

The Logic of the Observed: Merleau-Ponty's Conception of Women as Outlined in his 1951—1952 Sorbonne lecture "The Question of Method in Child Psychology"¹

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Abstract: The first line of Merleau-Ponty's 1951-52 lecture "The Question of Method in Child Psychology" reads, "In child psychology (as in psychopathology, the psychology of primitives, and the psychology of women), the situation of the object of study is so different from that of the observer that it cannot be grasped on its own terms." [F, 465] Is there any hope for a feminist reading of Merleau-Ponty's psychology with such a statement, or are women relegated in Merleau-Ponty's corpus alongside the childlike, the insane, and the primitive? This paper endeavors to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the psychology of women is not a false or bigoted placing of women in an infant-like position. Rather, he demonstrates that it is precisely this relationship of man to woman that must be the starting point of analysis for both a philosophy and psychology of sex.

Résumé: À la première ligne du cours de Merleau-Ponty intitulé "Méthode en psychologie de l'enfant," on peut lire: "En psychologie de l'enfant, comme en psychopathologie, en psychologie des primitifs et en psychologie de la femme, l'objet à connaître est dans une situation si différente de celle de l'observateur qu'il est difficile de le saisir tel qu'il est." À la lumière de cette citation, peut-on espérer faire une lecture féministe de la psychologie de Merleau-Ponty, ou les femmes sont-elles reléguées, dans le corpus merleau-pontien, à l'infantile, l'insensé et le primitif? Le présent article tente de démontrer que la compréhension merleau-pontienne de la psychologie des femmes ne place pas indûment ou de façon sexiste les femmes dans une position infantile. Il démontre plutôt que cette relation même entre l'homme et la femme doit constituer le point de départ de l'analyse pour une philosophie et une psychologie sexuelles.

Introduction

The first line of Merleau-Ponty's 1951—52 lecture at the Sorbonne, "The Question of Method in Child Psychology" reads, "In child psychology (as in psychopathology, the psychology of primitives, and the psychology of women), the situation of the object of study is so different from that of the observer that it cannot be grasped on its own terms." [F, 465] Is there any hope for a feminist reading of Merleau-Ponty's psychology with such a statement? Or are women relegated in Merleau-Ponty's corpus alongside the childlike, the insane, and the primitive?

This paper endeavors to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the psychology of women is not a false or bigoted placing of women in an infant-like position. Rather, he demonstrates that it is precisely this relationship of man to woman that must be the starting point of analysis for both a philosophy and psychology of sex.

However, implicit in his analyses is an unquestioned zero-point around which all other explanations revolve: the heterosexual white-male perspective, or the "observer." This paper proposes to apply his analysis to include the heterosexual white-male perspective. In so doing, the heterosexual white-male position becomes one of many groups within a society. Instead of ignoring the social and historical dominance of this position, thus reifying it as untouchable, the dominance of the male perspective should be identified as the hidden standard.

If we take seriously Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that we should begin from relations between groups and individuals (and not from the essence of the individuals themselves), it follows that no individual or group has a more dominant position in the analysis of any particular relation. This paper ultimately demonstrates that what is often an ethical precept—inclusion instead of exclusion—is also a methodological demand.

Basic Themes in Merleau-Ponty's Psychology

In order to assess just how Merleau-Ponty viewed a "psychology of women" (why he thought such a psychology was necessary, just who the "observer" would be, etc.), it is necessary to understand his psychological theory. The Sorbonne lectures cannot be praised for their systematicity. However, one can say confidently that Merleau-Ponty advocates in-depth psychological analyses of particular individuals within their social, historical and cultural setting. Such studies allow not only for an understanding of the subject's situation, but as importantly they investigate the situation of the observer in relation to the subject.

