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Review of:

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2020). *The Sensible World and the World of Expression: Course Notes from the Collège de France, 1953* (Translated from the French with an introduction and notes by Bryan Smyth), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL, 320 pp., ISBN 978-0810141421, \$34.95 (Paperback), \$99.95 (Hardcover), \$34.95 (eBook)

In 1952, Merleau-Ponty obtained a chair of philosophy at the Collège de France. Until his death in 1961, he then typically gave one principal and one complementary course per year. The topic of his main course from the first year of his teaching (1953) was “The Sensible World and the World of Expression.” While there seems to be no record of what Merleau-Ponty actually said during these lectures, his preparatory notes have been published in French in 2011 (Merleau-Ponty, 2011). Unfortunately, these materials have received relatively little attention from the English-written scholarship thus far. With Bryan Smyth’s new English translation/edition of the notes, this may now change. The volume provides Anglophone readership with an excellent resource for exploring Merleau-Ponty’s ideas, whose significance is not limited to the course itself.

Merleau-Ponty’s course can be divided into four main segments. In the first three of the total fourteen lectures, Merleau-Ponty outlines his goal and defines the basic elements of his approach to expression. Lectures 4–10 are dedicated to concrete analyses of perceptual phenomena, such as oriented space and movement, which are already expressive according to Merleau-Ponty. Lectures 10–14 revolve around the notion of body schema which helps Merleau-Ponty to clarify how the expressive nature of perception is related to an embodied subject’s exploratory acts. The last lecture returns to the topic of cultural expression and briefly discusses visual arts and film as examples of pre-linguistic expressive phenomena.

Apart from Merleau-Ponty’s preparatory notes for the teaching, the English edition of the course contains a collection of the author’s more loosely related (but important) working notes, Smyth’s introduction, a note on the translation, annotative notes, bibliography, and index. Below, I detail the contents of the course, I describe formal aspects of the book, and I comment on the specifics of the English edition.

Merleau-Ponty’s goal in his first course from the Collège de France is closely linked to the reception of his earlier works in the post-war period. When he applied for the position at the Collège, he had already published *Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, 2012). However, his phenomenological account of perception and embodiment was not yet taken as seriously as he had probably wished. In the summary of his first course from the Collège, he noted that although contemporary thinkers “readily admit that the sensible world and sensible consciousness should be described in terms of what is original in them ... everything continues as though such descriptions did not affect our definition of being and subjectivity” (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 3). As shown by the discussion Merleau-Ponty had with colleagues in 1946 after his lecture on “the primacy of perception”

(Merleau-Ponty, 1964a), some philosophers viewed phenomenological descriptions of perception merely as a collection of “psychological curiosities” which do not have any significant impact on properly philosophical matters. In the post-war period, Merleau-Ponty was therefore facing the task to show how the situated, perceiving bodily subject, whom he described in his first books, is simultaneously a *thinking* subject who has access to *generally valid truths* and being itself. For Merleau-Ponty, there was no question of abandoning the results of the previous analyses and subordinating the structure of the sensible world again to a presumed universal intelligence or constituting consciousness. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty believed that his study of perception revealed a relation to being that makes possible, and even “necessitates ... a new analysis of the understanding” (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 3).

As he made clear in the two important texts that he wrote in support of his candidacy (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, 2000), he aimed to solve the problem of the transition between a situated perceiving subject on the one hand, and rationality, truth, and being on the other, by focusing on the phenomenon of *expression*. Expression, he argued, is situated midway between the sensorial, “private” experience of a bodily subject, and intersubjectively shared, generally valid, “public” truths. Expressive human activities take place in the sensible world, but they already initiate a process through which humans liberate themselves from what is particular in their situations and orient themselves toward a universal knowledge. A bodily gesture, for example, reorganizes the perceived world and reveals intersubjectively accessible aspects of reality which would otherwise remain unperceived. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty believed that the phenomenon of expression affords a new theory of the relationship between nature and culture. Culture and rationality do not eliminate the structures of the sensible world and bodily experience, but rather transform them, and hence also conserve them (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 7; cf. 2020a, p. 9). Building on these ideas, the principal goal of Merleau-Ponty’s 1953 course is to “reestablish the unity and at the same time the difference between the perceived world and the intelligible world through a redefinition of consciousness and of sense” (Merleau-Ponty, 2020a, p. 9). As I outline below, Merleau-Ponty did not quite achieve this goal, but he carried out a series of investigations that are very important in other respects.

