

SARTRE AND MERLEAU-PONTY'S THEORIES OF PERCEPTION AS COGNITION IN THE CONTEXT OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL THOUGHT IN COGNITIVE SCIENCES

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Abstract: Husserl's phenomenology was particularly influential for a number of French philosophers and their theories. Two of the most prominent French thinkers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, turned to the instruments offered by phenomenology in their attempts to understand the notions of the body, consciousness, imagination, human being, world and many others. Both philosophers also provided their definitions of perception, but they understood this notion in very different ways. The paper describes selected aspects of Husserl's phenomenology that were adopted by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty and depicts the presumptions of their respective theories of perception, as well as the differences between them. The main thesis presented here is that theories as different as those proposed by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty may, and indeed do, lead to the same conclusion, i.e. that perception represents a different form of cognition. Despite the differences between these theories, they can both be placed in the contemporary context of phenomenological research carried out by cognitive philosophers Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher, as well as by the proponent of the enactive theory of perception, Alva Noë.

Keywords: cognition, consciousness, enactivism, perception, phenomenology.

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Introduction

The theories of perception to be found in French philosophy are mainly a result of the influence of Husserl's phenomenology. Twentieth-century French academics such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Henry, Jean-Toussaint Desanti, or Jean-Luc Marion adopted Husserl's concepts, treating them as the basis for their own proposals concerning perception, cognition, imagination, emotions, learning and memory, as they sought to understand the way in which humans experience the world and react to it. They conducted this research in the areas of aesthetics, epistemology, theory of literature, theory of photography, and psychology.¹

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¹ See: Merleau-Ponty (2004): 3–4; Delay (2019).

The theories of perception propounded by two great French thinkers, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are particularly interesting. Both philosophers based their research on Husserl's phenomenology.² While they characterise perception in very different ways, the conclusion that follows from their reflections is the same, i.e. that perception allows us to acquire knowledge about the world and therefore it constitutes a cognitive process. Today this belief seems almost trivial, but it is important to remember that French thought at the time of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty was dominated by a Cartesian tradition emphasizing rational, rather than perceptual cognition of reality.³ Second, both of these theories (albeit stemming from the same source of inspiration) have found their place in cognitive sciences, where the phenomenological perspective is currently gaining prominence.⁴

The objective of this paper is to examine the theories of perception proposed by both thinkers. First, the paper will present certain strands of Husserl's phenomenology such as intentionality and the experience of things appearing in the world, which served as the basis for Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. A detailed analysis of the phenomenological concepts adopted by both philosophers deserves a separate paper. Even so, if we are to understand the role of their theories of perception in cognitive sciences, it is necessary to demonstrate the role of phenomenology (defined as a "study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view"),⁵ even though this paper may offer only their general outline. Its main task is to present the tenets of the theories of perception proposed by each philosopher and to analyse differences between them. These reflections lead to the thesis of this paper, i.e. that both theories, despite their differences (which in the main part of the text are defined as a passive form of perception, i.e. simple recording of sensations in Sartre's theory and an active form of perception associated with body movement in the thought of Merleau-Ponty) result in the same conclusion, since Sartre and Merleau-Ponty treat perception as a form of cognition. Finally, I demonstrate that both theories fit the context of research carried out by certain cognitivists who draw upon the phenomenological tradition.⁶

I am aware that every notion examined in this paper merits a separate analysis. Due to obvious constraints, I limit this paper to the analysis of the thought of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. No other philosophers interested in perception are mentioned here and I do not compare the concepts of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty with those proposed by other thinkers. Second, the analyses are limited to the phenomenological perspective defined

² See: Macan (1993).

³ It is worth mentioning that Sartre's attitude to Descartes' philosophy was very complicated. On the one hand, Sartre rejected the philosophical rationality of Descartes, and on the other hand he emphasized the importance of his theory of consciousness. Sartre's approach to Descartes deserve a separate paper. See: Wolff (1955): 341-348; Sartre (1967): 113-143.

⁴ See: Bruzina (2004): 43-88; Dreyfus, Hall (1982).

⁵ See: Smith (2013).

⁶ I wrote about (1) Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's theories of perception but in the context of Merleau-Ponty's commentary of Sartre's theory of consciousness (2) Gallagher's and Zahavi's philosophy but in the context of their interpretation of Sartre's theory of consciousness in their book *Phenomenological Mind* (2008) in my book: *Consciousness, Phenomenon, Imagination. The Theory of Imagination in Jean-Paul Sartre's Early Philosophical Thought* (Nicolaus Copernicus University Publishing, in publishing process).

as the experience of the world from the first-person point of view.⁷ I focus on the role that the notion of intentionality (understood as an ability to be in relation with things or to be conscious of something and thereby create links between subject and objects) plays in both theories. The paper does not deal with the psychological reflections of the examined thinkers, which, as interesting and novel as they were, are beyond the scope of my work. Third, while attempting to show the place of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in cognitive sciences, I focus on the findings of Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher, both of whom represent phenomenological tradition in cognitive sciences⁸ and on Alva Noë, the leading proponent of the enactive theory of perception.

