

MERLEAU-PONTY AND MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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I did the M.Phil. in Medical Anthropology at Oxford in 2003-2005, having been teaching in the Philosophy Faculty (my affiliation is with Mansfield College) for some twenty years at that stage. I still look back on those two years as among the most exciting and challenging periods of my life. One of the many attractions of the course was the fact that one of the great loves of my intellectual life, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, was appreciated in the Anthropology Institute – indeed rather more than in the Philosophy Faculty, at least at that time. Since then, I have been co-lecturing for the Anthropology of the Body and Gender paper for the M.Phil. with Elisabeth Hsu (latterly also with Caroline Potter and Karin Eli). The tenth anniversary of the Medical Anthropology course at Oxford is a great cause for celebration, as well as an occasion to reflect on the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and medical anthropology.

The body of this essay presents three quasi-historical vignettes, looking at Merleau-Ponty's relationship, first, with Claude Lévi-Strauss and Pierre Bourdieu; secondly, with Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault; and thirdly, with the Gestalt psychologists and the 'ecological' psychologist J. J. Gibson. Lévi-Strauss was a close friend of Merleau-Ponty's (*The Savage Mind* is dedicated to Merleau-Ponty's memory), Canguilhem a contemporary who attended the same college as Merleau-Ponty a couple of years earlier; Bourdieu and Foucault were students of both Merleau-Ponty and Canguilhem. Gibson was also a contemporary; he was influenced by the Gestalt psychologists and Merleau-Ponty,¹ and has been taken up by some social and cultural anthropologists.² The point of these quasi-historical vignettes is, first, to exhibit Merleau-Ponty's intellectual influence in the history of anthropology, including medical anthropology; and secondly, to contextualise his well-known reconceptualization of the human body within his wider philosophical project.

Morris, Merleau-Ponty and medical anthropology

Merleau-Ponty (1908-61), more than any other phenomenologist, critically engaged with the science of his day and reflected on the relationships between philosophy and science.³ He considered the relationship between philosophy (phenomenology in particular) and the ‘human sciences’ (including social anthropology and sociology) in some detail in essays (‘The philosopher and sociology’ and ‘From Mauss to Lévi-Strauss’, both in *Signs*) and in lectures (‘Human sciences and phenomenology’ in *Child Psychology and Pedagogy (CPP)*); a version of this is also included in *The Primacy of Perception (PrP)*). His best-known work, *The Phenomenology of Perception (PP)*, can be read as an extended phenomenological critique of one particular ‘human science’, namely psychology (in particular the psychology of perception). In later lectures (*Nature*) he critically engaged with biology. He argued, on the one hand, that phenomenology could learn from science, since it may reveal possibilities undreamed of by the philosopher. On the other hand, he argued that phenomenology could contribute to science: the philosopher ‘is not disqualified to reinterpret facts he has not observed himself, if these facts say something more and different than what the scientist has seen in them’ (*Signs* 101).

Merleau-Ponty, Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu

The structural anthropology practised by Lévi-Strauss has fallen out of favour; Bourdieu can no doubt be credited with contributing to its demise directly, but many of his criticisms, as well as the approach with which he replaces structuralism, clearly echo Merleau-Ponty.

Bourdieu's twin targets in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (later elaborated into *The Logic of Practice*) are 'subjectivism' and 'objectivism'; he aims to 'escape from the ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism in which the social sciences have so far allowed themselves to be trapped', and to see them as 'dialectically' related (Bourdieu 1977: 3-4; cf. Merleau-Ponty: 'the most proper task of anthropology' is the 'process of joining objective analysis to lived experience', *Signs* 119). Structuralism, with its inherent 'intellectualist tendencies', is one manifestation of objectivism (Bourdieu 1977: 19), and 'intellectualism' inevitably distorts the phenomena on which Bourdieu's own 'theory of practice' puts emphasis: 'practical knowledge' and 'practical mastery'. Merleau-Ponty, by comparison, speaks of 'bodily knowledge' or 'bodily comprehension', and in *PP* he identifies 'empiricism' and 'intellectualism' as two basic forms taken by 'objective thought' against which he inveighs throughout.⁴

