



From Radical to Embodied Freedom: Merleau-Ponty's Reappraisal of Sartre

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ABSTRACT

Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau Ponty both place freedom at the centre of human existence. Still, they do not mean the same thing by freedom. This paper argues that Merleau Ponty does not simply reject Sartre's idea of radical freedom. He gives it a different ground. Freedom, for him, grows from our living body and from our everyday contact with the world. That shift changes the whole discussion. The paper closely reads *Phenomenology of Perception* together with Sartre's main existential writings. It shows how perception, habit, and our relations with others shape every free act. We are never outside the world when we choose. We always begin from a situation. This does not make freedom weak. It gives freedom a richer meaning. The paper also suggests that Merleau Ponty's view speaks to present discussions on embodied cognition and phenomenology. This connection has not received enough attention in studies that compare these two thinkers. The main claim of this article is that Merleau Ponty offers a new way of thinking about freedom. His account moves beyond the idea of pure choice and explains freedom as something lived, embodied, and always unfolding within the world.

Introduction

One of the major questions that the philosophers ask themselves is the question of freedom. Over the years many philosophers have attempted to give an account of what freedom is and how human beings make

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choices. In the 20th century, it was Jean Paul Sartre who provided one of the most emphatic answers to this question in existentialism. He maintained that human beings are free, in a profound and inevitable way. We are not completely determined by our history, our body or our society. There are always opportunities to make other choices. As a result, freedom is the fundamental condition of human life.

Maurice Merleau Ponty took it as a given that freedom is fundamental to human life. However, he wasn't entirely content with Sartre's account. He felt that Sartre had overemphasized pure consciousness and not emphasized enough the body and the world in which we live. At first glance this may appear to be a minor detail. It does alter, though, the meaning of freedom in a significant way. Merleau Ponty poses a question. Is it possible to select without having been involved in some living world? His answer is no. The starting point of us is always the body, the place, the history, and the relations with other persons. These are not restraints on freedom. They represent those conditions which make freedom possible.

The difference between the two thinkers has been studied extensively with regard to the phenomenological and existentialist approaches. The term 'critical' is used in the discussions to indicate Merleau Ponty's criticism of Sartre's concept of radical freedom. It has been said that their disagreement is an existentialistic versus phenomenological one. Others write on the topic of perception, lived body or intersubjectivity in Merleau Ponty's philosophy. Both of these studies are useful. Nevertheless, they tend to represent Merleau Ponty's stance primarily as an attack on Sartre. They are less concerned with the positive concept of freedom which emerges from his own phenomenology.

This paper goes a different way. It claims that Merleau Ponty is not simply going against Sartre's conception of freedom. He refashions it; he puts freedom in lived experience. Freedom isn't up in the air. It shows in our interactions with objects, our routines, our actions, and our relationships with others. There is no "outside" looking in on the world. It is going on before we reflect and make decisions. This means there is no absolute freedom, and there is no lack of freedom. It is lived, that is, it is situated, it is connected with the world that we live in.

This argument is developed in four steps in the paper. It briefly introduces Sartre's concept of radical freedom and the philosophical presuppositions involved in it. It then looks at Merleau Ponty's critique of this stance. The discussion then presents how Merleau Ponty constructs an alternative account of freedom as embodied, perceptive and situated. Finally, the paper reflects on the significance of this liberal understanding in the present day, in light of the concepts of agency, embodied cognition and current phenomenology.



The main thesis of this article is that Merleau Ponty's reinterpretation of Sartre is not merely critical but constructive as well. He retains the existential worry about freedom of the human person but places it on a new ontological foundation. Freedom is no longer one's isolated consciousness. It is part of a life within a shared world as it moves, senses, reacts. This transformation provides a fuller account of human agency and new prospects for modern phenomenological philosophy.

