

Chapter 5

From Dialectic to Reversibility: A Critical Change of Subject-Object Relation in Merleau-Ponty's Thought

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Abstract: This essay is trying to clarify the process of the change of the subject-object relation in Merleau-Ponty's writings. This process is deeply concerned with his own reading of Husserl. This philosopher's "shadow," namely, that which was unthought by Husserl, became more and more his main theme, and this motivates him to abandon the dialectical synthesis of subject and object, not only in the realm of the superior human ego, but also in the kinaesthesia of the human body.

It is perhaps the case that Merleau-Ponty, throughout his *Phénoménologie de la perception*, gave no word such an ambiguous meaning as the word "object" or "objective." I think this is one of the main reasons why this book is so difficult to understand. This is not a contingent matter, because considered in the wider perspective—namely, between his first book, *La Structure du comportement* (1942), and his posthumous work, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (1963)—Merleau-Ponty's idea of the Subject-Object relation changed remarkably, and accordingly in his second book, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), the position of the object towards the subject is just in the process of changing.

I

In his first book, *La Structure du comportement*, it is evident that Merleau-Ponty uses Gestalt theory as his method in order to achieve the goal of his book, namely to "understand the relations of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or even social."¹ As a Gestalt is a total structural unity of elements with a proper sense, the constructing principle of which

1. Merleau-Ponty, *La Structure du comportement* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1942), 1; *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 3 [cited hereafter as SC, with French preceding English pagination].

is dialectical, the synthetic coincidence of each of its constructing elements is self-evident. A Gestalt could be a Gestalt insofar as it could integrate any independent or even opposing elements or lower Gestalts into itself and make them its subordinate structure.

“In a form [i.e., Gestalt], the whole is not the sum of its parts” (SC 163/150):

The relation of each order to the higher order is that of the partial to the total. . . . The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them. This is why we have spoken of a human order rather than of a mental or rational order. The so frequent distinction of the mental and the somatic has its place in pathology but cannot serve for the knowledge of normal man, that is, of integrated man, since in him the somatic processes do not unfold in isolation but are integrated into a cycle of more extensive action. It is not a question of two *de facto* orders external to each other, but of two types of relations, the second of which integrates the first. (SC 195/180–1)

The higher behavior retains the subordinate dialectics in the present depths of its existence. “They are not recognizable in the whole when it functions correctly, but the disintegration in case of partial lesion attests to their immanence” (SC 224/208). There is a duality that reappears always on one level or another: hunger or thirst disturbs thinking or sentiments; the properly sexual dialectic is usually visible through a passion. The integration is never absolute, and it is always stranded, whether at a higher level in a writer, or at a lower one in an aphasiac, says Merleau-Ponty.

There always comes a moment when we divest ourselves of a passion because of fatigue or self-respect. This duality is not a simple fact; it is founded in principle—all integration presupposing the normal functioning of subordinated formations, which always demand their own due.

But it is not a duality of substances; or, in other words, the notions of soul and body must be relativized: there is the body as mass of chemical components in interaction, the body as dialectic of living being and its biological milieu, and the body as dialectic of social subject and his group; even all our habits are an impalpable body for the ego of each moment. Each of these degrees is soul with respect to the preceding one, body with respect to the following one. (SC 226–7/210)

Following this principle, Merleau-Ponty found three types of Gestalt as regionally fundamental: Physical order, Vital order, and Human order. “[M]atter, life and mind must participate unequally in the nature of form; they must represent different degrees of integration and, finally, must constitute a hierarchy in which individuality is progressively achieved” (SC 143/133). From here on, the vital order integrated into the human order is called by him the “phenomenal body” (SC 169/156).

The phenomenal body is a dialectical relation not only with biological nature, but also with an economic, social, and cultural nature (second nature). But to pertain to the economic, social, and cultural world is not yet a sufficient definition of the human order. “What defines man is not the capacity to create a second nature—economic, social or cultural—beyond biological nature; it is rather the capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create others” (SC 189/175). The existential character of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of humanity is quite evident at this point. (I will return later to this problematical idea.)

But for our investigation of his idea of object, I will quote here a very interesting example that Merleau-Ponty uses to clarify the difference between human and ape:

[I]f an ape picks a branch in order to reach a goal, it is because it is able to confer a functional value on an object of nature. But . . . we have seen that, having become a stick for the ape, the tree branch is eliminated as such—which is the equivalent of saying that it is never possessed as an instrument in the full sense of the word. . . . For man, on the contrary, the tree branch which has become a stick will remain precisely a tree-branch-which-has-become-a-stick, the same *thing* in two different functions and visible *for him* under a plurality of aspects. (SC 189–90/175)

Merleau-Ponty says that this ability makes it possible for humans alone to create instruments for virtual use, even without the factual pressure of a situation.

