

Spring 2014

Maurice Merleau-Ponty And Aesthetics: On Perception, Art, And Embodied Existence

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**MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND AESTHETICS: ON
PERCEPTION, ART, AND EMBODIED EXISTENCE**

BY
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SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
PHILOSOPHY AS REQUISITE FOR
GRADUATION WITH HONORS

APRIL 2014

CARROLL COLLEGE
HELENA, MONTANA

This thesis for honors recognition is approved by the Department of
Philosophy.



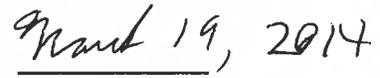
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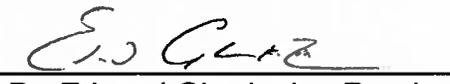
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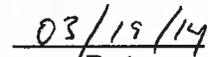
Dr. Jeremy Johnson, Reader



Date



Dr. Edward Glowienka, Reader



Date

To my parents

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Finishing this work would have been impossible without the help of several important people. First, I owe the deepest thanks to Dr. Elvira Roncalli for taking on my project. I cannot begin to thank you for the number of hours you spent reading draft after draft of my paper, for being understanding when I was having troubles, and providing me with your much needed insights. This paper is in many ways the culmination of my educational journey thus far, and you played a special role in its production. Your passion for philosophy has been a major inspiration for me along the way. Not only did you help me write a paper, but you have also helped form me into the academic I am today.

Second, I would like to thank my readers. Dr. Jeremy Johnson, you have helped me in more ways than simply helping to edit this paper. The importance of your participation on this project, outside of the valuable critiques of the paper itself, cannot be understated. Your continued support over the years has helped me keep faith in myself as a student. As such, your involvement in this project was instrumental in developing the confidence in my ability to succeed.

Dr. Edward Glowienka, I am indebted to you and your philosophical expertise. Your insights have been invaluable in refining the philosophical ideas in my paper. However, you also pushed me to think outside the limited scope of my thesis. This is a sign of a dedicated philosopher. Writing a thesis, above all else, is a learning experience. You never lost sight of this. In challenging me to think of the implications of the philosophical claims in my paper, you provided me with a deeper understanding of the claims themselves along with how these fit

into a broader philosophical context.

Lastly, I owe a deep sense of gratitude to my family. To my parents especially, your love and support has been the single greatest driving force behind this paper. Its completion is a testament to your unwavering dedication to your children's education and intellectual growth.

ABSTRACT

French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty is one of the 20th century's greatest phenomenological thinkers. Merleau-Ponty's main philosophical concern is understanding how humans experience and perceive the world around them. He grounds his thought in phenomenological inquiry and existential ontology, providing a rich understanding of what it means to be a human living in the world. In his examination of human situation in the world, Merleau-Ponty draws from art, in particular the work of French painter, Paul Cézanne, in outlining a theory of aesthetics that brings to light our being in the world as an embodied individual who is immersed in it, not outside of it. In my paper, I explore the various implications of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, arguing that his aesthetic theory is not simply ancillary to his general perspective, but instead unveils a new way of understanding what it means to be human living and existing in the world.

INTRODUCTION

“The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.”¹

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

What does it mean to study aesthetics? Is there a meaning to art that goes beyond the artwork itself? Why is art even important at all? These are some of the questions that have pressed artists and philosophers throughout history. Different thinkers have gone about reconciling them in different ways. Some have held that art’s value lies in its cultural significance: a milestone, a place-marker of historicity. Others look to the art itself, looking to art as an exemplification of beauty. Still others have studied art as representation of theological beliefs, a study into the nature and beauty of God.

In the epigraph above, French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty articulates a kinship between art and philosophy in their ability to bring “truth into being.” Here Merleau-Ponty is summarizing his unique aesthetic perspective, outlining the embodied nature of art. Merleau-Ponty holds that art is an intrinsically corporeal enterprise. It is made, created, developed by a living, embodied person. It involves creativity, discipline, and technique. Art requires an introspective view of oneself and an insightful examination of the world at large. For Merleau-Ponty, art is not an historical placeholder. Its purpose is not to capture the essence of beauty. Rather, art is an action, an act of

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxii.

human situatedness, and the capturing of existence as being in the world.²

In my thesis I situate Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory in the context of his phenomenological and existential approach. Merleau-Ponty, a 20th century philosopher, is widely known for his work in phenomenology and his investigation into the nature of embodied, human experience in the world. The embodied nature of experience and the implications for how we experience the world play a central role in Merleau-Ponty's thought. It is within this rich framework that Merleau-Ponty builds his aesthetic perspective. In looking at Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on aesthetics, it will be important to discuss the relationship between the artist and what he or she paints. This will be done by discussing the French post-impressionist painter, Paul Cézanne, along with giving specific examples of his work.

In order to properly understand Merleau-Ponty's general philosophy, and more specifically the value of his aesthetic theory, it is important to place Merleau-Ponty's philosophy within a historical context. Merleau-Ponty focuses his philosophy on situating the human subject of experience within the world. A person's being— his or her living, breathing, existence in the world— is crucial to how a person experiences the world. This position draws a contrast with many thinkers throughout the history of philosophy, especially the rationalist perspectives of René Descartes. Descartes states that human beings are thinking things whose nature is ultimately separable from embodied existence. In assigning the essence of humanity to a person's rationality and intellect, Descartes deemphasizes the importance of the body in coming to know the world. This perspective is starkly different from that of Merleau-Ponty, who often elucidates his own

² "Human" in this sense is meant to emphasize Merleau-Ponty's point that our experience of the world is as a living, breathing, embodied person. Here, a reference to the "human" nature of existence is meant to articulate the embodied, corporeal aspect of lived existence in the world.

existential positions through a critique of Cartesian views on personhood and what it means to be a human. The first chapter of this paper will focus on gaining an understanding of the relationship between these two thinkers, which is paramount in understanding the development of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic perspective.

Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory also finds grounding in an investigation of the phenomenal nature of the world. As a phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty focuses much of his philosophy on the investigation into the structuring of subjective, conscious experience and how this experience relates to objects in the world. Merleau-Ponty is greatly influenced by Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological method. As such, the second chapter of this paper will outline the origins of the method as outlined by Husserl. Through understanding this, a deeper insight can be gained into Merleau-Ponty's own perspective, in turn grounding Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory in a rich phenomenological epistemology.

Painting in particular holds a special place in Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory. For Merleau-Ponty, painting is a unique activity because it involves a visual depiction of the coming-to-being of the world. This activity, in all of its technical intricacies, is an intimate, personal activity. In the third chapter, I focus on uncovering the embodied element of art. In his discussion of art, Merleau-Ponty often references the work Paul Cézanne as exemplifying his (Merleau-Ponty's) own desire to investigate the world as given through embodied perception. In looking at and discussing specific examples of Cézanne's works, we can gain a deeper insight into Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic perspective.

All of these — Merleau-Ponty's existential-phenomenological perspective, his

critique of other ontological and epistemological views, and his reference to specific artists and works of art — play essential roles in the development and articulation of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory. Merleau-Ponty states that art is not separate from humanity, but intertwined with the world, becoming the expression of the inerasable interrelationship between human beings and the world. By looking at his aesthetic attitude, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's attitude towards art is not simply a supplementary perspective to his general philosophy, but instead uncovers and concretely details aspects of his philosophy in uniquely phenomenal manner.

Chapter One

Modern Thought and Existential Phenomenology: Empiricism, Cartesian Dualism, and Merleau-Ponty

In order to understand a philosopher's writings it is often important to treat other thinkers who influenced that philosopher. This is particularly the case when discussing modern philosophers and their influence on contemporary thinkers. Much of contemporary philosophy continues a dialogue with 17th century thinkers, a testament to its enduring influence. A particular topic within the purview of modern thought is the topic of epistemology. While epistemological inquiry is an important and well treated subject throughout the history of philosophy, the 17th century, "modern" period of philosophy saw a resurgence of different and renewed approaches elucidating how we come to know and understand the world.

