

# The Learning Experience in Merleau-Ponty's Theory: The Connection with German Idealism

Shimpei TSUNEFUKA  
*Keio University*

## Abstract

This paper aims to show that Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment has a wide range of potentialities to explain learning experiences that require the abstract operation of symbols, such as mathematics, by focusing on his acceptance of Kant and German idealism. Many studies in the realm of the philosophy of education seem to assume that Merleau-Ponty criticized objective thought into which science tends to fall and regarded German idealism as its origin. Contrary to what many commentators suppose, this paper examines Merleau-Ponty's texts (mainly *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Nature*) to elucidate a different link to German idealism. Merleau-Ponty does not directly criticize Kant, but the intellectualistic interpretation by neo-Kantians in France (e.g., Lachièze-Rey). He follows the same path as the German idealism of Schelling and Hegel, who interpreted and extended Kant's theory. Merleau-Ponty appreciates Schelling and Hegel for expanding the concept of Nature by taking on "intellectual intuition" and "intuitive understanding," which Kant himself never developed. According to Merleau-Ponty, Nature is not just something filled with physical causality but also latent and perceivable with the meaning inherent in culture and history. It is worth noting, however, that Merleau-Ponty speaks of "intellectual intuition" or "intuitive understanding" as "bodily intentionality," based neither on transcendental consciousness nor the Nature with its primordial identity, but on the body. According to his theory, Nature is perceived by the body before the experience of judgment, and simultaneously this perception creates in Nature a space that motivates new perceptions. Through this learning model, he argues that the learning experience in mathematics is also body-based.

**Key words:** Merleau-Ponty · Kant · German idealism · Learning experience · Body intentionality · Nature

## Introduction

This paper clarifies the range of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment within the context of educational philosophy, focusing on his acceptance of Kant and German idealism.

What many Merleau-Ponty studies on educational philosophy have revealed is that concrete bodily movements play a certain role in learning. These studies include those that focus on teacher-student interactions in the classroom and learning experiences in master-apprentice relationships in traditional performing arts, such as *Buyo*.<sup>1</sup> However, his theory of embodiment has rarely been used to discuss learning experiences in higher-order disciplines, such as mathematics and natural sciences.<sup>2</sup> Various circumstances can be considered the background for this. For instance, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the “objective thought” that science tends to fall into. The perspective of objective thought treats the world as something fully constituted in homogeneous time and space; that is, something that can be exhausted in a determinate manner. Many Merleau-Ponty studies have argued that this perspective originated in Kant or transcendental German idealism.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Merleau-Ponty has been assumed to have rejected Kant and Hegel as subjectivists. Therefore, there have been few attempts to apply his theory of embodiment to the analysis of learning experiences in disciplines such as mathematics and the natural

---

<sup>1</sup> Within the context of the philosophy of education, see Fujita (2003) for a reconsideration of Merleau-Ponty's developmental concepts from his pedagogy lectures. See Nishioka (2005) for an application of Merleau-Ponty's pedagogy lectures to the analysis of adult-child relationships in the classroom, and Okui (2015) for their application to the analysis of the transmission of knowledge in master-apprentice relationships in traditional performing arts, such as *Buyo*. In phenomenological theoretical studies, Howell (2015) compares Merleau-Ponty's theory of learning experiences with Husserl's in terms of the temporal structure of habits.

<sup>2</sup> Okui (2013) suggests a link between physical experience and abstract intellectual work in Merleau-Ponty's theory. However, in doing so, he does not draw from Merleau-Ponty's texts but from the American philosopher of language, Mark Johnson's. In addition, he does not detail how physical experience and abstract intellectual work are linked. In this paper, I present the link between the two and how they work together by intrinsically interpreting Merleau-Ponty's reception of German idealism.

<sup>3</sup> In Merleau-Ponty studies, some scholars trace the origins of such objective thought (as subjectivist) he criticizes to as Descartes or Kant (Carman 2008: 12, Morris 2012: 15), while others trace them to Kant and early Husserl, who conceived transcendental idealism (Romdenh-Romluc 2010: 20). This tendency can also be seen in German studies of the philosophy of education, where the achievements of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology are described as if they arose from a different context than Kant's philosophy (Ehrenspeck 1996: 219-220). Contrary to this, recent Merleau-Ponty studies have increasingly attempted to show that Merleau-Ponty has some affinity with Kantian philosophy and to clarify what aspects he has inherited/not inherited from Kant (cf. Antich 2019; Landes 2015; Matheme 2014, 2016). The background to this trend is that in recent years, after the publication of influential studies such as Allison (2004), the interpretation that Kant's text itself can be read in a non-conceptualist way is gaining significant acceptance (cf. Allais 2016). I will offer the interpretation that Merleau-Ponty incorporated Kant's “intellectual intuition” and “intuitive enlightenment” by recombining them with body intentionality.

sciences, which require the abstract operation of symbols. His account also seems to have been seen as alien to the tradition of the *Bildungstheorie* that has developed in the line with German idealism since Kant.

Contrary to what many commentators suppose, I show how Merleau-Ponty reads Kant as well as Schelling and Hegel to explain the learning experience. This analysis will reveal that his theory of embodiment has a wide range of applications and can explain the learning experience and its theoretical development in disciplines that require abstract symbolic operations, such as mathematics.

In this paper, I draw on *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>4</sup> as the main source of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Kant, supplemented by his lectures on *Nature*<sup>5</sup> from 1956–1960, in which he adds many commentaries on Kant. In this paper, I proceed as follows: First, I provide an overview of how the subjectivist interpretation of Kant is criticized in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Section 1). Then, I confirm that Merleau-Ponty recognizes the significance of Schelling's and Hegel's interpretation of Kant and its extension (Section 2). In the final section, I argue that with his expanding interpretation of Kant's schematism—by making imagination (rather than the capacity of consciousness) based on the body as part of Nature—Merleau-Ponty offers a theory of embodiment that can also explain the learning experience in disciplines that require the abstract operation of symbols (Section 3).

## 1 A critique of the subjectivist interpretation of Kant

Merleau-Ponty did not dismiss all of Kant's arguments. For example, in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, he agrees with Kant's stance in the *Critique of Judgment*,<sup>6</sup> which posits that “there exists a unity of the imagination and the understanding and a unity of subjects before the object” (*PhP* xii). What, then, does Merleau-Ponty attribute to Kant's argument in his criticism? In the preface to the same book, he criticizes Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*<sup>7</sup> for having ended up analyzing the experience of consciousness in which a predicative unity is formed (cf. *PhP* xiii). In other words, Kant is only

---

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth cited as *PhP* and the page number in the text.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, “Nature” is capitalized with the following special connotation, as described by Merleau-Ponty and German idealists: Nature refers to something that includes not only physical causality but also the historical and cultural meanings of human beings; henceforth cited as *N* and the page number in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth cited as *KU* and the page number in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Henceforth cited as A (1781) and/or B (1787) edition and the page number in the text.

concerned with analyzing experiences with propositional content established after perceptual experience; i.e., experiences that appear in the form of judgments and inferences.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted here that Merleau-Ponty does not directly criticize Kant's analysis of experience in the form of judgments and inferences; rather, he criticizes Kant for considering this experience to constitute all of experience. In this section, I begin by describing the Kantian interpretation criticized by Merleau-Ponty. Next, I specify Merleau-Ponty's matter in question as the conditions on the part of the subject that make perceptual experience possible.

### 1.1 The *Critique of Pure Reason* according to Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* seems to premise the model of the formation of experience in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as follows: In "sensibility," "a given multiple [of stimuli]" is passively received as intuition; then, in "understanding," its highest principle, synthetic apperception, spontaneously "peruses it [i.e., the given multiple] and completely penetrates it" (cf. *PhP* 279). Next, I summarize the differences between the description of "transcendental deduction" in the A and B editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and draw a picture of Kant, whom Merleau-Ponty criticized as a subjectivist.

According to Kant, when we consider the formation of human experience, there are two independent and incommensurable capacities of human cognition. On the one hand, there is sensibility, which is the act of intuition that receives an object; on the other hand, there is understanding, which is the act of inference and judgment about that object. Recognition is achieved through the union of these two completely different moments. Possibly following Heidegger's interpretation in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Merleau-Ponty seems to suppose that the A and B editions have very different accounts of how these moments come together.<sup>9</sup>

Edition A reads as follows: "The principle of the necessary unity of the pure (productive) synthesis of the imagination prior to apperception is thus the ground of the possibility of all cognition, especially that of experience" (A 118). Imagination was also considered "a common but to us unknown root" (A 15=B 29) that makes both sensibility and understanding possible—i.e., this fundamental and mediational capacity connects

---

<sup>8</sup> Antich (2019) argues that there is no conflict between Kant and Merleau-Ponty, but rather a difference in phase; in Kant, the term "experience" refers to empirical judgment, while in Merleau-Ponty, this term refers to perceptual experience.

<sup>9</sup> In *PhP*, there are two passages where Section 33 of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* is cited.

them. In other words, in edition A, Kant asserts that it is the “imagination” that plays the role of mediating between sensibility and understanding to bring them into union. This is why, as I mentioned in the Introduction, Merleau-Ponty favorably receives Kant’s description of the imagination in the *Critique of Judgment* and is expected to generally agree with the assertion of the edition A.<sup>10</sup>

However, edition B explains that experience, which is supposed to be the combination of sensibility and understanding, is established when transcendental apperception (i.e., the capacity of understanding) penetrates sensibility, thus upsetting the balance of the importance of sensibility and understanding. For example, according to edition B, “all combination [...] is an action of the understanding” (B 130). The supreme principle of this combination in understanding is transcendental apperception (cf. B 136). This transcendental apperception is the function of “I think...” that can accompany all our representations, namely, the content of our experience (cf. B 131). Then, imagination, which was said to be prior to the synthesis on the part of understanding, is positioned as “the transcendental synthesis of the imagination, which is an effect of the understanding on sensibility” (B 152). Even though it is said that “Synthesis in general is [...] the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul” (A 78=B 103), in edition B, imagination appears to be reduced to one of the acts of understanding. Thus, intuition, which has been considered on the side of sensibility, is ultimately subject to the conditions of transcendental apperception—the highest principle of understanding.

To summarize, in edition B, there is no need to assume the imagination that mediates sensibility and understanding for experience to appear with objective content. Instead, for experience to be made up, all that is required is the work of apperception on the part of understanding,<sup>11</sup> which means that the spontaneity of understanding must completely pervade sensibility. In fact, Merleau-Ponty, in the introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception*, says the following about Kantian interpretation in a subjectivist manner.

The general function of connection, which Kantianism finally attributes to it [understanding], is now common to the whole of intentional life [...]. (*PhP* 65)

---

<sup>10</sup> Contrary to my interpretation, Landes, who is also the English translator of *PhP*, believes that Merleau-Ponty was harsh in his assessment of both the A and B editions (cf. Landes 2015).

<sup>11</sup> These days, however, there appear to be only a few scholars who interpret apperception as the unlimited spontaneity of consciousness. Instead, one of the most popular contemporary interpretations of apperception today is that of Henrich, who sees a two-step proof structure in edition B *Transcendental Deduction* (cf. Henrich 1973: 93–94).

The Kantian and subjectivist position Merleau-Ponty criticizes here is the following: the capacity of the spontaneity of understanding, which permeates all over sensibility, and the possession of propositional content of experience, are the conditions for all experience to be possible.

## 1.2 The subjectivist interpretation of Kant and the “paradox of inquiry”

According to Merleau-Ponty, while in *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant confines himself to the analysis of experience as it appears in the form of judgments and inferences, neo-Kantians in France apply Kant’s framework to all forms of human experience.

In order to clarify what is at stake here, I feature the description in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty criticizes the interpretation of Kant by the French neo-Kantian Pierre Lachière-Rey.<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty focuses on the passage that Lachière-Rey cites and considers what is called the “paradox of inquiry” or “paradox of learning” in Plato’s *Meno* (cf. *PhP* 425). On the one hand, this “paradox of inquiry” means that if one does not know the object of inquiry at all, one does not know how to inquire about it, and even if one encounters the object, one cannot know whether it is the object one is inquiring about. On the other hand, if one knows the object of one’s inquiry, there is no need to inquire about it.

In Lachière-Rey’s (1932/1950) interpretation of Kant, this paradox can be resolved by presuming that humans are beings with the following two characteristics: On the one hand, humans have a sensible way of being that is constrained by the side of the object they experience; in other words, they are dependent on time and space. In this respect, humans have a finite way of being. We can have an “aspiration” or “Amour” for God or others—i.e., a receptive and passive experience of consciousness (cf. Lachière-Rey 1932/1950: 58). In this sense, there is room for humans to inquire about things that are unknown. On the other hand, humans have an understanding that allows them to actively construct meaning for an experienced object, and this is partially independent of specific time and space. It is precisely because of this that humans can access matters that are true beyond time and space (e.g., the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is  $180^\circ$ ) and create new knowledge (cf. Lachière-Rey 1932/1950: 34–39). Here, we can recognize the

---

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, for example, describes the subjectivist’s view of experience as “the classical idea of experience about the world as the pure action of constitutive consciousness” (*PhP* 281). To this is added a note: “Here I mean the Kantian concept [of intentionality], such as that of Pierre Lachière-Rey or that of Husserl in the second period (of the *Ideen* period)” (ibid.). See also Jitsukawa (2000) in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Lachière-Rey.

possibility of knowing the object of one's inquiry, that is, the ability to expand one's own understanding (intellect).

Merleau-Ponty calls these thoughts the “eternal interpretation of the Cogito” and rejects them. According to Merleau-Ponty, if we interpret Kant and analyze experience, as Lachièze-Rey does, we end up reaching the following conclusion: For human experience to be possible, humans must first possess a capacity of understanding that can act beyond time, as well as act accordingly. However, in this case, it is possible to assume that the human subjects are constructors of meaning that exert their intellectual action without limit—that is, without the constraints of the object or others (cf. *PhP* 428). According to Merleau-Ponty, this position fails to assume the other<sup>13</sup> or ensure constraints and solicitations on the content of experience from the part of the object (the ways the world solicits to learn). In other words, in the subjectivist position, the love for the other and the adoration of God that Lachièze-Rey tried to secure ultimately become only constructs of the consciousness of the human subject.

In light of this, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the neo-Kantian interpretation of Kant in France, such as that of Lachièze-Rey. He sees the problem with this interpretation in its failure to describe the conditions on the part of the object that make it possible to know the object of inquiry.

## 2 “Nature” making the learning experience possible

As seen in Section 1, Merleau-Ponty takes issue with the neo-Kantian interpretation of Kant in France, which considers judgment and inference to be essential for all of experience. If we adopt this interpretation, we cannot adequately explain the learning experience. Against this interpretation, he tries to explain that even before judgment, the human subject can already receive the limitation or solicitation of cultural meanings on the part of the object. There are two strategies in his philosophical project. The first is the reformulation of the concept of object, Nature, and the second is the reformulation of the concept of human subject, their understanding or body. In this section, I discuss the former. The next section focuses on the latter.

In this section, I take as an additional source Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes (published under the title *Nature*), in which he examines German idealism in detail. According to him, Kant's idea of Nature, which we can experience, is only “the sum total

---

<sup>13</sup> See Sakai (2020) for the concept of the “other” in Merleau-Ponty.

of all objects of sense” (*KU XVII*). In Merleau-Ponty’s view, however, Schelling and Hegel reformulate the concept of Nature. In other words, while Merleau-Ponty dismisses the neo-Kantian interpretation of Kant in France, he tries to follow the same path of deepening and developing Kant that Schelling and Hegel had followed. In this section, I show how Merleau-Ponty posits the way of being the object that makes the learning experience possible as he retraces the tradition of German idealism.

Merleau-Ponty positively assesses Schelling’s attitude, which is mainly found in *System of Transcendental Idealism*. In Schelling’s view, Nature, the object of experience, is not only what Kant calls “the sum total of all objects of sense” (*KU XVII*), governed by mere physical causality. It is also what provides a human with the possibility to perceive cultural meaning, even though it was external to experience.<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that this view of Nature was also valid for Hegel<sup>15</sup> and both Schelling and Hegel merged in the following view of art.<sup>16</sup>

There is a terrain where the two philosophies encounter: the terrain of poetry. [...] A poetic consciousness recognizes that it does not fully possess its object, that it can only understand it through genuine creation, and that it creates clarity through an operation that is not deductive but creative. The poetic consciousness overcome by its object must be recaptured but never separable from its own history. There is an act of faith in the encounter of passivity and spontaneity, of which the effort of art is the best “document.” This is the search for a Reason that is not prose, for a poetry that is not irrational. (*N 76–77*)

According to Merleau-Ponty, Schelling and Hegel believe that in poetry the union of spontaneity and passivity is realized. On the one hand, the created work represents human

---

<sup>14</sup> Ehrenspeck (2008) believes that Schiller found a “mixed Nature” between nature filled with physical causality and nature with human cultural meaning. According to her, Schelling and Merleau-Ponty would merge to this Schillerian conception of “Nature.” Merleau-Ponty, however, would not say that a human finds beauty from nature by some power of consciousness. Instead, he would say that the consciousness capable of finding beauty arises from the body, which is part of Nature.

<sup>15</sup> Here, Merleau-Ponty’s support for Hegel is limited to the period of *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

<sup>16</sup> Kakuni explains that Merleau-Ponty rejected Hegel’s ideas and adopted Schelling’s ideas (cf. Kakuni 2002: 128-129). Based on this, Ikeda argues that Merleau-Ponty’s theory “turns back the idea of subject-object identity found in the previous modern philosophy (e.g., Schelling’s conception of the identity philosophy) on a theoretical level” (Ikeda 2015: 186). However, it should be worth noting that Merleau-Ponty does not merely agree with Schelling, but also gives a positive assessment of Hegel. So, I consider the following. Merleau-Ponty does not just adopt Schelling’s view of “Nature,” which can include physical causality and human cultural-historical meanings, but also adopts Hegel’s view of “Nature,” which includes differences and contradictions at the root and gives rise to dialectical processes. For Merleau-Ponty, it is the role of the body to manifest these differences.



spontaneity in the sense that the artist's consciousness actively creates it. On the other hand, the created work is guided by the object in the outside world or the history of the art expression—it is constrained by Nature—and represents the passivity of human beings. In other words, an artwork, such as a poem, is an example of an objective form in which the opposing moments of sensibility and understanding merge with an equal status. Insofar as this, the Nature that solicited the creation of artworks must be considered as more than just “the sum total of all objects of sense” (*KU XVII*) since it also includes human culture, which is “never separable from its own history.”

Merleau-Ponty views the process through which Schelling reaches these ideas as a deepening development of Kant (cf. *N 71*). In other words, Schelling deepened the possibility of “intellectual intuition” (cf. *N 62, 362, 363*) or “intuitive understanding” (cf. *N 46*), which Kant had already discovered in the *Critique of Judgment* Section 76<sup>17</sup> but never developed. Merleau-Ponty summarizes Schelling's ideas as follows.

What Schelling wants to say is that we rediscover Nature in our perceptual experience before reflection. [...] Also, in order to refind the meaning of external nature, we must make an effort to rediscover our own nature in the indivisible state where we are exercising our perceptions. (*N 63*)

He also quotes a passage from Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*, after which he explains the following:

In order to refind oneself in this reflection of intellectual intuition, the Ego must have already recognized itself in this primordial identity, the result of the organization of a primordial and unconscious Ego. There has to be in things a preparation for what will eventually be explicit meaning [for a human], for the liberation of meaning captive in the natural thing. (*N 67*)

As we see in these passages, Merleau-Ponty, relying on Schelling, believes that following; we already grasp not only the causality of external Nature but also the historical and cultural (intellectual) meanings latent in Nature before we become aware of them, that is, in our perceptual experience.

---

<sup>17</sup> In his resume for this lecture, Merleau-Ponty states that if we are to analyze our experience, although Kant only indicated this possibility, we must consider “non-discursive understanding (entendement non discursif)” (*N 361*). In fact, this “non-discursive understanding” seems to be considered as equal to Schelling's “intellectual intuition” or Hegel's “intuitive understanding.”

Merleau-Ponty attributes the fundamental reason for the subjectivist consideration that judgment and inference are all objective experiences to a narrow understanding of Nature, which we can experience. Based on this consideration, subjectivists fail to grasp Nature as something that makes the learning experience possible. Merleau-Ponty supports Schelling and Hegel against them and takes over the idea of “intellectual intuition” or “intuitive understanding,” which Kant never developed. In inheriting this idea, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the object of our experience (Nature) is not merely something filled with physical causality but that it has a latent and perceivable meaning inherent in culture and history.

### 3 The body making the learning experience possible

As I have shown in the previous Section, Merleau-Ponty supposes Nature, the perceptual object, as something that has latent meaning in human culture and history in addition to physical causality. Here, the following question arises: How is it possible for humans to perceive such Nature and continue to explore it? In this section, I present Merleau-Ponty’s reformulation of the concept of the subject (the concepts of understanding and body). Then, I hope to demonstrate the process of learning experience through this reformulation. By doing so, I will answer the previous question.

#### 3.1 The body schema as a transcendental schema

As mentioned in the Introduction, Merleau-Ponty favorably received Kant’s description of imagination in *Critique of Judgment*. In the first section of this paper, I highlighted that Merleau-Ponty supports Kant’s view of imagination as the fundamental capacity that makes sensibility and understanding mediate, as seen in the edition A. In other words, Merleau-Ponty is interested in the function of the primordial capacity that gives rise to sensibility and understanding, or the mechanism of a mixture of the two, which Kant did not fully develop. What, then, is this remarkable idea that, according to Merleau-Ponty that Kant was on the verge of developing? I suggest that this is the schematic function.<sup>18</sup>

Kant introduces the schema as the third term for sensibility and understanding. He states that this schema is, on the one hand, like understanding and, on the other, like

---

<sup>18</sup> Matherne (2016) argues that Merleau-Ponty transforms Kant’s schematism into a body schema through Lachièze-Rey’s interpretation. I also rely on her interpretation and will adopt the framework in which Merleau-Ponty considers schematizing the activity of imagination as a bodily activity.

sensibility (cf. A 138=B 177). Then, he defines the conscious capacity that drives this schema's function as imagination (cf. A 140=B 179). At least in edition A, imagination thus is a function of consciousness that is independent of sensibility and understanding, although it mediates between them, exhibiting features of both.

In contrast, Merleau-Ponty did not think of imagination as a function of consciousness independent of sensibility and understanding. Rather, he seems to consider imagination an undifferentiated state of sensibility and understanding. In addition, he is supposed to attempt to postulate the primordial field from which this imagination arises. In doing so, however, we should not admit the subjectivist interpretation that the highest principle of understanding (apperception) is the "common root." This is because understanding must also be subject to constraints from the side of the object, including spatio-temporal constraints. Here, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the body as the condition or field from which imagination arises, where sensibility and understanding are undifferentiated.

Behind this world, there is a more original mode, prior to all activity, a "world before any thesis": this is the perceived world. Whereas the former [universe of theory] is given as a world constituted [by consciousness], the latter [perceived world] is given in flesh and bone, in *Leibhaft*. (N 105)

In brief, the field that guarantees the primordial identity of sensibility and understanding is the body, which belongs to the world. If we understand the world to be Nature in the sense I explained in the previous section, then the body is both a component of the Nature we perceive and an internal part of this Nature. In fact, Merleau-Ponty states:

[T]he anger or pain I read [...] on a face, the religion whose essence I grasp [...] in hesitation or reticence, the city whose structure I recognize [...] in the attitude of a city policeman or the style of a monument. (*PhP* 32)

Namely, before having human experience through judgment and inference, we have perceptual experiences through our bodies, which have latent human historical and cultural constraints (meanings) in addition to spatio-temporal constraints.

Thus, the famous "body schema" Merleau-Ponty offers can be understood as based on Kant's argument. What is noteworthy about Merleau-Ponty is that the body, as a part of Nature, with its spatiotemporal location and historical and cultural content, is the primordial field from which sensibility and understanding arise, rather than imagination

as the power of consciousness, as was proposed by Kant and the subjectivists.

### 3.2 Body-based learning experiences

How, then, does the body, as indicated in the previous section, resolve the “paradox of inquiry” to make the learning experience possible? In other words, how does the body both know the object of inquiry and create what is to be explored? To conclude, the following two things are doubly occurring in the body. First, a specific body posture (i.e., body intentionality) is established, prompted by “Nature,” which has both physical causality and historical/cultural meaning. Second, something is created and communicated that is neither a representation nor a concept of the perceptual object but something that promotes a further bodily posture toward the perceptual object.

According to Merleau-Ponty, “To say that I imagine Peter is to say that I procure a pseudo-presence of Peter by provoking ‘the behavior about Peter’” (*PhP* 210); when one perceives an individual concrete object, a body intentionality corresponding to that object is generated. In addition, “A movement is learned when the body has understood it [...and] To move one’s body is to aim toward things through it [body], [or] to let it respond to their solicitations, which are exerted on it without any representation” (*PhP* 161); the perceptions from the body naturally become articulated and then contribute to context-appropriate behaviors and thoughts.

Regarding such body-based learning, let us first consider the case in which one perceives a particular dog, Fido, in front of her. She takes Fido-specific intentionality, i.e., a specific body posture toward Fido. From this Fido-specific intentionality, we can recognize that the dog is Fido without thought or inference. The Fido-specific intentionality here is prompted not only by the optical stimulus on the retina, but also by the experiential meaning of the dog Fido that we know and the cultural meaning of loving the dog. Moreover, only when this intentionality is generated, is it possible to judge that “it is Fido there,” or approach the dog to check “is it Fido there?” and then to make body movements appropriate to this context, such as “I will pat him on the head.”

Henceforth, we move from our own Fido-specific body posture (intentionality) to an articulation of the content of that posture, that is, to thoughts and judgments. For example, it becomes clear that this body posture includes the dog’s appearance, such as bushy fur, coloring, and four legs, or the notion of a particular dog (Fido), which one has seen in the past. Furthermore, after one perceives the operability toward the symbol of Fido, one can compare it with the dog “Bingo,” which provokes a similar body posture, and think, “Which breed does Fido belong to?” In other words, Fido-specific

intentionality motivates further perception, inquiry, and thought (the operability of symbols), starting with the perceptual object Fido.<sup>19</sup>

Given this trajectory, one can go from perceiving individual objects to thinking about more detailed meanings. However, this is not limited to the perception of mere physical objects. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty considers mathematics (geometry) to be one of various human symbolic operations and uses examples of learning about geometric objects. According to Merleau-Ponty, when one perceives a triangle in front of her, she can enact operations such as adding parallel lines by adopting a particular body posture to it, leading to a theorem such as the sum of the interior angles of a triangle being  $180^\circ$  (cf. *PhP* 440–443). After describing the perceptual processes involved in constructing the triangle, he adds the following.

Just as the localization of objects in space, according to Kant himself, [it] is not just a spiritual operation but one that utilizes the motricity of the body [...]. (*PhP* 443)

It is precisely here that Merleau-Ponty continues Kant's schematism by placing the role of the body at the center. Even when dealing with what are thought of as universal properties, such as those found in geometry, he argues that one does not approach such properties with a mental capacity that has no location in time and space, but rather one captures the characteristics of a particular triangle by means of the body intentionality.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, after the body posture for a given triangle generates the implication that the sum of the internal angles is  $180^\circ$ , one can take a similar body posture for any triangle without inference (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1969/1992: 141). In other words, one is able to perceive the property that the sum of triangles' interior angles of a triangle is  $180^\circ$ . From there, one can perceive operability that reveals further properties of triangles, such as the inscribed angle theorem, and can go on to new thoughts. For example, the establishment of the body intentionality for triangles in Euclidean geometry allows one to perceive the possibility of extending such a definition by motivating one to ask, "Why not take up triangles on the surface of the ellipsoid?". Thus, one can learn to discover the properties of triangles in non-Euclidean geometry (e.g., elliptic geometry), where the sum of the interior angles of a triangle on a sphere is greater than  $180^\circ$ .

At this point, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of "intellectual intuition" and

---

<sup>19</sup> See also Tamura (2018) for an analysis of the concept of "motivation" in Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception.

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty, to be sure, does not consider geometric objects as being mere constructs of mental action. Instead, he assumes the existence of some object that gives rise to a certain intentionality, if such an intentionality provokes (cf. *PhP* 429).

“intuitive understanding,” as featured by Schelling and Hegel, becomes clear. First, understanding, as a function of thought, arises in the body, which is subject to spatio-temporal and cultural-historical limitations each time. Also, according to him, body intentionality does not arise merely from physical causality. To say body-based learning experiences are not merely bodily perceptual experiences. According to Merleau-Ponty, when a certain body posture is generated in a person, the possibility of a new body posture arises in her consciousness, as a background. Then, through the fulfillment of this possibility, she can recognize the unknown object of inquiry, as the figure. In other words, if body intentionality is extended through some new expression, whether academic or artistic, that extended body intentionality is enacted in a condensed repetition of the body intentionality manifested by an existing theory or expression. In sum, what Merleau-Ponty refers to as body posture, or body intentionality itself, is a historical and cultural one, namely, an intuition with intellectual content (intellectual intuition) or an intuitively generated intellect (intuitive understanding).

Based on these considerations, what is to be explored and what is to be communicated to others, even though it is non-conceptual, is how one is motivated by a perceptual object. For example, as in the case of the development of geometry mentioned above, academic inquiries can be developed by several scholars because of the incidental transmission of pre-propositional, non-conceptual things through body intentionality as well as the conceptual content manifested in the form of propositions. The reason a matter that cannot be conceptualized well can be conveyed to the receiver or can be conceptualized later is that the body posture toward the matter (which remained non-conceptual prior to the proposition) can be captured first. In other words, the body intentionality incidentally conveys the motivation to “take a closer look at” or “take in hands” a distant object, or to “operate the symbol” or “rewrite the rules of use of the symbol” in response to an academic problem, as in mathematics. In this way, “intellectual intuition” or “intuitive understanding” is communicated through the body, accompanied by rationality.

Above all, Merleau-Ponty attempts to solve the “paradox of inquiry” by reformulating the concepts of object and subject, respectively, and presenting the following process. The body, which has already received some constraints and solicitations from the object before judgment or inference, experiences a change in the way the world appears (a new object of inquiry appears). Through this change, then, the body is motivated in the way it relates to the world (i.e., how it comes to know the object of inquiry) in response to these solicitations. According to Merleau-Ponty, such dynamism occurs in the learning experience. Thus, the body can bear meanings that are

not yet propositional, but that will eventually become clear in perceptual experiences prior to judgment. This is because the body generates chained manifestations of the world that motivate new perceptions. For example, a mathematician may somehow (intuitively) see a formula for a solution, or her hands may move naturally toward such an operation. A painter may also intuitively find a suitable motif, concept, or technique (e.g., a brushstroke). Such “intuitive” acts may lead to the discovery or invention of new theories and expressions. According to Merleau-Ponty, the intuition of a mathematician or artist, or what appears to be a mere gesture, is a latent expression of the cumulative knowledge of that expression. In other words, what is described above is the same process in which those who are familiar with “Fido” would naturally adopt a behavior that fits the context of Fido based on their previous experience, starting from their body, without inference or thought. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, both the discovery or invention of mathematics and pictorial expressions result from the perceptual experience of the body, the same as the learning process that the perception of Fido motivates further thought.

## Conclusion

I have explored how Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment explains the learning experience, including abstract intellectual activity, by focusing on his reception of German idealism.

Merleau-Ponty does not criticize Kant directly but rather the subjectivist interpretation of Kant by neo-Kantians in France. According to him, this interpretation fails to describe the conditions on the part of the object because they assume that the spontaneity of understanding, which pervades all over the sensibility and has the content of experience like a propositional statement, is the condition for all experience to be possible. In other words, they overlook the terms of the object, which make it possible to know the object of inquiry.

Instead, Merleau-Ponty appreciates Schelling and Hegel, who extended the concept of Nature by taking on “intellectual intuition” and “intuitive understanding,” which Kant never developed. In other words, in Merleau-Ponty's view, they paved the way to consider Nature, the object of our experience, not only as something filled with physical causality but also as something that has latent and perceivable with meanings inherent in culture and history.

According to Merleau-Ponty, such Nature is perceived by the body before the experience of judgment. Simultaneously this perception creates in Nature a space that

motivates new perceptions. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's theory deepens and develops German idealism. Under this interpretation, the following significance of Merleau-Ponty's account becomes clearer. He speaks of "intellectual intuition" or "intuitive understanding" as "bodily intentionality," based neither on transcendental consciousness nor the Nature with its primordial identity, but on the body. Here, I should highlight two points: First, by means of Merleau-Ponty's concept of Nature, it is possible to show the existence of a mixture of intuition and intellect (understanding) with historical and cultural meaning, which Schelling and Hegel were trying to show. Second, by means of his concept of "body intentionality," it is also possible to understand how the body allows the learning experience and the creative process of learning and expression.

Thus, the theory of body-based learning experience derived from Merleau-Ponty can be described as an experience that consists of a back-and-forth process between the body and Nature, a mixture of physical causality and human historical and cultural meaning. It is also clear that the pedagogical significance of his theory of embodiment is not limited to the clarification of the effects of reading aloud or using the body to express oneself in some way. In other words, his theory of embodiment has a broader scope that explains the learning experience in mathematics, which at first glance appears to require the abstract operation of symbols. This can legitimately be merged into the context of *Bildungstheorie*, both theoretically and in the history of philosophy, and it also seems to highlight the uniqueness of his theory of the learning experience.

## References

- Allison, H.-E. (2004), *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, London: Yale University Press.
- Allais, L. (2016), "Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism in Kant: A Survey of the Recent Debate", *Kantian Nonconceptualism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–25.
- Antich, P. (2019), "Perceptual Experience in Kant and Merleau-Ponty", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 50, (3), 220–233.
- Carman, T. (2008), *Merleau-Ponty*, 1st ed., London: Routledge.
- Ehrenspeck, Y. (1996), „Aisthesis und Ästhetik-Überlegungen zu einer problematischen Entdifferenzierung“, *Aisthesis/Ästhetik : Zwischen Wahrnehmung und Bewusstsein (Pädagogische Anthropologie)*/ herausgegeben von K. Mollenhauer und C. Wulf, Weinheim: Deutscher Studien, 201–230.
- (2008), „Die Idee der Humanisierung des Menschen im Medium ästhetischer Bildung bei Friedrich Schiller und Johann Friedrich Herbart“, *Bildung: Angebot*



- oder Zumutung?!* herausgegeben von Y. Ehrenspeck, G. de Haan, F. Thiel, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 75–93.
- Fujita, Y. (2003), “Ningenkeisei to Merulo-Ponti no shisou: “Merulo-Ponti Sorubonnukouguroku” ni okeru “takeisei” gainen to shakaikakan no motsu shatei”” (La formation humaine dans la pensée de Merleau-Ponty: La portée des notions de polymorphisme et de socialisation dans le cours de Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne), *Kyouikutetsugakukenkyu* (*Studies in the Philosophy of Education*), no. 88, 84–100.
- Heidegger, M. (2010), *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (7th ed.), Frankfurt am Main : Klostermann.
- Henrich, D. (1973), „Die Beweisstruktur von Kants transzendentaler Deduktion“, Prauss, G., *Kant: Zur Deutung seiner Theorie von Erkennen und Handeln*, Köln : Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 90–104.
- Howell, W. (2015), “Learning and the Development of Meaning: Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on the Temporality and Habit”, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 53, (3), 311–337.
- Ikeda, T. (2015), *Benyamin no ningenkeiseiron: kiki no shisou to kibou heno manazashi* (*Walter Benjamins Bildungstheorie: Die Gedanke in Zeiten der Krise und der Blick auf die Hoffnung*), Kyoto: Kouyoushobou.
- Jitsukawa, T. (2000), *Merulo-Ponti to chouetsu no kongensou* (*Merleau-Ponty: The origine of transcendence*), Tokyo: Soubunsha.
- Kakuni, T. (2002) *Shizen no genshougaku: Merulo-Ponti to shizen no tetsugaku* (*Phenomenology of Nature: Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophy of Nature*), Kyoto: Kouyoushobou.
- Kant, I. (1998), *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg: F. Meiner.
- (2006), *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Hamburg: F. Meiner.
- Lachièze-Rey, P. (1932/1950), *L'idéalisme Kantien*, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin.
- Landes, D. (2015), “Between Sensibility and Understanding: Kant and Merleau-Ponty and the Critique of Reason”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 29, (3), 335–345.
- Matherne, S. (2014), “The Kantian Roots of Merleau-Ponty’s Account of Pathology”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 22, (1), 124–149.
- (2016), “Kantian Themes in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of Perception”, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* vol. 98, (2), 193–230.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945), *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Paris: Gallimard.
- (1969/1992), *La prose du monde*, Paris: Gallimard, coll. « Tel ».

- (1995), *La Nature : Notes, cours du Collège de France / Maurice Merleau-Ponty ; établi et annoté par D. Séglaard; suivi des, Résumés des cours correspondants de Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Paris: Seuil.
- Morris, K. (2012), *Starting with Merleau-Ponty*, New York: Continuum.
- Nishioka, K. (2005), *Kyoushitsu no seisei no tameni: Merulo-Ponti to Walon ni michibikarete (For the Generation of the Classroom - Guided by Merleau-Ponty and Wallon)*, Tokyo: Keisoushobou.
- Okui, H. (2013), “Shintaika sareta kouisha (embodied agent) toshitenomanabite: Merulo-Ponti no “shintai” gainen wo tegakari to shita manabi no tankyu” (A Learner as an “Embodied Agent”: Using Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of “Body” to Understand Learning), *Kyouikutetsugakukenkylu(Studies in the Philosophy of Education)*, no.107, 60–78.
- (2015), “Waza” wo ikiru shintai: ningyotsukai to keiko norinshoukyouikugaku (*The Body in Techniques: A Clinical Pedagogy of Puppeteers and Training*), Kyoto: Minervashobou.
- Romdenh-Romluc, K. (2010), *Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge.
- Sakai, M. (2020) *Merulo-Ponti arawareru tasha/ kieru tasha: “kodomo no shinrigaku kyoiukugaku” kougi kara (Merleau-Ponty; Autrui apparaissant, Autrui disparaissant: à partir des cours en Sorbonne)*, Kyoto: Kouyoushobou.
- Tamura, T. (2018), “Merulo-Ponti ni okeru chikakukeiken no mikiteisei” (L’indéterminé de l’expérience perceptuelle chez Merleau-Ponty), *Furansutetsugaku shisoukenkyu (Revue de Philosophie Francaise)*, vol. 23, 223–234.