

DISCUSSION

MERLEAU-PONTY ON MEANING, MATERIALITY, AND STRUCTURE¹

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It is at the end of *The Structure of Behavior* that Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests for the first time that the important idea of “structure” or “form” might have some special relation to *materiality*:

People have long spoken of infantile ‘animism’; but the expression seems improper to the extent that it evokes an interpretation in which the child would confer a signification on the qualitative givens which is distinct from them, would construct souls to explain things. The truth is that there are no things, only physiognomies – just as in adults a mescaline intoxication can give animal appearances to objects and *make* an owl out of a clock without any hallucinatory image whatsoever. ‘In nature,’ says Goya, ‘there are as few colors as lines.’ But even if there is no line which does not have a physiognomy for the child, still the *physiognomy must be delineated in a minimum of matter* [stress added]. What can be the appearance of this sensible support?

It is here that the notion of ‘form’ will permit us to continue the analysis. The form is a visible or sonorous configuration (or even a configuration which is prior to the distinction of the senses) in which the sensory value of each element is determined by its function in the whole and varies with it. The thresholds of chromatic perception are different for the same spot of color depending on whether it is perceived as ‘figure’ or ‘ground.’ This same notion of form will permit us to describe the mode of existence of the primitive objects of perception. They are lived as realities, we have said, rather than known as true objects.²

David Schenck has argued that this formulation, wherein it is insisted that physiognomy must be delineated “in a minimum of matter,” and from which perspective it is important to determine “the appearance of this sensible support,” reveals what Schenck refers to as “a lingering attachment to a matter/form distinction, and therefore to a substantialist metaphysic.”³ Schenck is especially concerned that the way that the doctrine of “form” is presented by Merleau-Ponty in this passage as the resolution of this particular problem betrays a deterioration in an earlier, superior doctrine of “form” or “structure”.

Schenck is afraid that the earlier doctrine, which dominated the first two parts of *Structure of Behavior*, and which construed “structure” or “form” as indicating quite generally the Gestalt-coherences, the “mutual-foundedness” of meaningful wholes and their constituent parts, gets abandoned in the third and fourth parts of the book in favor of a notion of structure as “ideas embedded in supporting materiality, without which meanings could not be actualized.”⁴ The problem with this, for Schenck, is that,

Seeking to exalt the lived and the material over the ‘merely virtual known,’ Merleau-Ponty unwittingly keeps alive that very distinction that has done the most to demean the material domains of flux; and he has thus not only lost, but has buried, some of his own most promising insights.⁵

Schenck cites a few more passages from *Structure of Behavior* that tend to shore up his case. They are important to review since, in the end, they all point toward the important doctrine of the “materiality of meaning” that plays a fundamental role in *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. If Schenck were right in viewing these developments as part of a *retreat* to a matter/form distinction, this would be quite earth-shaking. In a late passage that Schenck takes as explicit acknowledgment of a shift in the notion of “structure”, Merleau-Ponty writes:

What is profound in the notion of ‘Gestalt’ from which we started is not the idea of signification but that of *structure*, the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state.⁶

Concerning this passage, Schenck comments as follows:

Signification and structure are to be distinguished. As should be clear by now, this constitutes a re-definition of the notion of structure (some eighteen pages from the end of the book). Structure is hereafter the conjunction of matter (presumably without meaning or significance, without an ‘idea’) and matterless, spiritual ideas. It is matter ‘arranged’ in a meaningful way.⁷

Such a reversal would indeed tend to undermine the general effort at overcoming the matter/form dichotomy.

