

# MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE BODY\*

Russell Keat<sup>†</sup>

## 1. Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and phenomenology

It has been suggested that an equally appropriate title for Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1948; trans. C. Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1962) might be 'The Philosophy of the Body Subject'.<sup>1</sup> A few reflections on both the actual and possible title will serve to introduce the main themes of this paper.

By using the term 'phenomenology', Merleau-Ponty locates his work in the philosophical tradition effectively founded by Husserl, and implicitly endorses the latter's opposition to scientific realism, to the view that one should accept the privileged status of the natural sciences as providing descriptions of the real nature of the world, however much these depart from our pre-scientific, common sense conceptions of it. By contrast, Husserl maintains that the 'real' world is a world of *phenomena*, i.e. of things that appear to us; but not of 'appearances', in the sense of that behind or beyond which lies 'the real'. Nor are those 'phenomena' the sense-data of empiricism: colour-patches, shapes, sounds, and so on. Rather, they are the objects as they appear to us, objects-for-consciousness. And conversely, our consciousness is (always) *of* objects: it is 'intentional', aimed or directed *at* something.

By the phrase 'body-subject' in the alternative title, Merleau-Ponty implicitly challenges all philosophical positions which accept some basic dichotomy between subject and object, and then assign the (human) body to the latter category. In particular, he rejects Cartesian dualism, which places the human body in the same ontological category as the 'objects' of the physical sciences, and identifies the subjectivity of the human with its consciousness, with its being a *res cogitans* that is

---

\* [Added 2013] This paper was presented at a seminar at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, in May 1982; only copy-editing changes have been made here. Citations should be as follows: Keat, R. (1982) 'Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of the Body', unpublished manuscript, University of Edinburgh; <<http://www.russellkeat.net>> [date of download]. The account of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl presented here was later refined and developed in chapters 5 and 6 of *Understanding Phenomenology* (co-authored with Michael Hammond and Jane Howarth), Basil Blackwell 1991 (also available at [www.russellkeat.net](http://www.russellkeat.net)). Two other papers with closely related themes were written while I was a visiting fellow at the HRC: 'The Missing Body: Foucault, Habermas and Psychoanalysis' and 'Reich, Psychoanalysis and the Body' (both available at [www.russellkeat.net](http://www.russellkeat.net)).

<sup>†</sup> [2013] School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh: [russell.keat@ed.ac.uk](mailto:russell.keat@ed.ac.uk). Previously, Department of Philosophy, Lancaster University.

<sup>1</sup> Remy Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, 1963, p.3.

only contingently, though somehow ‘intimately’, related to its body. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, the human body is itself a ‘subject’, and the human subject is necessarily, not just contingently, embodied. It is to the articulation and justification of this conception of the body-subject that Part One of *Phenomenology of Perception* is devoted.

Even from these initial remarks, it might seem that there is some tension between Merleau-Ponty’s opposition to the dualism of consciousness and body, and his adherence to Husserl’s phenomenological standpoint, which apparently identifies the subject with consciousness, even if it ‘replaces’ the ‘objects’ of the natural sciences with the objects of that consciousness. The tension is undoubtedly real, but it is partly reduced by noting that it was Husserl’s *later* writings, particularly *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936), that were most influential upon Merleau-Ponty, and that he regarded Husserl’s introduction there of the concept of the lived world (*lebenswelt*) as at least implicitly marking a significant change of position in this respect. By briefly outlining the main argument of *The Crisis*, one can see both in what way this is so, and also the nature of the connections Husserl saw between scientific realism and Cartesian dualism.

The ‘crisis’ to which Husserl addresses himself is a *cultural* one, involving the growing recognition that the sciences were not in fact capable of resolving the central problems of human existence, whilst at the same time knowledge and rational enquiry had come to be identified exclusively with the procedures and results of those sciences. Husserl argued that the resolution of the crisis required a reinterpretation of the status of scientific knowledge itself, and proposed a historical diagnosis of the roots of its misinterpretation. These he located in the period of the so-called ‘scientific revolution’, focussing particularly on the Galilean project of the mathematization of nature.

Galileo, Husserl argued, developed his new science of mechanics by regarding as ‘real’ only those properties of physical objects that could be measured and quantified, and thus represented by the variables in scientific laws expressing (mathematical) functional relationships. The properties of objects not thus treatable were denied reality, and re-located in the human perceiver, as the subjective effects of external objects acting upon another such object, the human body.

