

## 2. Merleau-Ponty and Lévi-Strauss

by Roger C. Poole

The philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), Professor at the Collège de France as from 1952, radically influenced the course of phenomenology, turning it from Germany towards France. With Merleau-Ponty philosophy is sincere and searchingly intelligent, it begins to *try* as never before, it really exerts its strength towards a genuine human breakthrough at all levels of our experience. With Merleau-Ponty we find a respite from those traditions of mechanism and intellectualism which, starting from Descartes and Kant, have never ceased to plague the course of the philosophy of perception. With Merleau-Ponty, philosophy speaks simply, simply because things are so very difficult.

What interests Merleau-Ponty most perhaps is the classical philosophical problem of the Other, and our possible means of knowing him and communicating with him. In Merleau-Ponty we have a guide who is awake to every level of consciousness in the Other. He sees that communication with the Other is a matter of understanding that area where thoughts and actions are conceived, of moving, that is to say, behind the figure of the Other as he expresses himself in acts and words, in a search for meaning. We need to destroy in psychology and in philosophy the mindless collecting of facts and the refusal of synthesis together with all artificial dichotomising. We need to seek for the reality of the Other in a private or 'intersubjective' space.

Merleau-Ponty's search for the truth of 'intersubjective' space spanned his whole writing life, and the various articulations of his production form in themselves a fascinating methodological progress. With *The Structure of Behaviour* of 1942, Merleau-Ponty begins his search for space and the 'milieu' of consciousness with a thorough examination and a detailed refutation both of Freudian and 'Gestalt' psychology, of so-called objective Behaviourism as well as of vitalistic psychism, and he brings us to the realisation that we need a bigger ontological framework if we are to understand our facts in psychology, if we are to approach the 'milieu' of consciousness and a possible communication, which cannot help but be indirect, with the Other. He writes in his *Conclusion*, for instance : 'The perception which I have of him is never, in the case of suffering or mourning, for example, the equivalent of the perception which he has of himself unless I am sufficiently close to him that our feelings constitute

together a single “form” and that our lives cease to flow separately. It is by this rare and difficult consent that I can be truly united with him, just as I can grasp my natural movements and know myself sincerely only by the decision to belong to myself. Thus I do not know myself because of my special position, but neither do I have the innate power of truly knowing another. I communicate with him by the signification of his conduct; but it is a question of attaining its structure, that is of attaining, beyond his words or even his actions, the region where they are prepared.<sup>1</sup>

We are committed then to a search for this ‘region’. With his second major work, *The Phenomenology of Perception* of 1945, he attempts to give a phenomenological description of the Other in order to find a way of communicating with him. The phenomenological sense is always present. We may ‘read off’ the Other only insofar as we know him from the inside. And we may not know him from the inside if we persist in rushing at him with crude objectivism as we have it in most of the recognised ‘schools’ of psychology. The body image, ‘le corps’, in an intersubjective space is worked out from disparate psychological materials as our only possible method of finding a communicational technique.

The sections on the body in space, the movement of the body, the body as expression and speech, lead us into a world where the space around an existing consciousness is examined precisely in terms of the person whose body is involved. The space around my body is not like ‘objective’ space. Husserl has suggested this in his passages on ‘intersubjectivity’ claiming the existence of a previous spatio-temporality which is not yet objective spatiotemporality.<sup>2</sup> But Merleau-Ponty pushes his analysis far further than does Husserl towards the human experience of space, ‘existential’ space. How I appear to myself, how I understand my own Gestalt, is itself a result of my personal experience of that particular space which surrounds me. For instance, Merleau-Ponty writes<sup>3</sup> ‘When, in the concert hall, I open my eyes, visible space seems to me cramped compared to that other space through which, a moment ago, the music was being unfolded, and even if I keep my eyes open while the piece is being played, I have the impression that the music is not really contained within this circumscribed and unimpressive space’. Needless to say, it is by a parallelism of operations that the interpretation of the Other begins, when we consider communication through intersubjective space.

Whereas in our study of Hegel, Kierkegaard and Sartre, we made use of the Hegelian conception of a Gestalt, an incomplete human phenomenon, with Merleau-Ponty, though we have to deal with

<sup>1</sup>*The Structure of Behaviour*, trans. A. L. Fisher, Methuen, 1965, p. 222.

