

Chapter 4

Skill and the Critique of Descartes in Gilbert Ryle and Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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Introduction

The mechanistic concept of the body, as inherited from René Descartes, has generated considerable trouble in philosophy—including, at least in part, the mind-body problem itself. Still, the *corps mécanique* remains perhaps the most prevalent though least examined assumption in recent philosophy of mind. There are, however, at least two notable exceptions. Gilbert Ryle and Maurice Merleau-Ponty rejected this assumption for surprisingly similar reasons. Writing at about the same time, though in different languages and in very different circles, they each attempted to articulate a non-mechanistic concept of the body by stressing the importance of *skill: skillful behavior* constituting *cognition* in Ryle's case, and the *skill body* constituting *perception* in Merleau-Ponty's case. In what follows, I turn to their cautions and insights. By drawing out the relation between these two seemingly unrelated theorists, I hope to show that together Ryle and Merleau-Ponty have much to offer philosophy today—perhaps even toward resolving the yet unsolved problem of how the mind is related to the body.

1. Descartes' *Corps Mécanique*

It is commonplace to believe that we inherited dualism from Descartes. Much paper and ink has been devoted to escaping Descartes' dualism by rejecting the Cartesian concept of *mind*—a non-physical entity operating outside the laws of mechanical causation. On the other hand, almost no explicit effort has been made to dispose of the other essential constituent of his dualism: the Cartesian concept of the *body*—a physical entity operating

within the laws of mechanical causation. But what exactly is the Cartesian concept of the body? In the *Meditations*, Descartes only goes so far as to define the body negatively, as what the mind is *not*—namely, ‘an extended, non-thinking thing’ (1984b, p. 54). In the *Treatise on Man*, however, Descartes provides a positive account of the body.

Descartes begins by inviting us to imagine a grotto with moving parts, hydraulically powered by the pressure of visitors’ footsteps. Deep within the grotto, we are to imagine a fountain-keeper, who monitors the hydraulics, altering them when he sees fit.

The grotto and the fountain-keeper together are a metaphor for the body and the soul. Visitors—who step on tiles, opening valves that cause a Diana figure to hide in the reeds or a sun ornament to spew water—are just like external objects, stimulating the body’s sense organs and causing them to move in many different ways (Descartes, 1984a, pp. 100–101). And just as movement in the grotto depends on ‘the various arrangements of the pipes through which the water is conducted,’ movement of the body depends on ‘the arrangement of our limbs and on the route which the spirits . . . follow naturally in the brain, nerves and muscles’ (Ibid., pp. 100, 335). Descartes asks us to

compare the nerves of the machine I am describing with the pipes in the works of these fountains, its muscles and tendons with the various devices and springs which serve to set them in motion, its animal spirits with the water which drives them, the heart with the source of the water, and the cavities of the brain with the storage tanks. (Ibid., p. 100)

And, of course, the fountain-keeper situated within the grotto is situated like the soul within the body, preventing or generating behavior when needed.

The metaphor was not intended as an argument for the separation of the body and the soul. Its main purpose seems to have been to describe the mechanization of the body—whether a hydraulic statue or in the flesh.¹ According to this metaphor, *the body is a complex system of working parts, moving relative to one another in such a way as is determined by causal law.* And the body’s behaviors ‘follow from the mere arrangement of the machine’s organs every bit as naturally as the movements of a clock or other automata follow from the arrangement of its counter-weights and wheels’ (Descartes, 1984a, p. 108). The body, insofar as Descartes took it to follow this mechanistic causal model, is the *corps mécanique*.

According to Descartes, the *corps mécanique* includes

the digestion of food, the beating of the heart and arteries, the nourishment and growth of the limbs, respiration, waking and sleeping, the reception by external sense organs of light, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and other such qualities, the imprinting of the ideas of these qualities in the organ of the ‘common’ sense and the imagination, the retention and stamping of these ideas in the memory, the internal movements of the appetites and passions, and finally the external movement of all the limbs. (Ibid.)

Famously, *rationality* and *language* were exclusively within the province of the soul. Everything else—all of the body’s activities from internal organic functions to external behavioral profiles, from sense experience to imprinting of the idea of qualities in the common sense, from passions like joy and pleasure to pain and pale anger—was characterized mechanistically (Ibid., pp. 368–369).