Three major tenets of Merleau-Ponty's psychology which are relevant to this study revolve around his critique of scientific psychology. They are: 1) The situation of the observer: the subject of any study cannot be approached from a third-person point of view. Rather, the observer must first assess his or her own relationship to the subject before commencing any analysis. 2) The situation of the observed: the subject of study is not just "suffering" from a particular condition (i.e., mental insanity), rather this condition itself must be understood as unisolatable from the situation the subject lives in (cultural, historical, social). 3) The body: any study which suggests that certain psychological stages or states occur solely due to bodily development, or bodily characteristics, is mistaken. Although the bodily development is a necessary cause of psychological development, it is not a sufficient one.

1) *The situation of the observer*

Merleau-Ponty remains highly critical of attempts to make psychology more scientific by reducing its theoretical base to statistical studies. Such statistical studies (what could be said nowadays to dominate much of psychology) are only descriptive and fail to explicate anything about *why* the subject is a certain way. For instance, to say that 80% of children at age three undergo a particular transformation may be true descriptively, but the knowledge of this fact does little to further psychology. What theoretical impact would such a study make on the psychologist? How would this information transform his or her therapy? To Merleau-Ponty such a study would not alter the psychologist's theoretical outlook. In fact, the psychologist's primary theoretical stance, a faith in statistics, is never questioned. Moreover, this implicit faith in statistical inference would damage the psychologist's role by making him or her demand that unless a particular child adheres to the "norm" the child is deviant and unhealthy.²

The first step must not arise from an unquestioned belief in truths of scientific studies, but in an examination of one's own relationship to the patient and the class to which the patient belongs. It will not be enough to examine how one perceives this particular child who is in front of the observer, but one must also examine how one perceives children generally. What attitude is taken up toward children in one's society? What is expected of them?³ Any statistical inference depends directly on the conscious and explicit theory that underlies it; "It is impossible to construct a mean without a principle that informs us about these different elements so we can meaningfully collate them together." [F, 484]

The observer must take his or her position as essentially biased. However, this is not to say that Merleau-Ponty thinks no truth can be found in observation. Rather, the observer-observed relation must be an essentially equal one as it should be in society. No one group has more value than another, and thus the observer must not confuse his or her role in the therapy as essentially more secure or more objective than the role of the observed. It also follows that psychology must concern itself not only with the health of the patient, but also with the health of the society. If the society is fundamentally prejudiced, the observer must take his own participation in such a society into account.

2) *The observed*

What is the role of the observed? How should the observer view the pathological, immature, abnormal and ultimately "different" traits of the observed? Although Merleau-Ponty is consistent in his belief that many of these traits are related to the physical condition of the observed, he also notes that even pathological traits are not "parts" of the individual like fingers or toes. No trait can be understood as existing outside of how society views it. Pathological cases are merely extremes,

and thus are not qualitatively different than cases of "normal" behavior.

Scientific psychology makes the mistake of thinking that the pathological individual is fundamentally different from the healthy one. The error of this assumption blinds the psychologist to the fact that pathological individuals are responding to the *same* situations that the healthy are. By excluding them as statistically irrelevant, psychology fails to incorporate important alternative approaches:

Another aspect of this "general prejudice" is the exclusion of pathological cases. This is a pre-scientific mode of thought which separates the sick and the healthy human. We commonly say, "It is an exceptional situation" and "The exception confirms the rule." But this is a contradiction since; on the contrary, the exception invalidates the rule. In fact, these "slogans" show our prejudice in thinking that there is a "general science." Once generality is obtained, one gathers up all the results pell-mell and produces reports on "the unique child of Vienna in 1928," or in a generalization, "the child of one year." [F, 484]

Even hallucinating subjects are able to walk around rooms, enter and exit buildings and climb stairs. Thus, on many levels they are interacting with the same world. They pose one of the greatest challenges to understanding human behavior because they accord with certain "normal" behaviors, but not with others.

