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Introduction: The Hermeneutics of Ambiguity



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The chapters in the first part of this collection provide an explication of Merleau-Ponty's hermeneutics—an oblique theory of interpretation which shows how the perceptual world is “laid-out” by the embodied interpreter. This hermeneutics is “oblique” in two senses. First, Merleau-Ponty did not set out to write an explicit hermeneutical theory. His theory of interpretation is thus obliquely stated in what Gary Madison calls a “non-theory” of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, the primacy of perception is rooted in its interpretational nature. The starting point for his analysis is the hermeneutical fact that through perception we always find ourselves already immersed in meaning. Merleau-Ponty's hermeneutics is oblique in a second and more important sense: it veers off from the horizontal developmental line of the hermeneutical tradition. In this tradition the primary focus has been on textual interpretation where interpretation has been modeled on an internal mental reading of an external autonomous text. This tradition, as much as any epistemological one, has been a mix of the intellectualism and empiricism which Merleau-Ponty constantly criticized. Influenced by Husserl's insight that there is an interpretational schema operative in all consciousness, and following Heidegger's existentializing of the hermeneutical circle, Merleau-Ponty proposed a hermeneutical theory that identifies the embodied subject as the seat of interpretation.

For Merleau-Ponty, interpretation is no longer an erudite procedure located in an interior space called “the mind.” Meaning “is not first of all a meaning for the understanding, but a structure accessible to inspection by the body” (PhP 320). Merleau-Ponty detoured

from the hermeneutical tradition by showing that the human body acts as both an interpretational constraint and an enabling condition. Through the performance of my body "I am at grips with [*en prise sur*] a world" (PhP 303/349). The meaning of the world is not constituted on the model of a textual reading; rather, anterior to any intellectual process, the body schema both encodes and decodes the world as a meaningful structure. We find ourselves always already surrounded by meaning, already in-the-truth of the world since "being-in-truth is not distinct from being-in-the-world" (PhP 395/452).

That Merleau-Ponty's oblique hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of ambiguity may be seen by focusing on the concept of perspective. Ever since the eighteenth century when Chladenius introduced the notion of perspective (*Sehe-Punkt*) into hermeneutical considerations, a notion he rightly associated with the finite embodied nature of the interpreter, the question of how to adjudicate between perspectives in order to arrive at the objective truth of the situation has been a central hermeneutical issue.¹ For both Chladenius and the Romantics, differences of perspectives were resolved by employing logical and methodological procedures which guaranteed that truth, in the sense of *adequatio intellectus et rei* would be found either in the mind (intellectualism) or in the objective thing (empiricism). For Merleau-Ponty, however, perspectives never completely yield to methodological procedures and cannot be reduced by logical adjudication. He proposes a hermeneutics in which truth is not found, but *brought into being* (PhP xx). Yet the advent or realization of truth is never unambiguous; it is always incomplete and imperfect. How this truth is brought into being, "the origin of truth," is an important question addressed by Merleau-Ponty's hermeneutics of ambiguity. In regard to the question of the adjudication of perspectives, Merleau-Ponty proposed two answers, the terms of which—language and temporality—constitute central themes of his philosophy.

Gail Weiss, in her analysis of Merleau-Ponty's concept of perspective, explains why different perspectives can only be imperfectly adjudicated. Context and perspective are, Weiss explains, "interdependent, structural features of our experience" (below, p. 14). We find ourselves always already within a perspective which is defined and constrained by a context which itself is constituted by temporally changing perspectives. In this sense, the relation between perspective and context is reciprocal or dialectically circular. We have no perspective which is not constrained by a context; we have no context which is not defined by past and projected perspectives. Our previous perspectives constitute a contextual background for our present interpre-

tations and the perspectives that we are capable of taking with respect to our current situation. Insofar as we also “reckon with the possible,” our expectations and projections help to define our present context.

