

Commentary  
From the Puzzle of Qualia to the Problem of Sensation

*Phenomenology of Perception*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Roberta Lanfredini \*

lanfredini@unifi.it

*Phenomenology of Perception* is the expression of Merleau-Ponty's epistemological and methodological perspective, whereas *The Visible and the Invisible* represents its natural ontological extension.

Merleau-Ponty's epistemology considerably sets a limit of some conceptual tools employed in Husserl's phenomenology, such as those expressed by the notions of *intentionality*, *constitution*, *reflection*, *transcendental*, and gives stability to others such as those represented by the notions of *passivity*, *genesis*, *motivation*, *sedimentation*, noticeably extending their meaning. In many respects, concepts with a critical role in Husserl's phenomenological epistemology find in Merleau-Ponty a deeply different orientation. As Husserl's phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's epistemological project is radically anti-reductionist and deeply anti-naturalistic.

Scientific points of view, according to which my existence is a moment of the world's, are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me. To return to the things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is. (p. IX)

However, differently from the Husserlian phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's anti-reductionist attitude and anti-naturalism don't involve the suspension, or

\* University of Florence

the bracketing, of the natural stance. In a different way, the anti-naturalism professed by Merleau-Ponty has the aim to recover and preserve the natural stance, as well as a space for the *pre-categorical* thought, within which the consciousness, by its nature and genesis, inhabits.

In other words, according to Merleau-Ponty, differently from Husserl, the naturalization and the natural stance don't follow the same way. The naturalization implies a process of conversion, that is, the translation of something derivative and secondary (for example the phenomenal and qualitative world) in something considered epistemologically basic and grounded (for example the world described by the physics). Instead, the natural stance reveals the necessity of an immersion in the broad context of nature, a process required if we want to give a full and authentic account of these "things" that phenomenology aims to describe from a morphological point of view.

The exclusion of the natural stance involves a description of the things very similar to that provided by a map, which is to a particular region what geography is to a landscape. Accordingly, the segregation of the natural dimension, in addition to the rebuttal of a natural attitude, risks to drain the content of the experienced thing, showing the image of a disembodied object, deprived of its flesh, that is a mere functional element with no depth.

In philosophy of mind, the rebuttal of the naturalistic stance, as well as the assumption of a natural attitude involve a departure from the supposition that the physical states, e.g., the neuronal states, are primary and irreducible elements. At the same time this involves a departure from a kind of *anti-reductionism* which, on the contrary, considers the states of consciousness as primary and irreducible, that is, as free elements independent from any natural position.

It is interesting to observe that the anti-reductionism, as stated by Husserl, implies the assumption of a reductive stance. Definitely, in certain respects, the concept of phenomenological reduction has a meaning contrasting the concept of reduction used in philosophy of mind. The phenomenological reduction requires giving up, or at least taking distance from, the natural stance (the scientific and object-oriented attitude) emphasized by reductionism in philosophy of mind.

However, as paradoxical as it may sound, the phenomenological reduction and the reduction in philosophy of mind share a critical aspect that justify, at least in part, their homonymy: both of them affirm the necessity of a radical

departure from the *natural stance* (in the case of phenomenology) and from the *manifest image* (in the case of philosophy of mind). Starting from this shared necessity, the phenomenological approach and the reductionism in philosophy of mind turn into two antithetical paths: the former establishes the priority of conscious experience and considers the physical states – the neuronal states included – secondary and derivative; while the latter establishes the priority of the physical states and considers the states of consciousness as derivative and according to some of its defenders not existing and illusory, therefore eliminable.

Assuming this point of view, the absence in Merleau-Ponty's works of a process of reduction – also of the phenomenological one – is perfectly clear. To endorse a philosophical project characterized by a radical anti-naturalism is not to deny the natural character of the consciousness. In this basic methodological distinction a critical change of paradigm can be summed up noticing that on the one hand the exigency of Husserl's phenomenology was that of disentangling the subject from the *world*, and that on the other Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is concerned to completely immerge the subject in the world, restoring the natural *bilateralism* between thought and the environment that an original phenomenological description should always preserve.

The reflective subject of the Husserlian phenomenology, that is, the subject conceived as the condition of possibility, rather than the bearer, of an actual experience is the result of an analytic reconstruction and not of an original phenomenological description. Differently from this paradigm, in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology there is no absolute priority for an impenetrable and objective reality, as well as there is no absolute priority for the idea of a subject conceived as a constitutive power, that is, as an invulnerable inwardness that can be reached through a backward walk.

Merleau-Ponty transforms the *correlative* analysis, typical of the Husserlian phenomenology within which the structure of consciousness is the basic element, in a *bilateral* analysis according to which both the subjective and the objective poles require a foundational priority. Accordingly, he extends the methodological approach from a perspective that privileges the external *frame* of the experience, to a perspective that fills that frame with an *actual content*.