Yet Merleau-Ponty is *not* arguing in the Sorbonne lectures that all traits are qualitatively the same. He has a certain notion of a healthy and normal psychological state. Merleau-Ponty's critique of scientific psychology does not preclude any value differences; pathological subjects are unhealthy and not just misunderstood. However, his conception of what healthy consists in is not centered on a particular *telos*: a particular set of traits that must be achieved (for example, genital sexuality). Rather psychology must endeavor to approach the observed justly. The pathological is not an aberration on the face of society, just as the child is not an "unformed" adult. The observed must be taken as a full member of the society, for when the situation of the observed does not allow for an equal footing in society, he or she cannot come to a self-acceptance which is required for a healthy psychological state. Thus Merleau-Ponty's psychology is heavily centered upon ethical concerns of fairness and equality which will be discussed later in the paper.

3) *The body*

The body must not be considered as a container. It body does not "hold" all the reasons for the nature of the observed. The physical body, the *Körper*, plays a role

in the identity of the observed, but it is the lived-body, the *Leib*, which is the ground upon which theory must revolve.⁴ Thus, explaining the physical nature of the observed tells us next to nothing.

The psychology of the child is not at all the evolution of an occult nature. Thus for Freud, anatomical determinations are given from the outset, but within his theory they are almost non-existent. The determination of a mode of sexuality at any given moment is a function of the different positions that the child takes up in the familial constellation. Adult sexuality surpasses all the previous phases. To say at birth, "It's a boy" or "It's a girl" is almost to say nothing at all. However, whoever says "boy" or "girl" speaks of a situated individual. The child is situated in a force field which at every moment represents [F, 476] a particular nuance of masculinity or femininity. In this field, the child is subjected to vectors that draw him or her in different directions. [F, 475-476]

These vectors which draw the child in a particular direction emanate from the situation the child finds him- or herself in. It would seem that Merleau-Ponty comes very close to a notion of both gender and a constructed body.⁵ However, the body is determined by its physiology and not just by the way the subject lives. The body's physicality changes: growth, menstruation, puberty are intrinsically related to accompanying psychological changes. But, as we find in Freud, the weight of the analysis must lie in examining how the subject behaves and interacts with others.

The healthy attitude is the simultaneous acceptance of both physical and psychological changes. Instead of rejecting or trying to anticipate physical development, one must adjust alongside physical changes. However, since no causal chain links physiology and psychology, many disturbances occur. Some of these disturbances are caused by unjust expectations of society, some are caused by familial settings and some are caused by physiology. Because of these influences, children anticipate their future by play-acting and by taking on "adult" roles for which they are not ready, and likewise wish to return to former, more infantile states.

Women

Upon this question of masculinity and femininity we arrive at the crux of this paper. What determines these vectors that draw the child in a particular direction of masculinity and femininity? What role does the body have? And finally, why are women, and not men, singled out as deserving of a psychology? First, the paper will address these questions and finally demonstrate how the three theses of psychology described above indicate that Merleau-Ponty was inconsistent by not extending his analyses far enough.

Despite his insistence on the transformative role of the social setting an individual finds him- or herself in, Merleau-Ponty is consistent in affirming that there is something about women's and men's bodies that determines their

psychology:

Is there a feminine nature? The portrait we paint of women implies a certain representation of man. In other societies women are conceived as far stronger than men. Therefore, the fragile woman is a fact of culture and not of nature. Methodologically, there is no point in denying psychological differences between men and women which arise from biological differences. The only way in which to know whether, and to what extent, such differences exist is to get rid of notions of a "feminine nature" and of a "masculine nature." [F, 470]

It appears that the truth of the matter is precisely an investigation into these physical characteristics. In eliminating socially constructed notions of masculine and feminine, we will eliminate the contingent and arrive at the essential.

Support for this thesis is found in his discussion of the relationship between the physical and the psychological. Merleau-Ponty only discusses the physical transformations of women and the corresponding psychological developments. One might surmise that Merleau-Ponty believes the reason that women, and not men, afford their own psychology is that they undergo more physical developments and thus there are greater possibilities for a rift between the psychological state and the physical.

