

The Poetry of the World

A Tribute to the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty

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*Abstract Merleau-Ponty restored phenomenology to its original purpose: to cultivate wonder and not-knowing, to appreciate the profound ambivalence of the world, and our interconnectedness with it; to remember our embodied, situated condition and temper our Promethean will to a knowledge born out of fear; to become perpetual beginners.*¹

Redefining humanism

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) was a humanist who redefined humanism. At first the subtlety of his stance may feel challenging to contemporary readers because of the facile polarizations of our unsubtle times: believers vs. non-believers, materialists vs. spiritualists, cognitive-behaviourists vs. ‘trans-personalists’ and so-forth. Straddled between the clunky, fundamentalist materialism *à la* A.C. Grayling and the literalist spiritual evolutionism *à la* Ken Wilber, undecided between the uniformly second-hand metaphysics on offer, it is bewildering to come across a philosophy which praises ambiguity, embodiment and historicity, never settling for ready-made accounts of reality.

Merleau-Ponty is and is not a materialist: he does not resort to the notion of a spiritual substance to describe experience; at the same time, it is not possible for him to understand humans solely via chemistry and physics.

¹ This article, written with the aim of seducing the reader into further exploration, necessarily skips the surface of a vast and far-reaching thought. It had to omit many important themes, including Merleau-Ponty’s writing on painting and literature, on sexuality and the implications of his philosophy for contemporary ecology.

He is an unusual humanist: he had little time for the Enlightenment notion of a human subjectivity independent of physical, social and historical contingency; a left-wing Catholic who abandoned the faith because of the Church's shameful complicity with Hitler, he went on to embrace (and effectively restore, in the wake of Bergson and Lukács) humanist Marxism. He was an unusual atheist: his groundbreaking notion of the *body-subject* relies on Christ's *incarnation*, on the idea of God becoming flesh. He was an *agnostic* in the true, now lost, meanings of the word, ie: a) one who cultivates not-knowing rather than subscribing to a materialist or spiritualist belief system; b) a non-Gnostic, one who is outside the Gnostic perception of the world as an alien, 'fallen', hostile place. Merleau-Ponty's agnosticism was primarily dictated by humility – less sanctimonious piety than profound grasp of our limitations as necessarily embodied beings.

A profound humanistic message runs through his writings, a paean to human resourcefulness and ingenuity, his investigation scrutinizing painting, literature, film, psychology and philosophy. His humanism being existential, it never allowed him to minimize the spiritual import of human subjectivity in favour of either the neutrality of language or of a flight into the dialogical, both fashionable moves in contemporary discourse. Language is not like a prison, he would say, into which we are locked, nor is it a guide we ought to follow blindly. And the encounter between self and other implies risk rather than reliance on a dialogical matrix or on a set of taken-for-granted dialogical axioms. An ingenious interpreter of the early Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Merleau-Ponty was a *historicist* and could not easily stoop to the notion of timeless, universal structures of thought or to the neutered neutrality of Heidegger's *Dasein*. By the same token he could not settle with Husserl's 'transcendental ego' and provoked his Cartesian readers out of their complacency by asserting: "There is no inner man (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p xi); "Internal experience is meaningless (Madison, 1981, p. 276) and "The inner life is an illusion" (ibid).

The generation of post-structuralists that came after him, busy demolishing humanism for being too centred on the self and on 'consciousness', chose to ignore his work. Yet his shrewd critique of the subject/object distinction heralded the very 'decentring of the subject' which was to be a key feature in post-structuralism and deconstruction.

Humanism is redefined in Merleau-Ponty as authoritative reminder of our human (embodied, subjective) situation. Crucially for our time, his brand of humanism neither over-

spiritualizes subjectivity and the 'inner life' nor lapses into conceiving them materialistically as an object among other objects.

Beyond the Mind/Body Dualism

In his first book, *The Structure of Behaviour* (1938/1942) Merleau-Ponty investigates the relation of consciousness and nature and presents a critique of 'scientific' psychology challenging the dualistic opposition between the 'mental' and the 'physiological'. Dominant modes of scientific psychology, such as classical materialism (which sees 'mind' as another object in the world, equated with the brain) and behaviourism (which identifies the 'mental' with the external behaviour making thoughts and feelings manifest) rely too heavily on mechanistic conceptions and fail to see that 'behaviour' implies structure, intention and form. He widens the argument in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2010), a rich and comprehensive work presenting a critical appraisal of empiricism and 'intellectualism' (the idealist view). His argument here is a version of the same motif rising time and again in his writings: an attempt at navigating a poised middle ground away from one-dimensional polarities.

