

MERLEAU-PONTY'S *PHENOMENOLOGY*
OF PERCEPTION

This is an advanced introduction to and original interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's greatest work, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Timothy Mooney provides a clear and compelling exposition of the theory of our projective being in the world, and demonstrates as never before the centrality of the body schema in the theory. Thanks to the schema's motor intentionality, our bodies inhabit and appropriate space: our postures and perceptual fields are organised schematically when we move to realise our projects. Thus our lived bodies are ineliminably expressive in being both animated and outcome oriented through-and-through. Mooney also analyses the place of the work in the modern philosophical world, showing what Merleau-Ponty takes up from the Kantian and Phenomenological traditions and what he contributes to each. Casting a fresh light on his magnum opus, this book is essential reading for all those interested in the philosophy and phenomenology of the body.

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OF PERCEPTION

On the Body Informed

TIMOTHY D. MOONEY

University College Dublin



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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations will be used to provide references for primary sources in English translation. The latter will be placed in parentheses in the main text and are also employed in the footnotes. Wherever they are made, emendations to the translations will be indicated in the footnotes.

Works by Merleau-Ponty

<i>PP</i>	<i>Phenomenology of Perception</i>
<i>PrP</i>	<i>The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>The Structure of Behaviour</i>
<i>Sns</i>	<i>Signs</i>
<i>VI</i>	<i>The Visible and the Invisible</i>

Works by Kant and Heidegger

<i>A/B</i>	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> , A ed./B ed.
<i>BT</i>	<i>Being and Time</i>

Works by Husserl

<i>APS</i>	<i>Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis</i>
<i>CES</i>	<i>The Crisis of European Sciences</i>
<i>CM</i>	<i>Cartesian Meditations</i>
<i>EJ</i>	<i>Experience and Judgement</i>
<i>Ids1/Ids2</i>	<i>Ideas</i> , bk 1/bk 2
<i>LI 1/LI 2</i>	<i>Logical Investigations</i> , vol. 1/vol. 2
<i>PCIT</i>	<i>On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Thing and Space</i>

Preface

Never quite eclipsed by other and more fashionable approaches, the account of engaged awareness set out in *Phenomenology of Perception* has come back into its own in recent years. The new movements of embodied and situated cognition owe much to it, and their leading proponents have been careful to acknowledge its importance.¹ In his magnum opus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty exploits both physiology and psychology in the service of his project. He also draws on the diverse expressions of human existence in speech, sport, fine art and dance, and the book itself has an expressive power that exceeds its explicit statements.² For many a newcomer to his thought, it still appears as exciting and forbidding as when it was first published in 1945, and these were my experiences when I began to turn its pages. Exciting because it promises to cast new light on our embodied and perceptual life and on our lived world, and forbidding because Merleau-Ponty's exposition is extremely dense in places and frequently elliptical, for all of his elegant style that has been largely reflected in the new English translation. He often returns to a point much later in the book to clarify and expand on it, and on many occasions it takes much effort to find out whether he is setting out his own position or one that he will come to reject.³ In this study of his great work, I give sustained attention to his account of our projectively perceptual lives. Once his theory of projection and of its expression is brought to the fore, his lines of critique are easier to discern.

In the most general of terms, Merleau-Ponty seeks to show that perception is not so much an event *in* the world as our opening up and progressive revelation *of* the world. We might say that each of us as an actively embodied perceiver is 'the "flaw" in this "great diamond"' (*PP*, 215). His

¹ Gallagher 2017, 5, 10–11, 78–9; Varela et al. 2017, xv–xvii, 3–4. ² *Sms*, 10–11; Morris 2012, xii.