In his discussion of the Hélène Deutsch, Merleau-Ponty traces the role of menstruation. He writes that heterosexuality does not suddenly "appear" at the onset of menstruation. Physical development and sexual development, although linked, are not parallel:

Heterosexuality is not directly related to the physiological phenomenon of menstruation. Helene Deutsch cites the case of Evelyne, who began menstruating at the age of twelve, in which menstruation had had no direct influence on her mode of sexuality. There had been no psychological assimilation of the physiological event. This passage to heterosexuality, even when menstruation has begun, is still premature. [F, 502]⁶

Merleau-Ponty notes that the psychological series of developments that a young girl goes through prior and post menstruation are not directly related to the actual commencement of menstruation. There exists a certain correspondence, but not a casual link.⁷

It would appear that we have to content ourselves with some sort of biologically determined norm of health: the healthy woman is the woman who accepts her body as fate, accepts menstruation, heterosexuality and childbirth. The hope of finding

any ground for a feminist psychology within Merleau-Ponty's own psychology would be crushed.

However, such an assessment is too quick. The outline of Merleau-Ponty's three theses must be integrated into this example of a woman's physical development.

The corporeal body is not destiny. Rather, what pathological cases tell us is that in fact the individual does not have to psychologically "accept" the changes the body goes through: testimony to the independence of the lived-body. "Therefore, a singular relation exists between the body and the total subject. The body must be thought of as a mirror, the expression of the total subject's psyche: the expression of a psychological history. The anonymous development of the body is nothing as long as it is not integrated into its psychological history." [F, 505] For Merleau-Ponty, development is not directed toward one goal; it is flexible.

There exist multiple ways in which the physical change of menstruation can be integrated. One could be taking up the sexual stereotype that society has passed down, or one could potentially reject it. However, the corporeal body does limit the possibilities. Freedom is not absolute. One cannot deny the changes of the body without becoming pathological. Likewise, one cannot deny the standards of one's society without difficulties. Merleau-Ponty expands the borders of what can constitute a healthy individual, but he does not dissolve the all borders:

It is a question of a relatively **contingent order**. Nevertheless, development follows certain lines all the same; the possibilities of aberration are not infinite. This order, as entirely contingent as it may be, must surge forth spontaneously from prior states, from materials that it is going to utilize. Maturation consists in the adequation between the meaning of realized behavior and the materials with which this meaning realizes itself. The individual must take up again what the present bodily state has rendered possible. [F, 505]

Since psychological development is inextricably intertwined with the surrounding society, any maturity depends upon the society having a mature outlook itself. What Merleau-Ponty garnered from Margaret Mead's anthropological studies of native cultures is that although masculinity and femininity are flexible terms and signify nothing essential, sexual stereotypes exist universally. The content is contingent; the form is universal:

In conclusion to the analysis of Margaret Mead's conception of masculinity and femininity, we find that the masculine-feminine relation is an element in a total tissue of relations. As we find in this society, the relations between mother and child, between self

and stranger, and in general the inter-human relations all are part of the tissue in which we find the masculine-feminine relation. We have no grounds to speak of "the" masculine and "the" feminine since each civilization, according to its mode of existence, elaborates a certain type of masculinity in correlation to a certain type of femininity. But within any given society one finds *sexual stereotypes*. [F, 495]

As outlined previously, Merleau-Ponty employed a conception of biological essentialism: certain physical differences were the cause of certain psychological dispositions. Certainly, his famous work on perception requires a certain level of unquestionable physical truth. The question posed to readers of Merleau-Ponty is how to interpret this biological essentialism.

Merleau-Ponty's conclusion is that what unites us, and what should unify psychology, is the existential situation we are all in. Pathological subjects, children, women and men all must adjust to their being in the world. However, since we encounter the world via different corporeal bodies, our existential situation will be taken up in different manners. Moreover, physical and psychological changes will demand that as the subject changes so too must he or she readdress his manner of being in the world.

