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**Revisiting the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty
in the Context of Contemporary Cognitive Science**

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REVISITING THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MERLEAU-PONTY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY COGNITIVE SCIENCE

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a mid-twentieth century French philosopher whose work was influenced by the German phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty went on to influence existentialism, philosophy of perception, the study of consciousness and subjectivity, and, eventually, contemporary cognitive science. His work uses phenomenological methods to examine embodied perception. He grapples with inherited philosophical questions about mind-body dualism and methods of inquiry. Like most twentieth-century French philosophers, Merleau-Ponty engages with philosophical problems that were set by René Descartes in the 17th century. In fact, his main thesis—that the mental and the material are continuous through one's experience as an embodied consciousness—is a deliberate rejection of Cartesian dualism.

One of the more interesting episodes in the development of phenomenology throughout the first half of the twentieth century is the move away from and subversion of the transcendental philosophy of the field's first major thinker, Edmund Husserl. Some version of this shift was carried out by most major phenomenologists in the generations that followed Husserl: Heidegger, for instance, factored the conditions of history into a subject's attempt at articulating the meaning of being (Wheeler 2020). In the decades that followed, Jean-Paul Sartre, in "Transcendence of the Ego," denied the possibility of a transcendental, interior ego, instead putting forward a transcendent ego that exists out there in the world (Sartre 2011). Merleau-Ponty made this shift away from Husserl's formulation of transcendental phenomenology as well, and in the process brought philosophy closer to empirical psychology and made it a resource for contemporary cognitive science.

His shift—from a transcendental to an embodied phenomenology—entailed a reworked understanding of perception and the phenomenal field, which would be conditioned by the world and its facticity. This caused a tension within Merleau-Ponty's own thought between his commitment to the very transcendental project of articulating *a priori* claims of necessity about the essences of perceived objects, and the impossibility of articulating factually unconditioned

transcendental claims. This tension plays itself out in his thought and his methodology as a more extensive tension between those transcendental commitments and his use of the psychology of his day to build out his theory of the body and embodied perception.

We can understand this tension through the lens of what has been called *weak methodological naturalism* (Reynolds 2016, 101), or the rough, unfixed agreement between the results of phenomenological inquiry and that of empirical psychology and cognitive science. This relationship of reciprocity also plays out in the work of the enactivist cognitive scientists; they use the work of Merleau-Ponty to develop their own theory of consciousness and perception. All of which is interesting as it demonstrates the way in which his thought bridges the divide between philosophy and the sciences.

Merleau-Ponty and Transcendental Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty's work to develop a phenomenology of embodied consciousness is, in certain ways, a continuation of Husserl's project. Husserl aimed to use phenomenological methodology to provide a bridge between philosophy and the natural sciences. His primary project is similar to Merleau-Ponty's efforts to negotiate the theoretical gaps between philosophy and the human sciences. However, while Merleau-Ponty does draw on certain aspects of Husserl's thought, he also radicalizes them. To understand this moment in intellectual history, it is worth asking how Merleau-Ponty changed Husserl's formulation of a transcendental phenomenology and, whether, in doing so, he abandoned the central concept.

But before answering this question, it is worth clarifying what it means for transcendental phenomenology to be transcendental. In "Was Merleau-Ponty a 'Transcendental' Phenomenologist?," Andrew Inkipin explains how Husserl's phenomenology is transcendental. In Husserl's thought, according to Inkipin, there are three key notions that come together to define transcendental phenomenology: 1) the notion of the transcendental ego, 2) the method of phenomenological reduction, and 3) the concept of the field of pure phenomena.

Inkipin shows that when Husserl is trying to develop a methodology to make transcendental claims about the intentional objects of experience, he assumes a notion of a transcendental ego. A transcendental ego is the point of subjectivity left after phenomenological reduction; it is the form of ego which has the potential to serve as the foundation of knowledge

(Ruikas 1999, 501). This opaque notion carries over the emphasis on experience and ‘first-personhood’ from Husserl’s key influence, Franz Brentano.