³ In his new translation, Donald Landes preserves the elegance of the original without compromising its accuracy in philosophical terms. See Mooney 2012, 592–3. Landes gives the pagination of the second French edition (Merleau-Ponty 2005) in the margins.

chief target is 'objective thought', originally the thesis that the world is made up of fully accessible objects, and in modernity the allied thesis that only natural science can comprehend them properly. Since the sixteenth century, objective thought has taken two distinctive forms. For 'empiricism', the conscious perceiver can be reduced to the world of causal and physical processes without remainder. For 'intellectualism', consciousness cannot be reduced to this world either in fact or in principle, though everything outside mind and within the world – including our bodies – can only be genuinely known through the scientific concepts and theories that we formulate and impose as rational beings. On the first and bottom-up account, consciousness is absorbed into the scientific universe that is the only genuine reality. On the second and top-down one, it is granted a strange autonomy outside the world-picture they otherwise share. Both are in agreement in dismissing body and world as actually experienced.

Through our bodies as we live and use them and develop through them, according to Merleau-Ponty, we open up the inexhaustible world of possibilities, one of which is scientific research itself. The fundamental philosophical act is 'to return to the lived world beneath the objective world . . . to give back to the thing its concrete physiognomy, to the organisms their proper manner of dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its historical inherence' (*PP*, 57). Only then will we bring to explicit awareness our being in the world, with the aim of grasping 'the project of the world that we are' (*PP*, 427). It is to be emphasised that Merleau-Ponty's concern is not with our bodies alone. To give an anyway adequate view of our existence he must bring out the unity of the human perceiver in all of its attributes, from the affective and imaginative through to the cognitive and volitional. He only foregrounds *le corps propre* because it furnishes our first articulations of the world prior to language, reason and reflection. In a posthumously published prospectus of his thought, he gives his best summation of how it is characterised in his big book:

[T]he body is no longer merely an object in the world, under the purview of a separated spirit. It is on the side of the subject; it is our point of view on the world, the place where the spirit takes on a certain physical and historical situation. As Descartes once said profoundly, the soul is not merely in the body like a pilot in his ship; it is wholly intermingled with the body. The body in turn is wholly animated . . . A "body or postural schema" gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible

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movements or “motor projections” radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space . . . For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to shape our perception of things.⁴ (*PrP*, 5)

It is by way of the phenomenological method as recast in an existential mould that Merleau-Ponty supplies the evidence to back up these claims. In this monograph, my concern above all is with the *phenomenology of perception*. While I concur with Ian Hacking that *Phenomenology of Perception* is essential reading for any school as a classical work of Western philosophy, I cannot agree that it is not to be read as a contribution to that school called phenomenology.⁵ Without a grasp of earlier moves in phenomenology, much of its contributions will be missed, and I situate it within that school and the wider philosophical tradition. It is an exercise in ‘transcendental’ or ‘a priori’ philosophy in which the conceptions of constitutive syntheses and of the productive imagination can be traced back to Immanuel Kant.⁶ Much of the working terminology and transcendental analyses point for all that to the pervasive influence of Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological movement whose contribution is increasingly recognised in contemporary scholarship.⁷ Having been introduced to Husserl’s work by Aron Gurwitsch in Paris, Merleau-Ponty went on to study the former’s unpublished manuscripts in the newly established archive in Leuven. He adopts and adapts Husserl’s method of *epochē* and reduction and many of his central ideas. These include perceptual fulfilment and horizons, genetic constitution, passive and transition syntheses and operative intentionalities, the founding and founded, the lived body and our somatically founded agency awareness. The method and all these other ideas will be explicated in the coming chapters.

Merleau-Ponty is generous to a fault in acknowledging Husserl’s influence, and he builds on a claim that is defended throughout the latter’s work, namely, that things have significance before we can articulate them

⁴ Translation emended.

⁵ Back cover endorsement of 2014 paperback edition of Landes’ translation.

⁶ Gardner 2013, 130–1; 2015, 312–21; Matherne 2014, 130–46; 2016, 194–226.

