Merleau-Ponty and the Transcendental Problem of Bodily Agency

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In Merleau-Ponty's early works he draws attention to a problem concerning bodily agency which he presents as analogous to the problem of perception that is his primary concern. The analogy between the two problems is implicitly recognized when Merleau-Ponty in his first book *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) writes:

> Our intentions find their natural clothing or their embodiment in movements and are expressed in them as the thing is expressed in its perspectival aspects. (SC 1983, p. 188/ 1990, p. 203)[1]

In both cases the initial problem is to recognize the *sui generis* character of the intentionality that characterize the phenomena in question. For Merleau-Ponty the basic problem concerning perception consists in understanding how perception, as the occurrence in our subjective life it is, can constitute an openness to the world that confronts us with the object itself *in person* rather than a mere proxy which remains at a distance from reality itself. What I suggest in the following is that there exists an analogous problem concerning how we can regard the objective occurrence of a bodily movement in the life an organism, as the bodily presence and direct intervention of a mind in the objective world rather than as a mere emissary of the mind. My aim is to flesh out this parallel problem concerning bodily agency and to show that it is in fact a problem that is more or less explicitly articulated in Merleau-Ponty's early works exactly via an analogy to what he explicitly calls the problem of perception.

[1] I use "SC" to refer to Merleau-Ponty's *La structure du comportement/The Structure of Behavior* (1942). I refer first to the pagination of the English translation of SC (1983) and then to the page numbers in the French edition (1990). I shall use "PP" to refer to *phénoménologie de la perception/ Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and refer to the page numbers of Donald. A. Landes' recent translation, which contains indication of the corresponding pages in the French edition.

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In order to expose the problem concerning bodily agency in question I will exploit more recent work in philosophy of action, in particular the works of Hornsby and McDowell. In Hornsby's work we find the perhaps most articulate formulation of what I take to be the problem concerning bodily agency also pointed out by Merleau-Ponty; in McDowell's work we find what I take to be the same basic problem exposed via an analogy to the specific problem concerning perception that he analyses in *Mind and World* (1996).

The general idea of analyzing problems concerning agency via analogies to problems in philosophy of perception is of course an old idea. Such a "Methode der Analogie", as Husserl called it, is often motivated by the idea that the more extensive work on perception and in general theoretical intentionality can serve as guideline for our understanding of practical intentionality (Husserl 1988, p. 349).[2] This is also in a certain sense my motivation. In the first instance my aim is simply to bring out how reading Merleau-Ponty through the lens of such an analogical approach is exegetically fruitful. In this chapter I won't attempt to evaluate the extent to which prominent modern theories of action, or, for that matter, prominent interpreters of Merleau-Ponty or Merleau-Ponty himself, escape the problem in question. In the second instance my aim is, through my reading of Merleau-Ponty's analysis and diagnosis of the problem in question, to contribute to our understanding of the nature and pertinence of the problem.

1 The Problem of Perception

Merleau-Ponty states that the 'problem of perception' consists in the fact that perception is an original mode of knowledge (PP, p. 45). The originality of perception is said to reside in the fact that perception essentially is a *cognition of* or *acquaintance with* existences (*connaissances des existences*, PP, p. 42). Sometimes Merleau-Ponty also refers to the problem of perception as the "problem of the *presence* of the object" (PP, p. 26). In perception we are said to be presented with presences or existences rather than with a propositional content that would be properly expressed with a *that*-clause "It is true that …" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 14). Perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty argues, does not at its most fundamental level present us with facts or true propositions but with objects and their features in their bodily presence or bodily reality (*présence charnelle*, PP, p. 111, p. 211, p. 269; *réalité charnelle*, SC 1983, p. 187/1990, p. 202; cf. Husserl 1992, p. 51: *körperliche Gegewart/leibhaften Wirklichkeit*):

> My perception does not turn toward a content of consciousness: rather it turns toward the ashtray itself. (PP, p. 271)

[2] Some more recent philosophers of action who explicitly take such an analogical approach to action are: Danto (1973), Hornsby (1980), Searle (1983), Hurley (1998), Enç (2003) and Dokic (2003).

Merleau-Ponty's problem of perception therefore isn't just the problem of how to account for the specific sensuous way that perception presents us with facts understood as true propositions in contrast to a mere thought.

For Merleau-Ponty genuine perception consists in an acquaintance with existing objects, and in this sense it is a relational phenomenon that requires the existence of the object perceived, but this doesn't imply that that which is given in perception is an unarticulated, raw presence without any inner structure.[3] Perception isn't simply "a blind contact with a singular object" present merely as "a compact ensemble of givens" (Merleau-Ponty 1983, p. 197/1990, p. 213). Referring to the findings of Gestalt-psychology and the phenomenological analysis of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty claims that it is an essential feature of object-perception that the object itself is given through its appearances, or to use Husserl's expression through its adumbrations:

> The perceived is grasped in an indivisible manner as "in itself", that is, as gifted with an interior which I will never have finished exploring; and as "for me", that is, as given "in person" through its momentary aspects. (SC, 1983 p. 186/1990, p. 201)

In the first instance the problem of perception is simply to get the description of how things strike us in perception right, i.e. to recognize that what Merleau-Ponty calls our *naïve consciousness* of perception has an intrinsic duality (SC, 1983, pp. 185–186/1990, p. 202): On the one hand it is characterized by a naïve realism, perception is lived through as a being in the presence of an actual object itself; on the other hand it is evident in the experience itself, that this perceptual presence of the object shouldn't be understood as a full possession of the object, since our view of the object is always limited, i.e. we always see the object from a certain angle which reveal some aspects of the object while hiding others.