Second, for Husserl, the phenomenological reduction amounts to bracketing specifically the question of the validity of the experience, so that inquiry can take place into the structure of intentional consciousness and the intentionality of the object of experience. The reason for bracketing is so that the structure of experience is not reliant on the existence of the object. This reduction is preliminary, though. According to Inkpin, “the point of reduction is to shake off accountability to the way the world happens to be” (Inkpin 2016, 29). The effect of this preliminary shaking of accountability is that Husserl’s phenomenology studies what he calls “pure” or “absolute” phenomena. Because of the method of reduction, Husserl is able to study not just actual experience but an “as-if” kind of experience.

Third, the field of pure phenomena is accessible via “transcendental experience.” Husserl’s phenomenological inquiry is independent of non-transcendental (i.e., empirical, contingent, sensory) experience. Inkpin describes it as being *a priori*. For inquiry towards objects of experience, Husserl employs a free variation of analysis. This method enables the phenomenologist to understand the “constitution of the intentional object in consciousness” and thus enables the phenomenologist to intuit the essence of the object (Inkpin 2016, 30). And in this way—the essence of the object being accessible to the phenomenologist—*essentiality* is a defining notion in Husserl’s phenomenology.

Inkpin states that Husserl’s goal with this methodology is to make “claims with a *specific modality*” (Inkpin 2016, 30). That modality is, as he has said, *apriority*. However, Inkpin also states that, as Husserl makes transcendental claims, he insists on a *necessity* to these claims. And so, the criteria that Inkpin ascribes to transcendental phenomenology are commitments to the notion of a transcendental ego, to a kind of phenomenological reduction along the lines of Husserl’s, and to a view of a field of pure phenomena. Building on these three, Inkpin identifies three more criteria that make Husserl’s phenomenology transcendental: that it makes *a priori* and *necessary* claims about things’ *essences*.

From here, the most obvious part of the shift Merleau-Ponty makes from Husserl’s approach to phenomenology is to reject transcendental subjectivity and embrace a subjectivity that arises out of embodied consciousness. The effect of this is that instead of transcendental subjectivity being the basis for the intentional structures of consciousness, it is the embodied

consciousness. However, this does not mean that the experience of this kind of subjectivity is characterized by immanence but, rather, by a perspectival transcendence, as “the states and objects that enter into embodied consciousness are—like perceived physical objects—incompletely and perspectively given, so that its (self-)awareness is always, on principle, imperfect or incomplete” (Inkpin 2016, 33). My interpretation of Inkpin’s analysis is that, because experience is characterized by transcendence (in the sense that the object is never completely given, but only given perspectively) the phenomenal field is impure and our perception of the object is always incomplete and open. This extends to self-reflection generally, which hampers the act of reduction. Embodied experience, in the form of the embodied phenomenal field, is characterized by imperfect, perspectival transcendence. This is a step away from what Husserl meant by transcendence because it is not *a priori* but is instead based in what an individual experiences in a particular place at a particular time, through their own senses.

Within his discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s view of an imperfect phenomenal field, Inkpin describes how Merleau-Ponty reworks the notion of *a priori* truths. He equates them with being explicitly factual truths, as any phenomena within the embodied phenomenal field are “factually conditioned” (Inkpin 2016, 40). This entails that necessity is also conditioned by facticity; it is “determined by contingent underlying facts” (Inkpin 2016, 40). This divergence from Husserl should prompt us to ask if Merleau-Ponty’s factually conditioned *a priori* truths and notion of necessity are truly notions of the *a priori* and of necessity. The intent seems to be to extrapolate the general conditions of experience from an individual’s specific experiences.

As for facticity, Merleau-Ponty’s usage of this word seems to vary slightly. He does use it in the Husserlian and Heideggerian sense of the givenness of what is perceived. However he also uses it to refer to the contingent quality of what is perceived. That is what Inkpin is picking up on here. And thus the phenomenal field, in this formulation, can be understood as being conditioned by contingency. Contingency, for Merleau-Ponty, is the openness of the world, which is always in flux and can never be fully explained. This openness and flux extends to the body and the phenomenal field: as the nature of the body is subject to change, so too is the phenomenal field (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 463).

