



Accounting for Experience: Phenomenological Argots and Sportive Life-Worlds

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According to a certain position formulated within the philosophical school of post-structuralism, attempts to reconstruct forms of consciousness are themselves textual fabrications, and should be relinquished in favour of other, more 'textual' forms of analysis. This paper argues that phenomenologists should not reject this critique outright, for it compels them to think more carefully about the appropriateness of particular terminologies for the representation and comprehension of particular life-worlds. To this end, the vocabulary of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is delineated and considered as to its appropriateness for the study of sportive life-worlds in particular, and that of soccer play more particularly. A Merleau-Pontian analysis of the latter is offered, and it is contended that whilst certain problems are attendant upon its use, it nonetheless stands as a vital resource for understanding such a form of activity.

Introduction

The central purpose of any phenomenological explication of human activity is to represent the particularities of the modes of consciousness characteristic of the people under investigation. This project immediately raises a series of dilemmas. How is an external analyst to capture the nuances of those forms of being and experience that are constitutive of someone else's life? Is it possible fully to replicate phenomena - in this case, other persons' orientations to the world - when the very world that they experience is analytically assumed to be not a pre-given and static entity open to scrutiny by anyone, but to be constituted by those persons' particular existential conditions? What are the criteria by which we might measure the accuracy or otherwise of the account offered by the analyst of the life-world of the people under consideration?

The issue of translating experience into writing has been further problematised by authors working within the post-structuralist school of philosophy. According to the work of Derrida (1976, 1978), which has been very influential in the humanities and to some degree in the social sciences too, it is foolhardy to believe that texts can represent any reality beyond themselves. The truths propounded by texts are precisely textual truths, that have no validity beyond the literary rhetorics upon which texts are based. This form of post-structuralism therefore seeks to identify the 'bad faith' of texts which claim to represent phenomena beyond their own boundaries, as such texts are engaged in a dissembling of their own true nature, namely that they do not represent but rather construct that which they purport to bring into view. The implication of this position for phenomenological projects which seek to explicate particular modes of consciousness is that these latter are betrayed once they are re-

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presented textually. This is because the analyst's text is a device which cannot represent the particularity of those modes of consciousness, but which reconstructs semblances of these that have no intrinsic or meaningful relationship to the phenomena they are supposed to be representing.

Derrida's position poses a stark either/or choice: either we admit that all textual accounts are textual fabrications, or we are guilty of dissembling the true nature of the situation. However, we can reject such a black and white view of things in favour of accepting the point that language does contain rhetorical properties, and that it does have the power - to some extent - to shape the objects it recounts. We can also dispute the extreme claim that what texts point to is only ever other texts, and replace it with a series of reflections on which types of terminology might be adopted such that the particularity and haecceity (just-this-ness) of the phenomena under investigation are not rent asunder. This is a problematic based on the view that some terminologies might be better than others for the purpose of describing certain things. The task, then, is to examine different terminologies through which phenomena may be rendered into written language, analyse their conceptual and verbal components, and consider how they may or may not be geared towards usefully grasping particular forms of consciousness.

This paper is concerned with interrogating one particular phenomenological terminology in light of the desiderata set out above. The position we will consider is that provided by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The particular interest of Merleau-Ponty's specific analytic idiom lies in its stress on the role the human body plays in the constitution and reproduction of modes of consciousness, and therefore of the experiential contours of particular life-worlds. Both of the current authors have research interests in the study of sportive practices, and more particularly,

the ways in which sports-people experience the movement of their bodies as they partake in sportive processes. Thus after we have set out the main elements of Merleau-Ponty's position, we will turn towards the key argument of this paper: that his terminology is particularly well-suited towards the explication of how the human body and the spaces that surround it are 'felt' by the sports-person in motion. We will take the example of soccer players as the main exemplar of how the Merleau-Pontian argot can be used to reconstruct such modes of participative experience.