Thus a radical distinction emerged between ‘reality’ and ‘appearance’, the latter being assigned to the conscious experience of the subject, and which might be altogether misleading as to the actual character of the external world, itself to be revealed by scientific enquiry. To the extent that such appearances could be regarded as ‘real’, this was so only in the domain of consciousness.

Consequently, humans came to be seen as composed of two distinct substances, consciousness and matter, mind and body: according to Husserl, Descartes’ dualism is essentially a philosophical elaboration of this Galilean conception of science, and its associated division between primary

(objective) and secondary (subjective) qualities. Since then, the history of Western philosophy has consisted in a series of unsuccessful attempts to overcome this dualism, leading up, as it were, to Husserl's successful phenomenological attempt.

The key move made by Husserl in *The Crisis* is to claim that Galileo's mathematized nature is not a direct representation *of* the real, but an abstraction *from* it. Mathematically expressible matter in motion is not 'all that there is': it is only an abstract model that may be useful in aiding our encounters with the lived world, the world which we perceive and within which we act. Scientific theories necessarily take this lived world as both their starting and finishing points, and hence must not be understood, as the scientific realist maintains, as undermining the claims to reality of the lived world, replacing it with a 'scientific' one, and then re-locating the lived world within the subject as the internal conscious effects of a scientifically characterized externality. And Husserl then proceeds to criticize orthodox psychology for its acceptance of this dualistic picture based upon scientific realism's misrepresentation of the status of scientific knowledge.

Scientific realism and Cartesian dualism are likewise central targets of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Taking up Husserl's conception of the lived world, he starts by exploring one specific aspect of this, the lived *body*: that is, he attempts to provide a phenomenological account of the human body, focussing primarily on the 'first person' standpoint, on what is involved for each of us in our bodily 'existence'. The body that is thereby revealed is not the scientific object of Cartesian dualism, and its subjectivity is not that of a consciousness 'inhabiting' such an object. Further, the world as it is for the human subject is 'for' an *embodied* subject, not for a disembodied consciousness. Human 'being-in-the-world' is a *bodily* being or existence, and will require for its adequate description a breaking with traditional philosophical categories.

Thus Merleau-Ponty, in his account of the human body, is not only challenging the possibility of conceptualizing it as a scientific 'object', and of conceptualizing humans as composed of such a body and an ontologically distinct consciousness; he is also proposing that humans in some sense *are* 'bodies', when this concept is properly understood. Further, to the extent that humans do indeed differ from other organic and inorganic beings, this is due not to their having some distinctive, *non-bodily* features, but rather to the distinctive character *of* their bodies.

## **2. Merleau-Ponty on Schneider's motility problems**

After this highly schematic account of Merleau-Ponty's project, it may come as some surprise to discover that he attempts to achieve it through a lengthy analysis of the case of a brain-damaged veteran from the First World War, by the name of Schneider, a case that had been investigated and described in great detail by two neuropsychologists, Gelb and Goldstein. Schneider had been injured

by a shell-splinter that penetrated the occipital region of the cortex, normally regarded as the 'centre' of certain forms of visual processing. But the resulting defects were not exclusively visual, and Merleau-Ponty concentrates mainly on Schneider's body motility.

On the one hand, Schneider was capable of a large repertoire of normal bodily actions. He was employed making wallets, and could effectively handle the scissors, thread, needles and leather, with a production rate about 75% of the standard one. He could also successfully perform most everyday activities, such as pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to blow his nose, walking to the shops, scratching his leg where a mosquito had just bitten him, eating, and so on.

On the other hand, however, there were many actions that he either could not perform or, more usually, could perform only with considerable difficulty and with the aid of peculiar methods. When asked to point to his nose, he could do so only if he actually took hold of it, 'grasped' it. When his leg was touched by a ruler, under medical examination, he could neither point to the spot, nor verbally identify the position of the sensation. Asked to describe the angle of his arm to the floor when it was placed in a horizontal position, he could do so only by examining it carefully and checking the various angles between arm, trunk, and floor. Requested to make a circular motion with his hand, he would make a series of movements until, as it were, he 'noticed' one that looked as if it could become circular, and then completed it carefully. To give a military type salute, he had to arrange his whole body in an overall military bearing.

Following Gelb and Goldstein, Merleau-Ponty terms the types of actions that Schneider respectively could, and could not, perform, *concrete* and *abstract* movements. Roughly speaking, concrete movements are those performed in the course of everyday activity, responding to actual and immediate needs, whilst abstract ones involve a certain 'stepping back' from such concerns, and putting one's body into imagined, merely 'possible' situations, or taking its movements or positions as the 'object' (in the sense of 'aim') of actions. Merleau-Ponty then asks the question: how can Schneider's ability to perform concrete movements, and inability to perform abstract ones, be understood? More specifically: can the differentiation between the two be made within a dualistic framework?

