

Education as Praxis: A Corporeal Hermeneutical Account

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Abstract

In common language, education is mostly understood as teaching. In this article, I would like to employ the hermeneutical philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to draw attention on that other etymological background of education: *educere*. Education as *educere* is about liberating or displacing our view instead of achieving a liberated view. In this sense, education does not refer to an immaterial relation of knowing or mastering (*Erklären*), but to a relation of being (*Verstehen*). I hope to demonstrate Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body can make us attentive to the importance of this hermeneutical and praxical character of education. After all, his thinking very aptly describes our relation to the world in terms of a corporeal being rather than in terms of a cognitive or abstract knowing. His conception of corporeality and of our being to the world (*être-au-monde*) deconstructs a mere formal and all too immaterial account of education.

Keywords: education, hermeneutics, Merleau-Ponty, *Bildung*, praxis, corporeality

Introduction

A general idea of education understands its main object mostly in the sense of “formation”. Albeit not easily traceable, in contemporary society the idea at least deludes to have roots in the hopes of the Enlightenment: man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.¹ In this sense, education refers to the empowerment or emancipation of people. It signifies the possibility to cultivate a full-grown, critical and liberated perspective on the world that allows a better or more correct understanding. In a society that focuses heavily on professional

skills and on delivering results, the idea of empowerment summarizes the common conception of education. To be educated today means: to acquire or to be taught the adequate set of skills and views (Masschelein 1991). Such understanding of education will be the background of this paper. Its reason is simple: education as a form of critical self-fulfilment or self-actualization is not at all non-problematic however. It all depends on the meaning or interpretation of terms like *better*, *correct*, *critical*, *self*... Education could easily run the risk of transforming into an ideal in which the focus foremost lies on the realisation of a specific form, rather than on the praxis of its process. Such *formal* education – education towards a certain form – is by principle geared to getting results and focuses too much on the theoretical or ideal conditions of its action. It focuses on an instrumentality and functionality of education. It seems that it becomes nearly impossible to think about education nowadays without answering the question what ends it serves (Elias and Vanwing 2002; Masschelein 1991). In addition, in our contemporary society there still seems to be an excessive emphasis on the primacy of the cogito (O’Loughlin 1997). As a consequence, education is principally aimed at a certain (and not just any) conceptual and metaphysical reality. It is all about a certain evolution of our consciousness. We should be cautious about this hidden instrumental and mere functional or disciplining characteristic of education. This is why, in this article, I would like to employ the hermeneutical philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to draw attention on that other etymological background of education: *educere*. As recent theory argues, education as *educere* (“to lead out” or “to reach out”) “is not about arriving at a liberated or critical view, but about liberating or displacing our view” (Masschelein 2010, 44). What is important here is not so much the formal or instrumental scope of education, but precisely its lack of an objective or ideal. As a praxis, it is value in itself. In this sense, education does not refer to an immaterial relation of knowing or mastering (*Erklären*), but to a relation of being (*Verstehen*).² It is in this way that education becomes contrasted with training, formation or disciplining. Education is precisely the process that un-folds, displaces or impels ourselves without reference to

a form or goal. It is the reality – or even better: realization – of the myth of self-fulfilment; the hermeneutical version of the Socratic adagio “Know Thyself” (understand yourself). To be educated does not refer to a mental achievement or a specific highlight in our consciousness, but indicates an engaged mutuality with the world and being. I hope to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body can make us attentive to the importance of this hermeneutical and praxical character of education. After all, his thinking very aptly describes our relation to the world in terms of a corporeal being rather than in terms of a cognitive or abstract knowing. His conception of corporeality and of our being to the world (*être-au-monde*) deconstructs a mere formal and all too immaterial account of education.

