Phenomenology and
Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s
approach to consciousness
Heidegger's hammer

Ihde's chalk (Experimental Phenomenology)

Merleau-Ponty's gun

Kay's tennis racket
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

"All consciousness is perceptual...The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence."
Developing Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the being of *Dasein* as its bodily comportment and declares the body an essentially intentional part of the subject.

Since Merleau-Ponty wants to make the body itself intentional, it is no surprise that he intertwines time and the subject, (in)famously remarking that “we must understand time as the subject and the subject as time” (Merleau-Ponty 1945).
Merleau-Ponty’s Experience - Knowledge

- ...lived experience is prior to abstract reflection; it is pre-thematic.

- We live it, but don’t explicitly think about and calculate what we are doing.
Merleau-Ponty’s Experience - Knowledge

• When I am most typically engaged in a task, I do not reflect on the task, and this mode of ready-to-hand engagement is the primordial, experiential ground which makes reflection possible.

• Whenever we reflect intellectually on experience, we have to go back to the lived world of our experience prior to that reflection.
Unconscious – conscious

the unconscious:
• can be viewed as the pre-thematic, pre-objective, lived, concrete, latent experience of our engagement with the world (with others and alongside things) prior to reflection.

• It is what we live out but do not speak or think. When we thematize it, bring it to reflection, we make it thematic or “conscious.”
...our history becomes “sedimented” in our bodily gestures, contained there as latent and unreflected upon even though it is meaningful and lived out in the world.

To make these meanings thematic and subject to reflection is the process of, in a sense, making the “unconscious” “conscious”—or making the pre-thematic thematic.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty
French philosopher (1908-61)

Major influencer: *Edmund Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre*

Related videos:
Hubert Dreyfus on Embodiment (I-II):
1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99iTDUcBuRQ
2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhrGTrj4DOI&feature=response_watch
Merleau-Ponty’s Body-Mind

• The concept of body-subject as an alternative to Descartes’ ‘cogito’: critique of objective thought.

• The world is not merely an extension of our own minds.....
• Our perception ends in objects....

• **phenomenal thing** is not the unchanging object of the natural sciences, but a correlate of our body and its sensori-motor functions.

→ body cannot be viewed solely as an object, or material entity of the world.
Primacy of Perception

• Instead Husserl’s suggestion ‘all consciousness is consciousness of something’, he proposes: ‘all consciousness is perceptual consciousness’

• PERCEPTION: primordial openness and not as Locke claimed a product of sensation

• Embodied inheritance is more fundamental than our reflective capacities.
There is no lived distinction between the act of perceiving and the thing perceived.
Re-examines the interrelation between acts of thought ↔ intentional objects of thought

noesis

noema

Action of the body subject ↔ Perception of body subject
Body is not only an object but a perceptual openness to the world.

The primacy of perception signifies a primacy of experience, so to speak, insofar as perception becomes an active and constitutive dimension, an active dimension, in that it is a primordial openness to the life world.
Perceiving mind is an incarnated body, or to put the problem in another way, he (M-P.) enriches the concept of the body to allow it to both think and perceive. It is also for these reasons that we are best served by referring to the individual as not simply a body, but as a body-subject.

‘Inter-individual’: physically embodied

Consciousness: intentionality of the body
Body-Consciousness

- Our motility, that is, our capability of bodily movement, testifies that the body cannot be the mere servant of consciousness, since "in order that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it, our body must not belong to the realm of the in-itself"
PERCEPTION: involves the perceiving subject in a situation, rather than positioning them as a spectator who has somehow abstracted themselves from the situation

• There is hence an interconnection of action and perception

"every perceptual habituality is still a motor habit"
"Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself"

Perception is not grounded in either an objective or subjective component (for example, it is not objectively received before a subjective interpretation), but by a reciprocal openness which resides between such categories.

relationship between
perceiving subject ~ object perceived
Body Perception

• aspects of an object revealed to an individual are dependent upon their bodily position.

• "the presentation of objects in perspective cannot be understood except through the resistance of my body to all variation of perspective"
Perceiving our own Body

- we are not accorded quite the same privilege in viewing our own bodies, as we have in viewing other 'objects'.

- ‘the reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last minute’

- **Mirror**: is always mediated by body image
Body as means of Communication

body should be conceived of as our means of communication with the world, rather than merely as an object of the world which our transcendent mind orders to perform varying functions.
Body as means of Communication

- **Touching ~ Being touched**: ‘If I touch with my left hand my right hand while it touches an object, the right hand object is not the right hand touching: the first is an intertwining of bones, muscles and flesh bearing down on a point in space, the second traverses space as a rocket in order to discover the exterior object in its place’
There is then, a **gap** (*ecart* in French) between ourselves as touching and ourselves as touched,

- "I can identify the hand touched in the same one which will in a moment be touching... In this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body tries... to touch itself while being touched and initiate a kind of **reversible reflection**"
-this image of our left hand touching our right hand does more than merely represent the body's capacity to be both **perceiving object** and **subject of perception** in a **constant oscillation**

→ Our embodied subjectivity is never located purely in either our tangibility or in our touching, but in the **intertwining of these two aspects**, or where the two lines of a chiasm intersect with one another...
Merleau-Ponty: Chiasm/Flesh

- mind and body the perceptual faith and its articulation, subject and object, self and world, as well as many other related dualisms, are all associated **chiasmically**.

- he terms this interdependence of these various different notions the **flesh**.

- ‘because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things’
The legacy of **Merleau-Ponty’s work**

- He says that **scientific points of view**: "always both naive and at the same time dishonest" ...

- Critiqued Cognitivism (scientific and computational approaches of mind)
  
  → **Current applications:**
  
  - cognitive science's + phenomenology
  
  Scholars: Andy Clark, Alva Noë, Shaun Gallagher

  Neurophenomenology: 1991 of *The Embodied Mind* by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch
Readings


Books:


V. S. Ramachandran Phantoms in the Brain
Technology + Body-Mind + Embodiment + Experience