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Interviews With Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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INTERVIEWS WITH MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

by

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, a collection of previously unreleased audio-recorded interviews and dialogues with phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty were transcribed and published in French in *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier: et autres dialogues, 1946-1959*. Here, to my knowledge, I have translated three of those interviews into English for the very first time. Given that these interviews were recorded for broadcast to the general public, they provide an accessible entry point into some of the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty. The first interview that I have translated is Merleau-Ponty explaining his research in Philosophy. The second interview discusses Husserl, the concept of lived experience, and the discipline of phenomenology. The third interview is about praxis and how philosophy is engaged in the world. Following the three interviews is an original essay expanding upon some of the concepts introduced in the interviews, especially those in conversation with Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

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PREFACE

Maurice Merleau-Ponty gave a series of twelve interviews with French radio producer Georges Charbonnier throughout 1959. These interviews, along with many earlier interviews, were transcribed and compiled into the book *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier: et autres dialogues, 1946-1959* (2016) by the editor Jérôme Melançon. I have chosen three pieces to translate as part of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no previous translations of these interviews into English. My translations were done solely on the basis of these published transcriptions and with the notable help of my French advisor, Frédéric Rondeau, and with further proofreading from my philosophy advisor, Kirsten Jacobson.

The majority of the interviews found in *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier* focus on contemporary political issues, presumably as they were meant to reach the general French public. The earliest interviews in the collection take place just after the end of World War II, broadcast on May 29, 1946, and even the later interviews are not far removed from this traumatic event in world history. Following WWII, France entered into a period that would come to be known as Les Trente Glorieuse ('The Glorious Thirty') in which the country experienced unprecedented economic growth. At the same time, the Cold War emerged as a major paradigm in international politics, and France (as a founding member of NATO) found a tense place in the world as a nuclear-armed nation near the also nuclear-armed USSR. Questions of war and politics were on the minds of many, and public intellectuals from diverse backgrounds found themselves discussing the various implications of political issues. As a result, many of the interviews conducted in

this collection are on subjects outside of philosophy, ranging from Guallism to psychology. Given my academic and personal interests, I have selected three interviews to translate that relate most directly to the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The first interview that I translated, conducted by André Parinaud, was broadcast on French radio on December 21, 1952. The introductory note is a translation of Melançon's presentation of the interview. When it comes to the interviews with Georges Charbonnier, which make up the majority of the book, the recording dates are not clear, as Melançon compiled these interviews from the National Audiovisual Institute of France (Institut national de l'audiovisuel), which has several versions of the interviews with only the date of broadcast noted. That said, it is known that these interviews were conducted largely throughout the spring of 1959, and the interview on phenomenology took place around the centennial anniversary of Edmund Husserl's birth, recorded days later, on April 15, 1959. In general, as Melançon notes in the preface to *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, whenever the date of the recording is unknown the interviews are presented in an order that the editor believed would facilitate ease of reading and continuity of ideas. As a result, the exact date of the third interview that I have translated is not known.

The translation of these interviews was an involved project that took place over several months. I have never attempted a translation before, let alone a translation of originally spoken word. With the invaluable help of Professor Frédéric Rondeau, who helped ensure the accuracy of the translation, I was able to produce a text that attempts to stay true to the original French as much as possible, making alterations only when necessary to carry the sense of Merleau-Ponty's words into English. Professor Kirsten Jacobson also helped to ensure that the translation was clear to an outside reader who has

not read the original text. However, as with any translation, it can be difficult to reconcile the syntax of two languages, and French often allows for significantly longer sentences than English does. Furthermore, since the text is a transcription of an actual conversation, as opposed to the more polished work of published philosophy, sentences in this collection tend to be even longer. Moreover, since Merleau-Ponty is thinking on the spot and formulating his responses as he is talking, his sentences tend to have many asides and breaks in thought. For this same reason, I felt the need to translate more directly than I otherwise might, as the interview format gives us an insight into the way in which Merleau-Ponty thinks and allows us to *hear* his voice. Significant alterations to the original transcription would change this voice and would result in the loss of Merleau-Ponty's thought pattern. At the same time, alterations are necessary in the process of translation in order to produce a compelling and understandable text. For the most part, I kept the long sentences of Merleau-Ponty's speech, but I did change a fair amount of punctuation, replacing commas with em dashes to mark asides, and even removing commas entirely. But since commas serve to mark small pauses in speech as well as a grammatical function, I made the decision to keep commas where they do not confuse the meaning of what is said.

The greatest strength of the interview format is that Merleau-Ponty is forced to explain his philosophy in very approachable and mostly simple terms. Furthermore, the connections between different themes are easier to see when laid out in a conversation. This can readily be seen in the first interview that I translated as Merleau-Ponty traces the development of his philosophy. In this interview, he is largely responding to the paradigm of mind-body dualism that is widespread in philosophy and most other

disciplines. In order to find the link between the mind and the body, Merleau-Ponty begins with an investigation of behaviorism, which leads him to the phenomenological discussion of perception. Our relation to the body is a logical next step, given the body's role in perception. Merleau-Ponty next explores language, even calling it the phenomenal *body* of thought. He is finally brought to a discussion of art and other ensembles that contain non-logical senses. This interview took place just two years before the sudden death of Merleau-Ponty, and this final subject was not fully investigated before his untimely death. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty died with works very much underway—most notably, *The Visible and the Invisible*. This first interview I translated, as well as the conversation on phenomenology, will easily serve as an introduction to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, giving the reader a helpful overview of his thought that could prepare them to delve deeper into his more technical philosophical texts.

The strength of the interviews in presenting Merleau-Ponty's philosophy clearly and simply simultaneously prohibits a more in-depth discussion of the themes that are touched on. Merleau-Ponty was not at liberty to discuss many of his technical concepts in depth given the audience and the format of an interview, instead giving only "brief pieces of information" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 423). As such, I have attempted to expand in this thesis upon what is said in the interviews by delving into the more critical reflections found in his texts, especially *The Phenomenology of Perception*. I have chosen to work primarily through this text because it most directly and clearly discusses the primary themes mentioned in the interviews: perception, the body, language, pre-reflective consciousness and praxis. My writing is meant to make the connection between these subjects more explicit and to show the diverse ways in which they relate to each

other. I chose to end on the theme of praxis because this seems to be the perfect development and application of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty—namely, recognizing that well employed speech and language fundamentally change the way our world shows up to us and, thus, how we are called to respond and live.

INTERVIEW ONE: CRITIQUING MIND-BODY DUALISM

Georges Charbonnier - Maurice Merleau-Ponty, can I ask you a question that might be meaningless? What is the meaning of your research in pure philosophy?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty - The starting point of this research was at its heart rather traditional. I remember very well that, by the end of my studies, I had grown attached to the relationship between the mind and the body as an issue that particularly interested me. And, well, I continued in this direction for about fifteen years, and it's the result of this effort that appeared in the form of two books, one on perception, the other on behavior, that were both - from two different dates, by the way, because there is an interval of six years between them - that were both dealing with the issue of the relationship between the mind and the body. Essentially, you see, what always struck me throughout all of my studies was that our teachers were for the most part Cartesians; a man like Léon Brunschvicg was a Cartesian, so he accepted a categorical distinction between mind and body, which was the distinction of what is consciousness and what is object, existence as object and existence as consciousness being in contradiction with each other like Descartes taught, as everyone knows.[1] These philosophers didn't see a problem. Every time that we observe in our experience - as Descartes avidly said we observed, by the way - a link between mind and body, these philosophers always tend to show that the link, when we reflect, does not persist. There is a link between my mind and my body since, for example, I perceive according to what happens in the outside world, according

[1] Merleau-Ponty uses the word "maîtres" here which is more inclusive than "teachers," including philosophical influences as well as those who directly taught him.

to the action that external objects exert on my senses, and, in consequence, this demonstrates an effect of the body on the mind, and inversely, there is an effect of the mind on my body when I move, when I displace my body, but these issues, for thinkers formed by the school of Descartes and Kant, these phenomena are phenomena of a second order. As soon as the mind reflects on its real nature, it sees itself only as pure consciousness, thought in the Cartesian sense, and it is the mind itself that is again the spectator of the relationship between mind and body. It sees the relationship, thinks it, establishes it, this is a part of the universe of thought, but it isn't a link between thought and anything else besides itself. And it's this philosophical immanence of thought to itself that always shocked me, that always seemed insufficient to me. So, since the time of my studies, I intended to work on this problem of the relationship between the mind with what is not itself, how to make it understandable, how to make it thinkable.

So, I first did work on what the psychologists call behavior. This notion was especially widespread among American psychologists and Anglo-Saxons under the name *behavior* and it served first and foremost to designate a new object that these authors decided to give to psychology.[2] Psychology had to be devoted to the human, but the human as seen from the outside. I see someone else in the middle of acting; I can study the relationship that exists between the situation in which the observed person finds himself and the responses that he gives to this situation and the situation-response relation; there you have behavior. Among the authors who were the first to introduce this notion, the intention was at its core to totally free psychology from all types of interior life. It was a question of taking the human as he appears to me, not when I consider

[2] The word "behavior" appears in English here.

myself reflectively, but when I see another man as he is thinking, speaking and acting, and behavior understood as such was therefore considered an exterior reality, almost material. For the American Watson, for example, behavior was considered in many respects as a chain of causes and effects that happened according to the outside world, that acted from my body to my mind, by the intermediary of nerves to my motor organs and my mechanical responses to the situation.

And, so, a strange development of this notion of behavior was produced. Essentially, we realized very quickly that it was twofold. On the one hand, it was a quasi-materialist notion, since it assumes, as I was telling you a moment ago, the relationship of cause and effect between exterior events and the response that the living being gives to these events. But also, to the degree that we describe behaviors and that we classify them, we realize that these behaviors have different structures. And, so, even when we start, as Watson did, with the bias does not consider the interior, we see the interior reappear in the structure, the form, of behaviors.

So, in a slightly more technical work (on which I can obviously only give brief pieces of information) I intended to identify exactly what this structure of behavior was and how it leads us to define the relationship between mind and body, of material and sense, this is what I did in this first work.[3] And the second work, on perception, that I did, was essentially the same work, but this time taken more fully.[4] Whereas in the first, I was concerned with this notion of behavior and I even tried to follow its development, or certain developments, in the second, on the other hand, I did not submit to considering

[3] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice.*The Structure of Behavior.* Translated by Alden L. Fisher. Beacon Press, 1963.
[4]Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated Donald Landes. Routledge, 2014.

man from the outside, as one does in the psychological methodology of behavior, but I turned towards myself, but with the intention to seize in me what in certain regards is the least spiritual, the least pure thought, to understand perception.

Perception - which is, as everyone knows, our apprehension of objects existing around us, and the relations between these objects - perception seemed to me to be an important subject to study, because it is here that the junction between body and mind is accomplished. Clearly my perception depends on corporeal conditions, there must be objects in order to see them or, in any case, certain well defined phenomena in my nervous system are necessary to have a hallucination; in short, the link between the mind and the body is visible here, and it was still my problem of mind and body and their relationship that reappeared in the form of the topic of perception.

So here, I ran into the entire tradition, Cartesian as well, that analyzes our perception of the outside world by seeing in it an operation of the mind. You know, you remember the famous text in which Descartes analyzes a piece of wax and tries to show that when we reflect on it and when we try to remove what is firm and solid in the perception of a piece of wax, in the end, all of the sensible properties of the wax disappear, because none of them are totally essential to the object - the wax can change consistency, it can become liquid, it can change scent, it can change color, and it's still the same wax - and what's left to form the heart of the object is something that is understood by the intelligence or by the mind, by the inspection of the mind, says Descartes, to understand a certain portion of space, informed in this way or that and in different ways according to which the wax is solid or liquid, for example. But the characteristics that define the object are, in the end, characteristics that address our mind

and not our senses. Descartes's text is very well known, and you will certainly remember, he more or less finishes with these words: "I realize that I understand by an inspection of the mind what I believed to see with my eyes."[5] We don't see with our eyes, for Descartes, it isn't the eye that sees, it's the soul, he said. And, well, it's this Cartesian analysis, passed on in the history of philosophy by all kinds of other works, other analyses, that I took for a topic of discussion and that I decided to discuss.

I made use of a whole series of research that is known in Germany as the theory of form, or *Gestalt theory*, research whose common trait is the intention to describe what these authors call the form of the exterior world. And what they understood by form, it's not simply the contour, the exterior form. It's what we could more clearly call configuration. These authors, who started to write in Germany after 1918, and whose influence has since been considerable on the entirety of psychological and sociological literature, tried to give evidence in the name of *form*, or *Gestalt*, ensembles, organized ensembles. For example, a melody - a melody is an organized ensemble. It isn't a sum of elements since you can change every element, the form remaining constant; what happens when you transpose a melody - however, although this is an ensemble, the meaning of this ensemble is not something that speaks to only our intelligence, it's something quasi-sensible.[6]

[5] "I now know that even bodies are perceived not by the senses or by imagination but by the intellect alone, not through their being touched or seen but through their being understood" (Descartes, 30).

