

# READING MERLEAU-PONTY

Cognitive Science, Pathology  
and Transcendental Phenomenology

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this text.

Merleau-Ponty:

StrB *The Structure of Behavior*

PhP *Phenomenology of Perception*

PriP *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*

S *Signs*

PW *Prose of the World*

VI *The Visible and the Invisible*

John Haugeland

HT *Having Thought: Essays in the Metaphysics of Mind*

## Introduction

Anyone who has attempted to read the *Phenomenology of Perception* remembers the initial opacity of the text. One wonders what the author is actually getting at. What is being attempted here? Where is the argument exactly? Reading the text, one initially gets the sense that Merleau-Ponty is distracted, constantly shifting between problems and examples. With others texts, it is often possible to reassure oneself that one understands what has been said so far by correctly anticipating where the text will lead. This is practically impossible in the *Phenomenology*. Yet this very opacity is its great strength, for it invites (incites, even!) the reader to lend themselves to the text, to inhabit its rhythms and make them their own. The *Phenomenology* is not written in the form of an inference, or a novel. It would probably be appropriate to say that it is not written, but painted. Each sentence is a little patch of colour, which is why we get the sense that the meaning of the text is not *in* these sentences but *between* them. Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that our experience of reading the *Phenomenology* resembles Merleau-Ponty's experience of viewing a painting.

I would be at great pains to say *where* is the painting I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I do at a thing: I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I *see* it. (PriP, 164)

So, one does not read the *Phenomenology*, one reads with it, or according to it; following its meandering trajectory until around the next turn one finds something that is, if not expected, then at least familiar. The *Phenomenology* is basically understood when one incorporates its style. At that point, one may not be able to say authoritatively what the text is about, or how it works, but one will be able to respond to situations or assertions in a similar vein. Overcoming the opacity of the *Phenomenology* is not like acquiring knowledge, it is more like acquiring a habit. One finds oneself involved in a new way of dealing with things.

However, if the most difficult thing about reading the *Phenomenology* is becoming accustomed to its elliptical style and overcoming its opacity, the most dangerous thing about reading that work is that, at the same time, it is easy to lose touch with that opacity altogether. Having accommodated ourselves to it, and acquired the requisite skill, the text itself can disappear almost entirely, leaving nothing

but a prompt for us to re-adopt that posture or exercise that skill. The painting can become nothing but its title or content.

So the real challenge is to preserve its visibility; to keep its horizons open; to keep it fresh. This is not done by simply keeping it on show and in view, that is, stressing its importance and value. A classic remains a classic not by being lauded, but by being controversial and difficult; and a classic does not generate simply a diversity of opinion, but a range of paradigms within which opinions are evaluated. Preserving the visibility, the generativity, of the *Phenomenology* therefore requires demonstrating that it is still capable of disclosure, by which I mean that it is still open to being disclosed.

In its broadest terms, the aim of this thesis is to contribute to keeping the reading of the *Phenomenology* open. In particular, I want to show that a relatively minor deformation of the way it is read for cognitive science – a reading that I think is far more influential, especially in analytic circles, than its published output reflects – can reveal quite a different *Phenomenology*. I hope to show that, in much the way a focus on different patches of colour can re-animate and shift the meaning of a painting, so a focus on the phenomenon of transcendence and pathological rather than normal embodiment can re-animate and shift the meaning of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and give it a fresh relevance for contemporary thought.

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Since Hubert Dreyfus' stinging attack on the theoretical and phenomenological presuppositions that sustain the optimism toward what is now referred to as "good, old-fashioned artificial intelligence" in *What Computers Can't Do* (1979), Merleau-Ponty's name has been associated with the orientation of post-cognitivist developments in cognitive science. Cognitive science aspires to be a science of mind in the strict sense of the word. That is, it harbours the conviction that mental phenomena are amenable to experimental inquiry and quantitative analysis, and hopes to explain cognitive function in non-mental terms. Post-cognitivist varieties of cognitive science attempt to preserve this ambition and (broadly speaking at least) this methodological conviction, while dispensing with the cognitivist assumption that mental function consists in the rule-governed manipulation of discrete symbols. In the late twentieth century, many post-cognitivist approaches to cognition have emerged, not necessarily in competition

with each other, including embodied cognition, situated cognition, enactive cognition and dynamical systems theory (DST).

In Dreyfus' influential book, Merleau-Ponty shares the role of providing an alternative paradigm for thinking about cognition with Heidegger and Wittgenstein, but it may be argued that Merleau-Ponty's importance to the development of post-cognitivism has outstripped the other two. Certainly, it was Merleau-Ponty to whom the authors of the *Embodied Mind* (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991) turned when they sought to inaugurate the enactivist strand of cognitive science.

