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## Psychology and Phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty

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**Jalil Babapour**

*Professor of Psychology, University of Tabriz, Iran*

*[babapourj@yahoo.com](mailto:babapourj@yahoo.com)*

### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the close connection between the science of psychology, especially Gestalt psychology, and phenomenology in the thinking of twentieth-century French philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This philosopher established his own philosophy under the influence of significant advances in psychology on the one hand, and also under the influence of Husserl's phenomenology. Understanding the philosophy of this philosopher without understanding the close relationship between psychology and phenomenology, especially in the matter of the living body, will lead to a lot of misunderstanding in reading his views. In this article, we tried to show this close relationship in the thought of this thinker. We know, of course, that he criticized Husserl's phenomenology and Gestalt psychology, and argued that psychology fails to understand the nature of the human mind.

**Keywords:** Psychology, Phenomenology, experience, Gestalt and Merleau-Ponty

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## Introduction

When psychology emerged as an academic discipline in the early 19th century as a discipline independent of philosophy, it explored a variety of issues of emotions, feelings, awareness, and imagination, as well as issues of the mind in general, with an empirical approach. This process has continued to this day with different approaches in the field of psychology. Of course, it must be said that before the 19th century, there was a philosophical psychology that Plato, and especially Aristotle, explained in their own writings. We all know that experimental psychology has its roots in philosophical psychology. Nevertheless, regardless of the different schools of psychology and the issue of psychology and behavior, the roots of all these approaches and issues related to epistemology go back to philosophy (Luft & Overgaard 2011: 586). In the twentieth century, the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, owed his phenomenological thinking to a German psychologist named Franz Brentano. Brentano's aim was to introduce psychology as a science, and for this reason he proposed a form of descriptive psychology whose task was to elucidate the nature of the inner conscious actions of centralized cognition without resorting to causal explanation. It can be said that Brentano proposes a kind of philosophical psychology that focuses on the study of the mind. In this work, he introduces the concept of intentionality. After Husserl, French phenomenologists such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas tried to use phenomenology and psychology together to explain and analyze human lived experience.

Our aim in this article is to show the close connection between psychology and phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty's thought to describe lived experience. We want to show that Merleau-Ponty's psychology combines with his phenomenology, and we find a kind of phenomenological psychology in all of his writings. As mentioned earlier, the description and analysis of lived experience is the ultimate goal of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological psychology. In 1949 he was appointed Professor of Psychology at the Sorbonne. He even published a book on child psychology.

## Psychology And Phenomenology

We know that the starting point of this philosopher's thinking was Gestalt psychology, but he criticized the theory of the mind. To complete this more adequate theory of mind, Merleau-Ponty pressed into service the phenomenology and the science of psychology of his time. Drawing upon psychology, Merleau-Ponty used Gestalt theory as a point of departure. He drew on the more holistic tradition of German Gestalt psychology, including Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka, A. Gelb, and K. Goldstein. Moreover, phenomenology and Gestalt theory belonged to the academic culture in Germany in the early decades of the century, one in which the relation between philosophy and psychology was, as it remains today, problematic and conflicted.

Nevertheless, he thought that even Gestalt theory stopped short of an adequate application of the perception of wholes. From psychology also, Merleau-Ponty drew upon behaviorism's identification of the activities of the mind with brain states. His more detailed criticism of the shortcomings of behaviorism will be seen in the section on *The Structure of Behavior* (Primožic 2001: 6)

The issue of behavior and its nature was important to Merleau-Ponty from a psychological point of view. Much of Merleau-Ponty's first work, *The Structure of Behavior* (1942) is devoted to a detailed critical discussion of physiological psychology and the attempt to provide on its basis a reductive explanation of behavior. In developing his argument, Merleau-Ponty draws on Gestalt psychology and especially K. Goldstein's *The Organism* that emphasizes the holistic features of the life of organisms. Merleau-Ponty takes over Goldstein's holism and incorporates it into what he terms a 'dialectical' conception of the structures of behavior, according to which, as organisms evolve and become more sophisticated, higher forms of behavior develop which transform the life of the organism. So the new capacities characteristic of these higher forms are not simple additions to an otherwise unaltered neurophysiology. Instead, through a process of dialectical assimilation, these new capacities bring with them changes in the functioning of the underlying neurophysiology (Primožic 2001: 6)

Merleau-Ponty's two main sources of thought are psychology and phenomenology. He influenced strongly by Husserl's philosophy. Off course, Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl was aware of the intimate and parallel connection between psychology and phenomenology (Welsh, 2013: 27)

