

Original Research Article

Merleau-Ponty—The Phenomenology of Perception, Empiricism and Intellectualism

Kaiying Zhu

London School of Economic and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, UK WC2A 2AE

Abstract: Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a French philosopher—a leading figure in existentialism and phenomenology, his philosophy of phenomenology mainly focused on the relation between the body and the mind. Yet Merleau-Ponty’s theory differs from empiricism and rationalism, it is a position in between them yet he criticized both empiricism and intellectualism. Drawing from both empiricism and intellectualism, he tried to overcome the shortcomings of them. This essay explains his argument for the primacy of perception and body and identifies the differences between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, empiricism and intellectualism.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty; Phenomenology; Empiricism; Intellectualism

Merleau-Ponty’s theory differs from empiricism and rationalism, it is a position in between them yet he criticise both empiricism and intellectualism and he tried to overcome the shortcomings of them. Merleau-Ponty was affected by the Gestalt Psychology which believes we should study human beings as whole rather than focusing on component parts because the whole is something other than the sum of its parts. This principle can be found to have significant influence in his philosophy. For example, he says when he walks around his flat he perceives it as a whole i.e. he does not just focus on small components such as desks and sofas. Also, he thinks we are acquainted with the world in relation to our body, if he does not know how the flat looks from various aspects he would not recognise it as one. In opposing to empiricism, he argues that we can associate things together because of its inner coherence, we are able to do this not by external association of ideas.

He rejects empiricists’ view because he thinks sensations cannot be reduced to indescribable mental state, and he believes that we do not just passively receive sensations which he puts it “sensation is not an invasion of the sensor by the sensible.”¹ He disapproves the word ‘sensation’, because he thinks it is confusing and it would disturbs our study of perceptions. He believes our perceptions are intentional, they are ‘made’ by external things we perceived, however, “the concept of sensation corresponds to nothing in our experience”². It is a mistake to take the qualities we sense to be the inner qualities of things which requires some cognitive inferences. He believes perceptions corresponds to things in the world while sensations may not be the same as our actual experience. For example, in the Müller-Lyer illusion, we are tempted to think that two lines are of different length yet in fact they are the same, and this is an example of what he means by sensations are distorting.

He also disagrees with intellectualists as they often denies the precondition of the existence of phenomenal appearances and put the mind as priority over the body or doubt that sense experience should be trusted at all. Intellectualists hold that we are able to recognise things due to cognitive powers, sense experience relies on consciousness and it only allows us to perceive qualities of things. For example, Merleau-Ponty rejects intellectualist theories such as Dennett’s view that my judgement constitutes experience thus it cannot be false, for if this is the case then we could hardly distinguish true and false perceptions. On the other hand, there is a difference between ‘hearing’ and ‘thinking one hears’ e.g. auditory hallucinations. Therefore, my judgement does not necessarily constitutes perception. Although Kant’s theory is not as extreme as Dennett’s, Merleau-Ponty also thinks Kant’s transcendental theory is not satisfying. He particularly disagrees with Kant the definition of ‘a priori’. For Kant, the a priori is true prior to experience, it is necessary truth. Merleau-Ponty thinks the a priori is “unity of senses”³ and we should appreciate the cognitive powers in terms of factual situations. In my opinion, what he means is that a priori and a posteriori are interwoven and what must necessarily be can be what in fact exists. Human beings are necessary to this world, what we can think of i.e. the fact that we are in this world follows from it thus becomes a priori.

1 Reader, p164.

2 T. Carman and M.B.N. Hansen, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, p52.

3 Reader, p168.

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty thinks empiricism and rationalism both commit the mistake of “objective thinking.” Objective thinking⁴ is the view that objects can be known by a subject in a way without being affected by the subject’s own interpretations i.e. reality of things can be accessed by a subject objectively. However, Merleau-Ponty thinks we must take into account “the fact of my subjectivity,”⁵ because for him, to understand the phenomenal field we need to engage with the world. He thinks we are always given sensations which are already interpreted, this makes our perception of the object differs from the object itself. Therefore he objects the empiricist account that sensation is the content of experience. He argues rationalism makes the same mistake as well, because he thinks that objects cannot be grasped by sensations nor the intellect. Empiricism and intellectualism are like “two sides of a coin”⁶, Merleau-Ponty himself says in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: “empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for... and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for,”⁷ otherwise in both cases we could not look for it, this I think sums up their problems perfectly.