Sartre's Phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Jocelyn Benoist, the author of the work on the development of phenomenology in France, *L'idée de phénoménologie*, underlines that phenomenology as a whole was a welcome break from the idealism developed by Kant and Berkeley, according to which a phenomenal world is constructed by humans.⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre became acquainted with Husserl's philosophy in the 1930s, thanks to Emmanuel Levinas as he read his book devoted to the Husserlian theory of intuition.¹⁰ He owed his encounter with phenomenology to a friend, Raymond Aron, who held a scholarship in Berlin in 1933. Sartre decided to study phenomenology there (which at that time was still little known in France),¹¹ thanks to a stipend from Institut Français. In his conversations with John Gerassi, Sartre mentioned: "I got the same fellowship to go study there that Raymond Aron had the previous year. He helped me get that deal and so he also gets the credit for introducing me to phenomenology."¹² This is how Sartre described his stay in Berlin: "Since I arrived in Berlin, I could witness a great stir among students related to their great interest in phenomenology. I become part of this movement myself."¹³ He was excited by the possibilities that the new science afforded him, particularly the notion of intentionality. The definition of intentionality (consciousness is always the consciousness of something) became a stepping stone for his own theory of consciousness.

Sartre, however, did not adopt Husserl's system uncritically.¹⁴ His main objection to Husserl's theory was that it located the structure of *ego*, which is the centre of

⁷ This perspective is currently being developed in other research fields such as medicine, psychology and pedagogy. See: Neumauer, Witkop, Varpio (2019): 90-97; Schraube (2013): 12-32.

⁸ Both researchers focus on the study of structures of experience, or consciousness, they apply the notion of intentionality and first-person point of view. See: Gallagher, Schmicking (2010); Zahavi (2001; 1999).

⁹ Benoist (2001): 4-5. Husserl's phenomenology was first mentioned in France in 1910 and 1911 by Victor Delbos. Other texts, written by such authors as Hering, Levinas, Shestov, and Spaier were published in 1926-1930. In 1928, Gurwitsch presented the phenomenological method at his lectures at the Sorbonne. In 1929, Husserl himself lectured at Sorbonne and his lectures were translated by Levinas and Peiffer and published in 1931.

¹⁰ Levinas (1930).

¹¹ Fruteau de Laclos (2012): 198-199.

¹² Gerassi, Sartre (2009): 25.

¹³ Sartre (2010): 469.

¹⁴ Ibidem: 467.

our decisions, thoughts and emotions, within consciousness. Sartre also rejected the Husserlian phenomenological reduction, i.e. the act of suspending judgment about the world, as Sartre focused on "the discovery of the essences of various sorts of ideas, such as redness, surface, or relation"¹⁵ in the human's experience of the world.

If Sartre's criticism of these aspects of Husserlian thought may argue against the attempts to define the former as a phenomenologist *sensu stricto*, in the case of Merleau-Ponty there is no such doubt. Let us move now to phenomenological roots of this philosopher. As Taylor Carman states:

Merleau-Ponty was first and foremost a phenomenologist. Alongside pragmatism, logical positivism, and structuralism, phenomenology was among the dominant philosophical movements of the first two thirds of the twentieth century. Its founder was Edmund Husserl, and besides Merleau-Ponty its leading figures were Martin Heidegger, and Jean Paul Sartre.¹⁶

Merleau-Ponty became familiar with Husserl's philosophy before Sartre did, i.e. between 1928-1930. Ten years later, Merleau-Ponty also became acquainted with the works of Fink and Landgrebe on late Husserlian phenomenology.¹⁷ Like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty rejected the Husserlian phenomenological reduction and stressed the importance of intentionality. However, while Sartre adopted certain phenomenological notions in his early philosophical writings that allowed him to reflect on consciousness and its different forms, Merleau-Ponty directed his attention towards the philosophy of embodiment – the experience of the body and the experience of the world through the body. Taylor Carman emphasizes this in the following manner:

his point is that my *experience* of myself is wholly and exclusively an *experience* of a bodily self [...] The body is what constitutes the *structure* of my experience and my behaviour. It is not, for me, an object of belief or observation, but a framework or horizon that constitutes what Merleau-Ponty, following Heidegger, calls my "being in the world".¹⁸