Lévi-Strauss modelled his notion of structure in part on that which figured in Saussurean structural linguistics. According to Bourdieu, Lévi-Strauss was right to see an analogy between language and culture; in both we see the kinds of regularities in behaviour that lead some to want to talk about 'rules' or 'structures'. His problem, Bourdieu urges, is that he thereby inherited Saussure's problems in making sense of the 'language–speech' (*langue–parole*) relationship in his own understanding of the analogous 'culture–conduct' relationship (cf. Bourdieu 1977: 23). First, Saussure 'privileges the *structure* of signs, that is, the relations between them, at the expense of their *practical functions*' (Bourdieu 1977: 24). Secondly, although up to a point Saussure's or Lévi-Strauss' structures *model* many of the regularities in linguistic and social conduct, they make the mistake of slipping 'from the model of reality to the reality

of the model', imagining that the model exists objectively in unconscious mental structures or brain structures, and that this internal model is what explains the regularity in behaviour (ibid.: 29). Merleau-Ponty made parallel criticisms: one might dream, as Lévi-Strauss did, 'of a periodic table of [e.g.] kinship structures comparable to Mendeleev's periodic table of chemical elements' (*Signs* 118), as long as this table is not mistaken for objective reality.⁵ If we are to be justified in talking about such structures, 'there ought to be a sort of lived equivalent of that structure' (*Signs* 119).

Thus their critiques of structuralism have clear affinities; so too do their positive proposals. What is needed, Bourdieu urges, is a way of understanding how practices can be 'regulated without any express regulation' (Bourdieu 1977: 17). His notion of habitus is the central notion in this account. We may see habitus as Merleau-Ponty's 'habit-body' with a sociological twist, and with a scope that explicitly goes beyond (socially informed) motor skills and competences to include social and cultural skills and competences. The acquisition of a habit or skill, according to Merleau-Ponty, is 'a rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema' or 'body schema' (*PP* 142/164); Bourdieu helps himself to the term 'body schema' without acknowledgement or explanation (e.g., 1977: 15). Merleau-Ponty explains the body schema as a '*system of equivalents*': it is a 'system of equivalent gestures' (*PP* 315/367, cf. 141/163), in virtue of which I can (for example) shift with relative ease – and without having to *think it through* – from a left-hand-operated gear-shift to a right-hand-operated one (my left hand and my right hand are 'pragmatic equivalents' within the body schema). It is equally a 'system of equivalent gestures' that operates *between* people, so that when I am imitating someone facing me,

his right hand is immediately the equivalent of *my* left hand (*PP* 141/163). This is the foundation of Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'bodily reciprocity', elaborated below.

Habitus are 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu 1977: 72). Like the body-schema, they are 'structures'; what 'structures' these 'structures' (for both Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu) is repeated experience, i.e. practice; this experience becomes 'sedimented' in my body as 'bodily knowledge' or 'practical mastery'. Thus the habit-body embodies the past (*PP* 85/98); the habitus is 'history turned into nature' (Bourdieu 1977: 78). Bourdieu's emphasis is on the fact that this repeated experience is largely *common* to everyone within a particular group, class or tribe. Thus the habit-body becomes a 'tribe habitus' or a 'class habitus', with individual habituses being but 'structural variants' of this group habitus (*ibid.*: 86). This is how practices can be regulated 'without in any way being the product of obedience to rules' (*ibid.*: 72). These 'structured structures' are at the same time 'structuring structures' (cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* 101: 'the body is a "structuring" principle'): they give shape to the environment. Just as, for Merleau-Ponty, the 'physiognomies' of things (see section 3 below) are correlative to an individual's motor skills (so that when a proficient typist is sat before a typewriter, a motor space opens up beneath the hands, and the keys 'solicit' the hands to move in particular ways), so too a group habitus will 'give a social environment its *physiognomy*, with its "closed doors", "dead ends" and limited "prospects"' (Bourdieu 1977: 86).