When characterizing how the relation between the object and its profiles or appearances shows up in un-reflective experience Merleau-Ponty use the word "magical", and like in the quote I began this paper with, the relation is likened to the relation between intentions and movements or gestures:

> One can say, if you like, that the relation of the thing perceived to perception, or of the intention to the gestures which realize it, is a magical relation in naïve consciousness; but it would still be necessary to understand magical consciousness as it understands itself and not to reconstruct it from subsequent categories. (SC 1983, p. 189/1990, 204)

As emphasized by Jacques Taminiaux Merleau-Ponty's use of "magical" in contexts such as these isn't an expression of some "exotic taste for the irrational", but rather serves to emphasize the contrast between the phenomenon as it is lived through pre-reflectively and the way it has been typically reconstructed in philosophical reflection (Taminiaux 1991, p. 208). The point is not that we normally

[3] It is controversial whether we should read Merleau-Ponty as committed to a relational account of perception. I have argued that he is committed to such in an account in Jensen (2013); Romdenh-Romluc presents a different line of argument, with the same conclusion (Romdenh-Romluc 2011, pp. 159–167).

experience the givenness of the object through its appearances as magical in the sense of the magic performed on stage that seems to defy logic and the laws of nature. On the contrary, we normally take for granted that the appearances are proper 'manifestations' of the object itself, in a sense that contrast with how signs, for instance smoke, are signs of something not actually present in experience, for instance the fire causing the smoke (SC, 1983, p. 186/1990, p. 202). The fact that there is "for-us" an *in-itself* (PP, p. 74), is, as Husserl put it, the most commonplace for the philosophically naïve, but becomes the *the riddle of riddles* through philosophical reflection (Husserl 1996, Beilage V, §12).

It is one thing to *describe* the characteristic phenomenology of object-perception accurately, but yet another to make this phenomenon intelligible or to *think* or *conceptualize* it (SC, 1983, p. 188/1990, p. 202). According to Merleau-Ponty what makes it difficult to get the phenomenon in view in the first place, and secondly to make it intelligible, is a certain attitude or frame of mind which he calls Objective Thought. What is particularly difficult is to theoretically grasp the relation between the appearing object and the appearances of the object without reducing it to something else than what it appears to be from the perspective of *naïve consciousness*, namely an original, i.e. irreducible kind of intentional, or meaning-bearing relation that allows us to *accede to things themselves* through their perspectival appearances and have the object and its features revealed to us *in propria persona* (SC 1983, 219/1990, p. 236).

2 Objective Thought

Merleau-Ponty maps out the modern debates about perception (and action), philosophical as well as empirical, as caught up in a dialectic oscillation between two broad theoretical frameworks that he calls empiricism and intellectualism. He diagnoses the restless oscillation between empiricism and intellectualism as a symptom of an adherence to a deeper metaphysical presumption which he calls the prejudice of determinate being or the prejudice of the world (PP, p. 510, n. 60). It is the frame of mind or attitude which is dominated by such a prejudice that he calls "Objective Thought" (PP, p. 50). It is as long as we work within the boundaries of Objective Thought that we will, according to Merlea-Ponty, be unable to recognize the originality of perceptual intentionality as a kind of intentionality that lets the object itself manifest itself through the manifold of its appearances.

Merleau-Ponty provides different characterizations of Objective Thought, but one core feature of Objective Thought as it finds expression in debates about perception and action, is a commitment to the idea that all items that belong to the natural or empirical world exist *partes extra partes* and therefore can only stand in external or merely causal relations to one another (PP, p. 55, p. 75, pp. 77–78; SC, 1983, p. 202/1990, p. 218). The idea that anything that is a part of the natural world must be susceptible to an exhaustible explanation in purely natural scientific

terms, is part and parcel of the prejudice of the determinacy of being as it finds expression in philosophical reflection.[4] Such a scientific naturalism often regards the mathematical laws of physics as the paradigmatic case of science, and tends to regard the science of physics as the ultimate determination of being (PP, p. 55).[5] However, what defines such a naturalism is not physicalism or even scientific realism as such but rather the idea that anything which can be legitimately regarded as part of the empirical or natural world must be completely determinable by scientific means:

> It was no use denying any ontological value to the principles of science and leaving them with only a methodical value, for this reservation made no essential change as far as philosophy was concerned, since the sole conceivable being remained defined by scientific method. (PP, 55)

Objective Thought is more like an ideology than a commitment to any specific ontology. What matters is not whether one is for instance a scientific realist or a transcendental idealist but rather a commitment to a privileging of the scientific mode of understanding when it comes to the empirical world. What is defining of Objective Thought is a specific idea about how something must be able to be made intelligible if it is to count as a natural phenomenon, namely via an explanation that only deals in relations that are external to the relata and therefore excludes modes of explanation that ascribe meaning to the items made intelligible (cf. PP, p. 61). It is the idea that a proper understanding of nature must exclude any reference to meaning if it is to stay clear of superstition and mysticism.

