

## MERLEAU-PONTY ON CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD

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### Abstract

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) not only published in the fields of phenomenology, aesthetics, politics, and linguistics, but he also lectured as professor of child psychology, which resulted in several texts specifically devoted to the child. Most notably are the works “The Child’s Relations to Others,” *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, and *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures, 1949–1952*. And yet the question of the child occurs throughout his entire corpus. Thus, it is quite difficult to limit Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of childhood to one given text or theme, as his philosophy of childhood is the driving force behind his entire account of the self, others, and world in his philosophical project. The investigation of the child was not a phase of Merleau-Ponty’s career; it was what guided his entire project. Merleau-Ponty is adamant, however, that his work in psychology and philosophy should not be viewed as separate projects. Rather, he repeatedly stresses an intertwining of philosophy and psychology, self and other, theory and praxis, and (like Freud) the lasting influence of childhood on adult life. In this vein, the following texts, both from his “philosophical” and “psychological” works, provide a sense of the significance the child plays in Merleau-Ponty’s overarching project, particularly in his account of intersubjectivity and the parent-child relation.

Key words: Merleau-Ponty, childhood, psychology, parent-child relation

### Merleau Ponty sobre niñas y niños y la Infancia

#### Resumen

Maurice Merleau Ponty (1908-1961) no sólo publicó en el campo de la fenomenología, estética, política y lingüística, sino también realizó conferencias como profesor de psicología infantil que fueron publicadas en una serie de textos dedicados específicamente al niño. Entre sus trabajos más importantes se encuentran: Las Conferencia de la Sorbona desde 1949 a 1952: “Las relaciones del niño con los demás”, “Conciencia y adquisición del lenguaje”, y “Psicología infantil y pedagogía”. Estudia la cuestión de la niñez a lo largo del corpus de su trabajo. Por lo tanto es sumamente difícil limitar la cuestión de la infancia de Merleau Ponty a un único texto, en tanto su filosofía de la infancia se nutre, en su proyecto filosófico de su concepción completa del yo, de los otros y del mundo. La investigación del niño no fue una fase en la carrera de Merleau-Ponty: fue lo que guió todo su proyecto. Merleau Ponty está convencido que su trabajo sobre psicología y sobre filosofía no deben ser considerados como proyectos separados. Más bien insiste en reiteradas ocasiones en un entrelazamiento entre filosofía y psicología; yo y el otro; la teoría y la práctica y (como Freud) en la influencia duradera de la infancia en la vida adulta. En este orden de ideas, sus textos filosóficos y psicológicos proporcionan un sentido de la importancia que el niño tiene en el proyecto

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general de Merleau-Ponty, en particular en su relato de la intersubjetividad y de la relación padre e hijo.

Palabras clave: Merleau-Ponty, infancia, psicología, relación entre padres e hijos

### **Merleau-Ponty: sobre crianças e infância**

#### Resumo

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) não só publicou nos campos da fenomenologia, estética, política e linguística, como também lecionou como professor de psicologia infantil, o que resultou na publicação de vários textos especificamente voltados à infância. Os trabalhos mais importantes são “As relações da criança com os outros”, “Consciência e a aquisição da linguagem” e “Psicologia e pedagogia da criança: cursos da Sorbonne, 1949-1952”. E, ainda, a questão da criança aparece ao longo de todo seu trabalho. Então, torna-se um pouco difícil limitar a filosofia da infância de Merleau-Ponty a um texto ou tema específico, na medida em que sua filosofia da infância toma força, em seu projeto filosófico, de sua descrição completa do eu, dos outros e do mundo. A investigação da criança não foi uma fase na trajetória de Merleau-Ponty: foi o que guiou seu projeto inteiro. Merleau-Ponty está convencido, contudo, que seu trabalho na psicologia e na filosofia não deve ser visto como projetos distintos. Antes, ele repetidamente assinala um entrelaçamento entre filosofia e psicologia, eu e outro, teoria e prática, e (como Freud) a duração da influência da infância na vida adulta. Sob esta perspectiva, os textos a seguir, tanto de trabalhos “filosóficos” quanto de trabalhos “psicológicos”, atribuiu um sentido à importância que a criança tem no projeto geral do Merleau-Ponty, particularmente no seu trabalho sobre a intersubjetividade e a relação entre pais e filho.

Palavras-chave: Merleau-Ponty; infância; psicologia; relação pais e filho.

