

A Thomist Dialogues With Merleau-Ponty

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It was the conviction of St. Thomas that truth, wherever it might be encountered, finds its ultimate source in the Holy Spirit. For him, the reality and goodness of truth was not so much to be possessed by man as to possess him. And so he was always open to the discovery of new concepts that faithfully reflect the real order. He beheld the quest for truth as finally leading to Truth Himself perfectly possessing us in the heavenly vision of knowing and loving God forever.

This eternal encounter begins for man upon earth where he will find that the Spirit of Love and Truth may manifest Himself in some strange situations. As a Christian, St. Thomas firmly believed that the source of all saving truth is found in the mystical body of Christ animated by His Spirit. But, he was also realistic enough to recognize that infinite truth cannot be given an adequate and exhaustive expression, even within the confines of an infallible Church.

Anticipating the spirit incarnated by the documents of Vatican II, he understood that the very mystery of Christianity that God became man in Jesus Christ to save all mankind, calls for a Christian openness to truth everywhere. The light of faith and reason in the genuine Christian is not afraid to confront the ideas of other persons, even when they may be non-Christian or anti-Christian. For he has been endowed with a critical sense that can truly enter into dialogue with

the other, without running the risk of becoming indifferent or relativistic about the truth. At the same time he does not try to restrict the workings of Christ's Spirit in the minds and hearts of human persons to a visible structure. But he will always strive to respect their convictions, and to incorporate their valid insights into his own Christian synthesis as well as share with them the treasury of truth entrusted by Christ to Catholicism.

This same spirit of seeking the truth wherever the Holy Spirit may be breathing and inspiring it, that characterized the St. Thomas of the 13th century, would also be characteristic of him today. As he would enter into serious dialogue with contemporary philosophy, so too we must confront current thought. As he was conversant with Aristotle, Averroes and Avicenna, today he would have conversed with Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. His probing dialectic, so marvelously employed by listening to the arguments of the other, as shown, *e.g.* in the objections of the *Summa Theologiae*, would have engaged modern philosophers in dialogue. As ever he would be ready and willing to learn with an ear for the truth contained in their thought.

I wish to propose that that we have a dialogue between St. Thomas and one contemporary philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Since someone has remarked that there are as many contemporary philosophies as there are contemporary philosophers, I have chosen one whose thought we might listen to, learn from, and try to respond to. I have chosen the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty because his thought appears to be fairly representative of contemporary philosophy. After we have listened to his ideas, we shall evaluate them with a view toward learning their possible relevance to an open-ended Thomistic synthesis of truth. This critique will be made in the spirit of St. Thomas, striving for a mutual understanding and enrichment by sharing our own insights with Merleau-Ponty.

Biography

First of all, let us meet the man through a brief introduction to his biographical background. Born in Normandy, France, of Catholic parentage in 1908, he abandoned the practice of Catholicism. His main philosophical training was at the Ecole Normale where he first befriended Sartre who came to his rescue during a student riot, when Merleau-Ponty and some others protested against the insipid school

songs. He taught philosophy on the secondary level and at the University of Lyons. At this time Hegel and Marcel influenced his thinking. In 1935 Sartre introduced him to the thought of Husserl whose last works, *The Crisis of the European Sciences* and *Transcendental Phenomenology*, won him to the movement. During the war he escaped captivity, but the conflict left its indelible impressions as his philosophy reflects, particularly in his concept of history as our essential incarnation, and of existence as essentially being co-existence. In 1945 with Sartre and others he founded a philosophical periodical, *Les Temps Modernes*, which probed such problems as contemporary art, politics, Marxism and the reality of communism, and the sciences of man. In 1950 he taught child psychology and Gestalt psychology at the Sorbonne, and in 1953 assumed the chair of philosophy at the College de France. He broke with the absolutism of Sartre in 1955, and died in 1961. Among his many works, the two outstanding for his ideas are *The Structure of Behavior*, written in 1942 and a preparation for his main study of 1945, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

His Doctrine

The central concept of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is called the body-subject. His problematic might be expressed as: What does being-in-the-world really mean for man? And it should be considered in the context of his dialogue with empiricism and intellectualism. For he was constantly trying to mediate between these extremes of objectivism as found in scientism and subjectivism as found in Cartesian idealism. In reaction against the dichotomy between Descartes' thinking mind and mechanical body, he posits as the primary datum or "given" of his philosophy the fundamental unity of bodily being and subjectivity. The body-subject is also opposed to the empiricism of dehumanized science.

