

TAYLOR CARMAN AND MARK B. N. HANSEN

Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was one of the most original and important philosophers of the past century. Yet in many ways the full scope of his contribution is becoming clear only now, more than forty years after his death. His impact on philosophy, psychology, and criticism has been enormous, although his intellectual reputation was initially somewhat overshadowed – first by the greater notoriety of his friend Jean-Paul Sartre and then by structuralism and poststructuralism in the latter half of the century. As a result, in part due to his premature death, Merleau-Ponty's presence in contemporary intellectual life has remained strangely elusive. His influence has cut across disciplinary boundaries, yet it has tended to move beneath the surface of mainstream scholarly and popular intellectual discourse.

As a result, perhaps understandably, academic and nonacademic readers alike have been slow to appreciate the real depth and significance of Merleau-Ponty's thought, which cannot be neatly pigeon-holed in familiar conceptual or historical categories. He was a phenomenologist above all, yet he differed in fundamental ways from the three other major phenomenologists, Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. Unlike these philosophers, Merleau-Ponty availed himself of empirical data and theoretical insights drawn from the biological and social sciences, although he was not a psychologist, a linguist, or an anthropologist. He could fairly be called an existentialist, although that label has come to seem less and less informative in hindsight, embracing as it did such a disparate array of literary and intellectual figures. Merleau-Ponty was not himself a structuralist, although he saw sooner and more deeply than his contemporaries the importance of Saussurian linguistics and the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who remained a close friend throughout his life.

Cambridge University Press

0521809894 - The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty

Edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen

Excerpt

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It was a life as private and discreet as Sartre's was public and spectacular. Merleau-Ponty was born 14 March 1908 and raised as a Catholic in Paris by his mother following the death of his father. His early career followed the typical path of a French academic: he attended the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and then, with his friends Lévi-Strauss and Simone de Beauvoir, the École Normale Supérieure, graduating in 1930 and passing the *agrégation* in his early twenties. (Merleau-Ponty appears in Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* under the pseudonym "Pradelle.") In 1933, while teaching at a lycée in Beauvais, he submitted his first scholarly work, two research proposals on the nature of perception, to the Caisse Nationale des Sciences. Two years later, he returned to Paris as an *agrégé répétiteur* (junior member) of the École Normale. It was around this time that he attended Aron Gurwitsch's lectures on Gestalt psychology, and, in 1938, he completed his first major philosophical work, *The Structure of Behavior*, submitted as his *thèse complémentaire* for the *doctorat d'état* but not published until 1942. In 1939, Merleau-Ponty enlisted in the French army, serving as a lieutenant in the infantry; following demobilization, he returned to teaching at the École Normale and began work on what would be his major work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

The end of the war saw Merleau-Ponty in a new position at the University of Lyon, where he lectured on child psychology, aesthetics, and the mind-body problem and joined his fellow intellectuals – Sartre, Beauvoir, Michel Leiris, Raymond Aron, and others – in the editing and publication of the influential and still-prominent periodical *Les Temps modernes*. During this time, Merleau-Ponty discovered the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, which he began teaching and integrating into his phenomenological account of perception as an embodied experience of being in the world. He published two books in 1948: *Humanism and Terror*, a volume of essays on philosophy and politics, and *Sense and Non-Sense*, a collection devoted to aesthetics, metaphysics, and psychology. With his reputation firmly established, Merleau-Ponty joined the faculty of the Sorbonne in 1949 as professor of psychology and pedagogy at the Institute of Psychology, where he concentrated on theoretical issues related to developmental psychology, including experimental work by Jean Piaget, Henri Wallon, Wolfgang Köhler, and Melanie Klein.