Conclusion: The Logic of the Observer

In his conclusion to an exposé of Margaret Mead, Merleau-Ponty considers her focus on fairness to be a cultural tick of Americans. Since Americans are so culturally diverse, they are pre-occupied with equality:

Margaret Mead wishes for a "multisexual" society in which all types of "masculinity" and "femininity" would be admitted, each individual choosing his or her partner according to the masculine or feminine type that corresponds to his or her own type. This society would allow individuals to accept themselves as they are. (Note: Margaret Mead is American, living together in America with a multitude of people of different origins. We who have a past think very little about it and are not worried by our roots. Those who are without roots are, on the contrary, preoccupied with them. Thus, the importance of the problem of unity in the United States; since it is not founded on a long common history, it is sought in an uncompromising participation in certain stereotypes. This is why Mead is preoccupied with this omnipotence of a model or of a statistical norm.) [F, 495]

What Merleau-Ponty does not admit is that in his society those who were not "not worried by our roots" (and thus unconcerned with finding a way to include and not exclude diversity) are the white, French, heterosexual males. Diversity did exist in France, and certainly women, non-whites, and other under-represented groups did not have a conscious or unconscious sensation of stable, inclusive acceptance and participation in French tradition and history. By not explicitly addressing this group, Merleau-Ponty makes it the standard by which to measure all other groups.

In conclusion, we must return to the critique of scientific psychology in order to further Merleau-Ponty's analyses and understand how ethics and psychology are inseparable. The observer must take a role toward the observed that admits his or her situation is not invisible and privileged; the observer is also influenced by society's prejudices. However, throwing off the shackles of prejudice and justly approaching the observed requires more than an awareness of the prejudice.

The main problem with scientific psychology is that it does not question its own methods of analysis. It confuses correlation with causation, description with prediction and most worrisome is that it mistakes the healthy individual for the standard. Merleau-Ponty's psychology likewise moves toward making this mistake. The observer may be the healthy individual, but he or she should not be interpreted as a standard of psychological health.

As Merleau-Ponty explained, sexual stereotypes are universal since they determine a particular style of living for particular body types:

Relations of masculinity and femininity have to be seen as detached from the same ground. The problem to resolve is the same for each: human life. It is necessary to homogenize in a sense the varieties of responses to a situation. One must regard the patient, the primitive, the woman, the man, etc. all as parts of the psychological universe. Psychological laws will never be some sequences of facts which can be found everywhere. Scientific psychology will exist when we are able to understand the very different lives of primitives, adults, children, etc. as parallel systems responding to the same problem by different means: parallel logics. [F, 470]

What Merleau-Ponty failed to address is that the "logic" that hopes to solve the existential problem is not the logic of the observed, it is the logic of the observer. Sexual stereotypes deal with the existence of the other body, the other sex, just as psychological theory is occupied with understanding the very other nature of the pathological. Thus, the external situation one finds oneself in is not just a reflection of various individuals who are in the process of "finding themselves." Rather, one enters into a world where one is always and already defined.

In considering Merleau-Ponty's theory, the first sentence of this lecture is most

likely an incomplete thought (these are lecture notes, so the "truth" of the text is most likely not in any particular sentence). His theory demands that all groups, as well as all individuals, have a psychology. Perhaps it is an oversight, a slip of the tongue, a faulty transcription. However, this paper asserts that in fact it is consistent to say that these under-privileged groups would demand a psychology above and beyond the privileged.

As Merleau-Ponty asserted, social acceptance of one's development (both physical and psychical) is a necessary part of healthy development. However, one is already inserted into a social world. Merleau-Ponty says that as soon as birth the child is inserted into a world of social relations. If participation in the "norm," a norm around which all social relations revolve, is barred by one's own physical body, it follows that disruptions between one's psychological state and one's physical state will be inevitable.