As noted, the first three lectures of the course have an introductory role. Merleau-Ponty first outlines his goal which is to clarify the relationships between perceptual consciousness and expressive human activities. However, while he outlines his current aims, he also radically criticizes his previous works and provides suggestions on how to elaborate on them. In particular, he recognizes that he has not satisfactorily demonstrated the relevance of the analysis of perception for a general understanding of truth, rationality, and ontology. He finds that his analyses were often merely negative and insufficiently developed because he relied too much on the conceptual apparatus inherited from Cartesian and Kantian tradition (Merleau-Ponty, 2020a, p. 10). The concept of consciousness seems to be particularly problematic for him. Merleau-Ponty now aims to revise or even reject this concept (pp. 14–15).

According to Merleau-Ponty, the notion of consciousness must be replaced by the notion of expression if we are to elaborate the account of perception. There are important differences between how an embodied subject relates to a meaningful phenomenon and how a consciousness relates to it. A consciousness operates a “bestowal of sense,” that is, it grasps each phenomenon as a particular case of an essence, or an answer to the question “*what is given?*” Consequently, the meaning grasped by a consciousness is radically independent of its concrete phenomenal context. In contrast, a sensible phenomenon is inseparable from the

concrete setting in which it appears and hence does not let the subject impose a meaning on it from a spectatorial distance. A sensible phenomenon imposes a certain rhythm to the subject's body while preserving its transcendence. The subject interacts with the sensible without explicitly possessing the principle of such interaction. In other words, a sensible phenomenon is a momentary modulation of, or divergence from (*écart*) a tacitly presupposed norm of an embodied subject's interaction with the world.

Now, Merleau-Ponty argues that the interactive relationship between a perceiving body and the sensible world needs to be interpreted as a mutual expression. A sensible given "specifies the body one must have" to be able to perceive it and "the body completes the given" by adopting a position in the world that affords its optimal presence (Merleau-Ponty, 2020a, p. 43). For this reason, it is possible to claim that there is an "expressive relation between the exploring body and what it explores" (p. 21) and that "perceptual consciousness is essentially expression" (p. 133). In short, between one's sensing body and the spectacle, "there is an expressive relation, because each attitude is [the] power of a situation and each spectacle [is the] trace of an attitude" (p. 86).

However, Merleau-Ponty also points out that human body does not merely respond to what presents itself, but also "returns ... to the world in order to signify it or to designate it" (Merleau-Ponty 2020a, p. 15). Such an activity is still situated at the level of the sensible world and thus does not deliver extra-temporal essences, in which the particularities of our situated experience would be completely surpassed. Nevertheless, embodied expressive activity enables the construction of a "virtual space" (p. 15) in which we "take on" the sense of our perceptual situation and experience it more fully (p. 28). In this sense, perception "calls for its own expression" (p. 9). This leads Merleau-Ponty to argue that expressive cultural activities "resume and amplify" the expression found at the level of perception in the form of the implicit reciprocal reference between an embodied exploratory activity and a perceptual situation (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 4). In other words, higher forms of expression, which are associated with general knowledge, do not completely transcend the perceptual experience, but rather more fully exploit the ambivalent meanings to which it opens us.

As it is evident, Merleau-Ponty's application of the notion of expression in the context of perception is quite unusual. However, it is important to note that the mutually "expressive" relationship between the subject and the sensible world was already identified by Merleau-Ponty in his previous works. Merleau-Ponty's use of the notion of expression from the 1953 course thus seems to help him better systematize certain ideas from his earlier works. This is an important moment, since his renewed interpretation of expression clearly foreshadows the ideas of reversibility or chiasm which are central in his late works.

More than two-thirds of the course are dedicated to analyses that aim to illustrate the above-outlined ideas more concretely. In lessons 4–10, Merleau-Ponty discusses the perception of spatial orientation, depth, and movement. On a general level, he argues against psychological and physiological theories that attempt to explain perception from either subjectivist (intellectualist) or objectivist (empiricist) perspective. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty focuses on showing that a careful description of the sensible world reveals a reciprocal dynamic interrelation (hence "expression") between the subject-related acts and the object-related conditions. Merleau-Ponty's analyses from this part of the course clearly build on some of the work accomplished in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (in particular Part 2, Section II – "Space"). However, Merleau-Ponty now uses new literature and attributes much more importance to the phenomenon of movement.

The first group of phenomena discussed by Merleau-Ponty (lessons 3–5) are related to the perception of space. Merleau-Ponty argues that the experiences of spatial orientation (e.g., bottom-up, left-right), depth, proximity and distance, and the apparent size of objects demonstrate that their spatial values are “tied exclusively neither to [the] aspect of the world nor to that of the body” and rather lie “at their point of convergence” (Merleau-Ponty, 2020a, p. 41). Analogically, the spatial value of a sensible phenomenon is neither “an absolute property of the contents” of experience, nor is it due to an intellectual operation, because it is “tied to the sensible after all” (p. 40). Merleau-Ponty claims that a perceptual value such as spatial orientation can only be explained if we understand the relation between the body and the world as a “system” (p. 41) within which the two poles “express” each other. Gestalt psychological experiments show, for example, that the perception of a vertical orientation is directly determined neither by internal (psychological, physiological) nor external (sensory, causal) factors. Rather, the orientation results from a specific type of interaction between the system of the exploring body and the system of the environment which supports the body’s exploration.

