

# ***Body and Perception***

## ***– A Study of Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Body***

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**Abstract:** Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body brings a new perspective to Western philosophy and phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty inherited Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness and emphasized the idea of the oneness of mind and body. In this theory, Merleau-Ponty put forward the concept of “flesh” to oppose the Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind. In his understanding of perception, Merleau-Ponty proposed the concept of “perceptual field”, in which Merleau-Ponty believed that perception is embodied in the form of a field in which things can be presented in the most primitive and complete way, and perception is direct. At the same time, the concept of “flesh of the world” is also put forward. “Flesh” is the basic nature of people and the world, and the communication between human beings and the external world is the “flesh” and the “flesh” of the world. The communication between human beings and the external world is the direct mutual perception and interaction between the “flesh” and the “flesh of the world”. According to Merleau-Ponty, in communication, the body is the medium for perceiving and understanding symbols, and the meaning of symbols is formed through bodily experience and culture. The speech act is a complex expression of the body's interaction with the world that allows for a shared experience between the speaker and the listener. Merleau-Ponty's concept emphasizes the monadic embodiment of perception and thought, matter and consciousness in the body, breaking through the limitations of the a priori philosophical thinking of Western logic.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, Body-Schema, perception.

### **1. Introduction**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body innovatively proposes the concept of “flesh” in comparison with traditional Western philosophy, which considers the body not only as a physical entity in the external world, but also as a means of perceiving the external world. The body and consciousness work together to become the flesh, and the two inseparably form the basis of people's perception and transformation of the world. All of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical activity is aimed at transcending the traditional dichotomies between body and mind, spirit and matter, subject and object, and the body, in Merleau-Ponty's view, is the point of entry that can provide such transcendence. [1] Merleau-Ponty's theory of the Body Schema confirms this idea, namely that people's control over the body takes place unconsciously, and that they can interact directly with the external world without having to think about the details.

Before Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body came into existence, Western philosophical perspectives focused on abstract epistemology, Cartesian mind-body dualism, and Husserlian phenomenology. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body rejects the Cartesian mind-body dualism, which holds that the body and consciousness are one and the same. Merleau-Ponty took the creation of the concept of "incarnation" as a breakthrough and combined it with part of Husserl's phenomenology to promote traditional Western philosophy to get rid of the dilemma of questioning the reality of the external world created by the dichotomy of subject and object, and to emphasize the confirmation of the reality of the external world through feeling and experiencing the world.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body also inherited and advanced Husserl's Cartesian phenomenology of a priori consciousness, turning it into a phenomenology of simple perception.[2] Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body is also a part of Husserl's phenomenology of the body. [2] Husserl's traditional phenomenology focuses on revealing the essence behind phenomena through experience, while Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body emphasizes relatively direct perception and experience of the essence of phenomena; the body in the former theory is the tool of consciousness, the subject who perceives the external world, while in the latter, the body and consciousness are combined into a "corporeal body", the subject who perceives the external world. in the former theory, the body is the tool of consciousness to feel the external world, while in the latter, the body and consciousness are combined as the "body", the subject who feels the external world.

## 2. The Body and the World

### 2.1. The Body and Perception

In Merleau-Ponty's theory of the phenomenology of perception, "perceptual field" is a crucial concept. In the pre-Merleau-Ponty view of the phenomenology of consciousness, the perception of the external world is considered to be more point-like. In the phenomenology of perception, on the other hand, perception is no longer a point, but is described as a "field", emphasizing that perception is composite rather than monolithic. What people perceive through the perceptual field is not only the things that people pay attention to, but all the situations that can be perceived through various ways of perception, even if people do not pay attention to the situation in which this thing is located, but other things are still in people's "perceptual field". Merleau-Ponty explains in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, for example, that one cannot perceive anything in an absolutely homogeneous plane, and that assuming that one can only see a plane of nothing, one would only describe "not feeling anything" rather than "seeing a plane of nothing". a plane of nothing". If there is a red dot on the plane, one can perceive the red dot, but if the plane becomes red like the red dot, one cannot perceive the red dot. So the particular thing that people perceive is always in the middle of other objects, it is always a part of the 'field', and the perception of things in the 'perceptual field' is dependent on the environment in which they are located. Therefore, there is a certain level and structure in the 'perceptual field', and only the structure of actual perception can tell us what is perceived. [3] This also confirms that perception is not point-like, but a "field" - a "perceptual field".