On the use of the term ‘reduction,’ Inkpin suggests that Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, is using the word in a different way from Husserl. Due to Merleau-Ponty’s famous remark that “the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us

is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xv), it might seem strange that one would not be able to complete a full Husserlian reduction, as it is simply a bracketing of the question of the nature of existence of the intentional object. As Inkipin says, this kind of reduction is “an all-or-nothing matter” (Inkipin 2016, 36). This impossibility is due to the fact that, for Merleau-Ponty, in his shift from a transcendental constituting subject to a subject entangled with an embodied flow of consciousness, one’s body exists as a part of the world; therefore, one always holds on to an underlying assumption of the world’s existence. This is due to “the world [being] a permanent presence that permeates and defines the body...” (Inkipin 2016, 36). In other words, this permeating presence demands of us an assumption that “the world (real or intelligible) is a fully determined whole” (Inkipin 2016, 37) and that it is populated by fully constituted objects. This assumption is what Merleau-Ponty calls “objective thought,” or that the world is composed of objects fully constituted prior to their being perceived by the subject.

The consequences of this impossibility for phenomenology are stark. For Husserl, a complete reduction is the crucial first step that must be accomplished before moving forward with the analysis of the intentional structure of phenomena. If reduction could not be accomplished, the absolute kind of knowledge that Husserlian transcendental phenomenology tries to attain would be impossible. Thus, to reiterate the point about Merleau-Ponty’s shift in assumptions about modality, the claims that an embodied phenomenology make are conditioned by facticity and contingency. However, a phenomenology of embodied perception still holds on to a notion of essence.

The important point here is that Merleau-Ponty’s terminology is Husserl’s terminology: he is still performing phenomenological reduction with the aim of dissolving the subject-object distinction, and his phenomenology still has a notion of a phenomenal field. That is, he is still making transcendental claims about things essences; however, the model assumptions about his reading of the transcendental are factually conditioned. The terms are the same, but his usage of them differs.

Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenological Methodology

Against this backdrop we can assess Merleau-Ponty’s methodology, what it tries to accomplish, and its theoretical consequences. Jack Reynolds, in “Merleau-Ponty’s Gordian Knot:

Transcendental Phenomenology, Science, and Naturalism,” is also interested in the relationship between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, but he shifts the discussion towards Merleau-Ponty’s views on methodological issues pertaining to phenomenological reduction, eidetic analysis, genetic phenomenology, the relation between the transcendental and the embodied, and between phenomenology and more strictly empirical sciences.

The distinction between what Reynolds calls “inflated” and “deflated” readings of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in *Phenomenology of Perception* lies in the way these two divergent readings emphasize the transcendental nature of the phenomenological reduction. Both readings give interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s perplexing remark on the impossibility of a Husserlian reduction. Giving the subject direct access to the object is not possible. Inflationary readings, which Reynolds attributes to Bryan Smyth and Sara Heinämaa, claim that Merleau-Ponty’s overall project is a fundamentally Kantian one. This means that Merleau-Ponty moves from entertaining the empirical psychology of his day to a progressively more wholly transcendental project. It is worth noting that this reading does not prohibit a ‘naturalized’ understanding of Merleau-Ponty, but it holds that Merleau-Ponty’s primary goal is the investigation of transcendental phenomena and not their empirical counterparts (Smyth 2010).

A deflationary reading, which Reynolds attributes to Taylor Carman (2008), views the phenomenological reduction as preliminary within Merleau-Ponty’s methodology. The weight here seems to lie on his existentialist commitment to a world existing before thought, on the assumption of objective thought, and therefore on how the phenomenological reduction is “not so much to ‘the things themselves’ but to *thought* about the things themselves” (Reynolds 2016, 85). Thus identified, essences are at a remove from their existing objects, and any knowledge of them is fallible. Reynolds describes this reading as being fallibilist or even offering a pragmatic kind of phenomenology. If this is the better reading, then it is not clear whether or not Merleau-Ponty is fully committed to a Husserlian phenomenological method, as phenomenology is typically not about attaining best-fit explanations but, instead, determining the essence of things.

