

Academy for Lifelong Learning

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Critical transition in philosophy
(as seen by a non-philosopher)

Bob Fabian : fabian.ca/ALLTO
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Maurice Merleau-Ponty



- Maurice Jean Jacques Merleau-Ponty (14 March 1908 – 3 May 1961) was a French phenomenological philosopher, strongly influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. The constitution of meaning in human experience was his main interest and he wrote on perception, art, and politics. He was on the editorial board of *Les Temps modernes*, the leftist magazine established by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

- A friend of both Sartre and de Beauvoir, until they fell out over the value of Soviet communism. (He was disillusioned by what happened in Soviet Russia after the war.)
- He studied both psychology (Gestalt psychology) and philosophy (phenomenology)
- Lectured at the Sorbonne on child psychology and education (1949-1952)
- In 1952 he was the youngest person ever awarded the Chair of Philosophy at the College of France
- He died of a stroke in 1961 at age 53

Transition

- He was steeped in the diverse European philosophical and psychological schools
 - Not the North American/English pragmatism and behaviourism
- He was perhaps the most thoughtful and catholic of mid-20th century French thinkers
 - He contributed extensively and creatively. I first met his thinking in working on architectural matters.
- Leads naturally to a Cognitive Science inspired view of self as an embodied, embedded and evolved mind.
 - Absent any external reference, a satisfying view of self with meaning tied to our personal embedded and evolved realities.

Confession

- I find Merleau-Ponty often hard to read and difficult to follow. He isn't being obscure, but his thought is often subtle with very careful definitions and distinctions.
- Writing about Merleau-Ponty can be frustratingly obscure, with subtle distinctions and terms introduced that are given special and very local meanings.
- I'm attracted to the broad positions that he advances, but find that many of the philosophers writing about him to be hopelessly obscure.

Phenomenology

- Phenomenology is the philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness. [It accepts the primacy of the lived experience as the foundation for everything we can know. (RJF)]
- Phenomenology is not a unified movement; rather, different authors share a common family resemblance but also with many significant differences. Gabriella Farina states:

“A unique and final definition of phenomenology is dangerous and perhaps even paradoxical as it lacks a thematic focus. In fact, it is not a doctrine, nor a philosophical school, but rather a style of thought, a method, an open and ever-renewed experience having different results, and this may disorient anyone wishing to define the meaning of phenomenology.”

Gestalt Psychology

- Gestalt psychology is a school of psychology that emerged in Austria and Germany in the early twentieth century based on work by Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka. As used in Gestalt psychology, the German word Gestalt (meaning "form") is interpreted as "pattern" or "configuration". Gestalt psychologists emphasized that organisms perceive entire patterns or configurations, not merely individual components. The view is sometimes summarized using the adage, "the whole is more [other] than the sum of its parts."
- Classic Example: The melody is a part of what we hear independent of pitch, volume, tempo or orchestration. It's not "there", but we recognize it instantly.

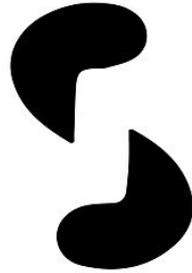
Wikipedia

Gestalt Examples

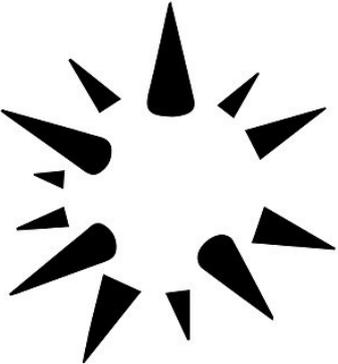
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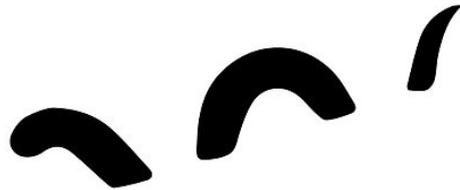
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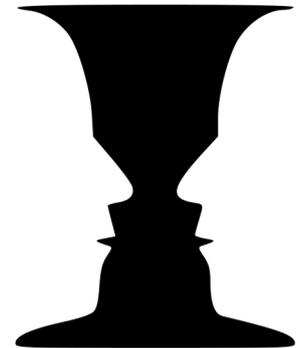
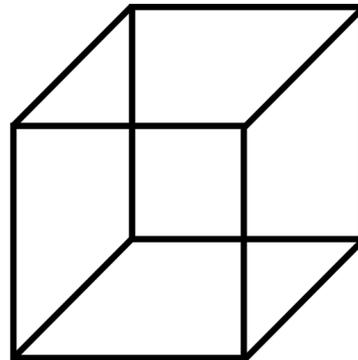


