

Reinterpreting Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenon of Synaesthesia from the Perspective of Motor Projects

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Abstract. Thinkers of the Enlightenment were enthusiastic about imagining both the possibility and the forms of synaesthesia. The problem of synaesthesia can be viewed as an implicit core issue in the rationalist–empiricist debate. Focusing on the phenomenon of, by drawing on Merleau-Ponty's texts, this paper attempts to explain why Merleau-Ponty claims that “synaesthesia is a general rule,” what is the mechanism of synaesthesia, and how Merleau-Ponty offers a phenomenological interpretation of it. For Merleau-Ponty, synaesthesia is neither a “quasi-sensation,” a mental representation that precedes an action, nor the empiricist idea of habitual association after perception. Rather, it is a form of “bodily knowledge” produced through the body's projective function and project toward movement. On the one hand, bodily knowledge reveals Merleau-Ponty's attempt to eliminate the Cartesian transparency of the “cogito” from the primordial process of perception, replacing it by a possibility for a non-objectifying form of knowing. The projective function, on the other hand, makes possible the individualization of private, singular synesthetic experiences.

Keywords: Synaesthesia, motor project, bodily knowledge, projective function

1. Introduction

The problem of synaesthesia can be seen as a “hidden battlefield” in modern philosophy. Discussions on this issue can be traced back to Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), where Locke describes a blind man who attempts to express the meaning of scarlet using the sound of a trumpet: “A studious blind man, who had mightily beat his head about visible objects... his friend demanding what scarlet was? The blind man answered. It was like the sound of a trumpet” [1]. Locke here denies the possibility of synaesthesia; he considers such a “trumpet-sound” kind of red absurd. It is impossible, in his view, for a person to acquire the knowledge of one sense through another. For Locke, such claims belong to “the philosophy of Sancho Panza.”

Thinkers of the Enlightenment were enthusiastic about imagining both the possibility and the forms of synaesthesia. In *Emile* (1762), Rousseau invites readers to imagine a child “born with the size and strength of a man” who “cannot carry anything into those organs of sense which enable us to discern objects; colours are not in his eyes, sounds are not in his ears,” so that “all his sensations are merged in one, and can exist only together in a sort of common sensorium” [2]. Here, Rousseau seems to advocate an empiricist view of perception: the emergence and differentiation of perception (indeed, in a sense, perception arises precisely through differentiation) depends on education and life

experience. If one does not know how to use the senses properly, the different sensations become mixed, producing a kind of confused synaesthesia.

Thus, the problem of synaesthesia can be viewed as an implicit core issue in the rationalist–empiricist debate. A philosopher’s stance on this issue could place them in one camp or the other. The Molyneux problem is the most famous example: Locke and Leibniz’s divergent answers represent the two pathways of modern empiricism and rationalism. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, what Merleau-Ponty seeks to do is precisely to use synaesthesia as an entry point to open up a third path beyond rationalism and empiricism.

2. The definition and presuppositions of synaesthesia

What is synaesthesia? Etymologically, synaesthesia (syn- + aisthēsis) literally means “joined sensation,” a term that first appeared and gained wide usage in the late 19th century. Regarding the intensity and precision of synesthetic experiences, two broad kinds are commonly distinguished: vivid synaesthesia and synesthetic tendencies. Vivid synaesthesia is “a rare ability: to hear colours, taste shapes, or experience other startling blends of sensory qualities that are unimaginable for most people”; synesthetic tendencies are “a tendency to match properties or features of one sense modality synaesthesia properties or features of another, whether this matching is realised in perception or in imagery” [3].

Here Sartre gave a vivid example: “In fact, the lemon is extended throughout its qualities, and each of its qualities is extended throughout each of the others. It is the sourness of the lemon, which is yellow; it is the yellow of the lemon, which is sour. We eat the colour of a cake, and the taste of this cake is the instrument which reveals its shape and its colour to what we may call the alimentary intuition” [4]. Here, the lemon’s colour, taste, and texture form an interwoven whole in which each permeates the others; we can separate them only through intellectual operations performed after perception.