There are two major schools of thought that emerged out of the modern period, rationalism and empiricism. Empiricism is a methodology that is largely concerned with understanding subjective experience. Specifically, empiricists look to how experience tailors and forms our understanding of the world. The empiricist holds that our coming to know the world is dependent on our sensual experience of the world. Most, if not all the claims we make about the world are a result of having experienced the world in some way or another. This is a stark contrast to the rationalist epistemological emphasis. The rationalist mode of

thought upholds the importance of rationality and its influence on how one comes to understand the world. Rationalists assent there are rationally conceivable ways to gain knowledge and truth independent and outside of sense experience. Many modern rationalists hold void the epistemological capacity of sensual experience under the objection that it cannot lead to concrete universal claims. Looking to the various aspects of rationalist and empiricist philosophy will allow for a richer understanding of how Merleau-Ponty moves his philosophy away from both the rationalist and empiricist schools, developing a unique perspective on how a person interacts with the world.

Empiricism and Existential Phenomenology

It should be noted that there does not exist a single overarching philosophy that unites the ideas of all rationalist or all empiricists. These terms, rationalist and empiricist, are used to generally define those thinkers who have similar philosophical methodologies and concerns. Empiricism will be used in a general sense for the purposes of this chapter, with special references made to specific thinkers. Empiricism, as a broad school, is generally concerned with understanding the nature of the world as it is presented through sensory experience. The sort of sensory experience, be it sight, touch, taste, or even cognition, corresponds to a specific phenomenon imposed upon the subject by an object. Any sort of knowledge of an object, of anything, is through a phenomenal experience of that object. In this way, empiricists place heavy emphasis on the importance of *a posteriori* knowledge in an understanding of the

world. Any kind of knowledge that can be gained about the world is through experience. For example, David Hume proposed that any understanding of causal relationship is based on an extrapolation of regularly occurring phenomena. In other words, when it is said that striking a baseball with a bat *caused* the ball to fly into the outfield, David Hume holds that there are no necessary grounds to posit a power of causation.³ However it is through continued and regular experience that any semblance of causality is induced.

While Merleau-Ponty espouses some empiricist principles, his philosophy does differ in many ways. And while an in-depth introduction to Merleau-Ponty's general philosophy will be given in a later section, it is important to offer at least a rudimentary introduction to how Merleau-Ponty offers valuable critiques of empiricism along with ways in which he is similar. As will be seen in later sections, these critiques will become much more vividly illustrated in an outlining of the intricacies of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory.

Merleau-Ponty is strongly concerned with elucidating of the world, as it is experienced. In this sense his project is similar to the modern empiricists. Starting from experience, Merleau-Ponty holds that perception is the primary means by which an individual comes to know and understand the world. And while similar to the empiricist project in this regard, Merleau-Ponty questions the empiricist's distinction between the subject and object of experience. Merleau-Ponty points out that for many empiricists, an inquiry into experience means a

³ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 41.

loss or de-emphasis of the nature of the subject-object relationship.⁴ In the writings of many modern empiricists, the human subject remains separate from or transcendent of that which he or she perceives. Even in such a case as mental phenomena, modern empiricism holds that there is a distinction to be made between a mental phenomenon and the subject who is experiencing it. There is a line drawn between the object of experience, the phenomenon of experience that is strictly experienced, and the subject of experience, who simply experiences. For example, John Locke is famous for describing the passivity of sense experience. Locke, an important figure in the modern empiricist movement, holds that a person is strictly passive towards that which is experienced through the senses.⁵ My experience of the chair on which I am sitting, or the desk on which I am writing have no relation to me other than my passively “taking in” the objects through my sensation.

According to Merleau-Ponty however, experience of the world is not a passive act of taking in a bombardment of phenomena. For Merleau-Ponty, a human being exists in the world as both an object and a subject at the same time. This being exists in a body; experiencing the world is through that body. As a being living within the world, Merleau-Ponty highlights how an individual's existence is contingent not just on perceiving, but on being perceived as well. Merleau-Ponty feels the interrelatedness of these two aspects of being is a fundamental, yet overlooked aspect of existing in the world.

Merleau-Ponty gives a famous example that demonstrates the breaking-

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xvi.

⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (New York: New American Library, 1974), 90.

down of the subject-object distinction present in modern empiricism. When a person touches his hand with his other hand, his body becomes both the object and subject of that perception. The hands are both touching and being touched simultaneously. They are not a distinct object or subject of perception, but a combination of the two. This is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as “reversible reflection.”⁶ The hand that is touched, the human body through which the world is experienced, does not transcend the world around it but instead is a part of it. Experiencing is not something done in a vacuum, but as one hand touches the other, it reaffirms the tangible, fleshy nature of one’s existence in the world. It is a breaking down of the strict subject-object barrier. Here, with his emphasis on situating experience in a living, breathing human person is where Merleau-Ponty begins to draw his distinction from many modern empiricists. This human aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, a reversibility that he refers to as *chiasm*, becomes a central part of his aesthetic theory and will be taken up in greater detail later.

Cartesian Dualism: An Existential Critique

While it might be said that Merleau-Ponty's epistemological footing is influenced by the empiricist focus on the importance of experience, Merleau-Ponty also concerns himself with addressing claims brought up by rationalist thinkers. Rationalism, as a school of thought concerns itself largely with discovering universal rational principles which guide all other philosophical discourse. This is not to say that empiricists like Hume or phenomenologist like

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 93.

Merleau-Ponty do not use reason in their respective philosophies. Philosophy itself is a rational activity. Any philosophical idea is a result of some sort of rational inquiry. Rationalists however give reason more epistemological weight than do other philosophical schools in holding that there such things as *a priori* truths, or truths that can be known outside or prior to experience.

This being said, Merleau-Ponty has many critiques of rationalist thought, specifically regarding of René Descartes. Descartes, who is largely considered the father of modern rationalism, wrote extensively on the primacy of reason in determining universal knowledge. Descartes, in *Meditations on a First Philosophy*, begins an epistemological inquiry into the validity of different forms of knowledge with the goal of determining a first philosophy, a starting principle out of which all other philosophical quandaries are investigated.⁷ In the initial stages of this process, Descartes engages in his famous hyperbolic skepticism, where he goes about doubting the epistemological grounding of all sources of knowledge. In so doing, Descartes rejects the validity of sense perception as being able to provide any sort of indisputable knowledge.⁸ He does this based on the grounds that perceptions can be deceptive, for example misidentifying someone seen from afar. Since perceptions can be intrinsically deceptive, Descartes concludes that the knowledge gained through perception cannot be trusted as the primary source of truth.

After doubting what he views are possibly disputable sources of knowledge, such as mathematics, physics, and medicine, Descartes continues

⁷ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on a First Philosophy*, (New York: Penguin, 2000), 18.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

his search for an indubitable first principle. Descartes eventually claims that one aspect of being is indeed indubitable, that, "(Thought) alone cannot be detached from me. I am, I exist."⁹ The fact that the human person is a thinking thing is the basis from which all other epistemological inquiries radiate. While this conclusion is important in itself, Descartes' emphasis on relation of thinking and being becomes very important in the development of his theory of dualism. Because he denies the validity of sensory knowledge and the indubitable existence of an external world, Descartes concludes that the human body must also be a dubitable part of reality. Descartes goes on to further conclude that the human person must be divisible into two distinct substances, the body and the mind.¹⁰ While these two parts interact so as to make a human being, the mind has the capacity to persist on its own without the body. Because Descartes believes that the foundation for human knowledge is found in reason and in the capacities of the mind, the body is secondary with regards to the determination of philosophical truths and realities.

The ideas Descartes presents in *Meditations* are problematic for Merleau-Ponty for a variety of reasons. And while much of his criticism is based against Cartesian rationalism, Merleau-Ponty disagrees fundamentally with many aspects of general rationalist thought. First, Descartes establishes a way of thinking that focuses on the acquisition of universal principles. Descartes is concerned with the discovery and elucidation of primary principles, even if this means that first principles are found in another realm of existence beyond the

⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

physical. For example, Descartes does not find it problematic to doubt the existence of a physical body on the way to discover the primary philosophical principles of human knowledge. And while Descartes does not actually believe that the external world or his own body and perceptions are intrinsically deceiving and useless, for the purpose of his methodology, the knowledge they provide is secondary or inferior to mental knowledge. Merleau-Ponty would likely support the philosophical endeavor of discerning logical first principles. However, he adamantly disagrees with the notion this can or should be done at the cost of a dislocation of the mind from the body.

