

Merleau-Ponty

Joel Krueger

Introduction

Phenomenologists have long argued that emotions play a central role in framing our experience of the world. Scheler, Stein, and Levinas, for example, insist on the centrality of emotions in shaping our empathic engagement with others (Jardine 2015; Krueger 2008). For Heidegger and Sartre, moods and emotions are core structures of our being-in-the-world insofar as they disclose the significance of our worldly projects and future possibilities (Elpidorou & Freeman 2015; Hatzimoysis 2009).

Merleau-Ponty is an outlier. He spends little time explicitly addressing emotions—and when he does mention them, it’s often in the service of another topic such as language, gesture, sexuality, or aesthetics (Cataldi 2008). The main objective of this chapter is therefore the following: I will bring together some of Merleau-Ponty’s scattered remarks about emotions and integrate them with his more general claims about embodiment, mind, and self to illuminate his view of emotions. I will argue that Merleau-Ponty defends an *externalist* approach anticipating current debates in philosophy of emotions.¹ For Merleau-Ponty, emotions are not exclusively head-bound; rather, they are styles of bodily comportment or “variations of being in the world” realized not only by the dynamics of our embodied agency but also by the objects and institutions around us. Merleau-Ponty’s externalism is philosophically interesting because it challenges some traditional assumptions about the ontology of emotions. It can also enrich current debates by highlighting under-investigated themes worthy of further attention.

Embodied emotions

For Merleau-Ponty, emotions are embodied. This amounts to more than the trivial claim that emotions depend upon our brain and central nervous system. And it's an even stronger view than approaches which argue that emotions are perceptions of bodily changes tracking features or events in our environment (e.g., the presence of threats) (Damasio 1994; Prinz 2004). Instead, Merleau-Ponty endorses an embodied *constitution* thesis: the claim that some emotions are partially made up of bodily processes beyond the brain.

We find versions of this thesis in embodied cognitive science. Embodied cognition theorists reject the idea that cognitive phenomena such as seeing a bottle of Belgian beer or solving a mathematical problem are constituted entirely by computational processes in the brain. For example, sensorimotor or “enactive” approaches argue that perception is a mode of action, and the bodily processes that comprise the latter (e.g., movements of the eyes and head; focusing and refocusing attention; reaching, grabbing, manipulating, etc.) are thus constituents of the former (Noë 2004). Similarly, some embodied cognition theorists argue that gestures can be part of cognitive processes like mathematical reasoning or working memory (Clark 2008) (see also Stephan's chapter in this volume).

What is Merleau-Ponty's constitution claim about emotions? Simply put, for Merleau-Ponty emotions are constituted not only by brain processes but also bodily processes and the dynamics of our embodied agency. Merleau-Ponty's view is therefore a kind of embodied externalism in that the vehicles of emotions span neural and extra-neural bodily processes. They are realized not just in but also *across* the body's “expressive space” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 147).

To further clarify this view, we can first consider Merleau-Ponty's general rejection of Cartesian “intellectualism”. This is a picture of mind that “by definition, eludes the ‘outside spectator’ and can only be recognized inwardly” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 391). Merleau-Ponty instead argues that mental phenomena are not hidden inside our bodies like marbles in a container. Rather, our body as a whole is constitutive of subjectivity. I don't simply *have* a body—“I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 205). Elsewhere, he summarizes his core thesis: “The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind. I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world (...) the insertion of the mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation which we entertain with our body and, correlatively, with perceived things” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 3–4). For Merleau-Ponty, my awareness of myself as a locus of experience and

action is inextricably bound up with my body and the way I bodily engage with the world. As a consequence, “the body, then, is not an object” but instead a being with “an ambiguous mode of existence” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 204). It is both a physical object with properties like size, weight, color, shape, and texture—but my body is also simultaneously a subject, something I experience and live through from the inside as I interact with the people and things around me.

