

## Chapter 2

# The Lived Body

### Phenomenology

The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) is an important thinker within the phenomenological tradition although his life has not been as exposed and analyzed as for example Sartre or Foucault.<sup>1</sup> He attended the prestigious *École Normal Superior*, where he studied together with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. His *docteur des lettres* (doctoral dissertation) was comprised of his first two philosophical works, *The Structure of Behavior* (1942/1963) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962). In this dissertation, he formulated his understanding of phenomenology as a “way of thinking” and worked out a groundbreaking view of the body and the importance of the body for philosophy. But before I present this work, an introduction to phenomenology is needed in order to fully understand Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical contribution.

Phenomenologists often spend the first third of their work explaining what phenomenology is not. True to that tradition, let me begin by explaining what phenomenologists call “the natural attitude”, which is our everyday way of seeing and understanding the world around us. This taken-for-granted, everyday understanding of the world is shot through with ideas, pre-understanding and prejudices which very seldom come to light, since it is “natural” to not examine them.<sup>2</sup> However, these ideas and pre-suppositions stand in the way of the subject matter of phenomenology, which is the systematic study of the realm of subjectivity. Phenomenology *does not* study the objective world as such, but rather the subjective foundations for being able to experience the world as objective and independent of our acts of attending and understanding. The way in which the world appears (shows itself) to human beings in and through subjectivity (consciousness) is the focus of phenomenology. The founder of phenomenology,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Carman 2008; Diprose and Reynolds 2008; Hass 2008 for literature on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy with some biographical material.

<sup>2</sup> The un-problematized belief in the reality of the world is also called thethetic/positional/existential/ontic reality character of perception. Ricoeur has poetically called this positing of realness as “the vehemence of presence.”

Edmund Husserl, called subjectivity “the wonder of all wonders”. It is the very ground for all our experience and knowledge and is the medium through which we can have contact with the world which we call “reality.” Phenomenology does not doubt the existence of the world, it simply recognizes that this certainty is yet another non-examined belief (part of the natural attitude) and as such must be examined in terms of subjectivity, which is the pre-condition for all knowledge and understanding. There are two very different epistemologies (theories of knowledge) underlying the natural attitude, with its belief in the objective reality of the world, and phenomenology, which takes its point of departure in the subjective. I will just briefly present these two points of view.

The objectivistic point of view could be characterized as “the view from nowhere” (Nagel 1989). This perspective could also be called a God’s eye view, where it is assumed that there exists an independent reality that can be correctly described in symbolic representations (language) which correspond to things and relationships in the “real world.” According to the objectivistic view, there is a neutral perspective beyond human limitations, independent of human subjectivity and embodiment, a transcendent “objective” stance outside of the relationship person-world, in which the alleged correspondence between things and what-is-said-about-things can be judged. Knowledge is objective, in the sense that it can be verified as factual states of affairs in the real world. The ideal of objectivity is one of the most cherished and prominent characteristics of natural science. The notion of a subject-independent reality is so ingrained in our cultural thinking that it is difficult to imagine knowledge and meaning in any other way. But however useful this idea may be in other contexts, it prevents us from grasping the subjective ground of thinking and understanding. In order to study the subjective in a positive way, and not merely as a disturbing interfering variable, we need an alternative way of thinking about the subjective. Phenomenology can reveal this dimension by the adoption of a different stance than the objectivistic one.

Phenomenology is the philosophical movement in Continental philosophy stemming from the works of Edmund Husserl (1913/1962; 1954/1970). The term “phenomenology” means literally the *logos* (or inherent meaning or order) of phenomena, that is to say, the meaning of that which appears or shows itself to man. How human beings perceive, understand and live the world is the subject matter of phenomenological study. Again, it is the realm of subjectivity that is the focus of interest for phenomenology. Husserl’s life project was to establish phenomenology as a rigorous science, on a par with the natural sciences that studied nature (the world of things). However, since the subject matter for phenomenology differed in kind from the subject matter of the natural sciences, Husserl had to create a methodology and concepts that would be suitable for the study of human “meaning constitution”, to use another term. He understood that the objective methodologies, so successful in natural science, would not do justice to

the subjective.<sup>3</sup> The study of “appearances” would need a new approach. This approach was worked out in Husserl’s phenomenological thinking and gave inspiration to an entire phenomenological movement.<sup>4</sup>

One can for the sake of simplicity, summarize the radical change in perspective from the objective view of the natural sciences to the phenomenological interest in subjectivity as a shift of focus. Instead of studying the world of objects in the material world, as the natural scientist does, phenomenologists, having decided to study another realm, place the “real” objective world in brackets, performing the so-called *epoché*, or phenomenological reduction. The term “reduction” by no means implies reducing wholes to parts or looking for the least common denominator, but comes from the latin *re-ducere*, which means “to lead back”. Husserl’s use of the term reduction as *re-ducere* was a call to return to the things themselves, that is, to the way in which the world shows itself in and through consciousness, in order to obtain knowledge about the subjective realm. The phenomenological reduction places the reality status of the world and the objective qualities of things within brackets (suspends our taken-for-granted belief in them) in order to concentrate on an area that is non-thematic and impossible to see as long as the objective perspective is dominant.

