

CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS ON THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

by Michael Fourth

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Introduction

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is a name that does not have any currency in non-academic circles. His contemporary, friend and rival Jean Paul Sartre received all of the press during his generation. By many accounts, however, he was a superior philosopher whose legacy will be felt longer in the history of ideas as that of Sartre. After having become more familiar with the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty I have arrived at much the same conclusion. I feel that his insights into phenomenology have depth and balance that warrant attention, and it is attention that I intend to give them in this paper.

As with any philosopher Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy evolved and matured during his lifetime. There was not, however, a radical break in his thinking that can be likened to such thinkers as Wittgenstein. One cannot responsibly speak of an “early Merleau-Ponty” and a “later Merleau-Ponty” like one can with Wittgenstein. His phenomenology simply evolved in a more ontological direction until such time as he arrived (or almost arrived due to his untimely death) at what has been labeled an indirect ontology in his incomplete and posthumously published volume *The Visible and Invisible*. My focus in this paper, however, is more on his contributions to epistemology via his theories concerning perception and meaning, so I will focus on the works of his earlier years. The primary

sources that I will be explicitly dealing with will be *Phenomenology of Perception*¹ and “The Primacy of Perception.”²

Merleau-Ponty was also active in discussions of political philosophy and anthropological issues such as the nature of freedom. He was involved with Jean Paul Sartre in the post World War II resistance movement in France which clung to Marxist ideals and published underground newsletters. He was also friendly with the Structuralist school, having a friendship with the structuralist cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. From this association he cultivated an interest in the philosophy of language. While those issues of his thought and life are interesting in and of themselves, I will shy away from those issues in order to get at the heart of his contributions to the field of epistemology stemming specifically from his phenomenology.

In the evaluation of any particular philosopher and his or her works, one needs to necessarily answer several questions. The questions for us are: What is Merleau-Ponty trying to accomplish by his work? Why is he attempting to do this? How does he hope to accomplish this task? Does he succeed or fail in his effort? I will seek to offer preliminary answers to these questions.

I will first evaluate a few of Merleau-Ponty’s influences in order to contextualize the intellectual environs in which he found himself. Secondly, I will attempt to express briefly what the general philosophical project of Merleau-Ponty was. Thirdly, I will explain the manner in which his philosophy can be described negatively, that is as a reaction to other prevailing philosophies of the time. Fourthly, I will illuminate some of the positive contributions that his phenomenology of perception has made to the furthering of epistemology.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998).

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 12-42.

Lastly, I will conclude with an evaluation of the beneficial and harmful aspects of his epistemological project.

Any evaluation this abbreviated of a philosopher's contributions is bound to be incomplete, so I merely aim to provide some reflections on the benefit and harm of some of his ideas as they are brought to bear upon a responsible Christian epistemology. Hence this paper does not claim to contain definitive *conclusions* but preliminary *reflections* on his epistemological contributions. The positive construction of such a responsible epistemology I leave to another.

Context: The Phenomenological Movement & Other Influences

The birth of the phenomenological movement (if you can call it a movement at all) is credited to Husserl. While those in the phenomenological movement reflect back on their predecessors and theorize who it was that first employed a phenomenological method, it was Husserl that did so explicitly and self-consciously.

The Legacy of later Husserl & the Lebenswelt

Husserl moved away from his early psychologistic ways under the tutelage of Brentano toward what he would come to call phenomenology. His rallying cry was "Back to the things themselves!" His thought is complex and nuanced. Husserl passed through various stages where he drew upon the thought of Kant and Descartes, but according to Merleau-Ponty he later emerged from the grip of the detached subject of his predecessors to an examination of the lived experience of the human subject in concrete reality. In his later work Husserl gravitated toward a concept that he labeled the *Lebenswelt*, or the life-world, which is the world of lived experience. Whether this interpretation is correct is irrelevant for the purposes of our discussion. It matters only that such an interpretation was a strong influence on the future thought of Merleau-Ponty.³

³ I tend to give him the benefit of the doubt considering he visited the Husserl Archive at Louvain to pour over the 40,000 pages of then unpublished material therein.

