

Name: Tanja Mourachova

Student Number: s1027979

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# Merleau-Ponty on the experience of habit and what it teaches us about the body, that scientific or classical philosophy theories cannot explain

This article is an explication essay on an excerpt from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he explains how the phenomenon of forming a habit shows us that our body is capable of 'understanding' or capturing (and even creating) meaning, as an argument that not only the intellect but the whole body 'thinks.' The words 'understanding' and 'thinks' are in quotation marks, because Merleau-Ponty (from now on MP) assigns new definitions to these concepts as well as to the concept of 'body,' that I will elaborate on in this essay. Before I dive into the text, I will first briefly introduce MP and his theory in general.

Merleau-Ponty grew up in Paris where he studied philosophy and became friends with Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre. All of them went on to become famous philosophers while collaborating with each other on and off. A turning point in MP's life was the sudden interruption of their elite and peaceful lives in France, when the second world war came barging in on their idealistic values. This confronted MP with the resisting quality of reality, which convoluted his existential ideas of freedom. This realization became a motivating force to address the ambiguity of experience in his writings: the active or creative versus the passive or imposed qualities to it. One can find this ambiguity also in the excerpt discussed in this essay. Merleau-Ponty's ideas became very influential, his influence can be found in writings by for example Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze (Toadvine 2016).

MP was interested in the phenomenological method and became deeply influenced by Husserl's philosophical ideas. MP's contribution to this method is mostly known for his focus on the role that the body plays in experience or perception. Classical philosophies, like those of Descartes or Kant, placed too much emphasis on the intellect and on the other side, existing scientific theories fell short by dismissing the subjective side of perception entirely. MP's project therefore was to overcome this false dichotomy of explaining perception from either an intellectualistic or empiricist point of view. In

the *Phenomenology of Perception* MP redefines the notion of the body as no longer an objective material thing inhabited by an abstract mind, but as a unified whole that thinks, that captures and projects meaning by interacting with the world. And from this relationship, between the body and the world, perception occurs.

The book is stuffed with numerous examples from daily life and experiments from the field of psychology to bring this point across. The argumentation style that MP uses throughout the book is first explaining these examples through the lens of intellectualism or empiricism to later show that these theories run into problems. Meanwhile he develops concepts from a phenomenological point of view with which he aims to describe these unexplainable phenomena with scientific precision. The excerpt explicated below has this same structure, built around examples of habit.

## Explication of the excerpt “Habit as the motor acquisition of a new signification” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 143-148)

In the explication below I will include sentences from the excerpt with their sentence number, so that the reader can find them with more ease in context of the whole excerpt. The whole excerpt with sentence numbers can be found in the attachment to this essay at the end of this document.

The key argument of the excerpt is that our experience of forming a habit is best reflected by a description of it in terms of ‘the body understanding something new,’ with ‘body’ and ‘understanding’ having specific definitions. MP argues that this ‘understanding’ cannot possibly be explained by empiricist theories that explain the world and body mechanically, as a sum of moving parts that are determined by causal relationships. Likewise, are intellectualistic theories unable to account for our experience, that the body can ‘know’ without the intellect being involved. To do justice to our experience we need new definitions of what the body is and what kind of knowledge it can possess.

### A new definition of understanding

MP drops the term ‘understanding’ in the first paragraph of the excerpt (sentence five), just after he explains that the learning process, i.e., acquiring a habit, is systematic.

- 3 Every mechanistic theory runs into the fact that the learning process is systematic: the subject does not weld individual movements to individual stimuli, but rather acquires the power of responding with a certain type of solution to a certain form of situation.

- 4 The situations may differ widely from case to case, the responding movements may be entrusted sometimes to one effector organ and sometimes to another, and situations and responses resemble each other in the different cases much less through the partial identity of elements than by the community of their sense.
- 5 Must we thus place an act of the understanding at the origin of the habit that would first organize the habit's elements only to later withdraw from it?

MP starts out from a mechanistic perspective, to immediately point out that it cannot account for the systematic quality of acquiring a habit, or learning. The first time I read it, I interpreted 'systematic' as 'being a system that is built from parts and can perform different tasks' like, let's say, a printer is a system of multiple moving parts that fulfils the function of printing. However, MP has a different kind of systematic quality in mind. In the fourth sentence we read that the subject responds to a wide array of different situations, by using whatever parts or organs it has, to fulfil a function. MP's usage of 'systematic' here appears more like a description of creativity. So, there seems to be some kind of *understanding* by the subject of the *meaning* of the function it tries to fulfil, such that the subject, or system if you will, *as a whole* can decide for itself how to realize this meaning or 'sense.'