Reynolds rightly identifies the key failings of both interpretations. The inflationary reading neglects his engagement with the empirical sciences, and the deflationary reading seems to downplay, in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s own methodology, its being wholly a form of phenomenology. It is worth noting that throughout much of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is engaging with the psychology of his day—notably with the Schneider case and

work on phantom limbs (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 133)—to inform his phenomenology. However, he is not simply making an appeal to what we experience, as one imagines a more straightforward form of empiricism would do. Instead, he is making an appeal to the (roughly) universally shared form of experience, which is embodied consciousness. The body, as a physical thing, can be understood as a material object, just as it can be understood as an object within the phenomenal field. His embodied phenomenology is built out and informed by the results of psychology. And as he does this, he expects psychology to be informed by work being done in phenomenology. The relationship, as Reynolds reads Merleau-Ponty, ought to be reciprocal, “that philosophy and the sciences are intertwined” (Reynolds 2016, 101).

To consolidate all of this, we might ask: How does Reynolds resolve this tension within Merleau-Ponty’s work, which implies both inflationary and deflationary readings? Reynolds does so by identifying his methodological commitments both to a reworked version of the methodology of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology, which Inkpin explicates, and also to an accommodation with the psychology of Merleau-Ponty’s time, and that the results of both should broadly be continuous with each other. Reynolds describes this as a form of *weak methodological naturalism*. He is not an ontological naturalist, as, being a phenomenologist, he still views the mind and the world as fundamentally entwined: the world plays a role in constituting subjectivity, and conscious subjectivity plays a role in constituting the objects of the world. To reiterate his main thesis, this intertwining, for Merleau-Ponty, happens at the location of the body.

Cognitive and Neuroscientists Interacting with Merleau-Ponty

So far, Merleau-Ponty has developed phenomenology in a direction that emphasizes the embodiment of human experience. This raises the question of whether Merleau-Ponty’s method is aligned with naturalistic and empirical methods. In other words, what is the exact relationship between Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology and empirical psychology?

Before developing an understanding of that relationship, it is worth noting that Merleau-Ponty’s thought seems to be at odds with computational approaches to cognitive science. The dominant paradigm in cognitive science, to this day, is to treat the mind as though it is a computer and thought as though it is a form of computational processing. We might, however, wonder whether Merleau-Ponty’s work is aligned with certain theories in cognitive science that

are more attentive to the role of non-computational features of mental life, such as emotional regulation and affordances, in producing human thought and experience.

At this stage, an image of Merleau-Ponty's work interacting with and being used by cognitive science is worthwhile. In "Affective Incarnations: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Challenge to Bodily Theories of Emotion," Roald, Levin, and K ppe (2018) piece together an understanding of Merleau-Ponty's theory of affect, which, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he never covers directly. They then compare their reconstruction of Merleau-Ponty's theory of affect to the affective theory of the neuropsychologist, Antonio Damasio. They argue that there is a degree of continuity between the two; however, they claim that Damasio's theory is inadequate. They make the assertion that "Merleau-Ponty's insights into the dynamic, affective body-subject reveal a comprehensive phenomenology of emotion that needs to be incorporated into any grand theory of emotion that purports to take embodiment serious" (Roald, Levin, and K ppe, 2018, 206).