This inclination toward a holistic approach intrigued Merleau-Ponty, and it is this aspect of his later thought that Merleau-Ponty incorporated into his philosophical project. Note that Merleau-Ponty does not borrow from the earlier Husserl quite as much, the Husserl that was engaged in epistemology proper, since it is those issues that he seeks to remove himself from so that he might investigate them.⁴

Gabriel Marcel & the Concept of Embodiment

Gabriel Marcel was a twentieth century French Roman Catholic existential philosopher. His major influence on the thought of Merleau-Ponty was through his emphasis on the embodied experience. “I am my body” is his famous line that Merleau-Ponty incorporated and fleshed out in his phenomenological project. The influence that Marcel had upon Merleau-Ponty does not encompass as many facets as does the influence of Husserl, but the influence of the embodied subject is perhaps the most significant for the contribution that Merleau-Ponty made upon the history of philosophical thought in the West.

The Influence of Heidegger & Being-in-the-World

Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* influenced more than a few philosophers in the twentieth century. His influence is especially felt within those who could be called existentialist philosophers. His investigation into Being via Dasein⁵ gave his philosophy an anthropological perspective that many perceived to be profound. We as human beings are not simply beings but our being is Being-in-the-world. We are situated within the world not as just another object, but we are thrown into existence, into Being. This emphasis on the dynamic view of human existence within which the knowing process transpires appealed to Merleau-Ponty, and we find that same animosity toward the static view of human existence in his writings.

⁴ By “those issues” I mean the issues inherent within the projects of the mainline epistemologists against whom Merleau-Ponty is reacting. “Those issues” will be discussed in the section dedicated to his negative philosophy. I don’t want to get ahead of myself.

⁵ Editor’s Note: “Dasein” is a term Heidegger used that means the “there of being”, but is used as a proper noun to refer to people in context of proving we are beings who are with others and in the world.

Gestalt Psychology & Holistic Thought

The Gestalt psychologists were attending to similar issues as were the phenomenologists and the existentialists, and Merleau-Ponty utilized the findings of these scientists to further his philosophical reflection concerning the real life lived experience of the human subject. The focus on the holistic nature of the human experience is mirrored in Merleau-Ponty's early works. Merleau-Ponty laments that the Gestalt psychologists have arrived at great conclusions, but they as psychologists have not applied their findings to the philosophical realm. This is what he seeks to do.

Merleau-Ponty's Distinctive Place in the History of the Phenomenological Movement

Despite being associated with a loosely defined movement within Continental Philosophy in the twentieth century, Merleau-Ponty was not an unoriginal figure whose work can be summed up by the tradition within which we find him. Rather he was a dynamic thinker who crossed boundaries of disciplines and thought synthetically. Consequently, he resides in a place of prominence among the phenomenological philosophers of that century.

In some ways he was the most faithful disciple of Husserl in that he remained true to the main tenet of Husserl's project, "Back to the things themselves!" He was also a good follower of the trend begun by Heidegger within the phenomenological movement of which Husserl scoffed, namely our being-in-the-world. He sought to make sense out of the embodiment principle of Marcel. Though he did borrow heavily from his predecessors, as we all must do, he was not uncritical of their conclusions. He was a master at weaving the philosophical tapestry through his synthetic appropriation of many cross-disciplinary influences.

Though he is often labeled an existentialist, his philosophy has a bit of different flavor than that of his contemporary and on-again, off-again friend Jean-Paul Sartre. He was a thorn in the side of the Sartrean dominated philosophical scene of the time. Sartre being more of a savvy popularizer became the darling of the masses, but Merleau-Ponty was responsible for training an entire generation of philosophers in France. While Sartre gave what could be considered a heartfelt eulogy at Merleau-Ponty's funeral mass, they were embroiled in a heated debate that lasted for about a decade.

As one can see, he had a myriad of influences. I have listed only the most glaringly significant. With this context in mind we can now turn to a brief explanation of the philosophical project of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty's General Philosophical Project

What was Maurice Merleau-Ponty trying to accomplish through his philosophy? Primarily, he is trying to restore the world of perception which he feels has been stripped away with conventional epistemologies. For Merleau-Ponty, like his predecessor Husserl, "phenomenology consists in forgetting the theoretical constructions of science and replacing ourselves in the world as we actually experience it."⁶

The Negative Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty

Why did he feel that he needed to write of such topics? He obviously felt that there was a need for further reflection, and he felt that he was one of the men to offer such reflection. Otherwise, he would have remained silent. What was such a burning issue that Merleau-Ponty dedicated his life to research, study and writing?

