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The Upsurge of Spontaneity and the Rise of an Undivided Subject: The Role and Place of Merleau-Ponty in the Dreyfus-McDowell Debate

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1.

In an attempt to dispel “traditional prejudices” and to “return to phenomena,” Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that conceptualist accounts of perception eradicate the true distinction between sense experience and judgment.[1] He writes:

Ordinary experience draws a clear distinction between sense experience and judgment. It sees judgment as the taking of a stand, as an effort to know something which shall be valid for myself every moment of my life, and equally for other actual or potential minds; sense experience, on the contrary, is taking appearance at its face value, without trying to possess it and learn its truth. This distinction disappears in intellectualism, because judgment is everywhere where pure sensation is not – that is, absolutely everywhere. The evidence of phenomena will therefore everywhere be challenged.[2]

Fidelity to experience, Merleau-Ponty contends, dictates a distinction between sense experience and judgment. But intellectualism, by maintaining that every perception is conceptual – that every sense experience is already a judgment – obliterates this distinction. Along with it, the hypothesis of a pre-conceptual engagement with the world is also rejected.

In his 2005 Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association, Hubert Dreyfus quotes the above passage in order to epitomize the view that he is criticizing. Dreyfus argues that John McDowell’s view, as presented to us in *Mind and World*, is a form of intellectualism, for it maintains the unboundedness of concepts, or, to put it differently, that perception is fully permeated by concepts. Contrary to Dreyfus, who readily accepts a pre-thematic engagement with the world as mandated by phenomena themselves, McDowell rejects the possibility of a nonconceptual experience, and argues that the “space of reasons” is always coextensive with the “space of concepts.”[3]

In this multifaceted debate between the two authors, Merleau-Ponty has been unambiguously placed on the side of Dreyfus. McDowell has even named Merleau-Ponty as one of Dreyfus’ “phenomenologist heroes.”[4]

Admittedly, the points of intersection between Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus are numerous. Merleau-Ponty, like Dreyfus, holds that our pre-thematic openness to the world is not void of signification, but already embedded with meaning. At the same time, however, this experience is not of the form that McDowell requires it to be: it is meaningful but not conceptual. Thus, perception is not coextensive with judgment. Conceptual activity, for both Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus, is founded upon a more basic, pre-thematic, unreflective engagement with the world. Spontaneity, thus, is the result of the transformation of the nonconceptual to the conceptual. “What makes us special,” Dreyfus writes (and Merleau-Ponty would agree with some reservations, as will become explicit later on) “isn’t that, unlike animals, we can *respond directly* to the conceptual structure of our environment; it’s that, unlike animals, we can *transform* our unthinking nonconceptual engagement, and thereby encounter new, thinkable structures.”[5]

In what follows, I argue that this transformation of which Dreyfus speaks is only partially in agreement with Merleau-Ponty’s account. More explicitly, I demonstrate that whereas Dreyfus holds that the difference between the nonconceptual and the conceptual is a difference in kind, Merleau-Ponty puts forth a more nuanced explanation of the relationship between the two: Namely, by arguing that the two differ *both* in degree and in kind, Merleau-Ponty does away with the exclusive dualism that Dreyfus inherits by maintaining a difference in kind, which is a radical or categorical difference.

2.

Although Dreyfus seems to be postponing the task of making explicit how the transformation of the nonconceptual to the conceptual comes about – as a task, perhaps, more suitable for younger phenomenologists or, more telling, for the phenomenologists to come, the phenomenologists of the future – Merleau-Ponty takes up this issue, in at least two places in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In these two instances, Merleau-Ponty struggles with this issue and despite the fact that no firm and conclusive result is reached, he provides us with invaluable insights.