That interest has persisted over the last fifteen years – through contributions from Shaun Gallagher, Evan Thompson, Alva Noë, Sean Kelly, Ron McClamrock and Ralph Ellis among others<sup>1</sup>. In that time, a literature has developed to such an extent that is becoming appropriate to ask questions about both the specificity and the diversity of views on the relevance of Merleau-Ponty for cognitive science.

This diversity of views within the literature can be exemplified by pointing to the tensions between the reception of Merleau-Ponty by pro-connectionist and pro-enactivist readers. Take for example Dreyfus' scathing review of the *Embodied Mind* (Dreyfus 1993). In his review, Dreyfus challenges the authors' characterisation of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment as requiring that we see our bodies as *both* physical and experiential structures, as both inner and outer, arguing that Merleau-Ponty held instead that the body forms a *third genus of being* between pure subject and object (Cf. PhP 350). Dreyfus also criticizes them for offering the passive, detached attitude of mindfulness meditation in place of phenomenology, suggesting that this is based on the mistaken assumption that Merleau-Ponty wants to characterise subjective experience. Since, in Dreyfus' opinion, Merleau-Ponty in fact objects to the "passive, detached attitude" of theory, which "distorts our sense of our active, involved body", it is ironic that the authors' offer a similar passive, detached attitude in its place.

The criticism was returned in a rather oblique way in the introduction to the *Naturalizing Phenomenology* anthology (Petitot et al. 1999), which Varela co-authored. There the editors attack Dreyfus' interpretation of Husserl. They argue

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<sup>1</sup> See the bibliography for references.

that Dreyfus is wrong to interpret Husserl's phenomenology as a variety of cognitivism and the Husserlian intentional state as "a sort of mental linguistic symbol" (59). More importantly from the perspective of our interest in Merleau-Ponty, they write that "This symbolic aspect of [Dreyfus'] interpretation plays a major role in his rejection of Husserl's phenomenology in favor of the work of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger." (ibid.) As a result, a new dimension of complexity has been added to the topic of Merleau-Ponty's significance for cognitive science. Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Husserl is now implicated.

This illustrates the way the task of determining Merleau-Ponty's *relevance for* cognitive science has begun to take the form of developing a *reading of* Merleau-Ponty. It has become possible, and I believe timely, to begin inquiring into the diversity and specificity of these readings of Merleau-Ponty for cognitive science, and this is the first specific task to which this thesis is set.

In the first chapter, I address separately the psychological and philosophical aspects of Merleau-Ponty's reception. Considered from the perspective of determining Merleau-Ponty's relevance to cognitive science, this might appear to be an arbitrary separation. However, when understanding the reading of Merleau-Ponty at work, it is important to distinguish between an affinity of descriptions and an appropriation of arguments. The psychological aspect of the reading is generally concerned with pointing to similarities between the way in which connectionists or enactivists summarize their approach to cognition and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological descriptions of embodied perception. By contrast, the philosophical aspect is an appropriation of critical moves against contemporary varieties of objectivism. Contemporary theories which are labeled as objectivist often play a foundational role in cognitivist cognitive science, making these philosophical arguments relevant in the cognitive science context.

The philosophical aspect of the reading has had a fortunate side-effect. Merleau-Ponty's reception has provided a source of optimism for those of us who are keen to see an end to the division of contemporary philosophy into analytic and continental schools. By provoking an engagement between Merleau-Ponty and the foundations of cognitive science, this reception has enabled a further engagement



with prominent analytic philosophers of mind, like Daniel Dennett, Christopher Peacocke, Gareth Evans and John McDowell<sup>2</sup>.

However, it is the optimism concerning a convergence of cognitive science with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (and phenomenology more generally) that really interests me here. In the preamble, I contribute to it myself by illustrating the suggestive similarities between parts of the *Phenomenology* and Ballard's "animate" model of computer vision. The question is what to do with this optimism – can it have a theoretical grounding or find a systematic expression? There has been a range of attempts to formalise the relationship between phenomenology and cognitive science, and in the third section, I consider four of these. They divide roughly into two groups: Dreyfus and McClamrock regard phenomenology as a propaedeutic to scientific inquiry that is therefore undertaken *prior to* the procedures of cognitive science, providing its explicanda or taxonomy. Meanwhile, Varela and Gallagher regard phenomenology and cognitive science as complementary procedures, which are to be coordinated *synchronically*.

What these attempts at formalising the relationship share is an implicit faith in the compatibility of Merleau-Ponty's descriptions with naturalistic explanations. However, what is really striking about the way Merleau-Ponty is read in this literature is that this compatibility seems to come for free. That is, unlike the reading of Husserl, no attempt is made to naturalize Merleau-Ponty.

