

# Maurice Merleau-Ponty

## *Phenomenology of Perception*

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### Learning Objectives

1. Understand Merleau-Ponty's idea of *bodily subjectivity*.
2. Describe Merleau-Ponty's view of the relations between perception, action, and motor skills or habits.
3. Explain how Merleau-Ponty tries to account for our emotions and thoughts.
4. Identify some ways in which we shape the world through our activities.
5. Describe Merleau-Ponty's claims about our experiences of other people.

### Reading Assignment

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2004. *The World of Perception*. London: Routledge, chapter 3. A translation of a set of radio lectures delivered by Merleau-Ponty in 1948. This short book provides a useful snapshot of themes that appear in his most influential work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

### Commentary

#### Introduction

[Maurice Merleau-Ponty](#) (1908 – 1961) was a French philosopher. One of his most important contributions to philosophy is a detailed account of ourselves and our place in the world that does justice to the fact that we are bodily creatures. He is associated with the traditions of [Phenomenology](#) and [Existentialism](#), both of which include a variety of thinkers and ideas and are difficult to precisely define. Existentialism is characterised by the thought that philosophy's starting-point should be our everyday life, and it should tackle the issues that are most pressing for us as finite human beings. Phenomenology holds that philosophy should begin with our experiences, described as accurately as possible. Phenomenologists agree that some general framework we employ in thinking about ourselves and the world is inaccurate, although different thinkers characterise this framework and the problems with it in different ways. They also agree that this framework distorts our understanding of our own experiences, so to describe experience accurately, we need to set aside or 'suspend' our usual way of thinking about things. (They call this setting aside the 'Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction'.) Once we have an accurate description of experience, we can develop new ways to understand ourselves and the world. The work of phenomenologists is also characterised by some common themes, which we find in Merleau-Ponty's work. Whilst Merleau-Ponty is classed as an existential-phenomenologist, his work builds on ideas from many different thinkers, and he draws heavily on psychology (he had a university position in psychology for a while).

#### Bodily self-consciousness

Merleau-Ponty aims to develop a way of thinking that gets away from certain dichotomies (i.e., sharply contrasting pairs of concepts). Chief amongst these are mind versus body, and consciousness versus world. Let's begin with the first of these two contrasts. It is common to think of the mind as distinct from the body, with the mind being who we are and the body being a sophisticated vehicle for carrying the mind around. [Descartes'](#) dualism that takes the mind to be a non-physical soul in contrast to the physical body is an example of this way of thinking. But so too is the physicalist approach that identifies the mind with the brain and/or wider nervous system. In both cases, the body is thought of as a mere object – something that is not so different from a table or a rock. The things that makes us human – the will, our intelligence, our thoughts and emotions, and so on – all reside in the mind.

Merleau-Ponty aims to replace the mind-body dichotomy with a new concept of *bodily subjectivity*. The body is not just an object, but a kind of physical consciousness. What is traditionally thought of as the mind is a particular collection of abilities that belong to a bodily self.

The key to understanding this idea is Merleau-Ponty's account of perception and action. He adopts a claim made by the [Gestalt](#) psychologists: we perceive the world as inviting us to act. For example, I see chairs as drawing me to sit down on them; cups of coffee invite me to drink them; and so on. Merleau-Ponty also notes that the world we perceive *feels* a certain way, and this contributes to the actions it draws us to perform, e.g., a poorly lit alley looks foreboding, 'suggesting' that we avoid it.

### **Motor skills, perception, and action**

The way we perceive the world is intrinsically bound up with our capacities for action. Merleau-Ponty calls these 'habits'. They are also often called 'motor skills'. These are physical abilities ranging from very simple things such as scratching an itch, to much more complex skills like driving a car. One gains them through practice, which is the body's familiarizing itself with the activity. Motor skills have both a motor and a perceptual component – to be skilled at something involves being able to *do* something, and to *see* what to do. A person who is skilled at climbing can both move her body up the rock face, and also perceive little cracks and ledges in the rock as handholds and footholds – she has learned to see the rock face as inviting her to scale it. Thus the way we perceive the world as inviting us to engage with it in various ways is, to a large extent, dependent on the motor skills we have acquired: what we see is partly the result of what we can do.

The opportunities for action the agent perceives the world as offering differ in how strongly they draw her to act, depending on how salient they are for her. A number of things affect saliency, including the agent's current goal, long-standing desires and interests, ingrained habits, and so on. For example, the park bench draws me to sit on it more strongly when I am relaxing with a friend, but not when I am rushing through the park to catch a bus. My love of dogs makes passing hounds stand out as strongly inviting me to stroke them. I am strongly drawn to eat the apples I see in my fruit-bowl because I habitually eat one for breakfast every day.