D



We see contradictory things,
but not simultaneously

We see more than is present



Wikipedia Images

His World

AT THE EXISTENTIALIST CAFÉ

*Freedom, Being, and
Apricot Cocktails*

with
JEAN-PAUL SARTRE
SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR
ALBERT CAMUS
MARTIN HEIDEGGER
KARL JASPERS
EDMUND HUSSERL
MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY
and others

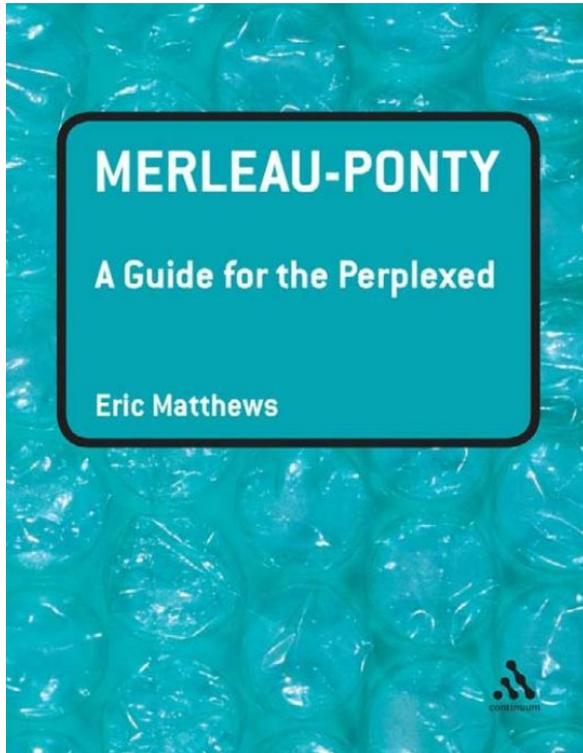
SARAH BAKEWELL



*Other Press
New York*

- 2016 popular introduction to the existentialist world in France after the Second World War
- Goes back to Husserl and Heidegger to plumb the phenomenological depths behind existentialism
- “Everyone who knew Merleau-Ponty felt the glow of well-being emanating from him. Simone de Beauvoir was warmed by it at first. She had been waiting for someone to admire, and it seemed he would do.”

Introductory Book



- “Merleau-Ponty is not an easy author to understand, but he more than repays the effort. The difficulty comes, not from any wilful obscurity, but from the sheer subtlety and complexity of his thought. This book is an attempt to guide readers through that complexity. It works by introducing some of Merleau-Ponty’s main themes step by step. Its structure is meant to be something like a staircase: by the time readers reach the top stair, they should have a better grasp than when they first set foot on the bottom stair.”
- Published 2006; Reprinted 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010

Embodied Mind

- Merleau-Ponty was one of the first existentialists to recognize the body is an active participant in cognition.
- Example: We never recognize “unimportant” elements in our visual field. The visual signals that reach the brain have already been processed. Our bodies shape our perceptions of actual and imagined experiences.
- The mind needs to be seen not as a disembodied spirit but as strongly embodied.

Chain of Development

- Phenomenology
- Gestalt Psychology
 - Existentialism
- Cognitive Sciences
- Meaning in 21st Century