Sartre's phenomenology was, first and foremost, the phenomenology of consciousness, or, more precisely, of the intentionality of consciousness. In comparison, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty was concerned with the direct experience of the world through the body, because: "when existential phenomenology proclaims that man is a being in the world, it obliges itself to furnish us with a coherent doctrine concerning the way in which I am my body."¹⁹ Sartre's attempts to find a definition of consciousness were different than those proposed by spiritual theories, Cartesian tra-

¹⁵ See: Martinich, Stroll (2020). Regarding Sartre's criticism of Husserl's phenomenology, see also: Mouillie (2001): 10.

¹⁶ Carman (2008): 14.

¹⁷ See: Seebohm (2002): 59–60.

¹⁸ Carman (2012): 275.

¹⁹ Lawrence, O'Connor (1967): 149.

dition and Merleau-Ponty's interest in the body, world experience, sensuality and art, because these interests had determined the directions of their thought. Sartre focused on constructing his own theory of consciousness, while Merleau-Ponty moved immediately towards examining various aspects of direct experience. Firstly, I would like to introduce Sartre's theory of consciousness in order to foster a better understanding of his notion of perception.

Sartre's Theory of Consciousness

As has already been mentioned, the starting point for Sartre's reflection was an attempt to provide a definition of consciousness. He believed that:

all consciousness has an intentional structure; it means that in perception, mental imagery, and thought, consciousness, far from being a receptacle, is aimed at something outside itself. Psychology is offered a new perspective: to differentiate the modes of intentionality according to the situations where consciousness is at work – because consciousness is an act – and to treat sensory givens and knowledge in relation to intentionality.²⁰

Sartre's account of consciousness was closely related with Husserl's principle of intentionality, i.e., the assumption that consciousness is always directed towards something; we are always "conscious of" a given object. We cannot say that objects are in the consciousness because the defining feature of consciousness is its intentionality, consciousness is a movement towards something. By defining consciousness as a movement, Sartre consequently rejected the notion of consciousness as a substantial entity.²¹ Firstly, Sartre understands consciousness as a movement without any interior. Secondly, since consciousness has no interior, it may not contain the objects of the external world.²² What is more, Sartre rejected Husserl's concept of the personal character of consciousness (i.e., the presence of a mysterious *ego*, which orders all our sensations, thoughts, and perceptions).²³ According to Sartre, this notion of consciousness is irreconcilable with consciousness defined as the movement towards the external. He held that the assumption of the existence of *ego* inside consciousness contradicts the theory of intentionality. Therefore, he intended to demonstrate that consciousness is deprived of *ego*. He notices in the *Transcendence of the Ego*:

Indeed, the I, with its personality, is – however formal and abstract one may suppose it to be – a centre of opacity, as it were. It bears to the concrete and psycho-physical me the same relation as does a point to three dimensions: it is an infinitely contracted me. So, if we introduce this opacity into consciousness, we will thereby destroy the

²⁰ Sartre (2004b): X.

²¹ The theory of consciousness as a substance was developed by the theories of neo-Kantianism, neo-Cartesianism, associationism and the philosophy of the spirit, rejected by Sartre.

²² Sartre (2003b): 88–89.

²³ Husserl (1989): 6–27, 103–118, 324–340.

highly productive definition we gave of it a little earlier: we will freeze and darken it, so that it is no longer something spontaneous, but bears within itself the germ of opacity. Yet another result would be that we are constrained to abandon the original, profound point of view which makes of consciousness a non-substantial absolute.²⁴

Sartre's phenomenological conception of consciousness allowed him to demonstrate the unity of consciousness without the aid of *ego*, since consciousness exists only as an intentional relation with the object. As Gabriella Farina emphasised "consciousness is relational (*relationnelle*) from its very nature."²⁵ As Hadi Rizk explains "Ego does not belong to consciousness [...]. The analysis presented in *The Transcendence of the Ego* leads to the conclusion that "ego is not an absolute structure of consciousness,"²⁶ and Kenneth Williford: "by intentionality, consciousness is a 'relation' to the world. This already means that consciousness is a 'relation' to an interconnected multiplicity."²⁷ Finally, according to Dan Zahavi, "nor is consciousness in need of any transcendent principle of unification, since it is as such an ecstatic flowing unity."²⁸