## MERLEAU-PONTY ON CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was a prominent French phenomenologist, existentialist, and psychologist whose work has had a profound influence on many fields of inquiry. Merleau-Ponty himself published works in a wide range of topics, most notably in the areas of perception, intersubjectivity, aesthetics, literature, philosophy of language, history, politics, and nature. And his thought continues to exert an influence not only in the aforementioned fields but in newer areas of inquiry such as cognitive neuroscience, philosophy of mind, comparative philosophy, and environmental studies.

Most notably, for the purpose of this essay, Merleau-Ponty was not only ensconced in the phenomenological tradition, but he also lectured as professor of child psychology at the Sorbonne from 1949 through 1952 (consequently, Piaget, who Merleau-Ponty sharply criticized throughout his career, began teaching at the Sorbonne in 1952), which resulted in several texts specifically devoted to the child. These lectures are contained in *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures, 1949–1952*, but his two most notable works from this time period are “The Child’s Relations to Others” and *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*.<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s explicit work on childhood and children reveals an extensive dialogue with many of the scholars in psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and linguistics who were prominent at the time in French academic circles. These include but are not limited to the work of Sigmund and Anna Freud, Jean Piaget, Jacques Lacan, Jacob L. Moreno, Gustave Guillaume, Henri Wallon, Melanie Klein, Edward Glover, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Henri Delacroix, Antoine Grégoire, Georges-Henri Luquet, George Herbert Mead, and Else Frenkel-Brunswik.

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<sup>2</sup> Originally published in French, respectively, as: *Psychologie et pédagogie de l’enfant: Cours de Sorbonne 1949–1952*. Paris: Verdier, 2001; *Les relations avec autrui chez l’enfant*. Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1969; “La Conscience et l’acquisition du langage,” *Bulletin de psychologie* no. 236, 18 (1964).

And yet the question of the child occurs throughout his entire corpus. Thus, it is quite difficult to limit Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of childhood and children to these lectures alone or to one time period of his career. Indeed, I would argue that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of childhood is the driving force behind his entire account of the self, others, and world in his philosophical project. While some scholars have drawn sharp distinctions between Merleau-Ponty's "philosophy" and his lectures in "psychology" (those committed to the former often not familiar with the latter), such a bifurcation of his works ignores the fact that the child is a steady theme in both his early and later philosophical texts. Further, Merleau-Ponty was adamant that "there is no difference between psychology and philosophy. Psychology is always an implicit and budding philosophy, and philosophy has never given up its contact with facts" (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 10). There are not two separate accounts of intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty; rather, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly stresses an intertwining of self and other, theory and praxis, philosophy and psychology, and (like Freud) the lasting influence of childhood on adult life.

The investigation of the child was not a phase of Merleau-Ponty's career; it was what guided his entire project. Merleau-Ponty discusses the child and childhood at critical moments throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, *Signs*, and *The Visible and the Invisible*. It is by recourse to the embodied child and a latent childhood, which undergirds all of our adult lives, that Merleau-Ponty undermines the primacy of the Cartesian *cogito* and its so-called "problem" of other minds in both the phenomenological tradition (e.g., Husserl) and classical psychology (e.g., Piaget)—and yet resists the tendency in postmodern thought to reduce the self to a web of cultural and social significations. It is by an analysis of the child that Merleau-Ponty arrives at an account of the self-other relation that calls into question the ontology of violence that is the centerpiece of the accounts of intersubjectivity in Hegel, Freud, and Sartre. And it is by a meditation on the child that he offers novel accounts of perception, linguistics, and epistemology that take into consideration our embodied, corporeal posture in the world. It is no surprise, then, that Jean-Paul Sartre—who was

a close friend to Merleau-Ponty for much of his career—would describe Merleau-Ponty as one who was “hopelessly pining for his childhood” (Sartre 1965, 245) and would describe him as a philosopher driven by wonder like a “child scandalized by our futile grown-up certitudes, who asks shocking questions which the adults never answer” (321).

In this vein, this essay provides selections from both Merleau-Ponty’s “philosophical” and “psychological” texts in order to provide a sense of the significance the child plays in Merleau-Ponty’s overarching project, particularly in his account of intersubjectivity. Selections include excerpts from his early philosophy (*Phenomenology of Perception*), from several of his lectures in child psychology, and finally, from his mature philosophy (*The Visible and the Invisible*). I have chosen to allow the texts to largely speak for themselves—a number of the quotations overlap in theme, and thus, help in clarifying each other—but a brief synopsis will be provided after each collection of quotations from each period of Merleau-Ponty’s career.

