized by science. He cannot help but acknowledge that this kind of intersubjective

symbolization is distinct from infant symbolization, and writes that scientific symbolization 'belongs to a higher dialectic' (Merleau-Ponty, 1983: 166). Despite the evident difficulty in accomplishing such a task with reference to infant perception, Merleau-Ponty declares that one must find where, in infant consciousness, the seeds for such linguistic symbolic systems lie. He writes that one has to make such higher dialectics 'appear in the primitive life of consciousness' and suggests that the key might lie in the 'known fact that infantile perception attaches itself first of all to faces and gestures, in particular to those of the mother' (ibid.). Returning to Kojève's emphasis of human consciousness as being part of a human social reality, Merleau-Ponty hopes to find the seeds of symbolization within the early social perceptions of the infant.

The reason why Merleau-Ponty wants to find the roots of this second kind of scientific symbolization in infant perception is tied to his conception of the role of perception. It must be made evident how cognition arises from perception. Animal behavior indicates no such problematic because animals are directed to perceptions of the situation, or previous situations. The higher order of human symbolization means that humans can have intentional states and histories with objects apart from any visible situation they are in. The Gestalt psychologist finds an essential component of perception is its figure-field quality and gives a name to this distinction, even though naive perception makes no such distinction.

Yet, how does the Gestalt psychologist leave his/her perceptions and think to objectify it? How can one explain the creation a linguistic symbolic system, something seemingly unrequired by animal perception? For Merleau-Ponty, transcendental philosophy is correct in noting that there are certain conditions of possibility for cognition, but he wants to find these conditions in perception itself. Merleau-Ponty (1983) states the issue thus:

The problem of perception consists in trying to discover how the intersubjective world, the determinations of which science is gradually making precise, is grasped through this field of... ambiguous perception... The thesis and the antithesis express the two aspects of it: it is true to say that my perception is always a flux of individual events and that what is radically contingent in the lived perspectivism of perception accounts for the realistic appearance. But it is also true to say that my perception accedes to things themselves, for these perspectives are articulated in a way which makes access to inter-individual significations possible; they 'present' a world. (p. 219)

Perception must in some way allow for symbolic distinctions,

even though these very distinctions often help constitute perception. For instance, after the artificial dividing of 'mind' and 'nature', historical repetitions of referring to them as distinct entities makes it difficult to see them as not. What was originally a construction becomes a truth. Merleau-Ponty wants to explain how such symbolizations, even if they are misguided, arise from ambiguous perception. More importantly, he desires to show how proper attention toward perception can lead one to the right symbolic distinctions for an objective science. Although Merleau-Ponty in no way solved this issue, he made an attempt to demonstrate that science could correct itself by careful attention to its practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to discuss briefly Merleau-Ponty's 1945 reaction to this problematic. In January of 1939 (Merleau-Ponty completed *The Structure of Behavior* in 1938, although it was not published until 1942), the *Revue Internationale de philosophie* appeared with an edition dedicated to Husserl. The *Revue* included Edmund Husserl's 1936 manuscript the *Origin of Geometry*. It revealed a much more complex phenomenology than his 1929 *Formal and Transcendental Logic* that Merleau-Ponty read while, or before, writing *The Structure of Behavior*. Many of the same issues Merleau-Ponty handles in *The Structure of Behavior* are present. In a much more condensed fashion, Husserl expresses the issue at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's thought about scientific objects: how to conceive of the original, human experience that led to something as objective and abstract as geometry?

Husserl notes that his investigation does not concern the historical situation of an individual or individuals who invented geometry. Instead, it is the search for the necessary origin of geometry: '...[W]e inquire into that sense in which it [geometry] appeared in history for the first time – in which it had to appear, even though we know nothing of the first creators and are not even asking after them' (Husserl, 1989: 158). In Merleau-Pontian terms, the discussion is centered on how one travels from perception of first-order symbolic objects in the figure-field distinction, that themselves do not seem to demand further symbolization, to a second-order of symbolic objects such as in geometry. What within experience leads one to the second-order of symbolization?

Although Husserl's discussion of the origin of geometry and Fink's accompanying preface were evidently influential on Merleau-Ponty and led to his more serious engagement with Husserl, Merleau-Ponty becomes distinctly more hostile toward science in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In a

certain sense, *The Structure of Behavior* is more consistent in spirit with Husserl's conception of science. Science is concerned with objectivity, and the point of the study of perception is to demonstrate the possibility of finding that objectivity in original experience.

It is therefore with some surprise that one reads in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that, 'Science has not and never will have, by its nature, the same significance *qua* form of being as the world which we perceive, for the simple reason that it is a rationale or explanation of that world' (Merleau-Ponty, 2000: viii). Science is declared inept to explain being in the world, and perception is liberated from having to give evidence of the possibility of symbolic, scientific objects. Scientific objects are but poor reflections of the richer experience of being. Merleau-Ponty writes:

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression. (ibid.)

Regarding such a claim, Husserl might suggest that Merleau-Ponty is committing the genetic fallacy. Just because the origin of geometry must be understood as the product of an embodied subject in a particular historical time, the validity of geometrical truths is not necessarily more suspect.

Merleau-Ponty's famous statement regarding the incomplete reduction in the preface to the *Phenomenology* argues that philosophy is no longer a cumulative project, like a science. Instead, it is a constant attempt to thematize the natural perceptual experience. Since philosophy cannot assume it has privileged access to this natural perceptual experience, it must constantly 'renew' itself by returning to perception. In so far as philosophy speaks the truth, it is 'an ever-renewed experiment' that returns to its origins, and it itself 'consists wholly in the description of this beginning' (Merleau-Ponty, 2000: xiv).

What is this beginning? Is Merleau-Ponty saying that the 'incomplete' reduction is the beginning? Or is he stating something more Heideggerian: the beginning would be articulating being-in-the-world? The kind of creative act Merleau-Ponty speaks of in the preface would require an attitude of wonder regarding the experience of being-in-the-world. Instead of starting from a position of objectifying the world, one must start from a position of wonder at one's inexplicable relationship to the world. This 'wondering' would

precede any *epoché*. Only after one is sufficiently removed from the seeming self-evidence of pre-given explanations for the world can one begin a philosophical inquiry. By subjugating science as dependent upon phenomenological descriptions, Merleau-Ponty clearly decides in favor of philosophy after his ambivalent early work. Yet this move further confuses how one could formulate a proper scientific approach, or understand the origins of science, since scientific statements are, in principle, incapable of arriving at any real truth of being. Since Merleau-Ponty continues to write about the social sciences throughout his works, this problem remains pertinent and unresolved. ⑤



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