Prompt 3: Merleau-Ponty and the Case of Schneider

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty draws on the case study of the patient Schneider to argue that the body is the seat of intentionality: Schneider has problems with abstract movements and intellectual disorders because his motor intentionality — to be understood as his function of projection and his intentional arc — is damaged.

Merleau-Ponty uses Gelb and Goldstein's study of the patient Schneider to draw attention to the challenges he faces with regard to movement, and more fundamentally, the relations between the body and space. He uses the descriptions provided by the psychologists to provide a phenomenological account of Schneider's problems. Firstly, Schneider is unable to perform "abstract" movements while he can execute "concrete" movements. In Schneider's own words, he is only able to "experience movements as a result of the situation," where no voluntary initiative is possible. (107) Here, Merleau-Ponty draws a crucial distinction between concrete movement and abstract movement: the former refers to the movement that one engages in when in an actual, real situation that calls for a "a certain labor" (108); the latter is called for by a virtual, imaginary scenario, "not directed at any actual situation." (105) Although Schneider can easily take his handkerchief and blow his nose, he is only able to accomplish abstract movements (e.g. pointing to his nose on command, in an experimental context) either when the point of his body is made present to him or with the aid of preparatory movements that places him into the spirit of the actual situation to which the commands correspond. Why? In concrete movement, quite simply, Schneider is his body and his body is the power of determinate action in a world given to him as "poles of action." (108) In abstract movement, however, Schneider is incapable of possessing his body as "the correlate of pure stimuli" in the absence of practical signification;

instead, Schneider can only possess his body as implicated in a "concrete milieu" upon which each stimulus would come to occupy an explicit position. (111)

Secondly, Schneider also has problems related to intellectual disorders such as those that arise, for instance, in mathematical thinking and engagements with works of art. Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that Schneider's general intelligence is intact. However, Schneider is unable to grasp significations which are not embodied in the given world. In a particular illustration of Schneider's lack of imaginary sense, Merleau-Ponty points out that Schneider can only speak according to a pre-determined plan — a conversation with another person fails to constitute for him a situation that can solicit spontaneous responses. Merleau-Ponty lays the stage for his subsequent diagnosis: imaginary situations are unable to become *meaningful* in the way that real situations can for Schneider.

What, then, is the fundamental function that is damaged in the case of Schneider? Merleau-Ponty argues that it is neither motricity nor intelligence, but rather "motor intentionality." (113) What makes abstract movement possible for a normal person is the function of projection, which is the power or the ability to project a situation — to shape a context in light of a particular task, polarizing the external world with the aims of the task and constructing upon it "a system of significations" that express the internal activity of the subject. (115) For Merleau-Ponty, this function lies at the existential core of a human being — it is only when we project the world in light of our various intentions (e.g. practical, cognitive, aesthetic, political) that the world and its objects take on *meaning*, which is what brings objects into "existence" for us. (137) Here, Merleau-Ponty introduces another important notion: unity. He argues that it is our ability to polarize the world in light of our intentions that gives *unity* to human existence. He calls the set of intentions — for instance, our human milieu, our physical

situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation — that issue from the function of projection, "intentional arc." (137) In this vein, the intentional arc is that which creates the inter-sensory unity between body and mind, motricity and intelligence. Accordingly, for Schneider, his intentional arc "goes limp," thereby inhibiting his ability to project intentions in light of virtual or fictive scenarios. (137) With a damaged function of projection, Schneider is shown to be lacking the general power of placing oneself in a situation. This general power, Merleau-Ponty argues, is an existential *freedom*.

Our freedom in motricity and how we relate to objects lies in the body, Merleau-Ponty argues. Using the case of Schneider, he points to motricity as "original intentionality." (139) With this, Merleau-Ponty claims that there is always a motor valence or an embodied dimension to our intentions that we project the world in light of. On this view, we do not just carry out our cognitive intention to figure out what the body schema is through our minds alone; instead, we *move*. If we think of intentionality as consciousness being directed towards or being related to objects, then we need to understand intentionality as poles of action, as *bodily* — the very movements of our body are intentional. Understanding that, Merleau-Ponty is hereby claiming that consciousness has its seat in the body instead of the mind. In his words, he argues that "consciousness is being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body." (140) He is thus conceiving the body as a mediator between consciousness and the external world. This is a radical reconfiguring of intentionality and consciousness through the notion of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty denies that the "I think" is the fundamental locus of intentionality; instead, it is the "I can," or the body that is our most original form of intentionality. By highlighting the body as the seat of consciousness (our power to project intentions upon the world around us), Merleau-

Ponty shifts away from the Husserlian account of intentionality as a mental event to his own conception of intentionality as embodied.

One objection that can be raised is to Merleau-Ponty's seemingly gender-blind account of bodily intentionality. By terming Schneider's inhibited freedom as a "deficiency" and "disorder," he assumes the function of projection and the unity of sensitivity and motricity as the normative default of human existence, regardless of gender. When analyzing the case of Schneider, by stressing that the "normal" subject has the "same power" of establishing lines of force and of organizing the giving world according to his aims, Merleau-Ponty ignores the possibility that the world could possibly exist as a "ready-made" or "fixed" world for women, and presumes, almost naively, a universality and equivalence in the power of polarizing the world. While ostensibly gender neutral, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of bodily intentionality are undergirded by an implicitly normative logic that falls under the paradigm of masculinity — he rejects notions of "inhibited intentionality" and "positional spatiality" in his account of the body, which later philosophers like Iris Marion Young and Simone de Beauvoir have pointed out as crucial modalities of feminine motility. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty fails to justify his use of "situational spatiality" (102) and the body as "a means of expression of a spontaneous and free spatial thought" (106) as the premises of his critique of Schneider. This ultimately weakens his argument for the bodily nature of intentionality.

Word Count: 1189

Works Cited

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception.* Donald Landes, transl. Routledge (2012).