By putting aside all interest in the existence of the real world and the objective qualities of things, phenomenology shifted focus to the manner of appearance, that is, to the way in which human consciousness attends to that which appears *as* it appears to consciousness. The focus of interest is how things present themselves (manner of presentation) and how consciousness “constitutes” the meaning of that which appears. This meaning constitution is discovered by examining the streaming of consciousness towards that which is outside of consciousness. The technical term for the streaming of consciousness towards something outside of itself is “intentionality”. Intentionality is a term Husserl borrowed from Brentano (1982), characterizing the way in which consciousness always points towards or “intends” its objects (“object” here referring to that *towards which* consciousness flows). In order to study the way in which consciousness intends or constitutes its object, the reality status of the world must be put aside. This does not mean that phenomenologists deny the existence of the real world, as mentioned before, it merely announces another focus of interest, requiring its own methods and terminology. Working out this philosophical strategy was Husserl’s life project.

---

<sup>3</sup> This insight was also formulated already by Dilthey in the 1800s. Dilthey, the father of the so-called “human sciences” is known for the motto, “nature we explain, the life of the soul we understand.” The point here being that the methodologies used and results obtained from the natural sciences (causal, nomothetic type of knowledge) are not appropriate to the study of man. Terms like “meaning”, “value”, “signification” and “motivation” would be appropriate terms to use when studying man, according to Dilthey, rather than the objectivistic language used to describe things in nature.

<sup>4</sup> See Spiegelberg (1982) for a comprehensive overview of the phenomenological movement.

A common misunderstanding about phenomenology is that the study of “appearances” would be less important than the study of the real world. An appearance is, after all, merely an appearance, less viable than real things, certainly secondary in importance to the study of real transcendent objects. We tend to give natural-scientific descriptions of things a higher status than the world we experience through our senses. However, as Husserl (1954/1970) pointed out, the world we experience is in fact primordial, that is to say, prior to natural-scientific descriptions of the world. We saw round objects in the world before this experience became abstracted into the mathematical concept of the circle. We saw how grains of sand make up a continuous stretch of beach before we started to construct theories about particles and atoms. According to Husserl, it is precisely on the basis of lived experience (i.e. “appearances”) that we have been able to construct the abstract terminology and explanations conceptualized by natural science. Unfortunately, according to Husserl (1954/1970) we have forgotten this grounding of science in the primordial experience of the world, and this forgetting has resulted in the depreciation of the so-called “life-world.” Life-world (*Lebenswelt*) refers to the everyday world of common experience. We find ourselves immersed in the life-world, consisting of values, beliefs, assumptions and cultural practices. The life-world is the unproblematic, pre-scientific world that constitutes the meaning of everyday life. Phenomenology affirms the life-world and the study of appearances as vital areas of study.

To reiterate, phenomenology does not make statements about how the world is in-itself, outside of human beings experiences of it. The subject matter of phenomenological studies is an examination of various human phenomena such as for example, perception, time consciousness, sexuality, religious and cultural practices, the body, the experience of the Holy etc. from the point of view of meaning constitution. In order to study these phenomena, it is necessary to implement the phenomenological reduction (bracket the reality character of the world) and focus upon the world-as-meant, or world-as-intended. When we do this, we find, according to Husserl, two poles of experience, one of which corresponds to the streaming of consciousness (*noesis* or noetic acts) and the other of which corresponds to that which consciousness attends to (*noema* or noematic objects). In place of the objective “real” object we find, under the phenomenological reduction, the streaming of consciousness towards the object-as-meant. This bracketed realm of *noesis* and *noema* is the study proper of phenomenology. It would be outside of the scope of this chapter to give a detailed account of the phenomenological method and the various forms of the phenomenological reduction. In this context it will suffice to say that phenomenology comprises an alternative to objectivistic epistemology, an alternative that takes its starting point in how the world appears to human beings. Within this perspective, we may now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical reflection upon the body.

## Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty had a good idea of what he wanted to accomplish already as a young doctoral student. At the age of 25 he turned in two research proposals that contained the themes he would come to work with in his first two philosophical texts, *The Structure of Behavior* from 1942 and *Phenomenology of Perception* from 1945. The focus of these two works was a phenomenological reflection on the nature of perception and human embodiment. Later on in his career he turned his attention to a variety of other topics, such as language acquisition (1964/1973), expression and meaning (1960/1964) and literature and art (1948/1964; 1969/1973), but his interest in perception and the body remained with him throughout his career. His last work *The Visible and the Invisible*, published posthumously in 1964 from his working notes, was a return to the theme of human embodiment and the relationship between mind-body and world. Many have read this last work as a critique of his earlier work and as an important step towards a new ontology. His concept “flesh of the world” from *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964/1968) was meant to describe the *event* where perception and meaning are born, not as a relationship between a constituting subject and a constituted object (traditional phenomenology) but as an intertwining or ensemble of being. In this last work he questioned the privileged position given to consciousness within phenomenology and maintained that we need to find another way to investigate the human world. The development of Merleau-Ponty's thought in this later work will be examined in [Chap. 4](#). For now, we may simply note that he spent his entire philosophical career reflecting on the nature embodiment and how embodied human beings experience the world.

Merleau-Ponty shows in his first two works how many of our ideas about the human body and the nature of perception are conditioned by notions and concepts from natural science. These notions make it hard for us to reflect upon and discover how we experience our bodies in the world, and how we experience the world through our bodies. We understand perception, for example, in terms of stimuli-response. Although we never experience a stimulus, we are convinced that sight (visual perception), for example, is “really” all about light waves hitting the occipital lobe in the brain. This is, of course, a perfectly legitimate way to describe vision from within a certain perspective, but it is not the way we *live* seeing the world. If we only focus upon chemical, neurological processes, we miss the way in which the experience and meaning of the world unfolds for us. Human experience is the result of a unique relation between the embodied subject and that which shows itself to him/her at every instant. The subject and the world are “born together” (the word for knowledge in French is *connaissance*, which means literally, born together) in a movement that has been poorly understood by both

science and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> We need to bracket our everyday notions about the objective body and natural-scientific notions about the nature of perception in order to elucidate the “dialogue” between the subject and his/her world.