In the next step, Sartre distinguished between primary unreflective consciousness, which is directed towards the world, and secondary consciousness, which is directed intentionally towards itself. Therefore, *I* is not present in unreflective consciousness. As Sartre explains: "consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object."²⁹ Unreflective consciousness is a mode of consciousness devoid of the sensation of *self* (which Sartre understand as a Cartesian *ego*³⁰). This type of consciousness, which is of utmost importance for this paper, is also referred to as primary consciousness, not directed towards *self*.³¹

Sartre's passive perception and Merleau-Ponty's active perception

It follows from the above that, according to Sartre, unreflective consciousness is completely filled with the current events towards which it is directed. Thus, according to Sartre, if the objects we see (and also feel, imagine, reminisce, etc.) create our consciousness, then it must be said that perception (and also emotion, imagination, etc.) constitutes consciousness.³² As Steven Crowell explains: "to be conscious of something is to

²⁴ Sartre (2004a): 5.

²⁵ Farina (2014): 9.

²⁶ Rizk (2011): 46–47.

²⁷ Williford (2011): 199.

²⁸ Zahavi (2000): 57.

²⁹ Sartre (2004a): 14.

³⁰ Attempts to explain the concept of *self*, see: Strawson (2000): 39–54.

³¹ An activity of reading is a good example of this mode of consciousness. While reading, we do not perceive the difference between the book we are reading and us reading this book. As long as I identify with the main character of the story, my self remains absent. Unreflective consciousness is not directed towards itself. See: Sartre (2004): 18–19.

³² Sartre established only three main types of unreflective consciousness: perceptual consciousness (*conscience perceptive*), emotive consciousness (*conscience emotionnelle*), and imaging consciousness (*conscience imageante*).

be conscious of being so. To the extent that perception is a conscious state or act, my perception of this landscape or that streetcar as aware of itself *as* perceiving."³³

In order to explain the nature of perception, Sartre provides an example of a cube. When we look at a cube, we can see only one of its sides. By turning the cube, we can gradually register each of its sides that previously remained hidden from our view, so our perception is not constrained – we can study, learn and memorise objects.³⁴ To put it simply, perceptual consciousness registers the impressions coming from the external world. That is all. We can learn about our external world but nothing more. Sartre claimed that through perceptual consciousness I not only perceive objects as they are, but I also perceive the relations between them. In the *Transcendence of the Ego* Sartre explains: "We are thus surrounded by magical objects which retain, as it were, a memory of the spontaneity of consciousness, while still being objects of the world."³⁵ I direct my intention towards a given object, but I can see only fragments of objects, the fragments that enter into relations with other fragments. My insight is only partial.

This process of cognition is limited to the registering of impressions: we must first register various aspects of a perceived object, so Sartre refers to perceptual consciousness as "passive consciousness". On the other hand, thanks to perception, we can learn about different aspects of the world and analyse our reality. In Sartre's view, passive perception allows us to explore the surrounding world and obtain knowledge of it. However, it takes place by means of a slow process, one devoid of freedom and spontaneity. As Mori Norihide emphasizes: "In Sartre's theory, images are generally characterized as spontaneous in nature, as opposed to perception, which is passive."³⁶

Sartre held that we gradually obtain knowledge of what is given to us in our visual impressions, but we cannot do anything with these impressions as creativity, freedom, and spontaneity lie within the domain of imagination.³⁷ John Gerassi – Sartre's friend and biographer puts it simply: "perception was passive [...] imagination active."³⁸ Following Husserl, Sartre defined perception as an act through which consciousness renders a temporal-spatial object present. Perception frequently gives us an impression of novelty, as we must explore the object gradually. Perception is passive registration of reality and thanks to this registration we can get to know our world. By stressing the passive nature of perception, I emphasize Sartre's statement that perception is nothing more than a data register.

Sartre did not pay attention to the fact that the act of perceiving involves our body and that our eyes may "lie to us". He did not write about misleading perceptions. It was Merleau-Ponty who tackled this area. As Shaun Gallagher noticed: "Of all the phenomenologists, however, Merleau-Ponty is best known as the philosopher of embodiment.

³³ Crowell (2012): 204.

³⁴ Sartre (2004b): XXI, 8–9. This example was also established by Husserl's notion of apperception. It can be seen that Sartre assigns an important role to memory and, thanks to which, we remember things that were captured by us in perception. Unfortunately, Sartre does not develop this thread further. He writes about memory in the context of imagining, that is, remembering what was already there and imagining what will happen next.

³⁵ Sartre (2004a): 20.

³⁶ Norihide (2012): 14.

³⁷ Sartre (2004b): 63, 118, 134.

³⁸ Gerassi (1989): 149.