What hinders both empiricism and intellectualism in recognizing the original intentionality of perception (and action) is, according to Merleau-Ponty, the fact that they both take the determinate universe of science as a datum (PP, p. 58), and construct their notion of perception and bodily agency accordingly. Let us take a closer look at some of Merleau-Ponty's reasons for thinking that a commitment to scientific naturalism necessarily obscures the recognition of the original intentionality

[4] At times Merleau-Ponty seems to use Husserl's expression *the natural attitude* as synonymous with *Objective Thought* and contrasts it with *the transcendental attitude* (PP, p. 41, p. 510, n. 60). Qua natural attitude the assumption of scientific naturalism doesn't seem to be a necessary feature of Objective Thought, but given the historical development of modern science, such naturalism has, on Merleau-Ponty's reading, become an almost inescapable conception of the natural world.

[5] Merleau-Ponty mentions different conceptions of causality: as transmission of movement or energy and a functional conception which doesn't constrain the possible variables of the function to for instance spatio-temporal, physical events (PP, p. 75). Merleau-Ponty sometimes indicates that he takes modern physics to have undermined "Causal Thought" from within: He refers to Goldstein's analogy between a proper understanding of organisms and the break with the classical notion of causality which Goldstein finds in quantum mechanics (SC 1983, p. 154/1990, p. 167; 1983, p. 193/1990, p. 208). Most likely it is also quantum mechanics Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he states that even physics itself recognizes the limits of its determinations and demands a reworking and a contamination of its own pure concepts (PP, p. 57).

of perception, in order to prepare the grounds for an articulation of the parallel problem concerning bodily agency.

3 The Empiricist Model of Perception

Empiricism rests on a scientific monism which takes the world to consist in the totality of spatio-temporal events standing in merely causal relations (PP, p. 42). Its fundamental mistake is, according to Merleau-Ponty the attempt to insert perception in nature as just one among such merely causally related events (SC, 1983, 193/1990, 208).

The version of empiricism which is the target of Merleau-Ponty's critique in the long Introduction chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* is committed to the project of naturalizing consciousness and intentionality and the creation of "an objective science of subjectivity" (PP, p. 11), where an objective science is one that deals only in causal explanations devoid of reference to intentional terms. This empiricist is committed to the idea that sensory consciousness is a matter of receiving impressions caused by external stimuli, themselves determinable in natural scientific terms. On this picture our subjective impressions can only be connected to the environment via causal correlations with external stimulation of our sense organs and therefore we must conceive of the impressions in the same atomistic fashion as the sensory stimulation. Such empiricism is committed to what Merleau-Ponty with the gestalt-psychologist Köhler calls the Constancy Hypothesis: There is a one-to-one correlation between sensory stimuli and subjective impressions (SC, 1983, p. 165/1990, p. 179; PP, p. 7). In order to build up an experience that is recognizable as the experience we actually enjoy, the empiricist in question appeals to classical Humean principles of association (PP, pp. 15–16). Our actual experience can amount to no more than atomistic impressions and associative relations between actual, imagined or remembered impressions and such associative relations are themselves thought of on the model of a merely causal, i.e. external relation (PP, p. 15, SC, 1983, p. 165/1990, p. 178). As a consequence, the relation between the appearance of the object and object appearing as it is experienced in naive consciousness, i.e. as a proper manifestation, cannot be made intelligible on this model (SC, 1983, p. 187/1990, p. 202). The sense of the presence of the object is on such an empiricist model reduced to the actual presence of an impression in a context of remembered previous impressions and expectations of future impressions. In so far as the different appearances of a perceived object correspond to something actually present to consciousness, they are reduced to a series of impressions that simply replace one another without any intrinsic normative or meaningful relations between them, i.e. without any internal reason to the process (PP, pp. 15–16). This is the reason why Merleau-Ponty can say that for the empiricist rationality is reduced to a fortuitous accident (*hazard heureux*, PP, p. 61). At this level of abstraction Merleau-Ponty's agrees with Kant's critique of Hume when Kant argues that on the Humean model the relation between

representations and objects of representations remains haphazard or arbitrary and therefore undermines the very idea of both rationality and of the objective world.[6]

The commitment to an atomistic conception of sensory consciousness, what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the *myth of sensation* is hardly shared by any modern defender of the project of naturalizing consciousness and intentionality or by any defender of a representationalist theory of perception (SC, 1983, p. 165/1990, p. 179).[7] Some of Merleau-Ponty's arguments against empiricism, however, do seem directly relevant also to present day discussions. On the general empiricist picture perceptual experience itself will be identified with an event taking place in the body and this event will be understood as merely contingently related to the worldly object:

> But the body appears capable of fabricating a pseudo-perception. Thus certain phenomena of which it is the seat must be necessary and sufficient for perception; the body must be the necessary intermediary between the real world and perception which are henceforth dissociated from one another. (SC, 1983, p. 190/1990, p. 205)

The empiricist conceives of the experience of seeing as a result of the irritation of certain sections of the nervous system and hallucinations are to be explained by activation of the parts of the brain that are involved in a normal seeing (PP, p. 351), which is why Merleau-Ponty implies that on such a view perceptions of a real object is nothing but veridical hallucinations (*des hallucinations vraies* PP, p. 308). A similar line of argument is familiar from contemporary discussions and is often used as an argument against the relational account of perception and in favour of an internalist conception of perception. The problem with such an internalist conception, which makes the revelatory character of perception an extrinsic feature of the experience, is, according to Merleau-Ponty, not only epistemic, rather it is of what we might call a transcendental nature: the internalist position raises skepticism not only about the trust-worthiness of what experience tells us, but about the very possibility of making sense of perception as seeming to present us directly with objects through the object's appearances, i.e., as having objective purport ("a claim to objectivity"/*prétention á l'objetivité*, PP, p. 249). According to Merleau-Ponty the internalist idea that perceptual appearances are, qua the subjective occurrences

[6] Kant writes: "Now we find that our thought of the relation of all knowledge to its object carries with it an element of necessity; the object is viewed as that which prevents our modes of knowledge from being haphazard or arbitrary, and which determines them a priori in some definite fashion. For in so far as they are to relate to an object, they must necessarily agree with one another, that is, must possess that unity which constitutes the concept of an object" (Kant 2007, A104–105).