Since the seventeenth century, there have been changes in our understanding of the body. For the most part, these changes have been only in degree, not in kind. The *corps mécanique*—whose complexities continue to be revealed by scientific inquiry—is still with us. In fact, the *corps mécanique* has survived through the flip-flopping of those traits considered constitutive of mentality. Rationality and language now fall under the category of things that *can* (or could, theoretically) be explained mechanistically, while qualitative experience now falls under the category of things that *cannot* (ever, in principle) be explained mechanistically. In other words, whereas Descartes once believed that rationality and language (not qualia) necessarily required a soul, and whereas we now believe that qualia (not rationality or language) necessarily require consciousness, the concept of the body inhabited by these capacities has remained more or less the same. The body has retained its metaphysical status of a highly complex machine.

2. Gilbert Ryle’s Skillful Behavior

Gilbert Ryle is credited with identifying and opposing ‘the Dogma of the Ghost in the Machine’ (Ryle, 1949, pp. 11, 15–16). But Ryle was not just interested in exorcising the Ghost. He was also occupied in dismantling the Machine. So however much philosophers today wish to place Ryle in the positivist tradition, his work marked a significant break from philosophical

behaviorism. Ryle simply was not interested in defending the claim that all statements about the mind are translatable into statements about mechanical bodily behavior. Indeed, he rejected this claim outright. 'If my argument is successful,' he wrote, 'the hallowed contrast between Mind and Matter will be dissipated, but dissipated not by either of the equally hallowed absorptions of Mind by Matter or of Matter by Mind, but in quite a different way' (Ibid., p. 22). Ryle wished to rearrange the logical geography in theories of mind. He did this in two moves. First, Ryle argued that the mind and bodily behavior are not of the same logical type; they are of different logical types, and so they cannot be equated or opposed to one another. This, Ryle's dreaded 'category mistake,' generated a 'great logical muddle' in the form of two regresses (Ibid., pp. 16, 85). I call these the 'duplication regress' and the 'transmission regress.'

The *duplication regress* is identified by Ryle as involving a tendency in both dualist and physicalist theories of mind to explain something overt in terms of some para- or quasi- or semi-overt thing, which itself must be explained; and then to explain that semi-overt thing in terms of some semi-semi-overt thing, which itself again must be explained; and so on, *ad infinitum* (Ibid., pp. 294, 295; 1979, pp. 31, 81). Thus, some essential aspect of the thing to be explained is duplicated in the explanation, such that no real (non-regressive) explanation is ever proffered.

For example, suppose we begin by asking, 'Why is this clown's tripping *clever* rather than *clumsy*?' Further suppose we answer that, 'The tripping was clever because the clown intended to trip and successfully executed that intention.' We then may ask, 'But why is this a bit of *clever* intending and executing, rather than a bit of *cunning* intending and executing?' We then may answer, 'The clown's intending and executing are clever because of some other more basic internal process.' We may ask again, however, 'Yes, but what makes these more basic internal processes clever—why is this a schema for clever thinking, why does cleverness emanate from this neural network?' And so on, *ad infinitum*. Therefore, the clown's tripping never gets its cleverness. As Ryle said about intelligence, 'if, for any operation to be intelligently executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be performed and performed intelligently, it would be a logical impossibility for anyone ever to break into the circle' (Ibid., p. 30).

The *transmission regress* is identified by Ryle as involving a structural tendency in both dualist and physicalist theories of mind to offer an explanation whose structure mimics the structure of the thing it is meant to explain. This tendency establishes an embedded structure that itself requires explanation; so another explanation is offered whose structure

mimics the structure of that embedded structure, which in turn establishes an even deeper embedded structure that itself requires explanation. And so on, *ad infinitum* (Ryle, 1971a, p. 213). Thus, the bridge from explanans to explanandum is never completed, and no real (non-regressive) explanation is given.