Yet in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty does not strictly distinguish between these two types but treats them together. This is not an oversight; rather, for him, describing both phenomena serves to reveal the interrelation among the senses in primordial perception, and to achieve this purpose, a strict distinction is unnecessary. Moreover, the difference between vivid synaesthesia and synaesthetic tendencies is quantitative, not qualitative: in degree of rarity, in intensity and precision of feeling, and in the degree of fusion (whether two sensations or one).

It is worth noting that André J. Abath has proposed two additional forms of synaesthesia: cross modal mental imagery and sensorimotor cross modality. The former refers to “mental imagery occurring in one sensory modality as the result of the presentation of a physical stimulus in another” [3]. Common examples include the sounds that arise in one’s mind when lip-reading or silently reading a text. The latter refers to representations of potential movements—for example, a cup is an object that “invites” grasping, so seeing a cup may be accompanied by subconscious motor imagery of reaching for it and an appropriate hand posture [3]. This research argues that the concept of cross modal mental imagery reveals a possibility of understanding synaesthesia as “imagination” (where vivid synaesthesia treats synaesthesia as “perception,” and synesthetic tendencies as a “judgmental tendency”)—in other words, a possible “imaginative synaesthesia.” In these two particularly illuminating examples (lip reading and silent reading), cross modal mental imagery may be a conscious, active process (when one intends to interpret lip movements) or an unconscious, passive one (when silently reading without awareness); it may involve constant associations (e.g., always humming a tune upon seeing certain lyrics) or occasional ones (not every lip movement elicits sound). Thus, the concept still awaits clarification. Sensorimotor cross modality, however, entirely

misunderstands and regresses from Merleau-Ponty's conception of perception, when discussing motor projects without the mediation of mental representation.

Almost all analyses and definitions of synaesthesia mentioned above—including experimental designs and even the formulation of the problem—presuppose a certain objectivist conception of perception. These presuppositions include but are not limited to perception as the passive reception of properties from pre-existing objects; sensory modalities as purely receptive channels triggered by corresponding stimuli (no stimulus, no sensation); in normal conditions, the five senses operate independently and are later integrated by some part of the brain; the relation between sensory objects and sensations is one-to-one. The issue of synaesthesia becomes an issue because is precisely because of the assumption that the sense data of the five senses ought to be strictly distinct, and the absence of a sensory stimulus guarantees the complete absence of the corresponding sensation. This prejudice originates in empiricism; in Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, it states: "Though the qualities that affect our senses are, in the things themselves, so united and blended, that there is no separation, no distance between them" [1].

Locke acknowledges the close union of qualities in things themselves—what Merleau-Ponty would call: "The 'real' is the insurmountable plenitude: it is impossible to describe fully the colour of a carpet without saying that it is a carpet, or a woollen carpet, and without implying in this colour a certain tactile value, a certain weight, and a certain resistance to sound" [5].

Yet Locke is unwilling to extend this union into perception itself. In perception, once the white of a lily is detached from its fragrance and texture, it is no longer the white of a lily. Insisting on this point does not deny our capacity for abstraction. Indeed, one can abstract the lily's white, condense it into a word or concept, or even reduce it to a colour code (e.g., C20 M30 Y10 K10). But this is no longer the perception of the lily. This explains why individuals rarely confuse the perception of that colour on a digital screen or in a magazine with the perception of the purple of a living violet. In conventional understandings of synaesthesia, individuals often presuppose too many biases about perception—and these biases may hinder access to genuine synesthetic phenomena.

3. Merleau-ponty's view of synesthesia

3.1. Refutation of André J. Abath's concept of "project towards movement"

In Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Synaesthesia, André J. Abath identifies the key to understanding Merleau-Ponty's view of synaesthesia in the following passage: "The problem of forms of synaesthetic experience begins to look like being solved if the experience of quality is that of a certain mode of movement or of a form of conduct...Movement, understood not as objective movement and transference in space, but as a project towards movement or 'potential movement' forms the basis for the unity of the senses." Understanding "movement," "planning of movement," and "potential movement" here is crucial. Abath, citing Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the Schneider case [5], interprets that Merleau-Ponty understands objects as "poles of movement," entities offering possibilities for action. Perceived objects are understood as things that provide opportunities for further action; through this perception, the body prepares for the next action. Therefore, according to Abath, "in being presented with an object in a given sensory modality as offering opportunities for actions towards it, one's whole body can be engaged in the experience in being in preparation for taking up these opportunities. In having one's body so prepared, one can have quasi-sensory experiences related to another sensory modality, without a corresponding stimulus" [3].