For Merleau-Ponty, the perspectival nature of perception is only partially explained in the *Gestalt* terms of figure-ground. Every perceived object is perceived within a spatial horizon, on a background from which it is distinguished. If *perspective* is capable of being defined in these terms, Weiss warns against identifying the *context* with spatial background or horizon. She proposes a significant correction to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of context by suggesting that contexts have an essentially temporal rather than spatial nature. They operate in a diachronic manner which determines the meaning of the perceptual, synchronic background. Backgrounds, which are essential parts of any perspective, are “constituted out of a whole network of past experiences and future expectations which, on principle, are not part of the sensory field at any given moment” (below, p. 16). In this sense, contexts, which help to define perspectives, are not directly tied to the spatial model of figure-ground but more comprehensively reflect hermeneutical and social dimensions.

The explication of a context involves more than describing the lived space of perception; it requires an interpretation of why we perceive what we perceive. Diachronic contexts constantly condition the meaning of perspectival figures and grounds. By this contextual conditioning, perspectives merge into the ‘perceptual field.’ But this conditioning is not a one-way process. If we ask how contexts come to be shaped, we must answer that contexts are shaped out of our past perspectives. Contexts, which lend their hermeneutical stability to constantly changing perspectives, and which thus help tie together a meaningful world, are at bottom constituted out of the flux of perspectives. Moreover, one can understand a context only from within a particular perspective so that the possibility of gaining reflective, methodological control over those contexts which condition our interpretations and communications remains always imperfect and incomplete. We find ourselves always within the hermeneutical circle in which contexts condition perspectives and perspectives condition contexts. Every interpretation, every perceptual experience operates within this circular structure.

The insistence on hermeneutical ambiguity, which makes reflection always imperfect and incomplete, motivated Paul Ricoeur’s critical questioning of Merleau-Ponty. “One can only wonder . . . how the moment of reflection on the unreflected, how the devotion to univer-

sality and truth, and finally how the philosophical act itself are possible if man is so completely identified with his insertion into his field of perception, action, and life."² Thomas Busch, in his chapter, takes Ricoeur's question as his starting point. Busch pursues the theme of perspective as perceptual finitude, and inquires into the possibility of escaping from the limitations of perspective. Following Ricoeur's suggestion, he explores the idea that *language* comes to the aid of embodied perception by allowing for a transgression of our own perspective by others. Merleau-Ponty himself accounts for the possibility of transgressing single perspectives through linguistic expression which is not, however, a purely intellectualistic accomplishment.³ Expression, as Busch explains, "is founded on perception in the sense of taking up, sublimating, transfiguring, perceptual wholes. In the process the perceived world becomes imbued with language, plurality, ambiguity" (below, p. 28).

Busch proposes to locate the possibility of transgression in the conversational aspect of language. By focusing on conversation, Busch moves Merleau-Ponty in the direction of Gadamer. In contrast to Ricoeur's early emphasis on the semiotic aspect of language—treating language in terms of the factuality of signs and thereby giving priority to the textual paradigm rather than to speech—Gadamer identifies conversation as the essence of language and holds that in its conversational aspect language always goes beyond subjective perspectives. Thus, Gadamer claims that "to be in a conversation . . . means to be beyond oneself, to think with the other and to come back to oneself as if to another."⁴ Precisely in this dialogue with others Busch locates the possibility of the transgression of one's own perspective. Since the other's perspective exceeds my perspective, dialogue establishes both the limitation of perspective and the possibility of a lateral universality. If Merleau-Ponty recognized that one's perspectives do not form a closed system (PhP 338), and that others "bring out the limits of our factual vision" (VI 143), still, he did not fail to acknowledge that language itself never escapes perspectivity. In contrast to the claims of Chladenius, we never resolve in a completely unambiguous way the hermeneutical *aporia* concerning the possibility of truth.