How then to disclose this uncharted territory? Merleau-Ponty begins by assuring us that there is certainly something outside of ourselves which we are born into, which we have no choice but to relate to in one way or another. This “something” is present to us in ways that we experience through our senses. But this world outside ourselves is not imprinted upon us like a photograph, but taken up in an active moment of meaning constitution. Merleau-Ponty describes this meeting in the following way:

Thus a sensible datum which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which *will* provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of showing up as blue; I must reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. And yet I do so only when I am invited by it, my attitude is never sufficient to make me really see blue or really touch a hard surface [...] As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an a-cosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it ‘thinks itself within me’...” (p. 214, italics in original) and, “Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning” (1945/1962, p. 214).

The classical subject-object dichotomy is loosened up and we find an area “between” subject and object, and it is only within this middle ground that the experience of what we call the world can arise. To take an illustrative example, imagine the phenomenon of figure/ground, a well-known principle from Gestalt psychology. I may look outside the window to see if my friend has arrived, or I may change perspective and notice that the window is dirty and needs to be cleaned. Foreground and background only exist between a subject who meets a view with certain interests and attention, and a world that shows itself *in terms of the* subject’s interests and attention.<sup>6</sup> We cannot see both the smudge on the window and the friend coming up the drive at the same time, as illustrated by the famous perceptual example of from Gestalt psychology of the vase and the two faces. One can only see the vase or the faces, never both at the same time. Both are *there* simultaneously in the picture (objectively), but only available perceptually (subjectively) one at a time. That which is present perceptually is thus dependent upon the subject. However, the subject needs to be given the opportunity to orient himself/herself towards the dirty window or the friend, the vase or the two faces. One sees only what one is “invited” to see, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it.

---

<sup>5</sup> “We must rediscover, as anterior to the ideas of subject and object, the fact of my subjectivity and the nascent object, that primordial layer at which both things and ideas come into being.” (1945/1962), p. 219.

<sup>6</sup> See Bredlau (2011) for a Merleau-Pontian account of the figure/ground structure of sense experience.

The phenomenon of figure/ground is a striking example of something that is constitutive of perception itself, namely, that there is always a given perspective in perception since there is always an embodied subject. The world is there *for me*, even if it is also an inter-subjective arena where I share my “view” with others, who have their own “views”. Our mistake has been to lose sight of this relationship and divide up experience in terms of an objective world, understood in terms of natural science, and an objective, anonymous body that processes various stimuli in the brain. But the world is not an objective collection of things lying about, and the human body is not a processing machine. Again, this description is entirely correct if we wish to study the world from an objectivistic point of view, but here the interest is in phenomenology and the study of the subjective, so we put aside this naturalistic conceptualization and examine experience in terms of subjectivity, embodiment and meaning constitution. If we disregard the subject-object dichotomy and focus upon the realm of the “in-between”, we will discover a lived unity that we could call a mind–body unity always present to the world, in one way or another. The “world”, again, should be understood as the dialogue between the embodied human being and the presentation of something which beckons to us as an invitation to understand. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) writes, “Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside of myself.” (p. 407) and “The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible.” (ibid, pp. 16–17).

## The Body and the World (Lived Body)

Merleau-Ponty calls the lived unity of the mind–body-world system “the lived body”.<sup>7</sup> The body understood as a *lived body* is necessarily ambiguous, since it is both material and self-conscious. It is physiological and psychological, but Merleau-Ponty asserts that these terms are not as dichotomous as one would imagine. There is mind in the body and body in the mind.

[...] The psycho-physical event can no longer be conceived after the model of Cartesian physiology and as the juxtaposition of a process in itself [the body] and a *cogitatio* [the mind]. The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary degree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence (1945/1962, pp. 88–89).

It is impossible to superimpose on man a lower layer of behavior which one chooses to called “natural” followed by a manufactured cultural or spiritual world. Everything is both

---

<sup>7</sup> Translated from the French *le corps propre*, which means literally owns own body, the actual body, the pure/clean body. Sometimes the term *le corps vivant* is used as well, which translates as “the living body”. The distinction between the objective and lived body was described in Husserl as a differentiation between the body’s thing like aspects (*körper*) from the intentional, living aspects (*Leib*).

manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behavior which does not owe something to purely biological being – and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life, and cause forms of vital behavior to deviate from their pre-ordained direction, through a sort of *leakage* and through a genius for ambiguity which might serve to define man (ibid, p. 189).

These realms are to be understood as levels, intertwined with each other, constituting a unified field. The self, the body and the world of things and others are neither separated from each other nor to be confused with each other, but rather can be seen as three sectors or levels of a unique field. The lived body is always oriented towards the world outside itself (otherness) in a constant flow. In order to understand what this means, let us examine in detail what Merleau-Ponty writes about the body.

Merleau-Ponty is sometimes called “the philosopher of the body.” He was not the first phenomenologist to draw attention to the body, Husserl had already written about the body as *Leib*,<sup>8</sup> but Merleau-Ponty placed the ambiguity of the body, as materiality and consciousness at the center of his philosophical investigation. The body Merleau-Ponty investigates and describes is not the objective body, in its materiality, but the subjective, lived body, in its constant “dialogue” with the world. To give an idea of the special status of the human body, let us listen to Merleau-Ponty’s own voice:

It is particularly true that an object is an object insofar as 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. Now the permanence of my own body is entirely different in kind: it is not at the extremity of some indefinite exploration; it defies exploration and is always presented to me from the same angle. Its permanence is not a permanence in the world, but a permanence on my part. To say that it is always near me, always there for me, is to say that it is never really in front of me, I cannot array it before my eyes, that it remains marginal to all my perceptions, that it is *with* me. It is true that external objects too never turn one of their sides to me without hiding the rest, but I can at least freely choose the side which they are to present to me (1945/1962, pp. 90–91).