[6] Merleau-Ponty is explaining that Gestalt Theory deals with organized ensembles whose sense is not found through the investigation of the mind,as Descartes would arue. A melody clearly has a sense when taken as a whole, but we only can only investigate this sense through listening; the melody is to some degree sensible.

And, so, what interested me in *Gestalt theory*, what still interests me, is this description of an order of sense and signification that is truly on the level of lived experience and that is not on the order of mind, in the Cartesian sense. I thought that I found here something that ensured the junction, the link between the properly sensible and the intelligence or judgement. And my work made an effort to completely clarify, to completely describe this concrete aspect of the relations as we perceive them, as opposed to the relations as we design them.

This implies for that matter, and this is a good part of my work, an analysis of the role that our body plays in the perception of the outside world. I once again made use of a lot of other work here, work in psychology and psychopathology. It seemed to me that one could show that in large my body is not only, as everyone knows, the seat of a certain number of conditions that govern the appearance of my perception of red or green or blue, my body is not only cause in this sense, and even if I describe things as they happen inside of me, from my point of view, it is not at all necessary to say that my body is the cause of perceptions; but it is more so the intermediary between me and exterior objects and perception, it's to be in relationship with objects and aspects of objects and of relations between objects by the intermediary of a body. In certain regards, the body - I was running into the Cartesian thesis here: it isn't the eye that sees, it's the soul, and I was trying to show that if it's the eye that sees, but not the eye of the physiologist, not this eye we can hold under our microscope or under our scalpel, this completely material eye, but a certain function of sensing and perception that is not of the order of mind and that is not of the order of material body, of objective body. I was trying to show that there is a body that is not the objective body as biological science can ascertain by its exterior

measures, that there is a body which I called, after others, phenomenal body, the body as we experience it, as we live it, and that this body is not simply one of the mind's objects, one of the objects it takes an interest in and that it considers from afar, that in a way our mind is situated in it, in an intimate relation with it, and that this body is the mediator of our relationships with the outside world. This is the general outline of these first philosophical essays that I published during and just after the war, and that have since brought me to other philosophical research oriented in the same way, but addressing what is above the perceptive level this time, above the level of simple perception.

I mean that once we show, as I have tried to do, that to perceive - this is not to think, that it's something else, once we have shown that the thinking subject of Descartes is linked to a body, and that this link with the body is not an accident for him, an exterior circumstance, but that this is his mode of insertion in the world; it then remains to understand how it can be that such an embodied subject, linked to a body, is at the same time capable of operations that are beyond the means of the body, because we can also think, we can perceive and we can also think, and there is not for us only one perceived world, there is the scientific world, there is the world of philosophy, there is the world of knowledge, in a general way, and so I have since grown attached to the analysis of this secondary framework of reality, of this secondary order of reality.

In particular, this led me to the close study of language because I in no way see an exterior envelope of thought in language, or a kind of mnemonic tool for thought, as if thought wasn't really concerned with the function of speech. I see in speech not a simple instrument, but I see more in it, in some ways, speech can be considered the actualization of thought. There are no thoughts that come to be actual, effective, to really capture

something, without the help of speech, whether it is a matter of audible speech or one of interior speech. And so what I am trying to do now at the level of language is an analysis in the same vein as those I attempted of perception and the sensible world: to make language appear as a kind of body for thought, in the active sense of the word "body," and not simply as a, an exterior envelope as I was saying earlier, or the clothing that thought dons and through which it happens.[7] So, to grasp what makes up - when we go from the order of the perceived world to the order of thought, which is also the order of culture, in a way every relationship is reversed. We perceive according to what is imposed upon us by given conditions, and in contrast it seems that at the level of language and speech, we are dealing with an active man and not simply a passive man. And however, this activity is constantly supported by - first, language has its own life, that is not exactly the life of thought, and so it's the examination of these close relationships between language and thought that have kept me busy for many years.

This leads me to study, in addition to everything that linguists could have told us about language, modes of expression that are not yet language or that are not language at all, even, but that might have the potential to make certain aspects of language clear to us that we would not grasp otherwise. I am thinking, for example, of painting or music, of which we can say that they *have* a signification. I am in no way making an allusion to the subject here, the subject about which the musician writes or of which the painter paints. I'm not thinking about the subject at all, but I'm thinking about what organizes the interior of a painting or a piece of music, which is certainly not an illusion, since this is

[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflections on language from this time can be found in *The Visible and the Invisible* as well as in *Signs*.

what makes all of the elements of music, or all the elements of a painting have a relationship and contribute altogether to making a single work. So, what is this sense? From which order of description is it susceptible? What are its relations with the sense such as I think I have unveiled at the level of perceived objects? There is here a kind of family of significations.

In any case, we are dealing with significations that are not *logical* significations. And what is the possible pathway from this prelogical signification, or metalogical, to the properly logical signification? What are the varied uses of language? Beside its everyday use there is also its more than significant use, which is that of poetry and literature - here is the order of problems with which I am now engaged. And the book I am currently working on tackles these problems. Only, in order to do so, it must take another look at and expand upon the first descriptions that I gave in my book on perception, and I was led, for reasons that would be a little long to explain, to reconsider the notion of nature, to which I was led by my first work, and it's only after having done this preliminary clearing up that I came to the problem of *logos*, which is to say that of meaning such as it appears at the level of expressive activity of man, whether in artistic forms or in truly linguistic forms, to use Paulhan's term. (Brief pause)

That's what I wanted to tell you, simply, I don't know if you will be able to put that in the program. It's simply to even out a little, to not… since we are speaking about, we spoke for a rather long time about politics and, as I told you, I wouldn't want people to completely lose sight that this isn't my focus, in the end, that my focus, it's philosophy. So, I think it wouldn't be bad to...

C. - Yes, yes, yes. And what's more I might not directly use under… entirely in one program, and well I don't know, it's all to be seen…

M.P. - Yes, yes, yes.

C. - I have to listen again…

(The recording ends here)

INTERVIEW TWO: PHENOMENOLOGY

Georges Charbonnier - Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I also want to ask you this question: What is the relationship between the phenomenologist and lived experience?[8] Does the phenomenologist attempt to explain lived experience, to summarize it, or does he attempt to recreate it? If he intends to recreate it, what sense must be given to the word "recreation"? As I understand it, the phenomenologist does not deal with lived experience as a scientist, his angle is different; and I wonder if phenomenology is not going to be, in a certain way, like the approach of the artist towards his object?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty - This theme of lived experience appears very early in Husserl. I was saying earlier that, at the beginning of phenomenology, we find themes that do not seem to go together. And here is an example; you're giving me an excellent example. Since the beginning of phenomenology, there has been a desire to return to lived experience, and there is at the same time, as we were saying earlier, certain logical elements, and in one sense, they are at odds with each other. Is it a question, in phenomenology, of forming a chart of concepts or essences, which would be a logical approach, or of recreating lived experience. The two approaches seem to be completely different, almost opposites.

However, the fact is that from the beginning Husserl said that he wanted both. He wanted both. And that is what allowed me to say earlier that Husserl was never really a logician. He wanted to make a science of lived experience, and when we say "science,"

[8] I made the decision to translate "Vécu" as "lived experience", since the original French word is both the past participle of the verb "vivre", to live, and it is generally used as "experience." "Lived experience" is also a technical term within the discipline of phenomenology.

we mean a *rigorous* exploration of lived experience; it obviously does not imply a science with the methodological apparatus that positive sciences make use of, that physics uses.

C. - And the accuracy with which it aims.

M.P. - The type of accuracy cannot be the same. However, it is certain that Husserl had the desire to retain the term science. As you know, the corresponding German term that Husserl uses, *Wissenschaft*, does not exactly have the same connotations as the French word "science." In France, when we say "science," it means science in a narrow sense. It signifies, in general, references to the experimental methods of science, or again to the mathematical apparatus of physics. Whereas when one says *Wissenschaft* in German, I believe at any time period, the term had a larger meaning. A scientific attitude, in the everyday language of the German academia, meant a rigorous attitude. And in this very large sense, then, philosophy can be a science without being so in the narrow sense.

So, I will close this digression, because the term that Husserl used shouldn't be abused. Yes, he wrote that philosophy should be a strict science, or exact, or rigorous, but he never thought that it should be a science in the sense that physics is, that biology is, or even psychology. And, justly, this is because he was attached to lived experience straight away. And so, to the degree that he developed what must be understood by lived experience, we see his thought ripen. In one sense, he took lived experience to be everything. There are in Husserl, let's take an example, analyses which perhaps made him most famous among the general public—analyses, concrete descriptions, that are, for example, about the role of the body, of my body. Husserl describes, attempts to show, that when we are perceiving something exterior, this is a sort of activity of our body, our

body viewed as a system of powers. He doesn't analyze perception as we normally do, as an operation of the mind alone, as one does in the Cartesian tradition. He tries to show that there is an "I can," a power, with which the body is equipped, a power of investigation, a power of exploration with regard to exterior objects, and that this motivating and carnal relation of my body with the object is a completely essential dimension of the thing perceived. There are many beautiful descriptions here that have made a place for an entire series of developments outside of the thought of Husserl and that are not descriptions of experience in the most habitual sense of the word, in the most concrete sense of the word.

Only this is a particular order of phenomenology for Husserl. It isn't the *entirety* of phenomenology. And at the same time, then, he takes the consciousness of lived experience into consideration, which is to say a cumbersome consciousness, loaded with material, material in the largest sense of the word, I mean: the weight of our body, of our embodied experience. At the same time that he describes all of this, for him, it is an order of phenomenological description, but this isn't all of phenomenology. And after describing all of that, it is a question of knowing how it is all done, how it is all formed. So, at the moment when the philosopher asks this question, he makes himself a pure spectator; the philosophical "I,"—I mean the philosophical ego, the subject of philosophy—truly arrives at its highest universality, and so it tries to understand how this network of concrete phenomena that was previously described is established.

C. - But by understanding them internally.

M.P. - By understanding them internally. The principle to which Husserl always held himself was that from the moment what we live is experienced by us and by our

consciousness, we have to be able, by examining this consciousness, to find the secret of everything that presents itself. How this is done, how this is constructed or composed.

C. - In summary, it's almost about contrasting a second, conscious experience from the first order lived experience.

M.P. - Yes, what you are saying expresses exactly how things are presented when one reads Husserl. There are several degrees of lived experience. And well, what is captivating for me in the late works of Husserl, in the last ten years of his research, is that he increasingly noticed that between the two meanings of the word "experience" that we were just discussing; between experience in the primary sense, from an original perspective, and experience in the radical sense of philosophical consciousness, there is almost an incompatibility. And if we take experience in the second and radical sense that we are talking about, then the philosopher now has only one world, which is the world of *his* consciousness. And this is, if he performs this disconnection from others in the first place, because a universal consciousness such as this can't really understand that there is another besides itself. Thus, this egology, as he said elsewhere, this radical reflection in which I am radically and absolutely *alone*, essentially doesn't allow for the presence of other consciousnesses opposite ourselves. Yet others *are* phenomena, do appear to us; it is therefore necessary to understand how they are. Consequently, in the last ten years of his research, Husserl—I don't think I am altering his doctrine by saying what I am going to say—has come to ask the question of knowing: is this attitude of *reduction*, of radical and total reflection, really possible? Or, if it is possible, does it not make certain themes that form a part of lived experience disappear, namely, others?

The question is expressly posed in the very last writings, such as, for example, the work titled *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, which appeared fully in German for the first time just last year. This question is asked there. As such, you see, we have to consider the entire career of Husserl not at all as a straight development, but as an intensification of this theme of lived experience. You know that, for Plato, what's characteristic of the philosopher is not to accept the alternatives, but to always want both. And, well, we could say that in this way Husserl was genuinely a philosopher. Because he wanted lived experience and he wanted rigor. And he always held both ends of the chain, and all of his philosophy, as time goes by, closely examines to an increasing degree how the two aspects can go together, how they are related, as they effectively are in our lives, which is at the same time a reflective life.

C. - But for me, a non-philosopher, the connection between lived experience and rigor is called "art."

M.P. - I think that if one reflects upon the last meditations of Husserl, what you are saying there would not have displeased him. Because it is certain that speech…I am saying speech and not language because speech…it's language in a living state, functioning and operant, and, well, speech plays a role in the last writings of Husserl—a fundamental role.

(break)

For example, he described, in his last unpublished fragments, which were written for himself rather than for the public, what he called sedimentation. He meant by this that a thought—that is always something transitive on its own, something that is a matter for an instant, thought in a pure sense, completely apart from its instrument of expression, a

flash, ultimately—this thought is sedimented. That is to say, with the help of language and through the medium of language, thought acquires a kind of stable existence.

C. - That's still the poetic ambition.

M.P. - It is the poetic ambition. And this function of language is thus… language conveys what Husserl called idealisations. Idealisations are only possible by virtue of language and by the power that language has to sediment thoughts.

This means that language constitutes a kind of incomprehensible wonder in the sense that it results in marks written on paper, and these written marks on paper are capable, by themselves, to cause in another mind, sometimes centuries apart, the revival—the reactivation, Husserl said—of thoughts that originally were sedimented in this language. So, do you see at what point language becomes something fundamental? It conveys the entire world of thought. It subsumes everyone, it is the frame of ideas, it is the body or the frame of the mind.