⁷ Heinämaa 2002, 127–46; Moran 2010, 175–95; Smith 2007, 1–22.

intellectually.⁸ From the outset Husserl models his act, content and object schema of conscious perception on the expressive and indicative functions of language, though he holds that the ‘content’ of an object in our early experience – this content being the significance or sense that it has for us – is pre-expressive and hence pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual.⁹ He shows that this sense is constituted through the lived body and its skills. In studying the deep structures of somatic and temporal experience, moreover, he appreciates that not everything in perception is conscious and act intentional with a content and an object, even when it is fully developed (*PCIT*, 7). All this being said, Husserl does not provide an account of the unthematic way we relate to things in what Hubert Dreyfus calls our skilled coping.¹⁰ Martin Heidegger provides one of the first such accounts, drawing on Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of ethology in which organisms in their environments do not encounter things as discrete or self-standing, but as opportunities to be taken up towards certain outcomes.

Gurwitsch also introduced Merleau-Ponty to Heidegger’s work, and indeed to gestalt psychology and the case studies of pathological motility

⁸ Merleau-Ponty is most sympathetic to Husserl’s later work. This is because it moves away in his view from an obsessive ‘logicism’ (or prioritisation of the absolute validity of logical laws), because it develops the notion of an historical constitution of significance and because it recognises the parallels between ‘transcendental psychology’ and ‘transcendental phenomenology’ without collapsing the one into the other (*PP*, 509–10). He is critical of Husserl’s middle period because of the emphasis on the sense-giving or centrifugal acts of the conscious subject. A model of an interpreting sense that informs a ‘hyletic layer’ of otherwise bare sensations has not yet been abandoned definitively. See *PP*, 253, 539 and *Idst*, 203–5, 238–9.

⁹ On an interpretation popularised by Hubert Dreyfus, Merleau-Ponty advances far beyond Husserl because he jettisons the latter’s theory that all perception and action is mediated by conceptual meaning contents (Dreyfus 2002, 372–3). Taylor Carman notes that these are not ideas or images interposed between perceptual awareness and things, while agreeing that Merleau-Ponty rejects the ‘semantic paradigm’ of conscious acts that require linguistic and propositional contents to pick out and engage with the things. It is rather that a thing’s sense in early childhood is something like its minimally intuitive coherence and perceptual significance as constituted with our bodily skills and dispositions (Carman 2020, 22–5, 37). Carman cites Husserl’s remark that the meaning of the word ‘meaning’ (*Bedeutung*) is extended to all acts beyond the linguistic sphere of expression, whether or not they are interwoven with expressive acts (Carman 2020, 24; *Idst*, 294). But Husserl immediately qualifies this, adding that he still speaks of ‘sense’ (*Sinn*) as different to meaning, since the latter only comes into play in the linguistic sphere of logical or conceptual signification in developed awareness. Only then can a meaning colour a sense. In the simplest perceptual act the ‘noematic sense’ of its object pertains to the ‘noematic core’, to the enduring thing as determined by the sense and as genuinely reached in the perception. It is made clear that ‘expression’ is distinctive in *adapting* meaning to every sense and to its core, raising these ‘to the realm of “Logos”, of the *conceptual* and, on that account, the “universal”’ (*Idst*, 295). Husserl consistently holds that ‘we must liberate the concept of sense from its relation to expressions . . . every intentional lived experience possesses as such its intentional sense; the latter becomes precisely a specifically *meant* sense when the ego becomes a subject who carries out acts thematically and becomes the subject of thematic interest’. *APS*, 33, my italics.