For example, suppose we say that the answer the student gives to his teacher is intelligent because, prior to his response, he reasoned his way to the right choice. That is, the logical reasoning gives rise to the intelligent answer. But we have yet to be told in what does this '*giving rise*' consist. Why does logical reasoning give rise to any answer at all—intelligent or otherwise? And if it does give rise to an intelligent answer, then how does this *transfer* from theory to practice work? Taking an investigative look into the nature of this transfer, we see that it must be subdivided into three parts: 'one bit which contemplates but does not execute, one which executes but does not contemplate and a third which reconciles these irreconcilables' (Ibid.). So we may ask, what is the internal structure of this third bit? How can a part that contemplates be reconciled with a part that executes? And where, on this bridge from reason to response, is intelligence transferred? Whatever answer we provide, at *that exact location*, we again find a theoretical part, a practical part, and a third part where the two meet. The question of the internal structure of 'this schizophrenic broker' reemerges (Ibid.). And so on, *ad infinitum*. Therefore, the student's answer never gets its intelligence.

Second, Ryle argued that cognition and *the manner in which a behavior is performed* are of the same logical type, and so they can be equated to one another, thereby averting a category mistake and its subsequent logical muddle.² The manner in which a behavior is performed, however, is not supplied by a mental or physical state preceding or occurrent with that behavior. Rather, it is the '*style, method or modus operandi*' of that behavior (Ibid., p. 19, Ryle, 1971b, p. 214). If a clown trips cleverly, then it is because he trips 'after much rehearsal and at the golden moment and where the children can see him and so as not to hurt himself' (Ryle, 1949, p. 33). And if a student answers intelligently, then it is because he moves from acknowledging some facts to acknowledging other facts, while avoiding mistakes, answering aloud when called upon by the teacher. What distinguishes clever from clumsy charades, intelligent from unintelligent replies, 'is not their parentage, but their procedure' (Ibid., p. 32). Cognition is not a single episode or event or state. Cognition is the manner in which we do a lot of things (Ibid., p. 118). This was Ryle's *adverbialism*.

Ryle motivated his view by using the examples of people who behave inspirationally, stiltedly, carelessly, boringly, unimaginatively, furiously, agitatedly, moodily—to name a few. He occasionally concocted neologisms when ordinary language was wanting: people act ‘cancelingly, rehearsingly, recapitulatingly,’ ‘self-coachingly,’ and (my personal favorite) ‘gramophonically’ (Ryle, 1979, pp. 25, 26, 38). When I hurried through breakfast this morning, I did not do two things, namely, hurrying and eating breakfast; I did one thing in a certain way, I ‘breakfasted hurriedly’ (Ryle, 1949, p. 28). When I am on a diet, I do not do two things, namely, eating and dieting; I immerse myself in an attitude toward eating, consuming a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, counting grams of fat (Ryle, 1979, p. 115). These examples and neologisms mark Ryle’s adverbial attempt to demonstrate the presence of cognition in our everyday performances.

Ryle’s favorite topic of discussion, however, was *skillful behavior*. This is because, in Ryle’s own words,

my long-range objective is to find out how to talk sense about the thinking that *Le Penseur* is occupied in doing without committing (1) the Category-howler of Behaviourism or (2) the Category-howler of Cartesianism—that is, (1) without trying to *Reduce* thinking to what it isn’t, for example, to audible soliloquizing; and (2) without trying to evaluate it by *Duplicating* it with some bits of inaudible because ‘mental’ soliloquizing. (Ibid., p. 17)

That is, Ryle took himself to be showing that the sacred operation of *thinking* (and its progeny—intelligence, cleverness, heedfulness, wit, etc.) belongs neither to the inner chambers of the mind nor to the exterior states of the body. What *Le Penseur* is occupied in doing, Ryle argued, is a special exercise of skill. Skill involves a series of progressively modified performances—a sequence in which each act is adjusted in light of the success or failure of its predecessors (Ryle, 1949, p. 42; 1979, p. 129).³ And thinking is progressive modification as applied to a new situation. ‘Thinking,’ Ryle declares, ‘is, at the least, the engaging of partly trained wits in a partly fresh situation. It is the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard’ (1979, p. 129).