Sartre's Idea of Radical Freedom

The central theme of Sartre's philosophy is freedom. It's not a quality among many. That makes a man a human being. A stone or tree or a table just is. There is a difference in the way a person exists. Humans have questions, can refuse, can imagine, can choose. This is a power that is always there. Therefore, Sartre thinks that each individual is in principle free.

This is best expressed by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. He maintains that man's consciousness is never static or definitive. Consciousness will continually turn outward to something else. It is not permanent in nature. It is open, in motion and unfinished. This is why Sartre claims that Existence precedes Essence. Our purpose and identity is not determined at birth. Who we are is shaped by our decisions. Each and every decision can impact our lives, and nobody else can make our decisions.

A key idea in Sartre's philosophy is nothingness. When we add in consciousness, there is a space between what we are and what we can be. The space between present reality and possibilities provides us with the opportunity to move past what we are to what we want to be. A student might be stuck in a family role. Despite that, that student can challenge those expectations and take another route. The situation can be challenging. It could even be life-threatening. But for Sartre the option for choice never completely vanishes.

This is how Sartre talks about radical freedom. The body, class, history and environment are not determining factors in the making of a human being. These facts are what life is made of but they do not determine our future. These given conditions are facticity, according to Sartre. Facticity means everything that we don't decide to be, our birthplace, our physical characteristics, our actions of the past, our social situations etc. These circumstances are true. He never says that they do not exist. Nevertheless, they cannot take away our freedom since there is always more consciousness than is offered.

Facticity and transcendence is one of the most relevant aspects of Sartre's philosophy. The facticity is the conditions in which we are born. Transcendence is the power we have to transcend beyond them by choice



and action. Both are always a part of human life. We are not free from our facticity yet we are not totally determined by it. The key to freedom is how we react to the circumstances we are in.

This concept of freedom is also the source of Sartre's notion of responsibility. People live free, they must live responsible. This responsibility can't be taken away by a higher authority, fixed human nature or universal moral law. This is perhaps best stated by Sartre (1956) who writes that human beings are "condemned to be free" (p. 439). It might sound weird to begin with. It is not something we can avoid; Sartre says, freedom is not something we can avoid. We choose even when we don't, and we still have to take responsibility for our life anyway. Each option is a lifestyle. Not choosing is a choice, too. Sartre thus concludes that man is not free from responsibility for his actions.

From this comes his well-known talk on bad faith. Bad faith occurs when someone acts as if there was no freedom. Someone can say that there are no other options because of the circumstances. Someone else may be playing a social role and behave as if this role is all they are. According to Sartre, each of these attitudes is a type of self-deception. This is because freedom is accompanied by uncertainty and anxiety. It's hard to take responsibility for life.

Sartre's philosophy of freedom has been influential in existential philosophy. It shows human beings as active creators of meaning in the world without pre-determined values. At the same time, the great consciousness thing asks questions. Is it possible to define freedom without referring to the body through which we perceive the world? Can consciousness rise above all situations as Sartre has suggested? These questions became a focus of Merleau Ponty's thinking. He concurred with Sartre's premise that there is freedom, but not the kind that would necessarily color the world in which it is experienced. The following section will review this criticism, and illustrate Merleau Ponty's first steps toward rethinking freedom.

Merleau Ponty's Critique of Radical Freedom

The French philosopher and phenomenologist Merleau Ponty was fascinated by Sartre's endeavor to make freedom the center of the human. He agreed that human beings are not passive objects which are manipulated by external forces. We are responsible for our actions, choices and shaping our lives. Nevertheless, he felt Sartre's description was too abstract from common experience. Sartre granted to consciousness too autonomous a status from the body and the world, in an effort to preserve the freedom of the human being.

In Merleau Ponty's case, this separation poses a serious issue. There is no pure consciousness that we first are and then come into the world. We live in the world before we think about it. This is the idea that



Merleau-Ponty (2002) captures in his writing: “To be born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world” (p. 527) A person's life is always and inescapably bound up in the world. Body, environment, and relationships are already there before reflection and decision making is even engaged. Through our bodies we see, move, touch and speak. All thinking is rooted in this lived relationship with our environment. The body is not just an instrument of consciousness. It is the way we are in the world.

