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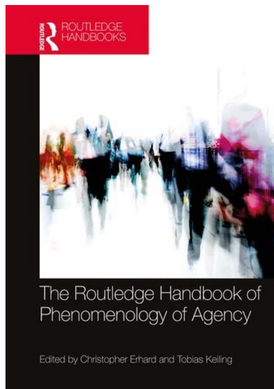

The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Agency

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Merleau-Ponty and agency

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315104249-16
Thomas Baldwin
Published online on: 30 Oct 2020

How to cite :- Thomas Baldwin. 30 Oct 2020, *Merleau-Ponty and agency from:* The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Agency Routledge
Accessed on: 20 Mar 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315104249-16

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14

MERLEAU-PONTY AND AGENCY

Thomas Baldwin

"You are your act" – Merleau-Ponty quotes from Saint-Exupéry at the very end of *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 483[1]), where the passage occurs as if it is the conclusion of the book. Saint-Exupéry is describing a situation in which there is great danger, and in other references to it, Merleau-Ponty writes that "It can even happen that when I am in danger, . . . my body completely merges with action" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 86), and that in these extreme situations one becomes aware of "the presence of self to self" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 426). So they reveal something important: "You are your act".

The emphasis here on action contrasts with the emphasis on perception that is characteristic of *Phenomenology of Perception*. We shall see how Merleau-Ponty seeks to present a new conception of human life which avoids the picture of us as "an activity tied to a passivity, a machine surmounted by a will" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 452). Before coming to this new conception, however, it is important to understand his reasons for rejecting the picture of us.

Beyond dualism

In simple terms, this picture is that suggested by the traditional dualism of the mind and body. For Merleau-Ponty this dualism is one between a consciousness whose essence is "being for itself" – so that "in consciousness, appearance and reality are one" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 310) – and a body whose essence is "being in itself" (so that its identity is determined by its intrinsic physical structure). Merleau-Ponty's critique of this dualism is set out most clearly in a long note in *Phenomenology of Perception* in which he discusses the analysis of apraxia advanced by the German neurologist Hugo Liepmann. Liepmann's diagnosis of apraxia, which is an inability to carry out bodily movements, despite having the physical ability to perform them, was that because of brain abnormalities or damage the subject lacks the power to convert their mental representations of bodily movement into appropriate movements. Merleau-Ponty comments that the fact that Liepmann's analysis involves mental representations shows that he thinks of acts of will as a kind of "motor consciousness" which represents desired bodily movements and normally gives rise to these movements by means of connections between these representations and the body; and, he argues, this position gives rise to the problem of determining "through which magical operation the representation of a movement gives rise in the body to precisely this

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very movement" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 525). The solution Merleau-Ponty then proposes involves a radical rethinking of the nature of consciousness and of the body:

> We will not render apraxia comprehensible nor make sense of Liepmann's observations unless the movement to be accomplished can be anticipated, but without being so through a representation. This is possible only if consciousness is not defined as the explicit positing of its objects, but rather more generally as a reference to an object that is practical as much as theoretical. That is, if consciousness is defined as being in the world (*être au monde*), and if the body is defined in turn not as one object among others, but as the vehicle of being in the world.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 525)*

Liepmann might respond that the mental representations he is concerned with are fundamentally neural states, so that there need be nothing "magical" about the connection between a mental representation and physical movements guided by it. Merleau-Ponty would challenge the assumption that this is possible, and the issues at stake here will come up later. But we should note now the way in which Merleau-Ponty connects his conception of our practical "reference to an object" with two of the central themes of his treatment of agency – *first*, that, as agents, we are beings whose being is being in the world; and, *second*, that our body is not just "one object among others" but our embodiment, the vehicle of our actions.

Merleau-Ponty sets out his alternative conception of action in the following passage in which he starts by alluding critically to the conception of kinesthetic sensations employed by some psychologists:

> What they expressed, admittedly poorly, by "kinesthetic sensation" was the originality of movements that I execute with my body: my movements anticipate directly their final position, my intention only sketches out a trajectory in order to meet up with a goal that is already given in its location, and there is something like a seed of movement that only grows later through its objective trajectory. I move external objects with the help of my own body, which takes hold of them in one place to take them to another. But I move my body directly (*directement*), I do not find it at one objective point in space in order to lead it to another, I have no need of looking for it because it is always with me. I have no need of directing it toward the goal of the movement, it touches (*touche*) it from the beginning and throws itself toward it. In movement, the relations between my decision and my body are magical.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 96–97)*