For example, I can unthinkingly reach for and grasp my coffee mug while focusing on the newspaper, or tenderly stroke my daughter’s cheek as I kiss her goodnight, because I have an immediate proprioceptive and kinaesthetic sense of where my limbs are in space and what sort of bodily actions are possible within that space. I possess a prereflective sense of myself as an embodied and situated subject. To be a body for Merleau-Ponty is thus to exist within the tension of this “ambiguous” existence where subjectivity and objectivity are interwoven within the dynamics of everyday life. And acknowledging this structural ambiguity of the embodied mind shows us that we are “no longer dealing with a material reality nor, moreover, with a mental reality, but with a significative whole which properly belongs neither to the external world nor to internal life” but simultaneously to both (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 182).

A consequence of this view is that it rejects a picture of mind as a private inner realm that only the owner of that mind has direct access to:

We must abandon the fundamental prejudice according to which the psyche is that which is accessible only to myself and cannot be seen from the outside. My psyche is not a series of “states of consciousness” that are rigorously closed in on themselves and inaccessible to anyone but me. My consciousness is turned primarily toward the world, turned toward things; it is above all a relation to the world. The other’s consciousness as well is chiefly a certain way of comporting himself toward the world. Thus it is in his conduct, in the manner in which the other deals with the world, that I will be able to discover his consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 116–117).

For Merleau-Ponty, we see mind directly in action (Krueger 2012). As fundamentally embodied and animate beings, we are open and responsive to our environment; this openness is constitutive of our bodily being-in-the-world. Accordingly, mind is continually *externalized*—and thus directly available to others—via the integrated suite of skills, capacities, and habits that enable us to act on and respond to the people and things around us. These features of our embodiment and

agency are constitutive of mindedness. And “the mental thus understood is comprehensible from the outside” (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 183).

Merleau-Ponty argues that emotions are similarly embodied and externalized; they are styles of bodily comportment or “variations of being in the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 372). This means that emotions should not be thought of discrete states that arise inside of us, fully-formed, only to pass away after some time as a new emotion takes its place (i.e., the common view of feelings as “a preordination, of a nature calling forth a feeling” (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 28). As styles of bodily comportment, emotions are inextricably linked with our *agency* (Colombetti 2014; Hufendiek 2017; Slaby & Wüschner 2014). They are enacted over time—not things that just passively happen to or in us but rather things that we *do*:

We can, for example, see quite clearly what is shared between the gesture and its sense in the expression of emotions and in the emotions themselves: the smile, the relaxed face, and the cheerfulness of the gestures actually contain the rhythm of the action or of this joy as a particular mode of being in the world (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 192).

A substantive consequence of this view is to see emotions as concretely articulated in what we might refer to as an individual’s “affective style”: their habitual way of moving, acting, expressing, and regulating emotions (Colombetti & Krueger 2015).² Other remarks support this externalist reading. They affirm that, for Merleau-Ponty, the bodily dynamics of our affective style—gestures, facial expressions, idiosyncratic mannerisms, mimicry, etc.—aren’t merely expressions of hidden feelings but instead outwardly visible parts of the emotions themselves:

I perceive the other’s grief or anger in his behavior, on his face and in his hands, without any borrowing from an “inner” experience of suffering or of anger and because grief and anger are variations of being in the world, undivided between body and consciousness, which settle upon the other’s behavior and are visible in his phenomenal body (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 372).

Consider an angry or threatening gesture (...) I do not perceive the anger or the threat as a psychological fact hidden behind the gesture, I read the anger in the gesture. The gesture does not *make me think* of anger, it is the anger itself (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 190).

Since emotion is not a psychic, internal fact but rather a variation in our relations with others and the world which is expressed in our bodily attitude, we cannot say that only the signs of love or anger are given to the outside observer and that we understand others

indirectly by interpreting these signs: we have to say that others are directly manifest to us as behavior (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 53).