As discussed previously with regards to his reactions towards the empiricist method of creating experiential subject-object distinctions, Merleau-Ponty has even stronger objections against Descartes' separation of the mind and the body. In Merleau-Ponty's eyes, Descartes goes a step further than the empiricists by denying the epistemological validity of empirical knowledge outright. Descartes' methodology and philosophical project denies what Merleau-Ponty finds perhaps most important in an epistemological inquiry: the experience of an individual as situated as a living person in a living world. Merleau-Ponty is very concerned with the existential situatedness of the human person as *in* the world. How people relate to and experiences the world around them has deep implications for the development Merleau-Ponty's ontological discussion.

Merleau-Ponty feels as though removing some aspect of a human person from his or her physicality detracts from or removes any kind of truth claim that might

be made by that individual.¹¹ What value do claims about metaphysical existences even have, especially when they are removed from any kind of reference to the experience of the physical? Merleau-Ponty holds that because the Cartesian method removes human experience from a worldly, embodied existence, Descartes is missing out on an essential aspect of both epistemological and ontological inquiries.

Now that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has been situated with regards to its 17th century influences, attention can be turned to the more contemporary influences of Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological method. In discussing the significant impact Husserlian thought has on Merleau-Ponty's own philosophy, Husserl's method will in turn be viewed in light of the existential ontology. It is this ontology which grounds Merleau-Ponty's inquiries into the phenomenal nature of the world. Understanding these, both Husserl's phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's existential response, are essential to considering the importance of art and aesthetics on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 63.

Chapter Two

Husserlian Phenomenology and the Existential Response

Moving ahead in time to the early 20th century, it is important to mention the contribution of Edmund Husserl to Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project. Husserl, through his development of the phenomenological method, attempts to answer many of the same questions Maurice Merleau-Ponty will address fifty years later. One of the main problems dealt with by Husserl is that of the subject-object distinction as found in the modern empiricist and rationalist philosophies. He addresses this in large part by developing a methodology that revolves around exploring how consciousness interacts with that which is experienced. In Husserl's attempt to solve this problem through the development of a philosophical method, Husserl lays some of the foundational claims that will be taken up and expanded upon by Merleau-Ponty.

As the initial developer of phenomenological methodology, Husserl's thought has obvious similarities with those who also utilize his methodology. However, if it can be said that Merleau-Ponty uses Husserl's phenomenological philosophy, what then are the differences between the two perspectives? While he does address some of the same questions, Merleau-Ponty will ultimately move beyond Husserl's transcendental phenomenology to develop a more existential, humanistic phenomenological attitude.

Husserlian Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl, an early 20th century Austrian mathematician and

philosopher, laid the foundation for the phenomenological methodology.

Phenomenology, at its roots, is an investigation into the structuring of subjective experience, consciousness, and how these relate to objects in the world.¹² In focusing on how reality is understood through a conscious mind, phenomenology attempts to rectify the disparity between the mind and the perceived, experienced world. This investigation is in part a response to how natural science largely disregards personal, subjective experience in the experimental process. Looking back in the previous section regarding empiricism and rationalism, one of the main issues addressed by both these schools of thought is the ontological distinction of the subject and the object. Taking after these schools, modern scientific inquiry owes a large part of its success and advancement to this distinction. Modern science is practiced under the assumption that the individual performing an experiment and observing empirical phenomena does not factor into the outcome of the results.

Take for example, physics. When a person measures the speed at which a ball drops from a table, he or she works under the supposition that this natural phenomenon is not contingent on or affected by her own subjective experience of it. Taking after modern ontological distinctions, the natural sciences operate with the understanding that personal perspective does not affect the understanding of phenomena. If natural science did operate under this context, it would be practically impossible to verify the results of an experiment. This would in turn

¹² Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern, and Eduard Marbach, *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 14.

make it impossible for natural sciences to make any kind of universal claim.

Returning to the example of physics, the physical law of gravity is based on a collection of specific observances of objects falling to the ground. This and other scientific theories are then developed through continued particular evidence for a certain claim. This evidence cannot include any reference to how an individual's consciousness perceives and interacts with the phenomena, as this would make every experiment subjective and unverifiable by any subsequent experiments.

However, even in light of the success and advancement of this way of thought, Husserl believes the removal of subjective experience should not be done in all intellectual pursuits, specifically philosophical inquiry. Husserl, in studying science and mathematics earlier in his life, was unsettled by how natural scientific methodology was being applied to other fields, wholly ignoring the importance of first-person experience. Subjective consciousness, he thought, plays a role in any experience whether it is admitted by natural scientific methodology or not. As a result, Husserl's focused much of his later life on the laying out a method by which to capture the relationship between subjective experience and the object experienced. Husserl called this method phenomenology. Phenomenology is both an epistemological and ontological methodology. In other words, not only does it explicate the nature of individual, conscious experience but also looks to unfold the way in which the world is manifested through this experience. In this way, phenomenology attempts to solve not only problems brought up by the ontological division of mind and body as seen in Cartesian dualism, but also attempts to address epistemological

questions raised in empirical inquiries regarding the relationship between the subject and object of experience.

In order for Husserl to fully delve into the methodological aspect of his philosophy, he must first create a framework to support it. One of the most central aspects of the phenomenological method, both ontologically and epistemologically, is the notion of “intentionality.”¹³ Intentionality is an understanding of experience as *of* something, seeing experience as an implicitly conscious act.¹⁴ Building off the empiricist emphasis on the importance of experience, Husserl notes that when experiencing, it is impossible to disassociate that experience from what is experienced. Imagine feeling heat against one’s hand. Husserl’s philosophy states that there is an inseparable relationship, a correlation between the conscious perception of heat and the phenomenon of heat. In other words, to experience is to be conscious, and to be conscious is to be conscious *of* something, namely phenomena.¹⁵ A phenomenon can be anything, a perception, a feeling, a wish or fantasy. Intentional experience of a phenomenon is to be conscious of it, to be directed towards it, to “intend” it. It is an irremovable aspect of experience. As subjective conscious experience is intrinsically tied to the intended object of the experience, to be conscious *of* something is to recognize the existence of something beyond

¹³ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵ By *of*, in this sense, is meant to articulate the heavy emphasis Husserl puts on intentionality. 17th century empiricism often spoke of experience as being the fundamental unit by which an individual comes to know the world. However, as was held by many philosophers during this time this unit is purely subjective. The experience of phenomena is intrinsically separate from the phenomenal object. On the other hand, Husserl goes out of his way to label experience as experience *of* phenomena, denoting a relationship between the consciousness experiencing and the object experienced.

the consciousness, acting on it. Experience denotes a consciousness that is invariably conscious of something, inseparable from an object of experience. In marrying experience with an object, Husserl affirms the existence of both the consciousness and its intentional object as well as creating an inseparable connection between the two.

The importance of Husserl's intentional consciousness cannot be overstated. Husserl, in discussing the functions of the mind as decidedly specific and directed at something external to itself, is moving beyond the 17th century philosophical distinction between subject and object. With this notion, he is setting the stage for a methodological approach that uncovers the epistemological relationship between consciousness and what it experiences.

The first step in the phenomenological methodology is a suspension of what Husserl calls the "natural attitude." The natural attitude is held when an individual takes his or her perceptions and experiences for granted.¹⁶ In someone's day-to-day activities, a person does not go around inquiring into the relationship between every perception and how it is related to consciousness. Everyday life, everyday experience, is simpler and rightfully so. Take for example, the process of making lemonade. When squeezing the lemons on the juicer, it is not ordinary to question the reality of the lemon. One does not inquire deeply into the phenomenal relationship between oneself and the lemon. The reality, the factuality of these objects are immediately present and are usually seen and used without much thought beyond hoping the lemon is not turned or under ripe. This attitude is natural, where "natural" is not meant as an evaluation or in a

¹⁶ Ibid., 61.

pejorative sense but is stating the ordinary nature of how we go about everyday life. It is simply how life is naturally lived, and is the primary means in which one interacts with the world.

However, when looking through the lens of the phenomenological method, this attitude will not do. Husserl states that the natural attitude gets in the way of a proper epistemological analysis of conscious experience. If, when experiencing the world through the natural attitude, the reality and presence of those experiences are not analyzed any further, how then would one look into the nature of the relationship between the consciousness and the intentional object? Husserl responds to this problem by employing an aspect of phenomenological methodology, what he calls *epoché*. *Epoché* finds its etymology in the Greek term *epokhē*, which translates as “suspension.” In his inquiry regarding consciousness, the act of *epoché* is the suspending or “bracketing” a view of the world from the simple understanding of the natural attitude.¹⁷ This in turn allows for a deeper and richer analysis into the intricacies of and the circumstances surrounding conscious experience.