He was able to integrate his study of psychology and neurology into his phenomenology of perception where the notions of lived body and body schema play a central role."³⁹

As opposed to Sartre's sketchy treatment, Merleau-Ponty characterised perception in detail in the works titled *Cezanne's Doubt* and *Phenomenology of Perception*. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he explained and defined what perception is, and in *Cezanne's Doubt* he reached for a specific example from the world of art. Why did he focus on Cezanne? According to Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne was of the opinion that impressionists (such as Monet with his cathedrals) rendered the world as they registered it with their eyes while neglecting other senses, such as the sense of touch. Cezanne attempted to present objects the way we see them (with their solidity and heaviness), but he understood perception in a different way than Sartre's passive registration. As Taylor Carman explains:

Merleau-Ponty wants to capture, he says, the *depth* or *thickness* of the perceptual world, its intimation of *reality*, as opposed to its mere outward surface. We do not just see colours and shapes, but *things*, indeed things we see to *be* hard, soft, wet, dry, warm, cold, heavy, dense, light, and so on.⁴⁰

Cezanne held that our perception is not only visual, but it is aided by other senses. Michael B. Smith explains that: "by perception Merleau-Ponty referred to our kinaesthetic, prescientific lived-bodily presence to the world. We are living bodily system (*le corps proper*) prior to the body-object that is constructed by science or medicine."⁴¹ According to Merleau-Ponty this is what perception is all about, and this is why Cezanne aimed at presenting objects in their solidity: "In the work of Cézanne, Juan Gris, Braque and Picasso, in different ways, we encounter objects – lemons, mandolins, bunches of grapes, pouches of tobacco – that do not pass quickly before our eyes in the guise of objects we 'know well' but, on the contrary, hold our gaze. [...] This was how painting led us back to a vision of things themselves."⁴² Ken Pepper, who writes about Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception gives an example: "when I look at a coffee cup on a desk, it is part and parcel of my experience of the cup that it has a reverse side which, though occluded given my current perspective, is present in my immediate environment and potentially visible from an alternative perspective. Phenomenologically speaking, this is just a basic fact about what it is for human beings to see a three-dimensional object as a three-dimensional object."⁴³ Already at this point of reflection, we can find significant differences between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. In Sartre's philosophy the definition of perception is limited to the statement: "I watch and thanks to watching I can learn." Merleau-Ponty introduces the concepts of three-dimensionality, horizon, heaviness, solidity and touch. It allows him to demonstrate that perceptual cognition is rich, complex and covers all human senses, in particular (as we can see in his analysis of Cezanne's works) the sense of touch.

³⁹ Gallagher (2014): 10.

⁴⁰ Carman (2012): 281.

⁴¹ Smith (1993): 8.

⁴² Merleau-Ponty (2004): 93.

⁴³ Pepper (2014): 55.

What is more, Cezanne noticed that the human body, and more specifically the human eye, is involved in the process of perception. Cezanne, as a painter, was aware of the fact that in a creative act an artist simultaneously registers the objects, reacts to them emotionally and composes the painting. Merleau-Ponty held that Cezanne was able to catch the nature of an object in the act of becoming, i.e. in its spontaneity, and by the same token, painted it directly as he saw it. Merleau-Ponty concludes that Cezanne “wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization. He makes a basic distinction not between ‘the senses’ and ‘the understanding’ but rather between the spontaneous organization of the things we perceive and the human organization of ideas and sciences.”⁴⁴

The question should be raised as to what he meant exactly by “spontaneous organization.” In Cezanne’s perspective, when we look at things around us, our eyes wander around objects, as we look at them from different perspectives: for example, we need to look at them from the left side and the bottom and we are not aware of the fact that our mind imposes its three-dimensional order upon our world or our reality. According to Carman, Cezanne:

does not paint the glasses and plates on a table setting as geometrically perfect ellipses, but instead lets them bulge outward to evoke their real presence as things one could walk right up to and touch. What Cezanne manages to paint, then, is not the light at our eyes [...] but a world perceptually organized by our bodily involvement in it.⁴⁵

However, this “spontaneous organization” happens almost automatically and we fail to register this process. This is why Sartre defined perception as the simple, passive reception of the object, which, as it seems to us, we manage to grasp in one single look. According to Sartre we perceive. This is it. Therefore, he renders perception as a very simple and uncomplicated process.