For Merleau-Ponty the human body is not a union of two opposites as matter and spirit or body and soul, but rather a unity, a single reality, a subject that does not derive its subjectivity from any other principle. Man's body is a knowing subject, a personal being and not a purely thing-like being. But it is already a subject on the pre-conscious level, since consciousness is not fundamental to subjectivity. For prior to any free conscious activity, man is already a meaning-giving existence. The body itself is an intentionality which gives to reality appearing to us a meaning that is not freely chosen by us, a

meaning which arises when the body situates itself in the world. The eye, *e.g.*, will adjust to seeing objects at a distance or in darkness, by dilation or contraction of the pupil, prior to any conscious act of man. Or at the age of puberty a youth's developed body encounters a new meaning of sexual attraction in the world without clearly knowing why. This pre-conscious subject is attuned to the world, and as the "natural I" it understands the world before and better than the "conscious I." It is presupposed to a conscious and free existence, since if I choose to hike in the mountains or to climb this or that peak, I presume the fact that the body can move in an oriented space. And so the fundamental discovery of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is the original and irreducible body-subject. But as pre-conscious it is obscure, and as a unity of matter and spirit it is ambiguous. By what method, therefore, does he penetrate this realm of man's being?

Cartesian dualism has resulted in a separation of the natural sciences, which use an inductive method in proceeding from facts to laws, from sciences of the mind, which employ a reflective method to discover the fundamentals of our mental life. Neither method is adequate to approach the body-subject.

Any reflective method, even the most profound self-observation, is inadequate to witness the dialogue between the body and the world on the pre-conscious level such as the birth of sexual meaning, of space, of color arising from my own existence as a giver of meaning. In this dialogue or dialectical relationship, the body-subject is not just acted upon or merely an effect of its surroundings, but is rather the central part of a circular causality in the reciprocal relations of a gestalt, a form-whole with mutually related parts. The body-subject really creates its own environment, making it to have meaning for itself. As the organism is primarily active in the digestion of food, transforming it into living reality, so the body-subject is an intentionality that gives meaning to the reality which it confronts.

Likewise, an inductive method is inadequate to discover the pre-conscious body-subject because induction is based upon causal connections in passing from facts to law, and the body is not related to the world as cause and effect, but as a connected whole of meanings, a gestalt, *i.e.* the body comes to be itself through its surroundings which are surroundings precisely as having meaning for the body.

He adopts a methodology called the "Intentional Arc," which makes possible man's conscious life by projecting around him his past and

his future, his human milieu and physical situation, his ideological and moral situations which unify his life, behavior, senses and intellect. This method of observing the dialogue between the body and the world was employed by Merleau-Ponty in analysing the famous Schneider case, a disabled German soldier, whose "intentional arc" broke down, and so was unable to move freely toward any situation unless he was actually in it. No choice was possible because he could not link up any past experiences with his present situation and thus be able to initiate any action of his own.

Merleau-Ponty's main work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, has attracted psychologists who find that his view of the pre-conscious depths in man is not an approach to a thing-like existence, but preserves both its obscurity and subjective character, and also sociologists since we enter into conscious contact with one another through pre-conscious bonds which are not thing-like. His method, in opposition to empiricism, does not discover meaning in the world as absolutely independent of the body, nor, in opposition to idealism, as the projection of absolute ideas present in us and uncovered through reflection. Rather he sees the body as organizing the world whose structure depends upon the body's structure, not as causing the world but giving it meaning. The world is the whole of meanings resulting from the dialogue between the body and the world. He reserves the term existence for the body-subject as distinct from the closed being of things. He uses the word soul, not as a separate principle in man, but as designating the self-transcending subject that man is, whose body goes beyond the object of empirical sciences as merely a mass of chemical combinations constantly interacting. The dialogue with environment and with society indicates that the human body-subject can continuously transcend itself.