Mechanistic theories do not have room for such an understanding. One could argue that a system is just very complex, that it looks as if the entire system understands the meaning of a task, but really it is just a set of moving parts that move other parts. Indeed, this is exactly why mechanistic theories do not capture our experience of our body being systematic, creative, or understanding.

If mechanistic theories do not account for this systematic quality of our body that can be described as understanding, maybe intellectualist theories can fit it somewhere? That is how I understand the switch MP makes in sentence five. I suspect MP referred to Kantian theories of perception in the first two sentences of this paragraph, where he mentions 'intellectual synthesis' and 'external association.' The idea is that the intellect is able to understand, and that this intellect is responsible for moving the various parts of the body to fulfil a function. Still the problem of where to put understanding remains, because once you have learned something you do not have to think about it anymore. Understanding does not go away after you formed a habit. It is the opposite; it seems to be the case that my body internalizes knowledge while learning and only from this point on it really starts to understand.

For example, in the period while writing this essay, I am also challenging myself to learn doing handstands. For now, when I swing my legs up in the air, I need to think hard about keeping my arms straight, pressing my fingers into the ground and tighten my abdominal muscles, hoping this will give me enough time upside down to get used to balancing on my hands instead of my feet. Hopefully one day I will acquire the habit of standing on my hands, which means that I will not have to think about

how to not fall over anymore. Instead, my body will just know on its own which muscles to contract to find balance, just as I do not actively think about how to keep balance when standing on my both feet.

You see, there are two distinct kinds of understanding involved in the process of learning. The first one fits easily in intellectualist theories, because it is my intellect that I use to guide new movements to let my body get used to it. MP acknowledges this in sentence six with the example of learning new dance moves. Once this conscious learning process is completed however, the second type of understanding emerges, which is not that of the intellect but of the whole body (sentence 8). MP describes this process as a “motor consecration” (sentence 7). I think he uses the word ‘consecration’ to emphasize the importance of meaning or purpose. The word ‘consecration’ is commonly used in religious contexts to describe the process of devoting something to a sacred purpose. It is not the consecrated thing itself that changes, but the meaning of it. For MP acquiring a motoric habit comes down to the motricity of the body understanding or capturing a new purpose.

The difference between intellectual understanding and understanding by the whole body is explicitly mentioned by MP further down in the next paragraph, where he introduces a new example, that of typing:

- 23     One can know how to type without knowing how to indicate where on the keyboard the letters that compose the words are located.
- 24     Knowing how to type, then, is not the same as knowing the location of each letter on the keyboard, nor even having acquired a conditioned reflex for each letter that is triggered upon seeing it.

It is true that when you just start out learning to touch-type you still need to think about where the locations of the keys with the correct letters are on the keyboard. Once mastered the skill of touch-typing however, you no longer think, you just do. The knowledge of the locations of the keys helped learning it, but now your hands just do it correctly on their own. If you relied on your body this way for a while and suddenly start to think about the locations, you will slow down the speed of typing or even start make mistakes. This shows that the understanding of the intellect, knowledge about objective space and location, is something different then the understanding by the body.

This difference between the two concepts of understanding is important for MP’s argument against intellectualistic theories. It seems as if they can account for understanding in a way empiricist theories cannot, but they do that only for a specific kind of knowledge. Examples of habits show that there is another kind of knowledge or understanding, that the intellectualistic theories also cannot

explain. At the end of sentence twenty-four MP mentions 'conditioned reflex'. This is not an alternative way of describing the knowledge of the body, but a repetition of the mechanistic view and MP's argument that pure reflexes have nothing to do with meaning and understanding. Sentence twenty-four is a classic MP argument in which he shows that neither intellectualistic nor empiricist theories provide an accurate explanation for our experience.

In sentence thirty-nine we see what new definition MP gives to 'understanding' from a phenomenological point of view:

39     **To understand is to experience [éprouver] the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization – and the body is our anchorage in a world.**

Understanding is being able to realize an intention. To type the words you are meaning to produce on the screen, to express your thoughts by forming sentences with your mouth or to walk on your hands without falling over if that is your intention. In all these cases you know how to do all those things in MP's definition of understanding, without knowing how you do them in the definition of objective or intellectualistic theories.