However, Merleau-Ponty finds that the dynamic “expressive” coexistence of the body and its environment is much better evidenced by the phenomenon of movement (lessons 6–10). Merleau-Ponty first dedicates considerable effort to demonstrate why subjectivist and objectivist accounts of movement should be rejected and then turns to Gestalt psychological studies. His goal is not to take over the theoretical explanations suggested by Gestalt psychologists, but to return to the authentic phenomenality of movement. In Merleau-Ponty’s opinion, Gestalt psychological studies of stroboscopic movement confirm that, in order to understand movement, it is neither accurate nor necessary to presuppose a moving object. Rather, the phenomenon of movement is best understood as a specific configuration of the perceptual field and its variation.

To elaborate, Merleau-Ponty turns to Michotte’s experiments with stroboscopic projections. Michotte’s works show that a sequentially projected series of abstract lines can be perceived as a movement of a living creature (e.g., crawling, swimming) without the observer having consciousness of a specific object. That is, the perceived movement does not *remind us of* an object (e.g., worm, frog), it simply results “from variations of [the] internal articulation of the figure” (Merleau-Ponty, 2020a, p. 66). There is thus a relation of reversibility and equivalence between the global sense of the perceptual field and the relation of its elements to one another. For Merleau-Ponty, this means that movement “reveals being” (p. 67). A perceived movement does not *presuppose* the consciousness of an object, but rather *brings about* the experience of a certain object.

Subsequently, Merleau-Ponty argues that the elements of the perceptual field are only grasped as a spatiotemporal unity thanks to the fact that the perceiver is able to control phenomenal transformations of space, or that they are “geared into space as a system of the powers of [their] body” (Merleau-Ponty, 2020a, p. 73). One perceives movement, its sense, and its characteristic pace “through motor possibilities of one’s own body” (p. 80). In other words, the “ground of the mobility of objects” is our own motricity (p. 81). Hence, like spatial orientation, movement does not exist “in itself.” A perceived movement is inseparable from a subject who has certain motor and, more generally, vital possibilities and must be conceived of as a specific modulation of these possibilities.

In the lectures 10–14, Merleau-Ponty complements his analysis of perceptual phenomena with insights afforded by the notion of body schema. This concept seems to be particularly well suited for explaining how the spatiotemporal unity of the body becomes

reflected in the perceived phenomena and how this relationship undergoes dynamic adaptive variations. Body schema plays an important role already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, but in the 1953 course, Merleau-Ponty significantly elaborates his interpretation. He also implements new literature, in particular Schilder's extended version of an earlier study (1935), and a number neuropsychological works.

Merleau-Ponty seems to combine the early neurological interpretation of the concept of body schema, the Gestalt psychological idea of level (*niveau*), and Husserl's thoughts on embodiment (e.g., the idea that the body serves as the zero point of orientation). For Merleau-Ponty, body schema is a dynamic structure or a Gestalt that serves as a reference level (*niveau*) in contrast to which perceived phenomena acquire their sense. Somewhat in contrast to Schilder, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that body schema is not a sensorial "image" of the body. However, he also refuses to conceive of it as a quasi-conceptual representation in the consciousness. In Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, the notion of schema has the advantage to situate the sense-giving function of the body midway between all the traditional categories, such as the ideas of objective physiological mechanism and subjective experience, individual sensations and a general organization, explicit representation and implicit horizon.

Merleau-Ponty first provides a range of negative characteristics which distinguish body schema from traditional concepts. Subsequently, he focuses on defining the body schema positively. In particular, the unity of body schema seems to be of a special type. It is for him a unity of "mutual implication," spatial, sensorial, and functional "coexistence" of all the parts of the body, in particular the active limbs. Thanks to unity of body schema, all parts of the body synergically engage in a coordinated exploration of the world. When we are acting in the world, we prereflectively draw on this "register" from which we obtain information about our relative readiness to confront certain tasks and accomplish certain actions. Conversely, the results of our interactions with the world are recorded in our body schema. The unity of the body schema is thus fundamentally dynamic. In particular, it is continually structured in function of both physical events happening to us and our intentions to act and perceive.

In a more general context, Merleau-Ponty draws on the concept of body schema to explain the relationships between practical, perceptual, bodily understanding (*praxis*) of the world on the one hand, and, on the other, the "theoretical" and observational understanding (*gnosis*). More specifically, he discusses the relationships between various impairments of these types of behaviors as seen in apraxias and agnosias. On his view, dissociations between these types of conditions confirm that one's practical engagement in the world does not depend on a general intellectual function. However, Merleau-Ponty also attempts to show that intellectual functions should be conceived of as forms of higher-level praxis and that they are consequently special types of embodied expressive operations.