(Self-)knowledge, ambiguity and the body

In *La Phénoménologie de la perception* Merleau-Ponty pinpoints the weaknesses of the two most important modes of thinking at that time (but maybe they still are?): empiricism and intellectualism (Merleau-Ponty 1945).³ They both presume the possibility of objectivity, respectively that of the world or that of its perspective: “both keep their distance in relation to perception, instead of sticking closely to it” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 30; 1945, 34). According to Merleau-Ponty both have lost an innocent contact with the world: some sort of primordial, empty but already determinate intention (*l’attention*) (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 36). There is an existential understanding situated on a pre-reflexive level. This non-thetic consciousness doesn't have a defined idea of its objects. With this, Merleau-Ponty directly criticizes the Cartesian idea – which is still present in contemporary society – that we have access to reality by means of a clear and distinct cogito. He argues, “to revert with Descartes from things to thought about things is to take one of two courses: it is either to reduce experience to a collection of psychological events, of which the *I* is merely the overall name or the hypothetical cause, in which case it is not clear how my existence is more certain than that of any thing, since it is no longer immediate, save at a fleeting instant; or else it is to

recognize as anterior to events a field and a system of thought which is subject neither to time nor to any other limitation, a mode of existence owing nothing to the event and which is existence as consciousness, a spiritual act which grasps at a distance and compresses into itself everything at which it aims, an “I think” which is, by itself and without any adjunct, an “I am” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 426).

Although Merleau-Ponty concurs with Descartes on the fact that it is undoubtedly so that “I think”, he believes the latter goes too far when he reduces the whole of being to thinking. According to Merleau-Ponty, “the acts of the I are of such a nature that they outstrip themselves leaving no interiority of consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 438; 1945, 431). Consciousness is not in and for itself. It is no subject that places itself outside the world. The “I” does not see or cannot grasp “my” whole reality or existence: “it is not *because* I think I am that I am certain of my existence: on the contrary, the certainty I enjoy concerning my thought stems from their genuine existence” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 445; 1945, 438). Thinking is a consequence of existence rather than its foundation. Moreover, since existence is not simply reducible to consciousness, “I” is – or I am – first of all ambiguously. Being shows itself to us in ambiguity.⁴ Being and beings are not given to us by way of a clear and distinct idea. Indeed, they are given to us, they are already there, but before every idea we can have about them. But this means nothing other than the fact that we are always already immersed in something: we are always already toward the world. It implies that we cannot pretend to be absolutely outside of something – or to be absolute: *ab-solute*, a being that is detached. There always already (*déjà-là*) is a “direct and primitive contact with the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, vii; 1945, i).

In *La Phénoménologie* Merleau-Ponty discovers the body as the vehicle of this originary and ambiguous relation to the world. Through the body “I am at grips with the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 353; 1945, 349). Neither the body, nor the world are conceived as an object, but are expose our most original experience and direct preconscious approach to or touching of the world. It is through the body that we encounter the world. It is our engagement and involvement. The body

indicates our being-to-the-world. In this sense, our contact with the world and being is first and foremost a *je peux*, instead of a *je pense*. The emphasis shifts from a detached, thinking cogito to an engaged embodiment. According to Merleau-Ponty our body is not simply an object: “in order that we may be able to move our body towards an object, the object must first exist for it, our body must not belong to the real of the ‘in-itself’” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 161). Our body is intended towards the world. It is not simply “in” the world and time, but is “towards” them: “it *inhabits* space and time” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 161; 1945, 164). Our body *embodies* the world. As such, the body for Merleau-Ponty is not to be considered as a mere object. It is that what carries us into existence; it is that what makes us exist. In this sense, a body is not something I can *have*. It is not something outside of my thought. It would be more adequate to say: “I am in it, or rather I am it” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 173; 1945, 175). As such, Merleau-Ponty completely retraces the conditions and limits of what we generally understand by mind and body. Indeed, he argues consciousness is not something outside our corporeal being: “our body is not an object for an “I think”, it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 177; 1945, 179). One of Merleau-Ponty’s commentators aptly summarizes that there is “a creative power in the body to which we fail to do justice when we persist in seeing it as the handmaiden of consciousness, or when we ignore the body’s intelligent connections with the world at hand in order to draw attention to the linguistic construction of social structures and the symbolic features attached to ‘subject positions’ within discourse” (O’Loughlin 1997, 24-25).

From this follows that human action is a field that incorporates or embodies subject and object and that its source cannot be reduced to conscious autonomous motives. The source isn't hidden somewhere behind the action, but comes into being in the interplay itself: through the body. Merleau-Ponty argues it is not possible to grasp reality in a dualism of subject and object and as such our primary encounter with the world is everything but objective. The intertwining of body and world, of subject and object, puts an end to the centrality of the subject

and to the objectivity of consciousness and brings corporeality to the fore.