As with any philosopher, Merleau-Ponty's work is anchored in time and within a philosophical context. Therefore, we can expect for his work to be

⁶ Eric Matthews, *Twentieth Century Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1996), 89.

engaging and reacting against prevailing theories of the day. The negative aspects of the philosophical project of Merleau-Ponty can be viewed as his reaction to two popular threads running through the contemporary scene of epistemological discussions of his day. He labeled them the *empiricists* and the *intellectualists*. Ironically both suffer from a similar problem.

Phenomenological attention to what perception is actually like, however, should bring to light the underlying assumptions which are shared by empiricists and intellectualists: For the world as we actually perceive it does not consist of a collection of discrete, atomistic, and fully determined sense-data, which acquire unity only because it is imposed upon them by our own minds.⁷

Or from the pen of Merleau-Ponty himself:

Both take the objective world as the object of their analysis, when this comes first neither in time nor in virtue of its meaning; and both are incapable of expressing the peculiar way in which perceptual consciousness constitutes its object. Both keep their distance in relation to perception, instead of sticking closely to it.⁸

The common objection is then that both vantage points err on the side of being overly objectivist and scientific. Let us now turn to a brief discussion of each in turn.

Merleau-Ponty contra the Empiricists

Merleau-Ponty devoted an entire chapter of his magnum opus, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, to explicating how the empiricists destroyed, by their methods and assumptions, the very knowledge that they sought. He has two main arguments against the empiricists. “They hide from us in the first place

⁷ Matthews, *Twentieth Century French Philosophy*, 90.

⁸ MMP, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 26.

'the cultural world' or 'human world' in which nevertheless almost our whole life is led."⁹ By divesting perception and anything else that does not fit the scientific mold; we are impoverished in our appreciation for meaning. Secondly, the natural world becomes false for us as well. "But the nature about which empiricism talks is a collection of stimuli and qualities, and it is ridiculous to pretend that nature thus conceived is, even in intention merely, the primary object of our perception: it does in fact follow the experience of cultural objects, or rather it is one of them."¹⁰ One can see quite evidently that Merleau-Ponty perceives that empiricism is not doing us any favors.

Merleau-Ponty contra the Intellectualists

The very next chapter in his *The Phenomenology of Perception* is devoted to a critique of what he has labeled the "intellectualists." The intellectualists were those that sought to place the genesis of reality in the mind and were best represented by Descartes and Kant. It is the mind that imposes structure and reality. This does not solve the problems that are inherent with its antithetical partner, empiricism, since it deals with the world in the same objectivist manner. He employs an evaluation of the presuppositions of intellectualism in light of the findings of the Gestalt psychologists in order to show how far removed the intellectualists are from the world that we inhabit.

Merleau-Ponty was not simply reactionary in his formulation of his philosophy. He had many positive contributions to the realm of phenomenology, and by extension to epistemology. It is to these positive contributions that we now turn.

The Positive Contributions of Merleau-Ponty to Epistemology

In an effort to reconstruct the epistemological contributions of Merleau-Ponty we must evaluate multiple interrelated and interdependent aspects of his

⁹ MMP, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 23.

¹⁰ MMP, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 24.

phenomenological project. These aspects of his phenomenology cannot be viewed alone; they are perspectives on the whole.¹¹ An explanation of his phenomenological project can and has filled many volumes, so I will focus on those aspects of his phenomenological epistemology that have the most significant bearing on our understanding of his philosophy and have the most impact on our own Christian epistemological project.

Intentionality

Perhaps the biggest buzzword for the phenomenologist is *intentionality*, which simply means “toward-ness.” Merleau-Ponty affirmed this by saying, “All consciousness is consciousness of something.” My knowledge is not simply knowledge qua knowledge, but it is knowledge *of* something. My perception is not simply perception qua perception, but it is perception *of* something. Merleau-Ponty seemed unimpressed with intentionality as a great discovery of phenomenology. “We can now consider the notion of intentionality, too often cited as the main discovery of phenomenology...”¹²

Subject/Object Distinction

One cannot help but perceive that in order for knowledge to exist there must be a subject and an object, a knower and something that is known. That, however, does not mean that all concepts of subject/object distinctions fall into one of two neatly prepackaged categories. The manner and extent to which the subject is removed from the object is a complex issue. According to our being-in-the-world we (the subject) are intimately involved with the object.