His answer begins as follows. Considered in terms of the physically describable behaviour involved, the muscular movements, and the external stimuli, there are in many (if not all) cases no significant differences between instances of the two types of movement. For example, reaching towards one's leg to scratch a mosquito-bite (concrete), and reaching to the point where a ruler has been pressed against one's leg (abstract), are near enough identical with respect to stimulus, behaviour, and muscular use. Schneider's body is not, as it were, physically unable to perform abstract movements, since it is

perfectly capable of similar or identical (physically characterised) concrete movements.

But could one instead make the differentiation on the basis of the respective absence and presence of some kind of consciousness, so that concrete movements are regarded as lacking this, as non-conscious, automatic routines, whereas abstract movements are guided by conscious aims, and by a knowledge of the body, of the location and spatial inter-relationships of its parts? No, says Merleau-Ponty, for two main reasons. First, when we look at the way Schneider *does* try to perform abstract movements, we can see that far from lacking a conscious, intellectual understanding of what is to be done, his problem is precisely that he has to make recourse to this at all. He consciously monitors his body's movement, and judges it against what is, in effect, a mental picture of the aimed-at state of affairs. What is pathological about Schneider is the very presence of conscious thought, as a substitute for the normal capacity to perform abstract movement without this.

Second, he argues, what Schneider *can* perform, namely concrete movement, cannot be understood in a purely mechanistic fashion. For instance, he has acquired the ability to make leather wallets. But the skill that has been learnt cannot be characterized in terms of a specific set of physically describable movements. He will 'know' how to vary his bodily movements to deal with an indefinitely large number of particular circumstances: with sitting at different distances from the bench at which he is working, with the implements and materials in different locations, coping with a temporary injury to one of his fingers, and so on. The bodily skill can be defined only by reference to its intended outcome, and the particular movements involved must be understood as solutions to 'problems' identified in relation to this aim.

Merleau-Ponty summarizes this stage of his analysis as follows:

“What he [Schneider] lacks is neither motility nor thought [the two categories of dualism], and we are brought to the recognition of something between movement as a third person process [the movement of the 'scientific', object-like 'body'] and thought as a representation of movement [the Cartesian 'consciousness'] — something which is an anticipation of, or arrival at, the objective and is ensured by the body itself as a motor power, a 'motor project', a 'motor intentionality' in the absence of which the order [i.e. the request to perform various abstract movements] remains a dead letter.” (p.110).

For Merleau-Ponty, neither concrete nor abstract movement can be understood either as physical motility (the motility of a 'scientific' body) or as this same motility 'combined' with consciousness. Both kinds of movement involve what he calls 'motor intentionality' (a concept I shall say more about later), and to analyse the differences between them we must distinguish the specific forms of

intentionality they involve, the different ‘attitudes towards the world’ — and hence, since ‘the world’ is *for* the embodied subject, ‘different worlds’. This kind of analysis, he says, consists in “correctly reading phenomena, in grasping their meaning, that is, in treating them as modalities and variations of the subject’s total being” (p.108). The specific analysis proposed in Schneider’s case goes roughly as follows.

In concrete movement, our bodies are related to the world as the locus of various immediate and habitual tasks, its objects presenting themselves as *manipulanda* (p.105), things to be acted upon, dealt with, for instance in work. For Schneider, says Merleau-Ponty, “the [concrete] task to be performed elicits the necessary movements from him by a sort of remote attraction”. Here, the body “surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them” (p.106). In abstract movement, by contrast, the body is withdrawn from this sphere of action, and may itself become an object of amusement, experiment, play-acting, and so on. This requires a capacity of “projection”,

“... whereby the subject of movement keeps in front of him an area of free space in which what does not naturally exist may take on a semblance of existence”,

a capacity to detach oneself from “that plenum of the world in which concrete movement took place”, and to carve out “a zone of reflection and subjectivity” (p.111). Thus:

“... in order to be in possession of my body independently of any urgent task to be performed; in order to enjoy the use of it as my mood takes me, in order to describe in the air a movement formulated only verbally... I must reverse the natural relationship in which the body stands to its environment, and a human productive power must reveal itself through the density of being” (p.112).