Self-actualization

This has far-reaching implications for our thinking of education: the Socratic command to know ourselves is always already marked by a deficit. According to Merleau-Ponty, the pursuit of self-knowledge only results in an anonymous flux (*un flux anonyme*): “everything that I ‘am’ in virtue of nature or history – hunchbacked, handsome or Jewish – I never am these things totally for and in myself” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 497, my translation). To know ourselves is not characterized by objectivity or abstraction. Its knowledge is situated, embedded in a certain intentional context that refers to the relation between my body and the world. Indeed, knowledge is not something to be mastered, “it is always felt and responded to somatically; that is, in its corporeal materiality” (O’Loughlin 1997, 29). In other words: as far as my body touches and understands the world around me, I find myself in a field that has not completely risen from my conscious or mental decisions: I know myself to be an individual not because I know of the being of this individual, but because I already am this individual. It is this intrinsic and primordial corporeal relation between myself and being – and not some abstract or absolute cogito – that forms the basis of my knowledge. My consciousness or my ‘knowing’, then, is not the straightforward instigator of my knowledge and as such cannot deliver me an objective and unambiguous perspective. What matters is the error of a mode of thinking that only considers intellectual objects and ignores the existential design that is its foundation. There exists an unspannable chasm between a subject that is to be known and an existential subject that knows. Therefore, reality is never objective or absolute, but becomes real through its corporeality.

With his primacy of the body Merleau-Ponty criticizes the possibility of an absolute subject and of objective knowledge. He does not consider the subject to be the ground or essence of being: my so-called subjectivity is nothing other than

an abstract notion of myself, a deceptive mode of being. I only know myself through ambiguity. This means my life must have a sense or meaning that is not solely given by me. Merleau-Ponty speaks of *intersubjectivity* rather than of subjectivity. There is no such thing as an I or subject that is independent or abstract of a world. They are *gleichursprünglich*, Heidegger would say. This is why Merleau-Ponty speaks of being as being-to-the-world (*être-au-monde*). They are always already interconnected. With the impossibility of objective knowledge, our being-to-the-world generates some sort of double blind. Self-knowledge or a sense of ourselves is not something that can be achieved, and can be nothing other than “the concrete project of a future which is elaborated within social coexistence and in the One [*l’On*] before any personal decision is made” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 522; 1945, 513). We only know being in so far as being gives us this knowledge. And this being is first of all corporal. In order to know ourselves, Merleau-Ponty figures the individual is left amidst a zone of general existence. This generality is *a* consciousness or *a* presence towards itself, the other and the world. It is and cannot be however an absolute presence or objective and direct contact with itself. As such, the idea of education as the pursuit of self-knowledge or self-actualization by means of mere individual or subjective consciousness loses its continuity. Rather, the emphasis shifts towards the corporeal involvement with the world. What does it mean that the body is our primary contact with the world? As we will see, this opens up the possibility for a lived understanding: not an explanation of reality, but a reaching or touching of the world; an existential understanding that is situated on a corporeal level.

Corporeal education; education as praxis

The key question is *what* is to be understood. For Merleau-Ponty it’s not about the understanding or interpreting of the actuality of this pre-reflexive way of being in the world. The body is not simply the subject of his hermeneutical endeavour. The centrality of Merleau-Pontian hermeneutics doesn’t look for the understanding of a latent concealed

meaning or sense of preconscious intentions, but supposes that this pre-reflexivity sets the borders of meaning and meaningfulness. The ambiguity and the pre-reflexivity are not the objects to be analysed or revealed, but merely give the structures and boundaries from which reality gets its sense and meaning. A theory of interpretation according to Merleau-Ponty goes beyond the scope of the traditional hermeneutical search for truth, meaning and identity. The surplus value of a Merleau-Pontian hermeneutics in the context of education is not to be found in the fulfilment or knowledge of some sort of *Self*, but rather in what I call a *differentiated situatedness*. Somehow badly chosen words, I agree, but they refer to what Merleau-Ponty calls *l'écart* – differentiation, spacing, separation. According to him, it is first of all this separation that “is the perceptual *sense*” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 250). It is not the thing in itself – the self – that makes up its sense, but rather its difference from what it is not, from its context. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is spacing or separation that marks things and as such their necessary relation. Separation points to the difference between things that emerges through the mutual relation they have with each other. As a consequence, a Merleau-Pontian hermeneutics should not focus on the formality or ipseity of a certain Self that needs to be actualized or known, but on the acknowledgement of the being-in-the-world, the acknowledgement of the difference or spacing in that corporeal situatedness. This difference only becomes clear when we realize the relation with the world and the other, that is: in the lived world (*le monde vécu*).