The Language of Merleau-Ponty

The trend in phenomenology after Husserl's (1982, 1989) foundational contribution which attempted to reconstruct the contours of consciousness-in-general, was towards locating the consciousness of a given subject in time and space (Luijpen, 1969; Lauer, 1965). This focus on the thrown-ness of consciousness, its inevitable positioning within a particular place, is a central theme of Heidegger (1988), from whom Merleau-Ponty took much inspiration. Merleau-Ponty's innovation was his systematic emphasis on the notion that both perception and awareness are fundamentally rooted in the body of the particular human subject. The visual field open to the subject is not just perceived but is thoroughly constituted by, and from, the perspective of a subject who possesses a body. In other words, consciousness is always and everywhere situated, both physically and existentially. From this perspective, all human subjects are body-subjects. This concept goes beyond the intuitive claim that a subject merely has a body. Instead, the idea of body-subject is an attempt to express linguistically the condition Merleau-Ponty took to be a basic characteristic of human life, namely that subjectivity and the body are not just interrelated, but completely indissociable. In this argot, the body is the subject and the subject is the body.

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Just as 'mind' and 'body' are seen to be interpenetrating entities rather than isolated and separate substances, so too on Merleau-Ponty's account are the human being and the world s/he inhabits thoroughly bound up with each other. Merleau-Ponty's (1968) terminology points to a situation whereby the body-subject is constituted by his or her life-world, and the life-world is constituted by the body-subject. Consciousness is seen to penetrate the 'world', and the 'world' likewise is seen to penetrate consciousness. Thus if the life-world is equated with the body-subject's visual field, the visual field constitutes the body-subject just as, simultaneously, the body-subject constitutes the visual field (Schmidt, 1985). The way Merleau-Ponty (1965: 168-9) expresses this situation is through a description of the mutual constitution of body-subject and field as a 'dialectic of milieu and action'.

This view has certain important ramifications for how the consciousness of body-subjects is to be understood. According to Merleau-Ponty, the primordial condition of the body-subject is understood as being prior to reflective consciousness. This primal condition does not involve the body-subject possessing a reflective consciousness, for the body-subject itself is a form of practical consciousness. A body-subject has as part of its very being forms of practical knowledge of how to operate in its field, and knows how to act on the basis of that knowledge. The claim here is that the abstract modes of thought involved in reflective consciousness are secondary products, generated on the basis of the pre-reflective modes of knowing and doing characteristic of the primitive existential condition of the body-subject.

Now that we have outlined in brief Merleau-Ponty's terminology, we can see why according those who have taken up his ideas, he can be said to have provided a general language that can be used to investigate particular species of embodied doing and being (Crossley, 1995).

Phenomenological analysis on this view seeks to reconstruct the contours of the 'lived' spaces created and experienced by particular body-subjects in their practical orientations towards the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). The utility of any terminology which seeks to explicate forms of consciousness can only be assessed on the basis of how well it might be judged to deal with particular modes of orientation towards and within a given life-world. We will now turn to present Merleau-Ponty's lexicon as a useful means of conceptualising a particular instance of sportive practice, namely how soccer players orient themselves while playing their sport. Here we shall portray what we take to be the benefits of a Merleau-Pontian account of such matters. Towards the end of the paper, we will indicate some of the problems that arise from adopting such an account.

Soccer Sensibilities

Merleau-Ponty himself directed his attention, albeit very briefly, to issues surrounding the experiential modes of soccer spaces. In an early work, *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty (1965) used the soccerfield as an example of how, in general terms, a body-subject orients and is oriented to the spatial dynamics of her visual field. Merleau-Ponty (1965: 168-9) described how the player 'plays' the game in this way:

For the player in action the soccer field is not an 'object', that is, the ideal term which can give rise to an indefinite multiplicity of perspectival views and remain equivalent under its apparent transformations. It is pervaded with lines of force (the 'yard lines'; those which demarcate the 'penalty area') and is articulated into sectors (for example, the 'openings' between the adversaries) which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the 'goal' for example, just as immediately as the vertical and the horizontal