Meaning in Perception

Merleau-Ponty’s predecessor, Edmund Husserl, followed Kant in the sense that Husserl affirmed that meaning is conferred from the ego that transcends the object. Contrary to that idea Merleau-Ponty posits meaning in the

¹¹ Hmmm, that sounds familiar.

¹² MMP, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, xvii.

object itself, *in res*, so to speak. “Perceptual meaning, he contends, is inaccessible to reflection; it cannot be separated from the sensible object which has it, not even ideally or in theory.”¹³ He did not, however, posit that meaning with any cosmic significance in mind. It is likened to one portion of a work of art having meaning with respect to the whole.¹⁴

The Body-subject & the Intentional Arc

Merleau-Ponty was very in tune with the manner in which our context can color our perception and our knowing. This is especially true of the manner in which we are embodied. This is perhaps his most significant contribution to the philosophical scene in the twentieth century. Merleau-Ponty himself describes it this way:

The perceiving mind is an incarnate mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world, going against the doctrines that treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as against those which insist on the autonomy of consciousness. These philosophies commonly forget – in favor of a pure exteriority or of a pure interiority – the insertion of the mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relationship which we entertain with our body and, correlatively, with perceived things.¹⁵

Note that it is by the principle of embodiment that he seeks to discount those who believe that perception is a matter of external things (the empiricists) and those who think that perception is a result of the autonomous consciousness of the human subject (the intellectualist). In this last quotation Merleau-Ponty tells you *that* he has aligned himself against those who would ignore the significance of the body in the perceptual, and by extension epistemic, self. Why does he feel

¹³ Henry Pietersma, *Phenomenological Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 132.

¹⁴ Matthews, *Twentieth Century French Philosophy*, 90.

¹⁵ MMP, “An Unpublished Text” in *The Primacy of Perception* trans. Arleen B. Dallery, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 4.

that such an alignment is necessary and helpful for philosophy? Later in this same unpublished essay he more fully explains the stance that he takes:

For contemporary psychology and psychopathology the body is no longer merely *an object in the world*, under the purview of a separated spirit. It is on the side of the subject; it is our *point of view on the world*, the place where the spirit takes on a certain physical and historical situation.... The body, in turn, is wholly animated, and all its functions contribute to the perception of objects – an activity long considered by philosophy to be pure knowledge.¹⁶

His continual focus on the body had a profound effect on that next generation of philosophers that learned at his feet. It changed the manner in which we deal with the phenomenon that is our embodied existence.

Phenomenal Field & Duration

He also fought against the scientific idea of atomistic sense-datum. “A phenomenological analysis shows that sense experience never has the character of atomic sensation or apprehensions of mere qualia that do not yet amount to an awareness of objects.”¹⁷ We can see that he is doing to sensation what Henri Bergson sought to do with time, contrasting scientific time with duration. He contrasts the atomistic sensation with the real life manner in which we encounter sensations in a phenomenal field. Both men tried to replace the discreet with the contextual. Put most succinctly, “The perceptual ‘something’ is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a field.”¹⁸

The Reconstitution of Meaning & Descartes’ “Cogito”

We already spoke of the fact that meaning is inherent in perception. Meaning and language precede our meaning-bestowing acts. Objects and words have a history of their own. They have pre-constituted meanings that are pre-

¹⁶ MMP, “An Unpublished Text” in *The Primacy of Perception*, 5.

¹⁷ Henry Pietersma, *Phenomenological Epistemology*, 129.

¹⁸ MMP, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 4.

determined. When I come to these objects or words, I reconstitute their meaning with respect to my particular time and space. Merleau-Ponty fleshes this out in his discussion of Descartes *cogito* in the famous chapter of his *The Phenomenology of Perception* by the same name.¹⁹ He notes that the *cogito* that I receive is a meaning-laden *cogito*. When I read it and appropriate it to myself, I have given it new shades of meaning with respect to my own “intentional arc”, my own situation, time, space, history, etc. It is now an approximation of what the *cogito* was for Descartes himself.