What is important for a hermeneutics of education is the idea that we find ourselves always already in a field of meaning and that therefore we're not able to protrude to an epistemological certainty. Merleau-Ponty speaks of “a vigilance that doesn't let us forget the ground of all knowing” (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 138, my translation). This might be a correct description of the ambiguity that indicates the flaws and deficiencies inherent to all meaning and understanding. With the emphasis on ambiguity, Merleau-Ponty denies the ideal of essence and shifts the focus to the boundaries of knowing and of meaning. Hermeneutics in that way is nothing more than

understanding or interpreting the embodied subject in the lived world: it is being-to-the-world as a possibility *an sich*. It is not a procedure located in an interior space called “the mind”.⁵ Meaning is not meaning for an objective understanding, but rather a structure that is open and embodied. Merleau-Ponty considers the body as expression and understanding of the world. Emphasizing on this expressional characteristics of existence, he speaks on human existence metaphorically: he sees existence as a talking subject (*un sujet parlant*), rather than a thinking subject (*un sujet pensant*). On the one hand, it means there is a meaning-creating subjectivity in the speech of men. On the other, Merleau-Ponty states that the subject can't transcend language: the subject only lives in its speech. There is no Archimedean point beyond language, beyond the body and the world. It *becomes* in its existence, in the intertwining between body and world. This *becoming*, the *speech* and *actual acting* contrast a concept of thinking that carries within itself ideas, concepts and categories that proceed their actual realization. As for meaning, the same principle applies: its actual signification emerges through the lived world. Existence is corporeal. It does not *have* a body, it *is* embodied. Thereby, the emphasis is not on that abstract or ideal concept that is expressed, but on what expresses. It is in this sense I want to speak about the praxis of education. What is important, is not so much the formal aspects of education or the ideas behind it. Education is not simply a mental or immaterial evolution. Its process exists – or takes *place* – throughout our embodied being-to-the-world. Indeed, what matters, “is what is felt knowledge, knowledge as “lived engagement” (O’Loughlin 1997, 29). As such, education first and foremost does not refer to something outside its praxis. It is nothing other than a corporeal hermeneutical experience. From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, education as self-actualization or self-fulfilment is no search for a Self or its knowledge, but refers to an understanding of a being that always already is situated and corporeal. This implies a rejection of the coincidence of an educated consciousness and a view of the world. It means education only happens to-the-world and primarily is no achievement of the mind but a bodily experience.

Education as an art of corporeal understanding

As already stated, education should not simply be understood as the possibility of an individual that can lift itself to the subject of its actions. It does not merely refer to training, disciplining or formation. There is no objective knowledge or actualization that is the pinnacle of its evolution. What matters is its process, which is a corporeal praxis. This can be aptly understood by Merleau-Ponty's nuance of consciousness: "consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that', but of 'I can'" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 529; 1945, 160). It indicates its corporeal and involved character. In this sense, education is not something to have to be achieved, but accomplishes itself throughout its praxis. This is similar to the way Merleau-Ponty describes the painter in *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* (Merleau-Ponty 1964b).⁶ In this work he describes the relation between the art of painting (the eye) and philosophy (the mind). Again the body has a key role to play. It refers to a synergy between seeing and moving. The visible here implies corporeality: it is truly the possibility to be in the world.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the painter can only paint *through* his body. In this way, the visible and the body are interconnected. Which also means the visible is connected with the one who sees. Viewer and visible are one, there is no separation between subject and object. For Merleau-Ponty, the view of the painter is intertwined with the visible: inside and outside criss-cross each other. This is different from a camera that registers images. "The world is no longer before him [the painter] through representation: it rather is the painter who is born within the things" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 69). Merleau-Ponty argues the painter does not look at a painting but that he rather views *through* or *by means of* a painting. What matters is not the necessity to capture or to picture reality. What is important is the emergence of other views and visibilities. The painter offers much more than a picture of the world. The painting is no copy. It does not relate to reality like a picture to its original. The painter does not represent reality, but alters it. It is in this sense art shows us things outside traditional

reality. Art is about a discovery of the world, about making the invisible visible.

