

Topic 3

“It will be necessary to...awaken the experience of the world such as it appears to us insofar as we are in the world through our bodies, and insofar as we perceive the world with our bodies. But by re-establishing contact with the body and with the world in this way, we will also rediscover ourselves.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945/2014, p. 213. Translated by Donald A. Landes.

The quoted excerpt from Maurice Merleau-Ponty contains a few presuppositions that need to be explained at the outset. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty sets out to challenge an idea deeply rooted in western thought. This is the idea that the mind and the body should be kept apart, since the former is characteristic of rational thought and the latter of unthoughtful and dubious physical sensation. The dualist dichotomy is present already in Plato and reaches perhaps its apotheosis with Descartes, who finds that rational thought is the only aspect of his experience that evades categorical doubt - cogito ergo sum). Both these great thinkers base their philosophies on the denigration of the body and the sanctification of the mind. Merleau-Ponty finds this divide not only unwarranted but also very damaging to the way we think.

Just as the mind-body dichotomy seeks to isolate one part of the lived experience from another, so too did Plato seek to separate different senses from one another. In his work sight becomes the preferred of the senses. This is most obvious in one of his allegories, where the sun - substituting for the Idea of the Good - emits light that enables humans to see. Seeing here is allegorical of the deepest comprehension that Plato posits. Although actual observation of objects in our sensory world has nothing to do with the ideal world where Plato locates real knowledge, this is still telling and perhaps symbolic of the radical reductionism that Plato applies on human perception. In his allegory of the sun there is no room for hearing, touching, tasting, etc., sight can do it all alone. Here Merleau-Ponty offers his main critique of Plato and the mind-body dichotomy. He believes that the world cannot be properly understood if the mind is preferred over the body or if one sense is preferred over another. His phenomenological method therefore tries to approach the experience as a whole, seeking in it a synthesis of senses rather than their analysis. Rather than driven apart, all our senses should act in concert with our mind to account fully for our experience.

The second quoted sentence requires some explanation too: the relationship between ontology and epistemology in Plato (Plato is pertinent here because his views often differ strongly from those Merleau-Ponty, but are in certain areas also surprisingly close) is very tight and hierarchical. By tight I mean that different (ontological) orders of reality require from the subject different epistemological processes. This is most obvious in Plato's allegory of the divided line, where he assigns to every separate ontological part on the line its own separate way of comprehending it (its own epistemological process). The hierarchy is therefore obvious - first there is the stable ontological reality of the outside world (in the case of Plato the world of Ideas) and it is exactly this reality that structures the epistemological

processes that comprehend it. It is very surprising how close to this relationship between ontology and epistemology the second sentence of Merleau-Ponty is. He believes that if one is to correctly apply his phenomenological (bodily) approach - i.e. to "re-establish contact with the body" - one will also "rediscover" oneself. Even if this idea prefers the rediscovery of the subject over that of some outer reality, the hierarchy is still there, only turned upside down. Here, we will - through the reconnection with our bodies and hence our world - ultimately rediscover ourselves.

I find this part problematic on a few accounts: although Merleau-Ponty goes a long way to overcome the mind-body dichotomy inherited from Plato, he is still not radical enough as to think of ontology and epistemology as completely separate. The subject he therefore posits is in its essence a stable subject, typical of existentialism and modernism. By stable I mean a subject that creates opinions by way of rational thought, a subject that is (in a Sartrean way) responsible for his actions. Its ailment is - to use Fredric Jameson - alienation (or anxiety if we were to think of the consequences of freedom in Sartre). I think that the second half of the last century has thoroughly changed the way one should construe of the subject. The existentialist/modernist subject has been superseded by the postmodern subject, whose ailment is - to use Jameson again - schizophrenia. I will therefore use some postmodern and poststructuralist philosophers to critique the excessive stability Merleau-Ponty assigns to the subject and its surrounding reality. I will also analyze technological developments to try to show more concretely, how these shifts are happening.

The second argument I would like to advance against the quoted excerpt stems directly from the first one, but focuses more on the (a)political dimension of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Can we adequately account for our experience nowadays with only bodily impulses, omitting entirely the proliferation of visual representations, digital interfaces etc. that have engulfed us since "the visual turn"? Can our bodily responses be "reprogrammed" by these often ideological representations and can Merleau-Ponty's ideas accommodate such a radical "turn"? I think they do not, since his bodily phenomenology does not leave enough space for outer impulses to change thoroughly the way humans perceive. Through an analysis of a sentence I once heard my friend say, I would like to think of other elements apart from our body that structure our experience of the world.

Merleau-Ponty concludes the quoted excerpt with the promise that if we are to apply his method correctly, "we will also rediscover ourselves". The paradox here is obvious: even though his critique of the mind-body dichotomy is radical, he still believes that there is a certain "ourselves" the correct way of doing philosophy can unearth. "Ourselves" is of course the subject and Merleau-Ponty believes his phenomenology can rediscover it. The idea of some "real" subject being somehow obscured from us until the right method is applied to it, is characteristic of philosophy before postmodernism and poststructuralism. According to this idea, there ought to be within the subject a certain unchanging essence that only has to be discovered. The poststructuralists, Gilles Deleuze, for example, would disagree; rather than focus on *being*, he would focus on *becoming*. Nothing ever simply exists and is stable, but is in a constant exchange with other objects, subjects, in an incessant flux of information. The subject itself is therefore much too mutable for an unchanging essence to emerge within it.