Merleau-Ponty's conclusions in the last part of the course nevertheless remain tentative. Beyond that, Merleau-Ponty explicitly acknowledges that our capacity to produce rational knowledge is fundamentally dependent on our use of language, which he understands as the most prominent of our instruments of expression. In the 1953 course, he deliberately sets the topic of language aside because in his view, language requires a dedicated inquiry. Unlike other expressive operations, language has the capacity to "sediment", that is, to condense previous expressive operations into the more recent ones. Language is discussed in Merleau-Ponty's parallel 1953 course on the "literary use of language" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013), in course on "the problem of speech" from the following year (Merleau-Ponty, 2020b), and in many of his writing from this period (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1973, 1964d).

In the last lesson of the course, Merleau-Ponty briefly returns to pre-linguistic cultural expression, in particular to visual art and film. Building on the idea that between perceptual figures and bodily exploration there is a mutual expression, he focuses on showing that artistic expressions do not merely evoke certain experiences in the observer, such as a representation of a movement, but rather accomplish “the movement of representation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 10). In other words, art systematically explores the fact that perceptible figures modulate our interaction with the world and therefore serves as a source for developing new ways of such interacting.

As it should be expected with preparatory notes, Merleau-Ponty’s text is often difficult to interpret. Although the notes for the 1953 course are more elaborated than some of those written in the later years, they are often fragmentary, allusive, and not always conclusive. Beyond that, Merleau-Ponty seems to take full advantage of the freedom guaranteed by the format of the lectures, which allowed him to focus on presenting his research in the course of development. As he claimed in his inaugural lecture, “the Collège de France has been charged with the duty, not of giving to its hearers already-acquired truths, but the idea of free investigation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c, p. 3). One of the consequences of this approach is that Merleau-Ponty does not exactly follow the plan which he announced at the beginning of the course. Consequently, the course notes do not offer an elaborated explanation of how the sensible world relates to all cultural expressive activities. Instead, they contain Merleau-Ponty’s thorough revision of his phenomenology of perception and his theory of embodied subject which also foreshadows his later ideas.

As Smyth notes in his Introduction, “the broader significance of these lectures ... remains to be worked out” (Smyth, 2020, p. xxxvii). His own study provides a very useful starting point. (The introduction written by E. de Saint-Aubert for the French edition is not included). Smyth’s Introduction explains the context of Merleau-Ponty’s inaugural course and provides an overview of the themes discussed. While Smyth’s Introduction seems to give more room to some aspects at the expense of others, which is inevitable, it touches upon all the important topics from the course.

The English edition of the course significantly differs from the French in that it contains a robust (70-page) apparatus of annotative notes compiled by Smyth. Whereas the notes included by the French editors are mostly limited to adding missing references and brief editorial clarifications, Smyth provides very helpful extended commentaries and many excerpts from Merleau-Ponty’s source texts. Smyth’s note on the translation lists some of the less-obvious translation decisions and provides reasons for his choices. Throughout the text, Smyth occasionally indicates the French originals in brackets, in particular when the term used by Merleau-Ponty is ambiguous or unusual. Smyth also implemented numerous textual additions which are mostly absent in the French edition (and which are always marked by square brackets in the English edition). Taken together, these interventions improved the flow and readability of Merleau-Ponty’s text without being too much intrusive or interpretative, while also making it possible to keep track of Merleau-Ponty’s original and creative use of the language. The quality of the edition is greatly supported by a carefully designed layout which respects the topography of Merleau-Ponty’s notes while keeping them reasonably organized.

The English edition of the course notes would be even stronger if it contained a revised English translation of Merleau-Ponty’s summary of the course. The summary, which was published by Merleau-Ponty himself, constitutes an extremely important resource (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, pp. 11–21). In contrast to the fragmentary and often inconclusive notes, it contains a systematized (or, as Smyth puts it, somewhat “cleared up”) account of Merleau-

Ponty's ideas and several conclusions that are stronger than any corresponding claims from the course notes. As Smyth points out in his Introduction (Smyth, 2020, p. xxxvii, note 2), the available English translation of the summary (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, pp. 3–11) contains some errors and infelicities. Smyth offers one correction in a footnote, but several other errors are not addressed. The French text of the summary thus remains indispensable resource for a more complete understanding of Merleau-Ponty's 1953 course.

Despite their fragmentary nature, Merleau-Ponty's preparatory notes for the course on the "Sensible World and the World of Perception" offer great insights into the middle period of his development and the overall unity of his philosophical project. Smyth's very well-thought-out translation/edition brings added value compared to the French edition and constitutes an excellent scholarly resource.

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