The two chief formative influences on Merleau Ponty's work were phenomenology and Gestalt psychology. Phenomenology is an attempt to provide a concrete description of things philosophers often all too hastily try to explain (or explain away) abstractly. The central phenomenon of concern to phenomenologists is intentionality —the object directedness, of ness or “aboutness” of experience. Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, was the first to draw a rigorous distinction between the intentional object and the intentional content—what he called the noema—of an attitude, a distinction systematically obscured by talk of “ideas” or “representations,” such as one finds in Descartes, Locke, Kant, and in contemporary cognitive science. Husserl's theory of intentionality is exemplary of the semantic paradigm in the philosophy of mind, for his notion of *noema* is a generalization of the concept of linguistic sense or meaning, in contrast to the referent of a term. As Frege argued, the sense of the expression “Morning Star” is different from the sense of the expression “Evening Star,” though both terms refer to the same thing, namely the planet Venus (Carman 2008: 27).

The second most significant influence on Merleau Ponty's phenomenology was Gestalt psychology, which emphasizes the non-conceptual or prelogical coherence of perceptual experience. According to Gestalt theory, perception is neither rational

judgment nor the registration of meaningless sense data. Merleau Ponty inherits from the Gestalt school a critique of the constancy hypothesis, the assumption of a one to one correspondence between sensory stimulus and perceptual content. The constancy hypothesis is the deep error common to both empiricism and intellectualism, according to which perception consists fundamentally in either sensation or judgment. A sensation is supposed to be the discrete effect of a sensory stimulus, yet what we experience in perception is not a fleeting mosaic of sensations, as empiricism suggests, but a stable and coherent world. Intellectualism recognizes the intelligibility of the perceived world and acknowledges that perception is not just a brute confrontation with sense data, yet it too takes the constancy hypothesis for granted by concluding that perceptual content must be supplied by a non-sensory faculty, namely thought or judgment (Carman 2008: 27-28)

He was a critic of experimental psychology and traditional philosophical psychology, and defended phenomenological psychology. The point of departure for these remarks is that the perceived world involves relations and, in a general way, a type of organization which has not been recognized by classical psychology and philosophy (Lawlor & Toadvine 2007: 90).

Merleau-Ponty's first book, *The Structure of Behavior* (1942), was influenced by Gestalt psychology, which emphasized the organized nature of human experience. Merleau-Ponty's interest in psychology remained for the rest of his life. According to Gestalt psychology, human perception is not made up of separate components called emotions. *The Structure of Behavior* refers to insights from Gestalt psychology and phenomenology into the relationship between the soul and the body. In this book, John Watson's physiological psychology of time critiques Pavlov's studies of conditioning, all of which regard behavior as an object. He does not consider the set of human behavior to be explainable by mechanical responses to stimuli, and does not accept the body as merely a set of limbs or components. Using Gestalt psychology, he says that the Gestalt is either the irreducible form or structure of human experience of the world. The meaning of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty means form versus behaviorism.

In other words, in *The Structure of Behavior* he deploys Gestalt psychology against behaviourism. Indeed, the 'Structure' of his work's title is the word usually used to translate the German 'Gestalt' into French. 'Gestalt' means 'shape' or 'form' and the Gestalt psychologists held that the way in which an object presents itself to a perceiver is ambiguous depending on the perceiver's own conscious or unconscious preconceptions. It presents alternative Gestalten (Priest 1998:3).

Why did Merleau-Ponty turn to Gestalt psychology? The answer is that Gestalt psychology deals directly with the perceived world and, as a result, rejects the introspective and objective view of psychology on the subject. But the question is whether Gestalt theory, after the work it has done in calling attention to the phenomena of the perceived world, can fall back on the classical notion of reality and

objectivity and incorporate the world of the forms within a being in the classical sense of the word. Without doubt one of the most important acquisitions of this theory has been its overcoming of the classical alternatives between objective psychology and introspective psychology. Gestalt psychology went beyond this alternative by showing that the object of psychology is the structure of behavior, accessible both from within and from without (Lawlor & Toadvine 2007: 99).

