

***Merleau-Ponty:***  
***The lived body subject, perception and meaning***

**A. CONTEXT**

**More on Husserl and Phenomenology— the background**

*Husserl*

- Distinguished the objects of consciousness from the contents of consciousness.
- Intentionality (directedness towards objects, awareness *of*..., the *of-ness* of awareness) as distinct from causal connections between external objects and mental states.
- Consciousness as intentional, as directed to an object beyond itself.

- Consciousness constitutes objects.
- Transcendental and eidetic reductions make up Husserl's phenomenological method.
- Wanted to get back to the things themselves.
- Lays emphasis on essence (existentialists lay emphasis on existence, but like Husserl they are concerned with the description of the phenomenon as it shows itself).

### *Heidegger*

- Rejected the Cartesian position.
- Husserl's method is seen as too abstract.
- Intentionality should be seen in relation human agents as they are, embedded in a concrete existence.
- Takes a hermeneutic approach.

### *Merleau-Ponty*

- 'The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction' (*PP*, Preface, xv).
- However, he was committed to Husserl's *descriptive* method.

- He was also influenced by Heidegger.
- Merleau-Ponty sees agents as embodied within concrete worldly situations.
- Perception and the body taken together are crucial to our understanding of our existence.
- Has the significance of the role of the body been neglected in traditional Western Philosophy?

## **B. Introduction to Merleau-Ponty (1908-61)**

- The idea of ‘engaged’ philosophy. The world and consciousness are mutually dependent parts of a greater whole.
- Critical of the objective viewpoint.
- Concerned with achieving a unity or reconciliation between the objectivism of the traditional sciences and subjectivism in philosophy. (In relation to this, can we see unresolved tensions in his work?)
- The primary of perception—the world as perceived or experienced is the common ground for philosophy and science.

### **C. Merleau-Ponty's philosophical account of the body**

- Emphasised the bodily nature of perception, the individual as body-subject, and our embodied position in the world.
- Critical of the tendency in philosophy to see the body simply as an object that is causally related to a mind.
- The mind is essentially embodied (both thought and emotion are embodied). 'The body is the vehicle of being in the world' (*PP*, p.94).
- He is NOT advocating a reductive behaviourism.
- His starting standpoint is that of the 'lived' body subject.
- Influenced by gestaltism.
- Perception is a system of meanings. 'Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning' (*PP*, preface, xxii).  
'[P]erceptual meaning arises out of an exchange between subject and object, perceived and perceiving' (Adams, 2001).
- Bodily expressions and gestures derive meaning from their context (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012, see pp.108-9).
- So even subtle nuances in bodily behaviour can have meaning. Only when we see expression, behaviour, gesture as set within

a larger context than is meaningful for ourselves, i.e. as part of a larger narrative, can it have meaning or signify something.

#### **D. The objective and phenomenal body**

- The objective body is the physiological, material body and the phenomenal body is *my* body as *I* experience it, the lived body.
- ‘[I]t is possible to experience one’s own body as a physiological entity, but typically this is not the case. Typically, I experience my body... as a unified potential or capacity for doing this and that – typing that sentence, scratching that itch, etc... The distinction between the objective and phenomenal body is central to understanding the phenomenological treatment of embodiment. Embodiment is not a concept that pertains to the body grasped as a physiological entity. Rather it pertains to the phenomenal body and to the role it plays in our object-directed experiences’ (1999, p.258).
- ‘It is never the objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery in that, since our body, as the potentiality of this or that part of the world, surges

towards objects to be grasped and perceives them' (*PP*, Part I, Sec. 3, p.121).

- Usually there is unity between the objective and physical body, but injury or disease can disrupt this unity. Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the distinction between the objective and phenomenal body through a discussion of various conditions in which the objective and phenomenal body become separated.

### *Bibliography*

- Harry Adams, 'Merleau-Ponty and the advent of meaning: from consummate reciprocity to ambiguous reversibility', *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol.34, No.2, June 2001.
- Merleau-Ponty [1945], *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (London & NY: Routledge, 2010).
- Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty', in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, eds. Sebastian Luft and Soren Overgaard (London & NY: Routledge, 2012).
- Robert Audi (ed.), *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

## Reading

### *Essential reading*

- Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Preface & Part 1, Chs. 1-3. Accessible at: [Phenomenology of Perception \(archive.org\)](https://www.archive.org/details/phenomenology-of-perception-merleau-ponty/page/n5/m0/phenomenology-of-perception-merleau-ponty.pdf). Accessed 3/5/24.

### *Recommended reading*

- Paul Gilbert & Kathleen Lennon, *The World, the Flesh and the Subject* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp.118-28.

### *Further reading*

- Olafson, F. A. (1995). *What Is a Human Being?* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cockburn, D. (1998). Frederick Olafson, “What is a Human Being? a Heideggerian View” (Book Review) [Review of Frederick Olafson, “*What is a Human Being? a Heideggerian View*” (Book Review)]. *Philosophical*

*Quarterly*, 48, 125-. University of St. Andrews for the Scots  
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