

HABIT, BODYHOOD, AND MERLEAU-PONTY

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Abstract: The phenomenal body is an intriguing concept, and Merleau-Ponty's notion of habit, coupled with motor intentionality, provides a novel perspective on its inner workings. I contend that his portrayal of habit tacitly bears two faces – *motoric habit* and *instrumental habit* respectively. The former is an attunement to some bodily possibilities that are already at our disposal while the latter is an explicit relation to external objects and a process of incorporating those objects into our own bodies. These two notions play into each other, creating a mechanism that offers an intuitive illustration and simple productive definition for a dynamic picture of bodyhood. Furthermore, it carries an internal delimitation that marks the boundaries of its application. The result is a view that provides something new to current interpretations of Merleau-Ponty, as well as potential applications in areas that derived from his appeals to motor intentionality.

Keywords: body, phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, habit, embodiment, intentionality, motor.

Published online: 27 June 2019

An exotic variation of habit can be found in Merleau-Ponty's work, one which proves essential to a coherent understanding of the phenomenal body. Although his concept of habit has seen no shortage of interest, a view of his notion from the perspective of bodyhood points to an internal division in his own use of the term. This division illustrates a profoundly unique iteration of habit – one which accounts for an extended body, entails a powerful self-imposed delimitation, and which bolsters the concept of motor-intentionality.

1. Body

It is no secret that Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* has as much to do with bodyhood as with perception itself. More precisely, it has more to do with developing an understanding of the body as body-subject, as *Leib* rather than *Körper*, as a *phenomenal* body.¹ In turn, there is a set of relatively clear elements that in large part define what the

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¹ *Leib* and *Körper*, where *Leib* is the body as something lived and *Körper* is something merely physical. *Body* as opposed to *a body* – a distinction put into focus by Husserl and in turn Merleau-Ponty, see Carman (1999): 209; Husserl (1989): 151–170.

phenomenal body is supposed to be. In order to situate habit, this more general picture needs to be brought into focus.

The distinction which sets the stage is one concerning the Janus-faced character of the body *simpliciter*. On the one hand, it is a physical object. It can be touched, measured, and observed. This is how most people think about the body. On the other, it is a medium. It is the means by which we touch, measure, and observe. This simple and intuitive distinction affords more than may initially meet the eye. It traces the features that Merleau-Ponty considers essential to our corporeality. Hence his claims:

[My body] defies exploration [...] it is never really in front of me [...] it remains marginal to all my perceptions [...] In other words, I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk round them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe [...].²

The body as an *object* is obviously observable. I can examine my hand, abdomen, etc. However, the body as a *medium* is not.³ To help illustrate these two aspects, consider a pair of glasses. As an object – I can look *at* them. I can see the frame, the lenses, etc. As a medium – I can look *through* them. I can put them on, and upon doing so I see past the lenses and begin to see the world that they communicate to me. Now, if I am wearing glasses and I try to look at their frames in my periphery, I cease to look through them and take them as the target of my seeing. They forfeit their functional aspect. If I look through the lenses again, they forfeit their objectified aspect. Yet both of these aspects are embodied by one thing: the glasses. Depending on how you approach them, one aspect or the other is brought up. The analogy to the body is simple – you can either feel your hand or feel with your hand. The former takes the hand as an object encountered, and the latter takes it as a given.

The sense in which the phenomenal body is distinct from the physical is innervated by Merleau-Ponty's assertion that the body is able to serve as more than a passive connection between the world and our higher order faculties; in other words, it is more than a simple medium. Among a myriad of arguments to that end,⁴ the one that interests us is that the phenomenal body commands a unique form of primitive directedness in action: *motor intentionality*.⁵ We can explain motor intentionality in two parts – the motricity and the intentionality.

In the case of the latter, intentionality may be understood broadly as an “aboutness” in our actions and thoughts.⁶ When I think, it is always about something, and that thinking is able to pick out some target regardless of its physicality or presence. I can think about unicorns despite the fact that I don't believe they exist, for instance. Or I can think about my friend Pierre, despite the fact that I haven't seen him in a few years.

² Merleau-Ponty (1965): 104.

³ *Ibidem*: 105, particularly the example of touching my right hand with my left hand.