In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched. What prevents its ever being an object [...] is that it is that by which there are objects. It is neither tangible nor visible in so far as it is that which sees and touches. The body therefore is not one more among external objects, with the peculiarity of always being there. If it is permanent, the permanence is absolute and is the ground for the relative permanence of disappearing objects [...] (ibid, p. 92).

True reflection presents me to myself not as an idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest (ibid, p. 452).

We said earlier that it is the body which “understands” in the acquisition of habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd, if understanding is subsuming a sense-datum under an idea, and if the body is an object. But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of “understand” and our notion of the body. To understand is to

---

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty has even said that his philosophy can be seen as drawing out “the un-thought thought” already present in Husserl’s work.

experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in the world (ibid, p. 144).

My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven [...] (ibid, p. 235).

My body is the pivot of the world: I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body (ibid, 82).

These quotes illustrate the insight that the lived body cannot be understood apart from the system “mind–body–world.” Where there is a body, there is a personal world, an opening upon the world which is unique. This uniqueness has to do with our life as mind, as persons, with the fact that we have language, history and culture and can ask questions about our own existence. Likewise, there is no personal life or mind without a body, even though the science fiction genre often plays with the trope of a disembodied head kept alive in a jar, as in the film *Cold Lazarus*, or a body without a soul, as in the multitude of films about zombies. Finally, this intertwined mind–body-presence is always embedded in a concrete situation. There is no world (as perceived) without a human to experience it, and there is no human experience that is not of the world. Thus, we cannot discuss the body as if it were something cut off from both mind and world.

How does Merleau-Ponty tackle the so-called mind–body problem? He wants to retain dualism, but a “good” dualism that acknowledges a realm of human signification that cannot be reduced to or understood in terms of materiality. But dualism is traditionally riddled with “interaction” problems. In order retain the realm of mind without winding up in dualisms classical problems, the conceptualization of mind and body needs to be reformulated. Already in his first work, *Structure of Behavior*, he wrote:

[...] the notions of soul and mind must be revitalized; there is the body as a mass of chemical components in interaction, the body as a dialectic of lived being and its biological milieu, and the body as a dialectic of a social subject and his group... The body in general is an ensemble of paths already traced out, of powers already constituted; the body is the acquired dialectic soil upon which a higher “formation” is accomplished, and the soul is the meaning which is then established (1942/1963, p. 210).

[...] the relations of the soul and body – obscure as long as the body is treated in abstraction as a fragment of matter – are clarified when one sees the body as a bearer of a dialectic (ibid, 204).

Merleau-Ponty wanted to bring the body into phenomenology as a constituting subject (not a constituted thing), which meant he had to clear phenomenology of Husserl’s bias of consciousness as the center of subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty points out that we are always already this being who is both mind and body in a natural unity. Mind and body are not the same, but neither are they as distinct from one another as Cartesian dualism has led us to believe.<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty prefers to speak of “planes of signification” rather than different sorts of being or different orders

---

<sup>9</sup> “The ego as a center from which his intentions radiate, the body which carries them and the beings and things to which they are addressed are not confused, but they are only three sectors of a unique field.” (1942, p. 189).

of reality. The discussion of how material physiological processes relate to meaning (the human psycho-social realm) is both fascinating and insoluble. Merleau-Ponty comments in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “How significance and intentionality could come to dwell in molecular edifices or masses in cells is a thing which can never be made comprehensible, and here Cartesianism is right. But there is, in any case, no question of any such absurd undertaking.” (p. 201). The mind–body problem has its origin in faulty conceptualizations of both mind and body. The “objective” material body is already intentional and fully engaged in meaning constitution (the body “knows” things below the level of consciousness) and the mind is through and through an incarnated mind. These levels are naturally intertwined as human embodiment. This is the way we are in the world. This mind/body unity is likewise always relating to a concrete lived situation (called “the world”). Merleau-Ponty embraces both the life of the “soul” (mind) as well as the reality of our corporeal existence, tied inextricably to our body. The physiology and materiality of the body are indispensable in that they set the frame for our possibilities, but we are never causally determined by our physical being.<sup>10</sup> Our concrete existence as beings who live in a meaningful world is never the product or result of physiological processes. We are also psychological, cultural beings. The materiality of our body is a fundament which is taken up and transformed into levels of existence which lie over and above our brute physicality.<sup>11</sup>

If the mind and body are not distinct regions for Merleau-Ponty, understood in diametrical opposition to one another, which is their relationship? One could say that the mental and the physical overlap or intertwine. We are always both mind and body, but different levels of our being (mental or physical) are evoked to a greater or less degree by different situations, giving us a picture of movement on a mind–body continuum. This “movement” is characterized in the following way:

Man taken as a concrete being is not just a psyche joined to an organism, but the movement to and fro of existence which at one time allows itself to take corporeal form

---

<sup>10</sup> In *Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty writes of the painter El Greco: “If one supposes an anomaly of vision in El Greco, as has sometimes been done, it does not follow that the form of the body in his paintings, and consequently the style of the attitudes, admit of a ‘physiological explanation.’ When irremedial bodily peculiarities are integrated with the whole of our experience, they cease to have the dignity of a cause in us. A visual anomaly can receive a universal signification by the mediation of the artist and become for him the occasion of perceiving one of the ‘profiles’ of human existence”. (p. 203) A similar comment on Cézanne, “Hereditary may well have given him rich sensations, strong emotions, and a vague feeling of anguish or mystery which upset the life he might have wished for himself and which cut him off from humanity; but these qualities cannot create a work of art without the expressive act, and they have no bearing on the difficulties or the virtues of that act.” (1964, p. 69).

