

Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part II, 4 "Our Selves and the Human World"

This is in some respects the most difficult section we've read in this work. So I don't want to run through the chapter as has been our usual procedure. I really want to highlight just a couple of major themes and try to flesh them out a bit – no pun intended. We left off last class having just reached the concept of "primary opinion" or *Urdoxa (Urglaube)*. This is introduced, of course, in the context of Merleau-Ponty's counter-example of the analysis of hallucination, that is to say, as a counter-example of reality or of the real. Before we address either the problem of hallucination (which is not theme today) or the question of the transcendence of the other (which is the theme of this chapter), I want to turn back to the Preface, particularly to page xi.

When I begin to reflect my reflection bears upon an unreflective experience; moreover my reflection cannot be unaware of itself as an event, and so it appears to itself in the light of a truly creative act, of a changed structure of consciousness, and yet it has to recognize, as having priority over its own operations, the world which is given to the subject because the subject is given to himself. The real has to be described, not constructed or formed. Which means that I cannot put perception into the same category as the syntheses represented by judgments, acts or predications. My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colors, noises, and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams round things. I imagine people and things whose presence is not incompatible with the context, yet who are not in fact involved in it: they are ahead of reality, in the realm of the imaginary. If the reality of my perception were based solely on the intrinsic coherence of 'representations', it ought to be forever hesitant and, being wrapped up in my conjectures on probabilities. I ought to be ceaselessly taking apart misleading syntheses, and reinstating in reality stray phenomena which I had excluded in the first place. But this does not happen. The real is a closely woven fabric. It does not await our judgment before incorporating the most surprising phenomena, or before rejecting the most plausible figments of our imagination. Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not 'inhabit' only the 'inner man,' or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself. (xi-xii)

I think this passage is especially relevant for where we are in the text and where we are in the class, and I want to use this passage to bring out fundamental themes addressed by Merleau-Ponty in chapters we're reading this week. Some of my analysis is going to be put forward by retelling of a bit of personal history which I think speaks to these themes, or more precisely, which puts flesh to the bones laid out here by Merleau-Ponty. But before I delve into this story, let's examine the last line by Merleau-Ponty in the above passage. "Truth does not 'inhabit' only the 'inner man'...there is not inner man, man is in the world...." Merleau-Ponty here cites Augustine, but it should be clear by now that he is not really confronting Augustine here as much as Husserl,

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especially Husserl of the *Cartesian Meditations*. Indeed, the last lines of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* conclude with the quotation Merleau-Ponty cites:

The Delphic motto, "know thyself!" has gained a new signification. Positive science is a science lost in the world. I must lose the world by epoché, in order to regain it by a universal self-examination. 'Do not wish to go out,' says Augustine, 'go back into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man.'¹

It is against Husserl's neo-Cartesianism that we find Merleau-Ponty's most incisive critique of the founder of phenomenology. And though Heidegger is not mentioned at this by Merleau-Ponty here, there is clear debt owed to him on this very point. (Perhaps debt is too strong.) To see this, we only need to compare the concept of the body-schema that Merleau-Ponty articulates against that of the there-structure of the existence which is mine as presented by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Look at page 115 of the *Phenomenology*:

The word 'here' applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in fact of its tasks.... In the last analysis, if my body can be a 'form' and if there can be, in front of it, important figures against indifferent backgrounds, this occurs in virtue of its being polarized by its tasks, of its *existence towards* them, of its collecting together of itself in its pursuit of its aims; the body schema is finally a way of stating that my body is in-the-world. (115)

This statement of the body-schema echoes closely Heidegger's analysis of 'Da-sein' in section 31 of *Being and Time*.

To say that in existing, Dasein is its 'there', is equivalent to saying that the world is 'there'; its *Being-there* is Being-in. And the latter is likewise 'there', as that for the sake of which Dasein is. In the 'for-the-sake-of-which', existing Being-in-the-world is disclosed as such, and this disclosedness we have called 'understanding.' (SZ, 143)

Now having said that, I do not mean to suggest that Merleau-Ponty offers a break from Husserl in a truly radical sense. For this is not the case. First of all, while a Cartesian orientation is predominant in Husserl's works such as the *Cartesian Meditations* and *Ideas I*, it is by no means Husserl's universal method of philosophizing. Husserl's last work, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, represents a turn away from his Cartesian style of philosophizing. His studies on inner-time consciousness and temporality, as well as Eugen Fink's critical re-working of the Cartesian project, are perhaps the most thorough-going influences apparent in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Having said this, we can look to the idea of Urdoxa or proto-doxa – in Merleau-Ponty "primary opinion" as a fundamental point of agreement between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. And this is a concept that finds its first expression in Husserl's Cartesian work, *Ideas I*. When explicating this concept in *Ideas I*, he articulates it in this manner:

¹ Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations*, p.157.

Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part II, 4 "Our Selves and the Human World"

At first a perceived object is there with simple unquestionableness, in certainty. Suddenly we suspect that we may have fallen victim to a mere 'illusion,' we suspect that what is seen, heard, and the like, may be 'mere semblance.' Or what is appearing keeps its being-certainty, but we are unsure about some determinational complex or other. The thing 'suggests itself' as possibly a man. Then a contrary deeming possible occurs: it could be a tree which, in the darkness of the forest, looks like a man who is moving. Now, however, the 'weight' of the one 'possibility' becomes considerably greater; we decide in its favor, perhaps in the manner which we definitely deem it likely that 'it was a tree after all.' (*Ideas* I, 250 – margin 215)

Husserl is articulating the notion of belief-modalities. I can suspect something is different that it first appeared only on the basis of already ongoing modality of primal belief. This is, as Merleau-Ponty says on page 400, the deeper function without which perceived objects would lack the distinctive sign of reality.... It is the momentum which carries us beyond subjectivity, which gives us our place in the world prior to any science and any verification, through a kind of 'faith' or 'primary opinion.' (400)

To put it another way, as he does a few lines down, this is the originary opening of the "antepredicative world." Fundamentally, this is a Husserlian insight. However, we see two modifications by Merleau-Ponty here – neither of which is fundamental alien to Husserl's deeper investigations into this 'phenomenon.' First, this primal opinion, the deeper function, is a momentum that carries into the world, i.e., into reality. As a momentum, it is fundamentally temporal in character. Second, *Urdoxa* is the very basis of his account of intersubjectivity. We can see this on page 414:

My <adult> awareness of constructing an objective truth would never provide me with anything more than an objective truth for me, and my greatest attempt at impartiality would never enable me to prevail over my subjectivity (as Descartes so well expresses it by the hypothesis of the malignant demon), if I had not, underlying my judgments, the primordial certainty of being in contact with being itself, if, before any voluntary *adoption of a position* I were not already *situated* in an intersubjective world, and if science too were not upheld by this basic $\delta\omicron\chi\alpha$. (414)

It is precisely to this fundamental origination of the worldliness of world that Merleau-Ponty points at the end of chapter four. (Top of page 425)

We have discovered, with the natural and social worlds, the truly transcendental, which is not the totality of constituting operations whereby a transparent world, free from obscurity and impenetrable solidity, is spread out before an impartial spectator, but that ambiguous life in which the forms of transcendence have their *Ursprung* (origin, literally their primordial springing forth), and which through a fundamental contradiction, puts me in communication with them and on this basis makes knowledge possible. (425)

This *Ursprung*, the "more fundamental logos than that of objective thought," lies at the heart of all of Husserl's descriptions of constitutional life. Hence the contradiction: our phenomenological descriptions point to an origin which is in principle antepredicative. (transition synthesis – page 384 ("it is Chartres"))