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planes of his own body. It would not be sufficient to say that consciousness inhabits this milieu. At this moment consciousness is nothing in than the dialectic of milieu and action. Each maneuver undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field. As we noted before, the point being made here about the general nature of body-subjects in the fields they operate within, is that there exists a 'dialectic of milieu and action', a constant intertwining of the consciousness of the body-subject and the field in which s/he acts. As a result, there is a process whereby simultaneously the body-subject constitutes the field, whilst the field constitutes the practical consciousness of the body-subject.

Merleau-Ponty saw the soccer field as a telling example of the general point he wanted to make about the nature of practical activity. However, the example can be used as the basis for a substantive account of the nature of soccer play. This is so if we reread the above quotation as an analysis of the experiential mode of a player-body-subject, that is a soccer player whose corporeal being we can identify using Merleau-Ponty's lexicon. Given this descriptive device, we can then begin to explicate the nature of the player-body-subject's life-world and how s/he moves within it. Following the logic of Merleau-Ponty's diagnosis of the nature of body-subjects and fields in general, we can then describe the arena of soccer play in the following phenomenological terms. The life-world of the player-body-subject is the soccer field as it is viewed and experienced by the former. Since the field is constituted by the player-body-subject, it is his or her 'property'. But so too does the field constitute the player-body-subject. Both the player-body-subject and the soccer field are mutually creative of each other. Viewed in this way, soccer play is not the result of the perceptions and reactions of a form of consciousness that is reflective. Instead, play is

generated by a pre-reflective consciousness, which in its very essence is itself constituted by a 'dialectic of milieu and action'.

From this perspective, the player 'feels' the direction of the different parts of the pitch, for example the movement towards the goal area, as much as s/he experiences the endowments of her own body. That is to say, he or she 'knows' the pitch not at the level of reflection but at the level of pre-reflective, practical engagement. The player's actions are generated on the basis of that form of practical understanding. Play can thus be seen as a flow of embodied practical activities rather than as a series of discrete actions presided over and adjudicated by a reflecting consciousness. The player-body-subject does not carry out 'strategies', if these are defined as the results of reflective monitoring and decision. Instead, the player-body-subject practically produces 'moves', which are felt (rather than thought) to be compelled by the spatial contours of the soccer field. As these contours are also 'felt' by the player-body-subject, they are transformed into dynamics of space, in this case the space of the soccer field. Thus there pertains a fundamental relationship between the dynamics of the perceived pitch, and the movements that the player-body-subject enacts. Both player and field are in movement together, the one orienting and reorienting the other simultaneously and constantly as long as the player is playing. The succession of 'moves', the very substance of play itself, constantly lead to reconfigurations both of the dynamics of the field, and of the subsequent moves 'demanded' of the player by those dynamics. Those dynamics are, of course, produced by the permanent interpenetration of the body and the field. The notion of there being a stream of play encapsulates the rhythm of play on the pitch. Whilst the player sometimes has to perform relatively 'discrete' movements - e.g. to stop running with the ball in order to take aim at a target - such activities are only relatively rather than absolutely distinct from the flow of play that preceded them and follows them. The

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terminology used to describe forms of play must therefore draw upon metaphors of processual and on-going movement, and not fall into the trap of utilising language that conveys a false impression of jerky, stop-start forms of motion.

Enter the Star Player

Thus far we have set out a framework that sets out what we take to be the nature of soccer player-body-subjects in general. However, empirically speaking, there are many different types of player in the world of soccer, and many different types of play. Forms of play and player vary in terms of levels of expertise and types of play. For example, there are quite clearly differences in the bodily dispositions of world-class players like Pelé or David Beckham, and amateur players who partake in informal games on a Saturday afternoon. Moreover, there are also important national and regional differences in styles of play, with the bravura style of the Brazilian national team contrasting greatly with the more stolid characteristics of the German or Dutch teams. We have examined the aesthetics of variant forms of play elsewhere (Inglis and Hughson, 2000).

