



What begins as an exploration of perception - one which interjects the body between consciousness and the world (and institutes it as both Subject and Object, simultaneously) - and (through much of part two) restructures the way one views their interaction with the world and their relation with the world - eventually attempts to encompass the complication of the perceptive Other (which mostly closes part two). Part three then goes on to incorporate the first two parts into a restatement of the cogito ("The fundamental truth is certainly that "I think," but only on condition of understanding by this that "I belong to myself" in being in the world."), and to reorient ourselves (and our perception) in a temporal flow (yes, M-P attempts to redefine time), and then eventually closing on a truly triumphant note.

If the synthesis could be actual, if my experience formed a closed system, if the thing and the world could be defined once and for all, if spatio-temporal horizons could (even ideally) be made explicit and if the world could be conceived from nowhere, then nothing would exist. I would survey the world from above, and far from all places and times suddenly becoming real, they would in fact cease to be real because I would not inhabit any of them and I would be nowhere engaged. If I am always and everywhere, then I am never and nowhere. Thus, there is no choice between the incompleteness of the world and its existence, between the engagement and the ubiquity of consciousness, or between transcendence and immanence, since each of these terms, when it is affirmed by itself makes its contradiction appear. What must be understood is that for the same reason I am present here and now, and present elsewhere and always, or absent from here and now and absent from every place and from every time. This ambiguity is not an imperfection of consciousness or of existence, it is their very definition.

1. Merleau-Ponty wanted phenomenology to take centre stage as the main focus whereas Heidegger turned more towards ontology with phenomenology as his method. This creates a difference between philosophical motives.
2. Merleau-Ponty bequeaths us our thoughts on embodiment, which does not come into Heidegger. This makes MP feel much more reflective about biological concerns without compromising his stand with regards to either scientific or objectivist methods. For MP, the phenomenal body is an experience from the inside that rises towards the world to create meaning. The body for MP is a natural subject and expresses the existence of being-in-the-world.
3. Pre-reflective states. Our being-in-the-world is not a dualistic relation between an objective body and disembodied consciousness; rather it is a pre-objective perspective. The intertwining between consciousness and nature. I, as body-mind, am both open toward the and am part of the world.

This work is - together with Nietzsche's "Beyond Good and Evil" and Heidegger's "Being and Time" - a perfect cure for anyone who has overdosed on abstract thinking. Its message has yet to be heard by a wider audience and is bound to gain new appreciation as the currently dominant mode of thinking begins to falter. A thorough background

in philosophy might be required to understand much of what Merleau-Ponty writes, but, then again, if you have not already spent a substantial amount of time in the realm of rational thinking, then it is unlikely that you require the relief that this work can bring.

Merleau-Ponty's classic text is a mixture of old and new.

It carries heavy traces of Husserl and Heidegger in it. And of course Sartre.

Historically, it follows in the footsteps of Descartes, Kant, Berkeley, Spinoza, Bergson... but subverting the tradition. (Then again, all the great philosophers have always subverted tradition.)

The notion of the primacy of the (intentional) body is utilized to overcome the subject-object dualism. There is no mystical union, here: the being-in-the-world as an intentional body is presented as a matter-of-fact phenomenological reality. Mostly it becomes a matter of SEEING ourselves without pretensions, NOT as possible objects of the natural sciences, NOR as a sublimely transcendental "thinking thing" in the Cartesian fantasy, nor as Good God's creatures, but as WORLDLY consciousnesses, with BODIES that reach out into the world, thus grounding reality itself.

The whole analysis is elaborate and a bit all over the place, but the basic point is well-made.

As is typical of the French tradition, the language turns occasionally very poetic and literary. Rhetorical flourish, and a good quip, is preferred over analytical intelligibility, and a simple syllogism. This is the difference between the German-French and the Anglo-Saxon traditions. The worst-reading parts are influenced by the tortuous language of Hegel, but as long as one is comfortable with its off-putting terminology - such as "for itself" and "in itself" - the methodology that Merleau-Ponty uses is, all things considered, relatively rational. There are no wild leaps of logic, just a few wild goose chases. Arguments are happily sprinkled full of real-life examples, literary quotations, and even references to empirical (Gestalt) psychology.

