

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961)

You can take the girl out of Nottingham...

But you can't take Nottingham out of the girl. This kind of statement is called a chiasm or chiasmus, from the Greek *chi* written as a cross, and the word literally means crossing / intertwined – e.g. first we make our habits then our habits make us (John Dryden). Merleau-Ponty liked the idea of the chiasm to express the interconnection of our consciousness and the world we inhabit.

Man is in the world and only in the world does he know himself.

Merleau-Ponty was close friends with Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus and the group of self-styled existentialists sparking off each other in Paris from the early 1930s onwards. Their thinking and their writings were initially influenced by late Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology and a rejection of Cartesian mind-body dualism.

"I am a psychological and historical structure. Along with existence, I received a way of existing..."

Building on Sartre's assertion of freedom and being in existentialism – 'existence precedes essence' – Merleau-Ponty wanted to explore our freedom to 'create' ourselves whilst still being contingent within the world.

Rocking between knowledge and questioning

"The philosopher is marked by the distinguishing trait that he possesses inseparably the taste for evidence and the feeling for ambiguity." Sarah Bakewell explains it thus: a constant movement is required between the two – a kind of rocking motion 'which leads back without ceasing from knowledge to ignorance, from ignorance to knowledge'.

We are never just a body – but a lived body

Merleau-Ponty takes up Husserl's approach but with one important difference – the fact that our experience consists not just of mental experience but also of bodily experience. In his most important book, *The Phenomenology of Perception* he explores this idea and comes to the conclusion that the mind and body are not separate entities; but that thought and perception are 'embodied' and that the world, consciousness and the body are all part of a single system.

"In order to see the world, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it."

In this statement, Merleau-Ponty harks back to Heidegger's phenomenology. Our experience is filled with puzzles and contradictions, our everyday assumptions prevent us from seeing these puzzles and contradictions. We must put our everyday assumptions to one side and relearn to look at our experience.

Les Temps Modernes

Merleau-Ponty was a regular contributor to *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal founded by Sartre and Beauvoir after the second world war. In 1952 Merleau-Ponty became the youngest-ever Chair of Philosophy at the *Collège de France* where he remained in post until his death aged only 53.

The voice of the body

Merleau-Ponty's own personal contribution to Philosophy and especially to the inquiries set up by Husserl and Heidegger was to introduce the much-needed recognition to the importance of the human body. The phenomenologists and existentialists hitherto were writing as if every human being was above all a centre of consciousness and that that consciousness was an entity that could be conceived as being abstract or immaterial. Merleau-Ponty insisted that the fundamental

character of our identity, as humans, is that we are physical objects, mind, body and consciousness being entwined, each placed (which sounds more gentle than Heidegger's "thrown") in a unique way in space and time. But to me that still suggests being "placed" by some hand rather like a chess piece. I must try and shake that idea off and replace it with something like simply "arriving" or better, emerging from what already existed.

Merleau-Ponty had an image for our consciousness. He suggests it is "like a fold in the world as if someone had crumpled a piece of cloth to make a little nest or hollow. It stays for a while before eventually being unfolded and smoothed away" as Sarah Bakewell says of this image in her book >At the Existentialist Café< *"There is something seductive in this idea of my conscious self as an improvised pouch in the cloth of the world. I still have my privacy – my withdrawing room. But I am part of the world's fabric, and I remain formed out of it as long as I'm here."*

Also I think Merleau-Ponty thought that there was a sort of symbiotic relationship between our consciousness, our bodies (the two inextricably linked) and the world - what he called the "life world". Not just a world of physical objects but our emotional relationship with those objects. And that those objects were in a "grip" like a fireman's grip with us, looped like a knitting stitch loops back to grasp itself.

This suggests that somehow the actual world out there is somehow animated but of course in Sartrean terms it is not. It is just an uncaring set of objects. And our consciousness can if we want think nothing of it if we chose. A huge difference in emphasis.

Merleau-Ponty loved Dancing and this helps to explain his notions of the body knowing how to and wanting to move with fluidity and dexterity, without there being any conscious examination or analysis of that movement.

He was also a psychologist and took over from Jean Piaget at the Sorbonne in 1949 but then 3 years later became Professor of Philosophy at the Collège de France. He wanted to knit together the ambiguities that traditionally separated the disciplines.

Rob Drury & Jos Burton