

## Maurice Merleau-Ponty

1908 – 1961 (age 53 at death)

### Early Life

1908 Born. Father died when he was a young child.

At college friendship with Simone de Beauvoir, and esp. with S de B's intimate friend 'Zaza'

1926: entry to ENS

1930: graduated from ENS; passed 'agrégation' and obtained a post at a lycée in Beauvais

1935: junior post at ENS; began work on doctoral thesis (*Structure of Behaviour*).

1930's: Friendship with Sartre, S de B., Aron, Nizan

The war etc.

1939 Brief visit to Louvain to study Husserl archive.

1939-40. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in French army. Not imprisoned after defeat of France.

1940-5. Back in Paris, teaching at ENS.

1942. *Structure of Behaviour* published; begins work on *Phenomenology of Perception*

1942-5. Some engagement in resistance (?)

### Career

1945 *Phenomenology of Perception* published; Professor at Lyon.; founds *Les Temps Modernes* along with Sartre and SdB.

1950 Professor at the Sorbonne; break with Sartre

1952 Professor at Collège de France; writes many papers etc.; starts work on a book on language ('The Prose of the World'); that project becomes a book on metaphysics 'The Visible and the Invisible'.

1961 Dies unexpectedly; *The Visible and the Invisible* published, incomplete, after his death.

### Background to Phenomenology

(i) Transcendental idealism vs. Naturalism in mid/late -19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy

#### Transcendental idealism

Against: reductionism, materialism, empiricism

For: holism, rationalism, 'mind'

Examples – neo-Kantians (Germany), British Hegelians, esp. F. H. Bradley (Britain), French idealists (Brunschvicg, Lachieze-Rey)

#### Naturalism in Philosophy

Against: Metaphysics, Essence, A priori

For: Empirical inquiry, Natural science

Positivism: Comte (France) Mill (Britain) Mach (Austria)

(ii) Other moves .....

Bergson: influential idiosyncratic eclectic hybrid .....  
Development of psychology as an empirical science; esp. in Germany (Helmholtz, Wundt). Most significant for us is the work of –

Franz Brentano (1838-1917)  
*Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874)

B. seeks to distinguish ‘physical’ from ‘mental’ phenomena:

Every mental phenomenon is characterised by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loves, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.

This intentional in-existence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. (pp. 88-9)

Not obvious what B. has in mind here! Not a relationship between subject and a ‘thing’; but mental states are essentially characterised in terms ‘reference to’ something typically non-mental which constitutes the ‘content’ of the mental state. General term here: ‘intentionality’; Brentano takes it from the scholastic (Aristotelian) theory of universals – the universal horse really exists in a real horse, but not in thoughts of a horse where its existence is merely ‘intentional’ (in the mind). Two significant aspects of intentionality - (i) no implication of existence (‘Tom is afraid of ghosts’), and (ii) description-dependence (‘Tom’s respect for Dr. Jekyll, but not for Mr. Hyde’).

Brentano’s work stimulated the development of an ‘Austrian’ school of philosophy, esp. Meinong (‘object-theory’ – i.e. the study of ‘intentional objects’), and Twardowski who developed Act/Content/Object Intentional analysis. T.’s position is comparable to Frege’s contemporary distinction between sense and reference. The resulting line of inquiry (intentional analysis) aims to avoid both naturalism and transc. idealism. As such it provided the background for Husserl’s development of ‘phenomenology’.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)  
(Career in Germany; but came from Austria (Moravia))

*Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891) – ‘psychologistic’  
*Logical Investigations* (1901) – ‘anti-psychologistic’ intentional analysis  
*Ideas I* (1913) – phenomenology  
(*Ideas II* – constitution)  
*Cartesian Meditations* (1929)  
*Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936)

‘Psychologism’

Thesis that philosophy is really just armchair psychology, and that once psychology is properly established as an empirical science, philosophy should merge with it.

Objections:

- (i) What about a priori truths?
- (ii) What about normativity? – concerning belief as well as practice  
e.g. Frege on logic (not ‘laws of thought’)

The issues remain alive today: cf. Quine’s ‘naturalism’, and proponents of philosophy-as-cognitive science (Stich).

Husserl’s phenomenology is, in part, intended to vindicate the conception of philosophy as non-psychologistic intentional analysis, but what seems to happen is that as his thought develops the position moves closer to transcendental idealism.

Phenomenology

Natural Attitude.

‘epoche’ – bracketing as suspension of belief for the sake of argument.

Why?

- (i) Arguments connected with knowledge?

Knowledge requires justification, reasons etc.

Causes etc. are not reasons

So: vindication of claims to knowledge,  
including natural science, is not itself a scientific inquiry.

Epistemology isn’t a ‘natural science’

(Can’t epistemology be naturalised – cf. Quine)

So is phenomenology a programme in epistemology?

No – that’s not what one finds.

- (ii) Arguments connected with meaning/sense

Meanings/Concepts aren’t natural facts –

the facts themselves don’t dictate how we should think of them, talk about them.

Criteria of identity

Properties vs. Concepts

Not nominalism; but ‘constitution’

Husserl’s phrase ‘*Sinngebung*’ – ‘sense-bestowal’ (*Ideas I* pp. 128-9).

That is central to Husserl’s phenomenology.

‘Constitution’

Only consciousness ‘gives meaning’ (*Sinngebung*)

Then: truth about anything is dependent upon consciousness

Hence: consciousness is ‘absolute’ as the source of meaning, and truths of all other kinds are dependent upon consciousness.

cf: conclusion of *Cartesian Meditations*

St. Augustine’s ‘inner man’

Doubts here

Suppose for 'consciousness' we read 'language': does idealism have to follow?

Should there be any 'absolute' truths on this view?

Suspicion that H's position draws too much on Descartes here .....

But how to problems of old-fashioned transc. idealism? Indeed, isn't this position just 'transcendental psychologism'?

M-P. on Augustine .....