[7] Quine claims to go beyond the discussion on whether sense-data or Gestalt has epistemic priority by replacing the concept of sense-data with the concept of observational sentences, i.e. sentences with a constant causal connection between stimuli and judgments manifest in behaviour (Quine 1969, p. 76). Merleau-Ponty's arguments against the possibility of a finding a lawful connection between intentional or content-involving understandings of behaviour and stimuli describable in non-intentional terms delivered in *The Structure of Behavior*, seem, if successful, also to rule out Quine's proposal.

they are, mere appearances (*simple appearance*, PP, 418, 401), in the sense that they are always compatible with things being otherwise than they appear, renders what he calls the *phenomenon of being* or *the phenomenon of truth* impossible (PP, p. 418, 308). What is rendered impossible is that perceptual appearances should be what they pretend to be, namely a direct manifestation of the object appearing. The consequence of this is, according to Merleau-Ponty, that we lose our grip on the very notion of an appearance; we "render impossible the consciousness of anything, even as appearance" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 310). Merleau-Ponty's argument here is intricate, but the basic idea is that if we are to make sense of perception as seeming to be a direct manifestation of the object itself, then we must have knowledge about what it would be like to actually have such a direct manifestation occur in one's experiential life, which in turn requires that one has actually had such experiences and known that that was what one had. This argument parallels what I elsewhere call McDowell's negative transcendental argument against what McDowell terms the Highest Common Factor model of perceptual appearances, which is exactly the view that regards even the appearances of an object present in a case of a genuine seeing as 'mere appearances', i.e. as of the same fundamental kind as those we find in hallucinatory cases.[8] Merleau-Ponty, like McDowell, regards the consequences of the idea that perceptual appearances must be regarded as a reaction to the sensory impression made on us by the world and therefore as always one step removed from the world itself, as fatal (McDowell 1996, p. 143): we will no longer be able to make our perceptual awareness, even qua consciousness of appearances, intelligible.

4 The Intellectualist Model of Perception

The (Kantian) intellectualist realizes how the classical empiricist model fail because what is supposed to tie the impressions together so as to give them the power to represent a mind-independent object, is reduced to non-normative, merely associative links. On this point Merleau-Ponty is in agreement with his contemporary the neo-Kantian Lachiéze-Rey. Lachiéze-Rey's diagnose the basic problem of empiricism as residing in the fact that it makes it unintelligible how our thinking could have so much as a "hold on things" and therefore makes our apparent understanding of the world an "illusion of thought" (PP, p. 389, p. 16). The intellectualist instead conceives of the intentional relations between different appearances of an object and between the object and the appearances present in experience in terms of explicit reasons or at least reasons that can be made explicit in judgements, i.e. can be articulated on a propositional form (PP, pp. 50–51). According to intellectualism the experience of a singular cube is a made possible by an a priori structure provided by the understanding which dictates how the appearances must vary according to the position of the subject and the perceived object in objective space (PP, pp. 210–211).

[8] See Jensen (2013) for a comparative analysis of Merleau-Ponty and McDowell's versions of the negative transcendental argument.

However, in order for intellectualism to avoid making the perceived world into a mere projection or construction of the mind and thereby undermine the *aseity* or mind-independence of the perceived object (PP, p. lxxix, p. 242), it is forced to maintain an element of the empiricist idea of a manifold of sensory matter which is synthesized by the forms of understanding. Intellectualism in the form of critical or Kantian Idealism might reject the realistic idea of sensory input but it still sees itself forced to appeal to an at least *ideally separable* sensuous moment of perception (SC, 1983, p. 200/1990, p. 216, PP, p. 251, p. 543, n. 60). Without such an appeal the very idea of receptivity will be undermined, since all we are left is a putative idea of affection which amounts to no more than the mind thinking that it is being affected (PP, p. 391).

According to Merleau-Ponty the basic mistake of intellectualism is that it takes for granted that the natural world equals the *determinate universe of science* (PP, p. 48). The empirical realism of Kantian intellectualism amounts to a scientific realism only now in the framework of transcendental idealism. What is ruled out by both the empiricist and the intellectualist model is that the impression that the natural world makes on our natural sensibility can itself be intrinsically meaningful and so as such constitute our most basic cognition of objects as singular existences. Intellectualism tries to introduce meaning via the synthetic activities of the understanding, but faces the fundamental problem of accounting for how the sensory manifold, itself devoid of any *rational intention* or *meaning* (PP, p. 53), could ever *motivate* or *guide* the synthetic activity so as to give us access to an world that is not just a creation of our own mind (PP, pp. 37–38). Exploiting Merleau-Ponty's own invocation of a well-known Kantian image, we can state the basic problem of intellectualism as follows: Because intellectualism begins with the idea of *blind* intuitions its compensatory attempts are bound to end up in *empty* concepts (PP, p. 34), i.e., to paraphrase McDowell, with concepts that would really not be concepts at all (McDowell 1996, p. 4). Merleau-Ponty concludes that the consequences of accepting a picture of our natural sensibility as reducible to what can be explained in merely natural scientific terms have made both the idea of our sensory contact with the world and the idea of judgements with empirical content *unthinkable* ("impensable", PP, p. 54, see also p. 251).