Some points here are straightforward, such as the fact that we move our bodies "directly", without the help of another body. But what is more significant is that the account of the practical "reference to an object" is elucidated. The suggestion seems to be that once an intended goal for action has been identified (presumably by perception), there is no need for a further representation of the limb movements (of the kind hypothesized by Liepmann) required to achieve this goal. Instead "from the beginning" our movement reaches out toward that goal; there is a fundamental teleology to bodily movement (and thus action) – "a seed of movement" which "grows later through its objective trajectory". What is then a little odd is the way in which, in the final sentence, Merleau-Ponty describes this position as one involving a "magical" relationship between one's decision and one's body, since in the discussion

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of Liepmann he uses the term "magical" to criticize Liepmann's position. But I take it that Merleau-Ponty is not here turning against his own account; instead he is just acknowledging that the inherent teleology of bodily action can seem to be "magical", a way of "touching" the goal one is reaching toward before one has reached it.

Merleau-Ponty says a good deal more about bodily movement in the context of his extended exploration of human embodiment in Part One ("The Body") of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Central to this account of the body are the two themes encountered earlier – that, as agents, we are beings whose being is being in the world, and that our body is the vehicle of our actions. One aspect of this embodiment concerns the role of our sense organs in providing us with our perceptions; another concerns the role of our limbs and other parts of the body as the "living envelope of our actions" (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 188), and these roles are combined in the functional conception of the "phenomenal body" as "a system of motor powers or perceptual powers" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 155). Merleau-Ponty contrasts this functional conception with the conception of the body as an object of some kind, as the "objective body", and the relationship between these two conceptions is a complicated matter, to which we must now turn.

The ambiguous body

Merleau-Ponty ends the Introduction to part I of *Phenomenology of Perception* with this enigmatic comment:

> And since the genesis of the objective body is but a moment in the constitution of the object, the body, by withdrawing from the objective world, will carry with it the intentional threads that unite it to its surroundings and that, in the end, will reveal to us the perceiving subject as well as the perceived world.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 74)*

The challenge here is to understand how it can make sense to write of "the genesis of the objective body", which presumably belongs to the objective world, and then, in the same sentence, to write also of the body's "withdrawing from the objective world". The solution must be that we are to recognize that there are two conceptions of the body, the objective body, which does belong to the objective world, and the phenomenal body, which so far from belonging to the objective world turns out to be the perceiving subject of that world. But quite what this solution involves, and how far Merleau-Ponty is willing to endorse a conception of the objective body at all requires further discussion.[2]

A good place to start is with "the ideal of objective thought" –

> The ideal of objective thought – the system of experience as a bundle of physico-mathematical correlations – is grounded upon my perception of the world as an individual in harmony with itself; and when science attempts to integrate my body into the relations of the objective world, it does so because it attempts, in its own way, to express the suturing of my phenomenal body onto the primordial world.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 366)*

There is a complex line of thought here. Merleau-Ponty compares the ideal of objective thought with the way in which our ordinary perception of the world as "an individual in

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harmony with itself" has a manner of "suturing", fitting, the phenomenal body onto "the primordial world" – which is the world of "primordial" experience that is "on this side of all traditions" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: note 7, 530). It is then this ordinary experience of ourselves as belonging within the world which the ideal of objective thought attempts to replicate by treating our experience as "a bundle of physico-mathematical correlations". One can think of this ideal as a version of physicalism, the thesis that physics is the fundamental natural science; thus its way of "suturing" the phenomenal body onto the physical world is to maintain that perception and action are just "physico-mathematical correlations" whose explanation can be reduced to physical explanation. The central thesis of Part I of *Phenomenology of Perception* is that this application of the ideal of objective thought to the phenomenal body is a mistake. Merleau-Ponty expresses this claim in a striking endorsement of Descartes's anti-materialist position: "It will never be made clear how signification and intentionality could inhabit molecular structures or cellular masses, and here Cartesianism is correct" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 367). Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, the physicalist's objective conception of the body as "a chemical structure or a collection of tissues" which "is formed through a process of impoverishment" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 367) fails to account adequately for central aspects of our being in the world such as our perceptual and motor powers and their inherent intentionality.