This is where the concept of freedom is altered. Sartre frequently depicts consciousness as stepping outside of any situation and going beyond it. Merleau Ponty does not like this picture being too abstract. No one consciously decides to do something without considering a range of options. No one makes any decision without taking a look at a variety of options. Each decision is made from a specific circumstance. We bring our habits, memories, emotions and relationships with us. These are not barriers to freedom. They are the means of the very life in which freedom is manifested.

Perception is an important factor in this argument. According to Merleau Ponty, perception is not a straightforward process of receiving information. It's the fundamental manner we approach the world. We are already in the midst of things around us before we judge or reflect. A familiar person does not count every step as he/she walks down a street. The body naturally reacts to the paths, objects and people it comes into contact with. This practical engagement demonstrates that human existence is always incarnated prior to reflection.

This means that Merleau Ponty calls into doubt Sartre's sharp difference between facticity and transcendence. Sartre frequently accounts for these as two aspects of being. Merleau Ponty has them as closely intertwined. The conditions into which we are born are not just on the outside of our freedom. They form the arena where freedom has significance. In deciding what to do, our body, our language, our culture and our past are always there. We can't divorce ourselves fully of them.

It is not to say that man is caused by his situation. Merleau Ponty denies that. He does not say that freedom is free, he says that freedom always happens in a situation. A situation provides opportunities, and it sets boundaries. Individuals can react to the same scenarios in various ways. Hence, there is a true freedom. But such responses are seldom totally detached from the world from which they emerge.

Habit is also a topic of interest for Merleau Ponty. Habit is not a topic of discussion when we talk about freedom, because it seems to be repetition rather than choice. He doesn't view it that way. Habits reveal the ways in which the body learns to do new things and gradually becomes the body of its own. Once a musician is proficient at the instrument, he no longer has to think about how to move his hands. A driver



doesn't intend to do every maneuver that he makes while operating a vehicle. These are the skills that the body possesses. There is freedom in these learned ways of action, not just during conscious choice.

He transcends Sartre's stance in his account of intersubjectivity. There is no one on earth who lives in solitude. Relationship with others is the way we develop. Our understanding of ourselves and the world is shaped by language, culture and common practices. In freedom, it is within a common world of humans that it can emerge. It is never a solitary consciousness unmerged with other people.

In the light of this, Merleau Ponty's criticism becomes more than just negative. He doesn't say that people are not free. He calls us to ponder freedom differently. The freedom is not a boundless power which can remove all restraints. It is the capacity to act creatively in the conditions which already form our lives. Freedom is not diminished by the body, perception, habit or our relationships with others. They provide it with living shape.

This change was one of Merleau Ponty's most significant contributions to phenomenology. His criticism of Sartre is not a desire to negate freedom with necessity. It is an effort to demonstrate that true freedom is possible only to the person who is an embodied being and is always part of a common world. The following section expands on this thought and details how from this phenomenological observation Merleau Ponty constructs a positive account of embodied freedom.

From Radical Freedom to Embodied Freedom

Merleau Ponty's account of freedom is not limited to his critique of Sartre. That's just the first criticism. His true mission is to make people understand what freedom means in practice. But as the body enters philosophy, so, too, does freedom. It is no longer a thing confined to the consciousness. It is part of the whole person as the person lives, moves and acts in the world.

This new understanding is based on the concept of the lived body. Merleau Ponty does not consider the body to be something we have. The body is the means by which we live in the world from the inside. The body is the means by which we grasp objects, communicate with others, and make our way through the world. All freedom starts from this free relation to the world. Outside lived experience there is no freedom; outside human existence there is no embodiment.

