<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Håkansson, L. (2013)

Le Monde Sensible Et Le Monde De L'Expression, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, eds.

Emmanuel de Saint Aubert and Stefan Kristensen

Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 44(1): 105-109

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2013.11006790>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* on 21 Oct 2014, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00071773.2013.11006790>.”

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-37295>

BOOK REVIEW

Lovisa Håkansson

Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, eds. Emmanuel de Saint Aubert and Stefan Kristensen, Genève: Métis Presses, 2011

Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression is one of the two earliest courses that Maurice Merleau-Ponty held at *Collège de France* 1953.¹ It belongs to a period when his philosophy undergoes a radical development, although the texts from these years still remain largely unexplored. This publication, edited by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert and Stefan Kristensen, offers an important elucidation of the very movement of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty from *Phenomenology of Perception* to *The Visible and the Invisible*.

The goal of the course, Merleau-Ponty states, is to deepen the analysis of perception in order to understand:

the expressive relation *the body - the sensible, natural or mute world*
*man - the institutional, cultural or speaking world*²

The relation between the body and the sensible world is the main theme of this course, whereas the relation between man and the cultural world will be treated in another course the following year. The general aim of both studies is to understand the relation between the sensible and the cultural world, as this was insufficiently elaborated in his earlier works. The first lecture presents an important critique of *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty states that, although he wanted to challenge the classical notions, the book “remained nevertheless ordered by classical concepts.”³ Therefore, the relation between perception and being remained enigmatic, and the

¹ The other one, “Recherches sur l’usage littéraire du langage”, is still unpublished.

² p. 63 « rapport expressif corps-monde sensible, naturel ou muet
 homme-monde institutionnel ou de culture ou parlant »

³ p. 45 « restait tout de même ordonnée à des concepts classiques »

ontological implications of his phenomenology unclear. Thus he again approaches the notion of perception and searches to give an account of it in which it is no longer conceived as sensory givenness, but as an “access to being.”⁴ In association with his application for *Collège de France*, Merleau-Ponty formulated a similar critique towards himself; he claimed that *Phenomenology of Perception*⁵ was unable to show how truth emerges in the perceived world, which makes the phenomenological investigations appear to be psychological descriptions that remain distinguished from a true reality beyond them. The Cartesian dichotomies between subject and object, body and soul, that *Phenomenology of Perception* wanted to question, would only be re-established and the world would still be an object, independent of our experience of it.

In *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, Merleau-Ponty again challenges the Cartesian notions. Instead of a positive consciousness that stands in front of an impenetrable extension, he searches to redefine the perceptual consciousness as well as the perceived world. To have consciousness of something can no longer be conceived as a possession of ideas or significations, because such a consciousness “can only have to do with its own significations” and things “can only touch it by awaking one of the significations it conceives.”⁶ The perceptual consciousness is both closer and farther away from the things it perceives, closer because as a part of the world it is not cut off from the perceived but “encroaches on it, surrounds it,” farther away because the perceived only reveals itself “through its vibration in me,”⁷ which means that the things always remain beyond the perception of them.

Consciousness is not “possession of representation” but an “exact divergence [*écart*].”⁸ The perceived thing is not positively given, instead it is negatively defined by what it lacks as much as by what it possesses; it is not an essence, but an “internal logic.”⁹ With the perception of a circle as a privileged example, Merleau-Ponty radicalizes Gestalt-psychology and extends the figure's dependence on the ground to the perceived's dependence on its imperceived. The meaning of the circle is a “mode of divergence”; it is not perceived as the geometrical circle, but as a “change of direction at every moment but always in the same manner,”¹⁰ and that in relation to which it is divergence is not posed, but only recognized in all the points that the circle does not

⁴ p. 46 « d'accès à l'être »

⁵ « Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty », in *Parcours deux 1951-1961*.

⁶ p. 48 « ...cette conscience ne peut avoir affaire qu'à ses significations... », « Rien ne peut la toucher qu'en éveillent en elle une des significations qu'elle conçoit. »

⁷ p. 49 « ... il empiète sur elle, il l'entoure. », « ...par sa vibration en moi... »

⁸ p. 164 « Non possession de représentation. », « écart précis »

⁹ p. 49 « logique interne »

¹⁰ p. 56 « mode d'écart », p.50 « ...change de direction à chaque instant mais toujours de la même façon... »

observe. As perceived, “it offers a *tacit* meaning that reveals itself rather in the exceptions where it is missing than in its own position.”¹¹ The circle is not a sensory givenness, but a meaning that expresses itself before us through a mixture of perception and imperception.

