

Summary

Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Thinking According to Perception

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In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, perception is not just a possible philosophical issue. The analysis of perception largely determines the way other philosophical issues, such as consciousness, time, language or ideal objects, should be approached. The philosophy of perception is thus a philosophy which "thinks according to perception" (as Renaud Barbaras puts it). As appropriate as it is, this designation still allows or even calls for further specification and that is precisely what this book is trying to achieve.

Merleau-Ponty repeatedly affirms the priority of perceiving, as, for instance, in his 1946 lecture *The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences* or in his masterpiece *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), where he regards perception as our "primordial knowledge" of the real. Closer scrutiny reveals, however, that the thesis of the primacy of perception has at least three different meanings.

Perception can be considered the *first* way that we encounter reality. Things and events that we perceive are *subsequently* grasped by language and reason (formation of general notions, inference), but perception takes place *before* language and reason. It is their precondition. Perception is not the sole encounter that we have with reality, but it is the first one. It may be called the *temporal* or *genealogical* primacy of perception.

Secondly, perception may enjoy priority not only because it *precedes* other human activities *in time*, but because it is their *foundation*, regardless of any temporal genesis. It may be claimed, for instance,

that the idea of objective time is based on the fundamental experience of time passing: we *perceive* how things around us change and how they pass. The idea of an objective, all-embracing time is derived from that experience. The thesis of the primacy of perception, in this sense, attributes the *foundationalist* primacy to perception.

Thirdly, the thesis of the primacy of perception does not necessarily imply that perception is either the first or the most fundamental encounter with reality. It can prompt us to extend certain features of perception to other human acts. Perception is, for instance, always bound to a certain perspective, to a concrete time and standpoint, and is consequently limited in its scope. It may be claimed that the same holds true for our forming general notions. Perception, then, would neither be the *origin* of general notions nor their *foundation*, but would simply serve as a *model* or *archetype* for our reflection on general notions. The third meaning of Merleau-Ponty's thesis attributes the *archetypal* primacy to perception. The call to think according to perception would then invite us to search for analogies with perception in other domains.

In Merleau-Ponty's writings, all three meanings of the thesis of the primacy of perception may be found. Our question is how they relate to one another and which one prevails in his philosophy. Scholars who interpret Merleau-Ponty's work often criticise the thesis for being ambiguous. However, only few attempts have been undertaken to distinguish its different meanings and to say which one is philosophically the most promising. Nevertheless, it is impossible to approve or disapprove of the primacy of perception thesis unless we have clarified which variant we are actually judging.

The thesis of the primacy of perception – in all its possible meanings – presupposes a certain idea of what perception is. Our examination thus proceeds in three steps. Firstly, Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception is studied closely (*Introduction*, Chapters I – III). Secondly, Merleau-Ponty's account of some classical philosophical issues (material entities, time, language, ideal entities; Chapters IV – VII) is discussed, which enables us, thirdly, to gather the material together and address the initial question of the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's fundamental thesis (*Conclusion*).

Summary

Merleau-Ponty develops his idea of perception in a critical discussion of “empiricist” and “intellectualist” philosophies of perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception should not be taken as a result of the action of impulses upon our sense organs. He applies to perception the general maxim of phenomenology, according to which the whole precedes its parts and makes the parts understandable. Thus, perception is a complex or holistic phenomenon which cannot be composed of elementary “impressions” or “sense data”, each sense datum being context-bound. Furthermore, perception is not merely a mode of knowledge, an act which enables us to know things and events, but an engaged and interested activity which enables us to grasp things, to find our bearings in concrete situations and to live in the world. The philosophy of perception is therefore not reducible to the epistemology of perception, but is instead an ontology of the perceiving subject and of the perceived world.