In 1952, Merleau-Ponty was appointed to the chair of philosophy at the Collège de France, a position once occupied by Henri Bergson and similar to those later held by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Merleau-Ponty was instrumental in securing Lévi-Strauss's election to the Collège in 1959, and, in 1962, Lévi-Strauss dedicated his book *The Savage Mind* to the memory of his deceased friend. Merleau-Ponty's inaugural lecture at the Collège, "In Praise of Philosophy," both marked his debt to the work of Bergson and indicated the limitations of this eminent forebear. Elevation to the most prestigious academic position in philosophy in France triggered a period of intense work on Merleau-Ponty's part, much of it devoted to the philosophy of language, history, and politics. The following years witnessed a break with Sartre, in the wake of increasingly sharp political and philosophical differences. As Lydia Goehr argues in her essay in this volume, the two had radically different conceptions of the nature of political commitment and the relative autonomy of philosophical reflection. Although the break occurred in 1953 and led to his resignation from the editorial board of *Les Temps modernes*, Merleau-Ponty made it official in 1955 with the publication of *Adventures of the Dialectic*, a skeptical assessment of Marxist theory as a guide to political practice and the catalyst of Sartre's own *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Claude Lefort's essay offers a rich account of the sophistication of Merleau-Ponty's political thought and his increasing awareness of the essential indeterminacy of human actions and events, an indeterminacy less alien to Marx himself than to the scientific pretensions of subsequent Marxist orthodoxy.

In the late 1950s Merleau-Ponty began to devote more time to his professional responsibilities. He edited *Les Philosophes célèbres*, a massive compendium of essays by important academic philosophers of the day, including Jean Beaufret, Roger Caillois, Jean Starobinski, Karl Löwith, Gilles Deleuze, and Alphonse de Waelhens. Many of Merleau-Ponty's own contributions to this anthology, introductions to the various sections of the book, appear in *Signs* (1960). During his nine years as professor of philosophy at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty devoted lecture cycles to a vast array of topics, including important courses on the concept of nature (1956–60). All the while he was at work on two major philosophical undertakings: one provisionally titled *Vérité et existence*, the other *The Prose of the World*. The former may well have been part of the work later titled

The Visible and the Invisible, which, despite its unfinished state and posthumous publication, constitutes his final major philosophical contribution. Merleau-Ponty's brilliant philosophical career, in full bloom, indeed still clearly in ascent, was abruptly cut short on 3 May 1961 when he died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-three.

Recently, renewed efforts to come to grips with Merleau-Ponty's philosophical achievement have been gaining some momentum in the English-speaking world. As part of this trend, the essays in this volume attempt to spell out the substance of his central insights and highlight the enduring legacy of his ideas in such diverse fields as epistemology and the philosophy of mind, psychology and cognitive science, biology and the philosophy of nature, aesthetics, and the philosophy of history and politics. What characterizes Merleau-Ponty's work in all these domains is his unique combination of penetrating insight into the phenomena, his perspicuous view of the origin and organization of knowledge, and his command of a wide range of literary and artistic references to render his arguments vivid and culturally relevant.

Admittedly, the style that emerges from Merleau-Ponty's unique blend of interests and abilities is at times eclectic. His arguments are not systematically organized; his prose is often lush, occasionally hyperbolic; and he delivers few memorable bon mots or resonant slogans by which to identify and recall his considered views. Indeed, he rarely asserts those views in the form of discrete, conspicuous propositions. Instead, his approach is more often interrogative, suggestive, elliptical, conciliatory, yet in the end persistent and unmistakable. Merleau-Ponty cultivates a deliberately nonadversarial dialectical strategy that is bound to seem alien, even disconcerting, to anyone educated in the explicit theoretical assertions and blunt argumentative techniques of contemporary analytic philosophy. He often avoids stating a thesis directly by way of staking out a position in contrast to competing views, or else he does so only obliquely, after extended preliminary discussion, exploration, and imaginative unfolding of the problem at hand. More frequently, and more confusingly, he will often try to imagine himself into the philosophical perspectives of the thinkers and ideas he is critically examining, borrow their insights, appropriate their terminology for his own purposes, and only then make a clean break by pronouncing a negative verdict in favor of his own (often radically different) position. What

might initially sound like cautious doubts, tentative objections, and subtle reformulations in Merleau-Ponty's prose often prove, on closer inspection, to signal fundamental disagreements, deep shifts in perspective, and startlingly original insights. In view of these potential stylistic and substantive stumbling blocks, it is worth trying to get a preliminary overview of Merleau-Ponty's work, its sources, its characteristic features, and its continuing relevance to contemporary philosophy, psychology, and criticism.