In addition, Merleau-Ponty suggests that in the "perceptual field", what we perceive is no longer presented to our consciousness in the physiological sense of a thought process mediated by the body as a receptor and transducer, but by our physical body through the "intentional" perception. It is our physical body that feels it directly through "intentional" perception. What is perceived is never dependent on thought to enable us to perceive it, but enters our consciousness directly; in other words, there is no need to think in order to perceive things; things are presented to us directly. If perception required a process of thought, our perceptions would be composed of a number of independent point

perceptions, but in fact, what we perceive is a coherent, holistic, and dynamic situation. This is what Merleau-Ponty emphasizes as the original presentation of what is perceived in the “perceptual field”.

The process of original presentation also breaks with empiricist and rationalist theories of perception. Empiricism holds that the character of an object we perceive is a property, not a feeling of the subject, and that sensation is the result of the stimulation of the subject by this property. Rationalism, on the other hand, holds that the way things are perceived is by ascribing subjective consciousness to the object, and that the judgment of the mind is used to understand what the perceived thing is. [4] Merleau-Ponty's view resides between the two and embodies the subject-object monad, the incarnation, describing the transcendental nature of perception of the external world and the immanence of consciousness as interdependent and inherently one, and that it is the joint action of the two that gives us perception, the internal and external being in no particular order; it is not the perception of the object that is presented to the subject in some way, nor is it the subject that is presented to the subject in some way, nor is it the subject that is stimulated to know what it is through some kind of judgment. to the subject, nor is it the subject that in some way allows consciousness to perceive this object in the external world. This subject-object unity is a more direct and comprehensive perception.

## 2.2. The Body, the Incarnation, the World

Perception in Merleau-Ponty's theory is a perceptually integrated, subject-object monadic feeling, which then requires objects as the basis of perception. Merleau-Ponty infers that the way in which man perceives the world and himself is not entirely physiological or entirely subjective perceptually, and therefore it is not reasonable to think that man perceives the world and himself either through his body or his consciousness. Rather, this would suggest that what man perceives depends on is neither spiritual nor material existence, but rather a special kind of existence between spirit and matter, full of spirituality[3] - what Merleau-Ponty calls the physical body (flesh). The body in the traditional phenomenology of consciousness is a material being without subjectivity, serving only as a conduit for inputs and outputs from the external world, incapable of feeling and thinking. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body does not fully subscribe to this view, and does not consider the body to be a medium for transmitting information for the physical body or consciousness to feel the external world and to interact with it, but rather that it can also be reactive in the physical body as a whole. The physical body has the ability to feel external matter as well as the ability to think and experience with subjectivity.

The philosophical dilemma faced by the mind-body dichotomy, which was proposed before the phenomenology of the body, is that we are unable to recognize anything outside of our own spirit when we can only confirm our own thinking, and that the mind-body relationship is the key to approaching the problem of the Other and to thinking about how to transcend solipsism [4]. Merleau-Ponty resolved the dilemma of the mind-body dichotomy by defining the concept of “incarnation” and explaining the mind-body relationship through the phenomenology of the body. Ferdinand Alquié, an interpretive scholar, characterized Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thought as “ambiguous.”[5] Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is based on the concept of the “body” and the phenomenology of the body. [5] The incarnation consists of the union of body and consciousness into a single body, the body referring to the material part and the consciousness to the spiritual part. Under the concept of incarnation, body and consciousness are embedded in each other and inseparable; their actions are reciprocal, not a one-way action of the body on the consciousness, nor a one-way action of the consciousness on the body. Thus, the concept of the physical body has the dual character of being the basis for perceiving the external and also being able to respond as a substance surrounded by the external world. In this dual character, what is perceived is that which is real, and both feeling and reaction are immediate.