In our role as representatives of St. Thomas in today's dialogue, let us listen a little more to Merleau-Ponty as he tells about some of the implications of body-subject in his philosophy. First, man as a self-transcending body-subject advances to speaking-subject since speech is essential to his thought, which needs words not just to signify its meaning but also to complete its meaning, as a teacher arrives at a clearer understanding from his own lecture. Just as the meaning of music is not distinct from the sounds, so the meaning of speech is not to be separated from the "Speaking Word," *i.e.* the original speech which gives meaning to words and makes them say what they have

never said before, as opposed to the "spoken word" or cultural acquisition. Thought, therefore, becomes thought in speaking, comes to exist in a new mode, and the word is much more than a mere conventional sign of the concept.

Meaning, as it is born and matures, is a social event. Coming into existence, we enter a movement of meaning that has begun long before us. I give meaning to my personal existence only by taking up the common situation and giving it greater development, while the common situation develops only because it is taken up by individual persons. Even as the subject in his bodily existence tries to become himself, so human beings in the "flesh of history" try to find one another. This is intersubjective history, which shows that an individual can lead a human existence only when human beings learn to exist together. Consequently, the converging movement of history is toward co-existence, which is contrary both to the particularism of capitalism and the absolutism of Marxism.

For Merleau-Ponty, truth cannot be absolute since the thinking-subject is essentially a speaking-subject, which is a body-subject whose conscious life and light originates in the obscurity of the preconscious. While man can be certain about the world in general, he is unable to have certitude about the particular things in that world because in his dialogue with the surroundings, he makes them appear according to what he is at the time. The universality of truth is rooted in the openness of the body-subject to the world which man enters and where he begins to live in language making his own a world expressed in speech, but where not a single truth of value is *common a priori*, *i.e.* by its own inner light. This universality is essentially connected with the convergent movement of history into which a man is inserted insofar as he takes up this history and actively makes it his own. His existence, as a share in intersubjective history, participates in something common or universal, and only in this way is he in value, or in truth, or in meaning. Being and intelligibility do not coincide since being has an inner density which resists total penetration. Nothing completely escapes the pervading light of man, but nothing is fully captured by it either. The rational order is a zone of light in the density of being which becomes intelligible because of man's presence. But this zone of light is always surrounded by a dark horizon and so there can never be eternal truth versus eternal falsity, but only the classical standpoints of a Socrates or Plato which illumine new facts, which in turn give actuality to the old standpoints.

While Merleau-Ponty refuses to call his philosophy atheistic, because it is a negation, he does not affirm God's existence because it would imply an affirmation of man's inferiority and so of absolute truth. For he cannot harmonize his concept of causality, which is completely univocal and restricted to physical interaction, with human freedom. For a Supreme Being to cause man in the totality of his existence contradicts the whole experience of the body-subject which has a dialectical relationship and not a causal connection with the world. Finally he applies the unity of reciprocal implication between body-subject and world, spirit and body, thinking and speaking, to the relationship between philosophy and the sciences. The sciences need a philosophical vision to evaluate facts, while philosophy requires a scientific analysis of phenomena for a proper vision of reality.

A Reply

As representatives of St. Thomas in the dialogue, we shall make our response to Merleau-Ponty first by incorporating what seem to be his valid insights into the open-ended Thomistic synthesis of truth, secondly by honestly identifying those ideas which seem to be incompatible with our criterion of what is true, and thirdly by offering the basic insights of St. Thomas which might correct and enrich certain aspects of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Our fundamental question is: To what extent has the concept of body-subject and its implications overcome Cartesian dualism, or really transcended the extremes of empiricism and intellectualism?

His notion of intentionality seems to have avoided, at least somewhat, the two extremes while preserving the element of truth in each. He avoids treating the body-subject in cosmological categories of object and natural causality as empiricists do, but retains their primacy of perceptual experience and even broadens the notion of experience by the dialogue between body and world. And while maintaining the original, irreducible character of the intellectualist subject, he still proposes a subject that is not entirely hemmed in from the world into which it projects its absolute ideas.