Perception is intimately connected to action on Merleau-Ponty's view. A very influential account of agency takes actions to be bodily movements that are controlled by thought, typically the agent's *intentions*. An intention is like a picture or map of the action to be performed (it *represents* the action), which 'switches on' the movement of the body. Thus, my action of picking up a glass of water and drinking from it begins with an intention that represents me performing this action, and sets the act of drinking in motion. It is clear that this model of agency relies on a sharp division between body (movement) and mind (thought) and unsurprisingly, Merleau-Ponty rejects it. He argues that there is a type of intelligent engagement with the world that does not involve thought. In some cases, a person's perceptual experience can immediately initiate and guide action without the need for any intervening thoughts. For example, I walk into a classroom and sit down in a chair. On Merleau-Ponty's view, there is no need for me to *think* about sitting down, my action is entirely guided by my perception of the chair as for-sitting-on. The opportunities for action that are most salient – and so draw the agent most strongly – are the ones that typically guide her actions.

It is certainly true that I do not consciously think about many of the things I do each day. I navigate obstacles like trees and houses as I walk my daughter to school; I reach for her hand at the road; I turn my head to look for cars – all whilst engaged in conversation with her. I type on my keyboard without needing to think about where to put my fingers. When someone gets into a lift next to me, I move a little to maintain the socially appropriate distance from other people (Dreyfus 2000). In these last two cases, I would be hard-pressed to *say* where the keys on the keyboard are, or what the socially appropriate distance to stand from others is. Merleau-Ponty takes this to be further evidence that in such cases, my actions are not controlled by thoughts. If I was thinking about the position of the letters on the keyboard, it would be unclear why I cannot tell someone where they were. Similarly, if I was thinking about how far to move from the other people in the lift, it would be unclear why I cannot state what this distance is.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the agent's ongoing interactions with the world – what Dreyfus calls 'coping' (Dreyfus 1991) – are often immediate responses to her perceptions of the world as inviting her to act. One might object at this point that they are not really actions, but just brute physical responses to stimuli. My perception of a chair as for-sitting *causes* me to sit down much like being jumped on by an exuberant dog causes me to fall over. In both cases, these are not things I *do* (actions) but simply things that happen to me. Sitting in chairs is a motor skill I gain through practice – by repeatedly sitting in chairs, I gain the ability to sit down in immediate response to my perception of them. The objection continues by arguing that this is essentially the same as Pavlov conditioning dogs to salivate when they heard a bell by repeatedly ringing it when he fed them. In both cases, repetition creates a *conditioned reflex*; reflexive behaviours are not actions.

Merleau-Ponty responds by arguing that motor skills cannot be thought of as conditioned reflexes like the salivating of Pavlov's dogs, because they are too flexible. In the case of a conditioned reflex, the behaviour produced and the stimuli that cause it are always the same. But consider a motor skill like playing the church organ. The skilled organist's behaviour will be different on each occasion as she plays a variety of tunes. There is also variation in the organs that she can play. With just an hour's practice she can transfer her skill to an organ with differently arranged pedals and stops. But an hour is nowhere near sufficient to instil a new set of conditioned reflexes. Very simple motor skills are similarly flexible. For example, doors differ in their handle shape and position, size, heaviness, whether they open outwards or inwards, and so on. People do not learn to only open one type of door, but can open all of these different types. A person can also open doors using different bodily movements – using their left hand, their right hand, pushing it open with their hip, etc. It follows that skilled or habitual behaviour cannot be thought of as brute physical responses caused by stimuli. Instead, it is flexible, intelligent engagement with the world.

### **Bodily knowledge and subjectivity**

Merleau-Ponty argues that our motor skills should be thought of as a kind of bodily knowledge or understanding. He says, e.g., that the skilled typist has 'knowledge in the hands' (2002: 166). They are a practical understanding of the world in terms of its potential for the person's actions. As we have seen, motor skills have both a perceptual and a motor component. For example, the skilled climber can move her body up the rock face and perceive little fissures and cracks in the rock as handholds and footholds. Merleau-Ponty suggests that this should be thought of as a sort of practical understanding of the rock face as climbable.

Merleau-Ponty's account of perception, action, and motor skills forms the core of his idea of bodily subjectivity, which is at the heart of his philosophical thinking. He aims to offer a new conception of what is traditionally thought of as the mind that is consistent with this idea of bodily subjectivity. It's fair to say that Merleau-Ponty never completed this task. But he offers some ideas towards this in [Phenomenology of Perception](#). Our psychological lives include our emotions. It might be tempting to think of these as feelings that exist 'inside' a person's head. However, Merleau-Ponty thinks of emotions as part of the way we engage with the world. We saw above that on Merleau-Ponty's account, the things we perceive feel a certain way, and how things feel contributes to the perceiver's experience of the world as inviting her to act. Our emotions are thus part of the content of our perceptions. For example, part of what it is to love my dog is for me to perceive him as lovable. A person's emotions are also partly constituted by her actions. My experience of my dog as lovable draws me to interact with him in a loving manner, tenderly stroking his head, feeding him treats, and so on. Engaging in loving behaviour towards my dog is part of what it is for me to love him.