The most explicit undertaking of this task occurs in the chapter on temporality. There, Merleau-Ponty tells us that subjectivity, as authentic temporality or a primordial openness to the world, is neither exclusively active nor exclusively passive but, rather, it is both. The subject is “not the creator of time.”[6] He does not initiate temporality, but instead time flows through him, ignoring his every action. By being-temporal, the subject is always already a subject-in-the-world. In the midst of circumstances, the subject finds himself not yet as a self. It discovers himself as a pre-personal project that has already begun. The factual nature of the subject, along with the anonymity that primordial openness entails, is precisely what Merleau-Ponty means by claiming that temporality, and as a consequence the subject, is passive.[7] But temporality is that which also bestows activity on the subject. For it is always in the present – a present in which all three temporal dimensions co-exist – that our ability to project, recollect, or transcend, is granted.[8] It is thus, in the constant flow, in the flux of the interlocking future and present horizons, that we “find a remedy against time.”[9] That is to say, it is out of time that our ability to conceptualize is born. Merleau-Ponty writes:

There can therefore be no question of deriving time from spontaneity. We are not temporal beings *because* we are spontaneous and because, as consciousnesses, we tear ourselves away from ourselves. On the contrary, time is the foundation and measure of our spontaneity...

which dwells within us and is ourselves, is itself given to us with temporality and life.[10]

Intellectual understanding is always a construction or synthesis. But prior to this synthesis, the world and things in the world already appear to us as (potentially) meaningful because we are in essence temporal.[11] According to the account advanced by Merleau-Ponty, understanding arises as the effect of an operative intentionality, a pre-conceptual engagement with the world. Spontaneity is derivative of temporality, and it is that which furnishes us with the ability to conceptualize, step back, and reflect.

There is, however, an additional account of the transformation from the nonconceptual to the conceptual. This can be found in an earlier chapter entitled “‘Attention’ and ‘Judgment,’” which is part of the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. There, Merleau-Ponty explains that “this passage from the indeterminate to the determinate, this recasting at every moment of its own history in the unity of a new meaning, is thought itself.”[12] The passage from the nonconceptual yet meaningful to the conceptual, the passage from mere perception to judgment, is one which is best described as thought and requires the agent’s attention. Merleau-Ponty explains this transformation as follows:

The miracle of consciousness consists in its bringing to light, through attention, phenomena which re-establish the unity of the object in a new dimension at the very moment they destroy it. Thus attention is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the *active constitution of a new object* which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon.[13]

Even though Merleau-Ponty claims that after these considerations we are now in a position to “finally understand how it [attention] emerges from its liberty of indifference and gives itself a present object,” the exact nature of this transformation remains unclear.[14] Is the change from the nonconceptual to the conceptual one of degree or one of kind?

As evidence for the former, we can cite Merleau-Ponty’s claim that attention is not a mere explication of “pre-existing data.” [15] He states that “to pay attention is...to bring about a new articulation of them [the pre-existing data].”[16] Attention, as the move from the indeterminate to the determinate, “is literally a question of creation.”[17] The inattentive perceiver neither perceives chaos, nor distinct properties and completely unified objects. Rather, pure or absorbed perception is the perception of an “indeterminate horizon,” and it is this horizon that attentive perception transforms into determinate objects.[18] These comments indicate that the difference between the nonconceptual and the conceptual is one of kind. Hence, Merleau-Ponty opposes, what can be called, the “camera model” of attention. That is, he rejects the view that our pre-thematic engagement with the world is just like a reflective and disengaged examination of states of affairs, with the exception that the former is an out of focus picture of the latter. Attention is not a matter of adjusting the indeterminate horizons, little by little, until they become clear, distinct and determinate. Rather, attention is a transformation, between two states that differ in kind.

However, in the chapter on temporality, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the difference between nonconceptual behavior and reflective behavior is also one of degree. As was already mentioned, there he announces that time is most properly characterized as being both active and passive. Time flows constantly, and even spontaneity, as a “remedy against” time, is still temporal in nature: when we judge and form concepts, for

instance, time flows through us in the exact same manner that time flows when we are unreflectively engaged with the world.[19] Most importantly though, Merleau-Ponty argues that “[a] spontaneity ‘acquired’ once and for all, and one which ‘perpetuates itself in being in virtue of its being acquired’ is precisely time and subjectivity.”[20] This aforementioned claim does not run counter to Merleau-Ponty’s contention that spontaneity is derivative of time. What comes first is always time. But this relation can neither be temporal nor causal. [21] The relation should rather be understood as a logical relation. Hence, time is only logically anterior to spontaneity: it is not temporally anterior, nor can time be divorced from spontaneity. Where there is time, there is spontaneity. Thus, we can conclude that time is both a passivity (a flow) and an activity (a perpetual spontaneity).

