Review Essay: Disorientation and Wild Delusion

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The Visible and the Invisible

By: Maurice Merleau-Ponty
Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968, 282 pp
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The beginning of this review essay is not where I expected it to be some months ago when I agreed to write it; an unexpected experience has changed my course. The recent death of a friend and colleague appears to have taken me back to the beginning of the book, and the impassioned foreword by Claude Lefort, where he writes of the impact of the death of his friend, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*The Visible and the Invisible* is the last, unfinished work of Merleau-Ponty). What caught me, in my state of grief, was the resonance of Lefort's words on the incompleteness of life and of the work, as a result of his death. This notion of incompleteness further points to the problem that there is always something incomplete about what is written: this is not just the missing pages of Merleau-Ponty's text, but the idea that there is always something missing in a text, whether it be the written word or the spoken – for example, in our therapeutic practice and research. Something always remains invisible. Beyond Lefort's foreword, this book proceeds to challenge our need for completeness and the many forms that may take. There is, however, more, perhaps the ultimate invisible, the gap that can never be filled, is death itself; 'Thus we discover death in the work' (p. xvii). This review essay is therefore an intertwining of my recent experience with death, my reading of the text and writing here and, of course, with other things invisible to me.

The work of Merleau-Ponty has been so important to my own work, which has involved utilizing a phenomenological lens to explore the unknown in psychotherapeutic practice, knowledge and research. It is, however, difficult to convey the way Merleau-Ponty's work, especially , has contributed to my search for ways of investigating human experience. Whilst phenomenology has been a position taken for such exploration, these ideas have provoked a struggle between dominant forms of inquiry that use predetermined modalities, including most phenomenological methodologies, compared to drawing on phenomenology, without it becoming mechanized. The problem of mechanistic approaches – and in a sense the very idea of method results in a set of instructions – is seen to act as an enclosure, necessarily reducing ways of being to ensure there is a fit into the prepared framework. This approach is something Merleau-Ponty particularly argues against. Some aspects of this argument will be considered here.

Phenomenology, as opposed to phenomenological research, is not easy to understand, or indeed to reduce to a set of directions on how to practise and research, and it could be said, this text resists. What has made the struggle to engage with phenomenology so much more difficult is the dominance of the current cultural discourse that requires us to articulate everything we do in order to validate it with little room for uncertainty, let alone the unknown. Yet Merleau-Ponty (1962) has from the beginning pointed to the irreducible nature of the

world and of being:

> The world and reason are not problematical. We may say, if we wish, that they are mysterious, but their mystery defines them: there can be no question of dispelling it by some 'solution', it is on the hither side of all solutions. (p. xx)

The Visible and the Invisible develops something of this argument, but in myriad ways and examples. However, I find myself caught in a dilemma in wanting to convey something of this thought-provoking text whilst being aware of a number of problems around any kind of summary. Firstly, it takes me far too long to gain access to any essential argument; it takes me many readings, time and struggle to engage with this kind of work. Every time I re-read a passage the words seem to have moved; or is it that the meaning, for me, has changed? This is perhaps linked with the idea present in phenomenology, or post-phenomenology (Cayne and Loewenthal, 2011), that there are always multiple meanings at play.

Secondly, whilst I will inevitably offer some of the ideas presented in the work, there is always the problematic of setting out these ideas as though they are the key elements of the argument, which is contrary to what Merleau-Ponty's work is about.

This work argues against sets of ideas, presented so they can be taken up as a method. This kind of text calls for us to experience it, to wonder. To summarize seems to delineate, to imply a beginning and an end and a completeness that is precisely a problematic that is raised in this book. Thirdly, whilst one might summarize key aspects of the work, in a few lines, one loses the experience of reading Merleau-Ponty's work, and with it the subtlety, complexity and challenge to our need for a place from which to orientate ourselves, which can so easily lead us into self-reinforcing circles. In fact, we need to have our own experience of the reading to discover our own reactions to being disorientated or to not understanding. My reactions on re-reading this text included, for example, procrastination and attempts to find familiar ideas I understood as a way in, to gain relief from the disorientation. When I relaxed as I gave up and my anxiety subsided somewhat, the reading started to be enjoyable, and there was potential for engagement with the text in a spirit of openness to what emerged. The reading became less about understanding, and more about an opening up of possibility and a space to allow thoughts, however wild they seemed.