Another critique of the stable subject might come from the postmodern philosophers, most directly perhaps from Fredric Jameson: he would probably believe that the depth of subjectivity assigned by Merleau-Ponty to the subject is just a characteristic of modernism and is not applicable to the postmodern era we live in now. The main characteristic of the postmodern subject is exactly the opposite of the depth of the modernist subject; the postmodern subject - bombarded with representations and signifiers at every moment of his life - cannot experience any kind of depth, but is always limited to experiencing just the surfaces of all phenomenons around him. Here, there is absolutely no way to "re-establish contact with the body", since the experience of the body and mind is too fragmented and schizophrenic for us to be able to reconstruct a subject, whose senses can create a unified experience.

The depthlessness of experience can be observed in many areas; a very obvious one among them is the shortening of the attention span in the last decades. As digital interfaces drive books out of lives of many people, we have to ask ourselves: is knowledge obtained on the internet equivalent to the knowledge obtained from books or lectures? Or, even more radically, does the structure of obtaining knowledge from the internet differ from the structure of obtaining knowledge from books, and if so, does it influence how we think? It is not a nostalgia for a lost paradise when I say I believe the knowledge obtained from the internet is utterly different from that of books. Books are usually read from beginning to end, with introductions, chapters, conclusions; this does not apply to the internet. Rather than being based on a progression of causally linked ideas or arguments, the internet can be entered at any random place, with videos of cute cats, pornography and virtual tours of world famous museums being all just one click apart. It is also characteristic of our use of the internet that we open so many tabs that we can soon hardly follow them or simply forget what they are about. It is exactly this characteristic of the digital interface that ultimately fragments our experience and fragments also the knowledge we attain from the internet. I believe that a phenomenological unity of bodily experience that Merleau-Ponty advocates is nowadays therefore quite unlikely.

One might say that this argument falls prey to technological determinism, and is wrong in presenting the internet as responsible for such profound shifts in human subjectivity. Many things have changed in the last decades, why should internet be considered so influential in terms of human epistemology? I believe the internet is of course not solely responsible for these shifts. It is just the latest development in the advancements of digital technology that has proven to be extremely easy to integrate with our lives. Internet acts in concert with our mobile phones, for example, since they allow us to access the internet pretty much anytime anywhere. It is also not the technology that is so influential, but the structures of perception that operate within it that are important. The book is not different to the internet or the mobile phone in that it is more traditional than the latter two, but that the experience of it is qualitatively different from that of the internet or the mobile phone.

The second argument I would like to make against Merleau-Ponty's claim that only bodily experience can really result in proper understanding of the world and ourselves, starts with a story. On a school trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau I was walking next to a friend of mine; when we

were nearing the platform in Birkenau where the future internees got off the trains, a terrifying sight of the Gates of Death emerged - we could see the gates head-on. In a sombre voice my friend said, that this was the place where all the photographs of Birkenau are always taken.

This sentence stayed with me for a while for its absurdity. The photos (representations) had been made to remind us of their referent, and yet, with the referent right in front of him, my friend was reminded of its many representations. Such a turn in the experience of the relationship between the representation and its referent is distinctly postmodern (for reasons I will enumerate shortly), but can also be found in eras prior to postmodernism. Most obviously we can see the influence of representation on the experience of reality in two great literary works, in Don Quixote and Madame Bovary. Both of these famous protagonists are avid readers, therefore they experience a great many literary representations of a certain way of life; Don Quixote is susceptible to representations of a knight's life and Madame Bovary to representations of romantic love. Because the representations of life in novels - that they have come to understand as real - cannot be reconciled with the world that they are experiencing, they both go mad, one to comic, the other to tragic effect. These novels are much more than just curious examples of craziness. They seem to talk (albeit tangentially) about a condition that almost nobody in the developed world nowadays can escape. That is the conflation of reality and representation.

In the twentieth century the amount of audiovisual material (as well as just visual material, i.e. photos) created, has reached unprecedented heights and is still rising today. Along with the proliferation of audiovisual representations, the technology with which we consume them has also developed incredibly. There are screens on busses, in our homes, in our pockets and all feed us a constant flow of representations. If people, engulfed with representations, had to be in the past rich and educated (like Don Quixote and Madame Bovary), this is today hardly the case. In developed countries there are hardly any people still without mobile phones, and digital representations are accessible in public places as well. We could therefore say that almost all of us live in a time where representation of the world precedes our lived experience of it. To follow the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard - the incessant flow of representations constitutes a simulation of reality, that ultimately creates the hyperreal. It was the hyperreal (created by the many representations they had experienced) that came in conflict with the real for Don Quixote and Madame Bovary. But nowadays we are not in the same situation as these literary characters anymore; because the flow of representations cannot be interrupted, the real can also never be reached or rediscovered. It is inevitably eclipsed and fragmented by the flow of simulations. I think this is exactly what my friend's sentence demonstrates and it is of great importance for the critique of Merleau-Ponty's bodily experience of the world.

In the quoted paragraph the implicit idea is, that the bodily experience of the world is somehow most basic, something we have once understood but have forgotten (that is why we will only "rediscover" ourselves). This idea seems rather intuitive, since our bodily reactions seem to be independent from everything else. I can control what I think about something, but I cannot control what I see, smell, feel, etc. It is the presupposition that the bodily precedes the rational, the political and the ideological, that makes in the eyes of

Merleau-Ponty his phenomenology the right way to “rediscover ourselves”. But as we have just proven, representations of events, places or characters hugely impact our experiences of them, very often in a way that precedes the sensations the body and mind can give us. In a way, we are perhaps nowadays even closer to digital representations than we are to our bodies.

I believe that Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the long lasting mind-body duality is extremely important, but at the same time also not radical enough. Parts of it are still applicable to our life now, but mostly it has to be replaced with poststructuralist ideas of becoming and postmodern concepts of fragmentation. Representation is a key term here, since it structures the way we feel even more primarily than the body. To find an emancipatory theory of the subject, we should look beyond the body and see the myriad complexities that influence it nowadays.