The art of painting is about the limits of the visible and the invisible. With this, Merleau-Ponty pinpoints an important educational aspect: to perceive the world differently, by means of other realities. The difference between the visible and the invisible, essence and existence, fades through the act of the painter and this teaches us to see the limits of our individual perspectives. This reveals the true meaning of a view *through* a painting: painting is equal to creation. A view is not simply a representation, but always already shows much more than itself. It is the very act of actualization. An example: our view of a space cannot merely be understood as a grid of relations between objects or as geometrical proportions or scales. It rather is the space where our view takes place: its lives *through* this space. According to Merleau-Ponty we shouldn't just speak about space or light, but we should "let speak the space and light that are there" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 59). It is in this sense that space and the visible always express a certain potential.

It is this potential the artist uses. He does not start from a blueprint, but makes the world speak for itself. The world and the body are no instruments, but they are preconditions. The artist does not work *with* his body or the world, but *through* them. In the context of education, the metaphor of art shows to be a useful model. It refers to the work of art that life is. There are no goals to be achieved, no Self to be actualized, known or fulfilled. As hermeneutics, it reminds us that there can be no objective claim of reality and that education does not refer to some sort of significant culmination or apotheosis, but that it is all about the displacement of significance and perspectives.

If education has a liberating power, this is not to be found in the liberty it releases or establishes, but in the possibility to focus onto something else. In this context Merleau-Ponty refers to the ability (*pouvoir*) to break with the previous or to commit to the other: "I can break every form, I can laugh with everything, there is no such case in which I am entirely absorbed: this is not because I retire in my liberty, but because I engage with something else" (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 516, my translation). The educational power of the artist is

there, not because he starts from a complete liberated view, but because he liberates in seeing things differently. The educational aspect of a corporeal hermeneutics is thus not situated in an evolution of consciousness. It presents us our corporeality, our expression or exposition. In this sense, education means nothing other than *educere*: that praxis that opens or breaks up, exposes, reaches out, expresses...

The practice of education

As a final remark, I would like to concisely indicate what the above means for the educational practice. With an emphasis on the praxis, education loses its focus on all too rigid action schemes or methodologies. Indeed, it rather asks for some kind of *poor pedagogy*, as recent research would argue (Masschelein 2010). What matters most for our understanding of education is the idea of coexistence. It refers to intersubjectivity and the impossibility of absoluteness or objectivity. Education always already presupposes the other (another ‘educated’ me, a teacher, the world...). For Merleau-Ponty there is always already some sort of being of two, a dual being (*être à deux*): “where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour [*comportement*] in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we coexist through a common world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 413; 1945, 407). It means the individual cannot conceive itself without the other or without the world. There always is some kind of interworld (*l’intermonde*) in which the encounter of two individuals implies their worlds merge. The interworld is a corporeal common world. It emphasizes that any individual is never just *individual* – it’s rather *dividual*. There are always already multiple meanings and identities that cannot be considered independent or abstract from the situation. In the context of the educational practice, the idea of coexistence indicates the importance of involvement and engagement. That, rather than theoretical methodologies and models, is what is primordial for the practice of education.

NOTES

¹ Surely, this is a reference to Kant who with his essay *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung* of 1784 still can be seen as an enormous inspiration for the philosophy of education.

² With Merleau-Ponty I do indeed consider hermeneutics on an ontological level. For considerations on this issue see Dillon (1988). For a theoretical approach of ontological hermeneutics see Gadamer (2006).

³ For quotations, I use the English translation of *La phénoménologie* by Colin Smith (2002). All translations are his, unless otherwise stated.

⁴ It is De Waelens (1951) who aptly describes this rudiment of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

⁵ See Busch and Gallagher (1992) for an extensive reflection on Merleau-Ponty and Hermeneutics.

⁶ All translations are my own.

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