The chief inspiration behind Merleau-Ponty's thought as a whole was the phenomenology that emerged in Germany in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, he and Sartre both, although separately and in different ways, discovered the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Max Scheler, introduced them to a French audience, and began to make their own original contributions to the field. Phenomenology was the chief formative influence on Merleau-Ponty, and yet, as we shall see, his own approach differed crucially from that of any of its other major figures, Sartre in particular.¹

Husserl, the founder of the movement, had in effect inaugurated a new way of doing philosophy, and with it a novel conception of the nature and purpose of philosophical reflection. Having abandoned his own early effort to analyze the fundamental concepts of arithmetic in psychological terms, and moreover breaking with the indirect theory of perception espoused by his mentor, Franz Brentano, Husserl developed a detailed account of what Brentano called the "intentionality" of consciousness, that is to say, its object-directedness, its *of*-ness, or "aboutness." Husserl's theory of intentionality marks a watershed in the history of late modern philosophy because, although Brentano was responsible for importing the term into our technical vocabulary, it was Husserl who effectively put the concept to work against many of the guiding assumptions that had dominated psychology and the philosophy of mind since Descartes.

It is not, of course, as if no one before Brentano or Husserl knew that consciousness is (typically) consciousness *of* something, that our mental attitudes are directed toward objects and states of affairs in the world. And yet, astonishingly, that humble fact had managed to slip through the cracks of Cartesian and Lockean epistemology, perhaps precisely owing to its seeming obviousness. According to the indirect representationalist theory of ideas in Descartes and Locke,

by contrast, what we are directly aware of is, strictly speaking, not external objects, but our own mental states, which (presumably) both respond to and represent those objects. Representationalism thus sought to analyze, and perhaps explain, the directedness of consciousness by positing inner mental tokens whose function it was to depict or describe things out in the world. Ideas, or in Kantian jargon “representations” (*Vorstellungen*), thus formed a kind of bridge, both causal and experiential, between the inner and the outer and were thus made to serve both a rational and a mechanical function simultaneously: ideas were at once supposed to be *effects* produced in us by the external world and to contain or *express* our knowledge of that world. If we could grasp the peculiar nature and operation of those representational intermediaries, it was assumed, we would understand the relation between the mind and the world. Intentionality would then reveal itself not as a primitive feature of experience, but as an emergent, derived phenomenon – perhaps even an illusion, as Berkeley in effect argued.

Yet even supposing that intentionality is a kind of illusion, the question remains what our awareness of our own ideas consists in, for ideas are themselves objects of awareness. Indeed, that’s just what “ideas” were meant to be: objects of awareness. But this just shows that the attempt to dissolve intentionality in the theory of ideas was incoherent from the outset, because that theory took the notion of our awareness of our own ideas for granted as self-evident, and hence unworthy of critical consideration in its own right. The very notion of an indirect representationalist theory of perception thus presupposes intentionality in the way it conceives of our epistemic relation to our own ideas, and yet it disallows itself any recognition of that relation as an essential aspect of thought or perception.