He chastises empiricism for failing to honour the perceiving subject, for viewing it as an object triggered and impacted by other objects in ways that are too readily explained away by natural science, and for failing to answer for the puzzling connectedness of experience. Before deciding that this is a vague argument and irrelevant to our times, we need to remember that what he calls 'empiricism' is alive and well today in neuroscience, CBT and the bio-medical model.

He offers an equally fierce critique of the 'idealist' view, originating in Descartes and Kant (and prominent in Husserl's early writing) which sees the mind as giving unity and structure to experience and mistakenly associates perception with thought *about* perception. This view is also influential in our culture today: many believe that thoughts organize experience or even that mind to a certain extent *creates* reality.

What both views have in common is a devaluation of experience; they both fail to see that experience contains its own intelligent form. Once we acknowledge this, we are ready to *describe* perception as we experience it, rather than relying on conjectures. For Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenological description of perceptual experience is "that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life" (1989,

pp 52-53). The world becomes the place we inhabit rather than something apart from us, and the way we inhabit it is by being embodied, by being a *body-subject*. We are not pure reason or pure consciousness; we will never be able to absorb and receive the whole of reality. Inhabiting the world as a body means realizing the sheer impossibility of a view from nowhere. It means giving up the notion of objectivity *and* transcendence. The world is unfathomable, our experience ambiguous, and it forever resists a completely rational or non-rational explanation of it. Of course the brain is crucial in allowing us to relate to the world and combine the activities of our sense organs, but this does not mean that consciousness is indistinguishable from the brain, that I am my brain.

I am not a mental substance or a 'mind' but instead a body-subject. Crucially for our cognitively-saturated times of hypertrophied consciousness and 'mindfulness', Merleau-Ponty cautions us that consciousness just cannot occupy all of its operations. Consciousness is limited. Descartes' *cogito* (I think) is too narrow; it limits our identity to the conscious mind, separate from 'matter' – a new *cogito* is needed, one that is able to include our interrelated physical embeddedness with a world we *inhabit* rather than *represent*.

Merleau-Ponty's unique version of Phenomenology

Alongside Marx, Nietzsche and Freud (all of whom in Merleau-Ponty's view variously anticipated phenomenology via their hermeneutics of rigorous inquiry), the two thinkers who most influenced Merleau-Ponty were the *younger* Hegel and the *later* Husserl. As with all the great French existentialists who studied left-wing Hegelianism in Paris with Kojève and Hyppolite in the 1930s, from the young Hegel Merleau-Ponty learned the importance of history and contingency as well as our all too-human "desire of another human consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 17): the encounter between self and other out of which (through conflict via the well-known 'lordship/bondage', commonly known as the 'master/servant dialectic', but also through love, friendship and shared endeavour) real subjectivity is born. The fact that Hegel – particularly the early Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – so crucial to French existentialism – is absent from all the syllabi of humanistic psychological therapies may well account for our profession's arguably poor understanding of history and contingency, for the misguided universalism that characterizes dominant psychotherapeutic readings of the human condition, and for bypassing the role of conflict in shaping human interactions.

Intrigued by an article on Husserl's later version of phenomenology in the *Revue internationale de philosophie* in 1939, Merleau-Ponty was one of the first visitors to the Husserl Archive in Louvain, Belgium. Husserl's earlier explorations relied heavily on Descartes and Kant and on Brentano's idea, borrowed from medieval thought, of *intentionality*. They were directed at finding a method able to study meanings, understood as the intended objects of a *transcendental* subjectivity, or transcendental ego. In his Parisian lectures *Cartesian Meditations* in 1929, Husserl appropriated a method called *epoché* (a Greek word meaning *suspension*, a.k.a. 'bracketing' or phenomenological reduction) but diverted its trajectory by bending it — to his own Cartesian/idealistic agenda. It might be useful here to consider briefly the original formulation of *epoché* which goes back to the Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-270 BC). According to Diogenes Laertius, Pyrrho developed his own philosophy after encountering some 'naked wise men' (*gymnosophistai*) in India when accompanying Alexander the Great on his expedition. The 'naked wise men' were none other than the philosophers of Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka* school of Buddhism (Kuzminski, 2008). For Pyrrho – and much later for Sextus Empiricus (c. 160 – 210 AD), who systematized his thought and founded Pyrrhonism) *epoché* entails suspending all non-evident claims and embracing immediate experience, ie those 'mere' phenomena, as reality itself, *trusting the senses* rather than (in line with religious/Platonist injunctions) suspecting them.