Merleau-Ponty

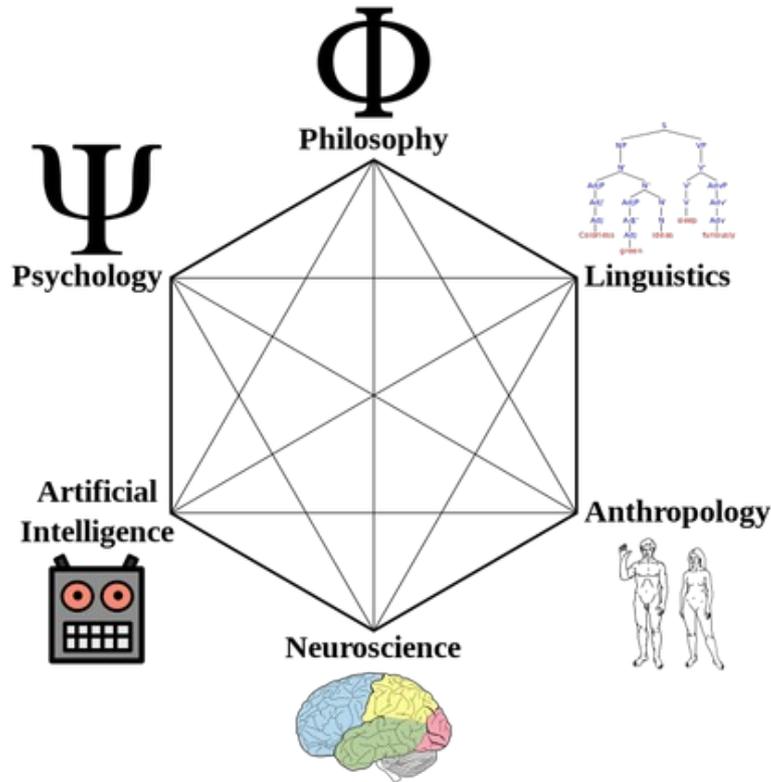


Natural
Next
Steps

Mind-Body Problem

- There is a fundamental transcendence in our awareness of self. That can't be just an arrangement of neurons in our brains! Can it? It certainly didn't seem possible
- But if the "self" is an otherworldly spiritual presence how is it that the "self" interacts with the body? Surely, my "self" has the ability to will changes in my body. And changes in my body will change my "self", e.g. pain from an accident.
- Cognitive Science offers a <mind+body> answer.

Cognitive Science

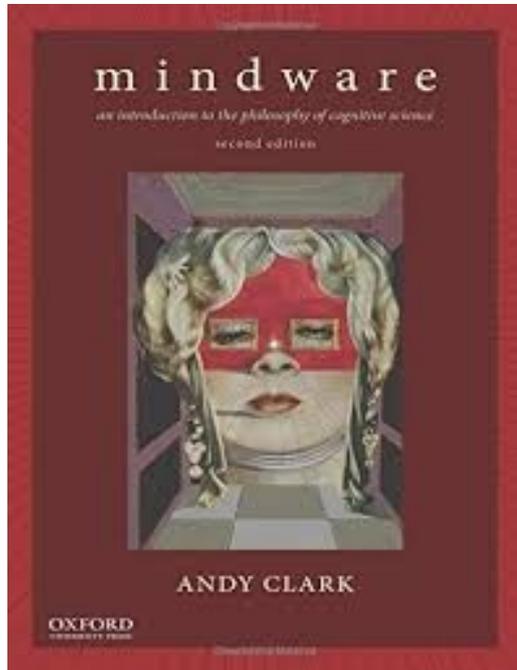


Cognitive science is the interdisciplinary study of mind and intelligence, embracing philosophy, psychology, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, linguistics, and anthropology. Its intellectual origins are in the mid-1950s when researchers in several fields began to develop theories of mind based on complex representations and computational procedures.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Mindware

- Ranging across both standard philosophical territory and the landscape of cutting-edge cognitive science, Mindware is a vivid and engaging introduction to key issues, research, and opportunities. Starting with the vision of mindware as software and debates between realists, instrumentalists, and eliminativists, Andy Clark takes students on a no-holds-barred journey through connectionism, dynamical systems, and real-world robotics.



My Personal View

- The ***self*** can (and should) be viewed as a ***mind*** that is ***embodied***, ***embedded***, and ***evolved***.
- Embodied: Pre-conscious processing happens before we are consciously aware of an image, sound, taste, smell, ...
- Embedded: We are strongly shaped by the cultural and physical environments that we experience during life.
- Evolved: Both abstractions and technologies contribute to what we are and are able to do. We have evolved and will continue to do so.

Embodied



- The “equipment” the brain uses to interact with the world is not neutral
 - The eyes are not cameras
 - The ears are not microphones
 - The nose is not a trace gas detector
 - The larynx is not a loud speaker
- Our bodies shape all of our interactions with the world.
- Our “self” should be viewed as being embodied

Embedded

- We learn language and we learn values from those immediately around us while we were growing up
- We are significantly defined by the social groups in which we find ourselves. (See Vygotsky on the social formation of mind.)
- The physical spaces around us have a significant impact on how we see the world.
- The “self” is strongly shaped by the social and physical contexts in which we are embedded.

Evolved

- Many of humanity's physical and conceptual developments act as human augmentation agents.
 - We're more powerful because of the physical tools that augment our physical abilities.
 - We're more conceptually powerful because of the conceptual abstractions available to us.
 - Even the smartphone can be seen as augmenting our abilities to see and remember.
- Strip away all of those physical and conceptual enhancements and we would be less evolved.

Search for Meaning

- We find personal value and meaning in contributing to communities we value. It's an important part of this Academy's experience.
- We find personal value in discovering, uncovering and articulating ideas that others can use in their efforts to understand and shape their world.
- And this afford us a (limited) kind of life after death. Our presence echos in our valued communities after we are no longer physically among the living.

Existentialists

- Very attractive when I was an angry young man in university searching for my way in the world
- But I wanted something that goes beyond the anger and the immediacy of existentialism
- For me, accepted contributions proved to be the most lasting source of personal satisfaction
- An expanded view of self provides me with a satisfying and meaningful way to understand my reality
 - And now has a solid philosophical and scientific basis

The End

Thank You
for listening to my story