Bourdieu provides a compelling way of supplementing Merleau-Ponty's account of the habit-body in its social and cultural dimensions. At the same time, Merleau-Ponty has something to teach Bourdieu (see also Ostrow 1990, Weiss 2008). Despite

Bourdieu's explicit statements that it is 'incorporated in the form of bodily schemes' (Bourdieu 1977: 15), it can seem somehow *disembodied*. Perhaps we can see why. Bourdieu has not theorized the notion of 'body schema' and in particular offers no equivalent of Merleau-Ponty's notion of *bodily reciprocity*,⁶ 'the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my intentions and gestures discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his' (*PP* 185/215). Merleau-Ponty has argued that bodily reciprocity is the only way to make sense of the *capacity for imitation* (*PrP* 116, *CPP* 21). Thus Bourdieu leaves himself unable to account for the imitation – of others speaking a particular language, articulating that language in particular ways, using implements to eat, deploying them in particular ways – which is surely a prerequisite of the acquisition of habitus.

Merleau-Ponty, Canguilhem and Foucault

Comparisons between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault made by medical anthropologists tend to be framed in the context of 'the three bodies' (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conception of the body is viewed as 'the individual body', whereas Foucault's 'docile body' is considered part of 'the body politic' (Foucault 1979). One can grant that Merleau-Ponty did not have a developed conception of the body as a locus for the exercise of power; one may also object that the docile body, like Bourdieu's habitus, seems curiously disembodied. Thus we may argue (as does, e.g., Crossley 1996) that Merleau-Ponty and Foucault are mutually supportive, rather as are Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu (as I urged in the previous section): for both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, bodies both act and are acted upon, even if Merleau-Ponty tends to

emphasise the former and Foucault the latter. I want to develop this argument here by considering the notion of a *norm*. Foucault's concept of 'normalization' is well-known and influential. I will argue, first, that there is a seldom thematized notion of normativity at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body-schema (see section 1), a notion that echoes Canguilhem's;⁷ and secondly, that Foucauldian normalization implicitly relies on this bodily normativity.

Canguilhem was both a medic and a philosopher of science (especially of biology), and his fundamental claim was that there was a *value*, namely *life*, at the heart of biology, so that biology could not be reduced to the natural sciences. Within this general framework, he made a distinction between different types of norms: social, laboratory, clinical and vital. This can be clarified by an example to which all types of norms may be argued to apply: obesity. There are, to be sure, social norms governing obesity; e.g., in 21st-century Britain being obese is socially frowned upon, and it is easy to tell a Foucauldian 'normalizing' story about the 'war against obesity'. Yet surely this 'war' is *more* than an instance of Foucauldian normalization (at the least this demonstrates that not *all* norms are Foucauldian norms). There are 'laboratory norms' grounded in the body mass index (BMI) which mark a BMI of over 40 as 'abnormal', i.e., 'morbidly obese'. These laboratory norms are grounded in 'clinical norms': a BMI of over 40 indexes a range of important health issues, including type-II diabetes and heart disease. However, clinical norms only count as *norms* – with 'normative force' – by reference to 'vital norms'. 'A BMI of over 40' is just a number; it is only *bad* because an individual with such a BMI usually lives a constricted life, that is, in terms of the vital

norms in respect of which '*pathology is a lived reality*', a reality in which 'the organism can no longer react creatively to new elements of its surroundings' (Mol 1998: 275).⁸

Merleau-Ponty constantly makes use of 'abnormal' cases in *PP* (e.g., amputees with phantom limbs, or the brain-injured war veteran Schneider) for his own philosophical purposes. These may be polemical (Schneider perceives in the manner that objective thought would have us believe we all do, namely by working out what he is 'seeing' through a series of cues and hypotheses, but his very abnormality refutes them), to illuminate the 'normal' by way of contrast (we, unlike Schneider, perceive the world 'physiognomically'; see section 3 below), or to illuminate the normal directly (the amputee reveals the 'habit-body' which we all possess, but in his case it shows up more clearly because it has got out of kilter with 'the body at this moment', *PP* 82/95). I submit that we should understand the norms underpinning Merleau-Ponty's distinction between normality and abnormality as at least *akin* to Canguilhem's 'vital norms'. Schneider's pathology and that of the amputee with a phantom limb are 'lived realities' in which their ability to 'react creatively to new elements of their surroundings' is at least impaired.

