Introduction: Merleau-Ponty's Gordian Knot

A feature of Merleau-Ponty's work that both distinguishes him from the other classical phenomenologists and makes him of particular contemporary interest is his intensive and explicit engagement with scientific research. However, as enticing as the prospect of a scientifically informed, but genuinely philosophical phenomenology might be, there is much uncertainty over how to understand Merleau-Ponty's methodological and metaphilosophical commitments. Particularly vexing is his apparent commitment to transcendental phenomenology on the one hand, along with his extensive use of empirical science – which seems to imply at least concessions to naturalism – on the other. For this brings together two kinds of intellectual project that have commonly been thought of as distinct or even incommensurable by both traditional and contemporary authors. The image of the Gordian knot captures this enticing but apparently unfathomable constellation of ideas, while prompting the question of whether and how the various strands of thought that are tightly interwoven in Merleau-Ponty's work can be analytically disentangled. The contributions to this edited Special Issue explore some of the ways this Gordian knot may be dealt with. Collectively they consider important historical influences on Merleau-Ponty's work (particularly Kant and Husserl) and different periods in that work, while setting out conflicting proposals for interpreting the extent of its transcendentalism and connecting it with contemporary concerns stemming from the empirical sciences and contemporary discussions about philosophical methodology and naturalism.

The contributions by Michaela Summa and Sebastian Gardner focus on Merleau-Ponty's relation to Kant and German Idealism and present him as a transcendental philosopher. Thus Summa draws on parallels between Merleau-Ponty and Kant's conception of reflecting judgment and genius in the *Critique of Judgement* to propose a transcendental philosophical account of creativity. Such an account is to be capable of complementing and informing empirical research in cognitive science and psychology by defining necessary conditions for creativity and showing how creativity plays a foundational role in experience and cognition. Beyond their parallels, Summa argues, the role Kant sees for creativity in the merely subjective genesis of knowledge is transformed by Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution, so that creativity has an intersubjective and constitutive role in experience and cognition.

Gardner argues that the deeply transcendental character of Merleau-Ponty's thought is best understood through a comparison with the problem trajectory of German idealism. He shows how Merleau-Ponty's thought parallels that of Schelling, both in its critique of Kant and in the form of its positive response, as a position that combines transcendental idealism with an object-centred philosophy of nature (Schelling's *Realidealismus*). Ultimately, however, Gardner contends that, even on a charitable aestheticist reading, Merleau-Ponty's *Visible and Invisible* is less successful than Schelling's speculative *Wissenschaft* as a transcendental account of the conditions for objective knowledge and should therefore be thought of as subordinate to the latter.

Several of the contributions offer contrasting interpretations of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, particularly its status as a transcendental or empirical work. At one end of the scale, Bryan Smyth suggests that Merleau-Ponty ultimately prioritizes the transcendental over the empirical by considering the question of what has logical priority in his overall project. Appreciating that perception works holistically, under the guidance of operative intentionality and a projective function that imposes a distinctive style on all experience of the world, Smyth argues, leads us to recognize the underlying methodological primacy of a certain conception of the sense or direction of world history. The nonnaturalistic orientation provided by this world historical horizon is to underlie and clarify Merleau-Ponty's own talk of the primacy of perception and to entail a corresponding priority of the transcendental over the empirical in his work.

By contrast, Andrew Inkpin argues that Merleau-Ponty's form of phenomenology cannot be considered a form of transcendental philosophy, despite the author's own use of transcendentalist terminology. He develops this claim through a comparison with Husserl, considering how Merleau-Ponty modifies several features that were central to the former's view of how phenomenology can make transcendental claims. The net result of these modifications, according to Inkpin, is that within the context of his overall position Merleau-Ponty is unable to define and ground claims of a distinctively transcendental kind and therefore should not be considered a transcendental philosopher.

Jack Reynolds takes a similar approach in reviewing various features of Merleau-Ponty's critical response to Husserlian phenomenology, but sees him as exemplifying an intermediate, methodologically hybrid position. Against strong

transcendentalism that neatly delimits and subordinates the role of empirical enquiry, Reynolds reads Merleau-Ponty as developing a deflationary, fallibilist conception of transcendentalism that allows inferential reasoning. Against reductive and eliminative variants of naturalism, he interprets several key disputed passages in Merleau-Ponty's work as defining a weak version of methodological naturalism that is committed to continuity of results with empirical science and to treating the latter as an equal partner in dialogue. Read in this way, Merleau-Ponty is to succeed in intertwining the transcendental and the empirical, as complementary aspects of a fully developed understanding of phenomena.

A close connection between transcendental reflection and science is also highlighted by David Morris, who argues that processes of empirical measurement provide a model for understanding Merleau-Ponty's distinctive view of the relation between the transcendental and the empirical. Measurement is taken to be analogous to transcendental reflection in attempting to draw an invariant standard (the measurement) from the underlying dynamic processes (the measured). For Morris, quantum mechanical measurement further provides a model for the institution of such a standard against the background of indeterminate being, while our perception of depth illustrates the simultaneous relation of intertwining and divergence (*écart*) that he takes to characterize the temporal relation between the transcendental and the empirical in Merleau-Ponty.

Finally, Søren Overgaard provides a concrete example of the application of Merleau-Ponty's views to debates of both philosophical and empirical interest by considering the implications of his emphasis on embodiment in understanding other minds. He begins by rejecting the idea that Merleau-Ponty simply dissolves 'the' problem of other minds and instead identifies three distinct other-minds problems. On the philosophical side, Overgaard clarifies and refines Merleau-Ponty's potential contribution to the problems of how other minds are conceivable (the conceptual problem) and how knowledge of other minds is possible (the epistemological problem). On the empirical side, he argues that, unlike some social cognition theorists, Merleau-Ponty was right to recognize that the mere fact of embodiment is of no direct use in answering the question of how we actually find out about other minds (the empirical problem).

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