He returns to this theme of "impoverishment" in a later comment about the objective body:

> The objective body is merely an impoverished image of the phenomenal body, and the problem of the relations between the soul (*âme*) and the body has nothing to do with the objective body, which has merely a conceptual existence, but rather has to do with the phenomenal body.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 456)*

What is notable here is the claim that the objective body "has merely a conceptual existence". For this would seem to imply that the conception of the objective body is just a fiction of the mistaken physicalist ideal of objective thought. But in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty also writes of the objective body as if it were a genuine aspect of our embodiment which needs to be allowed for alongside the capacities which constitute the phenomenal body (see Merleau-Ponty 2012: 212, 241, 322). One idiom which attests to this dual conception of the body is that of the "ambiguity" of the body which is experienced when one brings one's hands into direct contact, for this gives rise to "an ambiguous organization where the two hands can alternate between the functions of 'touching' and 'touched'" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 95). Merleau-Ponty describes these functions in a revealing way: in a case where one touches one's right hand with one's left hand while the right hand is itself touching an object, he writes:

> The right hand, as an object, is not the right hand that does the touching. The first is an intertwining of bones, muscles and flesh compressed into a point of space; the second shoots across space to reveal the external object in its place.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 94)*

These roles of "touching" and "touched" are clearly those of what one might call the "phenomenal hand" and the "objective hand". But he now goes on to write, concerning the

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body, that this situation "prevents it from ever being an object", which one might take to imply that the conception of the objective body is an illusion:

> Insofar as it sees or touches the world, my body can neither be seen nor touched. What prevents it from ever being an object or from being "completely constituted" is that my body is that by which there are objects.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 94)*

The way to understand this passage, however, is to recognize that although Merleau-Ponty does not use the phrase "phenomenal body" here, this is what he is describing when he writes of the body "insofar as it sees or touches the world". Hence when he goes on to write that "it" cannot ever be an object, the reference is just to "the phenomenal body", so that there is here no claim concerning the objective body. After all, one could match the earlier passage with the following one:

> Insofar as it can be seen or touched, my body can neither see or touch. What prevents it from ever being a subject or from being "purely constituting" is that my body is in these ways an object.

Here it would be clear that one was just writing of the objective body, and not asserting that, because it can be seen and touched, the body is in no way a subject.

The conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that the body's ambiguity amounts to a dual aspect theory whereby the right hand, for example, can have both the aspect of touching and that of being touched. Although Merleau-Ponty takes it that these two aspects are mutually exclusive, there is no contradiction in his holding that they are aspects of one and the same thing since each obtains only relative to the relevant perspective – phenomenal or objective. In later writings Merleau-Ponty in fact rejects the assumption of mutual exclusiveness: in "The Philosopher and his Shadow" he writes "I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes 'a sort of reflection'" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 166).[3] Similarly in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty writes that the experience of a handshake with another person is one in which "I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 142). Hence the conclusion to take is that which he affirms in the same book, that "my body is at once phenomenal body and objective body" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 136).

The question that now arises is how these two aspects of the human body, the phenomenal and the objective, are related. Since the phenomenal body comprises "a system of motor powers or perceptual powers" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 155) and the objective body is an "intertwining of bones, muscles and flesh" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 94), one suggestion might be that the "phenomenal" powers can be understood as products of the body's objective constituents in the way in which the powers of familiar substances such as salt and water can be understood in terms of their physical constitution. But that is the physicalist hypothesis to which Merleau-Ponty is emphatically opposed. The obvious alternative to the physicalist's "bottom-up" approach is, therefore, one which is, in some respects, "top-down" – i.e. takes it that the exercise of the perceptual and motor powers which are characteristic of the phenomenal body are fundamental elements of human life which are realized by the body's objective constituents but not determined by them. The dualism here is not a dualism of substances, but of two aspects of human life. So the starting point for a consideration of this position is not Cartesian dualism, but Aristotelian hylomorphism, the dualism of form and matter as applied to the philosophy of mind. This is not the place for a detailed discussion

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of the options and issues that confront positions of this kind, but the "naturalism" John McDowell presented in *Mind and World* is a good example of a position of this kind (McDowell 1994: 108–110), and I say more below about the way in which one can interpret Merleau-Ponty's position as one of this kind.[4]

Bodily intentionality

The main way in which Merleau-Ponty attempts to substantiate his position is by introducing two cases of people who have suffered serious injury, and showing that the nature of their injury is not adequately accounted for by a physicalist approach which relies on physical damage, including neural damage, but needs instead to be reframed in terms of a phenomenological approach which focuses on the ways in which their basic being in the world have been damaged by their physical injury.