### **A new definition of body**

The second important concept in the discussed excerpt, besides 'understanding,' is the 'body' that does the understanding. This body is different from the three-dimensional object in space that we are used to call body, as we can see in sentence forty-three:

43     **The example of instrumentalists demonstrates even more clearly how habit resides neither in thought nor in the objective body, but rather in the body as the mediator of a world.**

Once again MP uses the neither-nor structure to state that both intellectualism, which would place habit in thought, and empiricism, which would place habit in the objective body, do not explain habit properly. This time he uses the example of someone playing a musical instrument. He goes on explaining that it does not make sense to reduce habit to bodily reflexes (sentence 46) nor to representations in the mind (sentence 47 and 48). In contrast to the examples used before, in this example the creative aspect of habit is more visible. When this creativeness is acknowledged, one can define the body (in the phenomenological definition) as something that makes it possible for us to experience a world (sentence 65). Notice also that sentence forty-three says 'a world,' not 'the world.' So 'world' here also has a different definition than the objective world.

I find it a bit weird that the word 'mediator' is used to define the body in sentence forty-three. That makes it seem as if there is an *I* and a *world*, and a *body* that connects the two. That would not be consistent with MP's philosophy. Maybe the problem lays within the translation, the English word could lack a meaning that the original French word used by MP has. Or, what we see here could be what is often the case in MP's writings: that he wants to describe something for which we do not have the correct words (yet).

Maybe sentence fifty-two is an explanation of what 'mediator' could mean:

52      **Between the musical essence of the piece such as it is indicated in the score and the music that actually resonates around the organ, such a direct relationship is established that the body of the organist and the instrument are nothing other than the place of passage of this relation.**

I found it hard to wrap my head around the exact proposition of this sentence. I would interpret it as an example of the quality of openness that the body has in MP's philosophy. From an objective point of view, one could say that the objective body of the musician and the instrument together translate the music score mechanically to audible soundwaves. That is not how it is experienced subjectively, however. Phenomenologically the body is in that moment not significant, it does not matter what parts of the body or the instrument are moving. What is important is the music itself. The organist is not thinking about the movements, instead the organist is focused on the feeling, the essence of the musical piece that is embedded in the music score as well as in the soundwaves. In that moment, the body is as the "darkness of the theater" or "zone of non-being" in front of which the music exists (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 103).

The part in *Phenomenology of Perception* where MP talks about the body as a zone of non-being, is where he explains the difference between the bodily space and the objective space, which he mentions again in sentence 54:

54      **(...) the organist does not play within objective space.**

Objective space would be abstract space as defined by for example Descartes or Leibniz, with points that have coordinates and where distance can be measured with tools. We are very used to this idea of space and often assume its existence being independent from us, but for Merleau-Ponty this objective space is a construct we came up with long after we experienced space as bodily space where distance is not measured but experienced as a meaningful gap that needs to be overcome to get to some food for example.

The organist in the example is not playing in objective space, he is not thinking about coordinates, and he is also not focused on where his hands are going as much as he is focussed on expressing the musical piece. The body therefore constitutes an expressive space (sentence 55 and 57) that enables the relation between intention and realization (sentence 39). Not only does the body understand or internalize meaning, as we have learned from the first examples of this whole excerpt, the body also creates or projects meaning, as we have seen now more clearly in the example of the organist. This meaningful interaction between body and world is the fundament on which everything else takes form, including the idea of an objective body and objective world:

62      Our body, rather, is the origin of all the others, it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes.

Sentence sixty-two can sound idealistic, but MP is not saying that everything exists in your mind only. As we have already seen, the body needs the world to understand or catch a meaning. MP already made that point, so in this sentence he accentuates the other side of the story, the side where the body is creative. In the end it is the cooperation of my body and a world that creates meaning and gives rise to my perception.

This creativeness, openness or non-being of the body in MP's philosophy sounds existential and those terms are likely derived from or influenced by Sartre's existentialism. This is essential to have in mind to understand what MP says in sentence 70 and 71:

70      At all levels, the body exercises the same function, which is to lend "a bit of renewable action and independent existence" to the momentary movements of freedom.

71      Habit is but a mode of this fundamental power.

Here MP concludes that habit is a function of the body, with which a fundamental power of the body is expressed, namely the power of existing. Being beyond oneself, which is what the word 'exist' from origin means, makes it possible to become something new. When the body is not defined, does not coincide with itself, just as 'things' do, there is room for becoming. Habit therefore can be described as an act of the body that uses the power of freedom to transform oneself and acquire a new meaning (sentence 72).