What Husserl advocates in his early version of *epoché* is the very opposite: first, to regard phenomena as the intentional objects of consciousness; then, to move from instances to essences; third, to see essences as necessary rather than contingent. He patiently builds the edifice of a transcendental phenomenology in the attempt to give philosophy the status of rigorous science, a project not entirely dissimilar from the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle.

Merleau-Ponty was critical of this position, which he saw as Cartesian through and through, as effectively brushing aside the phenomenal world so as to ascend to an imaginary pure consciousness, a realm of essences and transcendental subjectivity. There is no such a thing, Merleau-Ponty says with Simone de Beauvoir: so-called "inner experience" is not transcendental but *situated*. The entire aim and direction of *epoché* must be changed to its original meaning: to have another look at the world, to unfasten our customary links with it and rediscover a sense of wonder. Husserl's notion of essences, freed from a customary

Platonic reading, can be useful as the fisherman's net draws up from the depths of the sea shuddering fish and sea-weed.

Most of this was already present in Husserl's later work, partly prompted by his disappointment in seeing phenomenology hijacked by Heidegger. The very direction of *epoché* changes: earlier on he had stressed the need to bracket the 'natural attitude' (ie the taken-for-granted view, engendered by science, of a separate solid world of matter 'out there') in the hope of accessing a 'transcendental ego' who would be aware of 'essences'. Now he criticizes Descartes for having equated a separate self with 'soul' and created an artificial division between mind and matter. What we need to suspend are our very explanations of experience; the self is no longer seen as separated but as part of the world. In tune with this latter view, Merleau-Ponty will go on to say that the task of phenomenology is *to put essences back into existence*.

Reclaiming Phenomenology from Idealist Philosophy

One of the first to use the term 'phenomenology' was the German scientist and mathematician Lambert (1728–1777). In a letter to Lambert of 1770 Kant had written of phenomenology as a necessary 'propadeutic' to metaphysics. The study of phenomena of 'that which appears' was for Kant subservient to the existence of *noumena* or pure concepts. One and a half century later Heidegger was to replicate this move: for Heidegger phenomenology is not an independent method of investigation but mere *prelude* to a theory of 'Being'. *Phenomenon* is in his view that which shows itself and phenomenology what makes manifest that which shows itself. Heidegger's pervasive if befuddling influence on contemporary existential/phenomenological psychotherapy blinds most practitioners to the fact that he was neither an existentialist nor a phenomenologist but an idealist philosopher within the mainstream German tradition. In Merleau-Ponty we won't find any grandiose attempt to create a 'theory of being', an idle task more suitable, according to Adorno (2002), to closet theologians such as Heidegger.

Compared to Heidegger's, Merleau-Ponty's stance is modest but also far more effective: the task of phenomenology is to clarify our experience in relation to an inescapably physical, social and historical dimensions, finding natural support to our quest from psychology, neurology, psychiatry and other methods of inquiry all disdained by Heidegger as inferior or, to use his jargon, 'ontic'.

The Lived Body

Everyone recognizes that perception is related to the body, but the predominant view oscillates between a *passive* view of perception as mere recording of an 'external' action or as an *active* projection of the intellect. In both cases we take for granted a separation between mind and matter, subject and object. But for Merleau-Ponty we *are a body-mind intimately connected to the world*. We are a *lived body*, ie not an object that can be objectively observed alongside other objects or a subjective 'interiority'. We are not a Cogito but a 'knowing body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1988). Yet the experience of being in the world is ambiguous because bodily inhabiting the world blurs the customary divisions between subject and object. The body is not an object, Merleau-Ponty says, and because of that my awareness of it is not a thought. How can I know this phenomenal body? There is only one way: we know it by living it, by being an embodied presence in the world. Our being in the world is circular: we experience the body both 'internally' and 'externally, as when I touch an object with my right hand, and my left hand touches my right hand; in that moment I am both *sensing* and being *sensed*.

This process is continuous and circular. This circularity does not produce identity but instead an opening and the possibility of a meaningful life, or, as he writes in a stunning passage in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, 1969) a subject without personal identity who loses track of itself in the perceived spectacle, an anonymous self buried in the world, one that has not yet traced its path. We need to lose ourselves in the world and find a voice, Merleau-Ponty says quoting a poem by Valéry in the very same book: "this solemn Voice/ Which knows itself when it sounds/To be no longer the voice of anyone/As much as the voice of the waves and the forests" (cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 155). As it turns out, there *is* room for transcendence in a philosophy which had started along rigorously scientific lines. But transcendence is not passage into a spiritual realm but instead the transmutation of biology into an embodied world of meaning, into a world both *invented* and natural. Before we think this is too abstract, he gives as an example *the kiss*, both a natural gesture as well as a culturally created usage of the body. As humans, we are not a 'natural species' but instead a 'historical idea'. We are not animals endowed with a soul but integral part of existence, which in itself is a process of the meaningless taking on meaning, for

instance in the ongoing movement from the biological to the sexual to the cultural domains, the very process of transcendence.