Epoché should not be confused with a form of skepticism. The phenomenologist is not suspending a belief into the existence of an external world. In fact, this is not even a question that is addressed by phenomenology. Phenomenology marks a movement away from the empiricist-rationalist debate over the nature of the world. Instead it asks an entirely different set of questions and look at the world in an entirely different way: as the world is presented through unadulterated, unfiltered conscious experience. This bracketing of the

¹⁷ Ibid, 63.

“givenness” of the world is the ultimate goal of *epoché*. Phenomena are not analyzed passively, but by how they are manifest to consciousness. Through the natural attitude the world is looked at as being prior to experience, through the phenomenological attitude the world appears as if perceived for the first time. The perception of the world is looked at simply as it presents itself, suspended of any preconceived notions or past experiences to give it context. In the words of Husserl, the goal of phenomenology is to return to “things themselves.”¹⁸ Husserl’s methodology is used to develop an understanding of the world as it appears, not as through the naïveté of the natural attitude.

This understanding, where the world is examined as it is perceived, is referred to as phenomenological reduction. Husserl comments that, “phenomenological reduction is nothing other than a change of attitude in which the world of experience comes to be contemplated consistently and universally as a world of possible and universally as a world of possible experience.”¹⁹ This change of attitude, developed through *epoché*, is what ultimately allows for phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenological reduction is very different from reductionism as understood in the traditional sense. Reductionism is a position that holds a complex philosophical system nothing more than a sum of its parts. Descartes’ reduction of the human being to material and mental substances is a classic example of traditional reductionism. Husserl’s phenomenological reduction differs from this understanding of reductionism insofar as it is deals

¹⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (London: Routledge. 2001), 68.

¹⁹ Bernet, Kern, Marbach, *Introduction*, 73.

more with the basic ontological relationship between consciousness and the world.

Take again for example making lemonade. Phenomenological reduction is a way of examining the perception of the lemon in all its different ways so as to discern how consciousness interacts with an object, generally speaking. When looking at the lemon sitting on the counter, only one side of the lemon can be seen. While it would be erroneous to say that this side of the lemon is all that exists because it is all that can be seen from that perspective, phenomenological reduction instead realizes this is only one of the many ways in which the lemon presents itself. Phenomenological reduction looks at this limited view as a means by which to better understand the relationship between the lemon and the person perceiving it. The lemon can be described as something to be eaten or something to be juiced and drank. It can be described as sour. It can be described as pulpy or yellow. All of these aspects contribute to how the lemon is experienced. In this way phenomenological reduction is less an inquiry into the “what” of the object as in traditional reductionism, and more “how.” It allows for an explication of the layers of the phenomenal world, showing how every phenomenal aspect of an object is not simply a single part in a sum of parts, but is instead an integral aspect of the experience of that object. It does not merely look at the intentional object, but also how this object is constituted through perception, how it comes together, as a conscious phenomenal experience. It is looking at how a multiplicity of characteristics can come to constitute the same intended object.

Husserl develops perspectives on knowledge that demonstrate a possible solution in rectifying the relationship between the subject and object of experience. Intentionality, *epoché*, and the suspension of the natural attitude, are extremely influential in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty concerns himself with how consciousness interacts with the phenomenal world. As such, he implements many important aspects Husserl's methodology in his own writings. There are however, ways in which Merleau-Ponty finds that Husserl's philosophy risks isolating consciousness as a transcendental aspect of reality. In this way Merleau-Ponty builds upon Husserl's theories and methodology, especially with regards to his own emphasis on the existential and bodily nature of human experience. The following section will serve as an explication of these differences as well as move onto a more specific analysis of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty and Existential Phenomenology

Picking up on many of the same questions dealt with by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty spent his life dedicated to a further explication of how the phenomenal world is experienced. Born in France in 1908, Merleau-Ponty studied philosophy and spent the later years of his short life lecturing on psychology and writing philosophy, before dying in 1963.²⁰ As he was very influenced by the work of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty wrote extensively on the manner in which phenomenological methodology should be used and the

²⁰ Thomas Baldwin, Introduction to *World of Perception*, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty trans. Oliver Davis (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

manner in which the phenomenism of reality relates intimately with the physicality of the world.

Merleau-Ponty accepts many aspects of Husserl's phenomenological method as well as his ontological grounding regarding consciousness. Where Merleau-Ponty differs however is largely due to his incorporation of existential ideas into the phenomenological method. Husserl grounds his philosophy in the idea that the conscious mind is always conscious of something, that experience is necessarily intentional. Merleau-Ponty agrees with this grounding, but does however think it falls short. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective is intricately woven within an existential, humanistic perspective, wherein Merleau-Ponty sees not simply a conscious subject of experience, but a conscious *human being*, living and experiencing within the world. Subjective consciousness is not simply intentional, but exists in a human person, in a body through which the world is experienced.

Merleau-Ponty's main concern about Husserl's philosophy and methodology is that it risks turning into another form of transcendental philosophy. Immanuel Kant, an 18th century German philosopher, is largely considered the father of what is known as transcendental idealism. Kant held that to perceive a phenomenon is not to perceive the object itself, but a representation of the object that is intuited by the subject.²¹ When a phenomenon is perceived it is not understood as what that object is, but rather it is "apprehended" through an inherent structuring of the mind.²² In other words, while there is an implicit and

²¹ Roger Scruton, *Kant: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 36.

²² *Ibid.* 131.

direct relationship between what is experienced and who is experiencing, there is a caveat in this relationship. The mind exists in such a way that when looking to understand a phenomenon, it is impossible to gain an ideal understanding of the phenomenon itself. The object of perception is in some part unknowable due to the constructs imposed by the mind on experience. Take again for example the experience or sensation of a lemon. This experience does not constitute awareness of the lemon *per se* but of qualities of the lemon, such as its taste, shape, or color. This perception of qualities is categorized through an *a priori* capacity of the mind, and intuited to be a lemon.

This transcendental epistemology can be seen at work in Husserl's idea of phenomenological reduction. Husserl's *epoché* suspends any validation of the "reality" of an object in the world, looking only to the relationship between the object and subject of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty agrees with Husserl that it is important to suspend the "natural attitude" towards the world. When I go out to my car in the morning, I do not usually bracket my normal relationship with the car in order to better understand how it manifests itself to me phenomenally. I simply hope it will start and get me to school on time. Merleau-Ponty does not deny that our experiences establish the relationships we have with the world, objects, and other people. However he does hold that the role of everyday experience is to "cover up" and organize perceptual experience differently from the way the world is actually presented.

But while they agree to some extent on the notion of suspension, Merleau-Ponty differs from Husserl in how the natural attitude should be suspended.

Merleau-Ponty thinks that Husserl, through *epoché*, removes the subject of experience from *within* the world and places it in another realm. This is why, according to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl's phenomenology is ultimately transcendental. There is a layer of distance between consciousness experiencing the world and the world itself. Husserl's theory of phenomenological reduction claims that it is possible to know distinctly the different qualities within a thing, gaining insight by scientifically isolating them and examining them individually. In this way, Merleau-Ponty claims Husserl turns experience of the world into thought of the world.²³ For Merleau-Ponty, a lemon is not experienced through its individual parts by a transcendental consciousness. The lemon is experienced as a whole by *somebody*, with all of these parts simultaneously contributing to how that lemon is experienced. This experience of the whole lemon is not only a conscious experience either. For Merleau-Ponty, speaking of consciousness as something separate from the world detracts from the true nature of consciousness. Consciousness is not a transcendent quality of human nature, but is a part of lived, embodied, human experience. The lemon then is not just experienced through consciousness, but it is experienced as a whole, yellow, sour, juicy, through an embodied consciousness.

This is Merleau-Ponty's project, to present the situatedness of the human subject within the world. In elucidating the embodied existence of experience, how a person interacts with the world, Merleau-Ponty begins with a critique of Cartesian philosophy. As discussed in the previous section, Descartes believed it

²³ Baldwin, *Introduction*, 8.

was possible to know the essence of oneself through a rational disembodiment. For Descartes a human is ultimately a thinking thing, as his relationship to the world is one that can be described primarily through the intellect. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, thinks that this conception of a person as primarily an intellectual being reduces humanity to something it is not. The human being is an embodied being and as such a person's relationship with the rest of the world is lived and experienced through embodied perception. It is important to point out here that Merleau-Ponty is also an existentialist philosopher. In contrast with the position of Cartesian dualism where philosophical inquiry begins with the mind as ontologically separate from the body, existential philosophy begins its inquiry with embodied, human existence. The human person exists first, and then comes to know the world through an embodied experience of it. Existentialism holds that each person is a living, breathing, experiencing human. This is an integral aspect of how that person interacts with the world. Consciousness is not something that exists in a separate reality from the rest of the world, as something to look down as if from another planet, but is inseparable from lived, embodied existence. It is this situatedness in the world, this facticity as Heidegger and Sartre call it, that allows for both freedom and limitations to experience. Where, when, and how someone is situated in time and place affect how that person will experience the world.

