Merleau-Ponty and an Ethics of Space


In the Sense of Space David Morris investigates the space of lived experience, what he describes as “perceived space as we experience it before objectifying it” (VII). The stated goal is to “reopen” Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, and so return to the discussions of the body and its spatiality that are there initiated. To do so, Morris sets aside Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published The Visible and the Invisible with its perceived challenge to his earlier phenomenological investigations (vii-viii, and 58–59), developing an analysis of both the spatial schema of the body, and its engagement with the world around it, its place, that reminds us that the Phenomenology of Perception is not so easily surpassed. What Morris has produced is a subtle retelling of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological story, one that in emphasizing the role of movement in the development and expression of the “body schema [schéma corporeal],” leads us even more emphatically to ethical questions.

Morris introduces his study of lived space with a discussion of depth, not the third dimension of geometric inquiry, but the first or primordial dimension (1–2) in which one perceives oneself in relation to other things. It is only because perception is animated by such depth that one can measure the distance that separates objects of different depths; and such depth, Morris explains, is “labile,” as it undergoes change that emanates from within but does not follow a fixed pattern; rather, it is “an alterability that can itself alter” (23). Depth, as experienced, is this interplay of the body and the world, a sensed meaning that is not predetermined as it follows from the way that these changeable elements work together. Morris makes use of the French “sens,” as it implies not merely “meaning and the senses but direction” (24). The fit of body and world is not arbitrary, it follows the directions that each of the two permit, and so its meaning, that of perception, is the product of such directed interaction. The book unfolds as an investigation of the fit of body and world, leading to a discussion of the ethical implications that follow from such a conception of the self.

In the first chapter the directed fit of body and world is investigated with the help of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of a “body schema.” This schema does not,
in the manner of Kant's transcendental schemata, mediate between heterogeneous faculties; rather, it "bridges" body and world, expressing the way that these disparate elements are conjoined in perception. The "body schema" designates the fit, or "sens," of the body/world intersection; it does not exist apart from them, nor can they be said to exist apart from it, for the "body schema" emerges in the movement that describes their interaction. Morris introduces the phrase "the moving schema of perception" to describe the "body schema" in order to avoid conceiving of the schema as something with an existence apart from that which it connects (36). The examples that he offers, concerning the roles of fingers in touching (39) and eyes in seeing (43), demonstrate the interrelation of disparate activities, or movements, that produce the evolving schema of our worlds.

In such a phenomenological account, perception is not conceived as cobbled together from sensory data; it is, rather, experienced as such, directed by the habits that order the body's movement. I can learn to integrate the view from a video monitor into my binocular vision (41), as I can learn to walk anew after an accident that limits my mobility. The schema of my perception is nothing other than these bodily paths that, rather than leading us somewhere, offer, as Morris writes, "a way of inhabiting the world" (41); and such a way of inhabiting the world cannot merely be attributed to the body's physical composition, for those whose bodies change do not immediately transform their comportment, as Merleau-Ponty's discussion of phantom limbs exemplifies (49).

In chapter 2 Morris begins the analysis of the development of the "moving schema of perception." He explains that this schema is a constraint limiting us to certain routes within the sensibly given. Such a constraint offers a way to understand what is otherwise unlimited and thus indistinct. Morris explains that Merleau-Ponty's account of a child learning to differentiate colors is helpful in this regard; what was indistinct becomes ordered, and so constrained, as the indeterminate horizon of vision is distinguished and its many possibilities recede, until what is left is the color perceived (78–79). The schema of perception develops through movement, that of seeing or touching or otherwise engaging the world; and such movement is described by Morris in the third chapter, not as the motion of a prior construct, but, in reference to Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, as a movement that is itself expressive, offering perception as an articulation of the "sens" that has come to be (87). Such an articulation of perceptual meaning distinguishes what Morris describes as the depth of the present, a depth structured by the temporal constitution of our bodily habits.