## A thinking body

We now have new definitions of 'understanding' and 'body.' The interesting thing about those definitions is that they include each other. MP's definition of understanding is a meaning or signification captured by the body. And MP's definition of the body is that it is something that can understand and create meaning. Together they form a body that understands, or a thinking body.

There is one sentence left in the excerpt that I would want to comment upon, sentence 60:

60 (...) the question as to why common sense places the seat of thought in the head is the same as the question of how the organist distributes musical significations in the space of the organ.

At first, I was quite puzzled about what the meaning was of this sentence, but now I think it is exactly this idea of a thinking body, that MP is hinting at. Common sense or intellectualistic theories try to answer the question of how the organist reaches for the right stops and pedals to realize his musical intentions (sentence 56) by placing the explanation in his head. However, it is equally as logical to place this thought process, which the intellectualist does not describe in much more detail, on the level of the whole body.

## Conclusion

What we have seen in this excerpt are a few examples from real life that show how empiricist and intellectualist theories struggle to explain habit accurately. These same examples also help formulate a more accurate description of experience, a phenomenological one, which is the goal of the whole book.

The main argument against empiricism as well as intellectualism is that there is no room for understanding on the level of those theories. Examples such as dancing or typing show us that in daily life our body habitually knows how to do things without our intellect being involved. This means that the body as a whole understands or thinks, that 'thought' not only resides in our head. Explaining habit from a mechanistic point of view, as just reflexes, also misses the mark. We, our body, behave as a whole: systematic and creatively. We catch a meaning when we learn. There is no meaning on the level of parts and causal relations only.

The phenomenological description of habit is that of the body acquiring a new signification or meaning. In this context this acquiring of meaning or understanding is experienced as the ability to realize an intention. As shown with the example of the organist, our body not only understands meaning, but it also creates meaning. The body, in the phenomenological view, is not an object in



objective space. The body is rather our means of having a world. It is like the darkness in a theatre, serving as a background for things to appear in front of. Its non-being serves as the freedom to become new again and again, which makes it possible to form new habits.

I found it interesting to think about habit from the phenomenological point of view. I catch myself nowadays taking this perspective when I am practising handstands. A positive effect I see is that I trust my body more. I have more fun just playing around and I notice myself letting go of thinking too much while I learn. Also, I realise that my body can capture or assign a different meaning to a situation or person, because of past experiences, even when my intellect yields to a different signification. In those cases, when I feel the incongruency of the understanding of my body and the understanding of my intellect, it helps to remember that there are different kinds of understandings going on inside of me, and that it is perfectly fine to experience ambiguity.

# Bibliography

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Toadvine, T. 2016. "Maurice Merleau-Ponty." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Visited June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022. URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>

# Attachment

The excerpt below can be found on the pages 143-148 of *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2012), the added sentence numbers are mine.

[m. Habit as the motor acquisition of a new signification.]

- 1 Acquiring a habit as the reworking and renewal of the body schema presents significant difficulties for classical philosophies, which are always inclined to conceive of synthesis as intellectual synthesis.
  - 2 It is true, of course, that what links elementary movements, reactions, and “stimuli” together in habit is not an external association.
  - 3 Every mechanistic theory runs into the fact that the learning process is systematic: the subject does not weld individual movements to individual stimuli, but rather acquires the power of responding with a certain type of solution to a certain form of situation.
  - 4 The situations may differ widely from case to case, the responding movements may be entrusted sometimes to one effector organ and sometimes to another, and situations and responses resemble each other in the different cases much less through the partial identity of elements than by the community of their sense.
  - 5 Must we thus place an act of the understanding at the origin of the habit that would first organize the habit’s elements only to later withdraw from it?
  - 6 For example, in learning the habit of a certain dance, do we not find the formula of the movement through analysis and then recompose it, taking this ideal sketch as a guide and drawing upon already acquired movements (such as walking and running)?
  - 7 But in order for the new dance to integrate particular elements of general motricity, it must first have received, so to speak, a motor consecration.
  - 8 The body, as has often been said, “catches” (kapiert) and “understands” the movement.
  - 9 The acquisition of the habit is surely the grasping of a signification, but it is specifically the motor grasping of a motor signification. But what exactly does this mean?
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- 10 Without any explicit calculation, a woman maintains a safe distance between the feather in her hat and objects that might damage it; she senses where the feather is, just as we sense where our hand is.
  - 11 If I possess the habit of driving a car, then I enter into a lane and see that “I can pass” without comparing the width of the lane to that of the fender, just as I go through a door without comparing the width of the door to that of my body.
  - 12 The hat and the automobile have ceased to be objects whose size and volume would be determined through a comparison with other objects.
  - 13 They have become voluminous powers and the necessity of a certain free space.
  - 14 Correlatively, the subway door and the road have become restrictive powers and immediately appear as passable or impassable for my body and its appendages.
  - 15 The blind man’s cane has ceased to be an object for him, it is no longer perceived for itself; rather, the cane’s furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone, it increases the scope and the radius of the act of touching and has become analogous to a gaze.
  - 16 In the exploration of objects, the length of the cane does not explicitly intervene nor act as a middle term: the blind man knows its length by the position of the objects, rather than the position of the objects through the cane’s length.