⁴ Among the arguments and concepts forgone is the *body schema* – Merleau-Ponty (2012): 100–105. It is inextricably woven into this analysis; I will address its features piecemeal and indirectly. Outlining and utilizing it explicitly is beyond the scope of this paper. An explication of both its terminological complexity and its character can be found in Gallagher (2001).

⁵ Merleau-Ponty (2012): 112–113.

⁶ See also Brentano (1973): 68; Kelly (2002): 387; Dennett & Haugeland (1987).

Traditionally, intentionality has been reserved for cognition, but Merleau-Ponty contends that there is a directedness in bodily action that mirrors our mental capacity for intentionality. In terms of “aboutness,” the body comports to the environment; it responds to the “intentional threads” that pervade it.⁷ It responds to what the situation calls for through our past experiences with certain objects and activities. In terms of physicality or presence, the body encounters and presents us with not only physical stimuli, but also possible actions. When I encounter a chair, I see it not only as an extension and color, but also as a place to sit. And if I am running from someone, that very same chair will appear to me as an obstacle to be avoided rather than a comfortable place to rest. In a word, the intentional capacity of the body incorporates affordances.⁸ This ability entails seeing more than is strictly given by a stimulus.⁹ These two features of the body come together to make a fairly compelling case for some sort of intentionality being expressed.

In the case of the former, motricity brings something altogether more radical to the table. Motricity is what precludes the intentional features described above from being attributed to the mental. Merleau-Ponty endeavored to show that the body could *operate* in this quasi-intentional fashion without relying on representations (or higher order cognitive processing). The appeal, although itself complex, can be intuitively understood through his simple remark concerning concrete movement:

When I motion to my friend to approach, my intention is not a thought that I could have produced within myself in advance, nor do I perceive the signal in my body. I signal across the world; I signal over there, where my friend is. [...] There is not first a perception followed by a movement, the perception and the movement form a system that is modified as a whole.¹⁰

The idea is that the directedness of motor intentionality is not pre-empted by some conscious deliberation. The directedness that the body exhibits is something altogether distinct from the traditional picture of thinking. Instead of operating on the basis of an “I think,” in motricity our body operates on the basis of an “I can” (given its access to affordances).¹¹ It latches onto familiar and relevant potential actions rather than propositional content or representations.¹²

⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2012): 108, the full quote – “Likewise, the subject placed in front of his scissors, his needle, and his familiar tasks has no need to look for his hands or his fingers, for they are not objects to be found in objective space (like bones, muscles, and nerves), but rather powers that are already mobilized by the perception of the scissors or the needle, they are the center-point of the ‘intentional threads’ that link him to the given objects.”

⁸ This is admittedly an oversimplification; however, it innocuously conveys the features that are pertinent for this analysis. For a detailed discussion of the relation between Merleau-Ponty and affordances, see Dohn (2006); as well as affordances themselves Gibson (1986): 127–143.

⁹ Perhaps the most compelling example of this is our tendency to see in three dimensions, albeit in a different sense than potential actions. See Merleau-Ponty (1964): 172.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2012): 113.

¹¹ Ibidem: 138–139.

¹² For a more in-depth discussion of this feature, see Kelly (2002): 386–389; and more generally Gallagher & Zahavi (2008): 156. An explicit expression of this can be found within Merleau-Ponty’s own work – Merleau-Ponty (2012): 140.

Thus, the phenomenal body is equipped with a form of intentionality that grants it a directedness, a capacity to grasp possibilities, and ensures its independence via the non-representationalism implied by motricity. This all fits nicely with the basic idea of the body as a medium; the phenomenal body is that through which you have a world rather than a collection of physical objects. With these characteristics in mind, we now have the tools to adequately deal with *habit*.

2. Habit

The animating force behind Merleau-Ponty's vision of the phenomenal body will prove to be habit, situating the otherwise abstract concepts outlined above within more tangible and intuitive notions, as well as opening the way to understanding their roles in the context of individual lived bodies.