To explicate Roald, Levin, and K ppe's argument, and to further explicate Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body and perception, it is worth briefly understanding the position Merleau-Ponty lays out in *Phenomenology of Perception*. One of his primary theses in *Phenomenology of Perception* is that the body is simultaneously a perceived object out there in the world and also that which does the perceiving; for Merleau-Ponty, these are "two facets of one and the same act" (Roald, Levin, and K ppe, 2018, 208). Given the implicit assumption within experience of the world as a permeating presence, discussed above in the explication of Inkipin's analysis, we each experience our own body as with the world, not just being in it. All of which means, as Roald, Levin, and K ppe write, "to have a body is not a passive state of *having* or being submitted to experience, but rather to actively *be an experience*, an *affective experience*" (Roald, Levin, and K ppe, 2018, 208). From *Phenomenology of Perception*, they are trying to elucidate that experience, as [bodily] perception, is innately affective. Extending this to a theory of subjectivity, the body, as a thing in the world, affectively perceives the world. However the body can also be sensed by another, which alters our own affective perceptions. The exchange of affective meaning goes in both directions (Roald, Levin, and K ppe, 2018, 211). For Merleau-Ponty, perceptions of the world are "already pregnant with irreducible meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 25), and our experiences in and interactions with the world and

with others are a vital part of the picture of consciousness and subjectivity which *Phenomenology of Perception* provides.

They compare this, as stated above, with the work of Damasio. His conception of affect builds off of the James-Lange theory of emotion, which holds that emotions and affect arise out of the body and bodily action. This is to say that foundational emotions happen at a neurological level. Emotions, for Damasio, build to primordial feelings which grow increasingly complex as the self is constituted by the interactions of affect and sensation (Damasio, 2018, 104). Here, the foundation of affect is the body. They point out that Martha Nussbaum has described Damasio as a non-reductive physicalist.

The point of criticism that Roald, Levin, and Køppe lodge against Damasio is that, because he views affect as a complex system wholly rooted in physical neurology, he is unable to articulate the *interplay* of the world and affect. In other words, Damasio takes affect as reducible to the physical body, whereas Merleau-Ponty holds that “affects are, as such, inseparable from, but also not reducible to, the subject or the world” (Roald, Levin, and Køppe, 2018, 216).

Merleau-Ponty’s position here was one of the primary influences on Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch when they published *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, inaugurating the enactivist approach to cognitive science, as well as a movement around it. And Roald, Levin, and Køppe are in fact enactivist cognitive scientists. For our purposes, the most relevant feature of the enactivist approach is its taking of body and world as constituting the conscious subject; consciousness is a complex process that arises out of one’s perception of and interaction with the world. “In a nutshell, the enactive approach consists of two points: ... perception consists in perceptually guided action and ... cognitive structures emerge from the recurrent sensorimotor patterns that allow action to be perceptually guided” (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991, 173). The movement around the enactivist approach formed as a reaction to cognitivism—the dominant paradigm in cognitive science during the 1980s when *The Embodied Mind* was published (Ward, Silverman, and Villalobos, 2017, 365). Cognitivism articulates an understanding of consciousness as being composed of inner mental states that correspond to and represent the object of consciousness. This is equated with computationalism (Watson and Coulter, 2008, 1). While cognitivism sees

consciousness as being reducible to the brain, enactivism sees it as emerging out of interaction with the world, and thus as being irreducible.

What is relevant here is the particular way in which Merleau-Ponty's thought is used by these cognitive scientists. His description of conscious subjectivity as forming via the act of interacting with the world through the body is a cornerstone of the enactivist approach to cognitive science. His work is used as a source of insights for the movement in cognitive science in development of thought on the nature of consciousness. Thus, the relationship between cognitive science and Merleau-Ponty's strain of phenomenology is reciprocal. This is the methodological naturalism of Reynolds at play.

The approach which Roald, Levin, and K oppe, as well as the enactivists generally, take up relates Merleau-Ponty's work to the findings of cognitive science and creates a dialogue with his work. They accept that the methodology and hence the epistemology of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is, at some level, workable. They each take Merleau-Ponty's resultant theory of perception and cross reference it with their own, usually enactivistic, understanding of perception. This is a vindication of his work as well as of the weak methodological naturalism which Reynolds attributed to him.

This reciprocal relationship even extends to certain metaphysical claims: as Dave Ward says in his introduction to enactivist cognitive science, the enactivist approach is a "rejection of a strictly realist or objectivist conception of the world to which we respond in perception, in favour of a conception of the world as both a product and reflection of our engaged activity" (Ward, Silverman, and Villalobos, 2017, 365). Ward makes it clear that not everyone who adopts the enactivist approach takes such a radical metaphysical position, but some do.