<sup>2</sup>See Edmund Husserl, *Logique formelle et logique transcendantale*, trans S. Bachelard, P.U.F., pp. 322–323, for example.

<sup>3</sup>*Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge 1962, p. 222.

very much the same thing, the name is different. Gestalt becomes body, 'le corps', the body image. It is through the body that all our perception happens, according to Merleau-Ponty. Space itself is a result of our having spatialised bodies, we understand objects, movements, colours, things, by analogy with our own personal experience of living in a body. By extension, if we wish to develop a theory of indirect communication in these terms, and Merleau-Ponty himself does not have time to develop his theory of indirection on his first plane of discourse, we have to turn to the body image as a matrix of interpretational technique. As he will say later, the body is 'primordial expression' and therefore all other expression is derivative from it (c.f. *Signes*, p. 84). We must seek then for the spatio-temporality of the Other in his own terms, as he himself reads off his own signs, his own myths, his own actions. The lead forward to Mauss as interpreted by Lévi-Strauss is here clearly present *in nuce*. If we approach a subjective phenomenon appropriately, that is to say in a subjective manner, we have a chance of understanding it from the inside, instead of multiplying the usual insensitive pseudo-objective analyses of the schools. For instance: 'The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his. The gesture which I witness outlines an intentional object . . . The gesture presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice, and inviting my concurrence in them. Communication is achieved when my conduct identifies this path with its own. There is mutual confirmation between myself and others'.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of the body as a communicational instrument is clearly perceptible in the passage which follows. 'It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive "things". The meaning of a gesture thus "understood" is not behind it, it is intermingled with the structure of the world outlined by the gesture, and which I take up on my own account. It is arrayed all over the gesture itself.'<sup>5</sup>

After 1945, Merleau-Ponty's interest was to be aroused in linguistics and anthropology, with the new significances taken on by signs, languages and the indirect methods of communication opened up by those sciences. Already in the 1945 work he is tending towards a critique of gestures in these terms. The junction which Merleau-Ponty hoped to make between phenomenology and the new sciences of communication is clearly emerging in this, for instance, which immediately precedes the passages we have noted: 'It is, however,

<sup>4</sup>*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 185.

<sup>5</sup>*ibid.*, p. 186.

perennial experience of space as a property belonging to it. The body's space leads us through all possible art, towards many definitions of intersubjective space, simply because we all have a body. It is the fact that the human being lies behind the signs in painting, lies behind the different styles, which gives to paintings any meaning at all, which gives us the power to interpret works of other periods (*Signes*, p. 86–7). Meaning lies between the words, in the cracks between images, in the silent reality of our necessary participation in the given work of art. The voices of silence are our voices, speaking to us from all epochs in every work of art.

We thus have at least two new uses of the body in Merleau-Ponty's work after 1945, that is to say, he has applied his phenomenological description of the body to linguistics and to aesthetics. Always, however, he is searching for the meaning of signs, in whatever medium they may be offered.

After 1952, the break with Sartre and with *Les Temps Modernes*, followed by the death of his adored mother, Merleau-Ponty enters a relatively silent period. He seems to have finished his phenomenological work, and his writing is mostly on political matters. In 1959, however, Merleau-Ponty produced two penetrating essays, *Le philosophe et son ombre*, and *De Mauss à Claude Lévi-Strauss*, which show that he had not ceased in the meanwhile to examine the future of philosophy and especially of phenomenology in the face of the challenges of linguistics and anthropology. We feel a quality of agonized indecision. He falls back yet again on Husserl's own remarks about linguistics, but never has Merleau-Ponty's faith in Husserl seemed weaker. He repeats, ever more sharply, the necessity of a phenomenology which would deal with the given human world, the world of gesture, of silence and art, but Husserl at the last seems to fail him. 'It is through his body that the soul of the other is a soul to my eyes' (*Signes*, p. 217). 'It is never anything but a question of co-perception' (p. 215). 'We are still far from being the Cartesian *blosze Sachen*' (p. 212). 'Space knows itself through my body' (p. 210). 'It is always myself and no other who lives this colour or this sound – prepersonal life itself is still *my* view of the world' (p. 220). It is the total disinterest of Husserl in the *Lebenswelt* which finally wrenches phenomenology out of Merleau-Ponty's hands.