Habit is a kind of attunement or acquisition which is perhaps best understood through examples. My capacity to move and my potential environments are extremely diverse. However, with time I fall into a certain tendency in movement and find myself frequently in the same environment. For instance, as I sit here and type this, I am in a familiar environment surrounded by well-worn paths of action. I rest my hands before my keyboard in a particular way. Should I reach for my coffee, I don't need to look around for it first; I reach for the place where I always keep it. When I get up to go to the kitchen, I turn to my left and stand up. Of course, I could do all of these things differently, but I've become accustomed to doing them some particular way – sometimes arbitrarily, sometimes because it's most convenient. Over time, habit has woven its way into my bodily comportment – not into physical substance, but into my motor intentional landscape. What is more, the apartment itself has come to afford some possibilities without which I would scarcely have the opportunity to develop my particular paths of action. Without a keyboard, I wouldn't rest my hands here; without a cup, I don't suppose I'd have a place where I always keep my cup. Here, habit shows its most compelling and interesting feature: a capacity not only to attune to possible actions but to acquire altogether new “cores of significance.”¹³ The amalgam of these features accounts for Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that habit is a “knowledge that is in the hands.”¹⁴ It is a kind of learned know-how. Its direct connection with motor intentionality gives it a surprisingly vital role for our understanding of the phenomenal body.

Insofar as habit concerns these two ends of the spectrum, Merleau-Ponty's seamless use of the term belies its complexity. Nestled within that complexity we can see two utterly distinct applications of habit – both of which are hinted at in the illustration above. These two notions of habit will prove to be asymmetrical, and they even appear to exhibit distinct structural characteristics. By wading into these details, I believe we can find a more cohesive understanding of motor intentionality and retrieve an intriguing means for defining the body itself.

The first form of habit will be called *motoric habit*. The second form will be called *instrumental habit*.¹⁵

¹³ Merleau-Ponty (1965): 168–170.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty (2012): 145.

¹⁵ Importantly, this is not a reflection of Merleau-Ponty's own distinction between motor and perceptual habit. The differentiation that I outline below cuts unevenly across them, not to mention that Merleau-Ponty ultimately draws his own distinction back together – Ibidem: 153–154.

2.1. Motoric habit

Motoric habit concerns the way we engage with the landscape of affordances *already* at our disposal. It is a matter of using the possibilities our body provides us. The difference between a professional flamenco dancer and myself is not a difference in our range of motion. I can perform the same actions in a physical sense; what I lack, however, is the required practice and comfort with the particular patterns of actions that compose a flamenco routine. These patterns of action, this habituation, is something like a *style* of body – an inclination toward some particular collection of bodily possibilities. That being said, motoric habit is hardly a superficial predisposition. By acquiring some kind of style, we gain genuine access to that bodily “I can” touted earlier. The professional dancer will see in terms of those movements and will recognize them far more readily than I, just like an artist begins to see the world in terms of perspectives and composition.¹⁶ The particular paths of action and perception we are familiar with are given priority over all the others. Merleau-Ponty himself illustrates the idea of style on a more fundamental level – that of an infant learning to distinguish the color blue. In his words:

When the child becomes habituated to distinguishing between blue and red, we see that the habit acquired with regard to this pair benefits all the others. [...] Learning to see colors is the acquisition of a certain style of vision, a new use of one’s own body; it is to enrich and to reorganize the body schema.¹⁷

It situates other actions and perceptions relative to that newly acquired skill and undoubtedly forms an essential element of our most basic motor-perceptual functions. And it isn’t as if the child simply didn’t *see* blue before – what changes is that they can now *recognize* it. This form of habit is “a new use of one’s own body” in the sense that it is an attunement to something that is already within the phenomenal body’s grasp. It is something that is newly accessed or accessible, but which was already there.

Given its character, motoric habit gives shape to the broader concept of motor intentionality. The blunt aboutness and affordances of motor intentionality are given direction by motoric habit – it draws the phenomenal body into the real world, to the individual situation of the lived body. It goes from an infinite sea of possibilities to a landscape that reflects my particular life.

2.2. Instrumental habit

Instrumental habit accounts for the extension of the phenomenal body; it is the process by which we explicitly *add* to our motor intentional field. This novel idea allows for the incorporation of otherwise inert objects into the bulk of our body.¹⁸ Suppose I want to write something down, and I notice a pencil on the table to my left. Initially, I locate it and see it as I would any other physical object. However, once I pick it up and start

¹⁶ A profound treatment of vision in the context of painters can be found in Merleau-Ponty (1964).