The first case concerns the phenomenon of a phantom limb, the often painful and troubling experience of those, who having lost a leg or an arm, feel as if they still had the limb that they know to be missing. Merleau-Ponty's suggestion is that this phenomenon reveals a kind of bodily memory of an ability once possessed which is especially activated in situations in which the missing limb would have been used – for example, when someone who has lost an arm sees a plate of food that he would have reached for without thinking of it, this memory is felt as the ghostly presence of his missing arm.

This account makes good sense, and one can see why Merleau-Ponty introduces it, for it suggests that the phantom limb phenomenon is best understood from within the phenomenological perspective of being in the world, that is being someone who remains "within the practical field that one had prior to the mutilation" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 84). This account does not exclude a neurological account of the way in which motor abilities are entrenched by neural connections in the brain, such that when neural centers are activated by perception of situations suitable for moving a limb they activate proprioceptive sensors which give rise to the feeling of the limb even though it is now missing. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that some such hypothesis is correct (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 88). Thus this case shows how Merleau-Ponty's dual aspect approach to the body is supposed to work.

In the course of his discussion of this case Merleau-Ponty introduces a further line of thought which is going to be central to his account of our being in the world, and especially agency. He starts from the thought that the motor abilities and predispositions which are manifested by the phenomenon of the phantom limb are typically states of which one is not conscious, and he then generalizes this point to suggest that what is revealed by this case is a web of sub-personal abilities and dispositions which organize much of our life beneath the level of personal existence:

> . . . we say that my organism – as a pre-personal adhesion to the general form of the world, as an anonymous and general existence – plays the role of an *innate complex* – beneath the level of my personal life. My organism is not like some inert thing, it itself sketches out the movement of existence.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 86)*

One might think at first that the distinction Merleau-Ponty draws here between one's "personal life" and the "anonymous"/"pre-personal" existence of one's "organism" is an implication of the basic ambiguity of the phenomenal and objective aspects of human existence. But on reflection it is clear that this is exactly what Merleau-Ponty denies when he writes "My organism is not like some inert thing, it itself sketches out the movement of existence".

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That is, the basic perceptual and motor abilities which constitute our phenomenal body are features of one's anonymous "organism", the pre-personal being which operates only in the background. Nonetheless, he claims, these abilities, despite their sub-personal status, have a crucial role in enabling us to maintain our personal lives, for our personal freedom is founded upon our bodily organism. Hence we should replace the conception of agency as the control of a physical body by an abstract mind, and view it instead as the interplay between the pre-personal being in the world of our organism and a personal self which uses this being in the world to understand and change it:

> Taken concretely, man is not a psyche joined to an organism, but rather this back-and-forth of existence that sometimes allows itself to exist as a body and sometimes carries itself into personal acts.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 90).*

This is not a complete account of agency; but it indicates the direction of travel by which Merleau-Ponty will seek to elucidate its possibility.

This line of thought is further developed through discussion of an Austrian soldier, Schneider, who suffered a brain injury during World War I and whose subsequent situation was described in detail by the psychiatric neurologists Adhémar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein. They describe one central aspect of Schneider's disability as an inability to point to things, despite have the ability to grasp them. Thus he can undertake concrete movements, such as reaching out to grasp the things which he requires for his employment in making wallets – cutting pieces of leather and stitching them together, but he cannot perform abstract movements such as pointing to his nose. For Merleau-Ponty this disability reveals a disturbance in Schneider's capacity for undertaking bodily movements which are not tied in to his current practical situation. Although Schneider can perform a military salute, he does so only by treating his situation as a whole as one in which a salute is required; he cannot simply put himself into an imaginary situation and act out what would be appropriate there. Merleau-Ponty summarizes this account of Schneider's disability as follows:

> The normal person *reckons with* the possible, which thus acquires a sort of actuality without leaving behind its place as a possibility; for the patient, however, the field of the actual is limited to what is encountered in real contact or linked to these givens through an explicit deduction.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 112)*

Thus the initial contrast between concrete and abstract movement is transformed into a contrast between Schneider's limited repertoire of habitual actions based on his practical needs and a normal person's open-ended capacity for actions that construct and explore novel possibilities that take us into new worlds. Merleau-Ponty describes how these new worlds then become "sedimented" in turn as "acquired worlds" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 131) which provide a background for the construction of further possibilities, so that, for a normal person (but not Schneider), action has a significance which draws on their open-ended ways of enhancing their situation. Merleau-Ponty describes this significance as a kind of intentionality that operates at a deeper level than that of explicit thought:

> So let us say . . . . that the life of consciousness – epistemic life, the life of desire, or perceptual life – is underpinned by an "intentional arc" that projects around us our past,

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> our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all these relationships. And this is what "goes limp" in the disorder.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 137)*

Merleau-Ponty now uses this way of characterizing our situation to advance a central thesis of *Phenomenology of Perception*, that "motricity", our capacity for bodily movement, is "original intentionality" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 139), so that "Consciousness is originarily not an 'I think that', but rather an 'I can'" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 139).

The claim here, that intentionality is not fundamentally a matter of mental representation, is one that I mentioned at the start of this chapter in the context of Merleau-Ponty's critical discussion of Liepmann. In the following passage (to which Merleau-Ponty attaches his discussion of Liepmann as a footnote) Merleau-Ponty writes that Brentano's famous "reference to an object" is to be understood as actually reaching out toward the object in question (which is presumably something the agent is perceiving), rather than as a representation of his future arm movement:

> The gesture of reaching one's hand out toward an object contains a reference to the object, not as a representation, but as this highly determinate thing toward which we are thrown, next to which we are through anticipation, and which we haunt. Consciousness is being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 140)*

Agency

Toward the end of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty returns to this distinction between the conception of the intentionality of consciousness as based on the "I can" of agency and the conception of it as based on the "I think" of mental representation. He now presents this distinction as one of the main conclusions of the book, emphasizing the difference between his new conception of bodily, or "operative" (as he now calls it), intentionality and the traditional conception of the "thetic" intentionality that is characteristic of judgment, and reaffirming the thesis which he had introduced through his discussions of phantom limbs and of Schneider's case, that this operative intentionality is fundamental:

> We uncovered, beneath act or thetic intentionality – and in fact as its very condition of possibility – an operative intentionality already at work prior to every thesis and every judgment.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 453)*

This "operative" intentionality lies at the core of agency as Merleau-Ponty conceives it. But it is important to consider first how it constitutes a kind of agency at all, for the way in which it is pre-personal might be thought to imply that the bodily movements required are no more cases of genuine agency than the movements of someone's gut during digestion. As we have seen, in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty used the term "organism" to contrast with "personal life" in the context of his discussion of the phantom limb phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 86). So a good way to take the issue further is to look briefly at his

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discussion of the behavior of "organisms", as he calls them, – i.e. non-human animals, in *The Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty 1963). He argues here that what distinguishes organisms from complex physical systems is that the behavior of organisms is organized by reference to a *milieu* which is appropriate to the species of the organism (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 129–130). He uses the term *milieu* as a translation of the German term *Umwelt* (environment) whose use in this context comes from the work of the Estonian biologist Jacob von Uexküll who introduced the term to describe the meaningful aspects of an animal's environment; and it is in effect von Uexküll's position that Merleau-Ponty affirms in *The Structure of Behavior.*[5]

Merleau-Ponty explains this position in the following passage:

> We mean only that the reactions of an organism are understandable and predictable only if we conceive of them, not as muscular contractions which unfold in the body, but as acts which are addressed to a certain milieu, present or virtual: the act of taking a bait, of walking towards a goal, of running away from danger. The object of biology is evidently not to study all the reactions which can be obtained with a living body in any conditions whatsoever, but only those which are *its* reactions or, as one says, "adequate" reactions.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 1963: 151)*

So what is distinctive about organisms is that their behavior constitutes "acts which are addressed to a certain milieu, present or virtual". In developing this position Merleau-Ponty introduces the concept that, as we have seen already, is central to his account of human life in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that of the organism's "phenomenal body"; and it is the organism's phenomenal body which organizes its milieu:

> The gestures and the attitudes of the phenomenal body must have therefore a proper structure, an immanent signification; from the beginning the phenomenal body must be a center of actions which radiate over a certain "milieu."
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 1963: 157).*

It is the final phrase here that is especially significant – the connection between the organism's agency, as a "center for actions", with its way of being in an environment ("milieu"). The message from these writings, therefore, confirms the thesis that because operative intentionality, be it human or animal, is a way of being in the world (*Umwelt*, *milieu*, or environment), behavior which manifests this kind of intentionality is a clear case of agency. As he puts it in his later lectures on Nature, life is "the opening of a field of action" (Merleau-Ponty 2003: 173).

