

Merleau-Ponty: Midterm Take-Home Questions

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1 Basic definitions

1.0.1 The Natural Attitude

Commonsense belief in the existence of the world, which someone is in before the attempt any sort of phenomenological reflection. Natural belief that the world exists because “it is there” rather than basing its existence on phenomenology. Suspending the natural attitude doesn’t entail putting into doubt the existence of the world, but rather just removing the subconscious fallacy of assuming the world that exists as it is for us. Merleau-Ponty says that in the natural attitude we forget about the subject, and focus on the world, which is another way of saying the same thing.

1.0.2 Experience Error

The experience error is the fundamental issue Merleau-Ponty finds in empiricist accounts of our sensation—when we take the qualities of things that we see, and take them to be qualities of the things as they are in our perception. In other words, the error occurs when we take our objective, scientific analysis of the targets of our perception and think that we learn, from that scientific analysis, about perception itself.

1.0.3 Constancy Hypothesis

The idea that there is an absolute correspondence between our stimuli (what we see), and our perception (what we know we see). Merleau-Ponty is diametrically opposed to this, as he holds that our perception of an object is more than the raw stimulus of the object itself—context, background, perspective is essential as well.

1.0.4 Abstract Movement

Movement that requires a person to have a spatial sense in the objective world—a movement such as “pointing my finger at my nose.” Merleau-Ponty says abstract movements are “projected on a background that the person creates”, which is simply to say that abstract movements require imagination in the subject, because he is not following a prescribed reactive action.

1.0.5 Concrete Movement

A movement that takes place completely in the phenomenal world—never reaches the objective world. Swatting a fly, a person feels the fly bite on his phenomenal body and reacts by swatting it with his hand, there is no self-awareness of body that

intercedes between the mind and the act. The subject does not look at himself as an object.

2 Short Answer

2.0.6 Gestalt psychology and the constancy hypothesis

Merleau-Ponty draws heavily on Gestalt psychology in his attack on empiricism. The fundamental findings of the Gestalt psychologists that he refers to is that humans, as well as perception, are holistic. It cannot be broken down into pieces, or explained by its constituent parts alone. When looking at perception, taking individual pieces of sense data, as empiricists do, is not enough. We have to look at the whole perception in its totality, and perception includes more than just the object, but also the object's background, horizon. The constancy hypothesis, positing a one-to-one relation between sense data and our perception, breaks down because the whole holistic picture is important when looking at perception—the same stimuli, in different contexts, will result in a different perception. In the Müller-Lyer experiment, each line is to perception a different line. The fact that if you were to measure them they would be the same length next to a ruler is not the issue at hand—they are only later related to each other by a judgement that we make *a posteriori*, rather than *a priori*. The constancy hypothesis has trouble with this example, because the one-to-one nature of the correspondence implies that there must be something fundamentally different in the lines themselves if they appear to us to be different lengths. But when measured, they are indeed the same.

2.0.7 2. “I forgo my constant power [...]”

The issue at hand here is Merleau-Ponty's discussion of repression. His examples of repression center around a traumatic experience in a person's youth, as he describes a person with such an experience as “imprisoned” in the event that traumatized him. However, he goes further than simply claiming that traumatic events imprison us: “We continue to be the person who once entered on this adolescent affair.” (p. 83). While we continue to experience new things and have new perceptions, they fail to change the underlying structure that repression puts on the subject, but rather exist under the same traumatic experience. The “worlds” that Merleau-Ponty refers to in the quote are the potential worlds and choices that lie in front of us, and the one that we forgo our power to choose for is the one in which we are still under the spell of the repression or trauma. This world over time loses its substance because it fades from our direct experience—it becomes hidden and eventually is reduced to its essential form—as “a manner of being.” But what is left, this manner of being, hangs over us and hence the *certain dread*. The fundamental force of the repression remains as a hidden force, removing potential choices that the person has, casting its shadow over the subject.