Merleau-Ponty holds a different view and, taking as example the works of Cezanne, asks us to consider the direction towards which we turn our eyes. Merleau-Ponty held that Cezanne painted the way we see:

For Cezanne, there is a basic distinction to be drawn between the spontaneous organization of our perceptual life and the human organization imposed upon this perception by our science and tradition. The meaning of his paintings lies in his continual attempt to unearth, beneath its human organization, the spontaneous unity of our natural perception. At this primordial level, the classic dichotomies which structure our thought about painting and perception-seeing vs. thinking [...] have no hold” [...] Just as the spontaneous organization of appearances gives rise to the object of primordial perception, freedom “dawns in us without breaking our bonds with the world” (CD, 27/72) by spontaneously organizing the givens of our life.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1992): 13.

⁴⁵ Carman (2012): 282.

⁴⁶ Toadvine (1997): 546–548.

Only when we do this can we understand that we are dealing with a lively, moving, changing perspective. In this context, attention should be paid to the concepts of the body. According to Merleau-Ponty, we perceive through our eyes, which are a part of our body. We can explore the world thanks to our body, which is at the same time a part of this world, as has been emphasised by Carman: "The structure of perception just is the structure of the body: my body is my point of view upon the world."⁴⁷ The body experiences the situations in which it finds itself. On this account, we owe our ability to experience the world to our corporeality. Our body is active and alive, and it reacts to stimuli coming from the world. Joyce Brodsky explains: "Although essentially a hermit, Cezanne's fanatic concentration on the dynamics of perceiving put the image of that act before the spectator, through the bodily act of painting. Thus, Cezanne was being-in-the-world as seer and as «lived body» in the same way that the viewer is."⁴⁸ The same applies to our eyesight, thanks to which we look and learn things. Our eyeballs are not fixed on things. Our eyes move, blink and stare, but of course, we can also look away when we do not like or fear what we see.

According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is the way in which our body actively works in the world. In the act of looking we change our focus from one point to another. All these perspectives come together to create the object in our mind. Therefore, the process of looking is not continuous as Sartre held, but it consists of momentary looks which are later integrated into a single object. Perception is an active process with many aspects and factors that we are unable register: "Merleau-Ponty, in the *Phenomenology*, quoted Novotny's analysis of Cezanne's art as the attempt to paint «pre-world» (PhP, 322; PP, 372), the physiognomy of things in their sensible configuration as they effortlessly arise in nature," Michael B. Smith explains.⁴⁹

In the view of Merleau-Ponty, only perception defined in such a way allows us to acknowledge the diversity and richness of the world. Jean-Paul Sartre reduced perceptual consciousness to visual perception and characterised its function as passive reception of visual impressions. In Sartre's view perception only sees an object and determines its properties. Even though Sartre emphasised that perception does give us knowledge, he limited it to a passive register of sensory impressions.⁵⁰ According to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre erroneously limited the function of perceptual consciousness to the passive reception of a visual stimulus. Instead, Merleau-Ponty understands perception in a very different way. He believes we can see all the sides of a given object simultaneously, as we are surrounded by horizons of perceptual experience: "it is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the objects is given [...] The perceptual synthesis thus must be accomplished by the subject, which can both delimit certain perspectival aspects in the objects."⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty seeks to describe our direct experience of the world as experience of a body acting in the world, so perception is tantamount to being-in-the-world which is rooted in my body, located in my reality, which I co-create. In his own words:

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2012): XV.

⁴⁸ Brodsky (1981): 130.

⁴⁹ Smith (1993): 9.

⁵⁰ This statement refers to representational theories of mind.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty (2002): 34.

This subject, which takes apppoint of view, is my body as the field of perception and action [*pratique*] – insofar as my gestures have a certain reach and circumscribe as my domain the whole group of objects familiar to me. Perception is here understood as a reference to a whole which can be grasped, in principle, only through certain of this parts or aspects.⁵²

According to Merleau-Ponty, our perceptions create our world, the world where we can determine relations between the objects, define, create, seek, and gain knowledge: “the perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion, for example; it is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question.”⁵³ While Sartre limited the role of perceptual cognition to passive reception, for Merleau-Ponty perception was tantamount to cognition that involves reception, movement, sensation, feeling, and experience, i.e. our existential way of being in the world: “we find in perception a mode of access to the object which is rediscovered at every level, and in speaking of the perception of the other I insisted that the word «perception» includes the whole experience which gives the thing itself.”⁵⁴ While Sartre explains that “perceptual consciousness registers” and this is how we learn about the world, Merleau-Ponty goes much further, for him “perceptual consciousness” co-creates our reality.