Merleau-Ponty even criticizes Pavlov's conditional psychology and physiology about the nature of behavior. Baldwin says that "Merleau-Ponty starts by criticising the hypothesis that reflex psychology shows how behaviour can be thought of as in principle explicable by neuro-physiological connections that link behaviour to the effects of past and present environment. He argues persuasively that the then current theories of Pavlov, Watson and other behaviourists are unsatisfactory; in making his case, Merleau-Ponty draws extensively on the work of the gestalt theorists (Wertheimer, Kohler, Koffka) to show that perception and action have complex 'forms' (Gestalten) that cannot be constructed from 'atomic' reflex connections". (Baldwin 2003: 3) In general, the Gestalt school tried to spell out general laws of perceptual form and envisioned an eventual reduction of those laws to causal mechanisms in the brain. But our relation to the world, however, like our relation to ourselves, is not just causal relation but intelligible, indeed practical, and Merleau-Ponty argued that no purely theoretical account of general laws could capture what we grasp intuitively and practically in our ordinary understanding in life world.

At the end of *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty calls on us to think about the close connection between perception and the world, and he goes to Husserl's phenomenology to complete his understanding of this close connection, and the *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) is the result. Merleau-Ponty ends *The Structure of Behavior* by calling for a philosophy that 'inverts the natural movement of consciousnesses in order to uncover the ways in which the real world is constituted in perception (SB 220). He opens *the Phenomenology of Perception* with a famous preface, which asks 'What is phenomenology?' (pp. 63-78; PP vii-xxi [vii-xxiv]) and answers that phenomenology is precisely a philosophy that will achieve this result; phenomenological reflection, he says, 'steps back to watch the forms 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' (p. 70; PP xiii[xv]).

Merleau-Ponty's attack on empirical psychology is a critique of the philosophy of empiricism and rationalism. In his attack on empirical psychology Merleau-Ponty is at pains to avoid philosophical rationalism: the doctrine that the nature of reality may be discerned through thought, rather than through experience. A Leitmotif of *Phénoménologie de la Perception* is the devising of a phenomenology that will eschew both empiricism and rationalism. Rationalism fails, in his view, partly because the existence and the detail of an object cannot be fully grasped in thought and partly because

rational reflection on an object, again, involves interpretation and so changing the object from its unreflected state (Priest 1998:6)

Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, the work of phenomenology is to describe the phenomena we experience in this practical and everyday world. Phenomenology does not seek to explain or deduce concepts from phenomena as the experimental sciences seek. The difference between a description and an explanation is that in describing what we experience as lived experience, we do not look for the cause and effect of a phenomenon; but in explanation, which is usually the work of science, we seek to explain the causes and factors of phenomena. According to Husserl, the motto of phenomenology is "return to the objects themselves." Therefore, the starting point of any phenomenological research is "lived experience". But this definition for Merleau-Ponty does not seem to be quite clear yet; so let us begin with the question that Merleau-Ponty asked in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: What is Phenomenology? And writes:

What is phenomenology? It may seem strange that this question has still to be asked half a century after the first works of Husserl. The fact remains that it has by no means been answered. Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'. It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins—as 'an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science', but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide (Merleau-Ponty 2005:viii)

But we know that empirical psychology is different from phenomenology because their perceptions of the concept of consciousness and the object of consciousness are different. In other words, the concept of intension in psychology is different from the concept of intent in phenomenology. Here Brentano and Husserl offer a different interpretation of intention.

Phenomenology based on the acceptance of the intentionality of consciousness is thus different from an empirical introspective psychology in a number of important ways:

First of all, it is not empirical. It is not concerned with what the world is objectively like, which would need empirical data provided by observation and experiment, but with what the objects that we believe ourselves to experience in the world mean to us, or with what our belief in them means. We can establish that without the need for empirical data about the outside world (and so a priori), just by reflecting on our own experience.

Secondly, it is not introspective. Consciousness, if it is intentional, cannot be studied separately from its objects, which are outside us (even, paradoxically, if they don't exist!). One way in which Husserl differed from Brentano was that Brentano thought of intentional objects as existing 'in' consciousness, whereas Husserl saw that that could not be correct, since it is contrary to what 'intentionality' means (Matthews 2010:8). Another difference between scientific psychology and phenomenology is that the former deals with the explanation of phenomena and the latter with the description of phenomena.

In other words, Phenomenology is not (scientific) psychology, both because, as has just been said, it is not reliant on empirical data, and also because it is descriptive rather than explanatory. Scientific psychology (like all sciences) does not only seek to establish the facts about its particular domain, but to give a causal explanation of how those facts come to be so: what causes what to happen. For instance, a psychological study of perception would have to try to explain how it comes about that we see things: light reflected from the object seen impinges on our retinas, which in turn causes certain responses in the optic nerve, and so on. But phenomenology is not concerned with such explanations, only with describing what is essential to our perception of such objects – what it means to us to 'perceive' such an object. The answer to such questions certainly has a bearing on empirical psychology (and on other relevant sciences), since it helps in trying to give a scientific explanation of, say, perception to have a clear idea of what it is exactly that one is trying to explain. And Merleau-Ponty thought, as we shall see, that in a sense a knowledge of empirical scientific findings could be relevant to phenomenology. A reading of the psychological literature might suggest, for example, that some of the explanations offered were unsatisfactory, not because they were refuted by empirical observations, but because they were based on confused philosophical assumptions. This would then give us a motive to try to undermine these assumptions, and so clarify the concepts used in the explanation, by means of phenomenological analysis. But this, of course, still makes phenomenology a distinct activity from any empirical science (Matthews 2010:9).

