
IV. A GLIMPSE AT PHENOMENOLOGY

Freedom Through Generality: The Body's Atmosphere in the Phenomenology of Perception

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Abstract:

This paper explores how 'generality' both enables and restricts freedom for Merleau-Ponty within the *Phenomenology of Perception*. By thematizing 'generality' as a concept crucial to the project of this text, the paper illuminates a narrative little analyzed before, while also investigating the conditioned nature of our freedom. The paper concludes that the general atmosphere in which the embodied subject exists, according to Merleau-Ponty, is 'general' since it is neither a particularizing determination nor a universal law. Instead, one's personal history and the powers of one's own body provide an open and indeterminate set of possibilities, and this is where both generality and freedom are found.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, generality, embodiment, style, freedom

Introduction

In this paper, we will explore how "generality" both enables and restricts freedom for Merleau-Ponty within the *Phenomenology of Perception*. We'll begin by defining two dimensions of generality, a personal generality determined by our history and a prepersonal generality which is our body. Then, we will see how these two levels of generality allow Merleau-Ponty to posit a conditioned freedom.

Let's first look at "generality" itself. "Generality" hovers between the extreme poles of the universal and the particular. A universal truth is unchanging and is necessarily true in all cases. A particular is not a principle, but a distinct entity. A general principle is that which holds "in most cases," informing and structuring them but without necessity. Generalities are porous and fluid, not strict universals which are absolute, but rather categories

which hold for the most part while being open to alteration. The general is a certain directionality or sketching out of something without pre-determining it. Universals contain within themselves all that they will unfold, whereas a generality is what it is only by unfolding in a contingent context, as its principle is never fully self-explicit or complete. We will now see how these characteristics of generality apply for Merleau-Ponty.

Personal Generality

Let's say that I see an apple. While I do see the apple according to the structure of my mind and perceptual capacities, these structures are neither explicit nor unchanging as the intellectualist would argue. While it is also true that I see the apple according to my past as the empiricist would contend, these experiences are not held as associated entities which predetermine my seeing the apple. Instead, bearing on my present perception is my own past *in general*. This past is composed of my past experiences, but these are complex "intertwinings" of causalities—physical, cultural, intentional, etc. I do not explicitly hold each of these past experiences as distinct particulars which I then synthesize into each new experience. Instead, these past experiences create a general atmosphere within which I live.

This atmosphere fundamentally and continuously shapes my world. It is an atmosphere since it is vague and ambiguous, and is not something in-itself, but is that which only exists through its coloration of objects and actions. Through the contributions of my past experiences, my present is, in a sense, determined, as this apple stands out due to my general atmosphere. Further, I know it as an apple, as something for eating, and as something red due to the general suggestions of this atmosphere. However, the past's contribution is general, as opposed to universal as the empiricist or intellectualist would argue. As Merleau-Ponty writes of this atmospheric generation of the past:

Our individual past [c]annot be given to us by...cerebral traces, nor by a consciousness of the past that would constitute it...If something of the past is to exist for us, then this can only be in an *ambiguous* presence...It must exist for us even though we do not think about it, and all of our recollections must be *drawn from this opaque mass*.¹

¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes (Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2012) 381. [my emphasis]

My past informs my present as an “opaque mass” informing what is possible in any given situation. My past does not absolutely determine how I will see the apple—nor even *that* I will see it—but my personal past is still ambiguously efficacious. At any given moment, I have before me a set of open possibilities—the atmosphere generated by my past delimits certain possibilities and gestures towards others, but never provides an absolutely open field, nor a single possibility. We described generality above as a “sketching out,” which we can now see as characterizing our past in its continual mode of presentation, which I will call our “personal generality.”

Merleau-Ponty writes of traumatic experiences: “...this past that remains our true present...always hides behind [our gaze]. Traumatic experience does not subsist as a representation...Rather, its nature is to survive only as a *style* of being and only to a certain degree of *generality*.”² A traumatic experience is not a *particular* entity, nor is it a *universal* law. Instead, the traumatic experience is that which generates a style of being. The traumatic experience is not a thing which affects or mediates my experiences, but my existence itself has changed its relationship to the world having undergone this experience. There is no explicit world for me beneath or behind this atmosphere, but seeing through a styled atmosphere is fundamentally the way I see the world. The traumatic experience exists for me not as a particular experience I associate with my present, nor as the seed of a universal principle, but as a generality implicit within the fabric of each experience.

Each new experience will contribute to shaping future sets of possible experiences, while simultaneously concretizing these past contributions into an actual event or action, as I realize one of the possibilities. As Merleau-Ponty stresses, we need distance from that which we perceive in order to see it, and it is generality which gives us this distance. Empiricism throws us face-to-face with the object as we blindly and reflexively respond. Intellectualism pulls us up into the cosmos, far away from the world as we oversee it in its constituted totality. Generality puts us concretely within the world, at a distance where we can see it and participate in its unfolding.

This very process can also be understood through the tension and movement of what Merleau-Ponty, in the wake of Sartre, terms “transcend-

² Ibid. 85. [my emphasis]

dence.”³ I am simultaneously determined by my past and factual situation, while remaining indeterminately open to the world. Transcendence is my *movement* of taking up each situation. Human existence is “the change of contingency into necessity through the act of taking up.”⁴ That is to say, I am continuously transcending myself by taking up an indeterminate possibility, concretizing this contingency, and investing it back into the structure of my being, thereby making it part of my past. This movement is determined both by my past and its various “intertwining” causalities, as well as by the world I find myself in. We will now turn to prepersonal generality, as the ground upon which our personal generalities are formed.

Body: The Prepersonal, Anonymous Generality

For Merleau-Ponty, I am always already within the tension of transcendence. But if there is no beginning to the movement of transcendence, then what is held in tension at the beginning of our lives? Without a past, what is conditioning my freedom?

Merleau-Ponty’s answer is: my body. Insofar as my body is open to the world in a certain way as the body that it is, it always already will have an open set of delimited possibilities laid out before it. I will always already exist according to my personal generality from the moment I have an experience, but logically prior to the contributions of this personal generality, my world is still one which carries a style about it, but this is a “primordial,” “prepersonal,” and “anonymous” style. The world solicits me *because* of the ways I am open to it, which is determined by my powers, which are gathered up by the body which I *am*.⁵ Insofar as I have a body, I can touch, hear, cry, and grasp—and there are an infinite number of things which I cannot do. These powers at my disposal do not determine my activities, but since I have these powers and not others, I am not absolutely free. This is why these powers produce *generality*—before my world is personalized, it is already limited without being totally determined.

My personal generality is a narrowing down, or a subset, of this larger set of primordial possibilities; my body’s powers open a vast universe of possibilities, and as I live my life and take on a personal history, many of these possibilities become foreclosed. We again find the ten-

³ Ibid. 172.

⁴ Ibid. 174.

⁵ Ibid. 151.

sion of transcendence, but now we recognize this as an embodied phenomenon—the body *is* that prepersonal generality which narrows its own possibilities by taking up a personal generality, and thus invests its world simply and immediately. I do not hold my past experiences as something separate and in-themselves which I bring to bear on experience, just as I don't first experience the world and then mediate it according to my bodily powers—*instead, the world which my body is open to is fundamentally structured according to prepersonal generality and the personal generality it has taken up.*

For Merleau-Ponty, I am not an embodied consciousness, but I am an existence *as* a body—and therefore the generality floating about me isn't located explicitly anywhere, but is borne by the body, and this is why it is atmospheric. As we have seen, my consciousness doesn't carry the traumatic experience with it as a separate thing, because my body in its very concrete openness to the world is fundamentally colored by the traumatic experience. Merleau-Ponty famously writes that “the body is our general means of having a world,”⁶ and we can now read this as saying that my body is both that prepersonal generality I begin with, and that which bears my personal generality through the structure of its transcendence.

If it is true, as is often stated, that the ancient Greeks could not see blue, this was not due to a lack of biological sensitivity, but because of the exchange between the possibilities that were open to their bodies and those which they concretized within their worlds. If their prepersonal generality was sensitive to the color blue, then the lack of a cultural context for making blue explicit produced the personal atmosphere in which blue as such did not figure. Indeed, in talking about this exchange between an individual and their world—as well as between the personal and prepersonal generality—it is unclear which variable makes what contribution, as they are all bound up within one another. In the limiting of the possibilities open to us, biology and culture are equally efficacious, and mutually informing. The colloquial conundrum of “nature vs. nurture” quickly falls away as the ambiguous, multi-leveled, dynamic movement of the body's transcendence of itself takes the place of an “order of facts” view of things.

Indeed, both the body and the world are active when seeing blue, as this *situation* is simultaneously the exercising of a power of seeing

⁶ Ibid. 147.

blue, and the soliciting of the world. “Blue” is the concretization of the world’s possibilities and my possibilities into a situation. If this possibility is not open to another, this is not causally connected to the individual’s biology or culture, nor to the world, but is just one expression of the complex, styled intertwining between that individual and the world into which they transcend.

Freedom and Statistical Thought

When asking what freedom is, Merleau-Ponty answers by re-articulating the movement of transcendence we’ve been analyzing:

What then is freedom?...The world is always already constituted, but also never completely constituted. In the first relation we are solicited, in the second we are open to an infinity of possibilities. Yet...we exist in both ways simultaneously.⁷ Thus, there is never determinism and never an absolute choice...

I am never absolutely free, for, as we have seen, I exist within an atmosphere of generality which forecloses certain possibilities and favors others. But I am also never wholly determined—although certain possibilities are foreclosed, I am still presented with an open set of possibilities. As Merleau-Ponty stresses, the world and the general atmosphere permeating it never *force* me to do anything, but instead *solicit* me. Each moment is a concretization of my personal and prepersonal generalities amongst the givens of the world, and, as Merleau-Ponty points out in the passage cited above, it is impossible to parse out fully what in the situation was dictated by my own contribution and what was due to the world. Each situation is a tension of interiority and exteriority, as the two are reciprocally intertwined—I transcend myself into the very world which I simultaneously take up.

Indeed, objective thought recognizes only absolutes—either one is free or is not. But Merleau-Ponty wants to argue against such absolutes, positing that “statistical thought necessarily belongs to a being who is fixed, situated, and surrounded in the world.”⁸ If I have continually led my life as someone with an inferiority complex—to use Merleau-Ponty’s example—then it is true that this is the style of my being. My

⁷ Ibid. 480.

⁸ Ibid. 467.

gestures, voice, thoughts, perceptions—these will all be permeated by an atmosphere that is generally colored by this inferiority complex. Certain thoughts and objects and actions will be privileged in my life, since the opaque mass I am continuously drawing from is one of “inferiority complex-ity.” My inferiority complex will be ever-present, investing the atmosphere that surrounds me—but since the atmosphere and its investments are general and not universalizing, it is only *likely* that I will act in accord with my inferiority complex. Something in my field will certainly be privileged by this inferiority complex, but it is not wholly determined to be selected by me. Indeed, this is what it means to be *privileged*—it will be presented strongly, but is not the only option.

Considering generality as the presentation of an open but delimited set of possibilities, we could say that *most* of my possibilities will be those colored by this inferiority complex, but others are still viable. Indeed, I am free to change my manner of being-in-the-world by continually accepting these other, unlikely options—which, in turn, will gradually weaken the existential reality of my inferiority complex, as it becomes less prominent in my atmosphere over time. We can always break our habits, if only gradually. A habit is not a reflex, but is a privileging, and therefore can be overcome. This is the other way that the opaque mass from which we draw is one of generality—it presents existential relations that hold *in most cases*. Our style dictates what is most likely for us, but we are always free to select another option, through this on-going transcendence which we embody by living out our existence in the world.

Further, I will not be able to force a particular experience upon myself since I am not absolutely free and the world resists. But I can work toward cultivating my being-in-the-world, doing my best to make the sorts of experiences I wish to have more and more likely, gradually styling my own transcendence in the choices I make.

It is important to note that those options not “colored by this inferiority complex,” will be colored by the inferiority complex in a certain sense, because they are the possibilities which don’t fall underneath it—and for an existence which has been long concretizing possibilities in line with this complex, that detail is not insignificant. It isn’t right to say that in breaking my habit I am *ignoring* it—rather, I am *actively* turning my back on it. We are always free to do the unexpected, to draw away from the general atmosphere permeating our existence, but we always necessarily act in relation to this generality, since to exist at all is to exist within a world, and our worlds are always already styled. Indeed, this brings us to

the final point to be made about freedom and its conditioned nature.

Merleau-Ponty equates my insertion in the world—this necessary given of my bodily existence—with my freedom.⁹ To be in the world is to be free. An animal wholly dependent on its reflexes is reduced to their particular experiences, since their whole being is gathered up in the bare responses to which they blindly adhere. But I am not reducible to any one of my experiences, because, given the nature of my body, I always have a certain distance from each situation, and the generality informing my life is never fixed. I have a set of possibilities spread out before me, an opaque mass of generality from which to draw, and therefore I am never determined absolutely. My unique style is reflected in every one of my experiences and choices which contribute back to this style, while the style itself is never wholly captured, much less determined, by any one of them.

This style—a condensed expression of the general atmosphere—is indeterminate and vague. But this destiny of being always free due to this generality is also a limitation, for we always exist in relation to it. As Merleau-Ponty notes,¹⁰ I can only escape from being into more being, and this is because I always exist in relation to both my personal and prepersonal generalities. I can close my eyes and ears, but my body does not cease existing. My atmosphere of generality, insofar as it begins in my corporeal being, permeates all the way down to my most basic bodily functions. Meditative silence may be one of the many possibilities open to me at any given moment, but this will always be the figure against the background of the noise of my existence. I can never escape into non-being, for I am fundamentally defined by my being-in-the-world—by the body which I *am*, which is a constant condensation of the generality borne behind me and the concretization of possible futures spread out before me. I am free to revise my atmosphere and select radically unexpected possibilities, but as long as I exist, I exist in the face of the possibilities I pursue and the world to which I belong.

⁹ Ibid. 377.

¹⁰ Ibid. 377.