¹⁰ Dreyfus 2002, 378–81.

and cognition that he draws on so extensively.¹¹ Yet Merleau-Ponty almost always underplays Heidegger's importance, though he reads Husserl through invariably Heideggerian and therefore existential spectacles (without any of the latter's philosophical antipathy to the former). Heidegger's influence is notable in his account of our habitually employed implements that are 'ready-to-hand' for our practical projects, and so too in his interlinked conceptions of existential temporality and of the 'intentional arc' or 'fundamental function' of projection through which our existence is futural and self-transcending. Merleau-Ponty maintains that most of the moves made by Husserl and Heidegger are reconcilable, and when we look at his philosophy of embodied existence in the round we find a sustained exercise of reconciliation. Ideas taken up from his phenomenological predecessors and from Kant are deftly aligned with each other and with discoveries in physiology and psychology. The foremost of these is of the aforementioned body schema, the sub-reflective organisation of posture behind one's pre-reflective postural awareness. The ideas and discoveries are shown to be complementary, their implications being drawn out in the service of a wider and deeper understanding of our being in the world. My core contention is that in Merleau-Ponty's theory our body schemas organise both our postures and milieus projectively. Their motor intentional predelineations gear us into the world towards the fulfilment of our tasks. This is fully compatible with his view that, as agents, we are at one with the bodies expressing our agency. With great acuity he foregrounds the ways that consciousness shines through the lived body, which in repose as well as movement is most closely comparable to a work of art.

Merleau-Ponty states over and over again that transcendental phenomenology has to be existential. Transcendental and somatic conditions of having self and world are inseparable from our specifically human existence, which on occasion he will simply call 'existence' (*PP*, 169, 173, 481). Tom Baldwin has added that he sees our bodies as ambiguous in being both transcendental and empirical. They constitute the basic structures of the perceived world, yet their perceptual and motor capacities (and the capacities for language, reason and reflection that they found) are evolved capacities of our species that are never free from all natural constraints.¹² Ambiguity is a recurring theme in the book, and for Merleau-Ponty the term has manifold meanings that have been teased out adeptly by Tanja Staehler.¹³ Our existence is ambiguous in

¹¹ For an account of Gurwitsch's influence on Merleau-Ponty, of his critique of *Phenomenology of Perception* and of Merleau-Ponty's response, see Toadvine 2001, 195–205.

¹² Baldwin 2019, 20–1. ¹³ Lewis & Staehler 2010, 188–97.

that it is natural and conventional, somatic and spiritual, conditioned and free. We live the unity of our body, milieu, historical situation and mind, but we cannot finally split it through analysis because these are not discrete elements. All its diverse features are interdependent and intercoloured. We only know ourselves in ambiguity, not as an imperfection of existence but as its definition. Everything we live, perceive and think is a nexus with several senses and an ineliminable indeterminacy (*PP*, 172, 347, 360). Yet the equivocal and indeterminate are not in the main 'bad ambiguities', for they motivate us to engage in exploration and to understand more adequately without completion or closure. We even display a 'genius for ambiguity' in so far as our expressions of ourselves and of things are prompts for still further acts of expressive articulation (*PP*, 195, 401; *PrP*, 11). Only within the frame of objective thought is ambiguity something to be ironed out or dispelled.

Ambiguity is set against a generalised and misplaced ideal of exactitude rather than rationality itself. The authentic philosopher 'is marked by the distinguishing trait that he possesses inseparably the taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity'. He or she will work to sustain a productive play or movement between them 'which leads back without ceasing from knowledge to ignorance, and from ignorance to knowledge'.¹⁴ Evidence has a peculiar signification for phenomenologists in that they systematically seek to foreground a priori structures of experience that are pre-reflectively present in experience, to show them forth *in* their evidentness as distinct from unearthing evidence for the hidden. In his theory of the body schema Merleau-Ponty posits an a priori and schematising intentionality that is not even marginally present in experience but *for* which he finds compelling evidence. I have opted for a narrative and reconstructive exposition of his book that does not always match the order of his chapters and sections, and this is to show more clearly the development and character of his theory. I draw on formulations from his other works where these are consistent with his big book and illuminate it more clearly, and where they can be extrapolated from it justifiably.