Inner Life and the Flesh

The self (or subjectivity) is a central problem in western philosophy and psychology, with the Greeks setting the scene for philosophical investigation way back via the Delphic instruction *know thyself!* However, their notion of self was different from ours and their response was not introspection as we understand it today. The notion of a self endowed with 'interiority' is a modern idea whose foundations were set by Augustine who famously said *Noli foras ire, in te redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas* (Do not wish to go outside, stay inside, truth dwells in the inner man (Madison, 1990, p. 29). The purpose of the Augustinian injunction was not investigation but repentance. Kierkegaard took this injunction to dangerous heights and the early Husserl made it central to his own inquiry. Where Augustine and Kierkegaard in their introspection discovered absolute otherness, a.k.a. God, the early Husserl corroborated Descartes' error of conceiving a self-existing mental subjectivity – which is also what the western philosophical tradition did. From time to time I wonder what it would have been like had we taken our clue from Montaigne's notion of interiority rather than from Descartes', given the latter's sincere amazement in finding out that *Rien d'humain ne m'est étranger* – Nothing human is foreign to me. We still find otherness in Montaigne's subjectivity but this is wiped out in Descartes' and in the western tradition's not-so-splendid mental isolation from the world of 'matter'. From then on, any philosopher worth the name will try to break free from the prison of Cartesian subjectivity in the attempt to find something 'objective', something 'other', something 'real' (ibid). Heidegger tried to circumvent subjectivity by a return to the pre-Socratics. Philosophy and psychology inspired by Eastern thought did away with the idea of the self altogether. A similar tack is taken by much of post-modern thought which disseminates the self into perspectivism. The current most popular way of bypassing the central problem of subjectivity comes from dialogical and relational perspectives.

Merleau-Ponty's uniqueness consists in taking the delicate stance of going beyond solipsism and at the same time taking subjectivity very seriously. He tried, in other words, to

go beyond subjectivism and individualism from the inside. Going inside the cave of subjectivity, he found the *Flesh*.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh has no equal in the entire history of philosophy. It is an attempt to register fully *the presence of the other in the same*: not only the tangible trace of another in our body/mind but also the discovery that I am a stranger to myself; my body is not only sensible to itself, it is outside itself, it is a stranger to itself. Through the notion of the Flesh, the other is woven into the fabric of the self. He writes in *Signs* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964):

“Before others are or can be subjected to my conditions of possibility and reconstructed in my image, they must already exist as outlines, deviations, and variants (*relief, écarts, variantes*) of a single Vision in which I too participate. For they are not fictions with which I might people my desert ... but my twins or the flesh of my flesh. Certainly I do not live their life; they are definitely absent from me and I from them. But that distance becomes a strange proximity as soon as one comes back home to the perceptible world [the flesh of the sensible] ... No one will see that table which now meets my eye; only I can do that. And yet I know that at the same moment it presses upon every glance in exactly the same way (p 15)

Merleau-Ponty and the Counter-Tradition

The history of western philosophy is the history of the Tradition, variously named as rationalism, metaphysics, systematic thought. According to the Tradition, the universe is not a chaos but a cosmos, well structured and intelligible, fully graspable by reason which is part of a presupposed Totality (Madison, 1981; Bazzano, 2013). The Tradition has dominated the West, our whole way of learning and thinking; its motivation is Promethean, a desire to manage the uncertainty of existence and achieve mastery through science and, more recently, technology. Alongside the Tradition, there has always been a Counter-tradition, “a counter-current which attempts to bring [us] back to a more just appreciation of [our] powers and limits” (Madison, 1981, p. 293). Empirical, skeptical, experiential (and phenomenological): these are few of the attributes linked to the Counter-tradition, alongside an appreciation of (dynamic) becoming and a critique of (static) being. Heraclitus