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perception in cognitive sciences

In the last decade of the 20th century, researchers such as Andy Clark, Arthur Glenberg, and Alva Noë held that in order to understand cognitive processes we need to assume a broader perspective. i.e. the phenomenological perspective.⁵⁵ Along with many others, they believe that phenomenology may prove useful to explore the relation between a human and the world.⁵⁶ To establish the status of Sartre's findings in relation to modern cognitive science, I have decided to refer to the research of Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, both of whom are interested in Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's versions of phenomenology of perception and consciousness.⁵⁷ To illustrate this point I will refer to the words of Dan Zahavi who notices:

Philosophical phenomenology can offer much more to contemporary consciousness research than a simple compilation of introspective evidence. Not only does it address issues and provide analyses that are crucial for an understanding of the true complexity of consciousness and which are nevertheless frequently absent from the current debate, but it can also offer a conceptual framework for understanding subjectivity that might be of considerably more value than some of the models currently in vogue in cognitive science.⁵⁸

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Lawrence, O'Connor (1967): 48.

⁵⁵ See: Shapiro (2011): 625–636; Wilson, Clark (1999): 506–517.

⁵⁶ See: Depraz (2004; 2006); Depraz, Varela, Vermersch (2003); Brook (2008); Pokropski (2011).

⁵⁷ See: Zahavi (2005); Gallagher (2012).

⁵⁸ Zahavi (2005): 5.

Both Zahavi and Gallagher believe that it is necessary to introduce the phenomenological perspective to cognitive science, as a phenomenological approach may help to solve the problem of consciousness. Their understanding of consciousness is akin to the one proposed by Sartre in his phenomenological theory, where consciousness is linked with intentionality and perception. As we can see, Zahavi and Gallagher are right to emphasise that the phenomenological approach attempts to understand the character of the relation between consciousness and the world.

It should be noted that Sartre took a very similar stance, rejecting what he deemed to be an overly biological approach to psychology and opting in favour of intentionality. Zahavi claims that:

Sartre, probably the best-known defender of a phenomenological theory of self-consciousness, considered consciousness to be essentially characterized by intentionality. He also claimed, however, that each intentional experience is characterized by self-consciousness. Thus, Sartre took self-consciousness to constitute a necessary condition for being conscious of something.⁵⁹

Gallagher and Zahavi are focused on providing an account of descriptions of “the ‘what it is like’ of experience”.⁶⁰ According to Ludwig Landgrebe, who quotes Husserl:

Natural cognition commences with experience and abides in experience. In the theoretical attitude that we call the ‘natural’ attitude, the entire horizon of possible research is designated with one word: it is the world [...] The world is the “totality of everything intramundane” and perception is the “original object-giving experience.”⁶¹

Both of them turn to the conception of perception as consciousness proposed by Sartre. In the chapter of *The Phenomenological Mind* devoted to Sartre’s unreflective consciousness (unreflective because does not need to confirm to itself), they point to the importance of the first-person perspective (*I*) in the research on consciousness:

To emphasize the importance of the first-person perspective should consequently not be seen as an endorsement of a perceptual model of self-knowledge, as if our acquaintance with our own experiences literally came about through a specific perspective-taking. Rather, the point is simply that there is a distinctive way experiential episode presents themselves to the subject whose episodes they are.⁶²

This type of consciousness is always directed towards the world: “when I am absorbed in reading a story, I have a consciousness of the narrative and a pre-reflective self-awareness of the reading but, according to Sartre, I do not have any awareness of

⁵⁹ Zahavi (2005): 12.

⁶⁰ Gallagher, Zahavi (2008): 10.

⁶¹ Landgrebe (1973): 6.

⁶² Gallagher, Zahavi (2008): 47.

an ego" – explains Zahavi.⁶³ For Sartre, Gallagher, and Zahavi, it is obvious that when I am engaged in a conscious activity, I do not direct my attention towards myself, but I am still self-conscious of myself as a person who is doing it. They write:

If I am engaged in some conscious activity, such as the reading of a story, my attention is neither on myself nor on my activity of reading, but on the story. But if my reading is interrupted by someone asking me what I am doing, I reply immediately that I am (and have for some time been) reading; and the self-consciousness on the basis of which I answer the question is not something acquired at just that moment but a consciousness of myself that has been present to me all along.⁶⁴

Gallagher and Zahavi also tackle the issue of temporality and invoke the Husserlian concept of time. Husserl's reflections on temporality correspond to the concept of perception propounded by Merleau-Ponty, primarily to the latter's vital assumption that perception is a way of being in the world. In the work titled *The Interpretations of Embodied Cognition*, Shaun Gallagher categorises theories of embodied cognition according to the "presumed extent to which body impacts cognitive processes."⁶⁵ The author distinguishes minimal embodiment, biological embodiment, embodied semantics, embodied functionalism and, last but not least, radical (enactive) embodiment, propounded by the author himself, along with Alva Noë, Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson.⁶⁶ For the purpose of this paper, I am particularly interested in the last stance on embodied cognition since it is deeply indebted to the phenomenological tradition. As Shaun Gallagher states: "in scientific contexts the concept of phenomenology is not usually taken in the strict or formal sense defined by the philosophical phenomenological tradition. As such, phenomenology still has an important role to play in studies of embodied cognition and bodily action".⁶⁷