In this view, the constitutive structure, or the reflective component, is progressively placed side by side with the domain of the unreflecting; the transparency of representation with the opacity of the feeling; the expressible character of the structured datum shows the relevance of the dumb, tacit,

unexpressed and inexpressible nature that the experience inexorably brings with itself.

This is a powerful change of perspective that makes it possible to transform puzzles in philosophy of mind (as in the case of the “question” of *qualia*), in “genuine” problems. On the other side, as noticed by Kuhn, the conversion of a puzzle in a problem becomes possible only when a change in the theoretical and conceptual background happens, a change that opens the door to a different definition of the problem and not to other solutions of the same puzzle.

This conceptual change is evident in the way Merleau-Ponty faces the problem of sensation as opposed to the puzzle of *qualia*. As it is well known, because of their subjective nature (intrinsic, private, and hardly reducible to a third person perspective) and their essentially qualitative character (direct, immediate, and so ineffable), *qualia* are considered in philosophy of mind the only and genuine *hard problem*. But Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology adds another trait, maybe the most important, to those that can be considered the standard features usually ascribed to *qualia*. *Qualia* are essentially and not accidentally associated to the subject’s embodied dimension, that is, to the possession of a *lived body* contrasting the mere possession of a *physical body* (as in Descartes’ philosophy). The introduction of the body establishes the role of the natural subject, that is, the role of the embodied, situated subject as regard to which both the notions of reduction in philosophy of mind and the phenomenological reduction appear to be inadequate.

On the other side, the introduction of the body determines an epistemological shift from the abovementioned *puzzle of qualia* to the *problem of sensation*.

There are two ways of being mistaken about quality: one is to make it into an element of consciousness, when in fact it is an object for consciousness, to treat it as an incommunicable impression, whereas it always has a meaning; the other is to think that this meaning and this object, at the level of quality, are fully developed and determinate. (p. 6)

According to Merleau-Ponty, it is necessary to consider the question of sensitivity as a genuine *problem*: this is not a question concerning the possession of inert qualities or contents defined by well marked boundaries. Contrasting the identification of the notion of sensation with that of *qualia* assumed as a reply to external stimuli, the sensitivity is not something determined, instantaneous and detailed, but it is vague, ambiguous and

indeterminate. On the other side, for Merleau-Ponty, it is not correct to consider the domain of sensitivity as intrinsically formless and structureless except when a theoretical and meaningful system intervenes to check the rush and chaotic sphere of sensorial stimuli. This is the idea of a great part of post neo-empiricist epistemology, according to which, to be accessible the datum should be interpreted and embedded in a circle of hypotheses and background theories. On the contrary, according to Merleau-Ponty, the sensible datum is not tied to a theoretical and conceptual apparatus, but shows its own a proper structure, even if flowing and ambiguous.

The sensible field – that qualities inhabit – far from representing the immediate result of an external stimulus, or a mere reply to an external situation, depends on specific variables such as for example the biological sense of the situation. This makes the sensible experience a critical process analogous to that of procreation, or that of breathing and growth. Things are for Merleau-Ponty *flesh* and not mere *bodies*, they are not a mere extensions or bodily surfaces covered by specific qualities. Accordingly, sensations are not a mere reception of qualities but represent a living inherence, they don't offer inert qualities but active and dynamic properties characterized by a proper value related to their functional role in preserving our life.

The pure quale would be given to us only if the world were a spectacle and one's own body a mechanism with which some impartial mind made itself acquainted. Sense experience, on the other hand, invests the quality with vital value, grasping it first in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that it always involves a reference to the body. (Merleau-Ponty, p. 60)

The identification between *qualia* and *sensitivity* derives from a process of alienation suffered by the concept of body that inevitably leads to the leveling off of both the notion of consciousness and the notion of experiential thing. Contrasting this view, the *embodied* thought becomes the result of a circular conception of experience and knowledge. This is a conception within which the experience assumes an *insight* that nor the Husserlian notion of *plena*, nor the notion of *qualia* in philosophy of mind, are able to show. In the first case because the former notion is too close to an extensional idea of the qualitative element. In the second, because the latter notion is too close to an empirical notion of sensible datum and to a physiologic and mechanistic interpretation of sensation.

The idea of sensation conceived as a filling quality and the idea of sensation assumed as the phenomenal and qualitative reply to an external stimulus, contribute to leveling out the domain of experience, draining and atrophying its own sense, that is, the idea of sensitivity as a living rhythm. A sensitivity that, in order to be understood, cannot be divorced from the analysis of the notions of body and embodiment, together with the awareness of the radical change of paradigm introduced by them.