Is Sartre right to claim, in the perceptive closing pages of his essay on Merleau-Ponty in *Situations 4*, that he had lost faith in the possibility of communication? Had the body lost significance for him as a communicational instrument? What is the meaning of the long essay *L'Œil et L'Esprit* which he wrote in the year preceding his death? Likewise what signification may we give to the pages of the work he never completed, now published under the title *Le Visible et l'Invisible*?

We may not leave these questions unanswered. It is necessary to offer at least a suggestion about them. There is no doubt whatsoever

that the experiences of 1950–2 (the discovery of the existence of the Russian Camps, the horror of realizing that the Communists were capable of participating in the Korean War, the subsequent break with Sartre and finally the death of his mother) broke down Merleau-Ponty's belief in the consistency of life and its logic, its goodness and even its significance. He said to Simone de Beauvoir after the death of his mother that he was already more than half dead. Sartre's own presentation of the dissolution of the friendship which had subsisted up to 1950, shows how much both suffered in the years 1950–2. What meaning may we give to the search for transcendence in immanence which marks Merleau-Ponty's last years if not that of a broken will to communicate? With the loss of will to communicate came the double shock of realisation: the abstract phenomenology of Husserl and the study of the conditions of possible experience were useless when put to the test of human need, and at the same time, the emergence of the ideas of indirect communication present in linguistics and anthropology struck to the heart his belief in unaided philosophic reflection. Merleau-Ponty's last years represent a real tragedy of the intellect. Phenomenological theories of inter-subjective space and indirect communication failed, as did Husserl himself, at the moment of need. In evaluating his own Gestalt and those of the people who surrounded him in the world, Merleau-Ponty chose to remain silent. In his silence, he becomes, like Kierkegaard before him, an indirect truth which 'steps out in character'. For the final truth that Merleau-Ponty had discovered was the painful necessity of silence.

#### *Lévi-Strauss*

When we come to the provocative work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Professor of Social Anthropology at the Collège de France, we face a brilliant and dazzling kaleidoscope of ideas about communication in all its forms and at all levels. Though dissociating himself from a philosophy of communication, Lévi-Strauss' thought cannot avoid posing many problems in a philosophical way, and he himself looks forward to a time (*Anthropologie Structurale*, p. 329 f.) when the various social sciences now absorbed in special aspects of communication will be absorbed into a master science of communication, which cannot in its nature avoid being a philosophical science.

Lévi-Strauss' contributions to the study of communication, (communication which is indirect in the terms of this study) are enormous, and one has the impression of standing before a constantly changing communicational mobile, a 'kinetic' methodology of communication which changes as one watches it. The direction which his future work will take is of course unknown, but it will have to come to terms with the disjunction between science and philosophy which has so unhappily been erected in France. With Lévi-Strauss, we are always

*in medias res*, simply because the world and all it contains provokes him to ever more daring synthesis and experiment.

*La Pensée Sauvage* (1962) and *Le Cru et le Cuit* (1964) give ample and varied viewpoints on the ways in which human societies communicate non-verbally. But perhaps some of the most succinct methodological ‘programmes’ are to be found in the papers collected together in the book called *Anthropologie Structurale* (1958). One paper, dating from 1952, *The Notion of Structure in Ethnology*, has a peculiarly striking formulation of non-verbal forms of communication, which draws of course to some extent on the work of Mauss:

‘In every society, communication operates at at least three levels: communication of women; communication of goods and services; communication of messages. Consequently the study of the system of parenthood, the study of the economic system, and the study of the linguistic system offer certain analogies . . . Culture does not therefore consist exclusively in forms of communication which belong to it in a formal sense (like language) but also – and perhaps above all – in rules applicable to all sorts of ‘communication games’ whether these games are displayed on the natural or on the cultural level’ (p. 326).

We may notice in passing the analogies in this passage with the problems that Wittgenstein was wrestling with all by himself in a different milieu of thought, and regret that English philosophy has never thought it worth while to examine the immense richness of structural linguistics and structural anthropology for a possible set of solutions to Wittgenstein’s hermetically sealed-off problems, never found it worth while to follow that mild advice so full of wisdom: Only connect . . .