So, to sum up my criticism:

1) The text is sometimes too obscure - i.e. unclear - for its own good. (A fact perhaps made worse in translation.) It would have been a better book with tighter editing and a more focused structure. Such looseness, alas, is a common problem in French philosophy - but this doesn't excuse Merleau-Ponty's falling into the same trap. Some chapters are better than others. None are perfect.

2) Despite its major innovations, the arguments are often rehashed from the classics. It is not the most original of works, even if it revolutionized the way we approach, or interpret, phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty did not completely extricate himself from the Husserlian-Cartesian projects. He simply wanted to follow it faithfully to the existentialist direction. Furthermore, by rehashing traditional themes, and tossing them about, he often gets entangled in some old Cartesian snares.

Despite these problems - which are mostly quibbles - the book is well worth a read. It has been used in philosophy - e.g. in aesthetics, psychology, epistemology and ontology - to achieve great insights and new avenues of study. And it also forces a deep self-study on the (un)fortunate reader.

It is a remarkable work in many ways. But just how this book, full of the unique spirit of its times (*Les Temps Modernes* and all that jazz), written in a laid-back but obscurantist fashion, will be rated in a hundred years, is hard to judge. Perhaps it will be forgotten, or treated as an "in-between", second-rate work of those years, relegated in the shadow of Heidegger and Sartre?

Or perhaps someone, with less Hegelian baggage, will come along, one day, and express the same thing - the fundamental bodily-phenomenological insight - more clearly, for a new audience? (Or perhaps one would do better to read some Hubert Dreyfus instead.) That would be desirable, because unfortunately many people will find the form in which the argument is presented to be impenetrable.

For eternalism renders the very concepts, past, present, and future, meaningless. Therefore, scientific intuitions are not founded on common-sense intuitions. Now, anyone who has read *Phenomenology of Perception* knows how devastating this demonstration is. For Merleau-Ponty relies, almost on every page, on just this assumption, in

conjunction with the other assumption, that there is no unconscious consciousness. After all, Merleau-Ponty will, after reducing scientific claims to life-world experience, then try to show that the order of experience is not generated solely by the mind, but by the figure-ground structure of the objects of the life-world. However, he can only successfully do this by appealing to the fact that we are not conscious of creating this structure. He assumes, from this, that the structure in question emanates from the world itself (and from our bodies in relation to it). Hence he rules out the possibility that this structure emanates from unconscious mechanisms of the mind. He does this on the mere supposition that unconscious consciousness is oxymoronic. As Jerry Fodor points out, the entire field of cognitive science, since the 1950's, is founded on the assumption that there are unconscious processes of mind determining the structures of experience. Hence every result of this field is a living refutation of the claims in this book, which was written in 1945. For instance, at one point, Merleau-Ponty identifies thought with speech. He needs to do this because he needs to reduce, after reducing scientific claims to the life-world, internalism to externalism (or show their equivalency), because he needs to show, against Kant, how the structure of the world is not wholly mind-created, and that it emanates from the world and the body's relation to it, or whatever. So, thought is internal. Speech is external. For Merleau-Ponty, they have to be equivalent. It has, however, been demonstrated by cognitive science that preverbal infants understand concepts (i.e., they have thought) before they understand speech. Therefore they are, minimally, not equivalent (it might still be the case that all thought nevertheless takes place in language - but speech? c'mon!). Hence the equivalence of the internal and the external is unfounded. Merleau-Ponty assumes they are equivalent, because we are only fully conscious of our thought in speech (even this claim is suspect without knowing any cog-sci facts). He rules out the possibility that there could be thought processes we are unconscious of (and furthermore he rules out the possibility that experiments could show this). But this is just wrong (as the case of preverbal infants shows). Hence the assumption is wrong. Anyone who has read this book will know how absolutely destructive my critique is: for these two assumptions are behind almost every sentence here. Again, Merleau-Ponty's whole procedure and aim here is, first, reducing empiricist claims (science) to life-world intellectualist claims (to the mind-object-world relation) and, then, in order to oppose Descartes and Kant, reducing these claims to the mysterious body-thing-world relation. But the first reduction is impossible, because science contradicts our experience (something actually Descartes knew); and the second reduction is impossible, because the possibility exists that any given structure that we are not conscious of having made may nevertheless have been made by unconscious processes in the mind. This book, therefore, is, with massive irony, metaphysical dogma through and through; and you know what Hume says to do about that!