In fact, this double nature of temporality is what forces Merleau-Ponty to state the following: “We are not in some incomprehensible way an activity joined to a passivity, an automatism surmounted by a will, a perception surmounted by a judgment, but wholly active and wholly passive, because we are the upsurge of time.”[22] But if we are both *wholly* active and *wholly* passive, the passage from sense experience to judgment cannot be one that involves a change in kind. By taking up a reflective stance, we do not shed our temporal skin, nor give up our spontaneity when we lose ourselves in our projects. We are always already temporal and as such, we are both active and passive.[23]

In addition, and with respect to the relation between understanding and temporality, Merleau-Ponty writes:

Every active process of signification or *Sinn-gebung* appeared as derivative and secondary in relation to the pregnancy of meaning within signs which could serve to define the world. We found beneath the intentionality of acts...an operative intentionality...a ‘Logos of the aesthetic world.’[24]

We are able to conceptualize only because there is already an operative intentionality in play. By citing Husserl, Merleau-Ponty describes this intentionality as the “Logos of the aesthetic world.” Our ability to conceptualize and judge, or, more precisely, our ability to be rational and thus a *zoon logos echein*, is founded upon our involvement with another kind of “Logos.” This again suggests that the difference between attention and immersed, pre-thematic experience is one of degree. We become rational or spontaneous, that is, we become in a possession of *logos*, only because we are already in touch with another kind of “Logos.”

The change from the nonconceptual to the conceptual is a change from one end of the spectrum of logos to the other. It is a change between two states that differ in degree. But, we have already seen that for Merleau-Ponty, the difference that attention brings about is also one of kind. Hence, we have to conclude that Merleau-Ponty maintains, rather paradoxically, that the difference between attention and absorbed coping is both a difference in kind and a difference in degree.

3.

Dreyfus also discusses the double nature of human experience, and he, like Merleau-Ponty, will agree that the reflective attitude does not constitute a rejection of our temporality. Human beings, he tells us, are characterized both by their ability to reflect and by their ability to be involved in a “nonconceptual embodied coping.”[25] Moreover, both Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus concur that what comes first – that is, what is

existentially anterior – is always the latter. But Dreyfus, unlike Merleau-Ponty, is not ambiguous about the nature of the passage from the nonconceptual to the conceptual. He writes: “analytic attention brings about a radical transformation of the affordances given to absorbed coping.”[26] Attention brings a radical transformation, that is, it brings about a change in kind and not a change in degree.

Interestingly, Dreyfus wants to maintain that pure perception, or embodied coping, transcends the domain of logos. In a passage where he criticizes McDowell’s appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, Dreyfus first cites Heidegger and then criticizes McDowell for failing to take notice of Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle. In more detail, Dreyfus cites Heidegger saying that “in [*phronesis*] there is accomplished something like a pure perceiving, one that no longer falls within the domain of logos,” and then states that “McDowell, however, would no doubt reply that there couldn’t be any such logos-free pure perception.”[27] Dreyfus’ objection to McDowell makes manifest that for him, pure perceiving should be logos-free. But if we take seriously Merleau-Ponty’s claims that “we are *wholly* active and *wholly* passive,” that every act of signification is founded upon a “Logos of the aesthetic world,” or that subjectivity is “a spontaneity ‘acquired’ once and for all, and one which ‘perpetuates itself in being in virtue of its being acquired,’” we then have to reject that Dreyfus can be both faithful to his “hero” and, at the same time, claim that pure perception is logos-free.[28] Although Dreyfus makes it clear that logos-free does not equal an absence of meaning, he still has to make explicit the differences between the two and even more pressing, he has to illustrate how a logos-free perceiving is meaningful.