It is not entirely obvious, however, that Schenck’s reading is a fair one. Clues to a more sympathetic reading of Merleau-Ponty’s apparently varying understanding of “structure” may be found in an early set of passages that Schenck takes as early warnings of “confusion” in Merleau-Ponty’s doctrine. These are to be found in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of different “forms” of behavior:

...it should be possible – and it is necessary – to classify behavior, no longer into elementary and complex behavior as has often been done, but according to whether the structure in behavior is submerged in the content or, on the contrary, emerges from it to become, at the limit, the proper theme of activity. From this point of view, one could distinguish ‘syncretic forms,’ ‘amovable forms’ and ‘symbolic forms.’ These three categories do not correspond to three groups of animals: there is no species of animal whose behavior *never* goes beyond the syncretic level nor any whose behavior *never* descends below the symbolic forms. Nevertheless, animals can be distributed along this scale according to the type of behavior which is most typical of them.⁸

Schenck is concerned about the “...shadow appearance of the traditional distinction between form and content or form and matter” in this passage. He is also intrigued by

...the entailed implication that it is in the *human* order...that form comes closest to dominating content, or matter. Instead of a notion of form as meaning-unities, we now have a distinction between form and content. Under a consistently developed philosophy of form or structure as meaning-unity, ‘content’ as described in the passage would itself be one type of ‘form’. But here, closer to the metaphysical tradition, content is *opposed* to form.

Schenck is surely right to worry about the possibility that Merleau-Ponty is sliding back to the “metaphysical tradition.” This would be disastrous, especially if such backsliding were to be, as Schenck suspects, the basis for the later work in *Phenomenology of Perception*. A more charitable understanding of Merleau-Ponty is possible, however, and the key is to be found in these passages concerning the “syncretic,” “amovable,” and “symbolic” forms.

The distinction Merleau-Ponty has in mind is no absolute distinction, no ultimate opposition of form to content: there are just different forms after all, different structures. These are just what Schenck calls “meaning unities.” For any one form or structure of behavior, there may of course be some internal distinction to be made that resembles the form/matter distinction of the metaphysical tradition, but this is fully relativized to particular meaning-unities.

In distinguishing among the various characteristic forms of behavior – and trying to go beyond traditional distinctions between “elementary” and “complex” behavior – it appears that organisms differ in the extent to which their behavior is motivated by symbols, by abstractions. Although the three “forms” are unfortunately named, the principle that guides their differentiation seems clearest in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the “amovable” forms.¹⁰ He thinks that chimpanzee behavior is characterizable as being of this “amovable” type, and this is intermediate between “syncretic” behavior (ants are his example) and “symbolic” behavior (us).

Citing Koehler¹¹, Merleau-Ponty contends that chimps are perfectly able to run behind a barrier to get fruit, but quite *unable* to push fruit away in order to maneuver it around the back of a barrier. He argues that chimpanzees can’t really treat their environments as filled with *things* that offer different prospects. Instead, he thinks, there are just the various prospects, not coalesced into things. He refers also to the chimpanzee’s apparent ability to use a particular box for climbing on, or for leaning on, on separate occasions (with some clues being given), while being *unable* to use the very box on which it has been leaning as a ladder at that time.

...the box-as-seat and the box-as-instrument are two distinct and alternative objects in the behavior of the chimpanzee and not two *aspects* of an identical *thing*...rather the object appears clothed with a ‘vector,’ invested with a ‘functional value’ which depends on the effective composition of the field.¹²

The *richness* of such vectors is just what distinguishes chimpanzees from ants and from people. For creatures whose characteristic behavior is “amovable”, structure is still to a considerable extent “submerged in the content of the behavior,” but it has *begun* to emerge as a “theme of action” in its own right.

What is it that the chimpanzee is unable to do that accounts for the difference between its behavior and ours? According to Merleau-Ponty, it appears to be a matter of viewing the world in terms of coalescences of use-potential. It is not that the chimp doesn’t see the world in terms of use-potential, it is rather that boxes and bananas and sticks do not present themselves to chimps in quite the multiply useful ways that they do to humans.¹³

In trying to make this distinction, is Merleau-Ponty committed to a traditional metaphysical form/matter cleavage? Probably not. The intended distinction appears to be among different levels of richness or sophistication in perceiving potential use-value in the world. The sense in which “structure” is relatively “submerged in the content of behavior” is just the degree to which animals are motivated by particular and presently demanded use-value within the environment, as opposed to being motivated by coalescences of varieties of potential use-values. The progression: “syncretic,” “amovable,” and “symbolic” forms of behavior is a progression of different styles of behavior.