However, Abath's definition leaves many ambiguities. For instance, what exactly is this bodily preparation? Is it a subtle, unconscious internal movement of the body, or a mental representation of

the movement? (Abath leans toward the latter). How can bodily preparation produce a quasi-sensation? If a sensation is either a complete, fully-fledged perception with content (the object perceived) and form (visual, tactile, auditory), or it is nothing at all: “if a sensation is not a sensation of something, then it is a nullity of sensation” [5]. Then, what is a quasi-sensation?

It is certain that Abath correctly identifies “project towards movement” as key to the problem of synaesthesia, but his understanding of “perceptual objects” and “project towards movement” deviates from Merleau-Ponty’s intentions. Firstly, for Merleau-Ponty, a “perceptual object” is not strictly an “object.” The famous football field example in *The Structure of Behaviour* shows that the football field is perceived as a field of “force lines” and “regions.” This field is not external to the perceiver; as Merleau-Ponty says, “the player and the field are merged,” and the field becomes, to some extent, an extension of the player’s body, providing the perceiver with an “internal limit” for action [6]. When individuals perceive things, they are situated within a field/environment: “All things are condensations of an environment; any clear perception of a thing is already involved in a preliminary communication with a certain atmosphere [5].”

Regarding “project towards movement,” Merleau-Ponty defines it as: “Something between movement as a third person process and thought as a representation of movement—something which is an anticipation of, or arrival at, the objective and is ensured by the body itself as a motor power, a ‘motor project’ (*Bewegungsentwurf*), a ‘motor intentionality’ in the absence of which the order remains a dead letter.” For Merleau-Ponty, a project towards movement is neither an objective movement in space (a “third-person action”) nor a mental thought (a “representation of action”), but an anticipation or grasp of the result assured by the body (*une anticipation ou une saisie du résultat assurée par le corps lui-même*). This means that bodily engagement with the environment does not require conscious mediation:

When I motion my friend to come nearer, my intention is not a thought prepared within me and I do not perceive the signal in my body. I beckon across the world, I beckon over there, where my friend is; the distance between us, his consent or refusal are immediately read in my gesture; there is not a perception followed by a movement, for both form a system which varies as a whole [5].

Emotions and attitudes toward others are directly manifested in bodily posture before entering consciousness.

In summary, according to Merleau-Ponty, a project towards movement: a) is not a “third-person action”; b) is not a mental representation; c) manifests as an “anticipation” or “grasp.” The first two points have been clarified; the remaining question is: what is this bodily “anticipation” or “grasp”? Is it simply a transfer of functions traditionally assigned to the mind, turning the body into a “mind-body” or “conscious body”?

3.2. Two aspects of project towards movement: bodily knowledge and projective function

3.2.1. Bodily knowledge

The bodily “anticipation” here is not casual; Merleau-Ponty explicitly describes the project towards movement as “guessing” (*deviner*) or “prescience” (*prescience*). He equates project towards movement with intentionality, calling it “motor intentionality”: “It [perception] is undoubtedly intentional: it does not rest in itself as a thing but looks toward and intends what lies beyond itself” [5]. The phenomenal body carries a form of motor awareness or perceptual consciousness more fundamental than intellectual consciousness [7]. This reveals a tendency to “conscious-ize” the phenomenal body: “Vision is a thought restricted (*assujettie*) to a certain field, and this is what we call sense (*sens*)” [5].

Bodily consciousness also expresses “familiarity” with the environment, a “habit”: “In this practical intentional relationship, the practitioner engages with the familiar situation through the phenomenal body, pointing toward various familiar objects in the world without objectifying or representing them [5].” Thus, there is a “practical knowledge” (*praktognosie*) or “bodily knowledge” (*reconnaissance corporelle*).

