

Merleau-Ponty Final Take Home Questions

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0.0.1 1. How is the body understood, from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologist-existential perspective, and how does this understanding relate to (contrast with) how the body has traditionally been conceived (in the modern west)?

One of the major threads that is to be found throughout Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* is his radical rejection of both empiricist and intellectualist notions of philosophy. He starts off his work by undercutting the empiricist and intellectualist approaches to philosophy as a whole, and as he develops his arguments for his phenomenological existentialism piece by piece, he shows how both the existentialist and intellectualist accounts in each case fail to provide satisfactory answers in any way. When it comes to his account of the body, one of the central aspects of his phenomenological world, it is no different. As he takes on each traditional branch of philosophy in turn, we shall do the same. Then, as Merleau-Ponty's radical subjectivity of the body becomes clear, the distinction he makes between his new philosophy and the classics that he attacks will develop.

Empiricism starts from the simple axiom that our sense experience is given to us in individual atoms. Each perceptual apparatus provides our brain with various discrete points of data, which independently do not contain relations between themselves. They can then be assembled to "make up" the representation of the scene before us, assembled by a second-order process that is not to be found in the sensations themselves. When it comes to the empiricists, or materialists, they completely deny the existence of the mental. Everything that seems to be mental is in reality a physical mechanism. The mental states that we seem to have can be completely reduced to physical states, certain physical configurations that provide us with the illusion of our mental experience. The body becomes an immensely complex machine, a physical object with certain physical properties that make up what we consider to be *our* body. The crucial aspect here that Merleau-Ponty will undermine is the concept that our body is an object at all, and we shall see later how the empiricist reliance on reducing the mental and all experience to physical configurations of our objective body is flawed and unworkable.

Intellectualism, which Merleau-Ponty also addresses at times as Rationalism, takes a very different approach, but is nevertheless doomed to failure. Intellectualists claim that everything is mental. In Cartesian Dualism, there is a very clear separation between the soul, all that is mental, and the body, all that is physical. The physical in no way encompasses the mental, and it is impossible to reduce the mental *to* the physical and Empiricists are wont to do.

Instead we have two separate domains, with a tenuous connection between the two. The ultimate test for a dualist is the fact that it would be theoretically possible for us to survive the loss of our body—it is imaginable that our “soul” or “mind” could attach to another physical body instead. Likewise in a Kantian view, it is our faculties of judgement and reason that produce our experience for our minds, a process that happens a step above the raw sensory flow that our physical body produces. So for the intellectualist, the subject is the mental, not the physical. The physical body in the world is a mere vessel, our subjectivity is located in our souls. (Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*) This too Merleau-Ponty will find objectionable, as he will claim that our subject in the world is simply our body, nothing more.

Merleau-Ponty’s radical shift can be stated simply: “I am my body.” Unlike dualism, there is no cleavage between mental and physical. Unlike empiricism, the mental is not thrown away, reduced to the physical. As the phenomenological project entails, Merleau-Ponty wants to examine and describe our experience rather than trying to give reasons for it, and his first step is to reject the notion of our body as an object of our experience. As a phenomenologist, he does so by appealing to experience itself, and showing how in our everyday phenomenon of experience, our bodies are not objects to us. When looking at objects, we only ever see a perspective of them. But we are able to walk around a church, for example, to gain different perspectives of it. We can vary our point of view with respect to a fixed point in order to circumscribe the object, against a horizon, in our field of view. I have the freedom to vary my view of an object, to examine it from different sides. But our body is different—we do not have this freedom, we are trapped in our head, prisoners of our own body. Furthermore, a quality of an object is that it can be moved away from me, and “ultimately disappear from my field of vision. Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence.” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* p. 90) My body is different, it is ever-present and part of me—to say that it is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, that I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with* me.” (PP, p.90) By being a part of me, there is never any distance between my body and myself.

Furthermore, he goes on to say, it is through our body that we discover objects. We pick them up, we manipulate them, we walk around them, all using our body. But what are we to discover our body with? We would need another, second, body to examine our own. And then of course this second body would not be an object for us. The fact that it is our body that creates objects, that it is our body by which there are objects for us, that is why it cannot be an object. Furthermore, the denial of our body as a physical object rejects empiricism as it was explained above.

