# Merleau-Ponty's Contributions to the Theory of Recognition

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## Content

### Abstract

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was an important twentieth century contributor to the theory of recognition, even though he made literal reference to the concept only sparingly. He emphasized the importance of recognition, not only at the level of inter-personal relations and in the individual's inclusion in the social, but also in terms of the capacity of human beings to communicate across cultures and across historical distances. The shift towards ontology in his later work provided a renewed grounding for his interest in intersubjectivity and cross-cultural communication. Such continuity might be traced to lasting Hegelian and Marxian legacies in his thinking, which inflected his political interpretation of recognition.

### Keywords

Alter ego · Institutions · Flesh · Hegel · Marx

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# 1    Introduction

There are a number of layers in Merleau-Ponty's philosophical work that directly relate to aspects of a theory of recognition. These layers can be traced throughout the different periods in his writing, beyond the varying degrees of emphasis and the changing methodological tools and core theoretical references he used. They all contribute to his rich vision of human existence as being inherently social and historical.

# 2    Layers of Recognition

We can find the trace of these layers already in Merleau-Ponty's first major text, *The Structure of Behaviour*, in the last part of the book dedicated to "the human order" (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 160–184). There, we see an articulation of two of the most important themes that traverse his work and that have substantial connections to recognition.

The first is the irrepressible evidence of the existence of other beings like me, in other words my immediate recognition of the other human being as an alter ego whose behavior and modes of expression demand specific kinds of responses, symbolic and normative, from me. Already in his first thesis, and as he continued to do throughout his teaching and writing, Merleau-Ponty addressed the problem of "other minds" by recourse to developmental psychology. This methodological angle directly anticipated the later developments of recognition theory, in which ontogenetic arguments feature prominently. This ontogenetic angle to study the structure and significance of intersubjective relationships explains Merleau-Ponty's constant engagement with Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, another trait anticipating later recognition theory.

A second significant layer related to recognition is the constitutive importance of the social and cultural worlds for individual existence. In his first book, Merleau-Ponty already tried to find a solution to a problem that occupied him throughout his intellectual life: how to account dialectically for supra-subjective "structures" in such a way that their framing power over individual consciousness and individual action is accounted for, yet their dependence upon the expressive and creative capacities of subjects and groups is equally highlighted. This problem is linked to recognition in two ways: first, it anticipates contemporary attempts to approach social ontology from the perspective of recognition. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, what is at stake here is the capacity of human subjects to collectively "institute" symbolic and normative realities that organize life in common. Having been created by individuals working with others, institutions are always amenable to being transformed with others (Merleau-Ponty 2010). The social-ontological perspective is informed by a reflection on the conditions of transformative political action. The second recognition perspective entailed in Merleau-Ponty's dialectical understanding of the relationship between subjective life and objective structures links the symbolic sense of intentionality to the epistemic sense of recognition. Since social and cultural institutions are "instituted" through

intentional acts and meaningful practices, they remain in principle accessible for human understanding across space and time. Throughout his work, Merleay-Ponty explored the idea that there is an a priori possibility of recognition of human subjects, societies and cultures, by other subjects, across cultural boundaries and across historical times (see notably Merleau-Ponty 1973, 9–29).

## 3    Recognition after the Ontological Turn

In his latest period, these ideas were reformulated after he significantly altered his method to shed the subjectivistic focus of his previous work. He now explained the possibility of sharing the world in common through a feature of being itself, namely the fact that whatever is objectively in the world, is "sensible", i.e., contains the intrinsic quality of being able to be sensed. The subjective perspective is thus inherent in objectivity itself, sensing and being sensed are on the same plane, two dimensions of the one reality. He termed this the reversibility of being and captured this key feature through the metaphor of the "flesh". From this perspective, human perception, action and expression are not just species-dependent modes of being in the world, but reveal structures of reality itself. This conception signals a radical shift in the grounding of recognition, away from psychological or anthropological arguments. Intersubjective, cross-cultural and cross-historical recognition are made possible simply because human individuals and groups all share in the same element of being. Since we are all made of the same "flesh", the "flesh of the world", beyond personal and cultural differences in accessing the world, we share the same ontological ground. There is in principle no obstacle to inter-personal and inter-cultural communication: "there is here no problem of the alter ego because it is not I who sees, not he who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 142).

## 4    Hegelian and Marxian Legacies in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Recognition

There are other layers of recognition in Merleau-Ponty's thinking, which come to light especially if we focus on some of his earlier writings. In *The Structure of Behaviour*, he described the collective institutions of meaning and norms by reference to the concept of "human work" (Merleau-Ponty 193, 162). This refers to the capacity of individual subjects to "recognize" in the achievements of other individuals and indeed of the collective, the product of human work understood in a generic sense, in the sense notably of Marx's 1844 Manuscripts. This articulation of intersubjectivity and sociality in terms of "praxis", as the French philosophers were wont to say at the time, points to lasting Hegelian and Marxian legacies in Merleau-Ponty's work. Such legacies are documented firstly in the literal reference to recognition in its Hegelian

version. Merleau-Ponty was well acquainted with Hegel's work as a whole, including the Jena manuscripts. In his references to Hegel, however, he tended to emphasise the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in particular the chapter on the struggle of self-consciousnesses for the recognition of their freedom (see his review of a famous conference by Jean Hyppolite in Merleau-Ponty 1964, 63–70). In contrast with other philosophers who used this passage as the ultimate cypher for conceptualising social bonds and social action, Merleau-Ponty sought to integrate it within his broader vision of intersubjective and social recognition. As the chapter on "The Other and the Human World" in *The Phenomenology of Perception* demonstrates, the idea that the struggle for recognition is a necessary moment in the reciprocal affirmation of each other's freedom can definitely be acknowledged as a structural possibility (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 374). And yet such conflict is premised upon a more fundamental layer, namely the embodied co-presence of individuals within their shared social world. Recognitive practices arise from the fact that the social is the "permanent field and dimension" of individual existence (379).

A Marxist inflection to recognition can be seen in the texts in which Merleau-Ponty sought to delineate the political contours of his vision of trans-historical, trans-cultural communication. The motto summarizing Merleau-Ponty's core ideal, which he identified with the promise of Marxism, was the "recognition of the human being by the human being" (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 111–112). This motto encapsulated the approach to political problems he took consistently throughout the turbulent post-war period. It formed the basis of his advocacy for a "humanism of all human beings" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 260).

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