These vital norms are inherent in the very notion of the body-schema. We characterized the body-schema earlier as a 'system of equivalent gestures'; we need to add that these 'gestures' are equivalent in terms of a 'comprehensive bodily *purpose*' (*PP* 99/113, italics original). In the earlier example, the gestures of shifting the gears with the right or the left hand are 'equivalent' in respect of the purpose of driving the car, that is (more generally), of maintaining the body's 'hold' on the world. The body *aims* at the 'best hold' on the world it can have (*PP* 266/311), or at being 'geared onto the world':

Morris, Merleau-Ponty and medical anthropology

‘my body is geared onto the world when ... my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world’ (*PP* 250/292). When vital norms are compromised, this comprehensive bodily purpose is undermined.

And, finally, the body’s ‘vital norms’ are a *prerequisite* for Foucault’s normalizing process of getting a grip on the body: disciplinary techniques ‘imposed’ on the body rely upon the body schema since the acquisition of a habit or motor skill is ‘a rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema’ (*PP* 142/164). This is a precise way in which Merleau-Ponty can supplement Foucault.

Merleau-Ponty, the Gestalt psychologists and Gibson

I contend that Gibson has only one advantage over Merleau-Ponty: his writing is more accessible. Accessibility is, to be sure, a good thing, but Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of perception, the perceived world and the role of the body in perception goes far deeper than Gibson’s. The key terms for Gibsonians are ‘ecological perception’ (the term ‘ecological’ stressing, as of course Merleau-Ponty does, the interrelatedness of perceiver and environment), ‘direct perception’ (by contrast with the notion – against which much of the Introduction to *PP* is devoted to arguing – that perception is sensation embellished by learning and inference), and the ‘co-perception of self and environment’ (see below). Merleau-Ponty offers us all this and more.

PP is, in a sense, the record of Merleau-Ponty’s critical engagement with the Gestalt psychologists.⁹ These psychologists developed their theories during roughly the same period that Husserl was developing phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty credits Gestalt psychology with ‘its overcoming of the classical alternatives between objective

psychology and introspective psychology' (*SB* 183). Most famous for their researches on perception (and visual perception in particular) – and correctly in Merleau-Ponty's view – they focused our attention on a number of features of the perceived world for which empiricism has great difficulty accounting (he refers to them as 'the very psychologists who described the world as I did', *PrP* 23). At the same time, he was highly critical of their continued adherence to 'naturalism': i.e., the notion that 'the real world is the physical world as science conceives it' (*PrP* 23). (Gibson simply sidesteps naturalism by asserting that 'what an object is' is to be defined 'in terms of ecological physics instead of physical physics', adding that 'it therefore possesses meaning and value to begin with', 1979: 139.) As part of their naturalism, the Gestalt psychologists saw the human body as an *object*. This prevented them from acknowledging the body's active role in the perception of *Gestalten*, and thus disabled them from the possibility of *accounting* for their own most fundamental discoveries about perception.

The term *Gestalt*, though difficult to translate, indicates the idea that the objects of perception are '*segregated wholes*' or 'unities', and what phenomenologists call 'the object-horizon structure' is the correlate of this unity. Every perceived object has 'outer horizons' (it stands out as a 'figure' against a 'background') as well as 'inner horizons' (although only one side of an object is genuinely 'seen', '[t]he hidden side is present in its own way, *PrP* 14) and 'temporal horizons' (the object's immediate past and immediate future). Moreover, objects are 'intersensory unities', and their qualities cannot be separated from one another: 'this red would literally not be the same if it were not the "woolly red" of a carpet' (*PP* 4-5/5).

