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Hayek and Merleau-Ponty on Mind and Interpretative Sociology

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ABSTRACT. Hayek's The Sensory Order and Merleau-Ponty's The Structure of Behavior share an original standpoint. These books criticize the assumptions of social holism on the basis of the idea that the mind is both an interpretative device and a self-organized system. According to social holism, consciousness – or at least a part of it – must be considered as a mere epiphenomenon of the social or economic context. For Hayek and Merleau-Ponty, since the mind is an interpretative apparatus maintaining a hermeneutical autonomy from the context, all the epiphenomenalist theories of consciousness are wrong. Although this criticism against social holism is emphasized both in The Sensory Order and in The Structure of Behaviour, it is analyzed more carefully in Merleau-Ponty's book. Comparing these two authors' cognitive psychology allows a better understanding of the links between Hayek's theory of mind and his methodological individualism.

KEYWORDS. Hayek, Merleau-Ponty, sensory order, enactive paradigm, methodological individualism.

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Introduction

The present article proposes a comparison of the ideas of Hayek and Merleau-Ponty on the mind and action. Both of these authors have combined an interest in epistemology with an interest in scientific, experimental psychology. In a footnote of *News Studies*, Hayek (1978, p. 38) remarks that his theory of the "primacy of the abstract" is "very similar" to Merleau-Ponty's idea of "the primacy of perception". This analogy has, however, remained rather neglected. This article focuses, in particular, on one specific aspect of Hayek and Meleau-Ponty's anti-objectivistic theories of action. Both authors have independently proposed a similar and original criticism of sociological holism. For them, the mind is a complex, self-organized system that functions as an apparatus of interpretation.

On the basis of this assumption, Hayek and Merleau-Ponty argue that consciousness cannot be viewed as a mere epiphenomenon of context, no matter how one defines context. According to both authors, the cause of action must always be sought after within an individual lived experience. Their analysis implies the defense of the presuppositions of so-called interpretative sociology, also known as methodological individualism (see Antiseri & Pellicani 1995).

1. Merleau-Ponty on Mind, Consciousness and Sociological Holism

In developing insights on Gestalt psychology and Goldstein's physiology, Merleau-Ponty criticizes all mechanistic and objectivistic views according to which consciousness has to be studied as a mere epiphenomenon (Barbaras 2005, p. 213-214). Such viewpoints dictate that consciousness must be analyzed as the effect of something acting on it as an external cause and whose relationship with it implies – to use Varela's words – a relationship of *allonomy* (i.e. the opposite of autonomy). For instance, Merleau-Ponty criticizes materialistic psychologies that explain perception as the mere representation of physical proprieties of the environment, intended as pregiven and objective data. He deems these theories to be false, because they do not take into consideration the idea that reality *in itself* cannot be known and that action depends on interpretative processes. The French thinker proposes a connectionist and anti-objectivistic conception of perceptive cognition that precedes by decades Petitot's and Varela's enactive paradigm (see Petitot & al. 1999).

Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 46-51) states that, since the mind is a complex, self-organized and extremely open system, it cannot be explained in allonomic and mechanistic terms (p. 129 ff.). For the French author, action is neither the ef-

fect of a cause which must be sought after outside the individual lived experience, nor linked to a perfectly predictable process. The mind does not produce a picture of reality, but develops interpretations of it in light of the individual's biological, cultural and personal history. According to Merleau-Ponty (p. 150), "behavior cannot be defined as an adaptation to the given conditions". Rather, it depends on the "significance" of the stimuli (p. 161).

