Talia Welsh


With *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist*, Talia Welsh continues and deepens her dialogue with Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the child. Her previous engagement, three years earlier, took the form of her translation of Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on child psychology at the Sorbonne (*Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures, 1949–1952*, also published by Northwestern University Press). These included all eight lecture courses, as the notes had been compiled and distributed among his students at the time, who had vetted them with Merleau-Ponty for accuracy, and first published in French in 1964. Her very thoughtful summary of those courses, which she provided as the translator’s introduction, had already shown a remarkable ability to deeply discern the key issues Merleau-Ponty engaged and trace succinctly how he resolved them. So it is a delightful treat to see her own treatise on this Merleau-Pontian comprehension of the child.

But this work is no mere summary of Merleau-Ponty. Though Welsh explicitly and carefully takes up Merleau-Ponty’s thinking expressed in those Sorbonne lectures in order to provide a detailed account of his understanding of child development, she also achieves two further goals. By engaging his thought dialogically, unfolding it also in relation to contemporary phenomenological researches, she demonstrates the continuing relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s insights, both for the field of child psychology and also for the “account of the human condition” that it reveals.

In order to accomplish this within the confines of a single book, Welsh smartly recognizes the necessity to focus on “a central interpretation” of Merleau-Ponty’s work on the psychology of the child. She selects three key features: “that the child’s experience is organized, socially interactive, and unique” (p. xiv). These features are, for Welsh as they were for Merleau-Ponty, the basic contours of the “primal and primary experience” that are the hallmark of
“the human condition”—and that the child displays so evidently as to earn the sobriquet “natural phenomenologist.” In so titling her work with this moniker, Welsh recalls that “Merleau-Ponty contradicts Jean Piaget’s claim that the child is a natural metaphysician by portraying children more as natural phenomenologists” (p. xx).

With respect to the first point, the organization of the child’s experience, “the child’s world is primal, but that is not to say that it is chaotic and disorganized” (p. xviii). Welsh documents Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that the child has “a significantly different, not reduced, experience” and his sensitive description of that coherent meaningfulness. In doing so, she notes his deftly balancing his interests in the findings of psychology with those of anthropology. As she notes, “the child’s experience is an ideal site from which to work through the complexity of how psychophysical maturation and culture shape development” (p. 23). Welsh reminds that the “cultural locatedness” of experience emplaces it within a concretely lived world, and so inoculates it from a tendency toward its abstract universalizing. From psychology, Merleau-Ponty drew on a wide range of approaches, including experimental psychology and neurology, whose limitations he shows often restrained them from being able to draw the full conclusions from their own discoveries. The approaches within psychology that Merleau-Ponty found most helpful have been Gestalt psychology and psychoanalysis. Welsh emphasizes Merleau-Ponty’s frequent use of the findings of the Gestalt tradition as “a source of inspiration for a positive account of the child’s experience” (p. 32). With respect to the positivity of its organization in particular, the Gestaltists showed that the difference between the child’s experience and the adult’s is not a matter of the child’s being less organized, but rather differently so, and indeed that the child is “more connected to the actual structuring of perception” (p. 33). Her good example is how the child is more aware of the background as an unthematized dimension of the meaningfulness of the lived experience than is an adult whose habit tends more to focus representationally on an isolated figure. With respect to the psychoanalytic tradition, Merleau-Ponty recognized that Freud could be read either narrowly or broadly, and chose the latter path with much gained thereby. Specifically, as Welsh summarizes: “psychoanalysis in the broad sense argues that the infantile traumas that determine adult behavior are constantly lived and reinstituted by the adult. Early traumas are not buried deep within an individual’s psyche, somehow creating specific negative effects on the individual’s adult behavior, but rather remain very much a living part of the adult’s structure of behavior.” (p. 37). In seeking a description of the unconscious not as something interior, inside a psyche, but rather as a living