Two-Way Street: The Textures of Living in Merleau-Ponty

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SYNOPSIS

Embodied consciousness is central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy because he realised that neither objectivism nor subjectivism would do. In both cases, human integrity is wounded: we become separated either internally (body/mind) or externally (self/other or self/world). This article explores key Merleau-Pontian notions and their applications for therapy.

Dismantling Duality

Merleau-Ponty helps take philosophy back to its early foundation in a sense of wonder at the world. We expect a sharp mind in a philosopher and we find it in him; but we also find an attitude of reverence, a fascination at our existence, a quality of being evident in his writing that might reverse the love of wisdom that constitutes philosophy into the wisdom of love. His writing at its best evinces and evokes the mystery of life and the texture of experience and possibility. Sometimes grouped with the existentialists, but essentially a phenomenologist, he is also one of the most 'human' of philosophers.

His central focus is on the embodied nature of our existence. Given the history of Western thought, it is still all too easy to schematize ourselves as pre-existent subjects launched into the world to engage with reality, subjects who happen to have bodies. It is then the Wittgensteinian homunculus in our head that drives this corporeal vehicle. But Merleau-Ponty constantly reminds us that we do not 'have' bodies; that it is at least as true to say that we are bodies. We relate to others and ourselves in this way: physically situated and embedded in the world. The dualism that has persisted in its various forms from Plato, through Descartes, Kant and Husserl is undermined in his philosophy. Language – itself a dualistic construct of subject acting on object – may struggle to convey the intertwining, interpenetration and inter-being of 'self' and 'other'/'world', but we would always do well to heed Nietzsche's warning and not make a 'god of grammar'.

There is, then, this clear emphasis on the body in Merleau-Ponty, not least because as soon as thinkers objectify it, that readily becomes paradigmatic for the world being 'out there' and us being 'in here'. That is one of the dualities that Merleau-Ponty seeks to dismantle. There is no outside world separate from an internal thinking subject and there is no internal thinking subject that is separate from an outside world.

More specifically, transcendental philosophy since Kant has sought to correlate the human world as we see it (*immanent*), structured by the categories of apprehension, and the world of objects 'in themselves' (*transcendent*). The first ignores, because it has no access to, how things truly are; the second ignores mediation via culture, language, history, and so on.

So, Merleau-Ponty provides an existential interpretation of Husserl's programme in his 'Preface' to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Instead of Husserl's description of a disembodied consciousness that constitutes the meaning of things at the ideal level of the transcendental ego, Merleau-Ponty describes consciousness as a situated and embodied awareness of primordial experience.

A focus on the body and the body's role in negotiating the world and in meaning-making helps us to move away from any such static, metaphysical prescriptions so typical of the conceptual register in general and philosophical discourse in particular. Rational sense is counterbalanced by the perceptual senses. For Merleau-Ponty and others influenced by him – such as Lakoff and Johnson (2003) in their seminal work on the metaphorical basis of our lives – it is primarily

as perceptual organisms that we exist. We are called by our interactions with the world in dynamic relationship. Feeling, movement, distance, perspective, position, sense in its widest sense – this is how we are in the world. We are not eternal, antecedent, ghostly spirits deposited here from a parallel Platonic universe. Of course, we have the ability to reflect beyond our embodied immediacy, to speculate, be discursive, and write articles such as this one – but even our abstractions are largely abstracted from our physical context, and retain some of its markers. Emotions, too, as the very word suggests, would be impossible without our embodied status. Emotions are movements of energy, bodily colouration (sometimes literally). We exist as body/mind: one without the other is unthinkable, as well as unfeelable. Mood, too, dismissed by many philosophers because of its labile, mysterious and capricious nature, is a bodily reality as well as a cognitive cast.

Merleau-Ponty never shies away from the enigmatic nature of the felt sense of life – life as it is lived, not just theorized. Although he did not produce fiction, one can sense in the poetic resonance of his work his kinship with the writers – Camus and Sartre amongst them – who formed his intellectual circle. This attitude also extends to his views on our sexual life. He rejected Freud's totalizing would-be explanation of our sexuality but endorsed the centrality of its importance. Sexual attitudes and feelings tend to reflect and exemplify wider attitudes of engagement with life and others.

Language, too, is a deep-seated way of being for Merleau-Ponty. Just as we are not pre-existent subjects who enter the world fully formed, so words are not the dress of pre-existent thought. Language is a form of participation, another way of being in the world. I am, therefore, called by language, but – typical of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on intertwining or what he calls the chiasmatic – I also take my position and assert myself in the world with language. I speak and am spoken into being. I exist both *in* and *as* the flickering play of signification. Interactions – physical, sexual and linguistic – are just that: inter-active. Everything in Merleau-Ponty is a two-way street. I cannot stand back from life – detached, independent, superintendent. There is no God's eye view, no view from everywhere, no view from nowhere. There is a vast web of influences, conditions and participatory engagements that we cannot step out of because they are not something we step into: they are, rather, what we *are*.