C. - I would maintain that it is truly a poetic ambition, but, however, philosophical expression by nature is not poetic. So, philosophical expression—philosophy—is it only the description of poetic ambition, of the movement towards poetry? When I say "only," it's to restrict the question and not to diminish the role of philosophy.

M.P. - Yes. The difference will always be that the poet employs speech—if you like, he *is* speech—and the philosopher wants to understand speech, understand this mysterious exercise.

Therefore here, as always, the philosopher takes a step back from the phenomenon to understand it and I'm not telling you that he succeeds in understanding it analytically. To understand, for philosophy, may not be to analyze. I believe that Husserl,

precisely—this is what is beautiful in the deepening of his thought—left an analytic; he attempted to create an analytic that was true to lived experience, but I wonder if, in the end, what he found really was an analytic. The evidence that he gives in his very last works would suggest that it wasn't, and that, for example, with regard to language, it is impossible to explain or understand the exercise of speech. This fundamental exercise of speech that we were talking about earlier, it's impossible to explain or understand as a combination of thoughts, of thoughts in a Cartesian sense, of distinct thoughts. There is a practice of speech that, in a manner of speaking, does more than is possible, that exceeds what is possible. And I believe that, in the last writings of Husserl, there is this very radical sentiment of effective realization, whether in the perceived world or the world of culture and the world of art, this realization of the impossible, which is the marvel of marvels. Only, this is not developed, it's only indicated in certain sentences of his last writings.

C. - But the impossible is precisely the territory of art in the most clear-cut way. I can only convey what I can't say.

M.P. - I don't think Husserl would ever have accepted philosophy being reduced to literature.

C. - Ah, that's not what I was trying to say. Because the word "literature" has a pejorative meaning.

M.P. - No, in the noble and high sense of the word "literature"—even in this sense, I don't think Husserl would ever have accepted that thought can't go beyond literary production and comprehension.

C. - I would never want to say that philosophy is being reduced to literature, because there is a point that is very simple to make: in the presence of a text, we know right away if it's literature or philosophy. There is a coloration that does not deceive.

M.P. - Yes. This isn't totally true, at the same time, with regard to phenomenological texts, because one thing that struck the public, I believe, in this philosophy is that it often appears—I wouldn't say literary, because as you are saying, the word has a pejorative meaning—but phenomenological expression often takes up phenomena and lived experience so directly that we feel like we get the same type of illumination that we do in literature.

I think that, said in another way, at the very end Husserl must have thought that philosophy, as far as it can't happen without speech, is also necessarily restricted to certain limitations of fact. These aren't limits that are placed once and for all, we can always move them back, shift them, but there are still some limits of fact that we talk about. Simply, I would say that the professional writer, that is, I mean he who decides to be a writer and not a philosopher, and, well, he dwells in language, language is his home, he sets himself up there, or again it's his instrument, it's an extension of his body and himself, whereas with the philosopher, faced with this obscure exercise of speech, there is always the will to understand speech itself, or in any case to describe with rigor what, in the interior of language, goes beyond the analytical intellect.

C. - The gap that exists, the delay that exits between lived experience, on the one hand, and conscious experience, on the other, does this allow me to consider time?

M.P. - Yes, you are touching an utterly essential point. One of the originalities of Husserl—a point on which we can reconcile with Bergson, which would be very time-

consuming to do correctly because there are, in reality, very profound differences, but in the end the convergence on this point must still be mentioned—one of the originalities of Husserl was to admit that the philosophical consciousness, as radical as it may be, as pure as it tries to be, stays temporal; this is not, the philosopher is not someone who can, through the medium of reflection, dominate, hover over time.

In the lectures on the interior consciousness of time (which was published by Heidegger, but given by Husserl, of which Husserl is the author), there is precisely this very important idea that consciousness, as deeply as we enter into it, and even if we go to its center, is *flux*, it is absolute flux. Consequently, you see, I believe that this comes to support what I was saying earlier, that Husserl was not a logician, because a logician always tries to ensure us of an intellectual domination, an intellectual possession of time. Whereas Husserl recognized that consciousness is time. Not in the sense that the word has in everyday life, where time isn't taken up from its source, but it is absolute flux.

C. - I wanted to ask you another question, but it seems to me that everything you said completely answers it: I wanted to ask you if phenomenology is a philosophy or a method. It seems to me that following your remarks it's both. But is it not appropriate in this case to give a rather particular meaning to the word "method"? Does the word "method" not change its meaning?

M.P. - In truth, you know, method and doctrine, it's rare that philosophers will separate them completely and if one wants - this may not be the most Cartesian way to proceed - one can concede that for Descartes, method is distinct from doctrine; he presents it as a relatively independent ensemble. But even with Descartes, it really is a question of knowing if the two things are independent, and among most philosophers, in any case,

they are not. Method is a glimpse of doctrine, and doctrine is the explanation of method. Just as, if you like, Bergson did not start by developing the method of intuition, but he started by grappling with an intuition, the intuition of duration; he confronted a certain type of being, he described duration, and he saw that the way in which we have access to duration could be, in a manner of speaking, generalized and could serve as a philosophical instrument, as a philosophical method; from there comes the concept of intuition, that he always said was very posterior, for him, to encountering duration. And, well, I believe that for all philosophers, it is a little like this. Their method is already the beginning of contact with the thing, the beginning of exploration of the world.

Regarding phenomenology, then, if we are speaking, in a somewhat vague way of the word, about the phenomenological method as description, in the sense that I was talking about it at first, in the sense that one can say that there is a phenomenological psychiatry, then, yes, we can distinguish method and doctrine, because it is here a question of research, which is not, properly speaking, philosophy. The doctor who treats a sick person in this frame of mind is in no way a phenomenologist in the sense of someone who strives to be, like the phenomenological philosopher does, or any philosopher. So, in this somewhat vague sense of the word "method," it is certain that method and doctrine stay distinct in phenomenology.

But in reality, for Husserl, for example, this is what was valuable in his concrete studies -- which departed from the contemporary thought that he represented. What was meaningful in the end was his devotion to his central philosophical intuition, that is to say, to his willingness to investigate the significance of lived experience (vécu), at the level of lived experience (vécu) itself, through a kind of experience (expérience). The

word “expérience,” philosophy founded on experience, philosophy as an expression of an experience, this is again one of those Husserlian words with which we can reconcile certain Bergsonian words.[9]

C. - Could we not also say that phenomenology is a description, maybe the first, of the philosophical process itself? I’m surprised that philosophers haven’t been phenomenologists, that they didn’t say so at least. But it seems to me that it is in the nature of philosophy itself to go towards the object.

M.P. - That is to say that there could be an age of philosophy in which philosophy doesn’t examine itself; in truth, when we look at things closely, the philosopher is always the one who has wondered what philosophy is, and who wasn’t sure. And whoever spent his life trying to understand what philosophy is. So every great philosopher…

C. - Which could even be the object of philosophy.

M.P. - Which is the object of philosophy. If there is a discipline that puts itself in question and asks what it is, it’s philosophy. In this sense, in Plato as well as Husserl, there is a putting in question of philosophy by itself, and it is this self-examination that is philosophy.

Only there may also have been times in which the connections between philosophy and lived experience, with historicity, with secular life, were less visible. It’s

[9] This passage is quite difficult to translate as Merleau-Ponty uses the word “expérience” for the first time in this interview in place of “vécu.” Both words can mean “experience” in general, although “vécu” seems to be used in a more technical sense as it relates to phenomenology, so I have translated it as “lived experience.” The word “expérience” is also the word for “experiment” in French, although Merleau-Ponty seems to be using this term in the general sense of “experience,” as opposed to “lived experience” which would be only a particular order of experience. There may be a play on the double meaning that gets lost translating it to either “experience” or “experiment.” Here is the original French of the passage: “Ce qu’il y avait de valable tenait finalement à son intuition philosophique centrale, c’est-à-dire à cette volonté de chercher le sens du vécu, au niveau même du vécu, par une espèce d'expérience. Le mot d’« expérience », de philosophie fondée sur une expérience, philosophie comme expression d’une expérience…”

quite certain that there may have been a period of philosophical hubris in the history of thought. And Husserl, on the contrary, belonged to an age where not only did philosophy no longer have hubris, but—or maybe it had undergone, at the end of the nineteenth century, an entire series of affronts—in the end, it was reduced to nothing, it became the specialty of generalizations, it was almost a kind of rhetoric, it was burdened in any case with creating a superficial cohesion from the results of strictly independent disciplines like the sciences, it was emptied of its substance. And so the work of Husserl, like others, since 1900, had to demonstrate that philosophy didn't really lose its meaning and its reality, but that it needed to reconstitute itself on the basis of experience, this as well; an experience that is not the maimed experience of the sciences, the partial experience of the sciences, but as a type of comprehensive unwinding of experience. And this is simultaneously true to the classic definition of philosophy, to the classic attitude…

(The recording stops here)

INTERVIEW THREE: PHILOSOPHICAL PRAXIS

This program, hosted by André Parinaud, consists of three separate interviews where a question is posed first to Gabriel Marcel; then Merleau-Ponty; then Gaston Bachelard. Each one seems to be alone during the recording, there is no interaction between them.

André Parinaud - My intention today is not to present an overview of the tendencies of contemporary philosophy, but more precisely, and more simply, to bring to the attention of three important contemporary philosophers some of the problems that interest thinkers in the diverse disciplines of thought and art. I now ask for the particular opinion of Mr. Merleau-Ponty, professor at the College of France, chair of philosophy. Mr. Merleau-Ponty, is the notion of engagement, in your opinion, one of the original issues of current philosophy, or is it responding to a trend and transient form of intellectual and social evolution?

M.P. - Well your question is embarrassing, because it is, I believe, full of misunderstandings, that are not your fault, of course, but that stem from the way in which the notion of engagement was introduced, I would say, in everyday use, and also in the manner in which one usually understands it. It is quite certain that if we take the word in the sense that those who first made use of it–namely, Mounier, in the past; in his magazine *Esprit*, since its beginning, and later Sartre; it was never a question in their minds of understanding engagement as an option between intellectual and political parties. If I wanted to give an anecdote, I could tell one about the founding of Sartre's

journal *Les Temps Modernes*. I remember that in 1945, when this journal was founded, at the same time that Sartre was defining what he called engaged literature, he was asking all of us—all who attended the founding of this publication—to not belong to any political party. That is to say, the idea of engagement was far from being confused for him with the compliance with a dominant or established opinion.

I believe there is a second misunderstanding about this notion of engagement that also needs to be removed. We often imagine that when we ask philosophy to be engaged, we at the same time recommend that it abandons its theoretical method in order to replace philosophy in the traditional sense with conceptual discussions, through a more literary mode of thought that is more immediately accessible. But, I think it is worth mentioning that Sartre, for example, who we are talking about, did not in any way renounce his technical system since, as you know, *Being and Nothingness* is a very abstract and difficult work.

So I believe that the only real sense in which those who first brought up the notion of engagement is the following: they understand engaged philosophy very simply as a philosophy that does not define or encourage a value[10] without putting it to the test of concrete situations in which it is destined to be manifest. So, taking the word in this sense, I would be able to respond to your question.

I do not believe that engagement in this sense is a transient mode, and I also do not believe for that matter that it is a modern invention. In some sense, we could say that engagement has always been practiced in great philosophy. It has been practiced in the

[10] "Valeur" has a larger meaning than "value," also encompassing "merit," "authority," "basis" and "worth."

form of a philosophical action. The Presocratics, who were at least making the philosopher a priest and a head of state in some occasions; Socrates; the stoics; Montaigne, in some sense; Leibniz, even, since he was involved in negotiations for a terrestrial religious organization; Spinoza, since he did public acts, in any case, he created graffiti that was meant to stigmatize statesmen who displeased him; the philosophers of the eighteenth century; Marx, of course; Alain, more recently; all of these philosophers have always admitted that one could not be a philosopher without demonstrating certain actions. And when philosophers do not go that far, they are content to write books, which is already a lot, and these books are often dedicated to action. All of the great philosophies contain a politics. There is a politics of Plato, there is one, even several, of Hegel, and it's not necessary to give other examples.

What's characteristic of the philosopher is, therefore, not to be uninterested in action and politics, but, as Alain said, not to profit from them. The philosopher is someone who takes an interest in these things with a particular, more intense manner than others perhaps, but who does not profit from them. So, there has always been engagement in good philosophy. You might ask me why, in these conditions, was it possible and necessary to reintroduce this notion of engagement twenty years ago, or five years ago, as if it were a novelty. Well, because, in the meantime, between the great philosophy of which I was speaking and us, a tradition was established, that is not a philosophic tradition—that is more of an academic tradition of recent origin that wanted the philosopher to express himself in theses, a tradition that wanted the philosopher to express himself in uniquely abstract works: Plato wrote dialogues, and today we publish theses. And from this resulted in a particular conception of academic propriety that wants

certain questions to never be evoked in the form that they are posed to most people. So, here is a tradition, I would say, that is not really philosophical. In some sense, it is somewhat inhuman, because it signifies that philosophy tends to become a specialty, and I believe that the existence of this tradition justifies at the same time the use of a word like engagement in order to remind the philosopher of his duty, without which one could say that this notion of engagement is completely novel.