The researchers who share many assumptions with enactivism and Merleau-Ponty emphasise the active nature of the process of perception: "perception is not a process of passive reception of information that is built up into a representation of a meaningful environment, but direct sensitivity – often made possible by exploratory activity – to properties of the environment that are already action-relevant" – claims James Gibson – a pioneer of ecological psychology.⁶⁸ They also take into account the notion of intentionality, arguing that it is intentionality that allows cognitive scientists to start the analysis of the relations between the mind and the world. Enactivists believe that cognitive processes can be explained by dynamic relationships between the brain, the body, and the environment. The authors of *The Embodied Mind*⁶⁹ (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch) take a similar stance to Gallagher and Zahavi, and criticise science, including cognitive science, for becoming too removed from everyday human experience. They state that

⁶³ Zahavi (2005): 34.

⁶⁴ Zahavi (2006): 277.

⁶⁵ Pokropski (2011): 127; Gallagher (2011).

⁶⁶ See: Pokropski (2011): 127–129; Thompson (1995; 2001); Noë, Thompson (2002).

⁶⁷ Gallagher (2014): 11.

⁶⁸ Ward, Silverman, Villalobos (2017); see also: Gibson (2015).

⁶⁹ Varela, Thompson, Rosch (1991).

cognitive sciences are overly focused on abstract computational models and argue that this approach should be abandoned in favour of the theory of cognition proposed by Merleau-Ponty. The writings of the French philosopher clearly demonstrate that it is through cognitive processes that the sense of the world may emerge.

We can only make sense of the world through interaction between an embodied being and the environment. Varela holds that embodied cognition is temporal, i.e., it is ordered by a "sensorimotor, dynamic structure of an action."⁷⁰ The sensorimotor character of cognition is one of the main assumptions of Alva Noë, who claims perception is formed by "sensorimotor knowledge"⁷¹, requisite for the very possibility to "constitute the object of perception."⁷² As the Polish researcher Marek Pokropski explains, we perceive the object in its entirety because perception provides for the possibility of "interaction with the object" and "bodily movement". In this way, Noë attempts to explain how we "perceive a multi-layered, rich in detail reality as coherent".⁷³ He claims that, in order to register the details of our surroundings, we need to look at them and move, as the movement (of the eyes, head, and the entire body) plays a vital role in constituting the perceived world.⁷⁴ Cezanne's paintings are an example of a lively perspective resulting from mobility, in this case, eye movement. Seeing does not consist of a Sartrean passive receptivity, but rather Merleau-Ponty's active perception. Perception is possible thanks to bodily engagement with the world, to mobility, time and the tasks they have to carry out in this world.

Conclusions

The phenomenology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty has proven to be an interesting perspective that has inspired cognitive scientists, psychologists, philosophers, and biologists alike. The comparison between two extremely different concepts of perception, and hence two distinct ways of gaining knowledge about the world, provides us with a multidimensional picture of a human acting in the world and relating to it. According to Dan Zahavi:

In my view, the phenomenologists have much to offer the contemporary discussion of self-consciousness. This is perhaps especially so given the current situation. Although higher-order theories of consciousness have enjoyed great popularity for a couple of decades, they have recently been met with growing dissatisfaction, and many have started to search for viable alternatives. But if one is on the lookout for promising and sophisticated alternatives to the higher-order accounts, one should take a closer look at phenomenology.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Pokropski (2011): 130. See also: Varela, Thompson (2001): 418–425.

⁷¹ "The sensorimotor theory of perceptual experience claims that perception is constituted by bodily interaction with the environment, drawing on practical knowledge of the systematic ways that sensory inputs are disposed to change as a result of movement." See: Silverman (2018): 157.

⁷² Pokropski (2011): 131. See also Noë (2004): 1.

⁷³ Pokropski (2011): 131.

⁷⁴ See: *Ibidem*: 131–132.

⁷⁵ Zahavi (2006): 293.

Thanks to the research instruments offered by different interpretations of phenomenology, we may arrive at a concept of a human being as a free, creative, spontaneous, and active individual who is “thrown into the world,” and, by the same token, one which is forced to react actively to everything the world has to offer.

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