Chapter 4 Criticism of Heidegger: A Brief Note

This topic, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Heidegger, has been dealt with in another place, in far greater detail. For this lengthier treatment see “Merleau-Ponty’s Criticism of Heidegger.” For now, it is perhaps appropriate enough to offer a brief note, the essence of the more prolonged treatment, sans a discussion of the important political differences between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

Richard Askay and Kevin Aho have drawn attention to Heidegger’s comments regarding the human body in the so-called Zollikon Seminars, where he provides a brief view of the existential body, one that is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s. Yet, there is also a fundamental difference, which Askay and Aho frame as follows. While Heidegger’s Dasein opens upon a clearing, on the ontological, the abyss of Being, Merleau-Ponty remains too tied to the ontic level of beings (Aho 16; see Askay 32-33).

Let us consider this claim. In his early The Structure of Behavior Merleau-Ponty makes the case for what we might called “ontological” perception, for a bodily perception that is lived through, that opens out upon the horizon of the world, rather than understood as reduced to a third-person, objective (ontic) process (SB 92-93, 192). Phenomenology of Perception continues this same theme.

“In other words, as we have shown elsewhere, the objective body is not the true version of the phenomena body, that is, the true version of the body that we live by: it is indeed no more than the latter’s impoverished image, so that the problem of the relation of the soul to body has nothing to do with the objective body, which exists only conceptually, but with the phenomenal body. What is true, however, is that our open and personal existence rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence.” (PhP 431-2)

The author clearly stresses the codependence of the lived through perceiving body and the natural body as a collection of stable structures. Yet he expresses this codependence even more clearly in another Phenomenology of Perception passage.

Neither the body nor existence can be regarded as the original of the human being, since they presuppose each other, and because the body is solidified or generalized existence, and existence is perpetual incarnation. The same reason that prevents us from ‘reducing’ existence to the body or to sexuality, prevents us also from ‘reducing’ sexuality to existence: the fact is that existence is not a set of facts (like ‘psychic facts’) capable of being reduced to others or to which they can reduce themselves, but an ambiguous setting of their inter-communication, the point at which their boundaries run into each other, or again their woven fabric. (PhP 166)

To express this using Heidegger’s language, when considering the human body and lived through perception, neither the ontic nor the ontological should be regarded as primary. Lived through human existence (or lived through perception) cannot be reduced to the material body, which must itself be understood as stabled structures of existence, as the body oriented toward the world in certain favored ways. Nor can the human body be reduced to the lived through. They must be integrated. The body must be understood as an aware orientation toward the world, and the lived through must be understood as an aware bodily orientation. The human body is both ontic and ontological, and is a blend of both.
Merleau-Ponty addresses Heidegger directly, along with a lengthier treatment of Husserl, in his lecture notes entitled “Phenomenology and the Science of Man.” He considers Husserl first, for he is particularly interested in Husserl’s own “double envelopment” of facts and essences, of the ontic and ontological. Husserl’s intuition of essence begins, and must begin, with the perception of particular facts. Then, using the free variation of these facts in the imagination, Husserl attempts to find, with the aid of a rational intuition, their essential structure. (PSM 70) Yet, again, the grasping of the essence must take off from a contact with the facts. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the relation between perception and Wesenshau [intuition of essences] is one of founding [Fundierung]; perception serves as a ground, or pedestal, on which an insight into essence is formed” (PSM 68, the first bracket is mine, the second is Merleau-Ponty’s). It is here that Merleau-Ponty speaks of Husserl’s double envelopment. (PSM 68) Facts suggest a certain interpretation, yet the interpretation is needed to more precisely express the meaning found in the facts. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty reports, this double envelopment is really Husserl’s way into eidetic phenomenology, for Husserl seeks to maintain contact with the sciences, particularly the social sciences, using this contact with the facts provided by the sciences as the necessary starting point for the philosophical intuition of essences. Merleau-Ponty proceeds to point out that Heidegger rejects this relationship.

“But Heidegger defines the attitude of the philosopher without recognizing any restriction on the absolute power of philosophical thought. For example, at the beginning of Sein und Zeit (3rd edition, Halle, 1931, p. 45), he said that the task of philosophy is to explore the natural concept of the world, independently of science, by the primordial experience we have of it. To determine the structure of this natural world, he adds, it is not at all necessary to have any recourse to ethnology or to psychology. These disciplines presuppose a philosophical knowledge of the natural world, and one can never find the principle which will enable us to order psychological or ethnographical facts by making inductions from these facts. In order to do this the spirit must first possess the principle.” (PSM 94)

Merleau-Ponty therefore concludes the following.

“Heidegger remained fixed in [his] thesis of the pure and simple opposition between philosophy and the sciences of man or, as Heidegger puts it, between the ontological and the ontic. For Husserl . . . the opposition was only a point of departure, which later became a problem and finally a hidden connection between the two kinds of research. Husserl, who defined philosophy as the suspension of our apprehension of the world, recognized the actual being of the philosopher in the world much more clearly than Heidegger, who devoted himself to the study of being in the world.” (PSM 94, my bracket)

Obviously, it is Husserl that Merleau-Ponty follows here, not Heidegger. Thus, we must qualify the claim made by Askey and Aho. While it is true that Heidegger places a greater emphasis on philosophy than science, on the ontological than the ontic, on Being than being, and that Merleau-Ponty seeks to maintain greater contact with the sciences, with the ontic, and with being, it is not true that Merleau-Ponty simply remains at the level of the ontic. Merleau-Ponty takes the ontological seriously, opening his philosophy to this orientation, yet, like Husserl, he seeks to also make sure that it is related to the ontic. In fact, he moves back and forth between, realizing that they must remain connected, and more, that they must be integrated.
Without this connection and integration, we leap into mysticism, as is the case with Heidegger’s philosophy. With this connection and integration, we find a more balanced and thorough understanding, as is the case with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.\textsuperscript{112}