To be clear, Merleau-Ponty is not endorsing a brand of crude behaviorism according to which mental phenomena like emotions are reducible to their behavioral expressions. Rather, they have a kind of hybrid reality—“a significative whole which properly belongs neither to the external world nor to internal life”—that cuts across that “old antithesis” between a hidden inner realm of mental phenomena and an observable outer arena of behavior and action (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 182). Merleau-Ponty has no desire to explain away the experiential character of emotions as we live through them from our first-person perspective. He notes that “[t]he other’s grief or anger never has precisely the same sense for him and for me. For him, these are lived situations; for me, they are appresented” within his behavior (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 372). Merleau-Ponty acknowledges an asymmetry with respect to my emotions and those of others. When I experience an emotion, I feel it immediately “from the inside”; I know it directly *as mine*. But I lack this sort of first-person access to other’s emotions, as they do mine. This asymmetry is phenomenologically constitutional for intersubjectivity.

Nevertheless, acknowledging this asymmetry does not entail accepting the ontological assumption generating the “old antithesis” that cleaves inner (mental) from outer (behavioral) realms. Asserting the irreducibility of the first-person perspective, which is necessary to preserve this asymmetry, is compatible with the embodied constitution thesis. And the take-away point then, is that for Merleau-Ponty, minds—including emotions—are hybrid entities. They are constituted by both internal (neural, physiological, phenomenal) and external (behavioral, expressive) parts and processes, integrated into a unified whole.

While space precludes an in-depth survey, we can briefly note that this view receives support from different streams of empirical work in current emotion science. For example, there is evidence that moods are partially constituted by an array of integrated extra-neural processes looping throughout the body and operating at multiple time-scales, including fluctuating rates of blood glucose in the bloodstream, hormonal processes (released by endocrine glands in the brain and body), and even mood- and behavior-influence gut microbiota (Colombetti 2017). Other work indicates that the ontology of emotions is not exhausted by neural components but may

also include expressive and behavioral components (Niedenthal 2007). People who receive Botox injections inhibiting facial expressions (Baumeister, Papa, and Foroni 2016), cases of acquired (temporary) facial paralysis such as Bell’s Palsy (Cole 1998), or individuals who suffer severe spinal cord injuries (Chwalisz et al. 1988) report less-intense feelings of emotions. A similar effect is found in the narratives of people with Moebius Syndrome, a congenital form of bilateral facial paralysis (Krueger & Henriksen 2016). This and other evidence lends support to Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the ontology of emotions cuts across both inner and outer components, integrated into a unified expressive whole.

Scaffolded emotions

An embodied constitution thesis about emotions flows from more general discussions of embodied cognition. However, a family of recent views push this brand of externalism even further. They argue for a kind of *environmental* externalism according to which our cognitive capacities are realized not just by our brains and bodies but also by the complex ways our embodied brains interact with our material and social environments. For these externalist approaches, the tools, technologies, and social resources we use to “scaffold” (i.e., set up, drive, and regulate) our thinking play such a crucial cognitive role that this beyond-the-head scaffolding ought to be considered a literal part of cognition (Clark 2008)—or more conservatively, as at least contributing environmental support essential for understanding its character and functional integrity (Sterelny 2010).

Versions of this environmental externalism are found in recent debates about the scaffolded nature of affectivity and emotions (Carter et al. 2016; Colombetti 2014; Colombetti & Krueger 2015; Colombetti & Roberts 2015; Greenwood 2015; Krueger 2014; Krueger & Szanto 2016; Slaby 2014; Stephan et al. 2014). Proponents observe that we routinely manipulate our emotions by actively manipulating things, places, and people around us. These manipulative processes loop back onto us and scaffold our emotions by synchronically and diachronically shaping their temporal and phenomenal development, often in a fine-grained way. And they may even help realize experiences and self-regulative capacities that we might not otherwise be able to achieve without their ongoing input.