Expression is understood as the “capacity a phenomenon has to, through its internal structure, make another known, that is not or has never even been given.”¹² This expressiveness is found both in the tool and the work, and in a more complex sense also in the work of art. The latter presents a reciprocal relation where man expresses himself in the product at the same time as the product expresses the world. Man is indirectly expressed as “the center of the perspective of these views”; he is present as the “relation between the expression and the expressed.”¹³ It is in this latter sense that “perception is expression”; it is “expression of the world.”¹⁴ The perceived meaning is given in the same way as expression in a painting, where “a stroke of green placed *here* makes a cheek smile without that we know how, due to a syntax we practice without having a science of it.”¹⁵

From the exploration of expression, Merleau-Ponty again poses the question of the relation between the natural and the cultural world. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he understood cultural expression and language to be based on the body’s capacity for expression, which centered it around the subject. The intersubjective character or, as it was later called in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the intercorporeal character, of language was left out, which made the understanding of how language can express a truth that transgresses the individual perspective enigmatic. Here, Merleau-Ponty again approaches the relation between the expressiveness of the body and the expressiveness of language, and this time it is not understood from the bodily gesture, but from the phenomenon of movement. It is here the link between the natural and the cultural worlds is to be found, because, as such movement belongs to the sensible world, where it reveals the expressive relation between the body and the natural world, but it also supports other kinds of significations; it is itself a means to and a capacity for expression of a higher degree.

¹¹ p. 49 « ...il offre un sens comme *tacite* qui se révèle plutôt dans les exceptions où il manque que par sa position propre... »

¹² p. 48 « ... la propriété qu’a un phénomène, par son agencement interne, d’en faire connaître un autre qui n’est pas ou même n’a jamais été donné. »

¹³ p. 57 « centre de perspective de ces vues. », « L’homme est ce rapport entre expression et exprimé. »

¹⁴ p. 48 « perception est expression », « expression du monde »

¹⁵ p. 50 « ... ce sont plutôt des significations comme celles du tableau: une touche de vert placée *ici* fait sourire une joue sans que nous sachions comment, en vertu d’une syntaxe que nous pratiquons sans en avoir la science. »

Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of movement starts from a double critique of, on one hand, an idealist's standpoint and, on the other hand, an empiricist's one.¹⁶ The idealist would examine our verbal concept of movement rather than movement itself and, pretending to know what he searches, only imply what he is to find. The empiricist, on the other hand, would view it as an objective transition between two points. The idealist's view empties the meaning of the phenomenon of movement, whereas the empiricist's view makes movement itself impossible, as Zenon's paradox shows us: if we conceive the room as consisting of an infinite number of parts, there can never be any movement because either the transition between two variable points is done or it is still left to be done, but the movement itself is never there. Merleau-Ponty claims that this is what Bergson sensed, i.e. that it is the actual and infinite division of time and space and their composition from an infinite number of units that made the movement described in Zenon's thought impossible. If movement is to be possible, it requires that time and space are divisible but not divided, that they permit an in-between for the positions and instants, which is not possible in itself.¹⁷ Thus thethetic consciousness "stiffens the movement," which can only be seen "*in the corner of the eye*, on the condition that one does not reflect upon it, that one does not know what he sees, as an appearance or an illusion."¹⁸

In order to show that there is no movement in itself but only the phenomenon of movement, Merleau-Ponty compares the real movement with the stroboscopic. Even when real movement appears, there is only on the retina a successive activation of different regions which means that the perception of it resembles the perception of the stroboscopic, to the extent that a subject that does not know before which is which cannot distinguish between them. With terminology borrowed from Gestalt-psychology, he explains that movement appears in the same way as the figure on the ground, because the figure's segregations are made by man and not given by stimuli, and the identification of the movement is of the same order as the identification of a figure in rest with itself. The movement is composed of "figural" characteristics - it is like the figure that by itself realizes a spatio-temporal segregation.¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty deepens the conception of movement as a figure on a ground, and claims that movement can no longer be understood as a change of place, but instead as a revelation of

¹⁶ p. 70

¹⁷ p. 91

¹⁸ p. 90, « Pas de mouvement devant conscience thetisque qui le fige... », « On ne peut le voir que du coin de l'oeil, à condition de ne pas réfléchir, de ne pas savoir ce qu'on voit, comme apparence ou illusion. »

¹⁹ p. 95f.

being, resulting from its inner configuration.²⁰ He compares the perception of an insect on the window to the one of an airplane at the horizon. They are perceived “without passing through the relation of the objectively appearing size-distance,” i.e. they are not identified by an intellectual resort to an idea, but through a different configuration of the perceived field wherein they describe different structures. They can be confused, i.e. the insect can be thought to be an airplane, but both when they are recognized and mistaken they are perceived as a “*style of movement*.” There is a mutual dependence between the meaning and the style of movement: “the meaning is a means to account for the movement’s style but appears only through it.”²¹ This can be compared to how the expressiveness of language is understood in *Prose of the world*, where Merleau-Ponty describes how the writer makes his language expressive through his characteristic style of using the words. From Saussure, he borrows the idea that significations are negatively defined by their relation to one another, and transposes this idea to the perception of movement:

If one wants to, signs, but in a modern meaning not as a sum of given things but as realizations of one and the same capacity to phonetic variation, that only differs itself by opposing itself, that is diacritical and in interaction. In that sense perception of movement is like reading.²²

The very existence of movement requires, according to Merleau-Ponty, that there must be a “blend of before and after, of here and there, encroachment.” This is only possible if the movement is neither in the things nor for me as a viewing subject, but instead performed “through a kind of blend between me and the things.”²³ The movement is only possible in interplay with our body, our motricity is the “foundation of the object’s mobility.”²⁴