P. - But what explanation can you offer for the attitude of many contemporary thinkers who make use of the disciplines of the novel, theater, and maybe cinema, in order to develop and make their philosophical concepts known?

M.P. - You know, there is already much to say there. Firstly, there is, note this, that even the philosophers among our contemporaries who express themselves through literature never do so through literature alone. Gabriel Marcel writes plays, but he also writes philosophical works, and the same goes for Sartre. In addition, it has to be asked whether philosophy is really moving towards literature, or if there isn't also a movement from literature towards philosophy. I am citing names in no particular order: since Mallarmé, since Proust, since Gide, since surrealism, literature has itself become philosophical, or philosophy. It is, therefore, more of a question of contact made between the two fields than one of the subordination of one to the other.

And when I say contact made, I could say again what I said earlier: contact resumed. The decorous separation between literature and philosophy did not exist at the time of German Romanticism as, once again, we introduce it today. Hegel, for example, read *Rameau's Nephew* by Diderot, and even earlier Descartes did not think himself devalued in writing the script for a ballet. Whereas today, if one of us, professors of

philosophy, wrote the script for a ballet, well, we would say that he is waning. And, well, I wouldn't recommend writing ballets to any philosopher, but I think there is something meaningful in this type of prudishness arising in our philosophy and our literature for so many years now. And if we understand it as such, the reminder of the union seems to me to be a happy one, even if it is accompanied by misunderstandings that I tried to clear up earlier.

MIND-BODY DUALISM AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF MERLEAU-PONTY

Absolutely central to much of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical work is the overturning of philosophical prejudices he deems to have obscured our ability to see and understand human experience and expression. The first interview I have translated opens with Merleau-Ponty explaining the origin of his philosophy is found in the pervasiveness of mind-body dualism:

> Essentially, you see, what always struck me throughout all of my studies was that our teachers were for the most part Cartesians… so [they] accepted a categorical distinction between mind and body, which was the distinction of what is consciousness and what is object, existence as object and existence as consciousness being in contradiction with each other (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 421).[11]

Mind-body dualism is found throughout philosophy and the sciences alike, and its extensive grasp leads most people to accept its tenants uncritically. The first interview above starts with mind-body dualism as the first term and explains how perception, the phenomenal body and language can be seen as areas of experience in which the "junction" between mind and body is shown to be indivisible. He speaks to related aspects of overcoming the dualist prejudice in the other two interviews as well. Since the interview format demands that Merleau-Ponty sacrifice a more in-depth explanation of how each of the subjects he presents relates to the paradigm of mind-body dualism and how they can be interpreted by the phenomenological method, I will try to expand upon

[11] This citation is my translation from the interviews above. Any quote from *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier* that appears in this thesis will also be my translation, noting the page number in the corresponding French text.

what is said throughout these interviews on the subjects of perception, the body, language and praxis.

Perception revealed itself to be an obvious starting place for Merleau-Ponty, since "in certain regards [it] is the least spiritual, the least pure thought," and this places his analysis in opposition to Descartes (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 423). In perception, we immediately run into a "connection" between the mind and body: perception requires objects that are perceived as well as some kind of subjective experience in the person who perceives. Furthermore, perception seems rather simple and well understood by the sciences and philosophy alike. This allows Merleau-Ponty to point out and comprehend how, just as he found in his studies, most people simply take the paradigm of mind and body for granted without any questioning of this foundation.

The traditional attitudes surrounding perception tend to come from the empiricist or rationalist traditions, or some mixture of these traditions that borrows convenient points from them. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty focuses on explaining the problems found within these traditional approaches to perception. Merleau-Ponty gives brief indications of this work in the interviews, indicating that the mind-body dualist misses out on the complicated incorporation of our body in perception:

> It seemed to me that one could show that in large my body is not only, as everyone knows, the seat of a certain number of conditions that govern the appearance of my perception of red or green or blue, my body is not only cause in this sense, and even if I describe things as they happen inside of me, from my point of view, it is not at all necessary to say that my body is the cause of perceptions; but it is more so the intermediary between me and exterior objects and perception, it's to be in relationship with objects and aspects of objects and of relations between objects by the intermediary of a body (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 426).

In some sense, the body is clearly the cause of perception, but there needs to be more nuance than the empiricist and rationalist allow. The body is not the cause in the sense that it blindly receives sense data that is translated to a physical brain and causes an image corresponding to this sense data as the empiricist claims. Nor is the body the cause of perception in the sense that it is guided by the thetic action of the mind as the rationalist claims. In both of these approaches, the body is stripped of any internal meaning, and the more immediate connection we have with the body is clouded and removed. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty approaches perception with the phenomenological method, which he addresses more fully in the second interview.

As Merleau-Ponty points out in the beginning of the second interview, there is a certain ambiguity in phenomenology itself that mimics the ambiguity of our experience of perception, the body, language and so forth. Phenomenology, as seen in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, is attached to both lived experience and scientific rigor in a seemingly paradoxical way. Merleau-Ponty clarifies that he is discussing science in the more general sense that is found in the corresponding German word (*Wissenschaft)*, allowing phenomenology to be a science without being restricted in the way of the empiricist and the rationalist.

Following this theme of lived experience, Merleau-Ponty also describes the importance of the body in perception:

> Husserl… attempts to show that when we are perceiving something exterior, this is a sort of activity of our body, our body viewed as a system of powers. He doesn't analyze perception as we normally do, as an operation of the mind alone, as one does in the Cartesian tradition. He tries to show that there is an "I can," a power, with which the body is equipped, a power of investigation, a power of exploration with regard to exterior objects, and that this motivating and carnal

> relation of my body with the object is a completely essential dimension of the thing perceived (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 132-133).

When examining perception on the basis of our lived experience, it is clear that perception is accomplished in the body. Our body exists for us as our power to investigate the world, and if the body was not an active participant in perception, we would never be compelled to explore the world surrounding us. This ultimately means that while perception does involve the subjective action of our particular consciousness, it can only occur through the medium of our body that is actively establishing our connection with the world. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach points out that perception is not unidirectional. Whereas for the empiricist the outside objects fully determine our perception and for the rationalist our consciousness governs perception, by contrast Merleau-Ponty shows how the relationship between object and subject is more like the give and take of a dance wherein these two terms can never truly be separated. When we hear a loud bang upstairs, this phenomenon solicits our consciousness, and our consciousness will then act upon the phenomenon accordingly.

The second interview also helps to clarify where the inconsistencies between phenomenology and science are found. Phenomenology seeks to *describe* our most immediate experience of the world as the foundation upon which all other reflective experience is found; phenomenology seeks to "investigate the significance of lived experience (vécu), at the level of lived experience (vécu) itself" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 140). And as Merleau-Ponty explains in this interview, "between experience in the primary sense, from an original perspective, and experience in the radical sense of philosophical [and scientific] consciousness, there is almost an

incompatibility" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 134). The mind-body dualist attempts to reconstitute experience from the perspective of a reflective consciousness, and for this reason they miss the phenomenon of perception. And since "[t]here are several degrees of lived experience," as Merleau-Ponty claims in the second interview, this discussion naturally leads us further down the path towards reflective experience in the form of language (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 134).

Merleau-Ponty makes the connection between language in the body very clear in the second interview, describing language as "the body… of the mind" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 136). And just as the empiricist and rationalist render the physical body passive in the act of perception, both fail to recognize the sense that is found within language itself. Both of these traditions describe words as if they were some empty envelope for thought. In contrast, just as with the junction between mind and body, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the connection between thought and language is more complicated and ambiguous than the foundation of mind-body dualism can allow for. Moreover, language is so fundamental to our thought that "[i]t conveys the entire world of thought… [and] subsumes everyone" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 136). Making another connection to the body, Merleau-Ponty describes speech as a kind of gesture, since it contains a sense within itself and aims at expression.

This last point brings us to the third interview as an application of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. The discipline of philosophy is often criticized for being unengaged in the world, as if it dealt with some kind of pure theory. But given Merleau-Ponty's discussion of language this can easily be seen to be off base. In claiming that philosophy is found purely in the realm of theory, the critic is supposing that such a world exists in

the first place. This seems to arise naturally out of the mind-body dualist position, which assumes a distinction between thought and the "real" world. But since language, like any other gesture, always aims at expression in the world, and since this distinction between subjective thought and objective world is problematic, even philosophers who are concerned only with writing books are necessarily engaged with the world. In fact, any work that does not put its values "to the test of concrete situations in which it is destined to be manifest" cannot truly be considered philosophy (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 73).

The mind-body dualist looks for engagement only in the concrete actions of political institutions. But as the feminist mantra "the personal is political" suggests, politics is found in our personal lives as much as it is in our explicitly political lives. In a similar way, all philosophies contain a politics without needing to do so explicitly. For this reason Merleau-Ponty argues that the philosopher who does not endorse a political movement is still engaged in the world, as "[a]ll… philosophies contain a politics" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 74). It is also worth mentioning that many of the biggest figures in philosophies were explicitly political: Plato wrote Socrates' criticisms of political leaders, Marx was deeply concerned with the economic system of capitalism and its ramifications, Jean-Paul Sartre was very active in the French communist party, and so forth. Merleau-Ponty explains the engagement of Husserl very well in the second interview, as well as the way in which the phenomenological approach is necessarily engaged in our lived experience.

Mind-Body Dualism and Perception

Despite giving these interviews some sixty years ago, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's observation that most people accept the conceptual paradigm of mind-body dualism without question continues to seem true to me today. As a student in philosophy, I often encountered mind-body dualism in the classroom, from philosophers, professors and students alike. This is the result of a deep intellectual tradition within the history of philosophy. In the first interview, Merleau-Ponty illustrates this tendency by revisiting Descartes's famous analysis of thought being essential to our ability to grasp a piece of wax (which we will consider further below). Descartes was part of a tradition of thought that argued the mind and its activity was the only solid epistemological foundation. This tradition is commonly referred to as rationalism. Merleau-Ponty also refers to some approaches to psychology as typifying the rationalist approach to mind-body dualism in the sciences of the time. However, largely as a result of developments in the natural sciences, we now mostly encounter mind-body dualism from the opposite tradition—namely, empiricism, which broadly argues that sense perception of material (typically characterized as matter in motion governed by laws) is the foundation of epistemology rather than activity of the mind. Merleau-Ponty uses physiology as a representative of empiricism in the sciences of his time. One of Merleau-Ponty's contributions to philosophy is the articulation of the commonality of mind-body dualism in both rationalism and empiricism, and the consequences of this assumption for our understanding of many phenomena, especially perception.

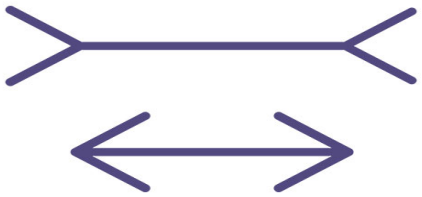
Following Merleau-Ponty, let us begin to see how mind-body dualism affects our understanding of perception.[12] According to the physiologist (taken as a representative of the empiricist tradition), there is a clear dichotomy between the subject and the outside objective world. The physiologist assumes that the outside world consists of various definite properties, lengths, sizes, colors, and quantities. These are all best understood through measurement, because the process of translating them to the subject through sensory organs can alter them, whereas measurements do not change depending on the person. Perception is then thought of as exactly this process of translating stimuli from the outside world through pre-established pathways in the body that present the otherwise independent subject with an image, taste, or other form of perception.[13] Theoretically, since perception is caused purely by outside stimuli, the images transmitted to our brains should correspond neatly to the objects that are being perceived. Physiology relies on a "constancy hypothesis" wherein "there is… a point by point correspondence and a constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 8). Yet this is often not the case: the various colored pixels of a television screen create the image of a uniform color that does not match that of the individual pixels; paintings portray three dimensional landscapes on two dimensional canvases; dark shapes in our closet at night take on the form of a person, etc.

[12] Both *The Structure of Behavior* and the *Phenomenology of Perception* respond to this paradigm of mind-body dualism. Since the latter does not "submit to considering man from the outside, as one does in the psychological methodology of behavior," and since Merleau-Ponty himself admits that it is more complete on this subject in the third interview, I will here focus on the *Phenomenology of Perception* as it connects to his interviews (Entretiens Avec Georges Charbonnier, 423).

[13] The empiricist position, as seen in behaviorism, only considers the subject from the outside, losing any internal motivations that might seem immediate to the act of perception. Instead, only the outside stimulus is given "the dignity of a cause" while "the organism is passive" (*The Structure of Behavior,* 9). As a result, any action on the part of the subject must be defined solely in terms of how the outside stimulus interacts with the pre-established pathways in the body, leaving physiology as the sole explanatory force.

Since empiricists favor the exterior world over what we actually perceive, they place the blame on our bodily sensations to explain discrepancies between perception and the objects perceived. A physiologist will likely say that the depth in a painting and the uniform color on the TV screen are "illusions" given to the subject because of the limitations and imperfections of the perceptive organs. Merleau-Ponty sums up the empiricist approach to perception while discussing the Müller-Lyer illusion (see Figure 1).