The title of this monograph picks out the body that is immanently informed from the outset (already being more than a sum of causal processes) and that is reciprocally determined by the act intentionalities and cognitions that it finds and shapes (in giving them their purchase on the world). In Chapter 1, I provide an initial explication of Husserl's phenomenology, a story about how Merleau-Ponty appropriates his

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty 1963b, 4–5.

methodology and another story about objective thought and its genealogy. In Chapter 2, I outline Merleau-Ponty's critique of first-generation empiricism and suggest how he might criticise some second-generation variants. In Chapter 3, I set out his critique of intellectualism and show how he takes up ideas from Kant that are not tied to its suppositions. Chapter 4 begins with an exposition of Husserl's phenomenology of embodiment, which is oriented around his fundamental distinction between the body as object and the body as lived. I show what Merleau-Ponty takes up from Husserl and adapts for his own purposes, and also what he gets from Uexküll's ethology and Heidegger's account of our being involved in the world projectively. In this light, I say more about his own approach, providing a more detailed preamble to his positive account.

In Chapter 5, I start to explicate his theory of the body schema through which our skills are deployed, focussing on his understanding of the phenomenon of the use-phantom limb. I then show what the schema can exclude and incorporate and why it is an a priori condition of cognitive distancing and of readily reckoning with the possible. Chapter 6 is devoted to his view of motor intentionality as silhouetted by the Schneider case. Such an operative intentionality is interpreted as the work of the body schema organising both postures and phenomenal fields towards outcomes. I suggest that skill transpositions can be extrapolated from Merleau-Ponty's theory, but also that he neglects shorter events of reflection in the flow of action. In Chapter 7, I turn to his account of the way we experience others in and through their attitudes and engagements. He is highly attentive to the expressivity of others and to our enculturation, and he maintains that we can never be objectified as Sartre thinks we can. In Chapter 8, I traverse the account of language as the medium of thought and as existentially significant and creative. This is followed by an outline of his views of our affective lives in knowing and loving. In the final chapter, my initial concern is with the theories of immanent temporal awareness and existential temporality that Merleau-Ponty inherits from Husserl and Heidegger and qualifies with his account of body temporality. I then set out his stories about the tacit and spoken cogito and about the concrete subject or person with its original union of conscious and cognitive awareness and a certain body. I conclude by examining some objections to his view, chiefly to the effect that his active and proficient body is an idealisation from an ageist and ableist perspective. These objections carry weight, though Merleau-Ponty's theory can be reworked to accommodate them. In any event, his idea of a radical reflection on reflection and on the unreflected shows his loyalty to the phenomenological enterprise. It

is of its essence to be revised and reworked, and the directions it is yet to take are unforeseeable.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was born in Rochefort-sur-Mer in 1908 and raised in Paris by his mother following his father's death in 1913. He studied first at the renowned Lycée Louis-le-Grand and then at the equally renowned École Normale Supérieure, where he became a friend of Simone de Beauvoir. Some years later he befriended Jean-Paul Sartre. This was followed by a research fellowship and teaching posts, first in the Lycée de Chartres and then back in the École Normale. After army conscription from 1939 to 1940, he taught in the Lycée Carnot and Lycée Condorcet in Paris. *The Structure of Behaviour* was published in 1940, five years before *Phenomenology of Perception* (which gained him his higher doctorate from the Sorbonne). In 1945 he also founded the journal *Les Temps modernes* with Beauvoir and Sartre and became a lecturer at the University of Lyon, being promoted to professor in 1948. He was appointed to the Chair of Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne in 1949, and to the Collège de France in 1952, the summit of his academic career. Other important works include *Humanism and Terror* (1947), *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955) after breaking with Sartre and *Signs* (1960). He died from a heart attack in 1961, leaving unfinished the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). If the anglophone reader wishes to learn about Merleau-Ponty's character, the course of his life and Parisian milieu, Sarah Bakewell's account is to be recommended. She gives a fine overview of his network of relationships and of his philosophy from early to late, and a rich sense of how his style is echoed in his thought. For most of his life, he was consummately what she says he was, the happy and dancing philosopher of the things as they are.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bakewell 2016, III–12, 228–41, 325–6. See also Robinet 1963, 1–65.