Merleau-Ponty, in response to the problem of man's relation to the external world, analogized the basis of feeling, the “flesh”, and proposed the concept of the object of feeling, the “flesh of the world”. The flesh of the world and the body are similar in nature: they are neither material nor spiritual. The relationship between the body and the “flesh of the world” is not distinct, but rather intertwined, with no absolute boundaries between them.[6] This understanding allows us to re-examine the nature of the object of sensation, the “flesh of the world. [6] This understanding allows us to re-examine the relationship between the self and the environment. Through the “flesh of the world,” we realize that the connection between human beings and the world is inseparable, and that human beings perceive the world not as a matter-to-matter sensation, but as the mutual perception and reaction of two subjective “flesh”. This process cannot be separated and understood in a purely physiological or psychological way, but rather occurs through the overlapping and embedding of spirit and matter. The complexity of this relationship reflects the richness of human existence and highlights the multiple roles we play in this dynamic world. It is through this interplay that we construct meaning, form identities, and seek to understand and connect in an ever-changing environment.

### 3. The Body and Expression

#### 3.1. The Body that Speaks

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is not only a tool for perceiving the world, but also a medium for understanding and communicating symbols, which have a bodily nature. The so-called physicality of symbols is not the form of possessing meaning, but the form of generating meaning. [7] The sign itself is meaningless; it is the thing to which the sign refers in the culture that is meaningful. The meaning of a sign is formed in the combination of the able and the referent, a combination that is not arbitrary but agreed upon under the cycle of bodily experience and socio-culture, i.e., language. In studies of people with aphasia we have been able to discover that without language we can still recognize an object or concept, we just can't express it in a way that is recognized by others. Therefore, the meaning of symbols is not only found in language or words, but is closely linked to our bodily experiences and perceptions. By physicality, we mean that symbolic meaning is also connected to bodily experience and perception, and exists in a “field”. Our understanding of symbols is in language, and symbols alone do not have concrete meaning, just as we have to understand letters in words and words and punctuation in statements.

For Merleau-Ponty, the bodily schemata that enable the phenomenal body to possess the world are not static, fixed structures; they are constantly revised and expanded as the practice of existence continues. [8] The bodily schema is not limited to our physical bodies, but can be extended to the external world, and the bodily schema of the flesh of the world can be extended to our individual bodies. Our bodily experience of our own bodies and of the external world allows us to judge the position of our bodies not through logic, but rather we can directly feel the position of our body parts. The integration of body parts into the body as a whole is referred to by Merleau-Ponty as “bodily synthesis”. According to Merleau-Ponty, bodily synthesis not only extends the body to objective objects or tools, but even language is the result of bodily synthesis. [8] That is to say, when we use language to express ourselves, we do not need to deliberately organize the language in our mind according to logic first, but rather we express ourselves naturally and directly.

Therefore, the speech act of expression can be viewed as an expressive phenomenon, which is not just a sound uttered, but a way in which the body interacts with the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, speech is not simply a direct mapping from mind to sound, but is a complex, integrated behavior of the body in response to the world in a given context. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that “my body is the site, or rather the actual presence, of expressive phenomena, where visual and auditory experiences nurture each other, and where their expressive value is the

basis of the prepositional unity of the perceived world.” This suggests that the speech act is part of bodily expression and that speech does not exist in isolation; it is intimately connected to bodily movements, expressions and emotions, which together constitute the complete expressive act. Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes the central role of the speech act in constructing and conveying meaning: speech is not just a combination of sounds, it is a social practice, a tool for the speaking subject to communicate and interact with others. In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective, the speech act is an embodied activity that reflects the intentional, emotional, and cognitive states of the speaker. The speech act is unique and is the creative expression of the speaker in a particular situation. The significance of speech lies not only in the information it conveys, but also in how it connects to the body and experience of the listener, thus enabling the sharing and exchange of meaning.