Lévi-Strauss shows us new ways of understanding the communicational ‘games’ we play, and suggests the existence of ‘rules’. The discovery of what these ‘rules’ might be is one of the possible junction points for social science and philosophy at the moment. Drawing on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss shows us that what we learn from the total outward life of a society is just as great as what we derive from its spoken language or its written signs. In the passage which stands above, the most striking element is the parenthesis: ‘and perhaps above all’. The dress, cooking habits, marriage patterns, myths, village-geography, all these refer to a code which lies behind them, as a sentence spoken refers to the grammar which lies behind it. De Saussure’s distinction between the ‘langue’ (the abstract, super-individual system of the language or code itself) and the ‘parole’ (the concrete individual act of talking or communicating) is here being used to enormous effect, but (and this it is which is so striking) not with reference to words at all, but with reference to *visual* ‘signs’ which have to be interpreted for their signification, their reference to an existent pattern of meanings, or moral *parti pris*, etc. It is through the ‘games’ played out in space and time,



without a word necessarily being spoken, that we get at the meaning of an indirect communication. Lévi-Strauss drives for the signification of what we *see* as well as what we hear, and with this drive we enter a kind of promised land of new freedom, where significance is at last freed from its verbal chains.

Another striking example of this new freedom may be found in a paper dating from 1951 (*Anthropologie Structurale*, p. 70):

'One may be legitimately surprised to see women assigned the role of elements in a system of signs. Let us be on our guard however, because if words and phonemes have lost (in a manner which is more apparent than real) their character of values and have become simple signs, the same evolution would not be able to happen where women are concerned. Unlike women, words do not speak. As well as being signs, women are also the producers of signs; as such they are incapable of being reduced to the status of symbols or mere counters.'

These walking 'signs' then, these signs which are themselves productive of other signs and values, have distinct analogies to Gestalten in our previous senses. These walking signs are pointers, who use, or who are, an indirect communication, to a structure of realities which lie behind the signs and the indirection. They do not speak, unlike words. Nevertheless, they are eloquent. We accede to their unspoken realities only by a sensitive appreciation of the signs, or (to pick up de Saussure's distinction again) it is only through the 'signifiant' of an indirect communication, be it a sign, a message, a look or a silence, that we reach back, or up, into the world of the 'signifié', the concept, the sudden rush of understanding, 'So that's what he means . . .', when we take to ourselves the inner or un-speakable quality of the experience which is offered visually to us.

We may ask to what extent the methodology of visual indirection such as Lévi-Strauss presents it in his latest books refers us back to a genuine unconscious reality, be that unconscious 'collective' in some sense, or tied to a given society, or merely individual. It is true of course that Lévi-Strauss does not hold a theory of a group mind, but he is undeniably aiming for what lies as a kind of common layer beneath all human societies and what, like a computer, the human mind generally agrees to read off as being significant from the mass of data in front of it. As he says in his *Introduction* to the collected works of Marcel Mauss, speaking of the 'social fact':

'It is necessary to apprehend it totally, that is to say from outside like a thing, but like a thing into which however, subjective apprehension enters as an integrating factor (conscious and subconscious), that subjective apprehension which we would have to take of it if, inescapably men, we were living the fact as an aborigine instead of observing it like an anthropologist' (*op. cit.*, p. xviii).

Lévi-Strauss then accepts the use of the subconscious as a guide in interpreting social structures. To what extent is it a reliable guide? Here the British school is uneasy. But it remains a fact that without some such attempt to get at the significance of primitive psychology we shall never get at the significance of our own. Putting it at its very lowest, what other methods are scientifically possible, once given that man is studying man?<sup>7</sup>

The future of communicational research in the social sciences is obviously rich in possibilities. It is sad to see that certain philosophers and anthropologists, both in France and in England, have decided rather to deny the value of the Lévi-Straussian advances and obstruct his theories than to try and surpass and better his methods. It is doubly sad in that Lévi-Strauss himself has accused philosophy of acting from 'a kind of irritation, sometimes a little angry and childish, before the enormous progress of scientific thought' and goes on to suggest that philosophy is reducing itself to 'a ridiculous attempt to create for itself a private domain which would be completely hermetically sealed off from science. This appears to me to be alarming'. (These phrases are taken from a recent interview in *Cahiers de Philosophie*, Vol. 1, 'Anthropologie', January 1966.)