Although he does not directly address these issues in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty does introduce a line of thought that helps to develop the position further. In chapter III of the Introduction, he contrasts both causal explanations and reason-based explanations of depth perception with phenomenological explanations in term of "motives", and one can appreciate from Merleau-Ponty's discussion of this case what he has in mind when he describes "motivation" as an example of a *non-thetic* consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 50), "a sort of operative reason" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 51). He also applies this conception of motivation to behavior, and the implication is that practical motives are often non-thetic, "operative reasons"; so where behavior is motivated by a subject's situation in their world (*milieu*), it has its own rationality, the operative rationality of practical motives. And what is agency, if not the capacity for rational action?

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This completes the case for Merleau-Ponty's thesis that operative intentionality, the fundamental way in which perception and behavior constitute being in a world, suffices for agency. Before leaving the topic, however, there is one further issue to be settled. Merleau-Ponty's thesis is not warranted simply by a verbal connection between talk of "intentionality" and "intentional action"; a more substantive connection is required, which I have suggested is to be found through his discussion of what it is for the life of an organism to be a way of being in a world. But there is a separate question one can now ask, namely whether Merleau-Ponty holds that it is a mark of agency that actions are, in the familiar sense, intentional – "agent-intentional", as I shall call it. This is, of course, a thesis that is familiar from the writings of Davidson and many others – for example, Sartre.[6] It has also been challenged, for example by O'Shaughnessy in the first edition of *The Will*.[7] It is not sensible for me to attempt here to assess this thesis itself: there are many putative counterexamples to it which typically involve strange behavior that cannot be easily understood.[8] But it is worth considering whether Merleau-Ponty himself subscribed to this thesis. So far as I'm aware, he never explicitly affirms it; but, equally, he does not explicitly reject it, though it has been argued that he holds that at least some actions are not intended (and not simply because there are some aspects of them which are not intended).[9] But he certainly writes a good deal about the "practical intentions" of agents, and my own view is that he just takes it for granted that actions are agent-intentional because they are behavior which manifests the operative intentionality of a subject whose being is being in the world. For example, he writes:

> When I motion to my friend to approach, my intention is not a thought that I could have produced within myself in advance . . . I signal over there, where my friend is.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 113)*

Thus an agent's intentions are just the contents of the operative intentionality which informs their behavior. In this sense, therefore, all action is inherently intentional – including that of animals. Merleau-Ponty would endorse Wittgenstein's comment:

> What is the natural expression of an intention? – Look at a cat when it stalks a bird; or a beast when it wants to escape.
>
> *(Wittgenstein 1953: § 647)*

The will

By now it will be clear why Merleau-Ponty rejects the picture of us as "a machine surmounted by a will" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 452). He has emphatically rejected the conception of the body as a machine, and replaced it with the conception of the body as a natural subject, the vehicle of our being in the world, which, as we have just seen, brings with it the capacity for agency. But what of the will? Merleau-Ponty does not provide an extended discussion of this topic; but in *Phenomenology of Perception* he alludes several times to aspects of human life which are "voluntary", contrasting them with the "pre-personal life of consciousness" as rational and reflective, including judgment and practical deliberation (see Merleau-Ponty 2012: 216, 362, 460).

This contrast brings out the need to clarify the relation between the pre-personal life of consciousness and the reflective, rational, personal life of someone capable of voluntary practical deliberation. Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that these two aspects of human life

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belong together. Just as the perceptual and practical abilities of living organisms depend on the biochemical properties of their material structures, without being reducible to them, the cognitive and practical abilities of rational persons depend on the perceptual and physical powers of their body. In *The Structure of Behavior* Merleau-Ponty calls these relations of dependence "dialectic", by which he seems to have in mind the enhancement of what was present at a lower level through its incorporation in some more complex whole. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty adds Husserl's conception of *Fundierung* (founding) to his account of this process, so that he now describes it as a "dialectic between form and matter" whereby "form absorbs matter" in that there is a "perpetual taking up of fact and chance by a reason that neither exists in advance of this taking up, nor without it" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 128–129), and this way of thinking about the matter connects with my earlier suggestion that the relation between phenomenal and objective body be thought of in terms of an Aristotelian relation between form and matter.