Merleau-Ponty has taken Heidegger's existential phenomenology and given it body! Heidegger's theory of *dasein* and the various ontological features that constitute it are abstract is ill-defended, even if it is intuitively appealing. From my reading, Merleau-Ponty covered all of Heidegger's main ontological themes and adds even more (e.g. sexuality, freedom). Moreover, he was up-to-date with the psychological and neurobiological findings at his time, and even if he ultimately rejects that scientific methods could ever get at the ultimate truth of our human condition, he is nonetheless scientifically minded and respectful of making his theories naturalistic and plausible. I would like to add that his theories have panned out in natural science; there is a movement in cognitive science called "embodied cognition" that is primarily inspired by Merleau-Ponty's embodied existential phenomenology and has provided solid analytic and empirical grounding to it. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty writes beautifully, with unexpected, effective metaphors and examples. Compared to Heidegger, he rarely uses obscure jargon and takes time to carefully elaborate on any terms he introduces. Overall, Heidegger broke much more new ground in philosophy compared to Merleau-Ponty, but I feel that Merleau-Ponty importantly refines and elaborates on Heidegger, as well as crucially makes Heidegger's philosophy naturalistic and scientifically plausible.

My favorite chapters are "The Body in Its Sexual Being", "Space", and "Freedom". Uniquely, Merleau-Ponty draws on cases studies in psychiatric and neurobiological pathology and uses these empirical facts about abnormal minds and perceptual realities as springboards for his theories. I found Merleau-Ponty, unlike many other theorists who attempt this method, deeply compassionate, respectful, and accurate to these individuals with such pathologies. With this method, Merleau-Ponty both makes his theories more scientifically plausible and immensely poignant or powerful to the reader. I found myself even at tears in his chapter on sexuality, no joke! In this chapter, he explained how behavioral and somatic symptoms are not mere indicators of foul mental states, but rather they are concrete, literal manifestations of unusual, detrimental ways of relating to the world. The mistake of taking them as mere symptoms is the result of sticking to an empirical framework, and the truth of their existential nature is revealed when we access the deeper existential realm, from which all theoretical frameworks are derived.

In the chapter on space, Merleau-Ponty makes the striking point that the world, which we find ourselves in, is presented by our body in continuous dynamical coupling with environmental structures since our time of birth (in other chapters, such as the one on temporality, he focuses more on our body's coupling to cultural traditions and sociality). It is important to remember this book is, foremost, a response to the question "how can the world appear

for us?", and this chapter directly answers it especially. From earliest infancy, our body learns, on the demand of its needs and motivations, the patterns of activities that let us fulfill these intentions. This process, at the same time, discovers new features of the world. All objects and features of the world are thoroughly intentional and relevant to our activities and ways of life. Every discovery and activity is made possible by previous "schema" (general potential ways of being in the world that are always indeterminate and open to change) and at the same time adds to this schema, or provides further detail or a new alteration into the schema. These processes demonstrate how our body is in constant, reciprocal co-determination (coupling) with the environment; the world shows up in terms of the schema held in the body, and the schema of the body is constituted and determined by the world. So, whenever we focus our attention on a part of the world, and it appears for us instantly, it is given by our body-world, as a dynamical system. My conscious awareness is always less than and distinct from this deeper level of the body-world, although the two are fundamentally integrated and determine each other.

Interestingly, although Merleau-Ponty doesn't explicitly mention this point, I see that his theory can be extended to our evolutionary history. When we are born into the world, our genetics bound to the billions of years of innumerable individual creatures who have lived in dynamical coupling with this environment. Our lives are not our own in two senses; one is our own body and world in perceptual interaction; another is our body and genetic predecessors in causal determination since the beginning of life itself. I find this deep, substantive interconnectedness a secular source of sublimity and belongingness - or "spirituality" in banal terms.