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At one level, the reason for this is simply that, unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty is not construed as a transcendental philosopher. However, such a reading still needs to account for Merleau-Ponty's ongoing interest in transcendental philosophical concerns – for example, his acknowledgement of a need to reveal the transcendental significance of the phenomenal field. This account takes place off-stage, and finds support from commentators and critics of Merleau-Ponty within the mainstream analytic and phenomenological traditions. These enabling interpretations allow Merleau-Ponty's relationship with transcendental philosophy to be downplayed in the context of his relevance for cognitive science, because they overwhelmingly suggest that Merleau-Ponty is inadequately

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. the response to Dennett (1991) in Thompson (1999); and Kelly (1998; and 2001) on Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Peacocke, Evans and McDowell.

committed to a transcendental perspective, or that his commitment is either unjustified or philosophically unintelligible. I consider these interpretations at the start of chapter two.

I also argue that there is support within some of the more recent literature that could make room for a reconsideration of the transcendental aspects of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. For example, Merleau-Ponty qualifies his own description of embodied perception in light of the problem of transcendence, which is also the central concern of transcendental phenomenology. This raises the question of whether one can legitimately appropriate Merleau-Ponty's description while ignoring altogether the question of how he deals with the phenomenon of transcendence, since it is arguably only in the context of a transcendental standpoint that this description makes sense.

Two further considerations set the stage for re-evaluating the sense in which Merleau-Ponty adopts a transcendental standpoint. The first is Sebastian Gardner's suggestion that Merleau-Ponty presupposes the possibility of a transcendental standpoint in order to critically engage with the transcendental tradition from within, without offering any criticism of realism. This diffuses the issue of the perceived inadequacy of such a criticism. But if Merleau-Ponty doesn't offer an *argument* for adopting a transcendental standpoint, it might nonetheless be true that he still answers the core demand (pointed out by Pietersma) of providing a *motive* for adopting it. With these considerations in mind, I turn to the task of re-evaluating Merleau-Ponty's relationship to the transcendental tradition.

In the second half of chapter two, then, I argue that the traditional view of transcendental philosophy as attempting to refute or negate scepticism is implicitly revised by Merleau-Ponty. The emphasis is rather on (dogmatic) philosophy's failure to take the sceptic seriously enough. Moreover, I argue that the pathological subject plays the role of the sceptic in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. This allows me to reread Merleau-Ponty's critique of intellectualism and empiricism as an objection to their failing to take such pathological subjects seriously, and ultimately rendering them invisible or unintelligible. In attempting to do justice to the phenomenon of pathology, Merleau-Ponty exposes the dogmatic objectivism that animates both.

The most important aspect of this is probably the significance that it has for how we understand Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method, and its relationship to intersubjectivity. Merleau-Ponty has often been portrayed as placing a limit on the Husserlian reductions, and in particular, on rejecting what is called the transcendental reduction. This view treats Merleau-Ponty's existentialism as being at odds with Husserl's intellectualism or idealism, and is based largely on a comparison of the *Phenomenology of Perception* with *Ideas I*, with its famous and unfortunate claim (in §49) that transcendental subjectivity is an absolute consciousness, which would survive even the nihilation of the world. Naturalists and materialists find such a claim unintelligible, while others conclude that Husserl was proposing a resurrection of Cartesianism. Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of himself as carrying on Husserl's phenomenological project has been regarded by commentators as an overly generous reading, either of Husserl, or of himself, depending upon their point of view.

On the other hand, mainstream Merleau-Ponty scholarship is itself undergoing a seismic shift in the wake of the publication of significant portions of Husserl's *Nachlaß*. Having the opportunity to consult the previously "two-thirds unpublished" Husserl which Merleau-Ponty read in Leuven, to read it *with him*, has already forced the community to begin the task of re-evaluating the relationship between these two great phenomenologists. I turn to Françoise Dastur's influential paper on intersubjectivity and Husserl's phenomenological reduction to demonstrate that, read in the manner that I have suggested, Merleau-Ponty can be seen as attempting a kind of intersubjective reduction that remains very close to a mature view of Husserl.

This reading helps make sense of Merleau-Ponty's notorious claim, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, that "the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction." (PhP, xiv) There have been many conflicting interpretations of this claim, but until recently all of them have shared the view that this claim should be interpreted as a criticism of Husserl, and have sought to explicate this purported incompleteness in terms of the rejection of some aspect of Husserl's phenomenological method.

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In the final chapter I take up two challenges raised in chapter two: 1) to illustrate the significance that Merleau-Ponty's concern with transcendence has for his

description of the body's role in perception, and 2) to show how using a confrontation with pathology as the motive for adopting a transcendental standpoint remains relevant in a contemporary setting.