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2012): 154–155.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1965): 166.

writing with it, it ceases to be some object before me and becomes an extension of my capacities.¹⁹ This seemingly simple example reverberates across the bodily criteria we outlined earlier. In terms of motor intentionality, it is a literal *extension* of my landscape of affordances – the pencil offers me new possibilities for output that I simply don't have without it. In terms of the bodily medium, the pencil goes from being an object *for* that bodily medium to being incorporated *into* that medium. Unlike the *style* of motoric habit which neither extended our motor intentional field nor addressed gains within the bodily medium, instrumental habit is an expression of an operant *relation*.

A more substantial illustration involves learning.²⁰ Consider playing a piano. When you are learning to play piano, there is a tendency to look at your hands and the keys. You identify the note and look for it among the keys; you reach for it as best you can with your fingers. As you get more practice, you stop having to look down at the keys. You also move instinctively with your hands and fingers, perhaps even adjusting to account for the notes that you know are coming up. What differentiates a novice is precisely that they continue to treat the keys and notes as something to be spotted, to be found – they continue to be treated as objects. A proficient player, however, merges with the space of the piano – he becomes intertwined with it.²¹ The piano comes to be an extension of his corporeality.

In learning how to play piano or knowing how to use a pencil, we engage instrumental habit. The relation is between ourselves and an object; its completion is marked by the transition of the object from something met to something wielded, something beyond myself to something very much constitutive of my afforded world. In many ways, *instrumental habit is a process of transition into motoric habit*. Insofar as I'm holding a pencil, it doesn't mean much until I've developed the right connection with the possibilities it offers me – just as in the case of the piano student, who continues to treat the piano as an observed object while trying to play it. I must be accustomed to the object in order to really wield it. In more formal terms, an appropriate level of motoric habituation is a necessary condition for the motor intentional relation to obtain.

Given the right situation and motor habitual background, practically any object can be incorporated by instrumental habit – that is to say that almost anything can be wielded. Merleau-Ponty's own examples involve hats that dictate our movements, cars that allow us to project ourselves, and white canes that serve as extensions of blind people's "sight."²²

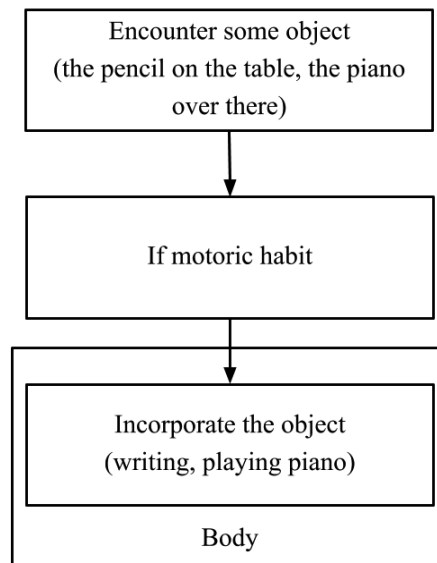
We can call this phenomenon the instrumental habit relation (IHR). It is a mechanism for capturing the extended phenomenal body. It isn't just a criterion, but a productive process, one that is apparently deeply functional given its applicability. The conceptual picture for IHR is fairly straightforward (see figure 1), and offers a promising vantage point for defining the phenomenal body outright.

¹⁹ Ibidem: 165.

²⁰ For an in-depth analysis of a learner in this context, see Dreyfus (2002).

²¹ Merleau-Ponty (2012): 146–147.

²² Ibidem: 144.