Here we will give an indication of how a Merleau-Pontian terminology can be used for phenomenologically reconstructing the experience of play as felt by one particular type of soccer player, namely the international 'star player' who is highly regarded by pundits and fans alike. From our researches in this area thus far, we would argue that the form of practical knowledge such players possess, and the types of movement engendered thereby, are best described as exhibiting very high levels of kinetic economy. Such a property of play is described well by the philosopher David Best (1995: 382), when he describes this as involving 'actions which ... approach ... the ideal of totally concise direction towards the required end of the particular activity', the latter being, of course, scoring goals. Best goes on to argue that this kind of play involves a 'unified structure which ... [is]

the most economical and efficient method of achieving the required end' (ibid., 383).

Best's use of the word 'structure' here is a little problematic, because the static and mechanistic connotations it throws up do not do full justice to the shape of such play. However, this can be rectified by recourse to the Merleau-Pontian terms suggested above, replacing such a brittle form of expression with descriptors such as 'stream' and 'flow' to describe the on-going process of play. Nevertheless, Best's description above does effectively capture what we have adduced from careful study of the movements of the famous names in international soccer: that they are possessed of an ability to avoid expending extraneous energy in their traversal of the pitch, being wholly focused on the particular end they are oriented towards. Elsewhere we have written of the peculiar physical beauty of this form of movement (Hughson and Inglis, 2002). The important point here is that there does indeed seem to be a star player type of player-body-subject, who is possessed of a mode of practical knowledge and capacities for movement that do seem to be different in certain ways from those held by other - 'less gifted' - players. Thus from the point of view of a form of external analysis - identifying a type of player and watching their corresponding forms of movement - we feel confident in claiming that there is indeed a star player form of soccer play that can be phenomenologically reconstructed.

Our researches have thus far focused on French players of this type, top-level French stars being known for their particularly dramatic (and for Anglo-Saxon tastes, over-dramatic!) style of play. The capacities of top-level French players are interestingly delineated in the following thoughts attributed to the former French international squad member, Eric Cantona:

To create the moment. To step out of time. To create space from nothing. To be truly spontaneous. This is the fate of the [great] footballer. He must be

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surrealist and realist, a magician and a scientist (cited at Blacker and Donaldson, 1997: 15)

If we downplay the oratorical flourishes so beloved of this particular individual, the passage does illustrate an important point about the type of play enacted by a (French) star player. Someone like Cantona can, in a sense, 'create space from nothing'. He can locate paths through the opposition's defence ranks, and discover ways of scoring goals, that in a very literal sense are shut off to other types of player on the field. The star player can be seen to create spaces which could not be created or even imagined by other players who do not possess the same type of skills.

Many commentators have remarked that Cantona's fellow French international, Zinedine Zidane, seems also to be possessed of this sort of dazzling ability. As Gibbons (1999: 38) has noted:

Among Zidane's range of extraordinary talents, perhaps the most precious is a chilling ability to disappear in front of 55,000 people, suddenly materialising in places far from where opposing defenders are stationed.

Zidane not only has the capacity to elude rival defenders, he also apparently has the power momentarily to escape the gaze of spectators by appearing like a phantom in unexpected places, and in so doing, he creates havoc among the opposition. Star players can therefore be understood in the terms de Certeau (1984: 93) invokes apropos of another type of practitioner: they 'make use of spaces that cannot be seen' by others. An 'artist' of soccer play like Zidane can create spaces denied to others, by calling upon a particular repertoire of playing skills, as he weaves around the contours of a pitch, the dynamics of which pulse through his body. When asked about such issues in interviews, Zidane is generally rather at a loss as to what to say. Questioned about one particularly spectacular goal that he engineered, he replied in this way:

... I ask myself, how did I do that?! They [my fellow players] were just as surprised as I was. You can make that particular move a hundred times, but only once might it work ... [After the match] I looked at it again [on video], although I generally don't tend to watch replays of my games. But that particular move, I watched it fifteen times, in order to dissect it. And it is beautiful! It is so beautiful! Here we can see that faced with a demand to explain precisely how he carried out such a maneuver, Zidane's mastery deserts him. All he can do is point to the beauty of what he has achieved, rather than be able to tell us in detail the resources that he could draw upon to that end. We are here faced with the paradox of how a master of his art cannot explain in words how that art works or where it comes from.

The Limits of Understanding

So far, we have presented the benefits we take to accrue from adopting a Merleau-Pontian terminology to reconstruct what is happening when soccer players enter the field. We have seen that it provides us with a lexicon through which the comments of soccer players as to their own forms of play can be made sense of. In particular, it allows us to think about soccer play in terms of a pre-reflective 'stream' of movements stimulated by, and in turn reconfiguring, the life-world of the soccer field. However, no position can ever honestly be said to be perfectly attuned to the subject matter it is being used to comprehend. In this section we will identify problems that we have come up against in our deployment of this brand of phenomenology for our particular subject matter.

In studying any aspect of human consciousness phenomenologically, one is faced with the problem of an object of analysis that potentially always slips through one's fingers as one tries to grasp it. If the analyst asks the person under study to describe what she is doing when engaged in a particular activity, the risk is not only that the formal interview process may skew the response in ways that invalidate it as a good description of the existential condition of that activity. The danger is also that, even if the

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interview - or other form of data collection - does not impinge seriously on the account offered by the subject, nonetheless she will in one way or another be compelled to express it in a formalised discourse that bears little relation to, and obeys different logics than, the mode of practical knowledge that informs the activity the analyst wishes to know about. In this way, the analyst ends up with an account of practice out of which all the elements of practical knowledge have leaked (Bourdieu, 1996).

These dilemmas have faced us in our attempts to understand 'from within' the activity of star player type soccer. The problem is compounded by the fact that the Merleau-Pontian approach we have adopted compels us to try to 'get inside' not just the heads of such players, but their bodies too (as it were). Here we run up against the age-old divide between the 'man (or woman) of action' and the 'man (or woman) of letters', each possessed of mastery of a realm governed by different exigencies. The study of sport phenomenologically by and large requires an interrogation of the conditions of possibility of the activities of the former, and arguably involves even more problems than the study of the latter. This is because analysis of the latter involves (in part) putting first-order discourses of subjects into the second-order discourses of the analyst (Schutz, 1967). It is perhaps less difficult to perform that sort of operation, than to translate more directly and expressly corporeal practices into language, especially given the fact that subjects themselves experience difficulties in making such a translation of their own practices into words. If the analyst is at a certain distance from other people's words, s/he is arguably at an even greater distance from their corporeal activities.

Thus we acknowledge that the material we presented above involves many sorts of methodological dilemmas. Even if we were to carry out face-to-face interviews with soccer players, the problems associated with such a

method of data gathering would still be with us, and made more problematic because the phenomena we are interested in are corporeal in nature, and therefore are perhaps particularly resistive to being put into discursive terms. We saw this in the case of the interview with Zidane. He knows what he is doing practically, for when he is on the pitch he is required to act as a body-subject, and one possessed of certain knowledges that allow him to make moves that others cannot. Whilst he is also a body-subject in the interview room, such a context requires different, more verbal, skills. As his capacities for mastering an environment lie in another, more directly corporeal, direction, he seems rather at sea in a life-world where words are the phenomena to be oriented towards, not soccer balls. Thus the reconstruction by the analyst of what Zidane feels when playing soccer, is particularly fraught, for it involves setting out in words corporeal experiences he himself finds difficulty in expressing verbally.