However, it says nothing about dualism and the mind-body problem that continues to plague traditional accounts of philosophy. Merleau-Ponty’s answer to the mind-body problem stems from his claim there there is no separation between mind and body, that our pre-reflective conception shows the fact that there is no mind-body distinction. Saying that “I am my body” is not to be understood as a reduction to physicalism, as we have seen that our body is not simply an object, but rather an imbuing of our body with our mental subject. Merleau-Ponty places our subjectivity in our bodies, turning it into what would better be called a body-subject rather than just a body. (Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty*

and Derrida: intertwining embodiment and alterity p. 7)

Merleau-Ponty appeals to our raw pre-reflective experience in order to explain this body-subject that he describes. Before applying our judgments and conceptions, we do not perceive objects in the world as separate from our minds, or objects as separate from our perception of them. There is no such thing as an object's internal content, there is simply the object. We simply perceive existing objects, as we perceive the existing world. The world is there for us, and we take it as such. The mind-body distinction that we find is only to be discovered once we apply our reflective thought to our experience—it is not in our fundamental mode of being with the world. We act as embodied subjects in the world, not as disconnected minds ordering a physical body to move about amongst already-existing objects in the world (objects of a doubtful ontological status). It is through reflection, he says, that “The world is doubled: there will be the real world as it is outside my body and the world as it is for me, numerically distinct from the first; the external cause of perception and the internal object which it contemplates will have to be separated.” (SB, 190) Before our reflection we are not aware of our living in two worlds, one of the mental and one of the physical.

Two of Merleau-Ponty's examples are particularly suited for explaining his lived body, his being-in-the-world. He discusses the experience of people with a phantom limb, patients who report having sensations from limbs of their bodies that they have lost. Both empiricist and intellectualist attempts to explain the existence of the phantom limb phenomenon fall short, he claims, and only a properly phenomenological account is able to make sense of it. Both the empiricist and intellectualist accounts fail, he claims, as a result of their treating the body as an object, separated from itself as a subject and outside its own personal history. Trying to find a causal explanation that links our physical bodies in the world with the ghostly sensations of the phantom limb will not work, as there is none to be found. Looking at it from a perspective of an embodied subject, a subject who discovers the world through his body, the phantom limb is merely a way for the subject to deny a certain condition, to live according to a certain set of bodily rules that were previously learned and are being held on to—”To have a phantom arm is to remain open to all those actions of which the arm alone is capable; it is to keep the practical field that one had before being mutilated.” (PP 97) This phenomenon shows how the subject is closely tied up with the world, how it is through the body that the subject exists, and how the “lived, phenomenal body must therefore not be thought of as an object in itself, but as the way a subject is present in the world and is aware of it.” (Gary Brent Madison, PP. 23)

The other interesting example that Merleau-Ponty uses is when, while touching an object with our right hand, we simultaneously touch our right hand with our left:

If I touch with my left hand my right hand while it touches an object, the right hand object is not the right hand touching: the first is an intertwining of bones, muscles and flesh bearing down on a point in space, the second traverses space as a rocket in order to discover the exterior object in its place. (PP, 92)

This example shows the duality of the subject-body, both as a perceiver and subject of perception. Merleau-Ponty

points out that as soon as we touch our right hand—the hand that is a part of the world, that is not an object for us but rather that which is exploring the world—it becomes a normal object again, the subject is instantly turned into the object. The body is then an ambiguous joining of the two, as it is both a subject and an object for itself. This is not to say that a body is both completely a subject and completely an object at the same time—for it can never be the case that a hand is both a subject and an object, there is always one hand that is the subject, discovering the other hand as the object. The constant play here between being a subject and being an object is simply the ambiguous existence of the lived body. (Gary Brent Madison, p. 26) But this example serves to illustrate more of Merleau-Ponty's idea of how we come to discover ourselves:

I can identify the hand touched as the same one which will in a moment be touching [...] In this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched and initiates 'a kind of reflection'. (PP 93)

This essential reflection is the mixing of the touching and the touched, the subjectivity and objectivity of our body. It fights against the complete distinction between being touched and being touching, and suggests that our subject-body is between these two poles of pure subjectivity and pure objectivity. (Jack Reynolds, p. 13)

What we have circumscribed here is a radically different concept of the body from anything found in traditional Western thought. The body is more than an object in the world for us, the body is as an embodied subject, tied up phenomenologically with the subject as well as a physical manifestation. This body has a mode of being that Merleau-Ponty calls being-in-the-world, a pre-reflective mode of being that serves to tie together the indistinguishable concepts of subjective existence and objective world. Our bodies do not move on our command, they do not respond as a company of soldiers responds to a general barking orders, rather, my body moves *with* me as a part of me. He uses the example of a soccer player on the soccer pitch, as for him, his body is not an object and the field is not his target, the field unfolds in front of him in terms of lines of force, he sees openings in players as drawing his attention, areas covered by opposing players are covered up from his vision. The field is perceived without the perception of it being perceived, it is directly understood and enumerated for the player as a manifold of possibilities laid in front of him. This rediscovery of the subject-body serves to undermine the treatment given to it in most Western philosophy, and places it directly in the center of our ontology when describing both ourselves and the world.

0.0.2 6. What is the 'traditional subject-object (for itself—in itself) dichotomy', and how is it undermined by the phenomenon of speech?