But Merleau-Ponty believes that Gestalt psychology is more in line with philosophy than experimental psychology. However, Gestalt theory was, in his opinion, a hybrid between psychology and philosophy or phenomenology. So, in *Child Psychology*, he writes about the relationship between philosophy and psychology:

There will be no difference between psychology and philosophy. Psychology is always an implicit, beginning philosophy and philosophy has never finished its contact with facts (Merleau-Ponty 2010: 9)

Elsewhere, he believes that philosophy and psychology are closely related. Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty argues, fails to see that the 'psychological atomism' which it criticizes is only one example of a view based on objectivist prejudices, and that acceptance of its account of perception is not merely the substitution of one psychological theory for another, but a rejection of the whole objectivist framework for thinking of human experience (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 59). But about the close relationship between psychology and phenomenology in the book *Phenomenology of Perception*, he says in a relatively long footnote:

Gestalt psychology has adopted a kind of reflection the theory of which is furnished by Husserl's phenomenology. Are we wrong to discern a whole philosophy implicit in the criticism of the 'constancy hypotheses? Although we are not here concerned with history, it may be pointed out that the affinity of Gestalt psychology and phenomenology is equally attested by external similarities. It is no chance occurrence that Köhler should propose, as the task of psychology, 'phenomenological description' (*Über unbemerkte Empfindungen und Urteilstäuschungen*, p. 70). Or that Koffka, a former disciple of Husserl, should trace the leading ideas of his psychology back to this influence, and try to show that the attack on psychologism leaves Gestalt psychology untouched (*Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, pp. 614–83), the Gestalt being, not a mental event of the type of an impression, but a whole which develops a law of internal coherence. Or that finally Husserl, in his last period, still further away from logicism, which he had moreover attacked along with psychologism, should have taken up the notion of 'configuration' and even of Gestalt (cf. *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, I, pp. 106, 109). What is true is that the reaction against naturalism and against causal thinking is, in Gestalt psychology, neither consequential, nor radical, as can be seen from the naïve realism of its theory of knowledge (cf. *La Structure du Comportement*, p. 180). Gestalt psychology cannot see that psychological atomism is only one particular case of a more general prejudice; the prejudice of determinate being or of the world, and that is why it forgets its most valid descriptions when it tries to provide itself with a theoretical framework. It is unexceptionable only in the middle regions of reflection. When it tries to reflect on its own analysis, it treats consciousness, despite its principles, as a collection of 'forms'. This is enough to justify Husserl's criticisms expressly directed against Gestalt psychology, but applicable to all psychology (*Nachwort zu meiner Ideen*, pp. 564 and ff.) at a time when he was still distinguishing fact and essence, when he had not yet arrived at the idea of historical constitution, and when, consequently, he was stressing the break, rather than the parallelism, between psychology and phenomenology. We have quoted elsewhere (*La Structure du*



Comportement, p. 280) a text of E. Fink restoring the balance. As for the fundamental question, which is that of the transcendental attitude in relation to the natural attitude, it will not be possible to settle it until we reach the last part of this work, where we shall examine the transcendental meaning of time (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 59).

## Conclusion

What is certain is that the tradition of phenomenology in Germany first began with the efforts of psychologists such as François Brentano, and this is especially evident in Gestalt psychology. But Husserl, who first turned to psychology, tried in his phenomenology to use the psychology of his time to explain objective and mental phenomena. This led psychology to enter the field of philosophy, especially phenomenology. But it was Merleau-Ponty who correctly integrated the two into his philosophy, although he made fundamental criticisms of both Husserl's phenomenology and Gestalt psychology in terms of experience and perception, and the question of mind and behavior. It can be said that psychology and phenomenology are so intertwined in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that they are like two sides of the same coin, and only at the level of conceptual and theoretical analysis is it possible to distinguish between the two. From his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, to his last unfinished book, *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty remained as faithful to psychology as he was to phenomenology, because the subject of his philosophy was the analysis of human lived experience and perception.

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