- 17 The position of objects is given immediately by the scope of the gesture that reaches them and in which, beyond the potential extension of the arm, the radius of action of the cane is included.
- 18 If I want to become habituated to a cane, I try it out, I touch some objects and, after some time, I have it “in hand”: I see which objects are “within reach” or out of reach of my cane.
- 19 This has nothing to do with a quick estimate or a comparison between the objective length of the cane and the objective distance of the goal to be reached.
- 20 Places in space are not defined as objective positions in relation to the objective position of our body, but rather they inscribe around us the variable reach of our intentions and our gestures.
- 21 To habituate oneself to a hat, the spatiality of one’s own body and motricity an automobile, or a cane is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one’s own body.
- 22 Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments.
- 23 One can know how to type without knowing how to indicate where on the keyboard the letters that compose the words are located.
- 24 Knowing how to type, then, is not the same as knowing the location of each letter on the keyboard, nor even having acquired a conditioned reflex for each letter that is triggered upon seeing it.
- 25 But if habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an automatic reflex, then what is it?
- 26 It is a question of a knowledge in our hands, which is only given through a bodily effort and cannot be translated by an objective designation.
- 27 The subject knows where the letters are on the keyboard just as we know where one of our limbs is – a knowledge of familiarity that does not provide us with a position in objective space.
- 28 The movement of his fingers is not presented to the typist as a spatial trajectory that can be described, but merely as a certain modulation of motricity, distinguished from every other through its physiognomy.
- 29 The question is often presented as if the perception of the letter written on the paper came to awaken the representation of the same letter, which in turn evoked the representation of the movement necessary to reach it on the keyboard.
- 30 But this language is mythological.
- 31 When I glance over the text offered to me, there are no perceptions awakening representations, but rather wholes that arrange themselves at the present moment, endowed with a typical or familiar physiognomy.
- 32 When I take my place before my machine, a motor space stretches beneath my hands where I will play out what I have read.
- 33 The word that is read is a modulation of visual space, the motor execution is a modulation of manual space, and the whole question is how a certain physiognomy of “visual” wholes can call forth a certain style of motor responses, how each “visual” structure in the end provides its own motor essence, without our having to spell out the word or to spell out the movement in order to translate the word into movement.
- 34 But this power of habit is not distinguished from the one we have over our body in general.
- 35 If I am told to touch my ear or my knee, I bring my hand to my ear or to my knee by the shortest path without my having to imagine the position of my hand at the outset, the position of my ear, or the trajectory from one to the other.
- 36 We said above that in the acquisition of habit it is the body that “understands.”
- 37 This formula will seem absurd if “understanding” is the act of subsuming a sensory given under an idea, and if the body is a mere object.
- 38 But the phenomenon of habit in fact leads us to rework our notion of “understanding” and our notion of the body.