It appears that his insights can enrich an understanding of the Thomistic theory of knowledge: that there is nothing in the intellect which is not first in the senses must be interpreted in the context of the *lumen naturale* and *primum cognitum* of St. Thomas for whom

knowledge is essentially an immanent activity in which the mind is not mechanically measured by reality, but whose interior light can break through the mere conceptual or representational presence of the object and know the reality. At the same time the substantial union of matter and spirit in man, the unicity of the human soul as the form of man's body, always demands a transcendental relationship of human thought to some embodiment in image, speech or action.

Merleau-Ponty's main contribution seems to lie in providing basis for a more dynamic philosophical anthropology. What we have heard about his psychological description of man's concrete situation in the world, his philosophy of language uniting thought with the "speaking word," his insertion of man into a movement of meaning in the context of intersubjective history, all offer a foundation for further development of man as a person in community. St. Thomas, it seems to me, would be the first to recognize these insights of modern existential phenomenology as an area of expanding the thirteenth century concept of man which lacked the more recent discoveries of social and historical determinism. While beholding human nature and the species of things in a more dynamic and evolutionary perspective, he would still avoid the extremes of an historicist relativism. Fully admitting the cultural and social influences upon the very definition of man, he would conclude to the openness of truth for more profound elaboration but not to the denial of its objective universality nor of its identity with being as a transcendental.

I believe also that he would see in Merleau-Ponty's rejection of an immanentist conception of the absolute a reopening of the approach to the transcendent. He would see as a complete misinterpretation of his fourth proof for God's existence the attempt to show that there must be a highest truth because of the imperfection of our truth, as though we had a basis of comparison in the depths of our consciousness between absolute and limited knowledge. While not accepting Merleau-Ponty's univocal concept of causality, he could sympathize with his misconception since so many philosophers and theologians, even in his name, have treated divine causality and human freedom in such a way that God seems to move man like the stars. He would use more personal analogies such as parents educating children to bring out God's causing human action, and in his metaphysics in general would preserve that sense of mystery in being.

On the other hand, St. Thomas might find his own approach to

truth pursuing a different direction from Merleau-Ponty's insufficient attention to the proper character of the human spirit. For he has not completely accounted for the distinction of man as a body-subject from any other being, *e.g.* an animal body, as St. Thomas did in I, q. 75 (*Summa Theologiae*) where he shows that no principle of life or soul can be a body since otherwise all bodies would be living and that the human soul in particular enjoys a certain subsistence, incorruptibility, etc. in light of the manifestations of spirit in human existence. Although I will not go into a complete critique here, I think that St. Thomas would proceed to point out, in the interests of truth, how this basic inadequacy in his central concept of the body-subject would call into question the other implications of his philosophy. How would he explain for instance, the openness of the body-subject to a dialogue with the world unless there is some interiority of spirit in the human consciousness rendering man capable of this dialectical relationship with his environment that is not found in lesser beings?

According to Paul Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty became aware of the gaps in his philosophical thought and may well have listened to the ideas of a true Thomist who could show him that a monistic concept of man can never really transcend the extremes of empiricism and intellectualism. He fell into an "idealism of meaning" and a "broadened empiricism" because the categories of phenomenology are not adequate to transcend the subject-object or consciousness-being relationship. Only a genuinely metaphysical concept of being that can embrace both man and the world will suffice to preserve both the subjectivity of the knowing subject and the objectivity of the reality known. Nevertheless Merleau-Ponty has provided philosophy and theology with valid and valuable insights.

FOOTNOTE

Particularly for those who may wish to pursue a study of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, it is necessary to point out the relative incompleteness of this article in light of his work, *Le visible et l'invisible*, which has been posthumously published. According to R. C. Kwant's book, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics*, an inquiry into the last period of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical life, his philosophy could become a metaphysics because he no longer considered the dialectic relationship between man and world to be the final source of all meaning, nor contingency to be his final philosophical perspective. The article as it stands, however, is useful for a critical introduction to his thought, and is especially based upon R. C. Kwant's *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, and A. Dondeyne's *Contemporary European Thought and Christian Faith*.