This explanation lies in opposition to what Ryle referred to as ‘The Official Doctrine’ concerning ‘the nature and place of minds,’—or the doctrine that the workings of the mind are non-mechanical, that the workings of the body are mechanical, and that the former controls the latter (1949, p. 11). Ryle traced the doctrine back to Descartes, writing that,

‘instead of asking by what criteria intelligent behavior is actually distinguished from non-intelligent behavior, [Descartes] asked, “Given that the principle of mechanical causation does not tell us the difference, what other causal principle will tell it us?”’ (Ibid., p. 21). Because Descartes could not distinguish the thoughtful and the thoughtless based on the principles of mechanical causation, he figured that the distinction must be made in some other way. Descartes posited a principle of non-mechanical causation. As such, the thoughtful and the thoughtless were distinguishable because the soul was responsible for intelligent behavior via the principle of non-mechanical causation, and the body was responsible for non-intelligent behavior via the principle of mechanical causation. Thus, for Descartes, the soul and the body became distinct substances joined via causal interaction. Ryle’s adverbialism, in contrast, unified the mind and the body under the manner of bodily behavior.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Skill Body

Merleau-Ponty put to himself a surprisingly similar task. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he wrote,

We cannot relate certain movements to bodily mechanism and others to consciousness. The body and consciousness are not mutually limiting; they can be only parallel. Any physiological explanation becomes generalized into mechanistic physiology, any achievement of self-awareness into intellectualistic psychology, and mechanistic physiology or intellectualist psychology bring behavior down to the same uniform level and wipe out the distinction between abstract and concrete movement, between *Zeigen* and *Greifen*. (2002a, p. 142)

This was Ryle’s critique of Descartes as well. It seems both Ryle and Merleau-Ponty thought that if the only way to distinguish between different bodily behaviors was by their causes, then important distinctions between bodily behaviors, like those between pointing (abstract movement or *Zeigen*) and grasping (concrete movement or *Greifen*), could not be made.

The overlap between Ryle and Merleau-Ponty on these points is no coincidence. By the time Ryle became an Oxford don, he was reading works by Brentano, Bolzano, Husserl, and Meinong.⁴ He also participated in a symposium on Husserl’s phenomenology in 1932, and throughout his career reviewed such books as Martin Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* and Marvin

Farber's *The Foundations of Phenomenology*.³ This was all while Ryle was writing his 1949 opus *Concept of Mind*, about which Ryle himself said, 'the book could be described as a sustained essay in phenomenology, if you are at home with that label' (1971b, p. 188). Though he often criticized the phenomenologists, Ryle should have seen that he shared with them a common goal—to reject the dichotomy between Mind and Matter in favor of a middle term that captured both.

Ryle concluded that skillful behavior provided an alternative to the dichotomy between mind and matter based in part on the duplication regress and the transmission regress arguments. However, in addition to these arguments, Ryle's work is filled with shrewd descriptions of skillful behavior. These examples are often overlooked as mere examples, rather than as ways of illuminating his subject. The opposite might be true of Merleau-Ponty. He argued for the conclusion that the *skill body* provided an alternative to the dichotomy between bodily mechanism and consciousness because of errors he saw in the traditional explanations of perception. Throughout his work, Merleau-Ponty provided arguments against these traditional explanations. His arguments, however, often are treated as of secondary importance to his phenomenological reflections. Of course, I do not mean to diminish the central role that description plays in Merleau-Ponty's work. But I do mean to suggest that, in the way that Ryle's arguments always involve some degree of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology always involves some degree of argument.

Merleau-Ponty distinguished between two separate traditions in philosophy, each aimed at answering a basic question about perceptual experience, namely, 'How does perceptual experience come to be meaningful?' In other words, we know that sensory stimulations are 'registered, then deciphered' so as to produce perceptual experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 2002a, p. 8). But how does this transformation occur? Merleau-Ponty distinguished between two answers supplied by the two separate traditions in philosophy that he calls 'empiricism' and 'intellectualism.'⁴

Merleau-Ponty described *empiricism* as a theory of perception that posits a chain of events 'from the stimulus to the state of consciousness' (Ibid., p. 391). Very simply, the empiricist believes that we are the passive recipients of *sensations*. These sense data have qualitative properties that, as they are processed by our perceptual machinery, become meaningful perceptual experiences. For example, to hear a foghorn sound in the distance is *first* to receive some raw sense data that are not properly horn-like or distant (though their qualitative properties do correspond to horns and distances in some way), to *then* process that raw sense data, and *finally*

to have an auditory perceptual experience as of a distant foghorn. Thus, the empiricist claims that we transform meaningless sensations from the external world into meaningful perceptual experience about the external world sometime after sensation, but before perception.