The unjust subjugation of women and the consequent disparity is not news to an audience of this paper. Particularly important to this analysis are the theoretical problems in which a more invisible disparity results. Merleau-Ponty was well aware of and opposed to the oppression of women or minorities. However, he does not address the obvious conclusion of his theory: his observer can only be someone who is white, male, French and heterosexual. Sexual stereotypes do not emanate from the sex to which they pertain, but to the controlling group which may or may not be the sex in question.

Thus women in a male-dominated society are not more pathological because of their corporeal bodies, but because of their situation. All groups in a society are defined by stereotypes which are not of their own making. However, the dominating group will inevitably give more weight to its own psychological possibilities and remain less defined, and define the other groups largely by their physical possibilities (which are relatively limited). The suppressed groups will thus be more determined and see fewer possibilities for themselves.

Naturally the dominating group is often the healthy one, but not necessarily the standard to which all other groups should strive. Since our bodies determine in part our way of being in the world, a standard of health can only be relative to individual bodies and cannot be universal. The logic of the "objective" and scientific observer is that his or her own position does not need to be addressed: only the situation of the observed needs to be explicated. However, if we are truly to understand the network of relations that create our social situation, the observer must not be reified as untouchable. In order for all groups to take charge of their own definitions, it is necessary that the dominating group, the "big" observer, does not become the hidden standard.

Notes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Méthode en psychologie de l'enfant" *Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne*. (Paris: Cynara, 1988). All the following quotes from this lecture are my translations which will appear in a forthcoming Humanities Books' volume. All quotations refer to the French pagination. The quotations will be followed by square brackets and the page number [F, xx].
2. The impact of Edmund Husserl's *Crisis* is evident (*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr [Evanston: Northwestern, 1970]). Husserl greatly influenced Merleau-Ponty. In his most acclaimed work he critiques sciences for thinking that their foundation and access to truth is guaranteed by their "objectivity". Husserl writes that instead the sciences must acknowledge their debt to theory.
3. "One must grasp the totality of the child's becoming. One must reconstitute the dynamic development and not only enumerate a certain number of performances that the child either succeeds in or does not succeed in at a given moment. It is the same for Goldstein's aphasiacs: the automatic linguistic practice is preserved, but not the intelligent one. The aphasiacs do not demonstrate verbal destruction, but rather a fall to an inferior linguistic level. In pathology, one is initially concerned with symptoms that are defined by responses that the organism no longer gives to environmental stimuli and to the psychologist's questions. However, this does not give us the essence of the illness. One must reconstruct the symptomology by posing questions to the organism that are more precise than those of common sense. Truth only arises from the moment that one reaches the center of the personality." [F, 483]
4. This is an important point of consideration for embodiment studies that draw upon Merleau-Ponty's work. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body in these lectures indicates that he is not only speaking of his familiar lived body. Some of his analyses seem to indicate that the developing body imposes great demands on the subject that are quite alien to the subject and thus are not "lived" by the subject. This interpretation allows for more crossover between more "objective" (in that they deal with the body as *Körper* and not as *Leib*) analyses in the biological sciences. Some contemporary embodiment studies suggest that any such analyses must be rejected because they do not accord with lived experience.
5. Consider Judith Butler's articulation of the constructed nature of the body: "In either case, the body is figured as a mere instrument of medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But 'the body' is itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies

cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender..." (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990, 11).

6. "Once menstruation has begun, everything still remains to be done, that is their integration as an element of a whole. But this integration is not always, or even often, completed (e.g., the abhorrence of menstruation in certain adult women). The girl who imagines that menstruation changes everything is very much deceived. Maturation will still have to establish a bond between the imaginary and the perceived, a bond between the fantasies about menstruation and the real facts." [F, 504]

7. It should be noted that in the Sorbonne Lectures, Merleau-Ponty upholds the notion that homosexuality is an immature form of sexuality.