Merleau-Ponty concludes his chapter on the body with a chapter on speech. This is of course not an accident, and through his analysis of the phenomenon of speech he brings together his discussions of the body and the subject and ties them together in order to underline his fundamental separation from the traditional distinction between subject and object. The subject/object dichotomy that he is arguing against is the separation of mind and body, and both empiricism and intellectualism fail to attribute to speech the necessary importance that he believes it requires.

The subject-object dichotomy that he argues against manifests itself in different ways in empiricism and intellectualism. In empiricism, he claims, words are accorded a place amongst a physical causality, they are the cause of linguistic behaviour in our minds, and they are hollow and lacking in meaning themselves. Similarly to the empiricist's explanation of the body as an object, speech is nothing more than the medium through which our internal neural mechanisms get excited, and merely a link in the causal chain that is initiated in the speaker and comes to a finish in a particular physical state in our brains. Furthermore, the empiricist takes each word as individual from the others, atomically separate and independently treatable, able to be analyzed by itself and on its own. This breaking down of sentences to their constituent parts, and correspondingly the construction of aggregate meaning in sentences by accumulating the associated meaning of individual words is thoroughly rejected by Merleau-Ponty, just as he rejects the atomicity of sense experience in our perception and existence. He charges the empiricist with making words the bearer of nothing, leaving them as gears in a causal chain that independently hold no internal meaning.

The intellectualist is guilty of doing the opposite. He clothes meanings in words, mental thoughts that are not directly translatable into physical existence are given words that signify them. The words used, again atomically, are bereft of their own meaning and simply stand for the meaning that the speaker has externally associated with them. The important fact here is that "language is but an external accompaniment of thought," (PP, 177) a medium used with which to transmit ideas that otherwise reside outside of the domain of speech.

We see here how for the empiricist, words lack their own meaning as they are simply a link in the causal chain that causes linguistic behaviour. For the intellectualist, words lack their own meaning because the meaning they have is externally placed upon them by the speaker when she attempts to communicate a thought—thought is prior to the speech, and will be stripped of it once more by the hearer.

It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty is able to reject both of these approaches by simply stating "*the word has a meaning.*" (PP, 177) Neither of the above accounts contend with his claim that words and sentences are meaningful in and of themselves, without requiring external meaning or empty causation. So what is this speech that he claims is different from both the empiricist and intellectualist accounts, and how can it bridge the subject/object dichotomy that he is constantly working to undermine?

Merleau-Ponty's first step is to examine what thought is to us and how it relates to speech. We do not conceptualize objects and relations in our minds and then search for words and sentences to express them. We do not first intuitively grasp speechless thought and then fumble around for the proper way to clothe the thought in suitable language. We undergo a much simpler and more fundamental process—our speech *is* our thought. We think in words and sentences, we posit relations, make propositions, entertain possibilities all already tied in an inseparable web of language. “The speaking subject does not think of the sense of what he is saying, nor does he visualize the words which he is using.” (PP, 180) Language is used as thought is thought of, it is the embodiment of our thought in ourselves.

He ties the use of language with his conception of the body in a powerful way, linking the use of speech to the way our body moves through a phenomenal world:

“I do not need to visualize external space and my own body in order to move one within the other. It is enough that they exist for me, and that they form a certain field of action spread around me. In the same way I do not need to visualize the word in order to know and pronounce it. [...] I reach back for the word as my hand reaches towards the part of my body which is being pricked; the word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and is part of my equipment. (PP, 180)

He rejects the necessity of treating words as objects just as he has shown previously how our understanding of the body is not one of an object in the world separate from our minds. Similarly to how we grasp our phenomenal body and how the world opens itself up to us in terms of fields of possibility, words embody thought without being treated first as singular items to be examined from all sides and measured for suitability.

Speech can be considered similar to art, like a painting, in the way in which the raw materials with which it is made of up do not independently contain meaning. We do not find the beauty of a painting in the precise distribution and selection of shades of color and brush strokes, rather, the painting itself has a meaning that it directly transmits to us. The whole has meaning as a unity, similarly to how speech is to be understood. (Madison, *The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: a search for the limits of consciousness* p. 115)

To emphasize his point that speech has meaning which cannot be removed from the words themselves, Merleau-Ponty claims spoken words are like gestures. Gestures are more than just the sum of the physical motions that they contain—when I notice my friend making a gesture at me, I do not notice that he is moving his index finger in such a way, and his whole hand in another way. I do not break down the gesture in terms of the representative physical motions to reconstruct it for myself internally. Rather, the gesture itself means something—I simply notice my friend beckoning me to come closer to chat with him. I do not even need to be aware of the bare physicalities in his gesture, the same way as when I gesture to my friend my joy I simply express my thoughts directly instead of consciously and mechanistically moving my raised fists to the sky together. It is easy to see how in the case of a gesture the act itself contains meaning, and Merleau-Ponty is making the same claim about speech, for “the spoken word is a genuine gesture,

and it contains meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its.” (PP, 183)