<sup>11</sup> “Visual contents are taken up, utilized and sublimated to the level of thought by a symbolical power which transcends them, but it is on the basis of sight that this power can be constituted. The relationship between matter and form is called in phenomenological terminology a relationship of *Fundeirung*: the symbolic function rests on the visual as on a ground: not that vision is its cause, but because it is that gift of nature which Mind was called upon to make use of [...]” (1945/1962, p. 127).

and at others moves towards personal acts. Psychological motives and bodily occasions may overlap because there is not a single impulse in a living body which is entirely fortuitous in relation to psychic intentions, and not a single mental act which has not found at least its germ or its general outline in physiological tendencies (1945/1962, p. 88).

That which we traditionally call “mind”, comprised of the cognitive processes associated with conscious thought, is just one level of mind. For example, my eyes focus upon a scene which I wish to see, and it becomes foreground and everything else fades into the background. This task is not accomplished by means of reflection or cognition, nor is it the result of causal processes. It is done as soon as *I wish* to see something. We need our eyes to see, but we don’t see with our eyes, we see with sight. Sight is a lived relation between the lived body and the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, “The eye is not the mind, but a material organ. How could it ever take anything ‘into account’? It can only do so if we introduce the phenomenal body besides the objective one, if we make a knowing body of it, and if, in short, we substitute for consciousness, as the subject of perception, existence, or being in the world through a body.” (1945/1962, p. 309, footnote). In this very basic perceptual way, the body is already an instrument of comprehension. Neither the eye as retinal structure nor thought as cognitive processes is responsible for being able to *look* at something. The “look” is to orient oneself in the display of the world, and this task is performed instantaneously, in the lived body (i.e. mind–body–world system). There is no mystery in this, but we need a phenomenological attitude in order to understand it, and a non-dualistic way of describing it.

Psychological motivations and bodily activity are woven together in the lived experience of existing in the world. The body is not an inert mass or thing which we must orchestrate into action, but rather the “living envelope” of all our intentions. We are an incarnated subject, living in concrete situations. The next step in this introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s thought will be to examine the nature of the “dialogue” between the incarnate subject and the world. In this chapter we will only examine the early Merleau-Ponty, from the point of view of the lived body. In [Chap. 4](#) we will see how he revises his concept of the lived body into the concept of the flesh.

The phenomenon of perception (our attending to the world through the body) is the place of interaction between the subject and its world. Our perceptual experience of the world is the only way in which we have access to that which is outside of ourselves. Merleau-Ponty’s insight was to place perception at the center of the mystery of human existence. Perception “[...] is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making: it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.” (1945/1962, 10–11). Perception brings together duration (existence as temporal), the unity of the world (the inter-subjective social world which we experience as the *same* for all) and the coherence of past and present (the historical, cultural world). In the early essay “The primacy of perception” (1964) he wrote: “By these words, the “primacy of perception” we mean that the experience of perception is our

presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us [...]” (p. 25) and from the same text, “Should we now generalize and say that what is true of perception is also true in the order of the intellect and that in a general way all our experience, all our knowledge, has the same fundamental structures, the same synthesis of transition, the same kinds of horizons which we have found in perceptual experience?” (p. 19). Put another way, perception is the opening up of the body onto being. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of perception is an immense topic, but for the sake of focus and relevance for psychosomatics, I will here only highlight the way in which the body is involved in “meaning constitution”, since the problematic of psychosomatics is precisely the anomaly of a “speaking body”.

The lived body is to be understood as someone’s lived relationship to the world. It is an ambiguous unity, both subject and object, both mind and body, intertwined, understood in terms of levels, or planes of signification rather than mutually exclusive categories of being.<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes some distinctions in this unity, which will be helpful in understanding the anomaly of a “thinking” body. At the most fundamental level, Merleau-Ponty speaks of an anonymous, pre-personal bodily existence (*le moi naturel*).<sup>13</sup> Here we find a dimension of meaning at the body level, which is meaningful and intentional, although it is a lived meaning which is not thematic nor articulated at the order of reflective thoughts. This lived, body “meaning” provides us with stable, habitual functioning which is the general outline of that which gets taken up and transformed into the realm of the personal, psychological cultural level of existence. What is this level of meaning? For example, take the everyday experience of moving about in one’s home. My body knows its way around my apartment, in what could be called knowledge of the legs.<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty gives the example in *Phenomenology of Perception* of the woman who has a feather on her hat which she manages to keep at a distance from her surroundings so that it doesn’t break off. She doesn’t calculate this distance. She has incorporated the feather into her body. This kind of body knowledge is our bodily understanding of the world, a kind of harmony between that which we aim for (to get to the kitchen) and that which is given (the particular layout of the apartment). This level of meaning is neither to be understood as a mental content nor a stimuli-bound reflex. As body knowledge (when it becomes sedimented as habit), it is neither thematic knowledge nor involuntary

---

<sup>12</sup> Descartes usually gets blamed for the dualistic conceptualization of man in his famous divide between *Res extensa* and *Res cogitans*, resulting in the influential definition of man as “the thinking reed/thing”.

<sup>13</sup> All perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is given to us as anonymous. I cannot say *I* see the blue of the sky in the sense in which I say I understand a book, or again in which I say I decide to devote my life to mathematics [...] if I want to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, not that I perceive. (1945/1962, p. 215).