This ‘productive power’, as one might already have suspected, is *freedom*, and Merleau-Ponty thus concludes that:

“... all Schneider’s troubles are reducible to a unity ...: he is ‘tied’ to actuality, he ‘lacks liberty’, that concrete liberty which comprises the general power of putting oneself into a situation” (p.135);

“... his body is at his disposal as a means of ingress into a familiar surrounding, but not as the means of expression of a gratuitous and free spatial thought” (p.104).

However, it is crucial here not to be misled, for instance by the last phase quoted above, into thinking of this ‘freedom’ as *thought*, as a conscious ‘reflection’ that is separate from bodily action and can ‘guide’ it. As noted already, abstract movement is not decomposable in this manner: it remains a form of ‘motor intentionality’, distinct from that of concrete movement, but nonetheless an embodied way of being in the world. The ‘detachment’ from familiar surroundings is not a detachment from our bodies, but a different mode of their existence.

To put this in more technical terms, we have here an example of an ‘*existential-phenomenological* analysis of the body-subject’, an attempt by Merleau-Ponty to ‘read’ the phenomena of Schneider’s embodiment in a manner which is entirely distinct from any kind of (what he calls) ‘scientific’ or ‘causal’ thought, and which rejects the dualism of body and consciousness. We can now proceed to his more general, positive account of the body-subject.

### **3. The body-subject**

In the course of his analysis of Schneider, Merleau-Ponty discusses several other examples of ‘normal’ bodily movements. He is particularly interested in habitualized skills of performance, such as using a typewriter, driving a car, or playing a musical instrument. None of these, he argues, can be understood as automated sequences of physically specifiable movements, for the reasons already given in the case of Schneider’s wallet-production. Nor do they involve the application, either consciously or unconsciously, of some mental formula or principle: one can perform successfully without being able to articulate the ‘principles’ supposedly involved, and conversely one can articulate the principles without being able to perform the actions. He discusses, for example, a particular organist, who could with one hour’s practice ‘transfer’ his skills to a new instrument whose stops, pedals, and so on were quite differently located from his usual instrument. This practising did not involve any attempt to form a mental picture or map of the new positions: rather, says Merleau-Ponty,

“He sits on the seat, works the pedals, pulls out the stops, gets the measure of the instrument with his body, incorporates within himself the relevant directions and dimensions, settles into the organ as one settles into a house” (p.145).

Both in the case of specific performing skills, and in our everyday dealings with the world, says Merleau-Ponty, we cannot regard our bodies as the object-like instruments of a guiding, knowing, intending consciousness. Instead, we must recognize that it is our bodies which themselves understand what to do and how to do it, and that it is the body’s intentionality which directs us towards the world. The concepts of ‘meaning’ — of intention, aim, understanding, direction/directedness, significance, etc — are applicable directly and literally to the body, not indirectly or metaphorically via a dualistic

view of the body-as-object linked to an intentional consciousness. In particular, our bodies can properly be said to possess *knowledge*, and we must not restrict the concept of knowledge to cases involving reflective intellectual processes, the explicit articulation of beliefs, principles, theories, goals, and so on. Thus:

“Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge [i.e. intellectualist, theoretical ‘knowledge’]; it provides us with a way of access to the world and the object, with a ‘*praktognosia*’, which has to be recognized as original and perhaps as primary” (p.140).

By “original and (perhaps) primary” Merleau-Ponty means respectively the following: that the body’s *praktognosia*, i.e. practical knowledge, cannot be analytically decomposed into more primitive concepts, such as ‘body’ and ‘mind’; and that this praktognostic body in some sense forms the basis for all other kinds of relationship between the human subject and the world. In particular, as he goes on to argue in Part Two of *Phenomenology of Perception*, our bodies provide the basis of our *perceptual* relationship to it, including, for example, our perception of the spatial relationships between its various elements. These relationships are experienced by us not in the form of the ‘objective’, impersonal matrix of a Newtonian space, but always from the perspective of our own, action-oriented bodily organization. ‘Up, down’, ‘on, under’, ‘near to, far from’, and so on: these are the dimensions of a lived, ‘phenomenal’ spatiality, gaining their sense from our embodied intentionality.