Thus the Merleau-Ponty of *La Structure du comportement* seeks to clarify the inner relation of consciousness and nature, including the body, by using Gestalt theory and arrives at three types of dialectical structure: the Physical, the Vital, and the Human, the latter of which, as a higher order, integrates the former orders into itself as subordinates. As Merleau-Ponty calls the higher order of this hierarchy “mind” and the lower order “body,” we may

also call them “subject” and “object” and regard his dialectical Gestalt system of hierarchy as subject-object dialectics.

In seeking the philosophical foundation of Gestalt theory, however, Merleau-Ponty was content neither with naive Empirical realism nor with Kantian transcendental idealism, which, according to him, eliminates the original experience of the real world. He wants to define transcendental philosophy anew in a way that allows it transcendently to integrate the phenomena of the real world into itself and to gather up all the life of consciousness *en soi* into consciousness *pour soi*. “To return to perception as to a type of original experience in which the real world is constituted in its specificity is to impose upon oneself an inversion of the natural movement of consciousness” (SC 236/220). In his footnote, he identifies this inversion of consciousness with the phenomenological reduction in the sense of the late philosophy of Husserl.

From the last pages of *La Structure du comportement*, I think we can surmise quite well the reason that led Merleau-Ponty to Husserlian Phenomenology. Gestalt theory based upon dialectics treats human consciousness as a subjective Gestalt synthesizing the objective Gestalt, but it never reaches self-consciousness as the first person, the ego, who is the ultimate origin of cognitive evidence. For a given subjective Gestalt, the “human” is always the third person that is a kind of object for an anonymous (first person) observer of the Gestalt. Merleau-Ponty never wants to abandon the dialectical structure of the human. He wants only to ground it philosophically, with the evidence of the free consciousness that not only intends any Gestalt in the world as perception, but can also project the world itself as the ground of such object-intentionalities. But, in a sense, such human consciousness surpasses any Gestalt, because it can transcend any given Gestalt structure by creating a new meaning. It is the “invisible” in a genuine sense. And the phenomenological reduction is, in a sense, the only method to make this invisible visible.

The second problem that seems to have led Merleau-Ponty to phenomenology is the problem of the alter ego. Not only my ego, but also the ego of the other, surpasses any Gestalt and is invisible. Though, of course, the alter ego often appears through the various social and cultural sedimentations in the world, he or she sometimes presents himself or herself to me more directly, especially in the case of dialogical speech. In order to grasp the appearing of such an invisible other consciousness, I suggest, Merleau-Ponty has to proceed from Gestalt theory to phenomenology.

At the same time, however, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology could not, from the beginning, be the same as Husserl's phenomenology. The transcendental subjectivity that intentionally constitutes elements of the natural and social world (namely, the lifeworld) is not the superior ego for Merleau-Ponty, as it is for Husserl, but is rather the inferior impersonal subjectivity that is subordinate to the world-projecting personal ego. Transcendental subjectivity as anonymity (*l'on*) belongs originally to the vital order, integrated into the higher human order. Merleau-Ponty's assertion of the essential imperfection of the phenomenological reduction necessarily results from this hierarchically founded position of transcendental subjectivity.

II

Now let us turn to Merleau-Ponty's second book, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, which is in ultimate principle no longer based upon Gestalt theory, but rather declares itself to be a new development of Husserlian phenomenology.

As I suggested above, Merleau-Ponty needed a new method in order to treat the epistemological grounding of the world-structure by consciousness, because this is a special kind of relation that surpasses any hierarchical relation in Gestalt theory. "I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them."² It is an absolute self-transcending relation of the ego to the world-Gestalt, which is also the main theme of Husserlian phenomenology and is disclosed only by the methodological reduction of the general thesis. This is because this self-transcending relation is already involved, before its transcendence, in a kind of ontological relation with the world, and in the core of this ontological relation stands my non-objective body in a still anonymous figure. Phenomenological reduction was originally intended to minimize the effect of this ontological relation upon consciousness by bracketing it, but Husserl himself gradually became aware that what is in the bracket is as important as the residuum, although he could not ultimately thematize this anonymous

2. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), iii; *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962; rev. 1981), ix [cited hereafter as PhP, with French preceding English pagination].

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