INTENTIONAL LIBIDO, IMPULSIVE LIBIDO

Alphonso Lingis

The Phenomenological Idea

The novel phenomenological idea was intentionality. In language acts there is, in addition to physical movements, a hermeneutical "movement," a movement of taking the sensuous data as words, as phrases, as signs, a sign-constituting, signifying movement. It is a movement that posits an ideal identity for the sensuous diversity. It is a movement of identification, of idealization, a metaphysical movement from the sensuously real to the ideal. It is a teleological movement, a movement determined not by its antecedents in the given environment, but by its objective, by the future, that is, by the object it itself posits for itself, represents for itself in advance.

Such a movement was identified as the very actuality of consciousness. But in Merleau-Ponty it formed the nucleus about which a new sense of the body was articulated. The agent body, the body as experienced by the one who acts in and with that body, appears as an intentional structure, and the foundation of all intentionality. Body stances and movements were shown to be understandable not as physical but as intentional formations. Physiology, the functional investigation, was shown to have primacy over anatomy, the morphological analysis. The lived body was shown to be a node of intentional functions, and the physico-chemical and neurological constants of the objective body itself become intelligible only when it is taken as a substructure within this dynamic, motile Gestalt. Each functional unit of physiological apparatus acquires its significance from, and is activated by, the whole, which in turn acquires its focus and orientation from the field of objectives which these intentional functions deploy before themselves. Thus the agent body is an expressive apparatus, its phases and parts referring to one another, and its postures and movements referring to significant configurations of its operational field.

Finally, these concepts made possible a new conception of the identity involved in a conscious agent. This identity is an intentional identity, the unity of coherence involved in the functional operations of the intentional body, the synthetic unity of references ahead to objectives and the future and of references back to position and situation. It first
forms in the temporal unity of the postural schema. The concrete and singular ego is not a substance or a source, but the immanent unity of the transitional synthesis intentionally formed in functional, teleological movements of the intentional body. The transcendental unity of the epistemological subject would ultimately have to be founded on this existential and corporeal identity.

A Phenomenology of the Libido

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty understood that these concepts could serve as the basic conceptual apparatus with which the sphere of the libido could be articulated in new, specifically vital terms, and freed from the physico-chemical, dynamic, hydraulic, and mythical metaphors in which it is formulated in empirical psychology and in psychoanalysis.

The transcendental clue would have to be the object: one would first have to describe what makes a libidinal object properly libidinal. One would have to itemize its specifically libidinal predicates, define its specifically libidinal inner organization. One would have to work out what a libidinal sense-unit is, what is this sensuous sense, this structure of being the functional correlate of libidinal movements, lure for caresses and copulations. One would have to spell out the specific organization, the Gestaltung, that the eroticized perception effects, making someone or something appear as functionally destined for voluptuous and orgasmic behaviors.

Then one would take the libidinal impulse itself neither as a mechanism, a stimulus-reaction circuitry, nor as a species of cogitation, but as a specific sort of intentionality, that is, a sign-constituting, signifying movement, a movement within the perceptual sphere which gives phenomenal objects a libidinal sense, takes them to mean erotic objectives. It is a movement not determined by non-libidinal, physico-chemical antecedents, but rather by voluptuous objectives. It is not merely a succession of reactions to real stimuli, but first an advance constitution of objectives in an erotic field, which materialize about ideal identities it itself posits.

This intentionality is not just in some glandular circuits, but in the sensori-motor whole; it is nothing else than intentionality itself, the intentional arc that makes the physico-chemical mass a functional organism. Just as one had to set up the concept of an agent body, a phenomenal body described as the set of functions which the agent in-