Husserl’s thinking has a great impact on Merleau-Ponty yet his rejection of empiricism and intellectualism is different to Husserl’s method. Husserl’s philosophy is sometimes described as ‘transcendental idealism’ which seeks to surpass empiricism and intellectualism, and this is what Merleau-Ponty wants to achieve as well. For Merleau-Ponty, sensation and intellect are both abstractions from perception. Also, he agrees with Husserl’s notion of ‘epoché’ which suggests we should suspend our beliefs in the natural attitude (which posits the existence of the world), he wants to establish phenomenological method which would enable us to examine the world from a completely new angle. Comparing to Husserl’s phenomenological reduction which claims common sense, interpretations, presuppositions and characteristics of subjects should not be involved when considering the content of experience, however, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the importance of ‘body-subject’ as it gives meaning to our lives i.e. we would not be existing without our body. Husserl is concerned with our primitive contact with the world, he thinks consciousness alone can access to beings within the world and he does not distinguish sensation and perception, whereas Merleau-Ponty believes perception is the primordial method for us to know the world. What’s more, Husserl thinks consciousness is to be conscious of something, which separates the act ‘thinking’ and the ‘object of thought’. Merleau-Ponty disagrees, he argues that when it comes to contemplating the body, the body does the thinking and the object you are thinking of is body, thus body can be both the subject and the object at the same time.

Furthermore, for Merleau-Ponty the ‘things themselves’ are perceptions, he differs from Sartre and Heidegger as he puts emphasis on perception as our interaction with the world. He argues for the ‘primacy of perception’ and bodily nature of perception. According to his theory of body schema, perception is neither purely mental nor physical, it has ‘intentionality’ which guides us towards our environment. Perception is bodily orientation and since it is so familiar to us, we are often ignorant of it or confuses it with sensation. The world of perception is complex and he claims we should relearn that we perceive the world through our body and the perception of the body. The body can be the subject and the object of perception as they “vary in conjunction because they are two facets of the same act.”⁸ Merleau-Ponty gives the example of Aristotle’s illusion, one will perceive two balls when one touches a ball by two adjacent crossed fingers. “Perception brings together our sensory experience”⁹, we look and touch the ball at the same time and recognise it as a single object. Nevertheless, perception is neither passive nor active but unfolds the phenomenal field. Merleau-Ponty insists perception is very different from sensation, he denies sensation as primitive source of perceptual experience, he claims that the concept ‘sensation’ is confusing and it “corresponds to nothing in our experience.”¹⁰ He claims we find consciousness and experience in our body and that body, consciousness, and the world are interconnected. Therefore, we are acquainted with the world in relation to our body, and the phenomenal is not independent of us but related to the existence of body-subject.

Merleau-Ponty furthers the idea of the body schema by using the example in the *Visible and the Invisible*, of left hand touching the right hand, which presents a “reversibility”¹¹ of subject and object. It can be interpreted that he uses this example as a metaphor to explain the relation of the bodily perception and the world as the relation of ‘touching’ and ‘being touched’. He thinks we misunderstand the correlation of object and subject and we neglect the fact that they can be reversed. If we do not do so perhaps we could avoid the mistake of ‘objective thinking’ which empiricism and intellectualism commit, because both of them try to establish a way in order to access an ‘objective world’. In addition, I think this reciprocal relation does not only apply to touching but also to other things such as a reversibility of entertaining and being entertained. For instance, when we interact with other people, we can be the person entertaining others and at the same time being entertained by others, we can be the subject and object of entertaining. One of the characteristics of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is ‘ambiguity’, but here ‘ambiguity’ is not a derogatory term, it means the reasonability of correlation of contradictory things and our continuous uncertainty of things in the world, thus they require phenomenology to redefine them.

However, E.T Gendlin offers not necessarily a criticism but, I think, modification of Merleau-Ponty’s theory. Gendlin argues for “the primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception.”¹² As Merleau-Ponty argues for the primacy of perception and body he puts them prior to a language and concepts. Gendlin points out that we cannot talk about anything without language and concepts, language is already implicit in our experiences. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty was wrong to put perception prior to language and

4 S. Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, p6.

5 Reader, p167.

6 T. Carman and M.B.N. Hansen, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, p60.

7 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Part I p36.

8 Reader, p158.

9 Reader, p174.

10 T. Carman and M.B.N. Hansen, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, p52.

11 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press; 1st edition (1968).

12 E.T. Gendlin, https://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2220.html.

concept. Although I agree with Gendlin's modification that it is primacy of the body but not necessarily perception, I slightly disagree with the importance Gendlin puts on concept, as I think whether perception or concept comes first is still a question.

References

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- 6 Priest, Stephen. *Merleau-Ponty* (Edited by Ted Honderich), Routledge, 1998, Chapter I, IV, V.
- 7 Rosen, Steve M. *Dimensions of Apeiron*, 2013, p173.
- 8 2017 UEA *Phenomenology and Existentialism Reader*, p157–p181.