***From Phenomenology of Perception (orig. pub. 1945), 172–73, 215, 404–05, 412–14,***

**473**

The various parts of my body, its visual, tactile and motor aspects are not simply co-ordinated. If I am sitting at my table and I want to reach the telephone, the movement of my hand towards it, the straightening of the upper part of the body, the tautening of the leg muscles are enveloped in each other. I desire a certain result and the relevant tasks are spontaneously distributed amongst the appropriate segments. . . . All these movements are available to us in virtue of their common meaning. That is why, in their first attempts at grasping, children look, not at their hand, but at the object: the various parts of the body are known to us through their functional value only, and their co-ordination is not learnt. . . . I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it. (Merleau-Ponty 2010b, 172–173)

It is true that often knowledge of other people lights up the way to self-knowledge: the spectacle outside him reveals to the child the meaning of its own impulses, by providing them with an aim. But the instance would pass unnoticed if it did not coincide with the inner possibilities of the child. . . . The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his. . . . I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject, and this life among things has nothing in common with the elaboration of scientifically conceived objects. (215).

I shall never manage to seize the present through which I live with apodeictic certainty, and since the lived is thus never entirely comprehensible, what I understand never quite tallies with my living experience, in short, I am never quite at one with myself. Such is the lot of a being who is born. . . . The fact that my earliest years [in childhood] lie behind me like an unknown land is not attributable to any chance lapse of memory, or any failure to think back adequately. . . . I am borne into personal existence by a time which I do not constitute, all my perceptions stand out against a background of nature. . . . Just as nature finds its way to the core of my personal life and becomes inextricably linked with it, so behavior patterns settle into that nature, being deposited in the form of a cultural world. Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, implements, a bell, a spoon, a pipe . . . . In the cultural object, I feel the close presence of others beneath a veil of anonymity. (404-05)

If I experience this inhering of my consciousness in its body and its world, the perception of other people and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty. . . . Through phenomenological reflection I discover vision, not as a 'thinking about seeing', to use Descartes' expression, but as a gaze at grips with a visible world, and that is why for me there can be another's gaze; that expressive

instrument called a face can carry an existence, as my own existence is carried by my body. . . . There is nothing here resembling 'reasoning by analogy'. As Scheler so rightly declares, reasoning by analogy presupposes what it is called on to explain. The other consciousness can be deduced only if the emotional expressions of others are compared and identified with mine, and precise correlations recognized between my physical behavior and my 'psychic events'. Now the perception of others is anterior to, and the condition of, such observations, the observations do not constitute the perception. A baby of fifteen months opens its mouth if I playfully take one of its fingers between my teeth and pretend to bit it. And yet it has scarcely looked at its face in a glass, and its teeth are not in any case like mine. The fact that its own mouth and teeth, as it feels them from the inside, are immediately, for it, an apparatus to bite with, and my jaw, as the baby sees it from the outside, is immediately, for it, capable of the same intentions. 'Biting' has immediately, for it, an intersubjective significance. It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body. . . . The self which perceives is in no particularly privileged position which rules out a perceived self; both are, not *cogitations* shut up in their own immanence, but beings which are outrun by their world, and which consequently may well be outrun by each other. . . . I am already in communication with others. . . . No sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in process of acting than the objects surrounding it immediately take on a fresh layer of significance: they are no longer simply what I myself could make of them, they are what this other pattern of behavior is about to make of them. . . . I experience my own body as the power of adopting certain forms of behavior and a certain world, and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world. . . . [The self] annexes natural objects by diverting them from their immediate significance, it makes tools for itself, and projects itself into the environment in the shape of cultural objects. The child finds them around him at birth like meteorites from another planet. He appropriates them and learns to use them as others do, because the body schema ensures the immediate correspondence of what he sees done and what he himself does. . . . In the experience

of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are inter-woven into a single fabric. . . . And indeed, the objection which my interlocutor raises to what I say draws from me thoughts which I had no idea I possessed, so that at the same time that I lend him thoughts, he reciprocates by making me think too. . . . The perception of other people and the intersubjective world is problematical only for adults. The child lives in a world which he unhesitatingly believes accessible to all around him. . . . At about twelve years old, says Piaget, the child achieves the *cogito* and reaches the truths of rationalism. At this stage, it is held, he discovers himself both as a point of view on the world and also as called upon to transcend that point of view, and to construct an objectivity at the level of judgement. Piaget brings the child to a mature outlook as if the thoughts of the adult were self-sufficient and disposed of all contradictions. But, in reality, it must be the case that the child's outlook is in some way vindicated against the adult's and against Piaget, and that the unsophisticated thinking of our earliest years remains as an indispensable acquisition underlying that of maturity, if there is to be for the adult one single intersubjective world. . . . With the *cogito* begins that struggle between consciousnesses, each one of which, as Hegel says, seeks the death of the other. For the struggle ever to begin, and for each consciousness to be capable of suspecting the alien presences which it negates, all must necessarily have some common and be mindful of their peaceful co-existence in the world of childhood. (410-14).

The event of my birth has not passed completely away, it has not fallen into nothingness in the way that an event of the objective world does, for it committed a whole future, not as a cause determines its effect, but as a situation, once created, inevitably leads on to some outcome. There was henceforth a new 'setting,' the world received a fresh layer of meaning. In the home into which a child is born, all objects change their significance; they begin to await some as yet indeterminate treatment at his hands; another and different person is there, a new personal history, short or long, has just been initiated, another account has been opened. My first perceptions, along



with the horizons which surrounded it, is an ever-present event, an unforgettable tradition. (473).

### *Summary and Analysis*

Merleau-Ponty stresses a wholism regarding the self: thinking, perceptions, emotions, and bodily senses cannot be neatly compartmentalized but are always informing one another while the self is engaged with others and the world. This stands in stark contrast to Piaget, who describes synesthesia as a fundamental “confusion” of the senses that is representative of the immature infant and which must be left behind if the child is to become a mature adult capable of linear, rational thought. Rather than depict childhood and adulthood as discrete stages, Merleau-Ponty observes a fundamental consistency. The child does not first self-consciously reflect on his or her body and then encounter objects; rather, the child experiences both the body and the world as a fundamental unity, with each sense working together in the child’s actions. This posture toward the world continues to persist into adulthood. Even more, it reveals the false binary of Cartesian dualism that leads to the so-called “problem” of other minds: I am not first and foremost an isolated mind that is subsequently inserted into a body and a world. Infants don’t first have a self-reflective understanding of their body, question whether the face of the other is another human, and then proceed to imitate their facial gestures. Rather, I already see the other as a human and have the capacity of imitation and playful response even when their bodies are not structurally the same as an adult’s and long before they will be able to recognize themselves in a mirror. Thinking is always already extended throughout my body and into an intersocial cultural world. I *am* my body—a body that is marked by the behaviors, interests, and values of those around me *before* I even have the capacity to self-consciously reflect on who “I” am.

And yet, that constitution of the self by external forces is not *total*. I am not hemmed in from all sides by my society or upbringing. Merleau-Ponty observes in

the child a capacity to be interested and to respond to the desires, gestures, and words of others. The early interactions between parent and child reveals intersubjectivity as a creative reciprocity—one that is not a pure circle, but rather, continually expands, overlaps, and evolves over time. Life—with all of its habits and behaviors—is an endless game of trying on new roles, of appropriating various ways of existing that are observed in others, and creatively performing them from an alternative vantage point. Thus, the encounter with the other is originarily *positive*: I do not initially encounter the other as a threat trying to eliminate my possibilities, as one who wants to kill me, or as one who objectifies me, but rather, as a teacher who will reveal to me both alternative ways of being in the world and the meaningful significance of the natural and cultural objects that surround me. And most significantly, learning new roles continues into adulthood—observed especially in parenthood—and in this reciprocal relationship, both child *and* parent experience the other as teacher.

*Selections from four of Merleau-Ponty's Child Psychology Lectures:*

*From "The Adult's View of the Child" (lectured 1949-1950), 131*

What we understand by the idea of structure is that the child's consciousness is different from the adult's both in content and organization. Children are not, as was previously thought, 'miniature adults.' Thus, contrary to the negative account, the child's consciousness is not identical to the adult's in everything except for its incompleteness and imperfection. The child possesses another kind of equilibrium than the adult kind; therefore, we must treat the child's consciousness as a positive phenomenon. (Merleau-Ponty 2010a, 131)

*From "Structure and Conflicts in Child Consciousness" (lectured 1949-1950), 145-46, 148, 169-71*

The classical conception [of sensory perception] understands the child as the receiver of different sensations from different sense organs which must be subsequently synthesized (i.e., visual sensations given by the eyes, aural ones by the ears, etc.). In reality, we find that these sensations are not bereft of mutual connections. Instead, it is a question of a *totality* of given sensations experienced through the intermediary of the *whole* body. The child makes use of his body as a totality and does not distinguish between what is given by the eyes, the ears, and so forth. The child has no multiplicity of sensations. The fact that the child claims to see a sound that he hears implies the existence of *intersensory* relations. This is confirmed by many experiences: the influence of sounds on color perception (hearing a sound changes a color seen separately). A very brief stimulus provokes a disturbance of the body which is hard to localize in any one sense.