Merleau-Ponty appears amenable to at least two varieties of a scaffolded approach to emotions. We can make this clearer by looking at his remarks on emotions and *incorporation*, and emotions and *institutions*.

Emotions and incorporation

For Merleau-Ponty, our embodiment is dynamic and open-ended. As lived bodies—“ambiguous” beings constituted by a synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity—we are open to various forms of structural augmentation (i.e., scaffolding) which reconfigures how we experience and use our bodies. More precisely, our bodies can be scaffolded by processes of “incorporation”: the ability of our lived body to take something else into itself. For example, we routinely incorporate new skills and habits that alter the configuration of our embodied agency. This is a process of “habit-incorporation” (Colombetti 2016). Learning to walk down the stairs, play a musical instrument, adopt new gestures, dance the waltz, ride a bicycle, or become a skilled rock climber all involve the development of unique skills that expand the range of things we can do with our bodies in different contexts. Incorporating these skills into our bodily-affective style thus has *functional* significance insofar as this process structures “our typical and cultivated ways of integrating and interacting with the environment” (Cuffari 2011). But habit-incorporation also has *phenomenological* (i.e., affective and emotional) significance, too. Once I acquire the skills needed to play the guitar, for instance, I now encounter guitars and guitar-playing contexts with a new-found confidence and attentive focus. Processes of habit-incorporation establish an “affective frame” (Maiese 2016) through which we orient, focus, and skillfully integrate with the things and spaces of our environment in new ways. And since we acquire—and also lose—skills and habits throughout our life, part of the ontological ambiguity of our lived body stems from the fact that it is constantly undergoing this kind of development and change.

But bodily incorporation is not restricted to skills and habits. Merleau-Ponty is also attuned to a second sense of incorporation—“object-incorporation”—which occurs when we integrate material objects into our lived body. From birth, Merleau-Ponty observes, we are situated in a world of things—not just natural things but also cultural things, objects that the child, with a sense of wonder, finds “around himself at birth like meteorites from another planet”

(Merleau-Ponty 2012, 370). Soon, however, their novelty fades and the child “takes possession of them and learns to use them as others use them”—both through observation and mimicry, and also because these cultural objects, designed by other embodied subjects, are crafted to invite specific forms of bodily manipulation and incorporation (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 370).

Merleau-Ponty offers several examples: a woman instinctively ducking when walking through a door to avoid damaging the feather in her hat; carefully negotiating a tight space while driving by feeling how close we are to obstacles; and a blind person skillfully exploring and responding to the environment with their cane. In these and other cases, the objects “have ceased to be objects whose size and volume would be determined through a comparison with other objects. They have become voluminous powers” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 144). In other words, we incorporate these objects into the dynamics of our “ambiguous” lived body. When we skillfully use a cane to explore our environment, for instance, that cane becomes experientially transparent. It is no longer experienced as an object but instead becomes the perceptual vehicle *through which* we access the world in new ways

Processes of object-incorporation, which occur throughout everyday life, likewise scaffold our emotional experiences. For example, wearing the right kind of hiking shoes while making our way down a slippery path—instead of walking the same path in flimsy flat-soled tennis shoes—directly modulates our emotions. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the lived body and incorporation, Colombetti (2016) argues that we are not directly aware of the shoes themselves as thematic objects of experience. We focus instead on the path. But our shoes are nevertheless experientially present as scaffolding *through which* we experience the path, in that they become transparently integrated into our bodily-affective style. And the continual feedback we receive from our shoes regulates our emotional engagement with that environment; it specifies the “affective frame” regulating both how we feel and how the world shows up for us via this feeling (i.e., as affording confident walking vs. a nervous descent). Similar scaffolding occurs when, for instance, a blind person learns how to explore and navigate their environment with a cane, a devout Catholic down-regulates their anxiety before an important job interview by praying the Rosary and habitually manipulating their prayer beads, or an individual riding a crowded bus listens to their MP3 player to elevate their mood and occlude the outside world. These and many other cases like them are examples of emotional object-incorporation. For

Merleau-Ponty, the dynamics of the “ambiguous” body mean that embodied subjects are always poised and ready to enact these habit- and object-incorporations—and in so doing, enact “the simultaneous articulation of their body and their world in the emotion” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 195).