The problem for the empiricist, however, is that the only way for meaningless sensations to become meaningful perceptual experiences is for there to be some sort of *inference* or rule-bound of transformation performed by the perceiving subject. This inference turns out to be problematic. For instance, in Sartre's *Nausea*, there is a famous scene in a park in which the protagonist, Roquentin, ceases to see the tree trunk before him as a tree trunk, and instead sees it as a 'black knotty mass, entirely beastly' (Sartre, 1964, p. 127). If the raw sense data remain constant, then is Roquentin making a bad inference or failing to make an inference altogether? The empiricist cannot answer this question because he lacks the resources to claim that one inference is right and another inference (or lack thereof) is wrong. Why? Because the empiricist would be required to posit an 'internal connection' between sense data and the perception they trigger—an internal connection which guarantees that sensations give rise to the proper perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2002a, pp. 31, 32).⁵ Now suppose the empiricist gives this internal connection the name 'attention' (Ibid., p. 31). Attention assures the right inference by focusing its spotlight only on the sense data that give rise to the proper perception. But then what is the structure of attention, what is the interior structure of that internal connection? As Merleau-Ponty wrote, 'consciousness is no less intimately linked with objects of which it is unheeding than with those which interest it, and the additional clearness brought by the act of attention does not herald any new relationship' (Ibid., p. 32). In other words, attention cannot distinguish among sense data, heeding only the ones that trigger the appropriate perception, because with attention on one side and the sense data it heeds on the other side, the empiricist still must conjoin the two, which would require yet another internal connection between attention and the sensations it heeds. And so on, it seems, forever. In the end, the inference required remains elusive, functioning more like a magical transformation than a proper explanation. Thus, the empiricist cannot account for how perception acquires its meaning. Or, to put it another way, the empiricist is unable to bridge the realm of meaningless sensation with the realm of meaningful perception.⁶

Merleau-Ponty described *intellectualism* as a theory of perception that posits a deduction from 'a certain idea of consciousness' (Ibid., p. 391). The intellectualist, again very simply, believes that there are no *mere*

sensations—there are no raw sense data to be transformed into meaningful perceptual experience. This is because perceptual experience, for the intellectualist, primarily involves *concept application* or judgment. The meaningfulness of perceptual experience then stems from the meaningfulness of the concepts applied to sensation. For instance, to see a green tree, we must *first* possess the concepts 'green' and 'tree,' which we *then* fit to green and tree sensations, in order *finally* to have a perceptual experience as of a green tree. Thus, the intellectualist claims that we deploy our concepts onto sensations from the external world in order to generate meaningful perceptual experience about the external world.

The problem for the intellectualist, however, is that concept application, too, must rest on a groundwork (Ibid., p. 143). As Merleau-Ponty observes, concept application would proceed haphazardly (or not at all) unless the sensations themselves bespoke the appropriate concept (Ibid., p. 31).⁹ Roquentin's nausea on the park bench would be commonplace if, in perceptual experience, concepts were applied to sensations on an indiscriminate basis. In Roquentin's case, supposing concepts are operative at all (which they may not be), the concept 'tree trunk' applies just as well as the concept 'black knotty mass.' So how can the intellectualist guarantee that the sensations accommodate the right concepts and resist the wrong concepts? The answer is that sensations must be determinately meaningful from the start. Therefore, the determinant meaning of the sensations assures the application of the appropriate concepts. But what then establishes the determinate meaning of the sensations? At some point, the intellectualist must settle on a final term that provides its own groundwork. And this final term must be *outside* the realm of significance. This is because an explanation of how perceptual experience has the meaning it does—to be a *genuine* explanation and not a regress—must at minimum extend someplace beyond meaning. For the intellectualist, however, nothing is meaningless (Ibid., p. 32). 'Judgment is everywhere and pure sensation is not' (Ibid., p. 39). In this way, the intellectualist fails to account for how perceptual experience has the meaning it does by making meaning inescapable.¹⁰

Merleau-Ponty recognized that, in order to avoid the problems faced by the empiricist and the intellectualist, a new idea of a sensation was needed. He wrote,

There are two ways of being mistaken about quality: one is to make it into an element of consciousness, when in fact it is an object for consciousness, to treat it as an incommunicable impression, whereas it always

has a meaning . . . the other is to think that this meaning and this object, at the level of quality, are fully developed and determinate. (Ibid., p. 6)

In other words, the empiricist has an idea of a sensation as a meaningless sense datum—an 'incommunicable impression,' while the intellectualist has an idea of sensation as being completely significant—as 'fully developed and determinate'; both ideas, however, are defective. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty proposed an idea of a sensation that is not wholly meaningless—it has *positive* meaning—and is not fully meaningful—it has *indeterminate* meaning. In this way, we have our first approximation of the famous 'indeterminate as a positive phenomena' (Ibid., p. 7).