Figure 1, drawing of the Müller-Lyer Illusion.
https://www.illusionsindex.org/ir/mueller-lyer



To describe it in mathematical terms, the Müller-Lyer illusion consists of two parallel line segments of measurably equal length. The endpoints of the closed line segments coincide with the vertices of four closed acute angles of equal length. On one of the parallel line segments, the two acute angles face away from the center of the line segment, and on the other line segment, the two angles face toward the center of the segment. The line segment with the outward facing angles (the top form in Figure 1) can appear longer than the line segment with the inward facing angles (the bottom form in Figure 1) despite the segments being measurably of the same length. In the objective world of the empiricist, there is an error in our perception of the line segments when we

see them to be of unequal length. This "error" can somehow be corrected by paying closer attention. Yet both the perception of the different line segment lengths and the "corrected" perception where we see the line segments to be equal in length are both equally possible impressions that a viewer can take from the figure. Either impression can happen. In saying that the perception of equal length segments is a more accurate act of perception, the empiricist is begging the question. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

> The question is whether the attentive perception… rather than revealing 'normal sensation,' does not substitute an exceptional arrangement for the original phenomenon. The law of constancy cannot, against the evidence of consciousness, make use of a single critical experiment in which it itself is not already implied, and it is already presupposed wherever it is believed to be established" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 8).

When empiricists argue that attentively perceiving the Müller-Lyer Illusion leads to seeing the normal or correct sensation, they could rather be merely substituting one sensation for another. The reasoning for preferring the sensation of equal length is merely the belief that perception should have constancy with the objective qualities of the world. The empiricist cannot accept the ambiguous character of the Müller-Lyer illusion because it does not correspond to the object that is being perceived, therefore failing to match up with the constancy hypothesis. But our perception must be consistent with the constancy hypothesis only because of the way the empiricist frames perception in the first place, as resulting purely from the outside stimuli of the objective world. We are still left without an explanation as to why perception is based on the object in itself, as something distinct from our consciousness. Furthermore, it seems strange that we should deny our lived

experience of the inherent ambiguity of perception and find some ulterior apparatus to explain away this ambiguity in the form of inattention.[14]

The physiological approach may be grasping a partial truth in its description of perception. Perception does depend on having the sensory systems which take in information from a person's surroundings. But as Merleau-Ponty says in the interviews, the physiological description of perception can only be partial, because it comes out of "the maimed experience of the sciences"—i.e., the physiologist's methods mischaracterize experience by only examining it in the terms of natural science (as the interplay of objective facts, pathways and forces), therefore failing to give place to how experience happens as it presents itself in its own terms or from the "interior" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 142). Even the examples that seem to most readily support the physiological analysis, such as physical damage that leads to the loss of perception, can be seen to be incomplete. Irreparable damage to sense organs will necessarily result in the diminishing and ultimate loss of sensation: cataracts if left untreated may lead to total blindness. But it is mistaken to describe this transition purely as the diminishing of perception. Instead, the cataract patient's perception is reduced to a more simplistic or primitive structure in several observable phases.[15] Merleau-Ponty concludes: "[c]onversely, normal functioning must be understood as a process of integration in which the text of the external world is not copied, but constituted" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 9). In perception, it is not the case that the objective world is merely

[14] The empiricist's account of perception skips over the first order description and finds itself dealing only with the second order description of a reflective consciousness in an object world. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "classical analyses have missed the phenomenon of perception" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 3).
[15] Merleau-Ponty quotes Viktor Freiherr von Weizsäcker, a German physician who made significant contributions to Gestalt Theory to help make his point (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 9).

imperfectly copied; there is something more that is occurring. Given the inadequacy of the physiological explanation of perception, it might seem that an investigation on the basis of the action of consciousness is warranted, so let us follow Merleau-Ponty and examine the opposite tradition—the rationalist tradition.

The rationalist approach argues that focusing the activity of the mind is the best model for discussing perception and reality more broadly. A paradigmatic example can be seen in Descartes's description of a piece of wax, as Merleau-Ponty mentions in his interview with Georges Charbonnier (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 424-425). What most interests Merleau-Ponty about Descartes's thought experiment is its description of perception and how the subject is related to exterior objects. The paradigmatic wax example is found in *Mediations on First Philosophy.* In the *Meditations*, Descartes is working on many goals, but the first philosophical project is to discover what is indubitable in his own understanding so that he secures a bedrock of solid knowledge from which to work in order to accurately understand reality. To expedite this goal Descartes treats as false anything dubious—i.e., anything of which he is uncertain of the truth or has even a single reason to doubt. Given his experience with misperceptions and dreams and given the possibility that an all-powerful and deceptive demon is the origin of the sensations he experiences, Descartes begins by distrusting all evidence from the senses and denies the certain reality of all physical bodies including his own. Through this process, the only thing Descartes arrives at that is impossible to doubt is that he is doubting, thinking, wondering—i.e., that these activities are occurring and that they are occurring to someone. Even if an evil demon were deceiving him, he would be that which is so deceived. It is indubitably true that he thinks, that he is (Descartes,

24). Building on this foundation, he wonders what else he is. He realizes that he has thoughts of bodies, sensations, and it is here in the *Meditations* that the example of a piece of wax is used in the argument. I will present a brief view of Descartes's discussion as it figures prominently in the third interview I translated.

In the course of the Second Meditation, Descartes interrogates a piece of wax as a piece of extended reality that can be sensed. Descartes thinks that the piece of wax shares the general qualities of all bodies, but to avoid being overly general, he asks the reader to consider the particular and specific example of a piece of wax recently taken from a beehive.

> Take this wax. It has just been extracted from the honeycomb. It has not yet completely lost the taste of honey and it still retains some of the scent of the flowers from which it was collected. Its colour, shape and size are obvious. It is hard, cold, easy to touch and, if tapped with a finger, it emits a sound. Thus it has everything that is required for a body to be known as distinctly as possible. But notice that, as I speak, it is moved close to the fire. It loses what remains of its taste, its smell is lost, the colour changes, it loses its shape, increases in size, becomes liquid, becomes hot and can barely be touched. Nor does it emit a sound if tapped. But does the wax not remain? It must be agreed that it does; no one denies that, no one thinks otherwise (Descartes, *27).*

Descartes observes (or imagines) that the wax taken from the beehive has a particular smell, feel, sound, appearance and taste when it is first observed, and then all of these particular sensorial qualities change when the wax is placed close to the fire. Yet, in either form we understand that the wax is still wax. From these observations, Descartes argues that none of the sensorial qualities are essential to the piece of wax, so there must be some other constant to which we have access in order to understand that it is the same piece of wax.

Descartes is working towards two goals in this description of perception: discovering what is essential to the wax as an object separate from our consciousness and discovering our role in perception. Since the physical properties of the wax are subjective, i.e., they appeal to our sensations and not our intelligence, they are considered a second-order experience and ultimately unessential to the wax.[16] In fact, all of the physical properties of wax can change without creating a new object that is distinct from the original piece of wax. This means that the wax's essence as something totally distinct from ourselves is unattainable by sensory perception. For Descartes, given the inadequacy of sensory investigation, our role in true perception must be as a thinking subject: "Something that I thought I saw with my eyes, therefore, was really grasped solely by my mind's faculty of judgment" (Descartes, 28). Furthermore, even though perception seems to form a link between the subject and object, because perception is always perception of some object, to a rationalist it is still the mind which establishes the link. Merleau-Ponty describes in the interview:

> As soon as the mind reflects on its real nature, it sees itself only as pure conscience, thought in the cartesian sense, and it is the mind itself that is again the spectator of the relationship between mind and body. It sees the relationship, thinks it, establishes it, this is a part of the universe of thought, but it isn't a link between thought and anything else besides itself (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 422).

To rationalists, like Descartes, thought is the spectator of the relationship with the mind and physical objects and this is merely another specialized activity of the mind, and

[16] As Merleau-Ponty explains in the interview: "There is a link between my mind and my body since, for example, I perceive according to what happens in the outside world, according to the action that external objects exert on my senses, and, in consequence, this demonstrates an effect of the body on the mind, and inversely, there is an effect of the mind on my body when I move, when I displace my body, but these issues, for thinkers formed by the school of Descartes and Kant, these phenomena are phenomena of a second order" (*Entretiens avec George Charbonnier*, 421).

therefore does not require anything besides itself. Even further than describing perception as the action of the mind on outside objects, the rationalist believes that perception only takes place in the mind: any investigation of the world is on the basis of conscious action, leaving perception only on the level of the reflective mind, independent of its objects of investigation. Descartes concludes that the essence of a piece of wax is fundamentally distinct from ourselves, accessed only through rational reflection, and that perception is ultimately a species of thought. This dichotomy between subject and object is passed down through many of the important figures in the history of modern philosophy, and it is this paradigm of which Merleau-Ponty is highly critical throughout his career.

Merleau-Ponty identifies a problem at the very foundation of Descartes's thought experiment: the wax and the observer are considered separate discrete units in advance and perception is thus believed to be a kind of rational reflection. These premises direct the investigation toward a pursuit of the object-in-itself and toward a description of the action done by the mind. In contrast, according to Merleau-Ponty, we need to begin again with the description of perception as the first term and let the wax and the observer emerge from this more immediate ground if we want to come to a more accurate understanding of perception. This rethinking also allows perception to not necessarily be a faculty of the reflective (i.e., self-understanding, deliberate) consciousness, but it is allowed to exist in a more ambiguous, pre-reflective consciousness. In fact, when we conceive of perception from the point of view of our immediate, lived experience, there is no reason to give thought the role of arbiter between the observer and the object as Descartes argued.

From the rationalist position, as seen in Descartes, it is our minds that establish our connection with the world. Rational thought is the only force which can constitute objects, and it is solely on this basis that we can come to knowledge of the outside world. Yet if this were true, if thought were this fundamental to perception, then it would seem impossible to have the ambiguous perception of the Müller-Lyer illusion. Furthermore, the rationalist position would not allow for the outside world to attract our attention. In fact, Merleau-Ponty argues that "we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or… we would not go looking for it" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 30). If pure thought was truly our mode of insertion in the world as well as what constitutes the objects therein, we would already know of everything that we might perceive. We would not be drawn to a bright light in a dark room or a loud noise upstairs if our minds were the force rationalism takes them to be.

Though rationalism and empiricism seemingly come from opposite sides of the of intellectual spectrum, Merleau-Ponty concludes that they ultimately make the same mistake by analyzing perception from the point of view of a scientific, reflective consciousness rather than from that of our immediate experience of perception. In both cases "[w]e build perception out of the perceived. And since the perceived is obviously only accessible through perception, in the end we understand neither" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 5). The rationalist is just as guilty of begging the question as the empiricist, both privileging the object in itself over the lived experience of perception. It is made clear by this common foundational fault that it is not enough to develop new ways of explaining away inconsistencies within each of these approaches, nor is it enough to form some hybrid approach that combines aspects of the physiologist and the psychologist.

Instead, we must find a new approach that gets beyond the foundation of mind-body dualism that clouds our experience and that "seeks to reconstruct actual perception" on the basis of an objective world in which we do not dwell (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 11). Indeed, when Merleau-Ponty contends in the first interview above that "to perceive, this is not to think... it's something else," he means that perception is on an order of experience that is more foundational than reasoning (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 427). Giving an account of perception that assumes it operates on the same basis as our reflective, scientific consciousness will therefore be incomplete, only grasping part of the whole and perhaps worse this approach to perception may misunderstand perception entirely.

An important consequence of the abstract (and thus problematic) accounts of perception is that our understanding of how perception works is intimately bound up with our understanding of who we as perceivers are. By attempting to enframe perception as merely an objective process, the empiricist renders the observer an entirely passive being who is confronted by a series of discrete objects, interacting with our world without intention and without a goal in mind. By attempting to enframe perception as merely a subjective process, the rationalist renders the observer an entirely active being that constitutes the objects and the world and cannot therefore meaningfully interact with the world. Merleau-Ponty summarizes the problem with both of the classical approaches to perception: "[w]hat was lacking for empiricism was an internal connection between the object and the act it triggers. What intellectualism [rationalism] lacks is the contingency of the opportunities for thought. Consciousness is too poor in the first case and too rich in the second for any phenomenon to be able to *solicit* it" (*Phenomenology of Perception*,

30). When we turn our heads towards a loud crash outside of the house, it is not done blindly and without some sense as the empiricist argues. For their part, the rationalist would have trouble explaining away the obvious way this phenomenon acts on our consciousness. Just as Gestalt Theory is concerned with ensembles—i.e., with the form of phenomena as wholes whose parts are inseparably linked to each other, we must look at our interaction with the world as inseparably linked with ourselves: perception is not unidirectional. The objects we perceive draw our attention and act on us just as we act on them by looking at and interacting with them. The relation between ourselves and the exterior world as seen in perception is more like a dance with a give and take between partners as opposed to the lifeless, unidirectional interaction presented by empiricism and rationalism. We, as perceivers, are then in the complicated place of being always both active and passive rather than merely one or the other. We might then ask how this active/passive relationship unfolds, and where the pre-reflective process of perception is discovered. Merleau-Ponty clearly links his work on perception to the concept of the phenomenal body in the interview above as a logical next step in his philosophy, so let us turn there to make address this next question.