A unity of the body exists, which is not itself a sum of tactile or kinesthetic sensations, but rather a "corporeal schema." This schema cannot be reduced to a sum of sensations, since it encompasses both the spatial awareness of our bodies and the unity which embraces all sensory givens. Thus, for the child as well as the adult, perception involves, on the one hand, the relation of different parts of the body and, on the other hand, the relation to the external world. . . . Prior to judgment, a more fundamental unity exists. A particularly important example of this perceptual organization is the phenomenon of *constancy*. . . .

For classical psychology, a circle is a law conceived by me while producing this figure. For Gestalt theory, a circle is a certain physiognomy, a certain curvature. We learn to see the *unity of things*. For example, the yellow of a lemon in connection with its acidity reveals a structural community which renders the particular aspects (yellow, acidity) *synonymous*. All of this thus confirms the fact that the infant's

experience does not begin as chaos, but as a *world already underway* of which the structure is only lacunary. (Merleau-Ponty 2010a, 145–46, 148)

*From Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language (lectured 1949–1950), 12–13, 14, 16*

A young child's facial expressions are quite precocious. Grégoire indicates that the nursing infant, up to the end of the second month, laughs and smiles, not only to demonstrate its satisfaction, but also to answer to the smile of those around him. This already presumes a relationship with others, which precedes the language that will appear in this context.

This is why it is artificial to consider the first words as spontaneous. Long before they appeared, there had been attitudinal responses. Grégoire emphasizes the fact that the intellectual activity of the nursing infant is much more important than we would think. We have a tendency to underestimate it, since it is not accompanied by any external manifestations. Yet from birth, there is a capacity for relating to the external world that does not stop growing during the first weeks of life. One can even stimulate conditioned reflexes in the embryo, and, from the moment of birth, the brain records specific changes occurring in the immediate environment. . . . (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 12–13).

Children imitate gutturals which cannot be seen on the lips of the person speaking. If there is any influence from the environment, it is hearing and not vision that evokes the imitation. Moreover, children fix not upon the mouth but rather on the eyes of the person speaking. It has often been noted that children open their mouths when they are listening to someone speak; but Grégoire claims that this has to do with the contagiousness of the other person's behavior (like yawning), and not with an effort to reconstruct that which has been seen.

But the presence of the adult's language stimulates the child in a general way: from his first waking moments, the child hears someone speaking. Most of the time, language is addressed to him directly, and this acoustic sensation provokes the

stimulation, first, of his limbs, and then, of the phonatory organs (assimilable by the limbs). In conclusion, the child receives the “sense” of language from his environment . . . . One must emphasize the importance of the child’s involvement in the mode of speech of his environment (i.e., rhythm, pitch, etc.), the effect of which is a general attraction to language. (Again, remember Delacroix’s statement: “The child bathes in language.”) . . . . (14).

Grégoire has attempted to show the continuity of language development. On the one hand, there is the expression and definition of the object, even before the appearance of the first word. On the other hand, this appearance does not in any way put an end to the babbling, which, for a long time, accompanies the child’s speech [*parole*]. And perhaps certain aspects of the adult’s interior language, which is often not formulated, are no more than a continuation of the babbling. On the one hand, from the beginning of life, there are anticipations of what will become language. On the other hand, there is a persistence, right up into adulthood, of what was previously babbling. (16)

*From “The Child’s Relations with Others” (lectured 1950–51), 244–48*

It is not at all a question of showing that cognitive functions are explained by social structures . . . . the subject has always been in the social environment in which he exists. . . . Thus, no possibility exists to institute a deciding experiment that establishes what causes what . . . The development of intelligence and the acquisition of language are tied to affectivity. Correlations exist between the age of greatest dependence on the parents (zero to two years) and the *responsive period* of language acquisition. . . . To learn to speak is to learn to play a certain number of roles, to assume behaviors of which one was previously the spectator. . . .