Implications and Applications for Therapy

The Body

It was noted above that we tend to think of the body as something we have, rather than something we are. Human beings, like other animals, have experiences and are subject to instinctual drives; but we also reflect on our experiences and do not necessarily yield to our organismic prompts. To borrow terms most associated with Sartre, our bodies exist largely in the *pour-soi* register (i.e. intentionally, subjectively, through the funnel of consciousness). We can also, within certain limits, step back from ourselves and look at ourselves in the third-person, as it were, and make generalizations if we choose. We do not live *wholly* in the immediacy of perception and instinct as other creatures appear to. Perception is always embodied, situated and contextualized: 'the perceiving mind is an incarnated mind' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 3).

One consequence of this is that we can embody our distress either directly (e.g. by simply suffering physical or emotional pain) or 'symbolically' – that is, in a way that shows the interconnection of the various dimensions of our existence. For example, eating disorders may represent at a physical, embodied level our emotional care-needs and deficiencies. The imbrications of organism and surroundings are not always clear-cut. In fact, they are the whole body, endowed with intentionality – directedness or perspective. For Husserl, such a viewpoint was limited to consciousness.

Another useful idea from Merleau-Ponty is that of the 'sedimentation' of the habitual body (Sartre uses a similar term, 'mineralization'). This comes from the deadening of perceptual habit. The habitual body (*corps habituel*) can be contrasted with the present body (*corps actuel*) (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 82). The former is basically the bodily schema, the precognitive familiarity with self and world. It is the place of learned skills, sedimented and anonymous, but available. It tends to be the instrumental and utilitarian dimension of our bodily existence. Therapies that work with the body, and certain forms of meditation practice, seek to re-connect us with the flow of experience that may have been somewhat anaesthetized by habit and buried beneath the sedimentation.

Language

We *find* ourselves in language as much as put ourselves there. Speech is an eventive and creative process. In dialogue, it is co-creative. We might say it is natal: meaning that it is born, not merely borne forth on the sedan chair of words. In ways that parallel the two bodily aspects delineated above, Merleau-Ponty differentiates between *le dit*, the common coin of social exchange, and *le dire*, the newly minted, emergent language of a specific encounter.

In an important essay from 1960, 'The child's relations with others' (Gordon, 2013: 23), Merleau-Ponty provides a phenomenological developmental model. The child organizes his world, not least through language. Development is, therefore, an active process, embodied and intersubjective.

Empathy, in this model, is no great leap for the growing person. It is a function of our shared humanity. Relation-to-others is how we are.

In any 'talking therapy', of course, we can look at how our world is created, received and processed via language. That leads to new insights and meaning, and may thereby lead to new ways of being.

Relatedness

Unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty is not concerned with the intuition of essences. Like Heidegger, but thankfully without the latter's crypto-Platonic mystification, he emphasizes our temporality, our being not in time but as time, our situatedness, our relatedness to the 'others' of our world – objects and people. In phenomenology this, too, is an aspect of intentionality – there is always an angle of interaction and of perception. Our lives can be whole-hearted, but we can never see the whole picture. Our consciousness, then, is world-related – it is always *of* something (rather than everything or nothing). Further, we can never be entirely sure where the dividing line is between the cultural and the natural. These are mobile markers for our discursive speculation but not amenable to scientific certainty. Just as my mind is embodied, so my body is enworlded.

The notion of co-dependent arising (*Pratitya-samutpada*) in Buddhism is sometimes represented by the image of Indra's net: at each knot of the net is a jewel which reflects all the other jewels. Merleau-Ponty's world-view, with its complex layers of interweaving and reciprocity, suggests something similar. We are implicated (i.e. folded) into the whole. This may, on one level, offend our narcissism; but, on another, it affirms our sense of connectedness. We may well be touched by the infinite but we are as much its focus as source. If the rule-of-thumb – that therapy is a way of completing our passage to maturity, from dependence to independence to interdependence – has any validity, it may, in this regard, find supportive arguments in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty.

Relatedness, inevitably, too, is dynamic, in a state of flux, constantly renewing and reconfiguring itself. Because it is not predictable and is so fluid, there is vulnerability in genuine encounter with other people. In Merleau-Ponty (Madison, 1981: 300), dialogue is seen as the art of 'taking the risk of communicating'.