This is evident in everyday life. A child who is learning to write slowly is beginning to take control of the hand. Initially, all the moves must be addressed. Later, writing comes as second nature. The body has taken on a new pattern of behaviour. This is how freedom is gained. It's not just the option to be in charge. It's also



the power to acquire new skills and adjust to new situations. No free speech is in short supply here. It renders freedom possible.

Perception is also a very significant element in Merleau Ponty. Perception is not a passive activity that occurs when information comes in from outside the mind. It is a dynamic interaction with objects surrounding us. There are many aspects of the world about which we already know before we start thinking. A carpenter sees the possibilities of a piece of wood. A dancer has an experience of space in terms of movement. These are examples of how the body and how practice affect perception. This is one way of becoming free.

Another key concept is that each circumstance has lots of options. Humans don't behave like mechanical machines. They find alternative actions in a similar situation. But those options are never limitless. What can be done depends on a person's history, relationships, social status and physical state. So freedom is in a space of possibilities. Not totally unconditional or limited. It grows out of the interaction between self and world.

The notion of choice is also transformed by Merleau Ponty's concept of freedom. Sartre's philosophy frequently features the presence of freedom in moments of conscious decision. Merleau Ponty extends this image. A lot of our actions occur before we're able to begin thinking. We wish someone a greeting, steer clear of an obstacle, or console someone, without thinking through the details beforehand. These are just expressions of our identity, even today. They demonstrate that there is freedom in our everyday life experiences, not just in dramatic moments of decisions.

This is reinforced by his later philosophy. Merleau Ponty describes the body-world relation as a very intimate kind of relation in his later works, particularly in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Mankind cannot be viewed as an outside observer of reality. We are in the same world that we know. Merleau-Ponty (1964) describes human existence as always being "in contact with the world, not outside it" (p. 261). Freedom is thus not the right of an individual consciousness. It is created, as we are interacting with the world that we already live in. Flesh is an idea that describes this mutual relation. The body is related to the world, and the world is related to the body. Always there is seeing and being seen, acting and being acted upon. Freedom is, thus, not absolute disembodiment from the world, but rather a different kind of bondage. Freedom, then, is not freedom from the world, but another kind of slavery. This ongoing interaction between the person and the world is the basis for its growth.



This is a way of thinking, which makes freedom more meaningful. Freedom does not mean how far we can get away from the situation. It is observed in our response to that situation, our creativity and openness. Two people may be in the same situation and act differently in their life. The essence of their freedom is how they relate to what is already possible in front of them. Thus, freedom is not some static force but a process.

This interpretation also provides a new understanding of the relationship between phenomenology and existentialism. Merleau-Ponty leaves not one bit of the existential engagement with human agency behind. He provides it with a phenomenological basis. The beginning of human freedom is with perception, the growth of it is with bodily habits, and development of it is in relation to shared relations. It's always joined to the world, for man himself is worldly.

From this point of view, Merleau Ponty's reassessment of Sartre is critical and constructive. He recognizes the value of freedom and is not willing to detach it from actual experiences. Freedom is not a mirage, nor the unlimited power. It's a thing we have to do continually in the world. This insight not only alters existential philosophy, but also provides new lines of thought on human agency in the context of contemporary phenomenology.

Contemporary Significance: Embodied Freedom and Human Agency

The concept of embodied freedom is relevant today after many current debates on human freedom have abandoned the image of the isolated mind. Philosophers, psychologists and cognitive scientists have been debating these issues in recent years and it is now common to think that thinking is inseparable from the body and the meaning of people's lives. Merleau Ponty had already been in many respects pointing in this direction. His work is a reminder that the human experience occurs always within the body.

This is particularly evident in thinking about embodied cognition. The traditional theories usually talk about the mind as a computer in its aspects of processing information. Merleau Ponty has a different picture. Learning must start from perception and action of the body, he says. We learn through movement, touch and speech. The mind does not produce knowledge. It is developed by life experience. His story of freedom is the same. This active involvement with the world is how human agency is developed.

His concepts are also relevant to contemporary discussions of social life. Nobody attains freedom without having someone to help. Each person is born into a family, a language, a culture and a community. The nature of these relationships shapes people's self-understanding and imaginations. These are social conditions that Merleau Ponty does not consider to be obstacles to freedom. They are the background on



which freedom emerges. This dimension remains relevant when considering identity, education, and public life.

The other one is disability studies. In older conceptions freedom was measured in purely physical terms. There are other ways to think, as Merleau Ponty's philosophy would suggest. All bodies are unique and understand and navigate the world differently. When dealing with different bodily conditions, that doesn't automatically take away the possibility of agency. There are various ways in which freedom can be felt in the body. Later philosophers have been influenced by this perspective to consider more carefully the concepts of ability, dependence and human dignity.

He has some value as well in moral philosophy. Moral judgments are frequently said to be a pure inference. Common sense tells us that this is more complicated. We typically react to circumstances in habits, feelings, perceptions and relationships before we start thinking carefully. This is a commonplace reality to which Merleau Ponty helps to contribute. The whole person is the source of moral agency; not only abstract thinking.

These ideas are even more important in a technologically driven world. Digital devices have now shaped the way people communicate, learn, work and even think. Human freedom cannot just be reduced to an inner act of choosing. It is also influenced by how people engage with technology contexts. The focus on embodiment, as shared by Merleau Ponty, brings attention to the fact that, even in digital environments, the human being is an embodied person, whose experiences are founded in everyday life. This attitude is helpful to consider when discussing agency in today's techno-societies.

Together these developments demonstrate that Merleau Ponty's philosophy is not just a reaction to Sartre. His description of embodied freedom is still of great value for contemporary philosophical debates. It means that freedom can be genuine but not be separated from the body, the society, or the world. That insight adds something more to his phenomenology than just the discussions of the twentieth century existentialism.

Conclusion

The present paper has explored Merleau Ponty's rethinking of Sartre's conception of freedom and has suggested that the differences between them are more profound than at first glance. According to Sartre, freedom is the essence of human beings and he emphasizes the role of conscience in transcending each situation by choice. His story is one of the most impassioned statements of existential freedom. Nevertheless, it does not answer an important question. It is not a complete account of the reality of freedom.



Merleau Ponty responds to this question in another way. He starts with the body of life, rather than with pure consciousness. There are no minds outside the body – people do not enter the world as minds and then inhabit their bodies. We are already interacting with people, places, and things by perceiving and using our bodies. All options flow from this intimate connection to the world. Thus, freedom is always bound up in the contexts in which persons are placed.

The paper has suggested that Merleau Ponty's critique of Sartre is not an anti-freedom criticism. His aim is to give freedom a stronger philosophical foundation. The body, the habit, perception and intersubjective life do not diminish human agency. They bring to light the possibility of freedom in normal life. Freedom is not an unlimited running away from all conditions. It's how people do their creativity in their situations and how they are able to make use of the potential it provides.

This is also a clue to the relevance of Merleau Ponty's philosophy in this day and age. His embodied freedom is a narrative that resonates with contemporary debates on agency, embodiment and lived experience. It is also related to some recent developments in phenomenology, embodied cognition, and moral philosophy. The paper has demonstrated that Sartre is not all that Merleau Ponty is critical of, in bringing these ideas together. He has a deeper experience and appreciation of freedom which is closely related to the reality of human life.

This is the view from which the transition from radical freedom to embodied freedom is not a radical departure from existentialism. It's a growth of the philosophical centerpiece that enriches the conversation. Merleau Ponty retains the notion of freedom of the human person but demonstrates that it always happens in the body and in the world. It is one of the greatest contributions of the twentieth century to philosophy, and a useful tool for reflection on human life in the present.

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