Of course, this is not to say that Merleau-Ponty is closer to McDowell than to Dreyfus. Instead, what this suggests is that, like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty takes discourse – and not language – to be an existential structure of the embodied subject.[29] This primordial “Logos,” upon which analytic attention is grounded, does not yet take the shape of propositional language, as McDowell would have it. Yet, a primordial “Logos” is always a logos. These considerations bring to the light a disagreement between Dreyfus and Merleau-Ponty: Dreyfus – by arguing that the difference between analytic attention and absorbed coping, and between pure perception and judgment, is *only* one of kind – adopts a position which is in fact more extreme than Merleau-Ponty’s. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the difference between analytic attention and absorbed coping is both a difference in kind and in degree. As such, he is able to bring attention and absorbed coping closer together.

4.

To maintain that the difference between two distinct states is both a matter of degree and of a kind is not to commit a logical fallacy. In fact, this model of difference is used to explain the physical phenomenon of phase transitions, that is, the transition of a thermodynamical system from one state to another. Let us consider the example of water turning into ice. This transformation occurs by successively decreasing the temperature of water until, at a critical point, it turns into ice. On one level, ice can be characterized as something that differs radically from water: to state the obvious, ice is a solid whereas water is a liquid. On a different level, however – that is, on an atomic level – the difference is not so radical. On that level, what occurs is the breaking of a symmetry: namely, the same atoms arranged differently bring about a change in state. In that case, the entire volume of the thermodynamical system, which was once wholly fluid, now becomes wholly solid.

Finally, one may wonder: what is the philosophical benefit of maintaining that this should be the model of explanation of the transformation from the nonconceptual to the nonconceptual? The answer lies in the fact that this explanatory model does away with a dualism that threatens Dreyfus's account of human behavior. Dreyfus holds that human behavior falls under two main categories: either we are involved in a mindless coping, or we take up the reflective stance. What explains the latter – namely, the following of various rules – falls short of explaining the former. There are no rules, either implicit or explicit, that one follows when one is fully engaged in a project. In such a case, we “regress” into a more basic and immediate interaction with the world. The world presents itself in a certain manner, and we react to it without having to consider our actions.

Under Dreyfus's view, an explanation of human behavior takes the form of an exclusive dualism: we are either absorbed or attentive, and there can be no explicit connection between the two. There is a categorical difference between an expert athlete, for instance, and a competent one. To use the analogy of the ice/water transition, according to Dreyfus, what we are, most fundamentally, is water. Analytic attention takes us from this state of fluidity (absorbed coping) to one of rigidity (reflective stance). This analogy fits Dreyfus' explanation of the Knoblauch case (a professional baseball athlete who purportedly could not throw to first base whenever he had to think about the throw) quite nicely. But Merleau-Ponty, or at least the Merleau-Ponty that was presented here, would neither hold that we are ice/rigid nor water/fluid. The analysis should be performed at a more fundamental level, one which permits us to circumvent the threat of dualism. That is, the analysis should be carried to the atomic level, the level of temporality. With reference to that level, what we are is atoms, or, what amounts to the same thing, a constant flow of time: both active and passive.

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1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, tr. Colin Smith, *Phenomenology of Perception* (hereinafter *PP*) (New York: Routledge, 2002); 1.
 2. *Ibid.*, 39.
 3. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); p.7. For a more recent and rather different articulation of McDowell's position, see *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); esp. chapter 14. The present essay deals exclusively with McDowell's position as this is advanced in *Mind and World*.
 4. John McDowell, “What Myth,” *Inquiry*, 50:4, 338-351 (2007); 349.
 5. Hubert Dreyfus, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise” (Hereinafter *Overcoming*) (American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Presidential Address 2005), socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/pdf/Dreyfus%20APA%20Address%20%2010.22.05%20.pdf, 18.
 6. Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 496.
 7. Cf. *Ibid.*
 8. Merleau-Ponty's description of temporality is heavily based upon the Husserlian account as it is found in *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstesens*. There, Husserl argues that our experience of any temporal object or event would be impossible if temporality were composed of a series of narrow, independent now-points. According to Husserl, if this were indeed the case – that is, if we were able to experience that which is given only in sharp instances of now – we would be incapable of experiencing anything that carries temporal extension. A chain of independent perceptions cannot give rise to a temporal experience. Husserl, aware of these difficulties, concludes that

