

The Dialectic of “Meaning” in Merleau-Ponty’s *The Structure of Behavior*

I. Meaning of the World

a. Reflex Behavior

- i. Reflexes cannot be decomposed into elementary reactions.¹
- ii. A ‘form’ . . . is a whole which has meaning and which provides therefore a base for intellectual analysis.²

b. Animal Behavior

- i. Reactions are not therefore a sequence of events; they carry within themselves an immanent intelligibility.³
- ii. The behavior of an animal cannot be explained by the mere addition of physical and chemical elements: this behavior has its own *meaning*.⁴

II. Human Capacity for Meaning

- a. What defines man is not the capacity to create a second nature—economic, social or cultural—beyond biological nature; it is rather the capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create others.⁵
- b. The advent of the higher orders . . . eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them. This is why we have spoken of a human order rather than of a mental or rational order . . . in [normal or integrated man] the somatic processes do not unfold in isolation but are integrated into a cycle of more extensive action.⁶

III. Conclusion

- a. Perception is a moment of the living *dialectic* of concrete subject; it participates in its total structure . . .⁷
- b. . . . the object of biology cannot be grasped without the unities of signification which a consciousness finds unfolding in it.⁸
- c. . . . *the only way for a thing to act on a mind is to offer it a meaning*, to manifest itself to it, to constitute itself vis-à-vis the mind in its intelligible articulations.⁹

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1963), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 224.

³ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴ Gary Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, trans. Gary Brent Madison (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 16, italics his.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, 175.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 166, italics mine.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 199, italics mine.