Emotions and Institutions

Merleau-Ponty can make another contribution by emphasizing themes that have not yet found a prominent place in current discussions of scaffolded emotions. This can be seen by looking at Merleau-Ponty’s claim that emotions are “institutions”. This idea is first presented in the following quote:

[T]he gesticulations of anger or love are not the same for a Japanese person and a Western person. More precisely, the difference between gesticulations covers over a difference between the emotions themselves. It is not merely the gesture that is contingent with regard to bodily organization, it is the very manner of meeting the situation and of living it. When angry, the Japanese person smiles, whereas the Westerner turns red and stamps his foot, or even turns pale and speaks with a shrill voice. Having the same organs and the same nervous system is not sufficient for the same emotions to take on the same signs in two different conscious subjects. What matters is the manner in which they make use of their body, the simultaneous articulation of their body and their world in the emotion. The psycho-physical equipment leaves so many possibilities open, and here we see that—just as in the domain of instincts—there is no human nature given once and for all. The use that a man makes of his body is transcendent with regard to that body as a mere biological being (...) Just like words, passionate feelings and behaviors are invented. Even the ones that seem inscribed in the human body, such as paternity, are in fact institutions (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 195).

There is much to unpack here. One interpretive challenge is that this topic is not really developed until nine years later, in Merleau-Ponty’s 1954 lecture-course on institutions (Merleau-Ponty 2010; cf. Maclaren 2017). But in light of what we’ve already considered, there are at least two points worth noting. First, this passage reaffirms Merleau-Ponty’s embodied externalism about emotions. We cannot understand the ontology of emotions without also accounting for their realization in our “psycho-physical equipment”, our bodily-affective style. However—and this is the second point—our bodily-affective style is not fixed by features of our embodiment alone. What we *do* with our psycho-physical equipment, the bodily-expressive dynamics by which we

“invent” emotions, also matters: “psycho-physical equipment leaves so many options open”. And this process of inventing emotions is scaffolded not just by features of our embodiment and agency—or even the cultural objects we incorporate into our embodiment—but also by sociocultural institutions that *regulate* our embodiment.

For example, consider how our emotional expressions and habitual dispositions (i.e., elements of our affective style) are regulated by the interaction routines distinctive of our local subcultures: corporate workplaces, social web-based groups, academic circles, the world of sports, fashion, or police and military culture. Over time, as we inhabit these domains, they exert an increasing top-down influence on the dynamics of our affective style; they scaffold and regulate ways of speaking, gesturing, moving, interacting, experiencing and expressing emotions that are normative in the domain in question. This may even happen without our full awareness or consent. Slaby (2016) argues that the “presence bleed” of contemporary knowledge work—the tendency to be online and available for work-related communication via email or instant messaging software, night and day, 365 days a year—erodes the boundaries of work time and leisure, with significant emotional consequences. Ever-present communication technologies like smartphones, which are transparently incorporated into the routines of everyday life, along with the institutional expectations and practices they support (e.g., persistent availability, rapid-fire responses), scaffold an array of emotions operative in contemporary white collar work: feelings of guilt, responsibility, fears and anxieties, along with the excitement of being part of corporate culture or glimpsing internal drama unfolding in real-time via these technologies. This case study highlights the emotional institution of modern white collar work—socially-instituted “structures of feeling”, as Slaby puts it, that are scaffolded by technological infrastructures, interaction routines, and normative practices distinctive of that subculture.