the embrace of consciousness must include more than what is given in the narrow now. In other words, the original experience of past and future must be somehow included in the experience of the now. We are conscious not only of that which is present in the now, but also that which has just passed and that which is about to occur. What is presently perceived is always located between *just-past* object phases and *soon-to-be* phases. The former is an intentional act that furnishes us with a consciousness of the phase of the object that has just been, whereas the latter provides us with a less definite consciousness of the phase of the object that is about to occur.

9. Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 496.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Cf. *Ibid.*, 499. For instance, Merleau-Ponty argues that it would have been impossible to grasp a circle as the locus of all points equidistant from a center, if the subject did not already have a pre-thematic familiarity with the world. Thus, temporality, as the ground of spontaneity, inextricably binds the subject to the world. As such, it reinforces Merleau-Ponty's point that the subject is always a "being-in-the-world" - a body which is always already in the world, not as an object in a worldly reservoir, but rather as a body which possesses and forms a world (*Ibid.*, 500). The body, as that which "breathes life into" the world, can never be severed from the world (*Ibid.*, 235). This primordial connection that we have with the world is that which makes it possible for us to discover "the world as cradle of meaning... [as the] ground of all thinking" (*Ibid.*, 500). Underneath our conceptual life there is to be found a "primordial unity of all our experience... the native abode of all rationality" (*Ibid.*) Meaning (*sens*) becomes inseparable from the primordial directionality (*sens*) which we inherit as a result of our pre-personal engagement with the world. Temporality is, hence, not only subjectivity but also, the meaning and the direction (*sens*) of our ek-static and factual existence.

12. *Ibid.*, 36.

13. *Ibid.*, 35. One finds Heidegger lurking behind these lines. Reflective thought – as that which brings to light (*Licht*) unity, determinate objects, and facts – is possible only if the self is no longer an isolated subject but an openness or, to be more precise, a temporal clearing (*Lichtung*). This observation is crucial, since it allows us to see that the two discussions are interrelated, and hence temporality is that which makes attention possible.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 35.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 34.

18. *Ibid.*, 35.

19. *Ibid.*, 496. Here, I am not referring to the time of inner sensations (immanent time), but to authentic time, the time that constitutes this derivative sense of time.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Merleau-Ponty holds that ultimate temporality is *atemporal*. Ultimate temporality "is not temporal in the empirical sense of the term," for this level of temporality not only constitutes world and immanent time, but also gives rise to itself (*Ibid.*, 487). Hence, despite the many temporal predicates that are being used to describe it, this level of temporality can neither be temporal, in the way worldly events are, nor reduced to a series of mental sensations or actions. If this were the case, it would necessitate an additional level of temporality – and this would inevitably lead to an infinite regress. It is meaningless, therefore, to maintain that the time constituting phenomena are somehow co-present, or succeeding each other. The relationship between the moments of the (living) present is not a temporal one, at least in the empirical sense. It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty declares this "ultimate consciousness" a "timeless' (*Zeitlos*)." (*Ibid.*, 491)

22. *Ibid.*, 497.

23. The air of paradox that this formulation carries will be dispelled in the final section of the essay.

24. *Ibid.*, 498.

25. Dreyfus, *Overcoming*, 1.

26. *Ibid.*, 18.

27. *Ibid.*, 6.

28. Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, 497; 498; 496.

29. According to Heidegger, discourse (*Rede*) is one of the four existential structures of human beings (*Dasein*), and forms the condition of the possibility of language. The intelligibility of Being-in-the-world is expressed as discourse, and this is then spoken out as language. Discourse is fundamentally about disclosing to us a background understanding of the world.

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