

## Seeing as Perceiving? The Danger and the Possibility in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Ontology

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Peter Albano's essay on Merleau-Ponty's *Primacy of Perception* draws our attention to aspects of knowing — *embodied* knowing — that is worthy of investigation and analysis precisely because it is ignored in education. Merleau-Ponty's work, described by Albano as "phenomenological ontology," is difficult. It is perhaps too contradictory to think about, much less talk about, because it is already barred and confounded by language itself. Yet, embodied knowing is too fundamental and potentially too liberatory to overlook.

And, we argue here, it is also dangerous: Merleau-Ponty's insistence on embodiment holds the possibility and promise of opening our consciousness to the variation, diversity, infinite possibility of manifestation of Being...and the danger of reiterating our limitations, of covering-over the complexity of the real with sensation of the "I." While Albano tantalizes us with metaphors of perception as consciousness and enactment of a dynamic tension of being-in-the-world and being-of-the-world, of simultaneous immanence *and* transcendence, he ultimately "lets go" that tension and *mis*perceives. In Albano's essay, the balance required to hold the contradictions in embracing ambiguity degenerates into the very dichotomization of the mind and body, the self and object, which Merleau-Ponty himself worked to avoid in the Cartesian concern of the *Cogito*. Specifically, Albano's argument fails to account for the particularities of our corporeality, for how we perceive and perceive each other as racialized, gendered, historically embodied beings. For the sake of brevity and clarity, we shall turn our attention here to issues raised in the sections of his essay concerning educational implications and ambiguity of communication, and focus on an understanding of what it might mean to perceive the other as an embodied being.

Albano is surely correct when he tells us that "the enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen," and that, quoting Merleau-Ponty, bodily "animation" occurs "between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched...when the spark is lit between sensing and the sensible." Although we can see and touch ourselves (Albano uses the example of one hand touching the other), the importance of this dynamic of perceiving and being perceived brings other human beings into meaning beyond that of mere things and objects in our phenomenological world. Albano confirms this when he writes, "the supreme perception is perception of the other, the mutual presence of embodied subjects to one another." He adds, "each...relates to the embodied other, *like unto oneself*, in reciprocal corporeal encounter." Mutual beholding is "two gazes which light and mirror each other," and shaking hands is a shared intercorporeality. Mutual reflection is truly reflection of "*one's own likeness*" (emphasis added). In other words, the act of perceiving is in fact paradoxical, because to perceive is to be perceived. The mind

and the body constitute, act as mediator to, the act of being made visible through another's gaze. To be sure, there is nothing more fundamental in education than to be, and be perceived as, an embodied being. But, this is precisely where Albano and Merleau-Ponty get into danger. *Who is it that sees us? Whom do we see? And, when we see, is what we see "our own likeness?"*

There lies a tacit assumption in perception, namely, the assumption of a normative structure of a bodily being. In writing a feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in terms of sexual ideology, Judith Butler remarks:

the potential openness of Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality is deceptive. Despite his efforts to the contrary, Merleau-Ponty offers descriptions of sexuality which turn out to contain tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality. Not only does he assume that sexual relations are heterosexual, but that the masculine sexuality is characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body.<sup>1</sup>

This critique is essential, as Merleau-Ponty himself considers the body as a "historical idea" rather than "a natural species."<sup>2</sup> In this sense, we are already-inscribed bodies. Bodies "demand" to be perceived; this demand — as subject to subject — is the corporeal context for communication.

Indeed, our not-sameness to each other is not a flaw, a lack, or a wound — but is the very condition of communication. Merleau-Ponty alludes to this when he writes that, while there is a "primordial communication" and a belief in an "undivided being between us," it is also that "the body of the other — as bearer of symbolic behaviors and of the behavior of true reality — tears itself away from being one of my phenomena, offers me the task of a true communication, and confers on my objects the new dimension of intersubjective being."<sup>3</sup> It is in the ambiguity of intersubjectivity — in the move to transcend our own sensation — that our embodied beings are animated and our perception "wakes up." At the same time, our intercorporeality exacts a perceptual communicative responsibility to engage in an intersubjective gaze.

When he cites Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* to characterize the social world of African-American community in the language of "anal economics and an excremental vision"; when he speaks Morrison's term "nigger joke" without understanding that the bodily reference in the joke is not about dark, dense excrement, but that the joke cloaks and expresses historical pain; when the only reference to women or persons of color in the essay is a conflation with "excrement"; Albano is not really "shaking hands" with Toni Morrison. The social world of the African-American community is reduced to the object of bodily functions rather than perceived as bodily subjects. To come to understand Morrison's work, as an example, necessitates that we broaden our gaze and engage our perception fully to communicate what an embodied being might mean. It is to consider the lived realities of a gendered, raced, and sexual experience in historical contexts. Albano fails to respond to this opportunity and demand in his misguided read of Morrison. Certainly, as educators, our phenomenological task is to turn to the "things themselves," or more appropriately, "to the embodied beings themselves." In building on Butler's critique, there cannot exist a reductive, normative perceptual terrain. The historical contingency of

our bodily experience is rooted in a uniquely gendered and cultured human organization.

The primacy of perception for us lies in not projecting our own lived experiential gaze onto an object — therein lies the danger — but to engage our minds and bodies to perceive one another as historically situated embodied beings, inscribed as we are with our own histories and cultures — therein lies the possibility.

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1. Judith Butler, “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenology Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception,” in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 86.

2. *Ibid.*, 85.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 17-18.