Additionally, perception, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, is ‘physiognomic’ (*PP* 132/152-3), so that ‘the object “speaks” and is significant’ (*PP* 131/151). This term denotes an *immediate practical recognisability*: immediate, in that we *just recognise*, say, a fountain pen, without having to *work out* (intellectually) what the thing is; and ‘practical’ both in the sense of being ‘bodily’ rather than ‘intellectual’, and in the sense that the object, in virtue of this physiognomy, ‘speaks to’ our practical capabilities, our motor habits. The Gestalt psychologists further distinguish between ‘demand characters’ (in Lewin’s terms, *Aufforderungscharakter*) and ‘functional characters’. ‘The demand characters will, as a rule, come and go with the need. The functional characters will, as a rule, be permanent’ (Koffka 1935: 392). Thus a letter-box makes demands on us (or ‘appeals to’, ‘attracts’, ‘repels’ or ‘solicits’ us, etc.) only when we want to post a letter, but it remains as something to-post-letters-in (and not merely a blue or yellow or red box) even when we aren’t in the letter-posting business. Aficionados of Gibson may be struck by the resemblance between Lewin’s term *Aufforderungscharakter* (demand character) and his own term ‘affordance’. Gibson himself notes that, unlike demand characters, affordances are ‘invariant’, i.e., they do not change from moment to moment with the needs of the observer (1979: 138-9). However, as he does not *mention* functional characters, he does not recognize that this very feature makes affordances their equivalent.

The body, as reconceived by Merleau-Ponty, plays a key role in the perception of *Gestalten* and physiognomies. Merleau-Ponty argues, first, that ‘perception and experience of one’s own body are mutually implied’ (*PP* 130 n.1/150 n.66): the body itself keeps track of its own movements – this is what guarantees the *unity* of the object

as one moves around it (exploring its ‘inner horizons’) – and of the movements of its organs, e.g., the eyes, this being what enables the body to *differentiate* between its own movements and movements of objects. (Again, aficionados of Gibson will recognize this in his idea of the ‘co-perception of self and environment’.) Secondly, Merleau-Ponty argues that ‘one’s own body is the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure’ (PP 101/115): the bookshelf is not just the background to the lamp, but the background to the lamp *from here*; and the term ‘here’ refers to the *body* as what ‘lays down’ ‘the first co-ordinates’ (PP 100/115). Thirdly, he argues that it is the body schema as ‘a ready-made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another’ that enables the perception of the *intersensory* object: the different senses – sight, touch, hearing and so on – ‘translate each other without any need of an interpreter’ (PP 235/273). Fourthly, the ‘physiognomies’ of objects ‘appeal to’ or ‘solicit’ the body in virtue of its possession of motor habits or skills; the keys on the keyboard solicit my actions *because* my body knows how to type. Finally, once again, we need to recognize that the body schema is purposive: even at the basic level of focusing, the two eyes converge or diverge because the *body* is focusing the eyes on the near or distant object, and focusing is a purposive activity which has the aim of *seeing the thing properly* (PP 232/289). Here, once again, the body is aiming for the ‘best hold’ on the world, and ‘my body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible’ (PP 250/292).

Some tentative conclusions

What I have tried to bring out here is, first, that Merleau-Ponty has had a tangible intellectual influence on the histories of anthropology and medical anthropology. I have used this to urge that, on the one hand, Bourdieu and Foucault have something to teach Merleau-Ponty – the one by allowing us to see how the habit-body, grounded in the body-schema, can be social, the other in confronting Merleau-Ponty with the effects of power on the body (I also suggested that the *only* thing Merleau-Ponty could learn from Gibson was accessibility). On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty, by theorising the body schema and especially his notion of bodily reciprocity, is able to account for habitus in a way that Bourdieu cannot. Similarly, Foucault's 'docile body' could not be made docile were it not for its ability to acquire habits, which requires us to recognise that the body schema has Canguilhem's 'vital norms' at its heart.