Michael Yeo, helps us to recognize the important ethical significance of just this *aporia*. Because a necessary prerequisite for a moral life is the recognition of others through their transgressions of our own perspectives Yeo calls our attention to the danger of not actualizing the hermeneutical possibilities of transgression. For Yeo, as for Busch, it is in relation to the question of language that we find the

more promising possibilities of transgression. As Merleau-Ponty indicated “the interlocutor, to the degree that he understands, goes beyond what he already knows. The meanings involved in such a language are open.”⁵ In conversation (*la parole parlante*) our own perspectives get transgressed, and we transcend ourselves towards others. Conversation not only brings truth into being, but carries us beyond ourselves. Language, in its conversational aspects “is like a machine for transporting the ‘I’ into the other person’s perspective” (PW 19).

Merleau-Ponty, in perhaps his most traditional of hermeneutical moments, offered the case of reading as a paradigm of this transgression. I not only carry something of my own to the text, but my encounter with the other through the text carries me beyond myself. There is a dialectic of assimilation and accommodation, of appropriation and transcendence (see PW 142). As Yeo puts it, “I can encounter the text only by assimilating its language to my ends, so to speak, but by so doing (and only by so doing) I open myself to experience something in the text that goes beyond what I put into it” (below, p. 47). The transcendence involved here is one which transforms the reader—one way or another—but without guarantees, since, as Yeo puts it, “it is not guaranteed that we will be respectful of otherness, and this contingency is the proper concern of ethics” (below, p. 49). If there is an ethical danger involved in failing to transcend our perspectives by opening ourselves to others, there is also a risk, as well as a responsibility involved in the attempt to do so.

Our experience with language in conversation constitutes the hermeneutical locus for the possibility of truth, but not a complete or absolutely objective truth. Gary Madison has noted that the “foundation of truth or rationality is this ‘progressive experience,’ the ‘experience of agreement with myself and others.’”⁶ But as Merleau-Ponty rightly remarked, this agreement is “hard to reach” (SNS 95). Language never guarantees a convergence to “the thing itself,” a complete coincidence of different perspectives, or a necessary concordance with others. It involves us in uncertainty, non-coincidence, and the possibility of misunderstanding (see, e.g., VI 125; T 22). Merleau-Ponty here moved toward the postmodern emphasis on “wild language” which “has us” and which speaks itself. Here, if truth is possible, it is not a question of assimilating language to my own ends; “it is not we who speak, it is truth that speaks itself at the depths of speech” (VI 185). In this case, which is one of decentered subjectivity, our relations with others are always ambiguous. Speech and conversation, even if they do allow appropriate transgressions, do not neces-

sarily “bring about that concordance between me and myself, and between myself and others . . .” (PhP 392).

If conversation and the ethical encounter with others allow us to move beyond our own narrow perspective toward a lateral universality, Merleau-Ponty still insisted that this is never a perfect universality, a complete adjudication or unambiguous truth; one does not find guarantees in conversation, since, as Gadamer would contend, we are never in complete control of conversation. Yet for Merleau-Ponty there is another possibility with respect to transcending isolated perspectives. A perspective is always involved in a “transitional synthesis” (PhP 329). One perspective “merges into” another. Here the focus is on temporality rather than language. My finitude is both what binds me to perspectives (as my past limits my present) and what frees me from my perspectives since from my present I can get a new perspective on my old ones—“my past on the horizon of my present” (PhP 338).

The temporality of experience, as Edmund Husserl has shown, makes reflection possible. Only in so far as we retain our past, can we review it, see it again from a new perspective, an ever-changing perspective, and thereby recognize the constraints that had been operative in those past perspectives. But even here Merleau-Ponty found no certainty, at least not the type of certainty that either Descartes or Husserl found in their own experience. Glen Mazis, in his essay on temporality and reversibility, throws light on this other hermeneutical possibility of transcending perspectives. By the concept of reversibility Merleau-Ponty explicates what Mazis calls “the thickness of a temporality in which significant experiences, in their open indeterminacy, are fated to return to themselves in never ending unfolding and enfolded” (below, p. 55). The working out of meaning is “always retrograde as well as progressive” (below, p. 55). It is not simply that our past experiences condition our present perceptions and interpretations, but our present situations lead to reflective reinterpretations of our past perspectives.