To give an example of positive indeterminacy, Merleau-Ponty described the experience of a walk along the beach (Ibid., p. 20). He saw a funnel, some masts, pieces of wood, dunes, and the forest. As he drew even nearer, some of the unconnected objects suddenly fused, forming a ship run aground. In Merleau-Ponty's own words:

As I approached, I did not perceive resemblances or proximities which finally came together to form a continuous picture of the upper part of the ship. I merely felt that the look of the object was on the point of altering, that something was imminent in this tension . . . Suddenly the sight before me was recast in a manner satisfying my vague expectation. (Ibid., p. 20)

If he had continued walking along the beach, we can imagine that the sight before him might have been recast again, satisfying yet another vague expectation. It could be multiple ships run aground, or a *trompe l'œil* of a ship run aground. So what would be the best way to characterize what Merleau-Ponty sees? To be clear: the sight before him was not chaotic, vague, or unassembled; however, it also was not ordered, clear, or assembled. It is a sight containing *objects perceived* (the funnel, masts, wood, dunes, and forest) and *objects about-to-be perceived* (the ship). There is what is given in the scene, and there is what is anticipated in the scene. But the content of that anticipation is uncertain.¹¹ It is 'an indeterminate vision' or 'a vision of something or other' or, better yet, 'a vision of I do not know what' (Ibid., p. 6; Kelly, 2005, p. 81).¹² Thus, we recognize the *positive indeterminacy* of sensation.

For Merleau-Ponty, in meaningful perceptual experience, two things are united: a demand placed by an object onto the body and the body's reply to the object's demand. As Merleau-Ponty claimed, there are 'certain

ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion' (2002a, p. 370).¹³ Positive indeterminacy is the demand placed by an object onto the body, and *motor-intentionality* is the body's reply to the object's demand.

With regard to positive indeterminacy, or the demand placed on the body, Merleau-Ponty argued that every object has optimal conditions under which it is to be perceived. The more optimal the conditions under which an object is perceived, the less indeterminate the perception of that object. That is, optimality is inversely proportional to indeterminacy. For instance, a sculpture has 'an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself,' as well as an optimum lighting under which it requires to be seen and a viewing duration in which it reveals most of itself (Ibid., p. 352). With touch, there is a most favorable pressure; with sound, there is a most favorable volume; and so on. These optimal conditions strike a balance between the competing demands of maximum clarity and maximum richness (Ibid., p. 371). For instance, standing up-close to a sculpture provides a view of its detailed carvings, even though the overall shape of the sculpture itself cannot be seen. Conversely, standing far-off from a sculpture provides a view of its overall shape, even though the carving detail of the sculpture cannot be seen. Somewhere in between is the optimal viewing distance—offering the least overall indeterminacy. As Merleau-Ponty wrote, 'the distance from me to the object is not a size which increases or decreases, but a tension which fluctuates round a *norm*' (Ibid., p. 352, my italics). The norm Merleau-Ponty is referring to is the optimal distance between him and the object. But what is the tension that fluctuates around this norm?

Recall that notion of 'tension' first was introduced in the example of the ship run aground. 'I merely felt that the look of the object was on the point of altering, that something was imminent in this tension . . . Suddenly the sight before me was recast in a manner satisfying my vague expectation' (Ibid., p. 20). Merleau-Ponty describes, in the scene before him, a mounting tension followed by a diminution of that tension. He was not merely a passive recipient of those feelings, however, he was also an active participant with them. When the sight before him was on the point of altering, when the tension was high, he approached the object. When the sight before him was finally recast, when the tension low, he beheld the object. In other words, the tension Merleau-Ponty felt directed his movements in such a way as to bring him into more an optimal, less indeterminate viewing relation with the object.¹⁴

The tension that Merleau-Ponty felt is a motor-intention or the body's reply to the object's demand, but it is not like an ordinary intention in the

sense of a reflective aim toward which an action is directed. This becomes clear in Merleau-Ponty's description of a situation in which he unsuccessfully beckons his friend to come nearer: 'When I motion my friend to come nearer, my intention is not a thought prepared within me and I do not perceive the signal in my body' (Ibid., p. 127). When he sees his friend's subsequent unwillingness to advance, 'my gesture of impatience emerges from this situation without any intervening thought' (Ibid.). Merleau-Ponty does not think about his action beforehand, nor does his reaction involve intervening thought. He does not form the intentions, 'I will wave to my friend,' followed by, 'I will demonstrate my frustration.' But it would be wrong to say that his gestures were unintentional. Merleau-Ponty's intentions are *manifest* in the manner of his movements—he waves warmly at first, then he waves impatiently. His intentions are motor-intentions.