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the concept of the body-subject involves not only the claim that the body is a ‘subject’, in the sense that many of the properties traditionally ascribed to the human subject are properly applied to ‘it’; but also, conversely, that the human subject is a ‘body’, in that if we adopt the view that ‘the world’ is somehow constituted as an object by and for the subject, we must recognize also that this subject is itself a (certain kind of) body. His account of the body, he claims, enables “us clearly to understand motility as basic intentionality. Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (p.137):

“I can therefore take my place, through the medium of my body as the potential source of familiar actions, in my environment conceived as a set of *manipulanda* and without, moreover, envisaging my body or my surrounding as objects in the Kantian sense [i.e. as the objects of a Newtonian ‘scientific’ universe]. There is my arm seen as sustaining familiar acts, my body as giving rise to determinate action having a field or scope known to me in advance [‘practically’ known, by the body itself], there are my surroundings as a collection of possible points upon which this bodily action may operate....” (p.105).



In the following section, I will examine a recent application of Merleau-Ponty's position to the analysis of gender-differences in bodily motility. By doing so I hope to indicate both the fruitfulness of his views, and certain problems they face. But before doing this, I want to propose a possible framework for understanding and assessing that position as it has so far been presented, by noting three different senses in which it can rightly be described as a 'phenomenology of the body':

(1) As the programmatic outline of a certain task of phenomenological description, which is concerned to identify 'what the (human) body is like', that is with the nature of our experience of our own and others' bodies, as we use and encounter them in our actual lives;

(2) As a 'philosophical' phenomenology (of the body), which not only advocates that (1) should be carried out, but which also rejects the standpoint of scientific realism, according to which any results of (1) would themselves require explanation by reference to the processes identified by the empirical sciences — for example, by neurophysiology; and

(3) As a distinctive position within philosophical phenomenology, which not only endorses the claims in (2), but further maintains that the human subject for whom the phenomenal world of objects exists is an embodied one, and hence gives (1) a special significance.

Some comments on the differences, and relationships, between these three may be helpful here. At least some psychologists would happily identify their approach as 'phenomenological', in the sense that their starting-point is an attempt to describe the subject's actual experience of the world: for example, the Gestalt psychologists' work on perception, or Michotte's on the experience of causality. They can thus be understood as endorsing (1). But they are not thereby *philosophical* phenomenologists (i.e. (2)), since they assume that it is necessary and legitimate to then go on to explain the character of this experience in terms, say, of external physical stimuli (light waves etc.) and their internal neurological 'processing'. By contrast, what for them are the 'real physical causes' are, as I noted earlier in the case of Husserl, for the philosophical phenomenologist only abstractions from the real, lived world.

Thus Merleau-Ponty, in his account of Schneider, argues at length against the possibility of any scientific explanation of his motor pathology by reference to the damage of the visual cortex. The only kind of 'explanation' that he will allow is one in terms of the character of Schneider's way of being-in-the-world, his lack of the 'projective capacity', his being 'tied to actuality', and so on. Indeed, commenting at one point on what is termed *apraxia*, disorders of voluntary movement such as not being able to reach out to pick things up, he says: "Objects no longer exist for the arm of the *apraxic*, and this is what causes it to remain immobile" (p.139).

That is, one should not try to explain the incapacity to reach for objects via the immobility of the arm, and then in terms of the brain-injury, ‘scientifically’. Instead one should ‘explain’ (through an existential-phenomenological analysis) the arm’s immobility in terms of the patient’s ‘attitude’ towards objects: a *bodily* (intentional) attitude, of course. And it is just because this ‘attitude’ is a bodily one that Merleau-Ponty is not just any kind of phenomenologist, philosophically, but specifically a phenomenologist ‘of’ the body (i.e. (3)).

#### **4. A phenomenology of the gendered body**

In an illuminating paper entitled ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ (*Human Studies*, vol 3, 1980), Iris Marion Young has applied an analysis based on Merleau-Ponty’s work to various differences between female and male bodies: or perhaps one should say, between feminine and masculine bodies in (primarily middle-class) contemporary North American culture — I will return to the importance of this preferred formulation later. She begins by describing an often noted difference, emerging at a quite early age, between the throwing movements of girls and boys. Whereas boys make use of their whole bodies, twisting the trunk and planting one leg behind the other, girls tend to stand facing forwards, with no movement in any part of the body other than the throwing arm itself. The same absence of whole-body use is displayed in many other activities, such as lifting or pushing heavy weights, or opening bottles and jars; and these actions are often performed with an apparent air of disbelief by the girl in her capacity to do them.