The Crisis of Modern Thought

Why does this matter? In "Philosophy as Interrogation," Merleau-Ponty, in his discussion on Husserl and Heidegger, articulates his understanding that there were two parallel crises of modern thought. On the one hand, the problem is solipsism: We have inherited a worldview that forces us to wonder how to bridge the perceived gap between our subjective experience and the stuff that is seemingly external to our subjectivity, or, simply put, the world. That world is both crucial in the process of constituting our own subjectivity and troublesome because it is external to us, in the traditional Cartesian worldview. Moreover, that world includes the independent

existence of other people with subjective experiences like our own. And, on the other hand, the natural and social sciences seemingly reduce truth to contingencies. Namely, in sociology, history and psychology (the human sciences), subjective human experiences that were once the focus of philosophy are reduced to being merely the effects of determinate social and historical causes and psychological states. Solipsism restricts the human sciences, the human sciences restrict philosophy, and this in turn erodes the possibility for the human sciences to have access to a distinctive truth of human experience. In discussing the erosion of possibility of the universality of Marxian history, Merleau-Ponty said the “core universality around which history was to organize itself has disintegrated” (1963, 170). He picks up this topic again in “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man” (Merleau-Ponty 1964), in which he puts it succinctly:

The man who philosophizes believes wrongly that when he thinks and affirms he is only experiencing the mute contact of his thoughts with his thoughts. He is wrong to proceed as if he were not linked with the surrounding circumstances, for as soon as one considers him from the outside, as the historian of philosophy does, he appears to be conditioned by physiological, psychological, sociological and historical causes. His thought appears therefore as a product with no intrinsic value... (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 48)

This is the core tension at the center of modern intellectual life: everything must get reduced to subjectivity or materiality.

In even more general terms, the monistic fixedness of premodern and early modern thought gives way to a necessitated “new sense of the *plurality* of possibilities...[and of] the expectations of a free reintegration” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 172). The persistent erosion of knowledge leads to a state of knowledge where no un-eroded ground is required. This sentiment, turned directly towards philosophy, is Merleau-Ponty's notion of philosophy as interrogation, or, rather, self-interrogation. Between the described erosion of knowledge and the above-mentioned state of eroding knowledge, there is a simple fact of modern intellectual life, a gap between explaining and understanding.

Phenomenological reduction, and Merleau-Ponty's methodology more broadly, become relevant here. Once we have experienced phenomenological reduction, he emphasizes that "we no longer have to try to understand how a for-itself can think of another from the ground of its own absolute solitude or how it could think of a preconstituted world in the very moment that it constitutes the world..." (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 176). In this way, by collapsing the distinction between the subject and the object, intertwining them at the location of the body, Merleau-Ponty interprets phenomenological reduction as the thing which resolves the core tension in modern intellectual life.

Through my discussion of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology's influence on the enactivist cognitive scientists, I interpret them as working, in some part, to resolve this crisis too. Their claims about the irreducibility of consciousness to the physical and its emergence out of the action of perceiving the world—which means that consciousness in the form of the body exists in the world, altogether, constituting the subject—entails there is a lack of any real distinction between mind, the body and the world. This means that the weak methodological naturalism of a phenomenology of embodiment is playing a central role in this dynamic. The dialogue between the human sciences and phenomenology functions to show a path through the tension between the tendencies of objectivism and solipsism.

Conclusion

To bring all of this together, Merleau-Ponty's shift from a transcendental phenomenology to an embodied one creates a tension between what commitments to transcendental philosophy he keeps and his new notion that such transcendental claims would be factually conditioned. This tension is on display in his methodology where, in order to build a theory of bodily perception, he pays attention to the results of the psychology of his day. This relationship between his phenomenology and his use of psychological inquiry can be seen as a kind of weak methodological naturalism. Such a relationship, seen at a much broader scale, works to navigate the tension between the subject and the object, which is the central tension at the heart of modern thought.

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