So perceptual experience unites positive indeterminacy and motor-intentionality. But in what kind of medium does this unification occur? Merleau-Ponty introduced different concepts of the body throughout his work. For example, he discusses the *thought body*: 'I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body' (Ibid., p. 94). In other words, the thought body is a tool of the intellect, and bodily behavior is the evidence of that instrumental relation. Merleau-Ponty also discusses the *objective body*: 'it exists *partes extra partes*, and . . . consequently it acknowledges between its parts, or between itself and other objects only external and mechanical relationships' (Ibid., p. 84). In other words, the objective body is a machine, and bodily behavior is the effect of its mechanical workings. Neither concept of the body, however, is capable of housing a motor-intention. What is needed is a 'common middle term' positioned between the thought body and the objective body, capable of embodying an intention in the manner of its bodily behavior (Ibid., p. 89). Merleau-Ponty posits the *skill body* as this common middle term (Ibid., pp. 94, 95, 164, 166, 167, 175).¹⁵ That is, the skill body is the vehicle in which perceptual experience is made actual; it is 'our general medium for having a world' (Ibid., p. 169).

Conclusion

Ryle and Merleau-Ponty established the inadequacy of traditional explanations of cognition and perception, respectively, with a pair of regress arguments, parallel ones at that. They wished to explain aspects of mentality in terms of movement. But Ryle and Merleau-Ponty determined that the

prevailing *corps mécanique* obscured distinctions among importantly different kinds of bodily behavior. Ryle claimed that mechanistic causation does not distinguish between intelligent behavior and non-intelligent behavior. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty claimed that concrete and abstract movement cannot be distinguished on the basis of mechanism. Both Ryle and Merleau-Ponty recognized that skill, instead, does permit for such distinctions. Therefore, they posited the development and exercise of skill as constitutive of the aspects of mentality they hoped to explain.

Notes

- ¹ See Bevyssade, 2003, pp. 129–52; Des Chene, 2001; Hatfield, 1992, pp. 335–70; Hatfield, 2007, pp. 413–40.
- ² Instead of the term ‘cognition,’ Ryle often used the more general term ‘mentality.’ Today we understand ‘mentality’ to mean both cognition and perception. Ryle’s interest, however, seemed to lie or primarily in cognition, not perception.
- ³ Ryle wrote, ‘it is of the essence of intelligent practices that one performance is modified by its predecessors’ and, conversely, ‘it is of the essence of merely habitual practices that one performance is a replica of its predecessors’ (1949, p. 42).
- ⁴ Brentano, Bolzano, Husserl, and Meinong together constituted Ryle’s ‘three Austrian railway stations and one Chinese game of chance,’ as he self-referentially put it (Ryle, 1970, p. 8).
- ⁵ Ryle, 1932, pp. 68–115; 1929, pp. 255–70; 1946, pp. 263–9. Husserl, 1970, pp. 14–15.
- ⁶ I am using the term ‘sensation’ similarly to Merleau-Ponty’s use of the terms ‘stimulus’ and ‘impression’ and ‘quality’; I am using the term ‘perception’ similarly to Merleau-Ponty’s use of the terms ‘consciousness’ and ‘being.’
- ⁷ Merleau-Ponty wrote, ‘in order to relate it to the life of consciousness, one [empiricist] would have to show how a perception awakens attention, then how attention develops and enriches it. Some internal connection would have to be described, and empiricism has at its disposal only external ones, and can do no more than juxtapose states of consciousness’ (1962, p. 31). Therefore, he concludes, ‘where empiricism was deficient was in any internal connection between the object and the act which it triggers off’ (Ibid., p. 32).
- ⁸ For Merleau-Ponty’s other critiques of empiricism, see pages 7, 25, 29, 31, 32, 35, 61, 143, 166, 355, and 391 in *Phenomenology of Perception*. For instance, Merleau-Ponty argued that association and memory fail to bridge sensation and perception in the same way that attention does. See also Carman, 2008 and Kelly, 2007, pp. 23–43.
- ⁹ Merleau-Ponty wrote, ‘intellectualism, on the other hand, starts with the fruitfulness of attention: since I am conscious that through attention I shall come by the truth of the object, the succession of pictures called up by attention is not a haphazard one’ (1962, p. 31). But since the role of concept application usurps the function of attention, he concludes, ‘in a consciousness which constitutes