<sup>14</sup> “My flat is, for me, not a set of closely associated images. It remains a familiar domain round about me only as long as I still have “in my hands” or “in my legs” the main distances and directions involved, as long as from my body intentional threats run out towards it”. (ibid, p. 130).

action. Merleau-Ponty calls this level of understanding for a pre-reflected “operative intentionality”, or “motor intentionality”.<sup>15</sup> This basic orientation in the world is the background which sustains the meaning of movement, gives movement its very pre-condition as a possible projection into a meaningful world.<sup>16</sup> He uses a similar idea for this function on a psycho-social level, called “the intentional arc”, which gives us our world as already “there” as the implicit setting of one’s movements thoughts and actions. It is a form of life which places us in a situation which we already understand, beyond or below conscious awareness and thought. He describes the intentional arc in the following way:

Beneath intelligence as beneath perception, we discover a more fundamental function [...] [which] makes objects exist in a more intimate sense for us. Let us therefore say rather [...] that the life of consciousness – cognitive life -, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting [...] which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility (1945/1962, pp. 135–136).

So we find in Merleau-Ponty a description of meaning which is not reserved for cognitive thought, a meaning that is a quiet constant constitution which is the pre-condition for having a human world.<sup>17</sup> My body already “has” the world in a primordial way. Another term Merleau-Ponty uses to explicate this level of meaning is body schema (*schéma corporel*). This term is not to be understood as psychologists use the term, but rather as a description of the intuitive understanding of one’s own the body and its position in space. One’s own body is the third term, always tacitly understood in the figure/ground structure. If the telephone is to the left of my desk, it is because I am to the right of the telephone. The body is not *in* space, it “inhabits” space. It is “[...] polarized by its tasks, of its *existence towards* them, of its collecting together of itself in its pursuits of its aim, the body image is finally a way of stating that my body is in the world.” (1945/1962, p. 101). There is always a setting in perception which pre-supposes this fundamental being situated.<sup>18</sup> This understanding is immediate and intuitive, never reflected upon. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this fundamental “being situated” by the

---

<sup>15</sup> Other thinkers have further developed this terminology, see Gallagher (1995) on “pre-noetic work” or Seamon’s (2000) “pre-cognitive intelligence of the body.”

<sup>16</sup> “It is not easy to reveal pure motor intentionality: it is concealed behind the objective world which it helps to build up. (1945/1962, p. 138 footnote).

<sup>17</sup> The word *sens* in French has a variety of meanings lacking in the English “meaning/signification”. *Sens* can mean: sensation, skill, intelligibility or direction. Meaning is thus connected to the body in its sensations, abilities and mobility, reiterating the intertwining of body, meaning and being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty uses the term *Être au monde* for being-in-the-world, which translates literally into being *towards* the world, again drawing attention to bodily tasks and engagements rather than being “in” the world, as being placed in a container.

<sup>18</sup> “Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible” (1945/1962, p. 243).

term “habit”, which has a special significance in this thinking.<sup>19</sup> Some quotes below on this:

The acquisition of habit is indeed the grasping of a significance, but it is the motor grasping of a motor significance. Now what precisely does this mean? A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and the things that might break it off. She feels where the feather is just as we feel where our hand is. If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can “get through” without comparing the width of the opening with the width of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway against that of my body. [...] To get used to a hat [or] a car [...] is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body (1945/1962, p. 143).

Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments [...] To know how to type is not, then, to know the place of each letter among the keys [...] It is a knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort (ibid, 143–144).

But this power of habit is no different from the general one which we exercise over our body: if I am ordered to touch my ear or my knee, I move my hand to my ear or my knee by the shortest route, without having to think of the initial position of my hand, or that of my ear, or the path between them. We said earlier that it is the body which “understands” in the acquisition of habit [...] But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of “understand” and our notion of the body. To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at what is given, between the intention and the performance – and our body is our anchorage in a world. When I put my hand to my knee, I experience as every stage of movement the fulfillment of an intention, which was not directed at my knee as an idea or even as an object, but as a present and real part of my living body, that is, finally as a stage in my perpetual movement towards a world. When the typist performs the necessary movements on the typewriter, these movements are governed by an intention, but the intention does not posit the keys as objective locations. It is literally true that the subject who learns to type incorporates the key-bank space into his bodily space (ibid, p. 144).

The “meaning” explicated in the phenomenon of habit reveals an intentionality that is both bodily and existential, which means that intentionality is not a matter of consciousness flashing a flashlight on various areas objects arrayed before it (remnants of the idealism Merleau-Ponty disliked in Husserl’s phenomenology), but the constitution of an embodied subject and world simultaneously. Meaning is that which emerges from the concrete encounter between the world that shows itself (affords itself) in relation to those tasks, interests and attentions that the subject brings to the scene. Meaning is virtual for Merleau-Ponty, not real, like a thing, nor ideal, like a thought. It emerges as the world and the subject carve our each other “somewhere in the middle.” This intertwining, taking place on all levels, is a direct challenge to traditional ontology (subject—object dichotomy) and the natural attitude way of thinking.<sup>20</sup> It defies the objectivistic epistemology

---

<sup>19</sup> Dreyfus (1996) points out that when uses the word “habit” he often means skill, that is, to be able to *do*.