Secondly, I have aimed to contextualize Merleau-Ponty's reconceptualization of the human body within his wider philosophical project of critical engagement with the sciences, of critiquing widespread conceptions of perception and the perceived world, and of mediating *between* 'objective thought' and 'subjective thought'. Merleau-Ponty tends to figure in medical anthropology mainly in the context of the anthropology of the body, where he stands for a non-Cartesian way of conceiving the human body. Sometimes this conception of the body is roped into the service of a critique of biomedicine, although sometimes only by way of gesturing at the fact that the body is both a subject and an object. Occasionally his conception of the body is seen as 'the existential ground of culture', in Csordas' well-known phrase (it even occurs in the subtitle of Csordas 1994). It may be that he has things to offer medical anthropology

beyond the anthropology of the body, and I hope that this essay will be suggestive of these.

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Morris, Merleau-Ponty and medical anthropology

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NOTES

¹ We owe our awareness of the direct influence of Merleau-Ponty on Gibson principally to Dreyfus (2007: 69 n.1); it is however evident in any case. Note that all italics within quotations are original unless otherwise specified.

² Ingold (e.g., 2000) is an obvious case; while he sees Gibson as his greatest influence (ibid.: 2), he also engages with Merleau-Ponty. He sees in both the possibility of bridging the gap between biological and cultural anthropology, which has sometimes appeared as a version of the body/mind dichotomy.

³ We should not get too hung up about his use of the term ‘science’. What he calls the ‘human sciences’ are sciences simply in virtue of doing empirical work, be it in the laboratory or in the field.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty was ‘faced with the task of taming an excessively subjectivist theory with a knowledge of the opacity and density of the world of structures. Contemporary social theorists are faced with the task of overcoming an excessively objectivist understanding of structures with the knowledge that structures do not simply constrain agents, they also allow agents to act in ways which frequently lead to the transformation of the structures themselves’ (Schmidt 1985: 166-7).

⁵ “‘Kinship systems”, like “phonemic systems”, are built up by the mind on the level of unconscious thought’. From Lévi-Strauss’ *Structural Anthropology*, quoted by Bourdieu (1977: 28). Lévi-Strauss drew not only on structural linguistics and Gestalt psychology but also on cybernetics, which was being developed in the 1940s. Cybernetics in a general way stressed the interrelation between the elements in a system, and it underlay the development of computers. The notion that the workings of the brain could be modelled on those of computers was an early application of cybernetics.

⁶ Bourdieu actually *dismisses* the idea that understanding another’s actions involves a “reactivation” of the “lived intention” of the agent who performs them’ (Bourdieu 1977: 80), a view which could sound like Merleau-Ponty’s notion, but his target here is evidently *not* Merleau-Ponty.

⁷ Canguilhem’s best-known work (*On the Normal and the Pathological*) was not published until 1943, just before *PP*; Merleau-Ponty does not refer to him in *PP*, although he makes a couple of references to him in *Nature*. It is most likely that both were responding, in parallel ways, to the contemporary mechanism/vitalism debate. Foucault himself drew a sharp line between the two phenomenological traditions, placing Canguilhem on one side and Merleau-Ponty on the other, though subsequently taking no interest in the latter (in his introduction to Canguilhem’s *On The Normal and the Pathological*, 1978: ix-x). This does Merleau-Ponty an injustice, as many have pointed out (see, e.g., the introduction to Carmen and Hansen eds., 2005: 20), but it is also responsible for Merleau-Ponty being largely eclipsed by Foucault.

⁸ As Mol brings out here, the relationships in practice between clinical and laboratory norms and between vital and social norms are far more polyvalent than this might suggest.

⁹ He had evidently read Guillaume’s books on Gestalt psychology, which brought this psychology to the attention of French intellectuals, even prior to hearing Aron Gurwitsch’s lectures on Gestalt psychology and phenomenology in the 1930s. His ‘two proposals’ on the nature of perception (in *TD*) date back to 1933 and draw heavily on Gestalt psychology.