In running, climbing, walking, playing games, and so on, says Young, there is a characteristically feminine mode of bodily comportment. In addition to the relative (to boys’) failure to mobilize the resources of all of the body, there is a tendency to concentrate attention upon the bodily movements themselves rather than upon the aim or objective of the actions, a form of self-consciousness about the body itself which occurs at the expense of its effective non-conscious use to achieve a particular task, and which sometimes involves a counter-productive concern with possible injury or harm. In crossing a stream, for example, the girl’s focus is often upon the apparent difficulty of placing her limbs in a secure position, rather than upon the attainability of the bank on the opposite side. And in playing games such as baseball, girls, unlike boys, tend to view the ball as something which is coming at them, and then await its arrival, rather than as something towards which they are going to move, to re-direct its motion.

Young goes on to sketch an existential-phenomenological analysis of these features of female bodily motility, basing this on Merleau-Ponty’s view that, as she puts it,

“There is a world for a subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions,” (p.12)

and that this primary intentionality involves an ‘I can’ rather than an ‘I think’. Young suggests that what underlies the characteristics of feminine bodily movement she has described is an ‘inhibited intentionality’ that expresses an ‘ambiguous transcendence’, which itself involves the body’s subjectivity being constantly undermined by a simultaneous objectivity.

The intentionality is inhibited insofar as the feminine body fails to be holistically organized exclusively towards the aim of the action. An *uninhibited* intentionality “projects the aim to be accomplished and connects the body’s motion towards that end in an unbroken directedness which organizes and unifies the body’s activities” (p.14). By contrast, she says:

“Feminine motion often severs this mutually conditioning relation between aim and enactment. In those motions which when properly performed require the coordination and directedness of the whole body upon some definite end, women frequently move in a contradictory way. Their bodies project the aim to be enacted, but at the same time stiffen against the performance of the task” (p.14).

This contradictory mode of movement can be regarded as expressing simultaneously both an ‘I can’ and an ‘I cannot’; or rather, perhaps, a ‘*one* can’ but ‘*I* cannot’: The action is ‘performable’, but not (altogether) ‘by me’.

The intentionality is thus inhibited by a persistent disbelief in the capacity to reach the objective, and undermined by an anxious focus upon the processes of bodily movement themselves. Thus the feminine body is never that of a fully transcendent subject, projecting itself wholeheartedly towards the world of objects to be acted upon, but is bedevilled by a pervasive ‘immanence’, returning to the status of ‘object’, and thus achieving only an ambiguous transcendence.<sup>2</sup>

Having presented this (existential-phenomenological) analysis, Young goes on to consider the question: how does it come about that the feminine body displays these features? At this point it is important to emphasize the historically and socially specific nature of the mode of bodily existence

---

<sup>2</sup> I think that Young’s reading of Merleau-Ponty is at certain points somewhat problematic, and is perhaps influenced too much by de Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s conception of the subject, which differs somewhat from Merleau-Ponty’s. This is especially so in the use she makes of a concept of ‘transcendence’ which is not, so far as I can see, one that Merleau-Ponty would endorse. However, I shall ignore these concerns in what follows, and assume that Young’s Merleau-Ponty is Merleau-Ponty: this is partly because I am more interested in substantive issues than textual exegesis.

she is talking about. As she rightly maintains, there is no reason to believe that this is universal: for example, it would be unlikely to apply in agricultural societies utilizing female labour. The diversity of feminine motility in different socio-historical contexts would by itself lead one to doubt any innatist explanation; and even if there are genetic differences between the potential strength of male and female bodies, Young points out that the difficulties in performing the 'acts of strength' that she has described are not due to relative muscular weakness but to the non-mobilization of the actual bodily resources. She is therefore inclined to explore instead the ways in which the female child, in a particular cultural context, 'learns' to use and regard her body: to examine, as one might put it, how one aspect of acquiring a feminine *gender* is acquiring a feminine *body*, in the existential-phenomenological understanding of this.

As Young notes, there are a number of fairly obvious ways in which girls are discouraged from engaging in the kinds of activities which would develop the bodily 'skills' described earlier: for example, they are rarely asked or expected to "perform tasks demanding physical effort and strength", and the types of play expected of them are typically more sedentary and "enclosed" (p.22). However, at a more fundamental level, she argues, girls come to regard their bodies primarily as 'objects', rather than as sources of outer-oriented activity. In particular, the girl's body develops both as the object of the male's sexual gaze or 'look', and also as the object of various forms of physical invasion. With respect to the former, Young suggests that this experience of being looked at is in effect 'internalized' so that the girl's body becomes an object for her own concern, generating a kind of self-conscious anticipation of and preparation for the gaze of others.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the awareness of her body as a potential target of invasion encourages a defensive strategy of constructing a protected area of inner space that keeps the others at a distance, but in doing so severs the links between the body and outer objects.