5 The Problem of Bodily Agency

Within the framework of Objective Thought the human body is conceived as an object consisting of parts that stand in merely external causal relations to one another, *partes extra partes*, and all events involving the body must, at least in principle, be exhaustibly explainable by natural scientific means (SC, 1983, p. 161/1990, p. 174, PP, p. 55, p. 75, pp. 77–78). According to Merleau-Ponty's analysis the basic problem of perception haunting both empiricism and intellectualism is generated by this naturalistic conception of the body and more specifically the implied conception of our sensibility; in what follows I argue that it is the same

conception of the body which gives rise to what I call the problem of bodily agency via the implied conception of our motility. In the case of perception the basic obstacle to recognizing the originality of perceptual intentionality is the idea that the world's making a sensory impact on our sensory organs cannot as such constitute our basic openness to the world itself but can at most be the external cause behind our subjective appearances. In the case of bodily agency the basic problem is generated by a conception of the motor output of the mind as an agency-neutral event, a mere bodily movement which in itself doesn't involve the agency of the subject but can at most be a mere effect of our conative modes of consciousness.

In *The Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty explicates the problem of bodily agency in terms of a dualism between consciousness and action. According to such a dualistic conception *action* is understood as the merely physical component of the event that takes place whenever a bodily intentional action is carried out; it is the "purely motor notion" of action as the sum of movements understood as a series of bodily events that are merely causally related, what Merleau-Ponty refers to as juxtaposed realities connected by external and blind relations (SC, 1983, pp. 163–164/pp. 177–78; SC, 1983, 202/1990, 218). All bodily movements involved in actions are, on this picture, agency-neutral events, in the sense of events that could have happened had no agency been in play. This leaves our conscious conative states or occurrences as merely externally related to the movements involved in any given intentional action:

> Correlatively, perception and action taken in that which is specific to them, that is, as the knowledge and the modification of reality, are rejected from consciousness. (SC, 1983, p. 164/1990, p. 177)

We can compare the situation with the theoretical picture of perception we get on the assumption of scientific naturalism. In the case of perception we get a conceptual divorce of the cognitive, mental occurrence of an appearance of an object from the natural event of the object affecting our sensibility. Because we think of the stimulation of our senses as something that must be exhaustibly explained in merely scientific terms we have excluded that the impression made on us by the world can as such amount to an occurrence with meaning like that of an appearing of an object to a subject. The appearance is conceived as something that is intrinsically *veridicality*-neutral in the sense that it is, qua the subjective occurrence it is, compatible with things being completely different from the way they seem. The impression made by the world on our senses is on the other hand conceived as meaningless, in the sense that it is not, qua the natural occurrence it is, something that can be seen as having any intrinsic, normative or motivational relation to the appearance qua content-bearing conscious occurrence. In the case of bodily action we get a conceptual divorce of the conative state or occurrence of the subject, her trying or intention, and the bodily movement through which the intention is effectuated. The conative item is conceived as something that is intrinsically *efficacity*-neutral; qua mental item it is compatible with nothing getting done in the world, i.e. with no actual movement of the body taking place. The bodily movement is on the other hand conceived as agency-neutral, in the sense that a movement of the very same

fundamental kind could occur even if no conative item of the person whose body moves had been present.

When discussing the problem of bodily agency Merleau-Ponty doesn't make as sharp a distinction between empiricism and intellectualism as in his discussion of the problem of perception. However, we can recognize the behaviourist model of action which reduces all intentional actions to complicated collections of reflexes (resulting from classical or operant conditioning) as one possible outcome of the empiricist project of naturalization. Here we find a parallel between the basic idea of the reflex arc which postulates a correlation between any piece of behaviour and some independently specifiable stimuli and the constancy hypothesis, i.e. the idea that any given subjective sensory impression must correspond to an objective stimulus specified solely via its physical properties (PP, p. 7; SC 1983, p. 165/1990, p. 179). The intellectualist on the other hand distinguishes bodily movements as actions by their relation to representational states or occurrences of the mind, representing at a minimum the goal of the action and possibly the bodily movement itself and its composing parts, and even the bodily automatisms that are to be triggered by the representations and assure the execution of the action (PP 525, n. 99; SC, 1983, p. 173/1990, p. 188).[9] The intellectualist conception of actions as bodily movements caused in the right way by a representational state, is compatible with what is often called the Standard Causal Theory of action, which is committed to something like the following: a bodily movement is an action if and only if it is caused in the right way and causally explained by some appropriate conative mental item that mediates or constitutes the agent's reasons for performing the action in question.[10]

The empiricist conception of intentional action could of course allow a representational consciousness as an essential component of intentional actions, but what would still distinguish the empiricist model from the intellectualist conception would be the intellectualist's insistence on the need to invoke irreducible intellectual capacities to explain our representational awareness. In opposition to at least the reductive naturalist version of empiricism the intellectualist would insist on what Davidson calls the anomalousness of the mental (Davidson 1980), i.e. on the idea that our representational capacities cannot be exhaustibly explained in merely naturalistic terms. What both intellectualism and empiricism remain committed to is

[9] In his discussion of the Schneider case and related neuro-pathological cases Merleau-Ponty distinguished between empiricist and intellectualist psychology, where the latter explains disturbances of motor behaviour with reference to disturbance of a representational function and the former explains the same disturbances in purely mechanistic, causal terms (PP, pp. 125–126, see Jensen 2009 for a discussion of these two models of action as they are played out in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the Schneider case).