Much of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is based around the embodied nature of conscious experience. According to Merleau-Ponty, Kant was right in some respects. Kant highlighted that qualities in an object are manifest through

experience of that object. However, Kant's transcendentalism ignores that these are in turn experienced through an embodied existence. Experience is not a faculty that transcends the world but instead belongs to a body, which in turn emerges from the world. As embodied consciousness, the primary relationship between an intended object and the conscious subject is through the body's perception of the world. It is through this embodiment that Merleau-Ponty wants to rediscover what he refers to as "the world of perception".²⁴ He states,

"Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the form of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice."²⁵

Merleau-Ponty's desire to integrate "the phenomena of the body" into his phenomenological perspective calls for an emphasis on the embodiment of perception. The "embodiment of perception," according to Merleau-Ponty, brings perceptual experience back into the world. It is through this embodied situatedness from within the world that allows for an experience of "a world of things in space and time whose nature is independent of us."²⁶

According to Merleau-Ponty, if experience were not embodied, it would be devoid of meaning. It is human facticity, the fact that the world and those who experience it are of the same "flesh," that allows for the validity of any claim about reality. In experiencing the world though being situated in the world, we are in a relationship with the world. This relationship must not be thought of as a

²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41.

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), xiii.

²⁶ Baldwin, Introduction, 10.

single thread connecting oneself to the world, but instead as a woven fabric of relationships. Objects in the world have a certain relationship with other objects. and in turn with the person who is experiencing them. When eating a lemon, the taste is not of all the lemons that have ever existed, or of some form “lemon.” It is of that specific lemon. This specificity of intentionality gives meaning to an experience. Experience is not just of *the* intended object, “lemon” generally speaking. It is the experience of a specific lemon in all its aspects. It exists as specifically interrelated to an embodied consciousness. It is unique. It is not the experience of just any lemon; it is the experience of a specific lemon.

This specific lemon, like all lemons, like all perceptions has certain qualities. It is ovular, is it yellow, it is sour. However, Merleau-Ponty finds something lacking in this description. While it is not intrinsically erroneous to describe a perception by its qualities, Merleau-Ponty wants to remind us that these qualities are inextricably tied to an object and an embodied subject experiencing it. Likewise, experience of these qualities, cannot be understood unless through a perceiving body. The meaning given to the object cannot be explained outside of perception. Quality, according to Merleau-Ponty, exists only insofar as it is experienced by an embodied existence. There is an interrelationship, a dialogue, between an object and the embodied human being. The lemon tastes like a lemon when it is being tasted. The lemon looks like a lemon when it is being viewed. Merleau-Ponty is known for saying that perception “constitutes” the world. In this way the lemon is lemony when and through its being perceived.

There are issues Merleau-Ponty must address regarding the relationship of human experience and the world, particularly regarding *how* it is that a person experiences the world. If one's own being is inextricably tied to a perception of the world, then where does perception start and subjective being begin? In answering this question, Merleau-Ponty highlights a certain ambiguity present in the relationship between an embodied existence and the world. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a *chiasm* to refer to a certain reversibility or intersection between the perceiver and perceived.²⁷ Using again his famous example of one hand touching the other, Merleau-Ponty explains the mutual importance of being both perceiving and perceived. In touching one hand to the other, both hands are feeling and being felt simultaneously.²⁸ This intertwining of action would not be possible if both the subject and the object of perception did not exist to be both perceived and to perceive. A human being exists *in* the world, as part of the world. He or she perceives the world, and in turn is able to be perceived by others. This reciprocity, this perceiving-perceivability continually reaffirms the worldly existence of reality. Merleau-Ponty believes it would be impossible otherwise. How could perception be possible if I am transcendent, or even simply separate from everything that is perceived? Phenomena do not exist as separate from the world and are not experienced apart from it. They are experienced from within the world, by someone who is also of the world.

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Visible and Invisible" In *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 247.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. J.M. Edie, (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964), 133.

This notion of *chiasm* does not just apply to objects or things, but to interrelationships with others as well. An aspect of a person living in the world is that he or she exists in community with other people, all of whom perceive and are perceived. Merleau-Ponty articulates this point by again addressing Cartesianism. Descartes, when attempting to understand the essence of man, filtered his understanding through a process of rational purification. In stating that man ultimately knows his being as a thinking thing, Descartes made man a “community of pure spirits.”²⁹ According to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes has, “ridded man of all traces of obscurity and confusion”.³⁰ Where Descartes’ understanding of man is one who intrinsically knows himself outside of a relationship to the physical, Merleau-Ponty holds that consciousness comes largely from one’s experience with others. Other people, according to Merleau-Ponty, are not understood simply as thinking entities conceived outside of their bodies. Relationships are tied to the way others are experienced, through gestures, speech, a body. These inter-personal relationships play an important role in an understanding of oneself and others. When trying to understand oneself, “the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too, and with it comes the others who are caught in it.”³¹ Merleau-Ponty posits that the realization of one’s own existence comes from self-reflection, a certain realization of corporeal situatedness with others. While this does affirm a certain individuality inherent in being, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes how this individuality is formed in and through

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 89.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 81.

³¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 15.

a social interaction. The affirmation of individuality is inextricably tied to a person's situatedness among others. As an individual exists within the boundaries of situation, it is difficult, even impossible to know where the individual freedom begins and where the demands of society end. In this way human existence is an ambiguous amalgamation, a knot of interdependence that helps give individual existence its value.

How Merleau-Ponty adopts and expands upon the phenomenological approach to include existentialist insights, such as the role of the body in experience, is a crucial aspect of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics. Looking ahead to the next section, Merleau-Ponty shows how art can aid in articulating the relationship between the embodied subject and the world by situating his aesthetic attitude within his greater philosophical perspective. In presenting this attitude, I will argue that an aesthetic position is an integral part of Merleau-Ponty's existential and phenomenological philosophy.

Chapter Three

Aesthetics and Embodied Existence

Throughout his writings, Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the role of art in his existential and phenomenological project. The study of aesthetic experience and aesthetic objects is fundamental to an understanding of art, which in turn leads to a deeper perspective on human existence in the world. Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory is grounded in rich ontological and epistemological perspectives, which explicate the various aspects of human facticity, that is how an individual human exists in a certain place and time. The following section explores these aspects with specific attention paid to Merleau-Ponty's use of art to elucidate his phenomenological perspective.

The Phenomenology of Aesthetics

While the philosophy of beauty has a long history, the study of aesthetics is a relatively new philosophical pursuit. While other aspects of the philosophy of beauty are concerned more with the nature of an object and how it might come to be considered beautiful, aesthetics instead focuses on the experience of beauty. Finding its origin in modern empiricism, aesthetics looks into the nature of the experience of the beautiful as well as the qualities of aesthetic objects and what kind of attitudes are brought to an aesthetic experience.

The term "aesthetic" was coined by the German philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten, in his mid-18th century work, *Aesthetica*. This classification of

beauty as an “aesthetic” conception was a turning point in the understanding of beauty as such. In *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten addresses questions regarding the epistemology of aesthetic knowledge. Following in the footsteps of such rationalist philosophers as René Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz, Baumgarten concludes that there are two forms of knowledge, knowledge gained by the senses and knowledge understood through reason and logic.³² However, in creating this distinction, Baumgarten does not agree with his predecessors in their devaluation of sense experience. Baumgarten believes that the two types of knowledge lead to different understandings of truths within the world. Drawing on the Greek word *aisthetikos*, meaning “to sense” or “sensitive”, Baumgarten founds a science of aesthetics: a system for understanding sensual cognition.³³ In placing a distinction between aesthetic knowledge and logical knowledge, Baumgarten creates an understanding of beauty as the object of aesthetic experience. Here, Baumgarten develops the idea of “taste.” Beauty is not something that is rationalized, or understood through a rational inquiry. It is instead “tasted,” experienced. Therefore, any kind of theory involving the nature of beauty must be attached to a more general theory of perception. And while it should be noted that Baumgarten’s theory was not immediately adopted, it did put an emphasis away from a rationalist conception of beauty to a more empirical, experience-based one.³⁴ It is with the introduction of the notion of taste that an

³² Leonard P. Wessell, “Alexander Baumgarten’s Contribution to the Development of Aesthetics”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1972): 333.