The conservative structure of continuity which one finds in Husserl’s concept of retentive consciousness is displaced in moments when the production of meaning transforms everything which had gone before. In such interpretational moments the past and present are interwoven, “*Ineinander*, each enveloping-enveloped” (VI 268). The hermeneutical situation is composed of “one fabric” within a plurality of differentiations (see VI 231). Insofar as time is an interweave of pasts and missing presents (“the new present is itself transcended”) rather than one thread strung out in a straight line, one never com-

pletely escapes a perspective. As Mazis suggests, one simply improves on it.

The fact that our past experience is both a constraining and an enabling principle for our present experience, *and* that our past is itself both constrained and enabled by our present, means that it is impossible to ever *absolutely* transcend a perspective, although we can always *ambiguously* do so. The text which Mazis cites from Joyce's *Ulysses* testifies to the ethical import of this situation. Michael Yeo reminds us of the danger involved if we fail to transcend our perspectives by opening ourselves to others; Joyce's text explicates the risk, as well as the responsibility involved in the attempt to do so.

Questions concerning language, reflection, and the possibility of achieving an objective viewpoint are central ones in the field of hermeneutics. In every instance the perspectives that call for hermeneutical reflection are biased by prejudgments, authority-structures, and distorted communication practices. The possibility of escaping such perspectives in order to obtain an objective consensus forms a central issue in one of the more famous of contemporary debates in hermeneutical theory: the Habermas-Gadamer debate which began in the late 60s and is still carried on in various commentaries. In the context of this debate I set out, in the essay "Language and Imperfect Consensus," to appropriate Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on language in order to show that whatever consensus might be found through conversation or critical communicative practice, it will always remain an imperfect consensus, short of perfect objectivity.

Merleau-Ponty's hermeneutics mediates between Gadamer and Habermas to the extent that he embraced a position which is *first*, akin to the hermeneutics of Gadamer, yet with more emphasis placed on the operations of power- and authority-structures; and *second*, akin to Habermas' concept of communicative rationality, but with more emphasis on the imperfection of any real consensus. With respect to language, Merleau-Ponty provided an account which would grant greater room for Gadamer's theory of the speculative nature of language but would not deny Habermas' project for communicative praxis. In my essay, however, I place Merleau-Ponty closer to Gadamer's side of the debate. This contrasts with Gary Madison's suggestion that rationality for Merleau-Ponty consists in a reasonableness which is "an attempt to reach uncoerced agreement with others by means of unrestricted dialogue," i.e., a rationality that comes close to Habermas' concept of communicative rationality.⁷ My contention is that for Merleau-Ponty dialogue can never be completely unrestricted, and therefore, consensus can never be perfect. Merleau-Ponty

helps to show that critique is possible, but only from within the ambiguous framework of language and the inescapable process of tradition. Since there is no absolute or external reflection, critique must operate within the hermeneutical bounds of interpretive understanding.

The imperfection of critique and the impossibility of perfect consensus are tied to the ambiguity of historical existence. We find ourselves already taken up into language, caught up in historical circumstances which are not completely of our own making. In attempting to get our bearings we cannot disengage ourselves from the larger social and linguistic processes in order to get an objective, neutral perspective. Nor can we completely adjudicate all perspectives in perfect consensus. Thus, our praxis cannot aim at a revolution which would result in absolute emancipation, or definitive solutions to human problems; rather, it must be a praxis of "unremitting *virtu*," because the ambiguity is unremitting.