praised flux, impermanence, the river of life and death; Protagoras and Gorgias disputed the ancient cosmologists; Isocrates debated against Plato; Montaigne critiqued the Renaissance's rationalism; Pascal disputed Cartesian rationalism; Kierkegaard attacked Hegelianism; and finally, Nietzsche deconstructed with nerve and wit any metaphysical pretension under the sun (Madison, 1981). Characteristic of the Counter-tradition are humanism, skepticism and poetic sensibility. The beauty of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is that it effortlessly belongs to the Counter-tradition without avowed adherence to it. He does not reject science but forswears (*desaveu*) it; he brackets scientism and all theoretical assumption, stating that after all science is a human endeavour and cannot substitute human experience. He reminds me of Pascal who in his *Pensées* famously states that the last step of reason is to recognize that there are so many things beyond its reach and that it is *un-reasonable* not to recognize this simple fact. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology presents a similarly rational critique of reason. Rationality goes beyond logic; it is forged in the crucible of *dialogue* and encounter. 'Rational' or, for that matter 'true' is not what is general, universal, or absolute but a tangible experience. As he puts it in his book *Sense and Nonsense* (1964): "In the end whatever solidity there is in my belief in the absolute is nothing but my experience of agreement with myself and others" (p. 93).

Epoché (the suspension of any scientific, theoretical or religious preconception and the invitation to cultivate the attitude of a perpetual beginner) was the great gift of the Counter-tradition. Phenomenology was the natural inheritor of the Counter-tradition in the twentieth century, except that within phenomenology there have been attempts to divert its course towards Cartesianism (early Husserl) and irrationalism (Heidegger). What a practice based on the phenomenological method of *epoché* states is that there is no *fundamentum inconcussum*, no solid ground on which we can build our tower of knowledge, our 'science of reality'. Through *epoché* we experience the failure of a total reflection; we experience the ambivalence of knowledge and the opacity of our very being. We also experience what Merleau-Ponty calls the unmotivated upsurge of the world.

Humanism and Terror

Unlike Husserl (who was disinterested in politics and for whom science alone could make mankind blessed), Merleau-Ponty was politically engaged. Unlike Heidegger (who supported Nazism) his politics were on the side of justice and of reasonable discourse.

Merleau-Ponty translated his view of the situatedness of the human condition with an engagement with active politics and with Marx, whose thought he considered integral to a hermeneutics of suspicion which in many ways had heralded phenomenology. Even after his subsequent disillusionment and his heated debates with Sartre over the Soviet Union which the latter had strategically supported, Merleau-Ponty never forgets that Western liberalism is founded on slavery and that Stalin had not *invented* violence. In politics too he searches a nuanced position away from knee-jerk reactions. In *Humanism and Terror* (Merleau-Ponty, 2000) he points out that the bourgeois anti-Communist refuses to see that violence is universal, while the exalted sympathizer refuses to see that violence is always unbearable, as in the agonizing scream of a single person condemned to death. Writing at the time of the cold war, his targets are the two superpowers. Writing as a western intellectual, he aims at dispossessing Western politics' from their clear conscience and reminds the reader that our celebrated capitalist democracies are built "on colonial exploitation, wars, propaganda, wage labour, unemployment, the violent suppression of strikes, anti-Semitism, and racism (Madison, 1981). He engages in a fierce polemic with Mauriac who had written of French colonialism as 'benevolent civilization'. Merleau-Ponty finds it scandalous that a Christian should be so incapable of getting outside himself and his 'ideas' and should refuse to see himself even for an instant through the eyes of others. One cannot help wondering what he would have made of contemporary historians like Niall Ferguson who wax lyrical on the great wonders of the British Empire bringing democracy and civilization to all those poor savages in the colonies.

'Chanter le Monde'

I conclude my sketchy foray into the thought of a great thinker by reflecting how in his late writings the psychologist and scientist gives way to a poet or even a mystic of Nature, one in search of the voices that reason alone is unable to hear. Others have spoken of the need for a remembrance of nature in the self, for a necessary re-enchantment of the world, following the thorough dis-enchantment of the Enlightenment project. Merleau-Ponty's own phrase for this is *chanter le monde*, to sing the world. Faithful to reason in the name of reason, singing through the body (how else?), "the more honest and purer voice ... speak[ing] of the meaning of the earth" (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 29). The human voice echoes and reproduces

“mimetic [and] onomatopoetic borrowings from nature” (Kleinberg-Levin, 2008, p. 48) but also articulates through ‘singing’ or appreciative expression its own distinctive imprint on the world. This response can only be subjective. True we are ‘born into language’ and in our voice we gather the voices of nature. Through articulating our response of a mysterious phenomenal world, we sing its praises with our living body.

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