Paradoxically, then, the theoretical strength of a Merleau-Pontian approach to studying forms of practice, its emphasis on the need to think about the embodied nature of activities, actually compounds the methodological problems associated with all forms of investigation which seek to delineate the nature of experience. By seeking to set out modes of embodied experience, a Merleau-Pontian approach can founder on the rocks of its own ambition. The search for the fine-grained details of someone's life-world is difficult enough. With an added emphasis on the corporeal aspects of that life-world, and the forms of consciousness intertwined with it, a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology compounds still further the dilemmas facing the analyst.

Conclusion

We have sought in this paper to challenge the post-structuralist idea that any kind of phenomenological enterprise that seeks to reconstruct particular modes of consciousness ought to be abandoned. If the phenomenologist's

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text does not represent that which it purports to depict, but in fact fabricates merely an imaginary version of that object, then that text would indeed only have value as symptomatic evidence of that scholar's naivety, if not also his or her bad faith. We suggest that instead of accepting such a stark choice between abandoning phenomenological investigations altogether, or completely ignoring the post-structuralist critique and carrying on as normal as if nothing has happened, contemporary phenomenological scholarship would do well to reflect on how well competing terminologies can be deployed to grasp particular subject matters. Our position is that there is no single way of testing the utility or otherwise of a particular way of describing life-worlds, nor can one ever state with complete confidence that a particular terminology is without merits. Instead, one has to consider carefully how a particular lexicon available for analytic use can be drawn upon to describe particular life-worlds, and to assess how well that manner of representation deals with the particular modes of being and doing under consideration. Does it tell us anything new about the life-world being investigated? Does it capture well the detailed features of a form of life? Does it miss out or misrepresent phenomena that for other reasons we might take to be important in the particular context under scrutiny?.

We have described above some of the methodological pitfalls a Merleau-Pontian terminology can lead us towards. Nonetheless, despite these quandaries, we believe that the study of sports in general, and soccer in particular, still gains a great deal from an adoption of the terminology set out by Merleau-Ponty. If one did not have a Merleau-Pontian emphasis on the intertwined nature of the mental and the bodily, one would end up with a very queer view of how sportive practices actually occur. Lacking such an outlook, we might be tempted to take at face value the discursive elaborations of sports-people as to their sporting activities. This approach would ignore the qualitative differences between a discourse made

up of post hoc rationalisations as to how and why certain movements are enacted in sport, and the practical, largely pre-reflective knowledges drawn upon in the actual flow of sportive movement. Phenomenology in general rightly draws attention to the practical, pre- or non-reflective aspects of many activities. The Merleau-Pontian terminology shows how such knowledges are always in one way or another interwoven with modes of bodily deportment and forms of 'bodily knowing'.

Such a focus is arguably crucial for a more realistic understanding of sportive phenomena, for without it many of the elements of sport that make it different from other activities would be lost to analysis, and the particularities of bodily comportment within particular sports might go unexamined.

In our researches, we have found that a Merleau-Pontian phraseology has been an invaluable means for us to pull together and to make sense of the empirical materials we have gathered on the game of soccer. We believe that

Merleau-Ponty's concepts provide a very useful framework through which we can develop further analysis in this area. We have not yet investigated, for example, how different star players perceive each other, both in the same team and in the opposition, and how they deal with such a potentially threatening presence. Although Merleau-Ponty's remarks on soccer did not encompass this area, nonetheless his ideas are very conducive towards providing the means to describe the ways in which bodies come together and separate on the field of play, sometimes in violent combat with each other and sometimes in euphoric celebration. These and other features both of soccer in particular and of other sports too, await uncovering by Merleau-Pontian tools. Soccer is often dubbed 'the beautiful game'. We believe that its beauty can be further discovered and admired if the appreciative analyst has Merleau-Ponty's glossary at his or her disposal.

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