As we have seen he takes it that the capacity for rational agency builds on the motives and values that inhere in our pre-personal being in the world. Indeed one can readily adapt his account of the relation between thetic and operative intentionality which I have cited earlier (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 453) to this case. It is as if –

> We uncovered beneath the capacity for explicitly rational action – and in fact as its very condition of possibility – a capacity for motivated action already at work prior to every thesis and every judgment.

But a further point is suggested by the following passage:

> No more can aphonia be considered voluntary. The will presupposes a field of possibles among which I choose: here is Pierre, I can choose to speak to him or not.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 165)*[10]

The reference here to "a field of possibles" is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on "the capacity of orienting oneself in relation to the possible" as the "essence" of human life (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 175–176) and his comment in the context of his discussion of Schneider's case that "The normal person *reckons* with the possible" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 112). Thus one can take from these passages the suggestion that voluntary acts are characteristic of personal human life, whereas the world of non-human animals and of our pre-personal bodily existence is limited to what is familiar and actual. What now needs some explanation is what is required for this capacity to reckon with the possible. Merleau-Ponty gives this question little attention; but there is one suggestion which seems to me worth exploring briefly, namely that Merleau-Ponty's account of language offers a way into the basis for a capacity which can then be used as a background for an account of voluntary action.

Merleau-Ponty presents his account of language in *Phenomenology of Perception*, in Part I, Chapter VI: ("The Body as Expression, and Speech"). In the present context two claims are especially relevant: first, that "speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes thought" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 183); second, that this accomplishment rests on the "ultimate fact" that "speech gives rise a new sense (*sens*)" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 200):

> Thus, we must recognize as an ultimate fact this open and indefinite power of signifying – that is, of simultaneously grasping and communicating a sense – by which man transcends

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> himself through his body and his speech toward a new behavior, toward others, or toward his own thought.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 200)*

This "ultimate fact" is the fact that we are able to create new meanings through speech in which we use more or less familiar sounds (words) in new ways. So the fundamental relation between thought and language is not, Merleau-Ponty insists, that through learning language we learn to translate our own inner thoughts into sounds which make them available to others. Rather, in learning language we acquire the ability to express new meanings and thus to have thoughts which we could not otherwise have had.

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that speech is a type of behavior, a vocal "gesture" as he puts it (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 190). But when he writes that the speaker "transcends himself through his body and his speech toward a new behavior toward others or toward his own thought" he intimates that language is central to the transformation of the pre-personal consciousness of the human animal into the voluntary and rational life of a human person. In his account of this transformation Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the role of speech in giving meaning to novel possibilities and also providing the structure for an intersubjective world of shared meanings and culture:

> Speech is the excess of our existence beyond natural being. But the act of expression constitutes a linguistic and cultural world, it makes that which aimed beyond being fall back into it. This results in spoken speech, which enjoys the established significations as if they were an inherited fortune. On the basis of these acquisitions, other authentic acts of expression – those of the writer, the artist, and the philosopher – become possible.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 2012: 203)*

Indeed Merleau-Ponty takes things further, remarking that because speech provides us with a way of refining our arguments and conclusion, it provides "a privileged place for Reason" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 196). Similarly, he remarks that "speech *establishes* the concordance of myself with myself and of myself with others" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 412) and this understanding of oneself and of others is central to reflective thought. So the development of language makes possible the cultural world we share with others and the rational reflective life that is characteristic of voluntary thought and action. To confirm this conclusion, however, it is important to check that it offers a way into the basis of a capacity to reckon with the possible which Merleau-Ponty identified as a presupposition of voluntary action and distinctive of human life in general. It is, I think, not difficult to satisfy oneself on this point. For it is central to Merleau-Ponty's account of speech that we can use language to give a new sense to our words in a way which makes sense of new possibilities. So the connection between language and possibility is straightforward, as is the connection with practical deliberation. This is typically an assessment of the practical possibilities inherent in one's situation: what language contributes is a way of making these possibilities explicit and thereby making it easier to reason concerning them. With language on hand, the motives (implicit operative reasons) for action characteristic of one's pre-personal existence can be articulated by oneself as explicit reasons and assessed as such. Where they conflict, one will need to make a choice between them in the light of the "spontaneous valuations" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 465) which enter into our experience of the world. So voluntary deliberation, so far from being a sham, as Sartre notoriously maintained,[11] is an essential ingredient of one's consciousness of oneself

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as someone who can in principle give meaning to their life through their own deliberate acts, their own *Sinngebung décisoire* as Merleau-Ponty puts it.