[10] The exact formulation of the Standard Causal Theory is a matter of controversy. This definition is appropriated from the one provided in Aguilar and Buckareff (2010). See Romdenh-Romluc's contributions to this volume for a detailed discussion of how Merleau-Ponty's positive account of bodily agency can be read as challenging the Standard Causal Theory (Romdenh-Romluc 2013).

that in so far as action involves a bodily movement such movement must be amenable to a purely natural scientific explanation, and therefore much be intelligible in terms that are agency-neutral and impersonal in the sense of terms that do not imply the presence of an intentional agent.[11]

6 The Problem from the Physical Side

In several places Merleau-Ponty explicates the problem of agency as a result of a dualism between being-for-itself and being-in-itself as two mutually exclusive modes of being. However, I do not think that the problem of agency that Merlea-Ponty draws attention to is a result of a substance dualism as such. The problem rather resides in the assumption that the subjective component (the intention or trying) and the objective component (the movement) of a bodily action can be made intelligible independently of one another, i.e. in a conceptual dualism.

We find Merleau-Ponty's perhaps clearest statement of what I take to be the basic problem of bodily agency in the context of his discussion of certain cases of motor disturbances, which the neuro-physiologist Liepmann dubbed *motor apraxia*:

> So long as consciousness is defined through representation, the only possible operation for it is of forming representations. Thus, consciousness will remain a motor consciousness insofar as it provides itself with a "movement representation". The body, then, executes the movement by reproducing it according to the representation that consciousness adopts and according to a movement it receives from it (Cf. Otto Sittig, *Über Apraxie: Eine Klinische Studie* (Berlin: Karger, 1931), 98). We must still determine through which magical operation the representation of a movement gives rise in the body to precisely this very movement. The problem is only resolved if we cease distinguishing the body as a mechanism in itself and consciousness as being for itself. (PP, p. 525, n. 99)

Though this critique is voiced in the context of a discussion of Liepman's specific neuro-physiological model it is raised as a perfectly general critique of any model that assumes a dualism of representational capacities on the one side and motility or bodily capacities to move on the other. In order to spell out this critique it is helpful to take a brief look at the way Merleau-Ponty makes use of Liepmann's work in his argument.

Liepmann used the notion of motor project (*Bewegungsentwurf*) in order to account for certain cases of motor disturbances, which he dubbed *motor apraxia* (cf. Rothi and Heilman 1996). In Liepmann's classic case of the *Regierungsrat*, the patient, Mr. T., was unable to perform the most simple tasks with his right hand, but

[11] The assumption of the agency-neutrality of bodily movements involved in bodily action is the common starting point of much modern philosophy action. For a survey of recent authors who ascribe to the idea of agency-neutral movements see Grünbaum (2008, p. 246, n. 4). The assumption is opposed with different versions of a so called disjunctive conception of bodily movements by amongst others Hornsby (1997), Haddock (2005) and Stout (2010).

if he was forced to respond to a command with his left hand he could respond swiftly and accurately (Rothi and Heilman 1996, 112). The case is neither a case of simple paralysis, as the motility of the hand is not completely missing, nor is it a case of a disturbance of the intellectual capacities of the patient, what Liepmann called the 'ideational preparation of the action'. The fact that the patient is perfectly able to perform actions with his left hand was taken by Liepmann to show that the intellectual capacity to represent the action is intact. The representational understanding is furthermore demonstrated by the fact that the patient can respond immediately and correctly to whole-body demands such as 'walk to the window' (Rothi and Heilman 1996, 112).[12] Merleau-Ponty now argues that when Liepmann demonstrates that what is disturbed in cases of motor apraxia is a power or a 'know how' (*pouvoir/ein Können*) and not a piece of intellectual knowledge or a 'knowing that' (*savoir/ein Kennen*), he is on the verge of breaking the spell of Objective Thought and dismantling the dualism of mind and body. However, when Liepmann regards this "power" as a "property of the nervous system" and reduces the power to a system of *automatic reflexes* that somehow ensures the innervations of the right muscles, then he, according to Merleau-Ponty falls back into the dualistic picture (PP, p. 524, n. 99).

My aim here is not evaluate whether Merleau-Ponty's delivers a fair critique of Liepmann's neuro-physiological model, but rather to articulate the general point made by Merleau-Ponty in these passages.[13] The general problem concerning bodily agency, pointed to by Merleau-Ponty, appear whenever the power to move so as to carry out one's intentions, i.e. the motility of the body, is understood as belonging solely to the body conceived as a system of "blind mechanisms". The mechanisms are blind in the sense that the working of the mechanisms is supposed to be intelligible in merely causal terms, something that rules out that they can be understood as responsive to the meaning of a representation. If one intends to wave one's arm then one's intention can be said to have representational content in the minimal sense of having satisfaction-condition that sets a norm for when I have successfully carried out my intention. The problem is now how we are to understand that a set of mechanisms blind to meaning can nevertheless be understood as capable of "grasping" and carrying out the intention of the subject: "philosophy does not possess an idea of consciousness and an idea of action which would make internal communication between them possible" (SC, 1983, p. 164/1990, p. 177). The problem goes in the opposite direction but is analogous with the problem of

[12] The argument via Liepmann's patient Mr. T. is structurally similar to at least one strand in Merleau-Ponty's argumentation via Gelb and Goldstein's case of Schneider. See Jensen (2009) for a more detailed analysis of the structure of Merleau-Ponty's arguments for the existence of non-representational motor intentionality via the case of Schneider.