John Haugeland offers an account of the body's role in "objective perception" that aims to be sensitive to the phenomenon of transcendence while remaining compatible with "naturalism, broadly construed". On the one hand, Haugeland takes a broadly Kantian line in his account, which treats the conditions for there being objects of perception as identical to the conditions for the perception of objects. On the other hand, he construes the conditions for the perception of objects in terms of the coordination of two sets of perceptual skills into a stance.

Haugeland argues that the transcendence of the objects of perception is not a kind of inaccessibility or alienness, but rather a kind of independence, in the sense that the phenomena themselves can make the perception of them untenable. In this way, the objectivity of perception is tied to its vulnerability to collapse in the face of "recalcitrant incompatibilities". What is meant by vulnerability here is not merely likelihood or probability of collapse, and this vulnerability would be meaningless for the perceiver if it were not for a personal commitment on their part to preserve the stance. Haugeland therefore introduces the notion of an existential commitment, which is his way of resurrecting the importance of the first-personal stake or involvement in the intelligibility of what is perceived.

A key point of tension between Haugeland and Merleau-Ponty lies in their differing accounts of the basis for the unity and diversity of sensibility. I argue that Merleau-Ponty would disagree with Haugeland in presupposing that sensibility can be analyzed into a collection of discrete mundane skills. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, synaesthesia is the rule, which means that these skills are not arbitrarily related prior to their coordination by some overarching collection of constitutive skills, as Haugeland suggests. This leads me to the provisional conclusion that Haugeland describes a *founded* mode of perception, more akin to categorial intuition than perception itself.

Now, it might be objected that this criticism is merely the acknowledgement of a difference in topic, and so I am obliged to show how Haugeland presupposes a founding mode of perception, beneath the objective perception he describes. I do this in two ways: first through an immanent critique, inspired by a critical remark made by Robert Cummins, and secondly, through a reenactment of the kind of

confrontation with pathology which we attributed to Merleau-Ponty in the previous chapter.

I argue that the vulnerability that grants the stance its objectivity compromises the possibility of correcting that stance in the wake of discovering that it is objectively incorrect. There can be no partial revision of a stance, every revision is a revolution, because the coordination of mundane skills is entirely due to the stance in which they participate. When that stance is undermined, when the phenomena actually assert their "independence", one is, as it were, thrown back to square one. Thus, my first critique is that Haugeland's account of the objective *correctness* of perception precludes an account of its objective *correction*.

Haugeland's account of the role of an empty excluded zone in the constitution of a stance is comparable to the role of abjection in the constitution of the body image. In this second critique of Haugeland, I call on Gail Weiss' account of anorexia. Weiss argues that we cannot understand anorexia in terms of a difference between the body one has and the body one is supposed to have, because this difference applies to all of us. Instead, she argues that the person suffering from anorexia is over-committed to a particular body image, and has lost a certain corporeal fluidity which would allow the substitution of another image in its place. Confronting Haugeland's account with the phenomenon of anorexia, I challenge him to differentiate an existential commitment to a stance from this pathological, and self-pathologising, over-commitment to a particular body image. The fact that Haugeland cannot differentiate them is suggested by the kinds of examples he uses, which treat the suspicion that one is suffering from some sort of pathology (usually madness or deception) as part of the normal perception of things.

Merleau-Ponty's account does not suffer from the same problems as Haugeland's because transcendence is not construed in terms of independence, but in terms of the fecundity and inexhaustibility of the sensible. So, instead of compensating for vulnerability through enforcing a personal commitment, we have the pre-personal development of a style within an inexhaustible field. I argue that, if we wish to account for the replacement of one perception by another that corrects it, it is crucial to distinguish the kind of projected background of a cognitive act described by Haugeland from what Merleau-Ponty describes as the world-horizon. The latter is a transcendental concept which cannot be naturalised as the correlate of an arrangement of skills.

Moreover, this world-horizon is essentially intersubjective. Returning to a discussion of the hidden sides of things from a Husserlian perspective, I argue that there is a reference to intersubjectivity in the experience of transcendent things. This is not a reference to the actual concrete experience of others. The intersubjectivity in question is an unbounded co-perceptibility. I show that Merleau-Ponty is aware of this in the *Phenomenology* and that this helps to explain the way he describes the concrete experience of others.

The living body is not analysable into discrete skills, which are meaningless in the absence of a coordinating commitment, rather the senses are so many ways of expressing one's inherence in a situation. On the verge of such an expression, we experience the fecundity of that situation in the form of an invitation, and it is through this metaphor of invitation that we can come to understand Merleau-Ponty's notion of a pre-personal commitment. This is a passive, anonymous commitment which one finds oneself to bear, and which ultimately founds the personal, existential commitment Haugeland describes.