The introductory outline discussing what is perception (*Introduction*) is subsequently developed in the following chapters, where three interconnected questions are addressed respectively: “In what sense can perception be said to be *receptive*?” (Chap. I); “What role does the *body* play in perception?” (Chap. II.); and “What is the *intentionality* of perception?” (Chap. III). These chapters reconstruct Merleau-Ponty’s main arguments against some doctrines of British empiricism and against Husserl (in Chapter I), against the Cartesian idea of the body and the Husserlian analysis of touch as constitutive for the body (Chapter II) and, finally, against the Cartesian and Husserlian doctrines of consciousness (Chapter III). Merleau-Ponty’s idea of perception implies a new notion of intentionality which does not presuppose the traditional idea of the “mind” or “consciousness”, it is an intentionality which is – as, e.g., in the case of emotional intentionality – related to temporal genesis, to one’s own body and to its own expression in bodily movement or speech. This new idea of intentionality has some important consequences. There is, for instance, no epistemological priority of the “mind” over the “object”, of the “inside” over the “outside”. Since this analysis of perception rejects the distinction of the “inner” and the “outer” worlds, it has important ontological implications.

The second part of the book addresses four classical philosophical issues in order to see how they are elucidated by the “primacy of perception thesis”. In Chapter IV, which considers material entities, the emphasis on perception leads us to see the perceived qualities of things as their proper qualities. Nevertheless, things are not reducible to what we perceive. They retain their transcendence which, paradoxically, shows itself in our perception as being independent of that perception. Chapter V, which considers time, shows that Merleau-Ponty considers the experience of things passing and changing in our perceptual field to be the fundamental experience of time, whereas the idea of objective time is derivative. Merleau-Ponty offers a philosophy of time as seen from the point of view of the present. The author shows the limitations of this approach which cannot, for instance, account for the unity of time and fails to take seriously the past, which has not been experienced. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of language, in Chapter VI, affirms the primacy of the speech act (*parole*) over the structure of language signs (*langue*) and the primacy of the event over the linguistic system. The book reconstructs Merleau-Ponty’s encounter with Saussure as well as with Husserl. Merleau-Ponty refuses the autonomy of the sign system (structuralism) as well as that of the pre-linguistic, perceptual meaning (Husserlian phenomenology). For Merleau-Ponty, there is a mutual dependence or “mutual constitution” of perception and language. In consequence, ideal objects, addressed in Chap. VII, are not eternal entities but the specific result of the process of the mutual perception–language constitution. They are subject to historical and cultural conditions (e.g. means of expression in geometry or mathematics, perspective in painting, etc.), and, although they are not a-temporal, they are temporal in a different sense than particular events. Ideal objects make up a historical, but, at the same time, relatively stable, frame of our experience.

Having studied these different fields of applications of Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental thesis, the book arrives at the conclusion that the prevailing meaning is the *archetypal* one. Merleau-Ponty neither wants to affirm that everything starts with perception or that everything is based on perception, but instead that all human acts and all aspects of the world can be understood by analogy to perception.

Summary

(1) Perception is the archetype of intentionality as such. Thus, not only perception, but also emotions, volitional acts and speech acts bear some common features: the inside-outside distinction (act being immanent, whereas its object transcendent) has to be replaced by a different idea of intentionality. Intentionality is no longer immanent, but incorporated, i.e. dependent on the means of its expression, be it bodily movement or linguistic signs. (2) The perceived world is the archetype of the world as such. Since perception opens access to what is not necessary but contingent (events, things, other people and their behaviour, animals), the philosophy of perception leads to a certain generalisation of the category of contingency to entities like linguistic meanings or ideal objects.

Incorporation (1) and contingency (2) thus represent two features which may be found on different levels of our encounter with reality, perception being their archetype. Nevertheless, not all features of perception and of the perceived world may be transferred to other acts and domains. Even though the analogical transfer can help us to acquire new insights – it can for instance help us to see our existence as being not isolated from, but interwoven into, the world – it also has its limitations. We have indicated those limitations, e.g. in the chapter on time where the primacy of perception appears to be the primacy of the present, or in the chapter on ideal objects, where Merleau-Ponty seems to blur significant differences between different sorts of ideal objects. We may conclude that to think according to perception means to search for analogies with perception, but to be well aware of the limitations of such an undertaking as well.