Formally, bodily knowledge differs from traditional consciousness. For instance, bodily consciousness is not the “*je pense*” of reflective, objective awareness, but the “*je peut*” of pre-reflective consciousness [5]. It is not “transparent” but has “vagueness” and “potentiality,” revealing as much about objects as it does about itself: “What is meant by saying that this intentionality is not a thought is that it does not come into being through the transparency of any consciousness but takes for granted all the latent knowledge of itself that my body possesses” [5].

Substantively, bodily knowledge manifests as a unity of meaning: “If I hear noise, I perceive not only or first of all a pure (or composite) sound, but I immediately identify this noise as construction going on around this house (the roof is being repaired) or of a job being done on the inside (someone is cleaning). Consequently, I never perceive ‘sense data’ but always already a unity of meanings (that of the house and of the people in it and the work they do)” [8].

Through experiments on the “motor aspect of colour” (*physionomie motrice de la couleur*), Merleau-Ponty further clarifies this bodily knowledge. Colour is not a mere property but a stimulus to action, a “something that elicits a way of looking from me.” Before becoming a visual sensation, colour manifests in bodily attitude (e.g., red = contraction, blue = expansion), and sound represents the final formation of bodily tension: “Thus, before becoming an objective spectacle, quality is revealed by a type of behaviour which is directed towards it in its essence, and this is why my body has no sooner adopted the attitude of blue than I am vouchsafed a quasi-presence of blue” [5]. In other words, the “qualia” presumed by empiricist perception are secondary; primary is bodily attitude, the project towards movement.

3.2.2. Projective function

If the project towards movement merely stores bodily knowledge enabling pre-conscious responsiveness, Schneider also possesses such project towards movement:

...when put in front of his scissors, needle and familiar tasks, does not need to look for his hands or his fingers, because they are not objects to be discovered in objective space: bones, muscles and nerves, but potentialities already mobilized by the perception of scissors or needle, the central end of those ‘intentional threads’ which link him to the objects given [5].

Schneider could respond to environmental demands but lacked abstract movement: specific movement occurs against a given world (e.g., sewing wallets), whereas abstract movement occurs against a constructed background (e.g., raising the left hand in an experiment). This capacity to construct a virtual environment Merleau-Ponty calls the “projective function”: the ability to mark boundaries, directions, force lines, and organize a meaningful system within a given world.

This bodily projecting function ensures that synesthetic experience is not entirely determined by the way objects are passively perceived, and it also explains why individuals can have fully singular and private synesthetic experiences. This singular synesthetic experience stands in contrast to what Arendt calls common sense—the “sixth sense that fits the sensations of my strictly private five senses... into a common world shared by others” [9]. The latter situates synesthetic phenomena entirely within an intersubjective world, treating them merely as representing a form of public reality that transcends the individual: “It is by virtue of common sense that the other sense perceptions are known to disclose reality and are not merely felt as irritations of our nerves or

resistance sensations of our bodies” [10]. In fact, synaesthesia only manifests as such a grasp of a unity of intersubjective meaning when the field in which it occurs is already given, rather than being created by the projecting function of the body.

4. Conclusion

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty calls the synthesis of sensory activities based on the project towards movement “perceptual synthesis.” Perceptual synthesis is the integration of sensory contents (e.g., visual, tactile elements of a cube) orchestrated by the phenomenal body through a project towards movement. It differs from intellectual synthesis: in the latter, the subject is transparent consciousness acting on objects of thought; in the former, the subject is the planning phenomenal body, acting in the world via a pre-reflective motor organization.

Synaesthesia arises precisely from this perceptual synthesis. A pre-existing or projected environment gives the body meaning; the body plans its movement toward this meaning, integrating discrete parts into a unified bodily schema—the perceptual synthesis. Thus, contrary to empiricist claims that perception occurs via independent senses later integrated by the brain, Merleau-Ponty holds that the body directly apprehends the meaning of objects through the project towards movement, producing what he calls bodily knowledge. This constitutes Merleau-Ponty’s view of synaesthesia

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