Approximate Knowledge & Cognitive Possession

Merleau-Ponty states that phenomenology mediates the gulf between extreme forms of subjectivism and extreme objectivism.²⁰ This statement can only be understood in light of his comments on approximate knowledge. “We must say that at each moment our ideas express not only the truth but our capacity to attain it at that given moment. Skepticism begins if we conclude from this that our ideas are false. But this can only happen with reference to some idol of absolute knowledge.”²¹ He sees with clarity the myth of Cartesian certainty. We can never cognitively possess an object; we can never exhaust an object.

A corollary to approximate knowledge is the idea that philosophy is not an endeavor aimed at reaching any end. This is one of the hallmarks of his philosophy that is most dear to my heart: the fact that he sees philosophy as a never-ending endeavor. Contrary to the egotism of the likes of Hegel, Merleau-Ponty realizes that we will never be done. This is a logical conclusion from the fact that he sees no hope in ever attaining cognitive possession.

The Primacy of Perception

¹⁹ See MMP, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 369-409.

²⁰ MMP, *The Phenomenology of Perception*,

²¹ MMP, “The Primacy of Perception” in *The Primacy of Perception*, 21. I find it interesting how religious language springs up in his writings.

He believed that perception had a primacy to it that had been ignored or undervalued by previous philosophers. This, however, was not a doctrine *per se* but a “program of phenomenological research which he left incomplete at his death.”²² In the preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception* he states, “Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.”²³ There is a sense in which perception is transcendently necessary for Merleau-Ponty. It is that which is necessary for the epistemic process to take place. Hence it is primary.

There are many other aspects of his thought that could be brought to bear upon the current discussion but are too numerous to discuss at length. We could look further into the concept of the dialectic between reality and appearance. We could look further at the concepts of transcendence and immanence in the knowing process. We could look further into the primordial world and the object as it confronts the subject. All of these things would be fruitful areas of investigation to further flesh out a fully orbed understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s epistemology, but they will have to wait for a later time.

Conclusion: An Evaluation of Merleau-Ponty toward a Christian Epistemology

After having said all of that, what indeed is the value of the epistemology of Merleau-Ponty? What did he do right? Where did Merleau-Ponty go wrong in his epistemology? He was a loyal Roman Catholic toward the beginning of his life, but he jettisoned that association as he emerged into the life of French academia. While he is reported to have returned to the Roman Catholic Church before his death, the majority of his philosophical project was completed while he was a practical atheist. Consequently, we should see both elements of borrowed

²² James M. Edie, Introduction to *The Primacy of Perception*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), xvii.

²³ MMP, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, x-xi.

spiritual capital and divergence from the truth in his writings. How do these aspects manifest themselves in his epistemological contributions?

The phenomenological movement, in fact, as a whole is built upon a gigantic edifice of borrowed spiritual capital. Husserl's own teacher, Franz Brentano, from whom he appropriated the concept of intentionality was himself a Roman Catholic priest until the pronouncement of papal infallibility at Vatican I drove him to eventual apostasy. Brentano had resurrected the Aristotelian and medieval idea of intentionality while studying under a medievalist and Thomist scholar himself. Martin Heidegger was a Jesuit seminarian for a short stint before his eventual apostasy and fall into National Socialism, and one can pick up on hints of influence from Patristic sources in his philosophy. Emmanuel Levinas was not a Christian, but he was a professing Jew whose contact with the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament) had a profound impact upon the manner in which he engaged in the philosophical enterprise. It should be of no surprise that many of the concepts that Merleau-Ponty employs are in accord with biblical wisdom and can be appropriated responsibly by a Christian epistemologist.