In the chapter on freedom, Merleau-Ponty resolves the debate on free will and determinism. He reveals how this quibbling is the result of a blind commitment to a combination of empirical causality and logical thinking. Genuine freedom can be understood only from an existential perspective, the most fundamental of all. Freedom is found in existential commitment - any commitment to a way of life, such as even philosophers' commitments to rationalism or empiricism. The status of any object or event in this world as being an obstacle or an enabler depends strictly on our existential commitments. Only when we have taken on a way of life and are concerned about it, then certain events will come with the significance of hindering or helping us on this project. For example, jagged rocks on a mountain will be a hindrance only to a person with an existential commitment to mountain climbing. To anyone else, these rocks would have other meanings or no significance at all. So, what we take to be obstacles to our freedom are in fact direct manifestations of our a priori freedom to pursue existential commitments.

"What is phenomenology? It may seem strange that this question has still to be asked half a century after the first works of Husserl!" So says Merleau-Ponty in the opening pages of 'Phenomenology of Perception,' perhaps the major work of phenomenology after 'Being and Time.' Merleau-Ponty sought, rather brilliantly, to redirect attention to the human body as the locus of our being-in-the-world for phenomenological inquiry. Unfortunately, I am convinced that Merleau-Ponty's efforts to turn the results of his phenomenology into an ethics and a politics are less impressive and important than Heidegger's breathtakingly brilliant attempt to use phenomenology as a means to fundamental ontology. Still, one has to admire Merleau-Ponty's command over biology and the natural sciences. His descriptions of visual illusions and phantom limbs are by now established classics of the field. However, many of his examples are needlessly extensive and dense. Less committed readers should turn to the final chapters of the book, where the majority of his philosophy can be found.

Along with Heidegger, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Levinas, Merleau-Ponty is an "existential phenomenologist": a philosopher concerned with the experiences that constitute human existence. He's often overlooked in favor of Heidegger or Sartre, but this is unfair; his analysis of human embodiment not only builds on theirs, but goes much, much further.

Phenomenology of Perception is concerned with the first-person experience of being embodied, or of having a body. Merleau-Ponty shows how basic features of human experience, such as the perception of objects as independent of us, space and time, and rationality are all inseparable from the structure of the human body.

In this work, Merleau-Ponty establishes a theory of truth by examining the centrality of the body to perceptual experience. Making use of phenomenological devices such as the eidetic reduction and intentionality, Merleau-Ponty provides a critique of the traditional paradigms of rationalism and empiricism and posits an epistemological theory where the lived-world is an ambiguous and inexhaustible rich setting of contextualized phenomena. In short, this is an exploration of the fundamental structures of experience, including a compelling new concept of embodiment and a distinct paradigm separate from the epistemological traditions of rationalism and empiricism.

In this classic work of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty tries to ground a third position between Kantian/Husserlian 'intellectualism' (meaning that the mind constitutes the world) and empiricism, wherein the mind passively receives experiences from an independent world. Merleau-Ponty is the philosopher of perception and phenomenologist of the body par excellence. That being said, I think his project is for the most part inaccessible without a firm grasp of Husserl and Heidegger. I was able to see that he is adjusting and amending the Husserlian project as a newly disguised Heideggerianism. While understandably fashionable at the time to want to disavow Heidegger, I see this as a tremendous waste of time.

The title is *Phenomenology of Perception*, so even if you don't know what "phenomenology" is (like I didn't when I first picked up this book), the focus appears to be at least half-clear: we're going to talk about perception (seeing, hearing, feeling, etc.). Merleau-Ponty argues that, to do a *phenomenology* of perception, we need to *describe primordial perception*: we need to describe the "things in themselves".

He begins with two theories: empiricism and intellectualism. Empiricism has an atomistic view of sensations. Thus, he argues it cannot account for the fact that perception comes to us as containing structure, as wholes (instead of points). Conversely, intellectualism privileges the constituting subject. Thus, he argues that it fails to account for the horizontal or ambiguous nature of perception. And then, throughout the book, he wrestles with these two approaches, always with reference to different dimensions of existence and perception. Ultimately, his argument demonstrates that these methods are incapable of accounting for primordial perception, lived experience, *being-in-the-world*.

Take for example that, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is not the objective body, as extended in objective space, but the lived body. This body is the background against which objects appear; not a literal background in the visual field, but *behind the gaze*, or precisely what is not seen in order for us to be *towards* something else, *towards* what is seen: the object. Thus, the body cannot be seen in the mirror because it is the perspective from where one is looking; the body is what makes you a perspective on the world.