The Phenomenal Body

In giving a more thorough description of perception from the point of view of our immediate experience, Merleau-Ponty runs into the role of our body in this process. Once again to mark his contrast with Descartes, Merleau-Ponty gives a broad characterization of Descartes's attitude to the body. For Descartes, the body is simply "one of the mind's objects, one of the objects it takes an interest in and that it considers from afar"

(*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 426-427). This quote would suggest that the body is only tangentially related to the mind, just as with any other object in the world. In the opposite tradition (empiricism), as seen in physiology, our body is what makes up the entirety of experience, and consciousness is nothing more than neurons firing in the physical brain. Yet again in contrast, Merleau-Ponty continues in the phenomenological tradition, arguing that "when we are perceiving something exterior, this is a sort of activity of our body, our body viewed as a system of powers" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 132). Perception is not "an operation of the mind alone," but rather requires the investigative power of the body, which itself is a motivating factor behind our interaction with the objects that surround us (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 132). The body is exactly what allows phenomena to solicit our attention as well as what allows for our interaction with the world. We see again that the mind and body are both inextricably linked in our insertion into the world.

However, the paradigm of mind-body dualism is again pervasive when giving accounts of the body, and the empiricist's and rationalist's accounts are well known in science and philosophy alike. Just as with perception, these traditions are only able to partially grasp our embodied experience. Both extend the dichotomy between consciousness and the object to the body, treating the two as distinct and discrete units. In opposition to the empiricist and rationalist traditions, Merleau-Ponty persists in describing an existence that is "between" the psychical and the physiological.[17]

[17] "Between the psychical and physiological" is a section header in the chapter "The Body as an Object and Mechanistic Physiology" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 75-91). Just as is made clear in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception, he is not searching for some hybrid approach, as this would not go beyond the foundation of mind-body dualism which prevents the psychical and physiological approaches from grasping our true relationship with our body.

Borrowing from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty gives an account of "being in the world" as the term for embodied experience that avoids mind-body dualism.

Investigating an example of how our relationship with the body is not well-described by the empiricist and the rationalist will help to clarify Merleau-Ponty's contrasting approach. He argues that our way of existing in the world cannot be reduced to acts of consciousness (as in rationalism) or to objective forces interacting (as in empiricism). Consider, for example, how particular situations can bring about immediate reactions from us and how these reactions often are not experienced as deliberate acts of our own choosing or as fully automatic processes set in play by the mere interplay of external forces. For instance, recently a butter knife dropped from my hand. To cushion its fall, I reached my foot out in an attempt to intercept it before it could hit the ground. If this reaction were processed fully by my consciousness, the danger and triviality of intercepting the dull knife with my bare foot would be apparent, and I would never risk injuring my foot for this purpose. Yet, when it happened, I experienced the situation as enacting a way of using my foot to catch objects that I developed through a lifetime of playing soccer and I did move to intercept it. Since this was not a deliberate or considered decision, one might think that it was an automatic reflex wherein my body was merely carrying out a predetermined interplay of forces. But the experience of cushioning the knife with my foot was not experienced as a moment of having my body taken over by external forces. Instead of experiencing it as being purely determined by forces beyond me or as purely decided by me in that moment, a better description of the reaction is that it was the result of a certain developed habit of using my body to catch falling objects by extending and subtly lowering my foot. I can even recollect stages in developing the

habit, often with deliberate exercises practiced over years as a soccer player. This last account of the experience allows for the situation to have much more ambiguity than the accounts of the empiricist and the rationalist.

When we attend closely to what our pre-reflective experiences are like (as exemplified in habitual reactions), ambiguity is uncovered in many ways. Merleau-Ponty argues that a given situation is lived as an open call for our reaction, "without… being known for itself" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 81). Merleau-Ponty compares this open situation to the first notes of a melody that sketch out the resolution in general terms. I might add to my account of cushioning the knife that I did not perceive discrete stimuli, in the way that the empiricist accounts for perception. Instead the situation was lived as an ambiguous whole and the knife fell more as a "thing-I-let-fall," we might say. Furthermore, my reaction did not involve thetic action, as the rationalist argues. I did not think, "Where is my foot. OK, now where do I need it to be?". Rather, the experience is better captured by the implicit sense "must-cushion-the-thing-falling." In the lived experience of this situation, I felt like I was making use of a general power of my body. The falling butter knife clearly implies a reaction in general terms, but this stimulus is not the fully articulated cause of reflex as the physiologist would have us believe. We do not blindly respond to the stimuli of some objective world. The physiologist is right in characterizing such reactions as prereflective, but this is only a partial description that ignores the internal *sense* of the reflex. Moreover, the individual stimuli of the physiologist can only have meaning to us if they are taken as a whole. Merleau-Ponty explains further: "[t]he reflex does not result from objective stimuli, it turns towards them, it invests them with a sense that they did not have when taken one by one or as

physical agents, a sense that they only have when taken as a situation" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 81). Given the physiologist's inability to fully account for this phenomenon, we might mistakenly get the impression that I sent my foot out as some thetic action, as the rationalist claims. But this should be quickly dismissed, given the irrationality of putting my foot in danger from the perspective of reflective consciousness. Chances are that I will cut my foot and the knife will not be damaged in the fall. Furthermore, the falling knife *did* solicit my reaction and attention, which would be impossible in the rationalist framework.

In phenomenology, we begin by dealing with a pre-reflective world that sketches out our possible actions without fully determining what we will do. It is precisely this pre-reflective perspective that distinguishes being in the world from physiological and psychological traditions and allows it to bridge the gap between the two. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes:

> our 'world' has a particular consistency, relatively independent of stimuli, that forbids treating 'being in the world' as a sum of reflexes, and the pulsation of existence has a particular energy, relatively independent of our spontaneous thoughts, that precludes treating it as an *act* of consciousness (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 82).

Just as with perception, our relationship to our body and the objects with which we interact is found most immediately in our pre-thetic experience. On this basis of "being in the world," Merleau-Ponty seeks to characterize the interdependent relationship between our mind and body. To do so, he begins with an examination of the peculiar and ambiguous phenomenon of the phantom limb.

Merleau-Ponty uses this phenomenon of experiencing sensation from an amputated limb as an extreme that can help illustrate the way all of us relate to our own

bodies. The example of the phantom limb is quite complicated and the ambiguity there within can easily be seen. On the one hand, the patient often seems quite unaware of their amputation, to the point where they will step out onto a stump, and sometimes not even be discouraged by the fall, repeating this "mistake" over and over again. On the other hand, the patient often can vividly explain the sensations from the amputated limb all the while recognizing the sensation is emanating from a limb that no longer exists.

Merleau-Ponty argues that this phenomenon cannot be adequately explained by the accounts of the physiologist or the psychologist. For the physiologist, "the phantom limb is the presence of a part of the body's representation that should not be given" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 82). However, the presence of the phantom limb can be explained away as an overactive nerve that used to be connected to the missing limb. Yet this limited account cannot explain the patient's experience of the phantom limb as present. Moreover, there are undeniable psychological elements at play in the case of the phantom limb. For example, a patient who has never previously experienced a phantom may develop this sensation "when an emotion or a situation evokes those of the injury" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 79). It is quite possible for an engineer who lost their arm years ago in an explosion to begin feeling sensation from the missing limb in the wake of a loud bang that imitates that of the explosion. Furthermore, the sensation from a phantom limb can sometimes be made to shrink and ultimately disappear entirely through psychological therapy. None of this can be explained by the purely material basis of the physiologist, and it would seem that we are dealing with the action of the mind in this case. We might then be persuaded to look into the rationalist's account of the phantom limb as a more complete explanation, but this would also be in vain.

The rationalist ultimately believes that "the phantom limb becomes a memory"; in other words, this phenomenon is considered to be triggered simply by the memory of once having an actual limb in its place (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 82). Yet, as noted above, a patient with sensation from a phantom limb often seems quite unaware of their dismemberment, as they will continually attempt to walk on a missing leg and will not even be discouraged by the fall (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 83). Describing the phantom limb as a memory in the purely rational sense would place it in the realm of reflection, but there must be some emotional component as well. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the phantom limb "could not be memory if the object that it constructs was not still held by some intentional threads to the horizon of the lived past," and this intentionality cannot be found in "one *cogitatio* [that] necessitates another *cogitatio*" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 88). Descartes's thinking subject, as detached from its emotions, would not be motivated to turn towards a past in which the body was whole. Being in the world, on the other hand, does not limit itself to the restrictions of the *cogitatio*, and is therefore able to grasp how "emotion can be at the origin of the situation" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 88). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argues that "memory, emotion, and the phantom limb are equivalent with regard to being in the world" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 88). Each of these can only be properly understood by recognizing the *intertwinement* or co-relation of body and world. Furthermore, there is some physical dimension at play in the phenomenon of the phantom limb that cannot be denied. If a surgery is performed that severs the relevant nerves that run from what is left of the phantom limb to the brain, all sensation from the missing limb will cease (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 79). Clearly the rationalist cannot account for

this physical factor and cannot give a sufficient explanation of the phantom limb as a memory in the sense of the purely rational subject. So, would the solution be found from simply taking explanations from both sides?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is quite clear that this would be ultimately fruitless. For these two approaches to co-determine this phenomenon, there would need to be "a single point of application or a common ground" between them (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 79). It would be impossible to find the commonality between an approach that considers everything to be reduced to physical factors and one that believes solely in the action of the mind. The fundamental mistake committed by those who support the paradigm of mind-body dualism is to analyze phenomena from the perspective of reflective consciousness. Upon reflection, the patient is obviously aware that a limb has been amputated, yet amputees will step onto a missing leg with confidence. When describing phenomenology in the interview above, Merleau-Ponty explains that "[t]here are several degrees of lived experience," and "between the two meanings of the word 'experience'… between experience in the primary sense, from an original perspective, and experience in the radical sense of philosophical consciousness, there is almost an incompatibility" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 134). The empiricist and rationalist both examine phenomena from the secondary experience of rational reflection.[18] But when someone steps onto a missing leg, they are not operating on this level, as they would certainly be aware of the missing limb upon reflection. Instead, they are acting on the basis of a more

[18] Merleau-Ponty is reversing Descartes's claim that our immediate experience of phenomena are of a secondary order. For Descartes, rational reflection is the sole guide for experience, and our embodied life is secondary. For Merleau-Ponty, following others in the tradition of phenomenology, reflection is of a second order while our non-thetic life is our original mode of consciousness.

immediate relationship with their body and with the world around them. Just as perception is a mode of pre-reflective action, our relation to our body is prior to thought, i.e., more immediately accessible than reflective consciousness. And yet the different levels of lived experience are not clearly delineated from each other. To someone who is sensing a phantom limb, this limb is *real*, and at the same time, they are reflectively conscious that it does not tangibly exist. Their lived world, however, continues to hold open a place for its existence and its presence.

This phenomenon perfectly demonstrates the seeming incompatibility between the more immediate lived experience of being in the world and the experience of reflective consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty explains: "if [the patient] treats [the phantom leg] in practice as a real limb, this is because, like the normal subject, he has no need of a clear and articulated perception of his body in order to begin moving it. It is enough that his body is 'available' as an indivisible power and that the phantom leg is sensed as vaguely implicated in it" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 83). Our body is not some object that the mind orders to move, one foot after the other. We are able to perform many complicated tasks, such as typing, without first needing to contemplate where our hands are. In fact, when we are performing a habituated act like typing, trying to thetically think through the process is difficult to do in the first place, and will often get in the way of the task. To bring back the example of a falling butter knife, I reach out my foot because of my habituation of catching objects I have dropped with my foot, which itself comes out of a larger context of playing soccer since I was a child.

Merleau-Ponty argues that we must distinguish two ways in which we experience and *live* our bodies.

> It is as though our body comprises two distinct layers, that of the habitual body and that of the actual body. Gestures of manipulation that appear in the first have disappeared in the second, and the problem of how I can feel endowed with a limb that I no longer have in fact comes down to knowing how the habitual body can act as a guarantee for the actual body (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 84).

The patient of amputation steps out onto a stump because they have a habitual sense of the body that is engaged in its tasks on a level more fundamental than thetic action. I kick my foot out to cushion a falling knife not for the sake of the knife, but because I have grown accustomed to doing so in order to protect my falling phone. And the patient who has lost this foot will still reach a phantom foot out because the falling object does not show up to them as some detached item in the objective world. Instead, on top of the notion of a habit body, the falling object appeals to the body in the particular manner of a thing to be manipulated. As Merleau-Ponty concludes: "I am conscious of my body through the world and if my body is the unperceived term at the center of the world toward which every object turns its face, then it is for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 84). By describing the phenomenon of the phantom limb without the bias of an "objective" world that stands apart and separate from us, being in the world is able to provide a more complete analysis of the phenomenon than either the rationalist or the empiricist could.