[13] I leave it an open question to what extent a modern defenders of a representationalist picture of the mind could defend a model similar to Liepmann's by restricting the model to the sub-personal level.

accounting for the transition from the sensory impression to the appearance of a mind-independent object, if the impression made by the world on our sensibility is understood as, using Quine's expression, mere "surface irritations" without any worldly content.

7 The Problem from the Mental Side

Let us take a further look at the claim that the intellectualist model in question makes the relation between intention and movement unintelligible. So far, I have tried to explicate the alleged mystery from the side of the body: How is the body, understood as a collection of meaning-blind mechanisms, supposed to be responsive to the meaning of intentions? We can also explicate the mystery beginning from the side of the subject who intends to do things. What belongs to the agentive power of the subject on the picture in question? The power of the agent seems to be restricted to the forming of intentions, i.e. to a control over the mental component of bodily action, since the bodily movement itself is understood as simply the results of the workings of blind mechanisms of the bodily movement. Merleau-Ponty expresses this confinement of the sphere of the will when he writes:

> The motor intentions of the living being were converted into objective movements: the will was accorded but an instantaneous fiat and the execution of the act was delivered over to nervous mechanism. (PP, p. 56)

The "motor intentions" (*intentions motrice*) in question here corresponds to what Liepmann called the "motor project" (*Bewegungsentwurf*) for which Merleau-Ponty also uses the expression "motor intentionality" (*intentionalité motrice*, PP, 113). The conversion of the motor intentions into objective movement corresponds to what Merleau-Ponty criticize as Liepmann's reduction of the bodily power (*Können*) to carry out movements in accordance with one's intentions to a property of the nervous system. On the intellectualistic model the power of the agent is restricted to an initiation of a series of events which are external to the will of the agent. This is a consequence of the scientific monism about bodily movements shared between empiricism and intellectualism, according to which, to use Brewer's succinct phrasing, bodily behaviour is reduced to "a mentally induced reflex" (Brewer 1993, p. 311). As Merleau-Ponty points out, on this picture our motility, understood as the capacity to carry out movements according to the intentions of the agent, is not a power which the agent can know herself to possess just by being an agent, since it belongs to the objective body, i.e. to the body as "an ensemble of organs of which we have no notion in immediate experience and which impose their mechanisms, their unknown powers, between ourselves and things" (SC 1983, 190/1990, 204). As Hornsby notes Hume raised an apposite question concerning the consequences of such a view of our capacity to move (Hornsby 2004b, 176):

> How indeed can we be conscious of a power to move our limbs when *we have no such power*, but *only* that to move certain animal spirits which, though they produce at last the motion of limbs, yet operate in such a manner as is wholly beyond our comprehension? (Hume 1748/2000, § 7, pt. I)

A modern version of Hume's question would speak not about the production of animal spirits but more likely of neural and neuro-physiological events as the immediate effects of a conative mental event, such as an intention or a trying. Assuming a denial of substance-dualism, on the intellectualist model my power as an agent must reside in the causal power of my intention *qua* brain event, with the consequence that my actual power is limited to the bringing about of the most proximate effect of the brain-event to be identified by the appropriate science. My true sphere of influence is restricted to the immediate environment of my brain, which, as Hornsby puts it, is not the world we know and inhabit as agents (Hornsby 2004b, 177). McDowell nicely captures the picture of ourselves we get once we accept that the mental items and the bodily movements involved in bodily actions are merely causally related, with the bodily movement in themselves being agency-neutral events:

> Our powers as agents withdraw inwards and our bodies with the powers whose seat they are – which seem to be different powers, since their actualizations are not doings of ours but at best effects of such doings – take on the aspect of alien objects. It comes to seem that what we do, even in those of our actions that we think of as bodily, is at best to direct our wills, as it were from a distance, at changes in those alien objects. (McDowell 1996, 91)

McDowell here suggests that if the picture in question leaves us with an intelligible conception of ourselves at all, it is one that heavily distorts the phenomenology of bodily actions. Merleau-Ponty also indicates that the intellectualist is forced to draw a distorted picture of our conative phenomenology when he, opposing the intellectualist model for bodily agency, writes:

> The subject does not live in a world of states of consciousness or representation from which he would believe himself able to act on and know external things by a sort of miracle. (SC, 1983, p. 189/1990, p. 204)

If the intellectualist model was correct it seems that the only way the agent could makes sense of her own power to carry out her intentions through her bodily movement would be by appealing to a kind of miracle that occur every time she intends to for instance raise her arm. Since the power of the agent has shrunk to the power of forming an intention and setting in motion a causal chain of events beyond her ken and control, her conative phenomenology, if it were true to the facts, should leave it completely mysterious how she ever succeeds in performing the movements that leads to exactly the intended outcome; she would have to believe in a miraculous pre-established harmony since nothing less seem capable of explaining by which "magical operation" the exact movements that satisfy her intentions are brought about.