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between authentic, speaking speech and second-hand, spoken speech. In all the talk about speech so far all that has been mentioned is authentic speech, as for Merleau-Ponty it is authentic speech that contains meaning, that is a creating act that brings meaning into the world. Authentic speech is speech that expresses something new, a lover revealing new things to his partner, a writer writing prose, or a poet and his poetry. On the contrary, second-hand, or spoken speech, is speech that takes up already made concepts and re-uses them, speech that operates on a playing field of delineated meanings and reconfigures them without creating new meanings. Spoken speech relies on concepts that are ready-made in the world, and as such it does not bring any new meanings into the world. Of course, spoken speech is the most common mode of speaking for us and our usual mode of interaction. So it is not all speech that Merleau-Ponty is talking about. But spoken speech is merely a sort of recycling of concepts already introduced by speaking speech.

Merleau-Ponty closes the chapter by bringing together his discussion of speech with his ongoing explanation of the subject-body. Our body is not a collection of particles making up a composite whole, and our body is not divorced from our soul and its meaning. What is essential is that it is the body itself that speaks, it is the body that creates meaning through language as he has discussed throughout the chapter. By locating the subject, the locus of subjectivity that through speech has thought, in the body Merleau-Ponty again irrevocably intertwines the subject with the body and the world. The body for Merleau-Ponty transcends its biological existence, as it is no longer simply a physical object it has “a power of natural expression” (PP, 181) and is the manifestation of thought itself. It rejects a dualism between subject and object as “the speaking subject (and thus the thinking subject) is not reduced to the motor subject, for the lived body is not itself an explanatory factor; it merely incarnates the “mystery” or the “miracle” of an expressive power which is defined by its transcendence over natural being.” (Madison, p 118) The transcendence over natural being, the overcoming of the physical is encapsulated by the subjectivity, speech and thought of the embodied subject. It is through his body and speech that man as a subject gives significance to the world. (PP, 194) So there is no distance left between the subject and the object, endlessly intertwined as they are. “Language is our element as water is the element of fishes.” (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* p. 17)

0.0.3 “Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of “I think that” but of “I can” (PP, 137)

This underlines Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental divergence from the empiricist and intellectualist traditions that came before him. A consciousness that is described in terms of “I think that” is one in which the mind is separate from the body, where thoughts live as isolated beings related only externally to the facts of the physical world. Both empiricist and intellectualist accounts place the thinking subject somewhere other than intertwined with the body, and it is that which Merleau-Ponty is drawing the line against.

What he brings instead of the traditional concept of the mind and the body is the fact that our body is tied to its intentionality. As he says, “[...] enable us clearly to understand motility as basic intentionality.” (PP, 137) The organization of our body is not centered around the abstract physical conditions of an objective world, but rather part of a complex relationship with our own intentions, desires, and abilities. The body responds to the world as a subject responds to a field of potentialities arrayed before it, creating lines of engagement directed towards the unfolding world.

Consciousness, which is located in the body-subject and exists as a being-in-the-world, relates to the world through what Dreyfus called ‘skillful coping’. The “I can” in the quote serves to show how the soccer field that the player is in the midst of discloses itself to him by means of lines of force—how the particular arrangement of teammates and openings in the opposition will call for his attention and direct his gaze. It is far from the case that there is a consciousness separate from the body that is thinking to itself, analyzing the field and directing its body to take advantage of opportunities on reflection. This synthesis is not a judgement that a thinking consciousness overlays over a flow of sensory data as a Kantian ego would. It is rather a pre-reflective engagement in the world, a fundamental mode of being-in-the-world where the intentionalities of the body-subject arrange the world around her.

So the quote establishes the body as organized by the intentionality of the subject that is tied up in it as well as tied up in being-in-the-world.

0.0.4 “Speech is the surplus of our existence over natural being.” (PP, 197)

[shorter because the background explanation overlaps with #6 above, but the thrust of the quote leads in a different direction]

Similarly in this quote Merleau-Ponty is talking about the phenomenal and physical bodies as hopelessly bound together. He has been describing what authentic speech is and how it creates meaning, and here he turns his gaze to how the body and speech are related. Speech is what endows human significance to things, it is a creative act that in his words surpasses the bare reality of existence. What this means is that man transcends his own being to “a new form of behaviour, or towards other people, or towards his own thoughts.” (PP, 194) Speech provides the mechanism for man to exceed himself and for his being to gain a significance—a significance which, as it has exceeded himself, cannot be solely defined in his natural being. The act of speech and creating significance for himself and others overcomes the

“natural object” that he is to provide more than just the “natural object” can. Affirming language in the lived body, or the embodied subject, is not enough to explain it completely, and it is as such that it is the surplus of our existence over natural being.

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