³³ *Ibid.*, 333.

³⁴ “Rationalist” in this sense pertains to the general school of thought discussed earlier when introducing Cartesian dualism. Rationalists typically view reason as the chief means by which to know and understand reality. When looking towards aesthetic inquiry, a rationalist would attempt

understanding of beauty began a turn towards something empirical and sensual, moving the discussion of beauty to the discussion of aesthetic.

As he is largely concerned with explicating how humans come to experience the world phenomenally, Merleau-Ponty is very interested in this way of investigating beauty. However, like with Husserl's phenomenological method, Merleau-Ponty develops and builds off Baumgarten's thoughts on aesthetics. As mentioned above with regards to Baumgarten's understanding of aesthetics, any position regarding beauty and artistic expression in turn relies on the epistemological intricacies of sense experience and the relationship between the object and the subject of that experience. Merleau-Ponty on the other hand is less concerned with questions regarding the nature of beauty, or even what constitutes an aesthetic judgment. In the section prior to this, Merleau-Ponty was shown to be very interested in how the phenomenological method can help illuminate the existential relationship between human beings and the world. As per phenomenology's goal of understanding the world as is it "given" in perception, Merleau-Ponty's inquiry into aesthetics concerns the intricacies of phenomenal aesthetic experience. In this way Merleau-Ponty brackets the questions regarding the nature of beauty and attends directly to explicating the aesthetic experience.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is largely concerned with investigating facticity — that is a person's existence as a human being living in the world — and how facticity influences and shapes perception. One of the main questions asked by

to use reason and to logically ascertain the nature of beauty. This stands in stark contrast to the empiricist's focus and elucidation of the experience of beauty, or the aesthetic.

Merleau-Ponty upon situating the embodied existence in the world, is how is this world manifest to us? How does conscious, embodied perception “constitute” the world before us? It is all good and well to say there is an existential relationship between a person and the world, a reversibility and ambiguity between oneself and the world, but what does that mean with regards to perception? Aesthetic experience plays a central role in this investigation. Merleau-Ponty comments extensively on the role of art and artists in explicating how human beings come to perceive and interact with the world around them. For Merleau-Ponty, art takes on a sort of visual rendering of the phenomenological method. Art’s ability to convey the relationship between the perceiver and perceived epitomizes Merleau-Ponty’s own desire to better understand both the existential and phenomenological nature of human existence.

Throughout his works, Merleau-Ponty shows an affinity for certain painters and styles of painting as better capturing the world as it is “given” in perception. In his work *Cézanne's Doubt*, Merleau-Ponty gives an intimate insight into the stylistic and purposeful struggles of Paul Cézanne. Cézanne, a late 19th century post-impressionist painter, is well known for his in-depth studies regarding scenic and portrait works. Because he challenged the impressionistic ideas on perspective and colorization, many of Cézanne’s works are regarded as influential towards the development cubist movement of the early and mid-20th century. It is in abandoning the classical techniques of painting that Merleau-Ponty regards Cézanne as visually articulating what he (Merleau-Ponty) attempts to philosophize.

Classical artistic technique holds that a painting should create an ideal representation of an object. If one were painting an apple from a certain vantage point, this apple would have a certain dimension in relation to a fixed point on the canvas. This style of shaping makes objects distinct from their surroundings and creates a kind of geometrical unity within the work. Much of Cézanne's work is a reaction against this way of organizing and distributing perception. In chronicling Cézanne's life as a painter, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the stylistic struggles Cézanne felt pressuring and directing his artistic output. In the development of his approach to painting, Cézanne struggled with "wanting to represent the object, to find it again behind the atmosphere."³⁵ Cézanne saw the classical style of painting as creating an artificial representation of perception. The world it portrayed was not realistic; it portrayed the world as if the artist was working from a perfect, almost unnatural vantage point where everything was perfectly clear and proportioned. In his attempt to capture the world as it is perceived, Cézanne was forced out of his Impressionistic style and "abandon himself to the chaos of sensation."³⁶ Recalling Cézanne's still-lives, a style of painting for which he is famous, one will notice the abandonment of a central perspective, horizons, and colorizations that one might find in other more classical pieces of art. Looking at the fruit on the table in *Le Panier de Pommes*, it is hard to tell where a plate ends and the table starts, giving the painting a distorted and blurred look. The fruit does not sit on the tablecloth, but rather is enveloped by it. A plate does not look

³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

round, but instead looks ovular, distorted. It is often difficult to find the “edge” of the table or a set of perfectly perpendicular or parallel lines anywhere in the painting.



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When speaking of Cézanne’s works, Merleau-Ponty draws reference to this blurring and distortion. He says,

“When our eyes run over the surface (of the table), the images it successfully receives are taken from different points of view, and the whole surface is warped. It is true that I freeze these distortions in repainting them on a canvas; I stop the spontaneous movement in which they pile up in perception.”³⁸

This style of painting captures an important aspect of how Merleau-Ponty

³⁷ Paul Cezanne, *Le Panier de Pommes (The Basket of Apples)*, 1894, Wikipedia, Last modified November 29, 2013,

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c4/Paul_C%C3%A9zanne_185.jpg.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 14.

thinks the world is manifest through perception. Perception is not a passive act, fixed on one single point. Perception, as inherent in human beings, is intrinsically active. When looking about a scene, when looking at the world, a person moves about. She moves her eyes, focusing on different things within her field of vision. In attempting to portray authentic aesthetic experience, painting should not capture the world as though from one central horizon, but from a multiplicity of perspectives. When moving one's eyes over a scene, such as those presented in Cézanne's still-life, the scene is not "taken-up" by observing at a single point in the middle of the table. It requires moving one's attention all around the scene. The act of perception is not organizing but is pre-reflective, constituting the world.

What does this mean, that perception is pre-reflective? For Merleau-Ponty, the act of perceiving the world is distinctly different from the act of reflecting upon it. Perception does not organize the world into distinct shapes and calculated depths. Perception is instead what happens before this. Here is where Merleau-Ponty's use of the phenomenological method can be applied to aesthetics. When analyzing how the world is presented through perception, all other preconceived notions of previous perceptions must be suspended. In the act of perception the world is not organized by right angles, perfect circles, and horizon lines. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception causes the world to "pile" before us. There is no parceling out how the objects of perception relate to each other. There is no process by which we analyze the spatial relationships of one object to another. It is pre-reflective: moving, dynamic, blurred, unfocused. It is not the means by which the world is organized, divided, or reflected upon, but how it is

“given”, simply how it is shown to exist. Through perception the world is constituted to us. It is the means by which the world comes to be around us, the way in which we primordially relate to the world.

Cézanne’s ability to portray this primordial aspect of lived perception in his paintings is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as “Cézanne’s genius.”³⁹ When viewing one of Cézanne’s paintings as a whole the scene looks “natural.” All of the blurring and bending of the individual objects throughout the painting disappear. The individual object “recovers” its relationship with the entire scene. This is how Merleau-Ponty understands the lived act of perception. Merleau-Ponty would state that the naturalness of the scene Cézanne presents comes from his representation of pre-reflective experience. It is not spatially logical as in classical paintings. If you examined deeper into the structural integrity of the table in *Le Panier de Pommes*, you would likely conclude it is somehow magically standing despite its being broken in the middle. But this is not what Cézanne is trying to accomplish by painting in this way. Perception for Cézanne, just as it is for Merleau-Ponty, is not the means by which these things are analyzed. It is simply the way in which the world is constituted, the way in which it is most naturally and most basically encountered. In perception apples blend together, plates are oval, and tables are disjointed.