Emotional institutions organize our social world and regulate our affective style from the moment we are born. For the first few months of life, newborns lack the ability to self-regulate attention and emotion. Accordingly, they rely upon close bodily contact of caregivers to help scaffold their cognitive and emotional function. Within these exchanges, caregivers employ a range of expressive strategies—mimicry, smiles, exaggerated vocalisations, singing, caressing, etc.—to arouse and regulate infant emotion (Krueger 2013; Taipale 2016). For our purposes, what is significant about these early dyadic exchanges is that they are already *culturally*

saturated institutions. In other words, they are from the start infused with the norms, scripts, and patterned practices distinctive of their sociocultural milieu. For example, within Zulu culture, children are expected to be less socially prominent than in North American or European culture—and the regulatory strategies that Zulu women use to engage with their babies and regulate their emotional displays differs accordingly (Spurrett & Cowley 2010).

The important point is that even these early emotional institutions teach infants about “the simultaneous articulation of their body and their world in the emotion”, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. Our habits of emotional experience and expression — our bodily-affective style — are not fixed by our embodiment alone but are rather “transcendent with regard to [our] body as a mere biological being”, insofar as these habits are scaffolded and shaped by the regulatory institutions in which we develop and connect with others. These emotional institutions regulate experience and expression throughout our life—often with profound political consequences, such as the way that emotional experiences of women, minorities, or society’s “untouchables” are constrained and regulated by the institutions of the dominant class (Cataldi 1993, 137–149). With few exceptions, however, these cultural and political dimensions of emotional scaffolding have not been a prominent part of current discussions.³ Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of emotions as “institutions” thus reminds us of the need to broaden the scope of these debates.

Conclusion

As we’ve seen, emotions for Merleau-Ponty are not exclusively head-bound entities. They are styles of bodily comportment or “variations of being in the world” that are scaffolded not only by the dynamics of our embodiment and agency but also by the objects and institutions around us. So where does this leave us?

This externalist picture can impact several philosophical debates. First and most obviously, it suggests that Merleau-Ponty has much to contribute to ongoing discussions of embodied and scaffolded emotions—currently an active area of philosophical research. As we’ve seen, more attention should be paid to cultural and political (i.e., “institutional”) dimensions of these debates.

Second, this view can fruitfully impact debates about social cognition and other minds. Several theorists have recently argued that if mental phenomena like emotions are externalized via the expressions, skills, capacities, and habits that comprise our bodily-affective style, there is no problem of other minds. We see minds (or at least *parts* of minds) directly, within another's bodily-affective style (Krueger 2018a). Of course, this does not settle the debate; there are many "problems of other minds", some of which remain untouched by this claim (Overgaard 2017). But it does suggest that perception is not as indirect a path to other minds as it's often thought to be.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty's view of emotions can help shed light on affective disturbances in psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia, severe depression, and autism. Many psychiatric disorders involve disturbances of an individual's bodily-affective style—e.g., depersonalisation, diminished expressivity, motor difficulties with habit-incorporation, etc.—which leads to global disturbances in their emotional life (Fuchs & Koch 2014). One of the important lessons of Merleau-Ponty's analysis is that our emotions are deeply regulated, at multiple timescales, by scaffolding provided by the objects and institutions around us. This scaffolding constrains our bodily-affective style; but more positively, it also brings regulative stability and predictability to the lived spaces we move through and inhabit on a daily basis. However, some individuals with psychiatric disorders lose reliable access to this scaffolding and its regulative potency, which may help explain some of the difficulties they have managing their emotions on both a moment-to-moment and long-term basis. The interrelation between material culture and affective disorders in psychopathology has not received much focused attention, however, an oversight which may impede a fuller understanding of the phenomenon (Krueger 2018b). Once again, Merleau-Ponty's analysis can point the way toward new and promising lines of inquiry.

¹ For two book-length treatments of Merleau-Ponty on emotions that cover themes I lack space to discuss here, see Mazis (1989) and Cataladi (1993).

² These observations can help clarify Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "The body cannot be compared to a physical object, but rather to the work of art" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 152).

³ Although see Slaby (2016) and Merritt (2014).

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