Through the Schneider case, he shows how this can be understood through the relationship between primordial perception and the overlay of the virtual. The objective world or acquired cultural worlds are virtual. They populate your perception with potentialities and possibilities. For Merleau-Ponty, the objective body is just one of these possibilities. Thus, it is valid and can serve useful purposes (for biology, psychology, medicine, etc.). However, it is *not* the body of perception.

Later on in the book, he extends this line of argumentation to consider the world. This entails reconsidering sensing, space, and the natural world, among other things. This is where he truly introduces his notion of *style*. His arguments on orientation demonstrate nicely that our sense of up and down cannot be derived from the contents of our sensations, because that would completely relativize our sense of up and down. (e.g., Earth's gravity does not give you a sense of down, it simply directs your body towards the Earth. There is nothing *down* about it. *We should* say that gravity meets up with the sense of down-ness that pre-exists in the perceptual field.) Another crucial moment is his rumination on depth, and to briefly recapitulate: depth is fundamental to understanding the relation between the subject and the object, and its sense cannot be reconstituted by understanding depth to be breadth (in profile) in objective space, or the variation of apparent size of simultaneous sensory images.

Finally, arriving at *being-for-itself* and *being-in-the-world*. These are the three parts: (1) The Body, (2) The World, and (3) Being-for-Itself and Being-in-the-World. To focus on just the second section: Merleau-Ponty gives an account of temporality in order to conclude that Subjectivity is time, Time is subjectivity. Why?

Past and future exist all too well in the world, they exist in the present, and what being itself lacks in order to be temporal is the non-being of the elsewhere, of the bygone, and of tomorrow. The objective world is too full for there to be time. [...] The past, then, is not past, nor is the future future. It only exists when a subjectivity comes to shatter the plenitude of being in itself, to sketch out a perspective there, and to introduce non-being into it. (434, 444) The horizontality of experience, the ambiguity of perception, living in the world and freedom. There is so much about this book that I did not mention: love, sex, intersubjectivity, and so on. For me, this book showed me the promise of the phenomenological project. One way to temporarily set aside the philosophy of the linguistic turn. The description of experience, its primacy, existentialism; it's all a wonderfully compelling account of perception.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* represents a new direction in the movement of transcendental phenomenology inaugurated by Edmund Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* and Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology in *Being and Time*.

The motto of phenomenology is "to the things themselves," a call for a return to (human) experience in and of

itself. Everything that we know about the world and existence, we know in and through our sense perception - what Merleau-Ponty called the "primacy of perception." Given this, Merleau-Ponty set out to offer an analysis of the phenomenological structure of perception. That is, he set out to answer the question of what we can know through our faculties of sense perception.

In order to achieve this, Merleau-Ponty offers a critique of the body/mind dualism, an assumption present in philosophy since at least Plato and articulated in modern philosophy by René Descartes (see his *Meditations on First Philosophy*). Bridging the dualism between body and mind through a dialectical model of consciousness is arguably one of Merleau-Ponty's greatest contributions to epistemology and phenomenology.

On freedom:

(...) it cannot be held that there is such a thing as free action, freedom being anterior to all actions. In any case it will not be possible to declare: 'Here freedom makes its appearance', since free action, in order to be discernible, has to stand out against a background of life from which it is entirely, or almost entirely, absent. We may say in this case that it is everywhere, but equally nowhere.

On body and existence:

body, caught up in existence;
existence, perpetual incarnation

The body is our general medium for having a world.

On time and temporality:

time does not flow like a river,
it is the river.

There is a temporal style of the world, and time remains the same because the past is a former future and a recent present, the present an impending past and a recent future, the future a present and even a past to come; because, that is, each dimension of time is treated or aimed at as something other than itself and because, finally, there is at the core of time a gaze.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception" attempts - as Hubert Dreyfus says - to reclaim the role of the body in intelligent behavior; that is to say, your body is an essential component in cognition. A new translation by Donald Landes has just been released and this might help put a finer grain to Merleau-Ponty's ideas since the translator himself specializes in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy!