MERLEAU-PONTY ON EXISTENTIAL SEXUALITY: A CRITIQUE

Martín C. Dillon

Merleau-Ponty's treatment of "The Body in its Sexual Being" (1962, pp. 154-173) is unsatisfying because, although he succeeds in undermining the reductionist strains in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, he never provides a positive account of sexuality. Indeed, on one reading, his thesis is that no such positive description purporting to isolate the essence or inner meaning of sexuality can be given. This principle of the indeterminacy of sexuality may be seen as a consequence of Merleau-Ponty's well known thesis of ambiguity. Hence, although our critique will focus on the issue of sexuality, it will have a bearing on wider ontological issues—which will be made explicit toward the end.

Following his typical approach, Merleau-Ponty considers—then rather summarily rejects—two traditional reductionist approaches to the question of the origins of sexual significance. The empiricist model reduces sexuality to instinct or to reflexes conditioned on genitally centered needs and pleasures. The intellectualist model reduces sexuality to the power of representation or to the superimposition of conscious forms (sexual categories) on otherwise neutral experience. Merleau-Ponty's counter-arguments rest on the familiar case of Schneider and purport to show that neither of these two reductionist models has sufficient explanatory power to account for this patient's aberrant sexuality.¹

The main point to be drawn from this critique is that sexual significance cannot be traced to origins in a pure or disembodied consciousness any more than it can be attributed to some purely autonomous response of a mechanically conceived physiology. It
is rather the case that sexual significance must be understood in terms of incarnate intentionality, that is, in terms of the prereflective yet intelligent activity of the lived body. The ontological point at issue here is clear: in order to allow for the possibility of an adequate description of sexual experience, mind and body must be conceived as grounded in a unitary reality rather than as discrete and mutually exclusive domains.

There is an erotic "comprehension" not of the order of understanding, since understanding subsumes an experience, once perceived, under some idea, while desire comprehends blindly by linking body to body. (1962, p. 157)

Merleau-Ponty's description of sexuality as a form of "original intentionality" based on an "intentional arc" that links body to body anticipates a later development in his thought where he uses the notion of "transfer of corporeal schema" (1964, pp. 117ff.) to describe the processes of transitivity and mimesis constitutive of the infant's recognition of and identification with other human beings. This is worthy of note because it correlates sexuality with intersubjectivity: there is the same "blind" or pre-reflective comprehension at work both in recognizing a fellow human as such and in desiring another person. Immediately, the question arises as to whether all forms of being with others are primordially permeated with sexual significance. This brings us face to face with Freud and the central problematic of Merleau-Ponty's chapter of sexuality.

The basic issue Freud raises for Merleau-Ponty is that of the relation of sexuality and existence. "Existence" here refers to the total ensemble of human concerns or vital significance as such. The question is whether to follow the Freudian tendency to reduce all human significance to a unitary and primary ground in sexuality. This would have the effect of transforming existential analysis into psychoanalysis and, as one might expect, Merleau-Ponty, the existential phenomenologist, finds serious difficulties besetting this reductionist approach. The major difficulty is that of isolating sexuality. If all vital significance is to be reduced to sexual significance and if this process of explanation by reduction is to be truly informative, then there must be a way of defining sexuality. If we cannot circumscribe, within the general sphere of human existence, an autonomous realm of sexuality, then the