The nature and value of subjectivity and intersubjectivity are highly contentious issues in the theory of humanistic counselling. One can speculate widely about the nature of relationship/encounter with another – even though it may help little in assessing the reality of sitting opposite another person in therapy. That is not to dismiss the importance of the distinctions that one might seek to make – just to suggest that verifying them is highly problematic. We can accept that few therapists would wish to treat a client as an object. But is the 'relational depth' that seems so highly prized in humanistic therapy a kind of intersubjective communion, a quasi-mystical union, or an encounter with the radically other? If one has never had *any* of these relationships, how is one to know which is which?

There are potentially ethical issues involved. If one assumes a commonality (a 'meeting of minds') or mutuality, even an inclusive equality (which, in some respects, would surely be desirable) between oneself and another, is that a rejection of the specificity of the other? Can we still then be said to be doing justice to the other, however much we flaunt our humanist credentials? If one prizes the ethical dimension of the deconstruction of the hierarchies found in traditional dualisms, this is an important consideration. As Critchley (1992: 28) notes, 'deconstruction opens a discourse on the other to philosophy, an otherness that has been dissimulated or appropriated by the logocentric tradition'. This logocentrism is the tradition that sought to reduce plurality to unity, to dominate difference into sameness, the tradition that built in no small part on the work of Merleau-Ponty (Reynolds, 2004). So, do therapists who crave intersubjective communion suffer a kind of Platonic nostalgia in their (unconscious) desire to domesticate what is other? Further, should one assume symmetry of relationship in therapy? If, as is sometimes claimed, a measure of the success of therapy is the equalization of the relationship between counsellor and client, what do we mean by equalization: the discovery of sameness or of difference (and its acceptance)?

What we can venture is that the term 'intersubjective' is a problematic one – not least because it suggests the existence of an (independent) subject which Merleau-Ponty refuted, in part because it maintained the dualistic tradition he was struggling against. It is clearly possible to envisage a kind of relatedness that is not grounded in such a way on a substantial subject (i.e. one with independent, enduring self-nature). Intersubjective, in this sense, if one wishes to retain the word (and I would argue that this is what Merleau-Ponty seeks to indicate) might be seen as the contact between two people taking place when habitual clinging to notional and defensive selfhood is actually relinquished.

Possibility

Whatever model they work with, therapists have to have faith. We have to believe in transformation, in the possibility of change (if not its very inevitability). Merleau-Ponty's accent on the interpretive dimension of perception and on the vectors of

our co-creative engagement with the world is also consistent with this attitude.

From a Buddhist perspective, realization of the intrinsic non-substantiality of the self (*anatman*) is not a cause for mourning because nothing has actually been lost – other, that is, than our delusion that something has. One might say the same of the dualisms that Merleau-Ponty and, later, Derrida sought to see through. They are discursive designations rather than ontological realities. Human beings exist in the current of experience; but we also reflect on and organize our experiences. We should not seek to eliminate either. Whether we call the former 'process' and the latter 'structure', or 'becoming' and 'being', or, as Spinelli (2007) does, 'worlding' and 'world-view', or even, as we find in the *Heart Sutra*, 'emptiness' and 'form', they are related. Rather than being opposites, that can be played against one another (so that one is dominant and primary), they are more like the two sides of a coin. It is the reification of the one (the former in the dyads just given) in the interests of the latter that is the source of misrepresentation. This is not surprising, as it is the latter of each pair that seeks to re-present the presentation (or 'presencing') inherent in the former. Philosophy – certainly 'traditional' philosophy – works largely through *le dit*. Academies are, in many ways, ossuaries of thought, seeking the skeletal frameworks of experience but missing its poetry.

Furthermore, one need not be a Buddhist to see the potential liberation in a facilitated exploration of our rigid and conditioned reactions to the world and to our experience of it (which is also part of the world). The client's problem, his 'issue' – a curious term that suggests a way out but feels to the client more like entrapment – is created and held in place by a series of conditions. By examining how the client participates in the relationships he has – with others, including the therapist, and with himself – he can, within the containment offered by the therapeutic space (seen as a microcosm of life), both sit with the embodied prompts, feelings and reactions of his current mode of being and experiment with other, more fruitful, ones.

This is no more 'person-centred' than it is 'other-centred', for that, too, is a false dichotomy of the kind that Merleau-Ponty spent much of his career unpacking. Just as subject and object are less opposites and more mutually constitutive correlates, so self and other is a distinction that is, at best, another convenient discursive designation. Self is called by other; other is a function of self. Just as Derrida had to coin terms so as not to be limited by the sedimentation of meaning in those that traditional philosophy bequeathed to him, so Merleau-Ponty sought to apply new definitions. The chiasm, the intertwining, reversibility – all of these are attempts to move outside the lineaments of dualistic thought, into the mysterious heart of embodied, relational existence.

Conclusions

Merleau-Ponty offers a critique of the excessive objectivity which denies our inter-subjectivity. We do not encounter objects in the world as neutral data. We interpret. A complete phenomenological reduction is not possible. We find and/or make meaning. We organize experience. Everything has a context. As for the phenomenon, whatever it is, there is a context of emergence and a context of reception. We do not engage with a series of empirical facts.