Positive Contributions

What can be said about the positive contributions of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy toward a responsible Christian epistemology? One major aspect that I think is significant is that of intentionality. Too often we forget that we as human agents intend ourselves toward objects in our perception, and it is those predispositions and prejudices that cause us to intend a particular object within a phenomenal field. Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty disavows the fact that the rediscovery of intentionality is the most significant contribution of phenomenology, we can see that its significance when contrasted with the decontextualized, passive self that is assumed by so many. Such a profound impact the rediscovery of intentionality has had that it has reached beyond the boundaries of the phenomenological movement into analytic philosophy. John Searle, a leader in the body/mind debate, has published a book on

intentionality.²⁴ David Kelly, a professor now at Princeton, did his dissertation under the guidance of John Searle (analytic) and Hubert Dreyfus (continental) at UC Berkeley and investigated the use and significance of the concept of intentionality for philosophy of mind and philosophy of language.²⁵ As we might surmise there is a certain magic to the rediscovery that our thoughts and feelings have objects to which they intend.

Another important facet of his project is the fact that he gives credence to the overwhelming complexity and organic nature of the epistemic experience. Evidenced by the myriad of subdivisions contained within the section above dealing with the positive contributions of his philosophy, we can see that he shied away from any simplistic answer of how the subject engages in epistemic activity. His theory does not begin and end with a simplistic theory of the knowing subject as *tabula rasa* ala John Locke, nor does his theory wind up resorting to some mythical transcendental ego. He anchors the subject in our bodies and in the world, and he allows our epistemic lives to be as ambiguous and paradoxical as our daily lives.

The third aspect that I think is significant is the emphasis he puts on the embodied experience. Evangelical Christians need to become more conversant with the relevant theologies that confront us that are focusing on the importance of the embodied experience with respect to the spiritual life and spiritual living. So what can be said of his focus on the embodied subject, the body-subject? The continual focus on the fact that we are embodied (or incarnate) subjects refocuses us away from the transcendental ego of Kant and Husserl, or the “inner man” as Augustine would have spoken of it.²⁶ By denying the transcendental ego that Kant posits, and that early Husserl after him likewise

²⁴ John Searle, *Intentionality, an essay in the philosophy of mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²⁵ Sean D. Kelly, *The Relevance of Phenomenology to Philosophy of Language and Mind* (New York: Garland Press, 2000).

²⁶ I focus on this aspect of the issue, because we as orthodox Christians are not so much in danger of falling into the opposing trap of reductionistic materialism

posits, is not Merleau-Ponty helping to rescue us from what had become a *deus ex machina* of the epistemological world? Rather than succumbing to the temptation to conjure a theoretical ego that transcends the knowing process and which looks down upon it, he opts for anchoring our *self* within the *Lebenswelt*, within our embodied existence. Having made this move does he not bring Heidegger's idea of Being-in-the-world to its epistemological fullness?

If we take several of these important insights and look at them in tandem as perspectives on the whole of the epistemic experience, then we can truly see the value of his contribution to epistemology from a Christian perspective. The fact that meaning is pre-empted in the object, the fact that there is that *something* that Merleau-Ponty is trying to wrap his mind around, reflects the fact that the world is given to us a pre-interpreted whole. The fact that we will never have cognitive possession of any particular object simply shows that the re-interpretation that we as image bearers participate in is never quite finished, never quite complete. John Frame states in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* that we are, as human agents, re-creators due to our image bearing nature.²⁷ If we apply this to our current epistemological investigation, then we can conclude that God is the primary interpreter, the primary pre-interpreter, and we are all the secondary interpreters, re-interpreters. All knowledge is a reinterpretation of that which is already pre-interpreted and laden with meaning by the Creator God. We not only reconstitute knowledge based upon the cultural-historical meaning of a word or object (situational), but we must also bring to bear certain norms in our continual reconstitution of meaning for our present circumstances (normative). Hence, the epistemic process is a never-ending, multilayered dialectical endeavor into which we are thrown.²⁸

The concept of the reconstitution of meaning seems to be a nice middle road between those who would insist upon static, eternal truths and those who

²⁷ John Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company, 1987), 29.

²⁸ The Heideggerian overtones to this statement were intentional.

would relativize all knowledge away. The fact that we come to an object with our own particular intentional arc is significant. We have our own body, our own story, our own strengths, our own weaknesses, etc. Those who seek to relativize all knowledge away see this as the only pole around which we must gravitate. They can reason to the conclusion that we can have no knowledge. The fact that we do have knowledge, however, frustrates this rational discourse. The fact that we neither make knowledge completely our own nor receive it purely as an objective given resonates with the manner in which we are confronted with the challenges and claims of the knowing process on a daily basis.