everything, or rather which eternally possesses the intelligible structure of all its objects . . . attention remains an abstract and ineffective power, because it has no work to perform’ (Ibid., p. 32).

- ¹⁰ For Merleau-Ponty’s other critiques of intellectualism, see Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. 31, 32, 35, 39, 54, 143, 170, 355, and 391. For instance, Merleau-Ponty argued that attention and memory fail to ground sensation and perception in the same way that concept application does. And, again, see also Carman, 2008 and Kelly, 2007.
- ¹¹ It is uncertain not because he does not know it is a ship run aground (he might know that there is a ship run aground exactly where he is looking) but because he does not see the scene before him as containing a ship run aground.
- ¹² Sean Kelly suggests this alternate translation—‘a vision of I do not know what’—of Merleau-Ponty’s phrase ‘vision de je ne sais quoi’ (2005, p. 81). This is because Kelly believes the thing itself is indeterminate (contrast this with there being a fully determinate thing that the perceiver has not yet determined for herself).
- ¹³ Along similar lines, ‘because my body is permanently stationed before things in order to perceive them and, conversely, appearances are always enveloped for me in a certain bodily attitude’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 352).
- ¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty regularly uses terms like ‘style,’ ‘ways,’ ‘attitudes,’ and ‘manners’ when discussing the bodily behaviors constitutive of motor-intentions. For instance, ‘my hands rediscover a certain style which is part of their motor potentiality’ (1962, p. 369); and ‘a form of behavior outlines a certain manner of treating the world’ (Ibid., p. 372).
- ¹⁵ The French phrase ‘le corps habituel’ used by Merleau-Ponty is translated as ‘the habit body’ throughout the English text. The words ‘habit’ and ‘habitual’ have the connotations of habitat and inhabit, which fit with Merleau-Ponty’s sentiment. However, the words ‘habit’ and ‘habitual’ also signify something we do unintentionally, mindlessly, and automatically (as in, ‘he did it out of blind habit’)—which is the exact opposite of what Merleau-Ponty meant. For this reason, I have translated ‘le corps habituel’ as ‘the skill body’ and other variations of ‘habitude’ as ‘skill.’

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Chapter 5

Phantom Limbs and Phantom Worlds:
Being Responsive to the Present

Susan Bredlau

We often assume that the world that appears to us is merely a reflection of a world that exists independently of us. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty argues in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this assumption is untenable. We are intimately and inextricably involved in the way the world appears to us. Our bodies' interactions with the world, rather than reproducing an already given world, actually accomplish the world that we experience. Yet beyond asserting that we are always involved in the way that the world appears, his work also suggests that these involvements are not equally successful. The world, though never predetermined, is also not simply our creation. We must interact with the world, and both our bodies, as specific attitudes, and the world, as particular environments, should exert influence over the precise form of these interactions. We can, in other words, do a better or worse job of answering to the world, even as the answers we give help to achieve this world.

In this chapter, I will explore what it means to be responsive to the world and successfully place our bodies 'at the service of the spectacle.' I will argue that this task is as much a temporal as a spatial endeavor: we can only answer to the world if we acknowledge when our present is different than our past. Because Merleau-Ponty offers an account of experience that challenges our very conception of what it means to account for experience, I think it is important to make sense of the *Phenomenology of Perception* in its own terms. I construct my own argument, therefore, within the framework provided by this text. Yet following Merleau-Ponty, who often incorporates research from other disciplines into his work, I also turn to psychoanalysis and urban studies for examples of the phenomenon under discussion. My motivation in doing so is twofold. First, drawing examples from these other disciplines allows for a richer description of an experience, that of a 'phantom world,' which is implied in Merleau-Ponty's