Here the reference is perhaps primarily to Paul Ricœur's attempt, in *Esprit* for November 1963, to maintain an area, specifically a philosophic one, for what he calls 'hermeneutics' i.e. an interpretative area which should be immune from Lévi-Straussian structural reduction, on the grounds that Lévi-Strauss, having chosen to deal with just those societies which suit his purposes, may not claim to exhaust or even to penetrate the significances of traditions of which he does not speak. This is self-evidently true, and Lévi-Strauss himself admits it, claiming modestly that he is only a scientist who advances little by little, not a philosopher who solves either all problems or none (see *Cahiers*, p. 50). Needless to say, in France it is not only Paul Ricœur who denies Lévi-Strauss the toga of philosopher, indeed he is one of the most moderate and intelligent of his critics.

In England there is the same tendency to deny philosophic status to Lévi-Strauss, but there the suspicion is found rather among the anthropologists themselves. In a recent article in the *New Left Review* (No. 34, Nov.—Dec. 1965) Dr Edmund Leach mounts a typical and hostile case against the philosophic pretensions of Lévi-Strauss. The article tends unfortunately towards being patronising and even insulting, and seems to proceed from a general sense of unease which is unable to define its focus of attack. Dr Leach gives the impression of being surrounded by invisible foes, and while insisting that he is unable to evaluate Lévi-Strauss as a philosopher is nevertheless passionately committed to denying the value of Lévi-Strauss'

<sup>7</sup>In a science where the observer is of the same nature as his object, the observer is himself a part of what is observed.' (op. cit. p. xxvii).



philosophy. Lévi-Strauss, he insists again and again, has no right to construct theories of Man. All the anthropologist ought to be concerned with is his facts. British anthropology is known for its tenacity in keeping theory down, in keeping facts bright and clear, if unconnected. Dr. Leach objects to what he calls the 'nineteenth century' aspects of Lévi-Strauss, the attempt, that is, after having examined the facts, to see what general significance these facts might have when taken together.

Lévi-Strauss' attempt in *La Pensée Sauvage* to see what light the totemic order of the Australian Aborigines might throw on the Indian caste system, Dr Leach regards (*New Left Review*, p. 26) as scientifically pernicious. The one is utterly different from the other, and we have no right to transform one 'code' (a communicational 'code') into another, or even to want to do so.

Lévi-Strauss, however, persists in believing that synthesis, and parallel investigation into widely differing cultures, have a value. Through these we come at the structure of the myth-making faculty in Man himself, we see through the various indirect communications which myth offers us, how it thinks. Although Lévi-Strauss is not concerned to talk philosophy, and is of course quite as concerned with facts as is the British school, he is concerned with the philosophical implications of his facts, in spite of being rapped over the knuckles for it both in France and in England. What the communication systems of one people tell us about the communication systems of another is for Lévi-Strauss of vital importance if we are to understand the process of thought itself, see our own thought reflected in the mirror of 'la pensée sauvage'. It is precisely here that Dr Leach objects that there is no universal process of thought, that thought differs *radically* from one epoch and society to another. Lévi-Strauss does not believe that thought differs *radically* from one epoch and society to another, that there are similarities of *process* at the level of mythical creation, across societies. It is in the communication patterns of a society that we see its links with other societies. The debate could obviously be fruitful, but only if this sad mutual mistrust is overcome.

In this article we have looked at various theories of indirection, and perhaps at the end we may be able to perceive a possible vantage point which lies beyond all of them. This vantage point would be a ground where the human sciences and philosophy could come together to work out rules, rules deduced from the mental processes which we have studied in the form of indirect communications. From these communications we could work out a plan of the area which lies behind them, the area which Merleau-Ponty refers to as the 'primordial silence' which is only broken by the gesture.

In this effort, every human and social science can bring help, every psychology however incomplete in itself can contribute, every anthropology however limited can add its support. By working

backwards from indirect communication, one might thus arrive at the creation of a methodology of interpretational technique, the proper use of which could contribute to the betterment of human communication. When we came to gaps and missing links in the specific terms of any human science, it would be to this integrational study that we should turn. This study must necessarily therefore be philosophical, and in it all the various sciences of communication could find their centrality and their point of repose.

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