Lastly, the emphasis on the pre-reflective and pre-theoretical, while we may not agree wholeheartedly, does give some weight to the fact that much more goes on in the knowing process than we could ever get our minds around. The search for an exhaustive epistemological theory finds a dead end in the descriptive philosophy of ...The invisible and supernatural aspects the knowing process need not be relegated to secondary importance simply to win favors with the secular audience.²⁹ Such allowances in our epistemology not only make room for the epistemic mediation of the Holy Spirit in the knowing process, but they also give allowances for the working of the unconscious (or subconscious) in the knowing process.

Negative Aspects

While I am convinced that there is much in the thought of Merleau-Ponty that is favorable for the Christian epistemologists, I am also convinced that there is much that needs to be shed in order to move forward with his insights. So where did Merleau-Ponty go wrong? A lot of the holes in his epistemology rely on his inability to go far enough with his speculation. Why? Because he lacked the theistic framework from which to work. He posits meaning prior to reflective and theoretical epistemic activity, and asks the transcendental question before

²⁹ The more I learn about epistemology, the more I realize that without the epistemic mediation of the Holy Spirit we would not know a thing!

the conditions necessary for knowledge to take place are in place. This transcendental (primordial perception) is a transcendental falsely so called—it is a cultural-historical transcendental that does not really satisfy. Thus, Merleau-Ponty is merely sidestepping the issue at hand. There is no ontological crux to this transcendental, therefore it merely describes the manner in which know *does* occur rather than *why* it occurs.³⁰ This error is recurring in secular thought, one that is easily remedied by reintroducing ontology where they have substituted cultural and historical explanations. They are perpetually sidestepping the issue, and we as Christians who hope to keep every thought captive must enter into the debate to reveal the insufficiency of the “transcendentals.”

Secondly, he seems to intimate that there are instances of purposeless sensation.³¹ There are times when we are simply enveloped in an act of perception for the sake of perception. In such events we are encountered by Being qua Being, and we stand in awe of it. Considering the fact that everything is revelatory for the Christian, this is not acceptable. The Creation manifests the invisible characteristics of God (Romans 1). The heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1).

Epilogue: Rationalism & Irrationalism

In this last section, I would like to make an effort to satisfy my Vantillian professor. I will end with an evaluation of the epistemology of Merleau-Ponty along the lines of Van Til’s insistence that non-Christian philosophy always ends up in irrationality. Irrationality falls into rationality, and rationality falls into irrationality. What can be said of the rational elements of Merleau-Ponty’s epistemology?

³⁰ I found this to be the same distinction that Gordon Stein failed to make in his debate with Greg Bahnsen. He failed to distinguish between the manner in which we come to know via methods of socialization and the ontologically necessary conditions for us knowing.

³¹ He seems to think that there is some suspension of the teleological in perception. Ought there to be? I think that Kierkegaard would chuckle at the idea of an ethical suspension of the teleological.

In the transcendental tradition he seeks to define the necessary conditions for the knowing process. How do we encounter Being? How do we encounter each other? He concludes, however, that there is a pre-theoretical and pre-reflective primordial world of perception about which language and knowledge speak. If it precedes knowledge, then it is unknowable. Hence it can be likened to the noumenal of Kant, and the same objections can apply. This objection is divested of all of its power once God's knowledge of that pre-reflective world is posited and the ramifications of that are understood.

His rational train of thought has led him back to a rediscovery of the pre-theoretical, non-scientific world, but isn't that the world from which the first philosophers wished to depart. Did not Thales look at the world before him and refuse to conceive of perception as primary? Instead he said, "All is water." His reason drove him away from perception, and philosophy was born. If Merleau-Ponty's reason drives him back to perception, then has he not forfeited the title of philosopher? Has he not denigrated the pursuit that he seeks to further? In this manner we can see that his rationalism slips into irrationalism.

Thirdly, as we have seen above, he states that there exists purposeless perception. What then can be said of it? If perception is that about which knowledge and language speak, then a purposeless perception yields no knowledge or speech. Otherwise it would be purposive. Here again we see the play between rationalism and irrationalism.

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