For Merleau-Ponty, painting is the expression of the pre-reflective “piling-up” of perception. Take for another example, Cézanne’s later watercolor entitled *le Pont Des Trois-sautets*. Here Cézanne can be seen seeking out the mystery of pre-reflective perception in his stylization. The colors, the greens, the browns, the

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

pinks, and the blues, “radiate around planes that cannot be assigned to any place at all.”⁴⁰ The spatial proportionality of the painting is missing. Instead of creating clear outlines and situating objects against a fixed horizon, objects in the painting are shown to be overlapping each other. The tree is there, but it is seemingly suspended in space without a beginning or an end. There is a distinguishable bridge but it is inseparable from the surrounding forest of colors, into which the bridge’s peripherals melt. Line and form, distance and color are blurred between each other in pre-reflected perception.



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⁴⁰ Ibid., 141.

⁴¹ Paul Cezanne, *The Bridge of Trois-sautets (le Pont Des Trois-sautets)*, 1906, Cincinnati Art Museum, Last modified December 27, 2013, http://collections.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/piction/ump.secure_uma?url=997706967ZZZZKDSHGUVWJ&version=&enc=D25456C05300662917D4430DD830503F0319D812C12750ED8ECF4DE933D64340&f=cam

Le Pont Des of Trois-sautets captures what Merleau-Ponty means when he discusses the importance of suspended analysis of perception. The scene Cézanne presents shows a critique of perception as if seeing the world for the first time, perception as pre-reflective. It is as if one is viewing the scene after stepping out of a dark room. Think for moment of being brought to the bridge in Cézanne's painting while blindfolded. When the blindfold is finally taken off, there is a moment where everything seems suspended. The world is, for that moment, being seen for the first time. The spatial relationships between the trees, the bridge, the water, all exist just as one sees them. This only lasts but a moment: the eyes adjust to the change in light and the world again seems familiar, unusual. The scene is studied, the bridges and the trees fall into place, and everything "makes sense". This is the distinction Merleau-Ponty draws between pre-reflected and reflected experience.

Aesthetics & the Reversibility of Existence

As discussed throughout this work, Merleau-Ponty is very interested in the question of what it means to have conscious experience. Like Husserl before him, Merleau-Ponty holds that consciousness is intrinsically intentional. To have conscious experience is to have experience of something, to have one's consciousness directed at something. As we have seen however, Merleau-Ponty differs from Husserl in that Merleau-Ponty holds that conscious experience is an embodied experience. A person experiences and perceives the world through their body, as situated in the world. Consciousness does not act in some sort of

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transcendent bubble, where it looks down on the things of the world. Human consciousness is situated within the world and as such has experiences of the world. In this way Merleau-Ponty states that his goal is to “interrogate painting itself” in an attempt to bring perception and aesthetics back down to the world of lived, embodied experience.⁴²

In one of his last works, *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty enters an examination of how art can help elucidate existential human experience. He begins this work with a critique of modern science. In this critique Merleau-Ponty states that natural science “looks on from above” and has “given up living in things.”⁴³ Here Merleau-Ponty is highlighting how natural science, in its attempt to objectify its results and experiments, has come to ignore a very human aspect of existence. Merleau-Ponty invites his readers to bring their understanding of perception back down to the ground of the living. In *Cézanne’s Doubt*, Merleau-Ponty quotes Cézanne to say that when painting, “the landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness.”⁴⁴ This pairing of painting to a painter’s body is integral to Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics. The embodied consciousness, that through which a person experiences the world, is the primary way we come to know the world. The body is the “seat of perception...the locus of expression.”⁴⁵ Painting exemplifies this relationship between the individual and how the world is

⁴² Galen A. Johnson, “Ontology and Painting: ‘Eye and Mind’,” in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. ed. Michael B. Smith, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 53.

⁴³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” In *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Michael B. Smith, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 121. 122.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 17.

⁴⁵ Michael Smith, “The Aesthetics of Merleau-Ponty,” *Les Etudes Philosophiques* 1 (1988), 78.

perceived. The painter's body is "lent" to art. The painter takes his or her unique embodied perception and relates it through artist expression. It is this individual perspective that allows, even constitutes the world which is painted.

This relationship between the painter and what is painted can be better understood in a deeper examination of Cézanne's quote given above. Cézanne states that when painting, "the landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness."⁴⁶ This statement seems to articulate a more complex existence than simply the embodying of conscious perception. There is reciprocity between the perceiver and what is perceived, an interdependent relationship between the object and subject of aesthetic experience. Throughout *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty discusses the overlapping of the notions of "perceiver" and "perceived". He states that as situated as a seer in the world, a person must in turn be capable of being perceived. Part of being-in-the-world as a body implies a certain otherness from the rest of the world, a "body (that) simultaneously sees and is seen."⁴⁷ This reversibility of human situation as among that which a person sees, the ambiguity and overlapping of being both perceived and perceiving is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as *chiasm*.⁴⁸ *Chiasm* is meant to help articulate the existential relationship between perceiver and perceived. Take for example, reading a book. In holding the book in one's hand, the hand is both simultaneously touching the pages of the book and being touched by the pages. It is impossible to separate the interrelatedness of the two experiences; the experience of touching

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 17.

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", 124.

⁴⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Visible and Invisible" In *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 247.

something cannot be understood outside of the experience of being concurrently touched. In experiencing the world, a person is in turn experienced by the world. The body is situated *among* things, “it is one of them.”⁴⁹ It is present, perceivable, existing as part of the world.

In another of his works Merleau-Ponty articulates this relationship in a more visually oriented way. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty discusses space and how it relates to the connected, reversible nature of human experience. He states,

“(Space) is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but is the means whereby the position of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float...we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected.”⁵⁰

This is a very different notion of space than is presented in natural science. Here Merleau-Ponty discusses space not as a something to be juxtaposed with objects, where objects exist with space in-between them. Instead Merleau-Ponty discusses space as the way in which things exist apart from and connected to one another. In looking at the world phenomenologically, Merleau-Ponty talks of space as how things relate to one another. It is not a physical thing in and of itself, an “ether” where in all objects exist. Space is an interrelationship of different beings. It allows for the interconnectedness of existence, how other things are different from and related to each other. Space is the way in which we experience the world, the way in which the world exists and is “given” to perception. I can perceive the world because the world and I are both different and interrelated at the same time. In space is *chiasm*, where I can both see and

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, 125.

⁵⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 243.

be seen, touch and be touched, perceive and be perceived, because I am related to other objects.

Painting displays perfectly the relationship Merleau-Ponty wants to articulate in his theory of *chiasm* and space. In painting, the seer becomes caught-up in what is seen. It captures the reversibility of seeing and seen, the painter annexing the world, situating oneself in the world. "Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies because the body welcomes them."⁵¹ These notions of space and *chiasm* are intimately tied to how Merleau-Ponty addresses the pre-reflective nature of perception. The painter affirms the reciprocal relationship between perceiver and perceived in his or her painting. In order to convey this relationship Merleau-Ponty turns again to the art of Paul Cézanne.

Merleau-Ponty, in conveying the embodied, human nature of existence stresses that a painter must address both the blurring ambiguity of perception and captures the unique "situatedness" of the object being painted. For Merleau-Ponty, painting should show the object as it is pre-reflectively perceived. This means that the way in which an artist paints is extremely important in his or her ability to convey the world as through pre-reflective perception. Stylistically, if one paints an object with a strict, bold outline it provides that object too much definition. There are no outlines in perception. Yes, there are distinctions between the objects in the room, but there is fluidity in their position with one another. An apple, a bottle, a plate, is each a distinct object. However, each object's existence, the distinction between them, is continually affirmed by their

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", 125.

relation to one another. Where the bottle is situated, its color, its shape, its texture, exists within everything, yet is separate from everything at the same time. It is less the outline of an object as it is what the object is “made of” that distinguishes it from the other objects in the painting. Merleau-Ponty points out that it is Cézanne’s use of coloring that bridges the divide between the two. He says that, “the world is a world without gaps, a system of colors across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves, are inscribed like the lines of force; the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed.”⁵² Take again for example, the apples of Cézanne’s still-lives. Merleau-Ponty points to the coloring of these apples as to what allows for their “depth.” Cézanne’s apples seem to “swell” in their coloring. The color is not seen to be something that is distinct from the shape of the apple, but *is* the shape of the apple. How the colors modulate around the apple *allow* the shape of the apple; “the outline and the colors are no longer distinct from each other.”⁵³ It is in color that one finds depth, how an object is hard, how it is soft, how it is smooth. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no differentiation between different aspects of perception. Perception is pre-reflective. Perception is a dynamic motion. Perception is situated. It is in this way that Merleau-Ponty would state that shape of a bottle is *in* its color. The taste of an apple is *in* its texture.