Linguistic progress is always discontinuous. It always presumed a restructuration of the child’s human environment because the human and parental environment is the mediator in the earliest infancy of all relations with the world and

with being. What one calls *intelligence* is a name for designating the type of relations with the other, the mode of intersubjectivity that the infant achieves. Here again, it is not about a causal explanation of a phenomenon through the other, but of recognizing the connection of the two “projects” at the interior of the unique project which is the child’s life. *The manner in which the child assumes his relations with the family constellation can be read in the type of perception and knowledge that he accomplishes.*

*In what conditions does the child enter into relations with others? . . . .* Classical psychology addresses this question with many difficulties, and it turns out it is impossible to resolve it. *What is the psyche?* Academic psychology responds that *it is what provides a singularity [seul]....* The other’s psyche is ungraspable and incommunicable even in its essence. . . . Only one solution remains possible: to presume that, as a spectator of the other’s gestures, I decipher the given expressions and I project in the other what I sense within my own body.

*The problem of the experience of the other appears as a system in four terms: (1) my body as object, (2) my sense of my own body (interoceptive image of my own body), (3) the other’s body that I see (visual image), and (4) the feeling the other has of his own existence.* The perception of the other would consist of deducing the fourth term from the third by analogy with the supposed relationship between the first and second terms. *The, the problem appears difficult to resolve.*

First, *the perception of the other is relatively precocious.* The child is sensitive at an early age to smiling. How could he through a complicated system and earlier study know so early that the smile is a sign of benevolence? . . . . This operation would presume a kind of reasoning by analogy: to understand the significance of the smile of the other after one’s own smile. It would be necessary for a precise correspondence between the seen body and sensed body. However, the infant has a minimal visual experience of his body, and the interoceptive image of his body is very different from the visual image of the other. We must presume that the child has different ways to globally identify the other’s body. . . . My body is not only known by internal sensations, but also by a corporeal schema. . . . A schema that carries the relationship

to the position of my body in the ambient environment. . . . If my body is no longer only known by a mass of strictly individual sensations, but as an object organized by relationship to its surroundings, the result is that the perception of my body can be transferred to the other and the other's image can be immediately "interpreted" by my body schema. . . .

The *first stage* is the existence of a kind of precommunication, an anonymous collectivity with differentiation, a kind of group existence. The *second state* is the objectification of one's body. . . . Individual consciousness only appears later, along with the objectification of one's own body, establishing a dividing wall between the other and me and the constitution of the other and of me as "human beings" in a reciprocal relationship. (Merleau-Ponty 2010a, 244-48)

### *Summary and Analysis*

Merleau-Ponty is adamant that the child is not a derivation or deviation of adulthood, just as perception is not a deviation or lesser form of understanding than knowledge. There are different ways of knowing, different ways of being, that are not simply a negation of my own existing or the negative pole of some transcendental norm. The child, as a "positive phenomenon," has something to teach us about ourselves.

In these excerpts, Merleau-Ponty continues his analysis on the unity of the senses in the child's interaction in the world. In some Neoplatonic and Cartesian models of knowledge, vision/light, and sometimes hearing/listening, are prioritized as closer modalities to truth, while the other senses are further removed from the truth since they are associated with the sensual body. However, what the child sees and hears cannot be detached from the smells, tastes, and textures that are associated with these visual and auditory stimulations. Similarly, following this line of thought, classical psychology (e.g., Piaget), believes we can compartmentalize the different senses as discrete modes of encountering the world. Certainly, we can bracket the

other senses and focus on only one for the purpose of science, but this is secondary to how we encounter the world. In reality, the child's so-called synesthesia persists in our own "adult" behaviors—when we turn off the music (sound) while we're driving in order to find a new destination (sight), by the way we associate colors with certain textures or desires (e.g., red is associated with passion, lust, blood, violence, the brick house of our childhood, etc.), or by the power of a smell to evoke powerfully lucid memories of a past experience or loved one.