Husserl’s phenomenology was groundbreaking in its rejection of this epistemological picture, which it managed to do in part by distinguishing between the *objects* and the *contents* of consciousness.² There is a difference, that is, between the things we are aware of and the contents of our awareness of them. This distinction allows us to conceive of intentionality as something different from and irreducible to the causal connections between external objects and internal psychological states, for the objects of my awareness are not

(ordinarily) the contents of my mind; rather, those inner contents constitute my awareness *of* outer objects. Intentional content is not (ordinarily) *what* I am aware of; it is rather the *of*-ness, the directedness of my awareness. As Wilfrid Sellars would later argue, traditional epistemology tried to draw both the rational and the causal dimensions of perception onto the same map, as it were, thus generating the hybrid, arguably incoherent, concept of “ideas” as all-purpose intermediaries between mind and world.³

Husserl, by contrast, like Sellars, and, more recently, John McDowell, insists on a distinction between the normative and the non-normative, between the “ideal” (abstract) and the “real” (concrete) aspects of mental phenomena, between the intentional content of experience and the causal conditions in the world (and in our brains) that allow it to have that content. The ideal, normatively defined, timeless content of an intentional state is what Husserl calls its *noema*, in contrast to its *noesis*, the token psychological episode occurring in time. Husserl’s phenomenological method thus involves two coordinated abstractions, or “reductions,” that serve to zero in on the noema, or pure intentional content as such. The first, the “transcendental reduction,” or *epochê*, consists in directing one’s attention away from the “transcendent” (perspectivally given) world back to the “immanent” (epistemically transparent) contents of consciousness. This reduction takes us from the external world, broadly speaking, to the inner domain of the mental. The second, the “eidetic reduction,” points upward, as it were, toward the ideal, normative aspects of mental content, away from its real temporal and causal properties. This reduction moves us away from factual psychological reality toward atemporal conceptual and semantic content, from facts to essences.

What inspired more than one generation of phenomenologists in all this was Husserl’s insistence on simply describing intentionality adequately at the outset, prior to any construction of theories, which tend more often to obscure than illuminate what he called “the things themselves” (*die Sachen selbst*). Philosophical explanations frequently go wrong precisely by beginning with impoverished or distorted descriptions of the phenomena they set out to analyze. To understand Merleau-Ponty’s work at all, one must appreciate his abiding commitment to Husserl’s conception of phenomenological

description as an antidote to abstract theorizing, conceptual system building, and reductive philosophical explanation.

Contrary to the impression he often gives, however, Merleau-Ponty was and remained deeply dissatisfied with the letter of Husserl's doctrines, however enthusiastically he embraced the spirit of the enterprise as a whole. To begin with, he could never accept Husserl's distinction between the immanence of consciousness and the transcendence of the external world, or between the mere psychological facts of perceptual experience and the pure essences that alone supposedly constitute its intentionality. Like Heidegger and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty rejected the transcendental and eidetic reductions as illegitimate abstractions from the concrete worldly conditions of experience that render it intelligible to itself. In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, for example, Merleau-Ponty writes, as Husserl never could, "The greatest lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (*PP* viii/xiv/xv).

Heidegger had already attacked the phenomenological reductions, both implicitly in *Being and Time* and explicitly in his lectures of the 1920s. Heidegger rejected what he called the "worldless" subject of Cartesianism,⁴ which he saw reaffirmed in Husserl's conception of a "transcendental ego" conceptually distinct from, although metaphysically identical to, the concrete psychophysical human being. Once I perform the reductions, Husserl insisted, strictly speaking, "I am then not a human I."⁵ But surely it is precisely as a human being that I am able to reflect on my experience and understand myself as intentionally opened onto a world; this is just what calls for phenomenological description. Husserl's studied disregard of concrete existence was thus anathema to Heidegger, who insisted that intentionality be ascribed to embodied human agents, not worldless transcendental subjects: "Transcendental constitution is a central possibility of existence of the factual self."⁶ We understand ourselves precisely as existing beings, defined as much by the *that* of our existence as by the *what* of our nature or identity; indeed, "if there were an entity *whose what is precisely to be and nothing but to be*, then this ideative contemplation of such an entity would . . . amount to a fundamental misunderstanding."⁷ As far as Heidegger was concerned, Husserl's phenomenological reductions amounted to an abstract, theory-driven distortion of the phenomena. In *Being and Time* he therefore advanced his own alternative account not

of some preconceived domain of “pure” consciousness, or transcendental subjectivity, but of what he called our everyday “being-in-the-world” (*In-der-Welt-sein*).⁸