In our actual experience of performing intentional actions we experience the relation between intentions and relevant movements as, using Merleau-Ponty's word, magical, but not in the sense that it seems to us that we perform a miracle every time we successfully move our body. The relation is experienced as magical

in the sense that it is unproblematic and smooth, i.e. not in need of any mediation from a further power, just like we think of a magical power as a power to bring things forth immediately:

> I move external objects with the help of my own body, which takes hold of them in one place in order to take them to another. But I move my body directly, I do not find it at one objective point in space in order to lead it to another, I have no need of looking for it because it is always with me. I have not need of directing it toward the goal of the movement, in a sense it touches the goal form very beginning and it throws itself toward it. In movement, the relations between my decision and my body are magical ones. (PP, pp. 96–97)

This quote can seem to be contradicting something said by Anscombe in response to someone who says "I can get my arm to move by an act of will but not a matchbox" (Anscombe 1957, p. 52). Such a person might be sitting starring at a matchbox as she makes her utterance. Anscombe responds that if we try to lift our arm in the way such a person tries to move the matchbox, our efforts will be just as much in vain, and that if the problem is how to move the matchbox like we can move our arm, then there really is no problem (Anscombe 1957, p. 52): We can simply reach out and move the matchbox. I find it helpful to bring out why Anscombe's point here is exactly not contradicting Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the special role of the body in action. What Anscombe is dismantling in these passages is a picture of the will which corresponds to the picture that McDowell described as the consequence of the conceptual divorce of the mental and the physical elements of actions. Her point is that our mind doesn't have a special relation to the object we call our body by virtue of the body being the only object we can direct our will at and then it will obey us as if under a magic spell. There is an important respect in which the way I can move the matchbox from side to side is just like the way I can move my hand from side to side. Under normal circumstances both actions are actions I perform without making use of any means-end knowledge about how to perform the action; they are in that sense teleologically basic actions.[14] As Anscombe points out it is often the case that the description under which we are aware of what we are intentionally doing is "at a distance from the details of one's movement" (Anscombe 1957, p. 54). The teleologically most basic description under which one knows what one is doing without having to observe what one is doing might be a description like "I'm tying my shoelaces". When Merleau-Ponty stresses that we can move our body directly, this is exactly a way of saying that we can move our body without our teleologically basic intention being a body-directed intention, in which, for instance, I intend to move my hand with a certain force and velocity in a specified direction. I can move the matchbox in a teleologically basic way exactly because I have a bodily capacity to grasp things and move them that does not require me to direct my will at my bodily organs as if from a distance.

[14] See Grünbaum (2006, p. 86) for the relevant notion of teleologically basic actions, developed via Hornsby's notion (Hornsby 1980).

8 Concluding Remarks on the Transcendental Problem of Bodily Agency

We are now in position to see more clearly the radicality of the basic problem of bodily agency I'm arguing is the analogue of Merleau-Ponty's basic problem of perception. If we are unable to make sense of ourselves as having the power to actually carry out our intentions because the motility of the body is regarded as system of blind mechanisms only externally related to our conative life, then it seems that even our ability to make sense of ourselves as at least possessing intentions to do something is endangered. The reason why we normally have no problem with understanding ourselves as capable of having intentions, such as the intention to pick up a match box, is that we know ourselves to possess basic bodily capacities that correspond to our teleologically basic intentions. I do not know the power, weight and reach of my body as an engineer knows a machine; I know my hands as my grasping power and my legs as my ambulatory power, and it is in virtue of my possession of these powers that I can immediately see an object as within reach and form the intention to grasp, and see a place as within walking distance and intend to walk there (cf. PP, p. 147). If someone sits starring at a matchbox and claims that she is trying to move it, then we will not, at least not at first sight, be able to make sense of her as actually having the intention to move the matchbox, because we cannot see how her intention could correspond to any teleologically basic bodily capacity. The problem with the conception of the bodily movements involved in actions as agency-neutral events only externally related to intentions is that it leaves us as theoreticians in a generalized version of the predicament we are confronted with when facing the match-box starrer. If we fail to make sense of ourselves as possessing teleologically basic bodily capacities, our actual capacity to move our body in accordance with our intentions, come to appear as a mysterious, telekinetic power.[15] It is this problem I think deserves to be called a transcendental problem concerning bodily agency, since it is a problem that concerns the very possibility of us possessing intentions with practical content at all. The problem is the analogue of the problem we saw Merleau-Ponty pinpoint as the consequence of a conception of our perceptual appearances as merely externally related to the appearing object. In the case of perception what is under threat if we accept the conception of our sensibility dictated by scientific naturalism, is the very possibility of regarding ourselves as having so much as an awareness of appearances, because the conception empties the impressions made on us by the objects of the world of any rational

[15] This line of argument draws heavily on Hornsby's way of arguing for the alienating character of the picture in question (Hornsby 1998, pp. 388–89; Hornsby 2004a, b). Hornsby borrows the image of telekinetic powers from Bernhard Williams account of Descartes' mind-body problem (Hornsby 1998, p. 389). McDowell indicates a comparable line of argument against the functionalism of Loar, which drives the explanandum of psychological explanations inwards and "away from the agent's involvement with the world" (McDowell 1998, p. 333). Hornsby pursues a similar argument against a functionalist conception of the mental (1997, p. 114).

meaning. In the case of bodily agency it is the possibility of seeing ourselves as so much as trying to make a difference in the world we perceive that we risk undermining, if we accept a scientific naturalism that reduces our motility to an ensemble of meaning blind-mechanisms.

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