The body is not some object that can be fully distinguished from the surrounding world. Instead, our body is our mode of insertion in the world and the medium through which the subjective and objective, which themselves can never truly be distinct terms, are connected. We relate to our body more immediately than the rationalist can conceive of and more ambiguously than the empiricist claims. Furthermore, objects in the world relate to our body insofar as they are manipulable by it, implying the body and its objects

are inextricably linked. And as Merleau-Ponty makes clear in the first interview, this discussion of the body as the pivot of the world naturally guides us to language as a kind of body of thought.

Language: First and Second-order[19]

For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this criticism of mind-body dualism naturally leads to a discussion of language. Just as an investigation of perception led to a discussion of language, the phenomenal body brings us to the topic of language and speech. As he explains in the first interview above,

> [o]nce we show, as I have tried to do, that to perceive, this is not to think, that it's something else; once we have shown that the thinking subject of Descartes is linked to a body… it then remains to understand how it can be that such an embodied subject… is at the same time capable of operations that are beyond the means of the body… this led me to the close study of language (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 427).

So far, we have been discussing aspects of our experience that are fundamentally pre-reflective. An investigation of our use of language would seem to move us further towards the world of thought and reflective consciousness insofar as language is obviously deeply connected with our thought. In fact, the use of language is so fundamental to thought that "there are no thoughts that come to be actual, effective, to really capture something, without the help of speech, whether it is a matter of audible speech or one of interior speech" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 427-428). And yet traditional approaches to language make the distinction between sign (word) and signification (thought) as if the two could be distinct terms. This distinction mimics the

[19] Sections of this essay were originally written for Introduction to the Study of Linguistics (INT 410) at the University of Maine, and reworked to fit into this part of the thesis.

dichotomy between mind and body, and traditional descriptions of the phenomenon of speech once again tend to be of either an empiricist or rationalist character; the empiricist explains the process through the mechanical response in the body when given the stimulus of a combination of words, and the rationalist believes that only the thoughts which are behind words give meaning to a sentence. These two argument forms may be extremes, but there is a common fault to be found in mind-body dualism as we have seen above with perception and the body. The empiricist and rationalist take opposite positions from the same basic framework, and it is this framework that is fundamentally problematic. It is worth exploring how these two perspectives on language examine the act of communication in order to point out where they fall short.

Merleau-Ponty opens the chapter in *The Phenomenology of Perception* on speech with a description of patients who struggle with aphasia of colors. When asked to group color samples together on the basis of their tint, these patients are notably slower and more meticulous in their process than the average person. The patient will need to pick up samples and compare two side by side in order to then classify them. They are largely successful with this tactic, but there are often substantial mistakes made. For example, after placing a pale red with a larger group of reds, a patient might then place a pale green sample in the same group. This perhaps indicates that they are not sustaining a consistent concept of color throughout the entire process. Merleau-Ponty explains further: "it is not the participation of the samples in a single idea that guides them, but rather the experience of an immediate resemblance, and this is why they can only classify the samples after having brought them together" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 181). Patients retain a sense of immediate resemblance and this guides them as they group the

color samples. That these patients can be successful in grouping colors when comparing two samples in front of them shows that they can still make use of the instant, concrete aspect of language—namely, they are still able to employ language within the context of a simple task that does not require abstraction from the matter at hand.

The problem for patients of aphasia lies in the move from particular samples of reds to the larger and more abstract category of "red." This study of aphasia of colors is being used as a negative example by Merleau-Ponty, explaining how people who struggle with seemingly mundane tasks can help reveal the true way in which we experience a similar experience. Patients of aphasia are successful when dealing with terms on the level of automatic language but are incapable of moving to the more abstract nature of language. And if the problem with these patients lies in the abstract realm that more closely involves thetic action, it would appear that language is conditioned by thought for the average person, as the rationalist posits.

The rationalist also holds that the word does not have a sense on its own, essentially describing language as the empty envelope for thought. On this account, words are only used in order to communicate the idea to one another and they have no importance on their own. To some degree this is true: a chair could have been called anything; this particular word taken by itself may be arbitrary. But once this word has an accepted meaning according to a language community, it starts to take up meaning in relation to other words. And since none of us engages with this primary designation of objects but instead grows up with words whose relations have been sedimented long before us, the language we use is far from arbitrary. When thinking in terms of our immediate experience of language, this complicated distancing of language from thought

is dispelled. While engaged in a discussion, for example, there is no need to think everything out before speaking. Instead, thought is often accomplished within the act of speaking, as though the word were accomplishing the thinking. The experience is similar for the listener, insofar as there is no disconnect between the words heard and the thoughts embedded therein. Merleau-Ponty writes: "[t]he words occupy our entire mind, they come to fulfill our expectations… but we are not capable of predicting it" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 185). If language was truly as the rationalist describes it, there would need to be some internal process that translates the arbitrary sounds of words into the thoughts behind them. And if this were the case, if each word had to be translated into its corresponding thought, it would be very difficult to keep up with a conversation; our use of language would be completely inefficient. More importantly, such an account simply does not line up with our experience of speech.

The rationalist account of language also fails to explain how we come to an understanding of a difficult text. I have often had the experience of struggling to comprehend a philosophical text, especially when it contains significant technical descriptions that employ words in particular, nuanced ways. On the first reading, it may be the case that I have understood little of the philosophical significance of the text. That said, simply learning how the author writes can be a key first step to gaining further understanding. For example, I often struggled to understand the *Phenomenology of Perception* when first reading it. Merleau-Ponty has a particular rhetorical style in which he examines how the empiricist and the rationalist analyze phenomena, but he often does so without clear indications that he is critical of these perspectives. It is only when he begins to point out how the perspectives are inadequate that his argument becomes clear,

making those first sections retroactively meaningful. He explains this phenomenon of coming to understand a philosophically rigorous text in the following short passage:

> And just as, when in a foreign country, I begin to understand the sense of words by their place in a context of action and by participating in everyday life, so too a philosophical text that remains poorly understood nevertheless reveals to me at least a certain 'style'... which is the first sketch of its sense. I begin to understand philosophy by slipping into this thought's particular manner of existing (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 184-185).

In this situation, it is the *manner* of the words themselves that reveals some meaning to their readers when they first try to comprehend the text, as the thoughts behind them remain unclear. The writing style and word choice in particular are not external to the argument; they actively portray and contain meaning. Merleau-Ponty compares the process of understanding a complicated text to an immersion experience, as in both cases we have to creatively engage with the language that is presented to us. Understanding another person is not a matter of getting beyond their language and grasping their thought, as the rationalist argues, but one of reading towards the sense contained within the words themselves. This again supports the idea that words have a sense on their own and it once again seems that the empiricist and rationalist are providing an overly simplistic model which can only partially grasp the phenomenon of language. In fact, language may be the most obviously ambiguous of the phenomena discussed up to this point.

To give a more concrete example, the difficulty of translation is well known. There are always shortcomings when comparing one language with another and while attempting a translation. Certain words cannot find a corresponding term in another language, and even those that do often cannot account for the nuanced uses of the original

word. The well-known Italian saying "*Traduttore, traditore"* (to translate is to betray) shows this point well. The original Italian is a pun on the similar sound of both words, who furthermore share the etymological root of "trans" (across, over). The corresponding English translation more or less captures the meaning, but necessarily loses some of the sense that comes from the words themselves.

When it comes to more complicated translations, the inherent ambiguity of language can easily be seen. I ran into this problem while translating the second interview above. Merleau-Ponty consistently uses the word "vécu" while talking about phenomenology. In its general use, "vécu" would translate to the English word "experience." However, I translated this term as "lived experience" given the particular use of the term within phenomenology, and the fact that the original French is also the past participle of the verb "vivre" (to live). The French word "expérience" is also generally translated as "experience" in English, although it can also mean "experiment." Merleau-Ponty ends up using both of these terms together towards the end of the interview and it is difficult to understand exactly what the distinction is between the two terms. However, it is clear that all of the nuance between these French words is found in the words themselves, or in the broader cultural context. The nuance does not originate in the thought of Merleau-Ponty himself, as I am not even sure what that thought is. If language were the empty envelope of the rationalist and empiricist, devoid of meaning on its own, the complications in this translation could not be fully explained.

We are fully submerged in language from a very early age to the point where even personal thoughts require an inner dialogue. If language were just an empty envelope for thought, there would be no need for an inner dialogue in order for us to think. But in

reality, a pure thought without the mediation of language is impossible to assign meaning; we cannot begin to *think* without words. The inextricable connection between language and thought reveals that our thoughts always tend towards expression, either through speech, writing, or inner dialogue. Merleau-Ponty explains further in the second interview: "[s]o, do you see at what point language becomes something fundamental? It conveys the entire world of thought. It subsumes everyone, it is the frame of ideas, it is the body or the frame of the mind." (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 136). Merleau-Ponty once again means the phenomenal body here, taken as our active mediator with the world. And just as the body "is not simply one of the mind's objects, one of the objects it takes an interest in and that it considers from afar," just as "our mind is situated in it, in an intimate relation with it," language is not tangentially related to thought, thought is situated in it (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 426-427).

The rationalist presents language as a distinct unit from the thought, both governing and underlying speech. The empiricist separates language as an "objective" stimulus and the action on the part of the physical brain which produces "thought." In contrast, Merleau-Ponty argues that language and thought are necessarily linked. Rather than language presupposing thought or vice versa, they "are enveloped in each other; sense is caught in speech, and speech is the external existence of sense" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 187). Speech accomplishes thought as much as thought accomplishes speech. In both the empiricist's and the rationalist's accounts, language is an external component that is used to convey a thought, but it does not play an active role in the development of thought. Yet in writing this paper, for example, it is not the case that I know exactly what I am going to include beforehand, despite having studied the material

beforehand. The writing process reveals new ideas to us and clarifies concepts. It is only in the act of writing that I can make my general thoughts on the subject concrete. I did some of this work beforehand in making an outline, but even this was accomplished in language. It is important to see that my use of language through writing was not external to my thought process: it actualized it. This is also why taking notes during class is useful to the end of internalizing information. It may be the case that I can look back on notes later while studying, but the act of writing ideas down already greatly increases the amount of information that is internalized. And when I do look back at notes to study, the words themselves make a thought reappear without having to reconstruct the meaning of what is written in the context of the class. All of this serves as evidence that, once again, language itself has a sense. It is not the empty envelope of the empiricist or the rationalist. So why is it that we can so easily fool ourselves into separating speech and thought?

The interconnectedness of language and thought as well as our understanding of others through speech shows us that "there is a taking up of the other person's thought, a reflection in others, a power of thinking *according to others*" in language (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 189). And it is precisely because of this power of taking up another's thought through language and language's immediate connection with thought that allows us to forget about the importance of language in the process. We believe to be reaching another's thought as a unit distinct from the speech that actively conveys the thought because language is so fundamental to "convey[ing] the entire world of thought… [that it] subsumes everyone" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 136). Another's speech is so readily accessible to us that it does not show up to us as the

intermediary between their thought and my own. And once again, just as mind and body are necessarily tied up with each other, language and thought cannot be separated. Merleau-Ponty makes a further point related to our taking up of another's thought through language by making a distinction between second-order and first-order speech.

In general, second-order speech (and thought) occurs when we take up the speech of another as an end in itself or when we reuse some previously worked out concept without reinterpretation. The first case seems to be quite rare and an existence on the basis of uncritical acceptance of others' speech would be empty, much like the de Beauvoirian "sub-person." Yet the second case happens daily. We might begin to think about this on the model of our actions, for example whenever we navigate our daily commute, pedal a bicycle, do our laundry and so forth. At one point, all of these activities had to be learned, and often are done with varying levels of thetic action. Yet each of these activities can quickly become so habitual as to take no critical thought. The same is true when it comes to our involvement with language. On a basic level, since we come into a world in which language has already been constituted, "we possess in ourselves already formed significations for all of these banal words" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 189). Thus, importantly, second-order speech should not be seen in purely negative terms. In fact, constantly existing in original thought processes while traveling to work each day would be exhausting if not impossible.

Furthermore, second-order speech often serves as the foundation on which more substantive thought takes place, just as the child needs to learn the seemingly arbitrary sounds of language in order to open their world to interpersonal communication through speech. The more substantive first-order speech still involves taking up the thinking of

another, but not as an end in itself as in second-order thought. Instead, it results in the formation of a new way to approach the world: “If authentic, speech gives rise to a new sense” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 200). This could be something as drastic as re-envisioning the solar system from a heliocentric perspective, or something as seemingly trivial as discovering that you like jazz. Copernicus’s scientific revelation obviously gives rise to a new sense for himself and others, but it could only happen on the foundation of second-order speech, in terms of rearticulating thoughts that were previously accepted uncritically. And while the discovery of jazz may seem unimportant, it still changes the way our world shows up to us in that we begin to recognize jazz being played in cafés where we previously heard mere background music.