It must be admitted, though, that the notion of “structure” being “submerged in content” is certainly a confusing way to put the matter, if indeed we are trying to avoid the traditional metaphysical bifurcations between form and matter, subject and object, mind and body. It is precisely here that J.J. Gibson’s notion of affordances, suitably purged of its specifically empirical dependencies, can come to the rescue.¹⁴ What *all* these animals respond to – ants, chimps, people – are affordances. These *are* no more than potential use-values within an environment, specified in terms of the needs and capacities of the animals whose environment we are thinking of. The *differences* among the affordances that different animals are suited to respond to are always functions of characteristics of the animals themselves, but they may also be discussed in terms of their characteristic relative richness of detail, their specificity, their “vector” character, etc. They capture and facilitate all the things that Merleau-

Ponty was trying to say in these passages that trouble Schenck so much, and they do so without raising the specter of the traditional form/matter distinction in any way at all.¹⁵

In the end, it is not absolutely clear that Merleau-Ponty ever meant to *replace* what Schenck refers to as the “unity of meanings” interpretation of “structure” with a “material meanings” interpretation. A particular problem-setting – for example, an attempt to understand the “truth in naturalism” or the “truth in dualism” – may very well require a particular mode of expression. I have been arguing that the mode of expression chosen by Merleau-Ponty for these purposes, while unfortunate in some of its apparent implications, need not be interpreted as recommitting him to the doctrine he spent his life working to renounce. I have argued that this would have been clearer had he been able to avail himself of the Gibsonian notion of affordances, which capture perfectly what he was reaching for. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in “The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences,”

...we cannot apply the classical distinction of form and matter to perception, nor can we conceive the perceiving subject as a consciousness which ‘interprets,’ ‘deciphers,’ or ‘orders’ a sensible matter according to an ideal law which it possesses. Matter is ‘pregnant’ with its form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon and ultimately in the ‘world.’ We experience a perception and its horizon ‘in action’ ...rather than by ‘posing’ them or explicitly ‘knowing’ them.¹⁶

I have argued that Merleau-Ponty’s views on structure mark no real departure from this central tenet.

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References

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2. *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p.168.
3. David Schenck, “Meaning and/or Materiality: Merleau-Ponty’s Notions of Structure”, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 1984, pp. 34-50.
4. Schenck, op.cit., p. 35.
5. Schenck, op.cit., p. 48.
6. *Structure*, pp. 206-07.
7. Schenck, op.cit., p. 44.
8. *Structure*, pp. 103-04. Schenck’s reference to this passage contains a typographical error which sends readers to page 130.
9. Schenck, op.cit., p. 42.
10. See especially *Structure*, pp. 113-20.
11. *Intelligenzprüfungen an Menschenaffen*, second ed., Berlin, 1921 (E. Winters, trans., *The Mentality of Apes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1925).
12. *Structure*, p. 116.
13. Whether all these conclusions are really true of chimpanzees is not here at issue. Rather, the point is to get clear on what Merleau-Ponty is trying to distinguish.
14. For a more detailed discussion of the relation between Gibsonian “affordances” and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical approach, see John T. Sanders, “Merleau-Ponty, Gibson, and the Materiality of Meaning,” *Man and World*, July 1993, pp. 287-302.
15. As M.C. Dillon observes, “Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception invites us to attend to the phenomenon as it appears in its richness and multi-determinability, that is, as lending itself to subsumption under a plurality of categories and to placement within a plurality of practical horizons and theoretical contexts. It is this richness of meaning that

underlies Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the intrinsic ambiguity of phenomena, a thesis that has been widely misunderstood..."Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 53.

16. In Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, edited and introduced by James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 12-42. The cited passage is at p.12. The article as a whole is a translation of an address to the Société française de philosophie in 1946.

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