This analysis harkens back to an example used throughout this work, the lemon, and how it can be used to articulate the existential interrelation of quality and being. Merleau-Ponty is very concerned with the reduction of experienced

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

objects. Thinking of the lemon simply as compilation of parts and qualities detracts from understanding the lemon as it exists as a whole, as it is and how it is perceived in the world. The lemon as a whole cannot be separated from its parts, such as taste and texture. When described the lemon as simply a list of qualities, the lemon seems to be lacking something real, something living. These qualities must be returned to the lemon itself in order to have any sort of meaning. The taste of the lemon would be devoid of meaning if it were separated from the texture of the lemon. In perceiving the lemon, the qualities are tied up in the lemon itself. There is no distinction between the color of the lemon and its shape; they are blended, ambiguous. As Sartre writes, “the lemon is extended throughout its qualities, and each of its qualities is extended throughout each of the others.”⁵⁴ This is what Merleau-Ponty finds that Cézanne portrays in his works. Paul Cézanne is famous for his many representations of Mont Sainte-Victoire, a mountain ridge in southern France. *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1902), given below, perfectly articulates Merleau-Ponty’s desire to situate the phenomenal aspects of being within the being itself. In the painting, Cézanne captures the texture of the trees in the shape of the brush strokes. The shape of the mountain set against the sky in its color. The houses at the mountains base are set *in* the trees. There is no distinction between what the thing is and how it is perceived. The entire object is as captured in the perception of the object.

⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 609.



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Art plays a central role in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological and existential positions. It does not simply serve as an aid, a supporting role to his greater philosophical opinions, but instead uncovers and broadens aspects of his philosophy in a distinct fashion. Art, as exemplified by Paul Cézanne's work makes public the examination of pre-reflective perception, something that is normally confined to individual investigation. The creative nature of artistic process adds an element of expression, an unfolding, to phenomenal inquiry. In talking about the role of art in phenomenological inquiry, Merleau-Ponty speaks

⁵⁵ Paul Cezanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1902, Class Connection, Last modified February 12, 2014, http://classconnection.s3.amazonaws.com/129/flashcards/402129/png/cezanne_mont_sainte-victoire_seen_from_les_lauves_1902-061307306978175.png.

of painting not as a representation of an object *per se*, but as simply conveying human consciousness as immersed in the world. He states,

“Ultimately the painting relates nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all ‘auto-figurative’. It is a spectacle of something only by being a ‘spectacle of nothing’, by breaking the ‘skin of things’ to show how the things become things, how the world becomes the world.”⁵⁶

Here Merleau-Ponty is attempting to end a long-lived debate as to the purpose and nature of visual art. This debate is generally regarding the merit and purpose of what might be distinguished as representational and nonrepresentational art. Within these schools of art there are those who think that art is primarily figurative or that is motivated by some sort of external object. In other words, any aspect of painting, line, form, perspective, color, shading, is derived from external experience and portrayed through the art. On the other side, there are those who think that there are elements of art that are non-figurative. While abstract art does not necessarily entail it being nonfigurative, there is a belief that art can be totally abstracted, not based on any kind of external objectivity. In the quote above, Merleau-Ponty claims that art is “auto-figurative.” By this he means that art, because it is being produced by someone who lives in the world, painting what they experience of the world, is intrinsically of the world. Merleau-Ponty holds that by the very act of painting a painter is taking from his or her experience of the world. However this does not necessarily make painting representational. Painting does not seek to uncover the nature of a specific object. Instead it makes visible the embodied act of perception. Cézanne’s painting is not a representation of a bridge, but the constitution of pre-

⁵⁶ Ibid., 141.

reflective perception. Cézanne does not paint an apple, but instead paints how perception captures the existence of a person situated within the world. Cézanne paints how the world comes to be through human experience.

Referencing the “auto-figurative” nature of art, Merleau-Ponty states that art alone, in contrast with science and philosophy, has maintained its innocence in its presentation of the perceived world.⁵⁷ Both natural science and philosophy are reflective activities. Natural science involves looking at particular instances of physical phenomena and extrapolating conclusions based on these instances. Philosophical inquiries are reflective in order to elucidate certain questions regarding reality, knowledge, and existence. However, according to Merleau-Ponty painting always has and always will be unique in its ability to portray the world as pre-reflective, how it comes to be constituted.

Art, through the specific way in which it is understood by Merleau-Ponty, captures the primordial nature of perception. It “awaken(s) the power dormant in ordinary vision, a secret of preexistence” as a public display of the unfamiliar moment before the world is organized and categorized by our pre-reflective mind.⁵⁸ Art, as a creative display of an artist “echoing” the world through his or her own body, characterizes the reciprocal relationship of a person within the world. It captures the situatedness of humanity, the relationship between perceiver and perceived and makes visible the reversibility of existing as part of the world. Art is a promulgation of aesthetic experience, a continual reaffirmation of human existence within a perceived world.

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, 123.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 142

CONCLUDING REMARKS

“This philosophy, which is yet to be elaborated, is what animates the painter — not when he expresses opinions about the world but in that instant when his vision become gesture, when, in Cézanne’s words, he ‘thinks in painting.’”⁵⁹

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*

What does it mean to look at art through the phenomenological and existential lens of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetic theory? How does viewing oneself as a human being, living and experience the world have any impact on how we understand art? In other words, why does looking at art as Merleau-Ponty does, as an illustration of the perceptual, pre-reflective constitution of the world, even important? This is the question that must be asked of artists and aestheticians alike: why does art matter?

Throughout history, the philosophy of art has taken different approaches to answering this question. An important and influential opinion is that of the ancient classical philosopher, Plato. In his work, *The Republic*, Plato undertakes a thought experiment: create the perfect society. Within this society, Plato discusses the place and purpose of art. Here Plato states that art is mimetic.⁶⁰ Art, in Plato’s mind is an interpretation, an imitation, of what really exists in the world; art gives but an illusion of real experience. If I paint a sunrise, I would use colored paints, certain shapes, and paint from a certain perspective. Plato sees this as an imitation of the true experience of a sunrise, and as such is far

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, 138.

⁶⁰ Plato, “The Republic,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1927), 417.

removed from what is true.

This idea of art, as an imitation of reality, has been embraced throughout art history. Plato's perspective on art can be seen in classical artistic technique. Art is used to idealize the external world. If I study an object, look to the way it is shaped, take its proportions, and paint according to this study, I can make a representation of the object that better conforms to the object in reality. In this understanding of art, the goal of painting is to make the best representation of an object, and its value lies in how closely it is related to reality.

This is a very different conception of art than is presented by Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, art is not simply imitative. Art is the illustration of pre-reflective perception. In the quote given above, Merleau-Ponty quotes Paul Cézanne as saying that he "thinks in painting." When Cézanne paints, he is not painting to represent an apple, a mountain, or a bridge. He is painting the act of perception. He is painting the way in which he experiences the world. He is painting to capture the living, breathing, human act of perception within the world.

For Merleau-Ponty art is not removed from truth but instead epitomizes what it means to be human. I live in the world as an embodied person, and experience the world as such. My actions and experiences are related to my situatedness as a person within the world. In turn, humans experience the world through perception. My perception of the world is not organized rationality, but is instead pre-reflective, unorganized and primordial. It is the way in which we encounter the world. It is the way the world is constituted around us, the way in which we most basically experience it.

Art, as understood by Merleau-Ponty and as exemplified in the works of Cézanne, is perception. In painting the painter captures how the world appears to us in pre-reflective perception. Art is not a reflection, nor is it a representation. Art is an act. Art brings the embodied, perceptual experience of the world into being. It is the artistic expression of the world as constituted through our perception. Understood this way, art is much closer to the truth of things than Plato thought. Art is not the reflection on or imitation of some object external to us. If understood this way art is little more than a lie. Art as reflected upon by Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the truth of embodied, perceiving existence in the world.

In looking to Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic perspective we are reminded of what it means to be human. His aesthetic theory calls for the development of a unique and refined perspective of the world. It calls for a well-thought understanding of oneself as a person as well as involving the difficult task of situating oneself in a phenomenal world full of possibilities and relationships. However arduous, it uncovers important aspects of our existence in the world. Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic theory takes these aspects and gives them a face, articulating them phenomenally, externalizing them for the world to see. It reminds us that art expresses what it means to be human, embodied, intertwined with, and experiencing the world.

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