From the phenomenon of movement, and with important influences from Paul Shilder as well as the neurologists Pierre Bonnier and Henry Head, Merleau-Ponty elaborates the notion of the body schema. He describes it as an “opening towards a *world* through motricity”²⁵ and understands it as a schema in the sense that it is a “reference system” and not a thing in space. It is not spread out before us like an object but a “system of immediate, intersensorial

²⁰ p. 102 « Donc ici mouvement = révélation de l’être, résultat de sa configuration interne »

²¹ p. 114 « ...sans passer par le rapport objectif grandeur apparente - distance. », « style de mouvement », « ...le sens est moyen de rendre compte du style de mouvement mais ne paraît justement qu’en lui... »

²² p. 111 « Si l’on veut signes mais au sens moderne non d’une somme de données, mais de réalisations diverses d’une seule puissance de variation phonématique, qui ne se distinguent qu’en s’opposant, qui sont diacritiques et en interaction. En ce sens là perception du mouvement = lecture. »

²³ p. 90 « ... qu’il y ait mélange de l’avant et de l’après, de l’ici et du là, empiètement. », « par une sorte de mélange de moi et des ‘choses’ »

²⁴ p. 120 « Notre motricité comme fondement de la mobilité des objets. »

²⁵ p. 158 « ouverture à un monde par motricité »

equivalences,”²⁶ that arouses the perceived space and reveals both the body’s and the world’s existence. It is “a certain structure of the perceived world and this latter has its roots in it.”²⁷ It is not here in the sense of an interobjective relation, but as my contact with the outside, its voids indicate that we are with it, situated in it. In a normal resting position it is not sensed, because then “the body is similar to its ground” and nothing is “sensed as figure”; it is in relation to this position that everything else is “*divergence, anomaly and thus perceived expressively*.”²⁸ Again, Merleau-Ponty makes a comparison to language: in the same way as language expresses differences in significations and not significations, the body schema is not a perceived thing but an index over our prethetic relation with space, and what we perceive are only differences or divergences in relation to it.²⁹

The body schema is also “relation with the other, language, thought,” and speech described as an “especially fragile superstructure of the body schema.”³⁰ Merleau-Ponty claims that language is that which “sublimates the most the human movement” because here the “body opens itself to a gesticulation according to a law of construction that is not natural, not gestural.”³¹ Language can no longer be understood as based on the bodily gesture, as it was in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and although there are a number of analogies drawn between the body’s relation to the perceived and our relation to language, the latter “passes to another order.”³² With the discussion of movement, Merleau-Ponty accounts for how natural expression can be transformed into cultural expression, but not how the difference between them should be conceived. He states that language is “not only sketching a perspective, an articulation of the physical and social world, but further reaches a *truth*.”³³ Does this mean that language has a privileged position as a vehicle of truth? Merleau-Ponty asserts that this will be further examined in another course next year, which means that he does not answer to the initial problem of the perceived’s relation to being and truth, but rather prepares the path for an answer.

²⁶ p. 129 « système de référence », « système d’équivalences intersensorielles immédiates »

²⁷ p. 144 « Donc le schéma corporel est aussi une certaine structure du monde perçu et ce dernier a sa racine en lui. »

²⁸ p. 143 « rien ne serait senti comme figure », « le corps rejoindrait son fond », « écart, anomalie, expressément perçu. »

²⁹ p. 143

³⁰ p. 164 « superstructure particulièrement fragile du schéma corporel », p. 158 « relation avec autrui, langage, pensée »

³¹ p. 164 « sublime davantage le mouvement humain », p. 162 « ... le corps s’ouvrant à gesticulation selon loi de construction (langue) non naturelle, non gestuelle ... »

³² p. 165 « passe à un autre ordre »

³³ p. 162 « ... non seulement dessiner une perspective, une articulation du monde physique et social, mais encore rejoindre une vérité. »

As he places the divergence of the consciousness and the perceived in the center of his understanding of perception, he prepares the tools for the ontology that will be elaborated in his later philosophy; an ontology that presents a real alternative to Cartesian idealism, because it operates outside of its concepts. Instead of the Cartesian impenetrable extension he displays the perceived world as an interplay of imperception and perception. Instead of a positive consciousness that possesses its ideas he shows how the perceptual consciousness is opened towards the world through its voids. With the phenomenon of movement, he indicates how the body and the world surround and encroach on one another. In a dialogue with Gestalt-psychology, Pierre Bonnier, Henry Head and Paul Schilder, the discussion of movement is deepened through the elaboration of the body schema. As stated above, it is described as an opening towards the world through our motricity and gives an account of the mutual dependence between the body and the world. Perception is performed through their interaction and can now be understood as an expression of being, in which being reveals itself before us.

The greatest advantage of the course is how it displays a number of central themes in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. It gives important insights into the understanding of expression, perception, movement and the body schema, as well as shows which questions they arise from. The course is essential in order to understand the development of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, as it prepares for the later ontology without introducing a rupture with his earlier works. Instead, it deepens and transforms the earlier discussion on perception through a critical encounter, where its ontological implications are extended and made more radical.