Gradually it became clearer that the experience of disorientation, above, was no random experience, and there seemed to be a great deal being said about our need to be located through beginnings. The search for origins is seen as a closure, as opposed to keeping the questioning open, which throws us back into the thick of it. Here again my memories of my friend and colleague were jostled – she was always questioning the question. Here again, there is a cautioning against method because of the way it leads to a seeking of origins and completeness, which we could think of as involving a search for causality, leading to a solution for a problem. Another problem with the need to locate ourselves in an origin is that it takes us to the reassurance of what we already know, which gets in the way of learning something new.

'The reassurance of what we already know... gets in the way of learning'

There is another aspect to this seeking to orientate ourselves in time and place, which is seen as hiding from the existential struggle that recognizes that we are 'not at home' (p. 104). It appears that Merleau-Ponty is drawing on Sartre, calling for recognition that we are nothing, we are lack and, as he puts it, 'it is necessary that nothing detain me in myself' (p. 52). However, he departs from Sartre through the idea of perception as a creative, relational act of meaning-making. Further, there is critique of Sartre as Cartesian because he gives supremacy to human consciousness. Here the relational, both as our relationship to the world and others, is not happening in one direction: we constitute and are constituted by the world and others. One way that Merleau-Ponty explores this relationship between Being and the world is through the *chiasm*.

The intertwining or chiasm seems to be a meeting point, a point of crossover as in the optic chiasm, with

both convergences and divergences. It is thus perhaps no coincidence that the idea of the visible is used here. Through the exploration of touch and being touched, then seeing and being seen, it is shown that meaning is made up of an intertwining, such that there is no split. It is never, simply, we who examine the world as separate from it. Likewise, although primacy is given to the body, there is no distinction being made between mind and body, or what is called 'flesh', or flesh of the world. Further, neither sight nor flesh can be reduced to the biological facts of seeing; being is not understood through such direct facts or, to use Merleau Ponty's phrase, 'lies hither to'. The chiasm also points to Being as paradoxical, and the idea of rupture or opening seen in his pointing out, the invisibility of vision or the untouchability of touching. The nature of the chiasm as including crossover, convergence and divergence, rupture and paradox, is perhaps best illustrated in his use of Claudel's phrase, 'a certain blue of the sea is so blue that only blood would be more red' (p. 132). This phrase has always held a rather playful mystery for me, but there is a resistance to any solution; it will not be solved, but it can be enjoyed.

It might seem that the search for phenomenological essences will provide answers, but even in this Merleau-Ponty will not let us rest. The objectivity of measurement and the problem of merger inherent in pure subjectivism are both 'positivisms' (p. 127) that occur through the attempt at orientation. Essence is not *an* answer, especially when it is sought. Seeking essences will always be the act of locating ourselves; searching for an essence is seen as still positivist. Further, essence is 'horizonal', and as such subject to history, culture and language and has therefore no beginning or end points. There is always incompleteness. He even says, 'I will not fill the blanks' (p. 105).

This book is challenging, but for me it is very like the world of psychotherapeutic practice, not to mention life, which seems mostly to be an experience of confusion and disorientation, and as such there are important implications for psychotherapeutic practice and research. If we consider the idea that we are not so much a part of the world, but rather we are the world, there can be no purely objective investigation. But there is also, necessarily, a rift in our being in the world, otherwise everything becomes reduced to our subjectivity. The act of seeing changes, and in turn the seer is changed by, the world. This does not however mean that there is no point in exploring the world and Being, but rather shows us what is to be gained by the intertwining of the one with the other, without reducing the one to the other. The act of inquiry is not neutral here; we are changed by it even if we wish to resist such change.

Julia Cayne completed her doctorate on researching the unknown exploring two issues: the role of the unknown in the acquisition of therapeutic knowledge, and the development of a methodology that might permit the unknown to emerge. Her subsequent work explores: assumptions made about the relational as though what occurs between two people is a known; the dynamic of what happens when the therapist/researcher assumes they can know the other through theory rather than giving precedence to experience; and critique of the way particular approaches to the nature of knowledge, that emphasize the pre-determined and/or the technical or technique-based, influence learning about practice, such that we are held within the domain of the already known. Julia is visiting lecturer in the Research Centre for Therapeutic Education, University of Roehampton, with a psychotherapy practice in southwest Wiltshire. http://www.juliacayne.bacp.co.uk/

This review essay is dedicated to the memory of Dr Val Todd (1943–2014) who questioned the question, much loved friend and colleague, teacher and student.

Reference

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