IN THE SHADOW OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL: 
SOCIAL COGNITION IN MERLEAU-PONTY AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE

Shaun Gallagher

If anything can make plausible Merleau-Ponty’s seemingly paradoxical thesis that human understanding necessarily tends to misunderstand itself, it is, surely, those two particularly rampant forms of logocentric objectivism that today go under the heading of Cognitive Science and Artificial Intelligence. ... In their search for the universal algorithm, they represent a kind of innate, genetically programmed disease of the human mind, or, at least, of modernist, Western logocentric consciousness.¹

The author of this statement, Gary Madison, was quite familiar with Hubert Dreyfus’s² use of phenomenology in his critique of “good old fashioned artificial intelligence” (GOFAI) – and of Merleau-Ponty’s role in this. One can see some of the thinking behind this kind of critique in Merleau-Ponty’s Structure of Behavior.

“When one attempts, as I have in The Structure of Behavior, to trace out, on the basis of modern psychology and physiology, the relationships which obtain between the perceiving organism and its milieu one clearly finds that they are not those of an automatic machine which needs an outside agent to set off its pre-established mechanisms.”³

Up until 1991, Dreyfus had been the only philosopher around that had anything explicit to say about phenomenology and cognitive science. In 1991 two books changed that. The first, Dennett’s Consciousness Explained⁴ was diametrically opposite to the position that Madison defends, and outlined

¹ “Ce qui peut servir à rendre plus plausible la thèse apparemment paradoxale de Merleau-Ponty sur la tendance nécessaire de la compréhension humaine à se mécomprendre, ce sont assurément les deux formes particulièrement déchaînées de l'objectivisme logocentrisme qui se nomment Cognitive Science et Artificial Intelligence. En effet, il serait difficile de trouver deux mécompréhensions plus complètes de la compréhension humaine. Dans leur recherche de l'algorithme universel, elles représentent une sorte de maladie génétique programmée dans l'esprit humain ou, au moins, dans la conscience moderniste occidentale logocentrisme.” G. Madison, “Merleau-Ponty et la déconstruction du logocentrisme,” Laval théologique et philosophique, 46 (1) (1990), 74.


⁴ D. Dennett, Consciousness explained (New York, 1991).
a quick dismissal of the relevance of phenomenology. The second, however, by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* was also diametrically opposite to Madison, but in the opposite direction to Dennett, in showing the relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological notion of embodiment for cognitive science.

Dennett’s book was capitalizing on a new interest in consciousness that was emerging in cognitive science – ironically, the very idea that motivated phenomenology, but that many “Continental philosophers” were then deconstructing and running away from as fast as possible. In Continental philosophy, phenomenology and the interest in consciousness was in decline at this time, except among a handful of staunch (or reactionary) defenders like Madison, who, in truth (as one might say), were more concerned to react against poststructuralism than to even consider cognitive science. Madison’s pronouncement was not the result of a large analysis, but only a passing comment.

While Dennett was revitalizing GOFAI with injections of neurotransmitters, and placing his bets on distributed brain processes rather than phenomenology, Varela et al. had already bought into Dreyfus’s critique, and were looking beyond the brain to a new incarnation of cognitive science where Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology would find an important place. In 1991, for a perspective that orients itself to Merleau-Ponty, things were not as simple as either Madison or Dennett thought.

*Paris (Royaumont) 1960*

Merleau-Ponty, in the 1940s, was engaged in an interdisciplinary study (neurology, developmental psychology, psychopathology) of embodied cognition oriented in a phenomenological perspective (anticipating what today we would call the third wave of cognitive science). This was a project that he was still interested in up until the time of his death in 1961. Indeed, in 1959 he met with a group of analytic philosophers, including Ryle, Ayer, and Quine at a conference at Royaumont, outside of Paris. Ayer, in his comments on Ryle’s presentation, seemed open to the legitimacy of phenomenology.

“It seems to me ... that one can legitimately pose some question about the whole ensemble of processes, of manners of being, of actions, of sensations,

---