Similarly, we do not come to know our clients via the explicit 'facts' that constitute their story. How they interpret things is crucially important. People respond and react differently to ostensibly similar situations. We each process the world in our own way. While some in the therapeutic world (normally those with more attention on the balance sheet than the client) may wish for homogeneity, reality does not oblige. We exist as being-in-the-world. Knowledge of the world, of engagement with others, and of self, are infinitely and intimately interlinked. Universally applicable, mechanistic or instrumental models ('A' leading to 'B') will not do justice to human life. They will not be equal to it.

The embodied subject or embodied consciousness is so central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy precisely because he realised that neither objectivism (empiricism or the scientific world-view) nor subjectivism (intellectualism as ghostly self-communing) would do. In both man had his integrity wounded: he was separated either internally (body/mind) or externally (self/other or self/world). In both he was alienated from a participatory involvement in/with the world.

Although some might dispute Merleau-Ponty's status as an existentialist thinker, he is very clearly a phenomenologist in that phenomenology looks at how the world appears to us, how it discloses itself: 'The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: xx).

We come back to wonder – or surprise. Phenomenology is, for Merleau-Ponty (1964b):

> ...largely an expression of surprise at (the) inherence of the self in the world and in others, a description of this paradox and permeation, and an attempt to make us see the bond between subject and world, between subject and others, rather than to explain it (p. 58).

Again we see that perception is not passive reception but an intentional making sense of world and self. It is for

this reason that *how* clients interpret their experience is crucial. We do not look at the world from a disembodied ego (however much we may seek to persuade ourselves that we do). We are always *in medias res*. We ex-ist: we are outside ourselves, beyond ourselves. And our existence is inter-est. This is one reason that the therapist's interest in the client can be so healing. It models the cure latent in the curiosity of engagement. Psychological health for the very fragile may involve strengthening ego boundaries; but for most it is a case of self-transcendence. Self is other-related just as other is self-related.

Phenomena, too, are gestalts – not simply the sum of discrete parts, but 'wholes'. Again, the conceptual boundaries with which we organize discourse may not accurately reflect the reality of the situation. We recall that language has its own structures (subject/object), its own temporal unfolding, its own constituent units, its own syntax and its own parsing – all of which may not do justice to the nature of our involvement with life.

> All experience is a process of gradual clarification and rectification through a dialogue with itself and others. [...] we can think through our errors, locating them in a widening domain of truth. On this account, the only solid *cogito* is one which reveals, not a subject transparent to itself and constitutive of everything else, but a particular thought engaged with objects it seeks to clarify, a thought in act which feels rather than sees itself. (Moran and Mooney, 2002: 425)

The above quotation indicates both the extent to which Merleau-Ponty's concerns anticipated some of those of post-structuralism (especially Derridean deconstruction) and also links to the observation that Merleau-Ponty does not so much solve the questions he raises as dissolve them (Gordon, 2013), often by merely exposing the falsity of the premises that underpin them. These two points are, in fact, themselves interwoven – as one might expect. For, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty is as sharp-eyed as Derrida in sniffing out binaries and hierarchies that are far from philosophically secure.

The upshot is that it is in the 'fold' between the sensate (the feeler) and the sensible (the felt) that experience is possible. For Merleau-Ponty as for Derrida, the poles between which we seek to situate ourselves – e.g. *a priori* subject encountering neutral objective data – are potentially misleading, even unethical, however much personal solace we take from their apparent reliability.

Not only that; our attempts to point this out risk simply inverting the problem rather than obviating it. We have seen how the perceiving organism is in constant flux, ever-changing but not an independent, autonomous, separate subject; how perception is situated in time and space. There are no essences or ideals or universals. Consciousness, too, we remember, is perceptual. There is a risk, then, that Merleau-Ponty himself invokes a universalizing philosophy of perception comparable to the philosophies of consciousness that he refuted, with 'I perceive' as a secure form of self-presence replacing, but still very similar to, the Cartesian *cogito* or 'I think'. His detractors might argue as much; but a defence can be raised on the grounds that this is again a result of the nature of language – a language which fascinated Merleau-Ponty, and whose very dangers he himself elucidated.

Language, after all, can make a static concept even of 'change'; but, if we are more highly attuned to the currents of life through which we pass and which pass through us, we can find experiential corroboration of the points that Merleau-Ponty makes. We do not have to take his word for it. The map is not the territory, but it can inspire us to go back to the world and give us guidance when we get there. That guidance may well – as it does in some theories of therapy and various meditative practices – emphasize the need to trust, rather, what we perceive, the emergent phenomena of life, to be open to its pain and wonder, beyond what anyone says.

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