<sup>20</sup> “In short, my body is not only an object among all other objects, a nexus of sensible qualities among others, but an object which is *sensitive to* all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds,

(the God's eye view) and places the body into philosophy in a fundamental way. He does not place one "sector of the field" (mind-body-world) as first or primordial, although he does in his early work use Husserl's notion of *fundierung* (founded upon) to describe the relationship between the anonymous, body level and the personal, psychological, cultural level. Not only are the higher levels founded on the lower, Merleau-Ponty means that much of our existence is played out on this lower, pre-reflected level of habit. The phenomenon of habit allows Merleau-Ponty to develop an important concept for his phenomenology of the lived body, namely the notion of "structure" and structure transformation. I will be using Merleau-Ponty's notion of structure and structure transformation in my psychosomatic theory developed in [Chap. 5](#), so let me end this chapter by presenting Merleau-Ponty's concepts of "structure" and "structure transformation", which will be an important part of understanding psychosomatic pathology."

## Structure and Structure Transformation

Merleau-Ponty's notion of structure was first presented in *The Structure of Behavior* from 1942, where his primary aim was to criticize the causal, mechanical thinking which had infiltrated philosophy and psychology. He considered the Gestalt psychologists' notion of "form" to be a step in the right direction, but not radical enough. His use of the term "structure" was his improvement on the concept of form, freed from Gestalt psychology's naturalistic bias. Structures are not really out there in the world (the naturalistic fallacy he accused Gestalt psychologists of making), nor completely constituted by consciousness. They are rather the result of the meeting of the two, a familiar theme by now. Structures are the meaningful signification of the lived. Structures are the bodily, psychological, socio-cultural patterns which lead us in our experience of the world, but they are also formed by our encounter with the world. Once again, we find the metaphor of dialogue to describe the meeting between man and the world. Structures are our attunement to the world, on all levels, whereby we take in "something" which is other than ourselves, get a "grip" on this "something" (be it bodily or at the level of mind) and when understanding occurs, a kind of "harmony" with that which presents itself is achieved. We gradually integrate this experience as a habitual way of relating to and understanding the world. Thus, our experiences are a constant flux of encounters with the familiar (using habitual sedimented structures) as well as encounters with the new and unfamiliar, which create a tension or disharmony, requiring a transformation of habitual structures in order to accommodate the new. When structures are transformed and sedimented, they become a

---

(Footnote 20 continued)

vibrates to all colors, and provides words with their primordial significance through the way in which it receives them." (1945/1962, p. 236).

part of our habitual way of being in the world, thus expanding and further articulating our experiences. The dialogue between man and world is an ever ongoing process. The world continually presents us with a rudimentary organization, unfinished and beckoning, which calls for our participation or response.

Being at grips with the world means having structures with which one can meaningfully experience the world. These structures, once in place, cannot be nullified. However, since the world is inexhaustible, in that it is always beyond the given, like a horizon, ever changing and transforming, I am constantly challenged to be prepared to transform my habitual (sedimented) structures. The more I deepen and articulate my understanding of the world, the more of the world is shown to me. This is the human condition, to be an embodied subject, already in the world that is familiar on a deep level (motor intentionality and intentional arc), yet constantly being challenged to modify and overturn sedimented “ready-made” significations when necessary. Thus, two major characteristics of structures are that they are sedimented into habitual patterns but also “spontaneous”, that is to say, capable of transformation.

To illustrate this rather difficult notion of structures, let me take some examples from *The Structure of Behavior*. Here, Merleau-Ponty gives some examples from the animal world. At the lowest level of animal existence, we find the simple reflex response.<sup>21</sup> Higher up, there are animals who can respond to a variety of situations which could not be handled by reflex behavior. These animals respond to a type of *configuration*, a level of reality which has been disengaged from material properties. It is this openness or ambiguity in the perception of this situation which allows for a certain degree of flexibility on the animal’s response. A monkey can learn to pick “the lighter color” or is able to understand that the chocolate is always under “the last box” and so on. Thus, the higher animals can understand the *form or structure* of the situation. They have succeeded in discerning the structure of signals from their material properties (not this or that particular box, but the box which happens to be the *last one*). The more complex the configurations are, and the higher the degree of freedom in the animal’s response, the more “intelligent” we call the behavior. In the same work, Merleau-Ponty recounts an interesting experiment where fish that had learned to eat both white bread and black bread were fed white chalk mixed together with the white bread. It was observed that the fish could only very slowly and arduously learn to ignore the chalk and eat only the white bread. What was interesting was that when these same fish were then fed black bread mixed together with pieces of black rubber, they learned very quickly to ignore the rubber. Merleau-Ponty comments, “It is not to a certain material that

---

<sup>21</sup> Even simple reflex behavior is critically examined by Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure of Behavior*, where he demonstrates that even these seemingly automatic behaviors are never completely indifferent to both the internal and external situation. The rhythm and location of the stimulus, for example, will determine whether or not the reflex is released. The classical account of reflex as blind automatic is thus called into question, in favor of understanding reflexes as behavior which tends to balance itself in accordance with preferred patterns of distribution. See pp. 10–33.

the animal has adapted, but to speak a human language, to a certain kind of deception [...] It is an aptitude of choosing, or a 'method of selection' which is established (1942/1963, p. 97). In other words, a very rudimentary structure had become sedimented for the fish, and as structure they were able to apply the lesson from the initial situation with the white bread to a similar one with the black bread. The structure "some particles which look like food are in fact not food" had found its way into the world of the fish. Animals may discern a structure, but only man can *create* a structure. Experiments have shown that a chimpanzee can understand to use a box to stand on the reach something, but will not use the same box as a seat. The thing remains only a "box to stand on". In other words, the chimpanzee was not capable of assuming a *point of view* in relation to the box. They could not freely choose which aspect of the thing would emerge in a particular field, or situation.<sup>22</sup> Man is the only animal who has a point of view, who can transform the significance of the scene, who can have a *possible world*.