These examples make it clear that first-order speech does not have to be the first time that something has been articulated from a historical perspective. If you successfully engage with a philosophical text, and if what the writer articulates connects with you in such a way as to change your perspective, you are taking part in first-order speech, despite the concept being previously articulated by the author. First-order speech can even come from something that you have spoken in the past. When someone recognizes that they are truly in love for the first time, despite having said so to past partners, this fundamentally changes their perspective of their partner, of love, of the world and so forth. Truly meaning “I love you” can be an example of first-order speech and thought even if this person has truly been in love with past partners, since we learn to love our partners for different reasons and in different ways; as such, saying “I love you” has a different meaning depending on who we are are when we say it and who we say it to.

The most vivid example of first-order speech that I can think of is the moment that Helen Keller first connected with the outside world through the power of language. Helen Keller went deaf and blind due to an unknown disease at just nineteen months old. As a result, she was unable to communicate with other people and had immense trouble understanding the outside world: she was largely stuck in her own head. Her teacher, Anne Sullivan, had been attempting to teach Helen language through tapping on her hand in order to spell out words, but these words initially had no meaning to Helen because she could not connect them to the outside world. In fact, she originally thought that Sullivan was playing a game with her. It was not until Sullivan brought Helen to a well and spelled the word "water" into one hand while water flowed over the other that she really connected with language and the world. Helen Keller describes the moment in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*:

> As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten–-a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away (Keller, 11-12).

By connecting the words she had learned with outside objects, her world was expanded and Helen could begin to interact with the "outside" in an immediate and brand-new way. So, we are seeing that language is not only a means of connecting with other people, but also the power of rendering the world meaningful. In a similar way, the child does not know an object until it has been given a name. Merleau-Ponty writes that "it is through expression that thought becomes our own. The designation of objects never happens after

recognition, it is recognition itself" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 183). For Helen Keller, with the birth of words came immediately and inextricably the birth of a new world.

The powerful expression of first-order speech often becomes second-order, just as learning to navigate a new city becomes a morning commute. To help clarify these two terms, Merleau-Ponty makes the distinction between "a *speaking speech* and a *spoken speech*" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 202). First-order speech would then be authentic self-expression while second-order speech would be a re-articulation. Yet each of these terms depends on the other and the two work together as our thought develops. Spoken speech uses what is already at hand, as if "available significations… [were] an acquired fortune" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 203). And it is only because of these "acquisitions" that a more authentic form of speech is possible. As Merleau-Ponty explains the interplay between first and second order speech: "Such is the function revealed through language, which reiterates itself, depends upon itself, or that like a wave gathers itself together and steadies itself in order to once again throw itself beyond itself" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 203). Language and thought become authentic only through the groundwork of previously worked out concepts. Copernicus could not imagine a heliocentric model if he were not taught and if he did not accept the geocentric model that others had previously articulated. It now appears that our thoughts depend on the previous thoughts of ourselves as well as others. On this last point, Merleau-Ponty considers our use of language to be a type of gesture that serves as an active intermediary between thought and the world.

Since thought is impossible without language and since language aims at communication, all of our conscious experience aims at a world with others. In characterizing speech as a gesture, Merleau-Ponty means that speech contains a sense on the sole basis of the words employed, and that it is meant to communicate with others. For example, speech is socially conditioned in a similar way to obscene physical gestures. But even more than this, speech and thought have a definitively bodily character. Love produces butterflies in the stomach and blushing; the realization of death produces an embodied, helpless feeling; when giving a presentation on a subject about which I am not confident, I fully feel the contours of my body and vulnerably so. Language and thought are directly related to our embodiment in the world rather than toward some intellectual process of thought. Authentic thought and self-expression fundamentally change the way in which the world appears to us. Taking up the practice of rock climbing, for example, can transform the way in which a person experiences their possibilities when they approach a sheer rock face. A steep cliff on a hike will show up to the rock climber in terms of the various ways in which it could be scaled whereas it will show up as a blank obstacle to the average hiker. While rock-climbing is very obviously a gesture of the body, we often forget that speech and thought for another reified gesture that we undertake. And it is only through the first-order process of learning to rock climb that will make the cliff show up in a different way. As Merleau-Ponty writes: "[s]peech is a gesture, and its signification is a world" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 190). Just as the rock-climber opens up the climbability of the rock face, in speech we open up the significations of the spoken world. It is on the basis of the way in which speech shapes our world that Merleau-Ponty declares in the third interview that "engagement has always

been practiced in great philosophy. It has been practiced in the form of a philosophical action" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 73).

Philosophy as Engaged Activity

Anyone who has studied philosophy has surely heard the criticism of the discipline as "pure theory." The philosopher is supposedly concerned with the world of thought and there is no practical application of their studies. In particular, philosophy is clearly out of touch with reality because it is impossible to get a job with a degree in philosophy. In fact, this is usually the first question that comes to mind upon hearing that someone studies philosophy. However, as Merleau-Ponty points out in the third interview, this notion of engagement is full of misunderstandings "that stem from the way in which… engagement was introduced" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 72).

Politics is often considered to be the practical application of philosophy—a notion that already creates a problematic divide between the two fields. Even within the realm of politics, theory is generally considered to be an abstraction from reality. This criticism seems to come out of the familiar foundation of mind-body dualism: those who criticize philosophy in this manner have defined "reality" as some objective state of what currently is. It follows from this definition that engagement requires studying what is, while abandoning anything that does not correspond to this "reality." Theory would then be seen as a departure from "reality" because it attempts to move beyond what currently is. Yet the confused notion of "reality" was never justified in the first place, just as defining perception in terms of an "objective" world is never explained by the mind-body dualist. Furthermore, certain disciplines of philosophy may seek to move beyond the

current state of the world, but many other disciplines seek to describe our experience of the world, such as phenomenology. And even those which are engaging in theory still find their conclusion from the world and must put these conclusions to test of this world in order to be successful.

Another misunderstanding comes out of the confusion of technical works of philosophy. People imagine that "when we ask philosophy to be engaged, we at the same time recommend that it abandons its theoretical method in order to replace philosophy in the traditional sense with conceptual discussions" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 73). And yet even philosophers who were deeply concerned with engagement, like Jean-Paul Sartre, have written very technical works that can be quite difficult to digest. The theoretical methods of philosophy would only be considered unimportant if, once again, we see theory as an abstraction from reality rather than a description of it. Furthermore, there is a mistaken belief that engagement is "an option between intellectual and political parties" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 72). The criticism of philosophy pretends that it is choosing to belong to certain intellectual parties (i.e. empiricism, rationalism, egoism, phenomenology, existentialism, etc.) without prescribing an affiliation with political parties that are dealing with the "real" world.

There is a partial truth here in that philosophers tend not to take up overtly political positions while writing. Simone de Beauvoir does not write that we must belong to the communist party in order to truly take up our freedom, but this does not mean *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is some lofty work of theory that does not correspond to the political world. In fact, her ethical positions naturally lead to political beliefs without explicitly saying so: you cannot be fully convinced by de Beauvoir's writing and find yourself on

the far right of the political spectrum. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty explains in the third interview that even the less directly political philosophers are engaged in the world: "philosophers have always admitted that one could not be a philosopher without demonstrating certain actions. And when philosophers do not go that far, they are content to write books… and these books are often dedicated to action. All of the great philosophies contain a politics" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 74). In fact, the type of theory that does not put its claims to the test of engagement, which is how many mistakenly identify philosophy, is not truly philosophy.

When asked why it was necessary to reintroduce the notion of engagement into philosophy, Merleau-Ponty explains that there has been an academic trend introduced around the turn of the century that "wanted the philosopher to express himself in theses," or in purely "abstract works" (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 74). Merleau-Ponty also makes this clear in the second interview when he describes the contemporary philosophy of Husserl's time. After suffering a series of affronts, philosophy in the nineteenth century was reduced to "a kind of rhetoric" that was almost meaningless (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 141). In these specific time periods, where philosophy is moving away from its essential connection with the world, it can make sense to reintroduce the notion of engagement. However, this is an anomaly in the history of philosophy, and the discipline has almost always been concerned with real world issues, from Plato's dialogues to current times. Any study that is not concerned with engagement cannot be considered philosophy. As Merleau-Ponty concludes in the third interview:

> Plato wrote dialogues, and today we publish theses. And from this resulted a particular conception of academic propriety that wants certain questions to never be evoked in the form that they are posed to most people. So, here is a tradition, I would say, that is not really philosophical. In some sense, it is somewhat inhuman, because it signifies that philosophy tends to become a specialty, and I believe that the existence of this tradition justifies at the same time the use of a word like engagement in order to remind the philosopher of his duty, without which one could say that this notion of engagement is completely novel (*Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier*, 74).

When it comes to the academic trend that seeks to strip philosophy of its substance, criticism on the basis of engagement is necessary. But we also must recognize that this trend is already a movement away from philosophy and that the point of criticism is to return to true philosophy, not to further reduce it to meaningless rhetoric. Even further than this historical evidence that philosophy is necessarily engaged with the world, there seems to be a deeper point to be made: philosophy can only be criticized as not engaging with the "real" world, as being pure theory, if the criticism is being levied from the point of view of mind-body dualism.

As we discovered in Merleau-Ponty's discussion, language and speech is a kind of gesture. To explain this concept further, take the physical gesture of raising a hand during a class discussion. The gesture does not result from some combination of outside stimuli, such as the combination of the particular words from whoever is speaking, that motivates the body to raise the hand in some mechanical process. Furthermore, the sense of this gesture is not found purely in some thought behind it. The hand is not raised because I think "I should raise my hand in order to be called on." The gesture is more routine than this intellectual process, and we simply raise our hand while thinking about what we are going to say: the gesture is made pre-reflectively. Since my body exists towards its tasks, it is enough to have a goal in mind—in a pre-reflective sense—for my

body to be put into motion. It should be clear from this that the gesture is not some blind process of the body, and in fact contains a sense within itself; we raise a hand for the purpose of indicating we have something to contribute to the class. This also makes it clear that gestures are characterized by their movement towards expression in an interpersonal world. As Merleau-Ponty explains: "[t]he sense of the gestures is not given but rather understood, which is to say taken up by an act of the spectator. The entire difficulty is to conceive of this act properly and not to confuse it with an epistemic operation" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 190). The gesture is necessarily engaged in the world and with others because it can only have a sense in this world.

The example of raising a hand in class is obviously a gesture, both in the everyday use of the word and in the more technical use of Merleau-Ponty. But in talking about language, Merleau-Ponty affirms that speech is just as much of a gesture as any physical one. Speech is a particular mode of bodily action, both in terms of the physical process of articulation and in the embodied experience of language, as when we feel hot in response to being embarrassed by what someone has said to us. And just as a physical gesture "refers to the sensible world" that has a particular cultural background, language is made up of "previous acts of expression [that] establish a common world between speaking subjects to which current and new speech refer" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 193). Like other gestures, speech carries a sense within itself that can only be completed by and with others.

Returning to the criticism of philosophy as unengaged, this necessary link with the world in language as a gesture is completely missed by critics. Any attempt at philosophical expression that did not aim at the world would be nonsensical, non-

philosophical, and immediately dismissed. Even philosophers that are mostly concerned with the world of ideas, as in the rationalist tradition of Descartes, cannot be truly separated from the world of objects and real-life situations. Even as rationalism is presented within the *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is responding to a world view that attempts to reduce humanity to a kind of mechanical pleasure machine. While there is a problematic foundation on which rationalism is built, we cannot say that it is unengaged with the world. There is a partial truth in the rationalist's claim that we must be more than material bodies as an empiricist would claim. If even the tradition that is concerned solely with thetic action finds a grounding in the world and attempts to characterize our experience, other more "concrete" traditions must be similarly engaged in the world.

Furthermore, those who criticize the discipline of philosophy as being unengaged are relying on a problematic conception of language that sees a distinction between the words used and the pure thoughts behind these words. The philosopher would then be interacting with "pure theory," as a world distinct from the "objective" reality of our lives. And since this distinction between a subjective and objective world is impossible, as Merleau-Ponty repeatedly brings out in his work, there is no "pure theory" with which the philosopher can engage. Philosophy may seem to be more abstract than other disciplines, but it cannot move towards some transcendent theory that separates itself from the "real" world. It seems that we are once again running into the pervasive paradigm of mind-body dualism in this notion of engagement.

When we are engaged with philosophy in terms of first-order speech, we are fundamentally changing our world. Before reading *The Phenomenology of Perception*, I had uncritically accepted the paradigm of mind body dualism as so many do. The

chapters on perception, the body, motricity, sexuality, language and freedom impacted my being in the world, causing me to relate to each of these aspects of my life in a different way. The same can be said of my responses to many other philosophers I have encountered. Philosophy is not a departure from our reality, but rather a description of it as well as motivating force. And when done well, philosophy opens up new ways of understanding our surroundings and others, and in doing so, it underscores our situation as a *lived* situation making an open call that demands our response.

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Cormac Coyle was born in Lebanon, NH on Nov. 9th 1997. Cormac was raised in Lebanon, graduating from Lebanon High School in 2016. .Majoring in philosophy and French, Cormac also has a minor in political Science. Cormac is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Sigma Tau and Pi Sigma Tau. He has been recognized as the 2020 CLAS Outstanding Graduating Student and has received the Skorpen and Schwartz awards in philosophy.

Upon graduation, Cormac plans to take a break from schooling while exploring his option for graduate level education.