If my essay measures Merleau-Ponty's contributions to critical hermeneutics, Gary Madison proposes, in the final essay of Part I, to move Merleau-Ponty into the context of the radical hermeneutics of postmodernity. Madison poses a surprising question in "Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?" He answers it in an even more surprising way: No—despite his extensive dealings with the issue of perception. In Madison's view, Merleau-Ponty rejected the traditional concept of perception which, for both intellectualism and empiricism is a metaphysical construct—either a subjective activity or an objective natural event. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, perception is a process of interpretation, a hermeneutical process which places the perceiver in the "phenomenal field" always in an indeterminate way. If the nature of theory is always to construct a determinate essence, then a theory of perception is, for Merleau-Ponty, impossible since perception itself is ambiguous or indeterminate.

Madison shows how Merleau-Ponty's insights into perception, interpretation, and language lead him in the direction of what was to become post-structuralism. In Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, for example, the term 'flesh' signifies diacriticality or differentiation and approximates Derrida's non-concept of *differance*. Madison cites Merleau-Ponty at this point of approximation: " 'The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance'. It is indeed nothing factual but is, rather, 'the possibility and exigency for the fact . . . what makes the fact be a fact' (VI 140). Like Derrida's *differance*, the flesh is a kind of primordial productivity. The 'origin' of both the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the sentient, 'the formative medium of the

object and the subject' (VI 147)" (below, p. 96). The non-concept of flesh represents a radicalizing of Merleau-Ponty's notion of ambiguity and approaches Derrida's radical notion of play.

For Madison, Merleau-Ponty's postmodernism has a decided advantage over other, more recent versions. Merleau-Ponty never abandoned philosophy or humanism. "Merleau-Ponty remained a philosopher precisely because he did not believe in the 'death of man,' i.e., the human *subject*" (below, p. 98).

Perhaps we could express this advantage in a different way. Merleau-Ponty's message for postmodernism is that postmodern thought always must find its limits in the hermeneutical situation. Merleau-Ponty would challenge those postmodern thinkers—including Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard—who quite frequently attempt to dissociate themselves from hermeneutics.⁸ He would remind us that postmodernism can not afford to leave hermeneutics behind—even if that were possible. It cannot dissociate itself from hermeneutics precisely because even postmodern understanding is a human enterprise which is hermeneutically situated. As we see in these essays, human experience, insofar as it is perceptual, linguistic, and temporal is contextual and perspectively limited, yet capable of both transcendence towards others and imperfect reflection on itself. Its hermeneutical situation is always ambiguous, regardless of whether one tries to repress the ambiguity, as in traditional theory, or radicalize the ambiguity, as in postmodern theory. For Merleau-Ponty, all thinking, whether traditional or postmodern, finds its limits in a hermeneutics of ambiguity, a hermeneutics which Merleau-Ponty started to work out between the extremes of traditional and radical hermeneutics.

Notes

1. See Johann Martin Chladenius, *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung Vernünftiger Reden und Schriften* (Leipzig: 1742), Ch. 8.

2. Paul Ricoeur, "Existential Phenomenology," in *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, trans. Edward Ballard and Lester Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 209.

3. In a similar context Dennis O'Connor has noted that with respect to transcending an embodied perspective the human body itself has a role to play. He suggests that by placing me "outside of myself," my body exposes me to interpretations by others, interpretations that I must come to terms

with in my own self-understanding. ("Addressing the Flesh: Teaching Carnal Subjects," paper read at the 14th International Conference of the Merleau-Ponty Circle, Canisius College, 22 September 1989).

4. Gadamer, "Destruction and Deconstruction," in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, eds. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 110; also see pp. 106, 115–117. Gadamer also writes: "The mere presence of the other before whom we stand helps us to break up our own bias and narrowness, even before he opens his mouth to make a reply" (p. 26).

5. Merleau-Ponty, "The Experience of Others," trans. Hugh Silverman and Fred Evans, *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* 18 (1982–83), p. 57.

6. Gary Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 71.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

8. See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 46. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 12, 109–110, 138–139, 202. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiii.