

Aims & Synopsis

Motivation and the Primacy of Perception: Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Knowledge

Peter Antich

Aims

In "Motivation and the Primacy of Perception," I provide an interpretation and defense of Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception, namely, the thesis that all knowledge is founded on perceptual experience. I take as an interpretative and argumentative key Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conception of motivation. Whereas epistemology has traditionally accepted a dichotomy between reason and natural causality, I show that this dichotomy is not exhaustive of the forms of epistemic grounding. There is a third type of grounding, the one characteristic of the grounding relations found in perception: motivation. I argue that introducing motivation as a form of epistemic grounding allows us to see how Merleau-Ponty's provides a radically new account of knowledge, one which begins not from justified true belief, but from this very phenomenon of motivation.

My central interpretative claim is that Merleau-Ponty's account of the primacy of perception should be understood in light of his description of motivation. For it is only in this light that we can properly see how the primacy of perception thesis avoids both rationalist and empiricist assumptions that continue to inform contemporary epistemology. In brief, empiricism maintains that all the content of our knowledge is grounded in *causal* interactions between the world and our senses, and rationalism holds that experience does not suffice as a *reason* for knowledge. In contrast, thinking of the relation between experience and knowledge in terms of motivation allows us to see how knowledge can be grounded in experience while at the same time transcending it.

The main objectives of this project, then, are twofold. First, I offer a novel and sustained interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's epistemology. While existing monographs do address the phenomenology of knowledge, none is focused on Merleau-Ponty's epistemology. Moreover, none interprets Merleau-Ponty's epistemology in light of his description of motivation, which I argue allows us to see the full promise of this new account of knowledge. Second, I defend Merleau-Ponty's epistemology, with the aim of demonstrating its enduring relevance as an epistemological option. I argue that thinking of motivation as a form of epistemic ground really does allow us to make progress in longstanding epistemological questions, and provides a compelling and radically new account of knowledge. In sum, my monograph seeks to show that Merleau-Ponty shifts the terrain of modern epistemology and remains a vital resource to today's epistemologists.

Detailed Synopsis

As explain above, I offer an interpretation and defense of Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception, using his concept of motivation as an interpretative key. I argue that motivation transforms the very concept of epistemic ground, resisting the traditional dichotomy of reason and natural causality

as epistemic grounds. According to this dichotomy, we can understand why we believe what we do in terms either of reasons that justify our beliefs or in terms of causal interactions (between our minds and the world) that explain them. This, for example, is this dichotomy that Sellars and McDowell give expression to in distinguishing between a "logical space of reasons" and a "logical space of nature." In the logical space of reasons, according to Sellars, we are concerned with the *justification* of beliefs, i.e., with the giving and taking of reasons in favor of a belief. In contrast, in the logical space of nature we are concerned not with justification, but with *explanation*. In understanding how the interactions between our senses and the world cause certain sensations in us, for instance, we at most *explain* our sensations. We are not responsible for these sensations – we cannot revise them in response to reasons – and so in answering *why* we have these sensations and not others we are concerned *not* with justification, but with explanation; not with the logical space of reasons, but with the logical space of nature.

The first thesis of my manuscript is that the dichotomy of reason and causality, which is essential to modern epistemology, is a false one. These two forms of grounding, while genuine forms of grounding with respective and exclusive domains, are not exhaustive of the forms of epistemic grounding. A central contention of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is that neither reason nor causality correctly describe the sort of grounding relations characteristic of perception. To understand perception, he argues, we need to introduce a new way of thinking about epistemic grounds, namely, what he – following the phenomenological tradition – calls "motivation." In my book, I take up this thought, arguing that there is a form of epistemic grounding which does not amount to justification, but also does not merely explain our beliefs. I show that this new account of epistemic ground requires a radically new phenomenology of knowledge.

Understanding the grounding relation between perception and knowledge in terms of motivation leads me to Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception and knowledge stand in what Husserl would call a *Fundierung* relation, i.e., a two way relation in which the latter is inseparable from, or demands supplementation by, the former, and the former requires clarification and determination by the latter. Understanding the relation between perception and knowledge in these terms does not, then, dissolve any distinction between the two, nor does it attempt to reduce knowledge to perception; it only shows how knowledge has its origin within perception. I argue that once we cease to approach this relation in terms of causality and reason, we are free to move past the dichotomy of empiricism and rationalism which cuts to the core of modern philosophy.

I defend these two theses, that motivation is an epistemic ground and the primacy of perception, over the course of seven chapters. In Chapter One, I explain what it means to consider motivation as an epistemic ground and show that motivation is not reducible to a species of either causality or reason. I argue that motivation is a form of grounding that is spontaneous, operates in virtue of implicit meanings, and is normative. This allows me to argue that motivation is not a species of reason, because whereas reason is active and explicit, motivation is spontaneous and implicit. Further, motivation is not a species of causality, because causality is passive, does not operate in virtue of meanings at all, and is not normative. Finally, I argue that motivation is unique in that the outputs of motivation transcend its inputs, i.e., its outputs are not definable in terms of, and are not contents of, its inputs.

In Chapter Two, I explain and justify my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the primacy of perception. I contrast Merleau-Ponty's epistemology with both rationalism and empiricism. Merleau-Ponty's position is not empiricist, because he does not think that all the content of our knowledge is contained in experience. But neither is it rationalist, since he thinks that experience can ground *a priori*

knowledge. I demonstrate that it is because Merleau-Ponty thinks of the grounding relation between experience and knowledge in terms of motivation that he can avoid both alternatives. Because the outputs of motivation transcend the inputs, if knowledge is motivated by experience then there is no reason to think that the content of knowledge is contained in experience.

In Chapter Three, I consider the relation between experience and judgments of experience. It is clear that experience in some sense grounds empirical judgments, but it is far from clear in what sense exactly it does so. Davidson, for example, holds that experiences, being non-propositional, are not the kinds of things that can justify judgments, and so experience can at most cause our judgments. McDowell, in contrast, holds that in virtue of its type of content experience can count as a reason for judgment. I argue that this debate is rooted in an inadequate phenomenology of the relation between experience and judgment. In fact, neither reason nor causality properly describe this relation, for this relation – I argue – is spontaneous (and not active, as it would have to be if it were relation of reasoning) and normative (and so cannot be merely causal). Motivation, I conclude, does a better job of describing the type of grounding with which experience provides empirical judgment than do either reason or causality.

In Chapter Four, I turn to the relation between experience and *a priori* judgments (judgments which no particular experience directly fulfills). While it is obvious that experience in some sense grounds our empirical judgments, it is not at all obvious that it grounds our *a priori* judgments. Indeed, rationalists have long held that experience is just not the sort of thing that *can* ground *a priori* judgments, because experience delivers particular and contingent facts, while *a priori* judgments must hold universally and with necessity. Empiricists, in contrast, have argued that our *a priori* knowledge is derived from experience. In Chapter Four, I argue that thinking the relation between experience and the *a priori* in terms of motivation, as Merleau-Ponty does, provides the best solution to the long-standing debate between rationalism and empiricism.

I first consider classical arguments for rationalism and empiricism, and argue that empiricism must be wrong that all the content of our *a priori* knowledge is contained in experience. On the other hand, I argue that rationalism must be wrong to think that experience is not the sort of thing that can ground *a priori* knowledge. In contrast, motivation (in virtue of its properties as described in Chapter One) explains how experience, being contingent and particular, can ground universal and necessary judgments. I then consider contemporary debates between rationalism and empiricism, divided into two parts: one concerning the possibility of innate knowledge and one concerning the possibility of *a priori* justification. In both cases, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's concept of motivation points the way to the best solution to these debates.

However, there is a kind of *a priori* justification which avoids both rationalism and empiricism, and which has fundamentally shaped the past two centuries of philosophy: the method of transcendental justification exercised by Kant. Kant's whole critique of metaphysics centers around his claim that the ground of *a priori* synthetic knowledge is *experience*, considered with regard to its possibility: transcendental method justifies certain judgments *a priori* by showing them to be conditions for the possibility of experience. In Chapter Five, I consider this type of *a priori* justification.

My contention is that, contrary to appearances, the projects of Merleau-Ponty and Kant are not contradictory but compatible; that, indeed, the two require each other. The two projects operate on different levels: they are concerned with different senses of experience and so approach experience with different standards. Whereas Merleau-Ponty is concerned with experience understood as perception, and

so approaches experience with the standard of motivation, Kant is concerned with experience in the sense of empirical judgment, and so approaches experience with the standard of justification. The many seemingly opposed conclusions they reach are a consequence of their pursuing investigations on different levels with different standards. Nevertheless, I argue that transcendental justification ultimately relies upon an *a priori* which is not transcendentially justified, but is instead motivated in the course of experience, in the manner I describe in Chapter Four. Transcendental method justifies certain judgments on the ground that they are conditions for determinate features of experience. But for this method to work, we must have some knowledge of the determinate features of experience. As I showed in Chapter Four, this knowledge is not justified but motivated. Conversely, I argue that for perception to be what it is, it must have something like empirical judgment on the horizon, and that Kant does provide a compelling account of the conditions for the possibility of empirical judgment.

In Chapter Six, I consider where these results leave Kant's critique of metaphysics. I argue Kant must be right that no synthetic *a priori* judgments can be justified through reason alone. However, this does not mean that experience cannot *motivate* synthetic *a priori* judgments. I make this point with regard to a specific metaphysical question discussed by Kant – that of the Third Paralogism – namely, self-identity. I argue that the structure of experience suffices to motivate the thought of self-identity. But if we approach this thought with the standard of justification, everything changes. Kant is right that empirical apperception does not suffice to justify self-identity, and so something like transcendental apperception will be required instead. However, these two levels – motivation and justification – are not indifferent to each other. Indeed, they require each other. For, I argue, it is only possible to refer transcendental and empirical apperception to the same subject, to the same I, if we understand how both arise from the reflective apprehension of the pre-reflective experience of self described by Merleau-Ponty.

In my Conclusion, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual faith. I argue that it can be read as a diagnostic response to skepticism: whereas the skeptic seeks to push justification to the limit of the space of justification, Merleau-Ponty shows that the space of justification is fundamentally limited by motivation. Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual faith belongs within this space outside of justification. This leads me to a consideration of perhaps the most difficult consequence of this line of thinking: that the contingent is the ground of the necessary. I approach this problem through a reflection on the ambiguity of knowledge and on how this ambiguity can be taken up authentically, which allows me to gesture toward the ethical ramifications of this project.

This project is of interest for several reasons. First, by offering a sustained account of Merleau-Ponty's epistemological thinking, this manuscript fills a notable gap in Merleau-Ponty literature. Second, it leverages Merleau-Ponty's concept of motivation, which has drawn increased interest in recent years, to show that Merleau-Ponty's thinking offers a compelling new account of knowledge, which still has not been adequately understood. Third, the project situates Merleau-Ponty's epistemological thinking within the major currents of modern and contemporary epistemology, and demonstrates its uniqueness and vitality. Finally, in doing so, this project creates a dialogue between disparate traditions and disciplines, and opens up new avenues for thinking about a variety of topics in Merleau-Ponty scholarship.