The difference between Husserl and Heidegger, then, is striking, at least in retrospect. Unfortunately, Merleau-Ponty’s naturally conciliatory hermeneutic approach to the texts and thinkers he admired often led him to conflate the two. For example, Merleau-Ponty seems to read Husserl’s theory of essential or eidetic intuition into Heidegger’s conception of human existence as being-in-the-world. In the preface to the *Phenomenology*, he writes,

The need to proceed by way of essences does not mean that philosophy takes them as its object, but on the contrary that our existence is too tightly held (*prise*) in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and that it requires the field of ideality in order to become acquainted with and to prevail over its own facticity. (*PP* ix/xiv–xv/xvi)

But this is a hybrid. Taking essences as objects was precisely the point of the eidetic reduction. Moreover, Heidegger’s notions of existence and facticity were precisely what Husserl insisted phenomenology must remain indifferent to, just as mathematicians must remain indifferent to the contingent properties of drawings or models of geometric figures: “a phenomenological doctrine of essence is no more interested in the methods by which the phenomenologist might ascertain the *existence* of some experiences,” he writes, “than geometry is interested in how the existence of figures on the board or models on the shelf might be methodically confirmed.”⁹ This abstraction from human existence as the site of intentional phenomena thus marks a sharp and irreconcilable difference between Husserl’s eidetic phenomenology and Heidegger’s “existential analytic,” which Sartre and Merleau-Ponty both followed, although in different ways and with different results.¹⁰

Like all philosophers inspired by phenomenology, what Merleau-Ponty learned from Husserl was the need for faithful description of phenomena, as opposed to metaphysical speculation and philosophical system building. What he learned from Heidegger, by contrast, was that “the things themselves” lend little support to the categories and distinctions on which Husserl based his method of phenomenological reduction and description. Far from revealing a realm of pure transcendental subjectivity separated from the external world

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by what Husserl deems “a veritable abyss,”¹¹ or for that matter a domain of ideal essences distinct in principle from all factual reality, phenomenological inquiry instead finds embodied agents immersed in worldly situations in virtue of perceptual and affective attitudes whose contents are themselves often conceptually indeterminate.

Indeed, notwithstanding his enormous debt to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty arguably goes farther in acknowledging the mutual interdependence of the normative contents of our attitudes and the factual worldly conditions in which those attitudes are enmeshed. For although Heidegger dismissed Husserl’s still all-too-Cartesian conception of human beings as “worldless” subjects, along with his “ontologically obscure separation of the real and the ideal,”¹² he drew a firm distinction of his own between the “ontological” and the merely “ontic,” that is, between the intelligibility of being and contingent facts about entities. Insisting on this “ontological difference” between being and entities, as Heidegger does, in effect prevents him from drawing close connections between general structural dimensions of intelligibility and the fine details of concrete phenomena, above all those pertaining to perception and the body. Remarkably, in all of *Being and Time*, Heidegger says virtually nothing about perception and mentions the body only to exclude it from the existential analytic proper: “corporeity” (*Leiblichkeit*), he says, “contains a problematic of its own, not to be dealt with here.”¹³ For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, perception and the body together constitute *the* phenomenon most crucial to an understanding of what he, too, calls our “being in the world” (*être au monde*). As several of the essays in this volume make clear, in particular those by Charles Taylor, Richard Shusterman, and Judith Butler, Merleau-Ponty’s account of the bodily nature of perception, of the perceptual bedrock of human existence, remains his most profound and original contribution to philosophy.

It should be no surprise, then, that Gestalt psychology was an almost equally important source of inspiration for him. Merleau-Ponty learned about Gestalt theory from Aron Gurwitsch’s lectures at the Institute d’Histoire des Sciences in Paris in the 1930s.¹⁴ Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka, the central figures of the movement, attacked the atomistic and mechanistic assumptions that had dominated psychology for centuries. Indeed, it is one of the enduring legacies of the Gestalt school to have thoroughly