However, IHR contains a serious limitation. It appears to already contain the phenomenal body. Insofar as it consists of a relation between myself and an object, I must already have a body that makes that connection possible to begin with. To pick up the pencil I need to have hands with which to grasp it, and before I can start playing the piano, I need to have eyes with which to notice it. At first glance, there *seems* to be no problem with extending IHR to account for the rest of our natural body – for my eyes that see, my hands that reach, etc. In fact, we’ve already addressed the notion that our hands may be taken as either objects observed or body parts felt. It seems that perhaps they too are a product of instrumental habit. Although an odd thought, watching an infant develop its motor skills does offer a pinch of plausibility to this suggestion. However, it should be increasingly apparent that inverting IHR onto itself is not viable. If my hands are the product of IHR, then there must once again be a latent body present for the relation to obtain – some way in which the hands were first apprehended as objects prior to being incorporated. So then, in turn, we must scale back a further layer, showing that it too is perhaps a product of IHR. A regress looms. Getting out of it requires capping the reduction; we need to accept that at some point the body-already-at-work in IHR isn’t itself a product of IHR. Despite the relation’s potential, it isn’t capable of defining the body in its entirety. No matter how the regress and reduction is drawn out, at some point we must simply presuppose some kind of body independently of habit.

While IHR fails to finish the job, it certainly leaves various opportunities in its wake. Precisely how that “core” body is defined allows for this rather unique approach to be appended (along with its curious features) to any paradigm that is compatible with motor intentionality broadly speaking – it can be attached to any such paradigm that has an established, satisfactory definition of body assumed.

Where motoric habit gave our intentionality shape, instrumental habit allows it to grow. It facilitates a vital link to our environment that implores us to understand the phenomenal body in terms of actions and expertise. In effect, bodyhood as a whole is shifted in a radical direction – not merely toward a species of functionalism, but toward an understanding of bodyhood that eschews the arbitrary limit set by our physiological bodies.

3. Conclusion

Although IHR is a seemingly powerful tool for weaving together the criteria of the phenomenal body as well as providing a simple schematic for an otherwise difficult set of concepts, it is necessarily forward facing – it can't be turned in upon itself. That being said, its inability to account for the body as a whole does not undermine its utility in defining the body in part. Insofar as it provides us with a conceptual apparatus for feeding into motoric habit, and thereby both feeding into and shaping our motor intentional landscape, it gives us insight into a functional understanding of the body, not as something given but as something that is itself subject to conceptual investigation.

Motoric habit in its own right helps to set motor intentionality with our lived situation – a crucial reflection of *Leib* over *Körper*. Although it lacks the moving parts and relational structure of instrumental habit, it remains an essential feature of bodyhood. The fact that it remains so understated in Merleau-Ponty's work lends to the importance of identifying it in the first place; it allows one to appreciate that the exotic object-oriented application of habit is based on a more pervasive and grounded form of habit.

These considerations resound both within current interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's work as well as opening new avenues of investigation further afield. Within current interpretations, habit is often relegated as a minor aside to the body schema or motricity, indicating little more than a readiness and historicity or skill.²³ It is equally often presented without habit altogether, despite subject matter directly concerning motor intentionality and the body.²⁴ Going further afield, the popularity of motor intentionality in domains like ecological and enactivist philosophy allows for habit to find footing there as well. More precisely, the gap left by IHR's inability to define itself leaves room for the biological basis maintained in many areas of cognitive science. In other words, that gap implies a degree of compatibility between more conventional biological treatments of bodyhood and the distinctly functional perspective expressed by IHR; those standard biological treatments may come to form that missing "core" noted in the previous section. Where IHR would acquire a stable foundation, those treatments would acquire the productive capacity and intentional tools of IHR. The spirit of this compatibility sits well with the point put forward by Gallagher and Zahavi:

what we describe as the lived body from the phenomenological perspective is exactly the same body as the biological body that we study from an objective perspective. The lived body clearly has a physiological basis, and as such it can be defined as 'a certain power of action within the framework of the anatomical apparatus' (MP 1962 p109). Accordingly, it can suffer losses as well as experience gains.²⁵

To map that power of action, to see the field of losses and gains, and to fully understand what that sort of definition entails, we must understand the two iterations of habit out-

²³ See Carman (1999): 219; Bullington (2013): 19–37; Dreyfus (1996): 2.

²⁴ See Kelley (2002); Dreyfus (2002); Dohn (2006).

²⁵ Gallagher & Zahavi (2008): 140.

lined above – an understanding that comes with the incorporation of IHR. The intuitive appeal and descriptive promise that accompanies these mechanisms is certainly welcome within the broader field of embodiment philosophy.

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