Our mental life also includes our thoughts. Thoughts might seem particularly troubling for Merleau-Ponty's conception of bodily subjectivity because one can have thoughts even when the things they are about are not near (spatially or temporally) oneself. I can, for example, wonder what my friend is eating for tea, even though she is on the other side of the world. I can also hope the rain ends tomorrow even though the rain ending is in the future. To make sense of this, it seems that my thought must be a representation (something roughly like a picture of sentence), which is contained within my mind and/or realized in my brain. If so, then thought does not have very much to do with the body, which just provides input for thought through the senses, and nourishment for the brain. We are back at the mind-body dichotomy that Merleau-Ponty rejects. He suggests instead that we should think of the different means we have of expressing ourselves – painting, gesture, music, language, etc. – as ways of thinking. Thus to write in a diary is not to simply give outward expression to something that one has already thought. The act of writing – as least under certain circumstances – is itself to think. Of course, it seems undeniable that some of our thoughts are private. Merleau-Ponty accounts for such thinking as imagined expression – for example, when I sit quietly ruminating on what to eat for lunch, Merleau-Ponty claims it is imagined speech. He argues further that imagining doing something involves exercising the same core skills that are used when I actually do it. Thus when I imagine swimming in the sea, I exercise the same central skills I would use to actually swim. Similarly, imagining speaking exercises the same core skills as actually speaking. On this account, thought is a bodily activity.

### **The relation between the world and consciousness**

On Merleau-Ponty's account, we are essentially connected to, and contained within, the world. Bodily subjectivity is at its core, a collection of motor skills or habits, which are ways of engaging with our environment. The sorts of skills I can acquire depends on the nature of my body – I cannot learn to fly unaided

because I have no wings. It also depends on what the world around me is like. For example, if I live in a world that contains bicycles, I can learn to ride a bike. If the world around me contains boulders, I can learn to climb. By constraining the sorts of skills I can acquire, the world shapes the kind of being I am. Conversely, the world depends on subjectivity. We have already seen that the way we perceive the world – the invitations to act that we experience it as offering us – depends on the skills we possess. So the experienced world that we live in every day is shaped by the things we do in it. Moreover, we physically alter the world as part of our interactions with it, creating objects to use in our activities such as spoons, cars, houses, and so on. One might think, nevertheless, that underneath our experience of the world, and the layer of artefacts created by humans, lies a real world that is independent from human perception of, and interactions with, it. But Merleau-Ponty denies that this is so. He argues that all the properties we take to be objective features of the world are really qualities it only has in relation to perceivers like us. Ultimately, he holds that the world and consciousness are two parts of a single whole. Their interaction gives rise to the everyday world we experience. Merleau-Ponty returned again and again to the question of how to understand the relation between the world and consciousness. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, one metaphor he uses is the poles of a force. The poles are not independent from each other, and are both elements of a single item: the force itself. We can see how this is apt given his claim that the world *pulls* the perceiver into action. A pull is a force. For something to pull, there must be something that is pulled. There cannot be one without the other.

I share the world with other people. Generally speaking, even though they are part of the physical world, I do not experience them simply as objects like rocks and tables. Instead, I am aware of them as *subjects*, creatures with a point of view on the world with thoughts and feelings like me. This is difficult to explain if one thinks that minds and bodies are largely separate. I can see other bodies, but other minds are hidden from view. So I cannot really know that they have minds inside them. Merleau-Ponty rejects the mind-body dichotomy and so can give us an alternative account. The perception of other people goes hand-in-hand with awareness of the world as shared. I do not just perceive the world as inviting me to act, I also perceive it as drawing others into action. Correspondingly, I perceive others as agents; I see them *doing* things. Merleau-Ponty writes,

My gaze falls upon a living body performing an action and the objects that surround it immediately receive a new layer of significance: they are no longer merely what I could do with them, they are also what this behaviour is about to do with them... Someone is using my familiar objects. But who? I say that it is another person, a second myself (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 369–70).

Finally, I do not just watch others from a distance, I also interact with them. Merleau-Ponty holds that in our interactions, we can become ‘interwoven’ with each other so that we almost become a single mind. An example he gives is of having a conversation. Sometimes we think by talking. In some conversations, what we say does not merely express thoughts we had previously: it *is* our thought. The dialogue invites responses from the participants, who respond by speaking. Thus each person is partly responsible for what the other one thinks, and their conversation is a single train of thought with two thinkers.

### **Questions for Review**

1. Explain Merleau-Ponty’s account of motor skills and how they allow someone to act without needing to consciously think about what they are doing.
2. Merleau-Ponty writes to classify habits alongside skills? Or can you think of any important differences between them?
3. Merleau-Ponty explains our emotions as ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. What does he mean by this? Can you think of any examples from your own life to illustrate this idea?
4. How do our activities shape the world, according to Merleau-Ponty?
5. Explain what he means by the claim that we can sometimes become ‘interwoven’ with other people.

### **Works Cited and Supplemental Reading**

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