At the end of her paper, Young notes various gaps and problems in her account of the feminine body. First, it might be said that her general claims about how women perform actions requiring 'whole body mobilization' are misleadingly based on a gender-biased sample, by considering only those activities that are primarily performed by men/boys, such as various sports and games. For example (mine, not hers) if one looked at the way women and men pick up and carry one well-known heavy object, namely a child, one might come to the opposite conclusion that women are 'better' at utilizing every part of the body, whilst men rather awkwardly stick out their arms and hope. Second, and more

---

<sup>3</sup> But note here that men, too, might be said to develop a sense of their bodies as 'objects', e.g. as mechanical instruments, or as objects of admiration for their strength and utility. Clearly, this terminology of 'subject' and 'object' is, by itself, inadequate to express these different kinds of objectivity: one really needs a quite different, more varied and subtle vocabulary.

importantly, she points out that her account has been confined to ‘task-oriented’, instrumental-purposive bodily activities, and does not include other varieties of movement, such as dancing.

However, earlier in the paper Young proposes a theoretical rationale for this instrumental action focus. “Primarily”, she says, “... the kind of movement I am concerned with is movement in which the body aims at the accomplishment of a definite purpose or task”, movement which requires “... the confrontation of the body’s capacities and possibilities with the resistance and malleability of things” (p.5). She continues:

“Besides reasons of space, this limitation of subject is based on the conviction, derived primarily from Merleau-Ponty, that it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole towards things and its environment which initially defines the relation of a subject to its world” (p.5).

Merleau-Ponty’s account of this, she answers, “applies to any human existence in a general way”; but “at a more specific level” there are particular “modalities” of this, such as the feminine one. But there is surely a problem, or potential danger, here. As has been seen, Young’s description of the feminine ‘modality’ of bodily existence essentially presents it as a defective one: incomplete, ambiguous, inhibited, and so on. She does not provide, or suggest the possibility of, an account of another modality, a masculine one, which might likewise appear as ‘defective’, but in different ways. Indeed, precisely the contrary is implicitly suggested: that women ‘fail’ to be proper ‘subjects’, whilst men succeed. Rather than there being a gender-neutral account of ‘human bodily existence in general’, with distinctive gender modalities, one gets the impression instead that the feminine mode, unlike the masculine, is only partly ‘human’.

But what if, in fact, this supposedly general, ‘human’ bodily existence was itself distinctively masculine? That is, what if the supposedly universal ‘we’ of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body were actually a *gendered, masculine* ‘we’? This is the possibility which, in the final section, I will briefly explore.

### **5. Merleau-Ponty’s masculine body**

That this might be so is partly suggested by the somewhat phallic character of at least some of the metaphorical terms that Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the body-world relationship. For example: he talks of an arm which “shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place” (p.92); “our phenomenal body”, he says, “surges towards objects to be grasped” (p.106); phenomenal space is described as something that we “have been thrust into ... by our body” (p.142), and Schneider’s problems are at one point described in terms of his “intentional arc” going “limp” (p.136).

More generally, he continually emphasizes the active, manipulative, task-oriented, grasping, working, getting-to-grips-with character of the body's being-in-the-world, and asserts that "the main areas of my body are devoted to actions" (p.146). Thus, both in imagery and explicit doctrine, Merleau-Ponty's body is the vehicle of what are, in the relevant cultural context, recognizably masculine projects and concerns.

However, it is not so much by what is present in his account of the body, as by what is absent from it, that one's suspicions may most strongly be aroused. In particular, I can find no reference to the significance of the body as the site of what has very often within philosophy been regarded as an essentially passive dimension of human existence, namely of the *emotions*: experiences which one supposedly 'suffers'. Nor does Merleau-Ponty talk of the body, not only as the means for our exploration of the world 'outside' us, but also as the means for certain forms of *self*-knowledge. It may be true that all emotions have an intentional object, are directed at something or someone; but it is also true that their specific character and quality emerges most clearly when one is prepared to turn one's attention away from their objects and towards one's own bodily experiences.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to illustrate this by considering just one example, taken from what is, in terms of current conceptions and practices of masculinity, an especially problematic area of emotional experience, that of *vulnerability*. Roughly speaking an important dimension of the process of becoming male/masculine is the acquisition of invulnerability: of the ability (as Wilhelm Reich would put it) to ward off the knocks of the outer world, to avoid dependency, to maintain a sense and appearance of impenetrability, to resist giving in or giving way, to conceal any feelings of weakness or helplessness. This acquisition of invulnerability is presented as a necessary element of maturity or adulthood, themselves defined in terms of the rejection and negation of infancy and childhood, during which the experience of vulnerability is typically central. And this process has a bodily dimension: for instance, the muscular and postural developments involved in the 'mastery' of the kinds of bodily skills discussed in the preceding section are also, I would suggest, a means of closing off one's body to the rejected domains of emotional experience.