Structures are the bodily, psychological and social ways of being oriented towards the world that guide our understanding and through sedimentation give us freedom by presenting the world as familiar and known. Our habitual, sedimented structures allow us to experience the world as comprehensible and manageable. We develop stable patterns of experience that tell us how to move our bodies, how to respond to various psychological and social situations, and how to understand our everyday ordinary life-world. These structures, built up over time, free our attention from having to form the "base" of experience over and over again. Our maternal language and bodily repertoire are second nature to us. We do not have to re-learn them in every new situation. Such sedimentations are the necessary precondition for us to be able to communicate fluently and move about in an unencumbered way. The experience of learning a new language or a new motor skill makes us aware of how effortlessly these sedimented structures actually work. To have to think about which verb form to use or where to put the negation in a sentence shows us what language is like when it is *not* part of a sedimented structure. However, if we learn the new language well enough and use it for a long enough time, we may reach the point where even the second language becomes a part of our sedimented language repertoire. In such a case, we have expanded our language structure. The ability to learn a new language is an example of how structures are not only sedimented but also spontaneous. This means that we can develop our structures to fit new situations and challenges.

The way in which structures are formed, change and develop can be illustrated by the experience of learning to drive a car. Before one can drive, the car is experienced merely as a means of transportation, or perhaps as a source of aesthetic pleasure. The "car-structure" is not articulated in a nuanced way, but generalized, with little detail. Perceptually, I attend to the car door, the seat, perhaps the smell of the car and the sound of the engine, but over and above these blunt impressions nothing particular stands out. In terms of motility, the car-structure of the

---

<sup>22</sup> This example is also from *The Structure of Behavior*.

non-driver has to do with the way one moves one's body into get to the car, the feeling of the seat (on the passenger side), the passing view from the window. Before one can drive, the experience of the car will be at this level of articulation. However, all of this changes as soon as I place myself in the driver's seat and start to learn to drive. Firstly, my body will no longer be passively "seated" in the car seat, but must become actively attuned to the pedals, stick shift, mirrors and steering wheel. The view from the window that was so entertaining and free from demands as a passenger suddenly becomes filled with questions (Which lane should I be in? When should I signal? Should I pass this car?) and demands (he is waiting for me to turn? I seem to be blocking traffic, I just missed a chance to enter the roundabout, they keep passing me, I'm probably driving too slowly, everyone is honking at me). When I listen to the engine as the driver, the sound is no longer experienced as the background noise of "starting the car" but rather a noise to be queried: how does the engine sound? Is everything all right? In the first phases of learning to drive, I will have to filter every perception and motor activity through cognition, as there is as yet no sedimented structure for this experience. I will be hyper-present to my own body, to the various instruments of the car and to the traffic in a way that experienced drivers have long forgotten. The passage from novice to experienced driver is accomplished when I "have" the road and the car in my body. The driving becomes a harmonious field of experience where I move with ease. I am no longer hyper-aware of myself driving, nor am I in need of constant cognition in order to navigate the car in traffic. I can even lose myself in thought and not realize how I suddenly arrived at home. There have even been reported incidences of people driving in their sleep as a side-effect of a certain type of sleeping medication. To an inexperienced driver, this sounds like an impossible feat.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body and structure transformation provides a philosophical alternative to the objectivistic epistemology that focuses on the objective body, as seen from a God's eye perspective. The lived body is understood as a mind-body presence always directed towards the world (otherness). Therein a field arises, an "in-between", that is constituted in terms of situations to be mastered and understood. The term "meaning" is expanded in Merleau-Ponty's work, through the introduction of the concepts body schema, motor intentionality, intentional arc, habit-body, structure and structure transformation. Studying the phenomenon of perception phenomenologically gives us access to a previously unexplored territory, which Merleau-Ponty describes in various ways as the intertwining or "dialogue" between man and world. All these concepts are extremely fruitful in order to by-pass the unsolvable mysteries surrounding psychosomatics. In the following chapter we will take a closer look at "meaning" in order to prepare the ground for a new understanding of psychosomatics in terms of the lived body.

## References

- Bredlau, S. M. (2011). A respectful world: Merleau-Ponty and the experience of depth. *Human Studies*, 33, 411–423.
- Brentano, F. (1982). *Descriptive psychology*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Carman, T. (2008). *Merleau-Ponty*. London: Routledge.
- Diprose, R., & Reynolds, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Merleau-Ponty: Key concepts*. Stocksfield: Acumen Press.
- Dreyfus, H. (1996). The current relevance of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment. *The Electronic Journal of Analytic philosophy*, 4(spring issue), 1–16. doi: [10.1145/1690388.1690464](https://doi.org/10.1145/1690388.1690464).
- Hass, L. (2008). *Merleau-Ponty's philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1913/1962). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (Vol. 1). New York: Collier Books.
- Husserl, E. (1954/1970). *Crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1942/1963). *The structure of behavior*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945/1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1948/1964). *Sense and non-sense*. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1960/1964). *Signs*. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964a). The primacy of perception. In J. M. Edie (Ed.), *The primacy of perception: And other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history and politics* (pp. 12–42). Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964/1973). *Consciousness and the acquisition of language*. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964/1968). *The visible and the invisible*. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1969/1973). *The Prose of the world*. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Nagel, T. (1989). *The view from nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seamon, D. (2000). *A way of seeing people and place: Phenomenology in environment-behavior research*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum publishers.
- Spiegelberg, H. (1982). *The phenomenological movement*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.



<http://www.springer.com/978-94-007-6497-2>

The Expression of the Psychosomatic Body from a  
Phenomenological Perspective

Bullington, J.

2013, VII, 105 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-94-007-6497-2