The intertwining of our sensory and intellectual engagement with the world is particularly made manifest in the acquisition of language. Language is not a purely intellectual endeavor but is tied to our affective and sensory encounters in the world. Merleau-Ponty articulates a rather novel position at his time that a continuation exists between our expression of linguistic phonemes and symbols and the earlier, often assumed to be nonsensical, babbles, coos, cries, screams, and guttural sounds that infants make—indeed, that this "babbling" never actually ends. Even if the infant cannot speak, the infant already recognizes speech as a meaningful behavior and positive interaction with the other within the social milieu. The child is oriented toward ascertaining the highly developed activity we call language. At the same time, the adult never loses this stage of inarticulate communication, which pervades our forms of communication: there are times when we cannot find words for our experiences (especially in times of great sorrow, pain, or joy), parents universally resort to a more rhythmic and higher pitched "motherese" when communicating with their infants, many of our words sound like what they are intended to symbolize (e.g., croak, woof, tick tock, fizz, buzz, mumble, hiss, pow, bang, grunt, slick), and many of the names we assign to our caregivers are closely connected to the first sounds that we have the capacity to make (e.g., mama, dada).

Finally, in "The Child's Relations with Others," Merleau-Ponty continues to insist that the child does not reason by analogy or interior projection when he or she encounters the other person. The problem of other minds is not a problem precisely because I do not encounter the other—and nor do I see myself—as just a mind. The



other is encountered on the affective and sensory levels as well, and more importantly, is perceived as a fellow actor in the world. The child and adult do not meet as pure minds but commune with one another as bodies with the possibility for shared behaviors and experiences in the world. The world of things toward which both child and adult comport themselves is the third that produces meaningful communication and understanding (there are fascinating parallels here with René Girard's account of desire having a triadic nature by the way).

**From *The Visible and the Invisible* (org. pub. 1964), 12-13**

It is therefore indeed true that the 'private worlds' communicate, that each of them is given to its incumbent as a variant of one common world. The communication makes us the witnesses of one sole world, as the synergy of our eyes suspends them on one unique thing. . . . That a child perceives before he thinks, that he begins by putting his dreams in the things, his thoughts in the others, forming with them, as it were, one block of common life wherein the perspectives of each are not yet distinguished – these genetic facts cannot be simply ignored by philosophy in the name of the exigencies of the intrinsic analysis. Thought cannot ignore its apparent history, if it is not to install itself beneath the whole of our experience, in a pre-empirical order where it would no longer merit its name; it must put to itself the problem of the genesis of its own meaning. . . . We speak and we understand speech long before learning from Descartes (or rediscovering for ourselves) that thought is our reality. We learn to meaningfully handle language (*language*), in which we install ourselves, long before learning from linguistics the intelligible principles upon which our tongue (*langue*) and every tongue are "based." . . . . As the thing, as the other, the true dawns through an emotional and almost carnal experience, where the "ideas" – the other's and our own – are rather traits of his physiognomy and of our own, are less understood than welcomed or spurned in love or hatred. To be sure, there are motives, quite abstract categories, that function very precociously in this wild

thought, as the extraordinary anticipations of adult life in childhood show sufficiently, and one can say that the whole of man is already there in his infancy. The child understands well beyond what he knows how to say, responds well beyond what he could define, and this after all is as true of the adult. A genuine conversation gives me access to thoughts that I did not know myself capable of, that I *was* not capable of, and sometimes I feel myself *followed* in a route unknown to myself which my words, cast back by the other, are in the process of tracing out for me. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 11-13)

### *Summary and Analysis*

In this final excerpt from Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published work, clearly many of the earlier themes that have already been discussed continue to percolate and drive his philosophical program. The continuity between childhood and adult life, between perception and thinking, between babbling and language, and between our socio-cultural values and what we come to think about our own identity are intertwined and ought to shape how we define what it means to be a subject. Philosophical anthropologies have long begun their analyses of what it means to be human by studying the allegedly autonomous, self-reflective, and purely rational adult. But to ignore human development and the upbringing that we experience as children is to overlook the roughly 20% of our time alive that in a myriad of ways (e.g., especially our acquisition of and cognitive capacities for language, learning, and morality) shapes how we will go on to live the rest of our lives.

Children are more intriguing, more inquisitive, and more cognitively aware than we give them credit. As they interact with their caregivers and their world, their capacities for learning and understanding are awakened and cultivated, and their possibilities are expanded. And this continues to hold true long into adulthood. A conversation with an interlocutor may well ultimately wind up shutting me down if the other does not care what I have to think. But most of the time, the other helps me

articulate what I think, draws ideas out of me that I didn't even know I had, and opens me up to a world of ideas that were previously unknown to me. Both child and adult, then, are oriented by a radical openness toward the other and toward adapting and adjusting their viewpoints and corporeal posture in the world.

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