---

<sup>4</sup> It might be argued that I am unfair to Merleau-Ponty since, in effect, I follow Young in concentrating on Merleau-Ponty's account of concrete movement, thereby ignoring what he says about abstract movement, the freedom of the projective capacity, and so on. So perhaps the example I go on to provide could be located in this latter aspect of bodily existence? However, I don't think this would be correct, since although he clearly has in mind the imaginative and creative 'use of' and 'play with' the body, I don't think he would include the bodily character of emotional experience. His abstract movement examples are still 'outer-world performances', like concrete movements.

However, the potential sense of vulnerability is rarely if ever entirely lost; and at least one important way in which it can be, as it were, re-activated, is through the use of bodily techniques in a quasi-therapeutic setting. For example, one can employ what might be termed ‘the supine *plié* posture’: lying down on one’s back, with one’s knees flexed, and legs rotated outwards in the classical-ballet *plié* position



This is a position that is often experienced by men as particularly threatening and ‘uncomfortable’, especially when combined with another person standing in the space provided by the opened-out legs. It may take little in the way of imaginative fantasy to experience a marked feeling of helplessness, and possibly to re-evolve actual or schematic painful ‘scenes’ from infant life. Equally, though, the initial scene of fear and impotence may be positively transformed into a growing trust and confidence; an enjoyment (without masochism) of a partly discovered, partly re-discovered ease and receptivity; and the relief that comes from there being no need to defend oneself or retain command of the situation. And to the extent that this initially therapeutic experience is allowed and enabled to become integrated into extra-therapeutic life, one might expect eventually to witness some change in the masculine modality of embodied existence.

I introduced this example to suggest that Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body-subject seems to exclude or ignore certain dimensions of embodiment, dimensions which are perhaps themselves relatively inaccessible from a masculine standpoint. And just because his account of embodiment is also, for him, an account of what is involved in being a human subject, further exploration of this and other similar examples might also suggest problems in his (and other philosophers’) conception of this ‘subject’. In particular, there seems a tendency here to equate subjectivity with activity, and objectivity with passivity.

That is, there may be an assumption that in order for humans to, as it were, distinguish themselves from the inert, passive world of ‘objects’ (and, indeed, in order for such a world to exist, to be ‘constituted’ as such), they must exist in an *active* relation to that world (and perhaps even to other human ‘subjects’). But this would mean that a whole area of human experience that, in certain respects might be described as ‘passive’ (though the pejorative sense of this term makes me uneasy in using it here), are *ipso facto* deemed ‘not genuinely or fully human’, are regarded as reducing the human subject to the status of a mere ‘thing’ or ‘object’, of a body in the sense in which the world of inert objects is composed of ‘mere bodies’. This seems to me mistaken, in that it effectively denies the still distinctively human and subject-like character of, for example, the experience of vulnerability or

receptivity, and thereby de-values or downgrades their potential significance.

Finally, what are the implications of this discussion of the engendered body for an assessment of Merleau-Ponty's work as a 'phenomenology of the body'? Briefly, and returning to the three-fold interpretation of this phrase proposed at the end of section 3, I would suggest something like this. The project of providing a descriptive account of the experience of the human body is admirable; but it must be conducted in a manner that is highly sensitive to the problems of the universal 'we', to the possibility of major differentiations along historical, class, and gender lines. The aim of going beyond this to an existential phenomenological 'explanation' is suspect to the extent that the ontological categories invoked — such as 'subject', 'object', 'transcendence', 'freedom', etc. — tend to impoverish the variety and distinctiveness of different modalities of bodily existence. It is also suspect to the extent that one remains sceptical, as I do, of the phenomenologists' philosophical account of the relationship between the 'lived' and 'scientific' worlds.

But Merleau-Ponty's view that the human subject is, in his sense, embodied; his implicit rejection of earlier phenomenologists' conceptions of the subject as consciousness, and his insistence that the intentionality and *praktognosia* of the body defy any traditional form of dualism, strike me as highly persuasive.