- 39 To understand is to experience [éprouver] the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization – and the body is our anchorage in a world.
- 40 When I bring my hand toward my knee, I experience at each moment of the movement the realization of an intention that did not aim at my knee as an idea, or even as an object, but rather as a present and real part of my living body, and ultimately as a point of passage in my perpetual movement toward a world.
- 41 When the typist executes the necessary movements on the keyboard, these movements are guided by an intention, but this intention does not posit the keys as objective locations.
- 42 The subject who learns to type literally incorporates the space of the keyboard into his bodily space.
- 43 The example of instrumentalists demonstrates even more clearly how habit resides neither in thought nor in the objective body, but rather in the body as the mediator of a world.
- 44 It is said that an experienced organist is capable of playing an organ with which he is unfamiliar and that has additional or fewer keyboards, and whose stops are differently arranged than the stops on his customary instrument.
- 45 He needs but an hour of practice to be ready to execute his program.
- 46 Such a brief apprenticeship prohibits the assumption that new conditioned reflexes are simply substituted for the already established collection, unless, that is, they together form a system and if the change is global, but this would be to go beyond the mechanistic theory since in that case the reactions would be mediated by a total hold on the instrument.
- 47 Shall we say, then, that the organist analyzes the organ, that he forms and maintains a representation of the stops, pedals, and keyboards, as well as their relation in space?
- 48 But during the short rehearsal that precedes the concert he hardly behaves like someone who wants to draw up a plan.
- 49 He sits on the bench, engages the pedals, and pulls out the stops, he sizes up the instrument with his body, he incorporates its directions and dimensions, and he settles into the organ as one settles into a house.
- 50 He does not learn positions in objective space for each stop and each pedal, nor does he entrust such positions to “memory.”
- 51 During the rehearsal – just as during the performance – the stops, the pedals, and the keyboards are only presented to him as powers of such and such an emotional or musical value, and their position as those places through which this value appears in the world.
- 52 Between the musical essence of the piece such as it is indicated in the score and the music that actually resonates around the organ, such a direct relationship is established that the body of the organist and the instrument are nothing other than the place of passage of this relation.
- 53 From then on, the music exists for itself, and everything else exists through it.
- 54 There is no place here for a “memory” of the location of the stops, and the organist does not play within objective space.
- 55 In fact, his rehearsal gestures are gestures of consecration: they put forth affective vectors, they discover emotional sources, and they create an expressive space, just as the gestures of the augur define the *templum*.
- 56 The entire problem of habit here is to determine how the musical signification of the gesture can be condensed into a certain locality to the extent that, by entirely giving himself over to the music, the organist reaches for precisely the stops and the pedals that will actualize it.
- 57 Of course, the body is eminently an expressive space.
- 58 No sooner have I formed the desire to take hold of an object than already, at a point in space that I was not thinking about, my hand as that power for grasping rises up toward the object.

59 I do not move my legs insofar as they are in space and eighty centimeters from my head, but rather insofar as their ambulatory power continues my motor intention downward.

60 The principal regions of my body are consecrated to actions, the parts of my body participate in their value, and the question as to why common sense places the seat of thought in the head is the same as the question of how the organist distributes musical significations in the space of the organ.

61 But our body is not merely one expressive space among all others, for that would be merely the constituted body.

62 Our body, rather, is the origin of all the others, it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes.

63 Even if our body does not impose definite instincts upon us from birth, as the animal's body does, then it at least gives the form of generality to our life and prolongs our personal acts into stable dispositions.

64 Our nature, in this sense, is not an ancient custom, since custom presupposes nature's form of passivity.

65 The body is our general means of having a world.

66 Sometimes it restricts itself to gestures necessary for the conservation of life, and correlatively it posits a biological world around us.

67 Sometimes, playing upon these first gestures and passing from their literal to their figurative sense, it brings forth a new core of signification through them – this is the case of new motor habits, such as dance.

68 And finally, sometimes the signification aimed at cannot be reached by the natural means of the body.

69 We must, then, construct an instrument, and the body projects a cultural world around itself.

70 At all levels, the body exercises the same function, which is to lend “a bit of renewable action and independent existence” to the momentary movements of freedom.

71 Habit is but a mode of this fundamental power.

72 The body, then, has understood and the habit has been acquired when the body allows itself to be penetrated by a new signification, when it has assimilated a new meaningful core.

73 What we have discovered through the study of motricity is, in short, a new sense of the word “sense.”

74 The strength of intellectualist psychology, as well as of idealist philosophy, comes from the ease with which they show that perception and thought have an intrinsic sense and cannot be explained through an external association of fortuitously assembled contents.

75 The Cogito was the moment of insight into this interiority.

76 And yet, every signification was simultaneously conceived as an act of thought, as the operation of a pure “I”; if intellectualism easily won out over empiricism, it itself remained incapable of accounting for the variety of our experience, for the regions of non-sense in our experience, and for the contingency of its contents.

77 The experience of the body leads us to recognize an imposition of sense that does not come from a universal constituting consciousness, a sense that adheres to certain contents.

78 My body is this meaningful core that behaves as a general function and that nevertheless exists and that is susceptible to illness.

79 In the body we learn to recognize this knotting together of essence and existence that we will again meet up with in perception more generally, and that we will then have to describe more fully.