There is now one final question to be addressed, namely how it is that one's decisions and other acts of will lead to bodily actions. It is clear that for Merleau-Ponty this relation is not a causal one; instead it is to be in some sense "rational". But it is not obvious how decisions add to the reasons for action which have already been taken into account in making the decision. Merleau-Ponty does not, so far as I can see, address this issue; but there is a way of extending the appeal to language to provide a solution. It is that one should construe decisions as self-addressed instructions concerning how one should act. For just as instructions by others with some authority over one give one a reason for doing what one is told to do over and above one's other reasons for doing it, a self-addressed instruction gives one a reason to do what one is telling oneself to do over and above the reasons on which the decision is based. So if decisions are conceived as self-addressed speech-acts of this kind, they will provide a reason of their own for doing what one has decided to do. Of course, our wills are not omnipotent; our decisions can be trumped by powerful temptations or anxieties. But these failures do not undermine the importance of this capacity for self-direction in the life of a rational, reflective, person.

I proposed earlier that one might use Merleau-Ponty's account of language to suggest how the emergence of language transforms the consciousness of a human animal into the "voluntary and rational life" of a human person by providing the basis for a reflective understanding of oneself. This final suggestion that acts of will be regarded as self-addressed instructions is an extension of this transformation into the domain of rational discourse, so that language does not just make practical reasoning possible but adds to our rationality by incorporating a recognition of the significance of the decisions which are the conclusions of our reasoning. It gives us a new kind of reason. Since this new capacity is one in which by acting in the way in which you have decided to act you affirm your own self, there is a sense in which "you are your act" – as Merleau-Ponty puts it in the conclusion of his *Phenomenology of Perception*.[12]

Related topics

Chapters 11 (on Sartre), 17 (on Dreyfus), 21 (Hanna).

Notes

1 References to *Phenomenology of Perception* are to the translation by D. A. Landes, which I have occasionally modified.

2 Merleau-Ponty's distinction between two conceptions of the body, phenomenal and objective, is influenced by Husserl's distinction between *Leib* (the lived body) and *Körper* (the 'corporeal' body) – as in Husserl (1989: 352–354). But there are important differences between their positions, see Carmen (1999).

3 This paper is a tribute to Husserl, and, among other things, explores the conception of the lived body (*Leib*). The passage quoted from Merleau-Ponty's paper is similar to Husserl's remark "my Body as touched Body is something touching which is touched" (Husserl 1989: 155). On the theme of embodied reflection see also the conclusion of the seventh sketch "Man and Evolution: the Human Body" in Merleau-Ponty's 1959–60 lectures on Nature (Merleau-Ponty 2003: 273).

4 One might seek to use the dual aspect theory developed and defended by Brian O'Shaughnessy in *The Will* as a model for thinking about Merleau-Ponty's position (O'Shaughnessy 1980). Although there would be much to be learnt from a comparison between these two positions, despite the radical differences between their presumptions and methodologies, it would require a detailed exposition and examination of O'Shaughnessy's theory which is not appropriate here.

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5 There are obvious similarities between von Uexküll's conception of an animal's *Umwelt* and the conception of "affordances" later developed by J. J. Gibson, especially in Gibson 1979.

6 See Davidson (1980), esp. "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" and "Intending"; Sartre (1969: 433).

7 O'Shaughnessy (1980: 58–69); but see also O'Shaughnessy (2008: 349–362) where this claim is retracted.

8 See Eilan and Roessler 2003b, Marcel 2003, and Perner 2003.

9 See Romdenh-Romluc (2011: 168).

10 Aphonia is an inability to speak. In some cases it is the result of physical damage or disorder; but in the case Merleau-Ponty is discussing its origin is psychogenic.

11 "Voluntary deliberation is always a sham (*truquée*)" (Sartre 1969: 450).

12 I have offered the suggestion that decisions are self-addressed instructions as a solution to a problem posed by Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the will, but it seems to me that it has considerable merit on its own account.

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Further reading

S. Gallagher and D. Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind* (2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), Chapter 8, provides a good introduction to phenomenological accounts of agency, though without much reference to Merleau-Ponty. T. Carmen, *Merleau-Ponty* (Abingdon: Routledge 2008) is an excellent introduction to Merleau-Ponty's work, but without much discussion of agency. T. Baldwin (ed.) *Reading Merleau-Ponty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) includes papers by K. Romdenh-Romluc and H. Dreyfus which provide an instructive debate on Merleau-Ponty's account of agency.