### 3.2. Self and Others

Merleau-Ponty innovated the concept of “inter-bodiness”, which emphasizes the direct, non-verbal communication between the self and the other through the interaction of the body. The concept of body chema is used to replace the concept of existential sensation because I, as a bodily-subject, do not perceive myself through internal sensation, but rather, I grasp myself and my environment through body chema in the first place. I have a grasp of myself and my environment. [8] This inter-body not only connects the self with others on the behavioral level, but also embodies the process by which the subject acquires self-consciousness by perceiving the body of others. The body is no longer an extension of the isolated individual's consciousness, but the way in which the individual exists in the world to coexist with others, and one is able to subconsciously perceive with the body what the mind does not perceive. Merleau-Ponty states that body-to-body interaction can create a relationship of mutual understanding on an unconscious level that does not rely on rational or logical analysis, but is made possible through the sharing of bodily experience.

According to Merleau-Ponty, language is a bodily expression, a central way in which the self interacts with others through the body. Language is not an abstract symbol divorced from the body, but a comprehensive form of expression closely linked to the body's movements, expressions, and sounds. Thus, language is not only conveying information, but also emotions, intentions, and understanding of the world through the synergy of voice and body. In verbal communication, Merleau-Ponty emphasized the importance of “the body speaks”. When people communicate with others, they convey meaning not only through the content of their words, but also through other body movements that convey deeper messages. The tone of voice and body language we use in our conversations with others subconsciously expresses our emotions and intentions in the present situation on a physical level, and these expressions are part of the language and part of the body. When the self interacts with others through language, it not only transmits conscious thoughts, but also realizes resonance with others' perceptions through the language of the body. Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of language and expression is clearly characterized by the phenomenology of the body, and the reason why he interprets language in this way is that he wants to construct a cultural world through language and explore the issues of interiority and transcendence on the basis of the cultural world. [2]

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body also extends the relationship between the self and the other to the dimension of culture. For Merleau-Ponty, culture is not only a system of symbols for the external world, but is also manifested through bodily practices and habits. In this context, the individual's body is not only a tool for interacting with others, but also shapes the relationship between self and others through cultural practices, values, and symbolic systems. In different cultural worlds, the way the self interacts with others may be influenced by specific cultural practices and symbolic systems. For example, manners, body language, and communication styles vary from culture to

culture. Merleau-Ponty points out that culture is not an abstract being, but is revealed through the behavior of the body. Through our bodies we enter and participate in a cultural world that is sustained and progressed through bodily practices. Thus, the individual not only perceives the external world through the body, but also participates in the construction of culture through bodily experience. Through the cultural world, the relationship between the self and others is embedded in a more complex social system. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is not only a material being, but also shapes the relationship between the self and others through its cultural context and social practices. In cultural interactions, the body is the central vehicle for perceiving others, understanding them, and building relationships with them. The body in this cultural world is both a concrete expression of individual existence and a continuation and embodiment of cultural practices.

#### 4. Conclusion

“Body” is an important concept in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, which in Merleau-Ponty's thought is perceived and thought. Body and consciousness are one and the same, and every body is a subject and an object. The body and consciousness think and perceive in part and incompletely, whereas the corporeal body as a whole is capable of thinking and perceiving others and the external world in a full and complete way, and Merleau-Ponty emphasizes this way of perceiving and experiencing with the concept of bodily iconography. Merleau-Ponty's explication of the existential and transcendental character of our body-schema entails a critique of the objectivistic method in neurology and psychology. In opposition to this method. Merleau-Ponty posits the existential phenomenological analysis, in which general structures of direct experience are identified and described. The body-schema which consequently appears is a very rich one, incorporating aspects of practical intention, expression and comprehension.[9] The communication between human beings and human beings, and between human beings and the external world, is the perception, thinking and interaction between inter-subject.

Phenomenology of the body is a different kind of philosophy that takes perception as the core way of thinking for the mainstream Western philosophy that takes a priori philosophy as its mainstay, breaks through the limitations of Western philosophy that uses logic to think, and solves the problem of Cartesian dualism that separates and opposes the subject and the object. Instead of answering the philosophical dilemma from the level of logic or a priori self-consciousness, Merleau-Ponty turned to the body and rethought the dilemma facing the philosophy of consciousness from the perspective of the “embodied” body. [3] This approach is no longer the traditional rational way of thinking, but an exploration of how to transcend the problem of egoism, based on an existential perspective.

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