"One cannot assign", Merleau-Ponty (2006, p. 161) asserts, "a moment in which the world acts on the organism, since the very effect of this 'action' expresses the internal law of the organism". Consequently, contrary to the resulting assumptions of scientistic approaches, we cannot ignore, he explains, the importance of characteristics as "intention" and "meaning" in explaining human action (p. 7). The epiphenomenalist theories of consciousness "demand that we reject these characteristics as appearances under which a reality of another kind must be discovered" (*ibid.*). By denying the hermeneutical autonomy of the agent from the context, these theories assume the existence of hidden causes that control us and render our consciousness into nothing but an illusion. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is impossible that something - which is completely foreign to the outcomes of the emergence processes that create our lived experience - determines us. Nothing, he writes, "determines me from the outside" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 456). On the basis of his conception of the mind, Merleau-Ponty questions certain sociological approaches, such as Marx's theory of false consciousness and Durkheim's culturalism. He considers them as essentialist-inspired theories of action. As is well-known, for Marx, consciousness is nothing but an epiphenomenon of the economic structure. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence", Marx (1967, p. 21) claims, "but their social existence that determines their consciousness". Marx considers the economic structure to be an objective and given characteristic of reality. For Merleau-Ponty, this makes no sense. He writes that it is easy to argue, in opposition to the Marxist sociologist, "that the structures of consciousness he relates to a certain economic structure are in reality the consciousness of certain structures. This argument hints at a liberty very close to the mind" (Merleau-Ponty 2006, p. 221). Consider the conditions that, according to Marx, render a worker a proletarian and which led to the Communist revolution. "Revolt", Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 443) writes, "is…not the outcome of objective conditions, but is rather the decision taken by the worker to will revolution that makes a proletarian of him. The evaluation of the present operates through one's free project for the future". The truth is that "history by itself has no significance, but only that conferred upon it by our will" (*ibid.*).

Merleau-Ponty formulates a similar criticism of Durkheim's theory of "collective consciousness". The latter views collective beliefs, like shared moral views, an epiphenomenon of social context (see Durkheim 1982). For Merleau-Ponty, it is a culturalist variant of what Varela refers to as "allonomy" or "external control". It is, in a sense, nothing but "a more refined form" of objectivistic psychology (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 136). "In opposition to Durkheim's 'collective consciousness' and his attempt at advancing a sociological explanation of knowledge, it is rightly argued", Merleau-Ponty (2006 p. 221) remarks, "that consciousness cannot be treated as an effect since it is that what constitutes the relation of cause and effect". According to the French thinker, the sociocultural milieu is not a given datum either. Through an essentialist approach, "Durkheim", Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 89-90) writes, "treats the social as a reality external to the individual and entrusts it with explaining everything that is presented to the individuals as what he has to become". This allonomic determinism is a mistake precisely because the social cannot be studied as an essence existing 'out there' – an essence of which our consciousness is a mere epiphenomenon. Due to the fact that the world (including the social world) and consciousness co-emerge from interpretative and self-organized processes, "consciousness is not comparable to a plastic material which would receive its privileged structure from the outside by the action of a sociological…causality" (Merleau-Ponty 2006 p. 169).

Moreover, since the connectionist mind can potentially transform its interpretative categories on the basis of the new lived experience, the subject, Merleau-Ponty purports, can adjust and correct his moral and cultural views. "Cultural objects", the French thinker states, "would not be what they are if the activity which brings about their appearance did not also have as its meaning to reject them and to surpass them" (p. 176; see also Thompson 2007, p. 178).

2. Hayek's Symmetrical Line of Reasoning

Like Merleau-Ponty, Hayek conceives consciousness as an emergent process resulting from the interpretative activity of a complex self-organized system (see Marsh 2010). According to the Austrian scholar, "every sensation must…be regarded as an interpretation of an event in the light of the past experience of the individual or the species" (Hayek 1952, p. 166). Consequently, for him, the perceptive world is a selective, fallible and temporally-variable construction. Hayek defends a largely Kantian perspective which is incompatible with the essentialist and objectivist theories of perception. Heinrich Klüver (xx) argues that his theory of the tacit interpretative presuppositions of cognition dismisses the "concepts of

'substance'". Hayek's thought "appears very modern…since not even traces of 'things-concepts' are left in his theory" (xx). Paraphrasing his friend Popper, the Austrian thinker explains that, in a sense, everything that "we know about the world is of the nature of theories" (Hayek p. 143).

Like Merleau-Ponty, Hayek (1952, p. 4) scrutinizes materialistic psychologies for considering the physical features of the environment as essences or purely objective data. For him, these psychologies must be rejected because, first and foremost, they "reserve the term 'reality' to something which by definition we can never really know" (p. 5). They share "a metaphysical belief in the ultimate 'reality' and constancy of the phenomenal world" (p. 191). These orientations do not take into account that what causes our action is not a pregiven world, but the way we interpret and enact our environment. Moreover, for Hayek (p. 188-189), materialistic psychologies do not consider that, since the mind is a complex self-organized system, it is impossible to conceive its functioning in mechanistic terms and predict it in detail.

At the end of *The Sensory Order*, Hayek develops a critique of the sociological variants of essentialism and contextual determinism (see Di Iorio 2009). In his opinion, socio-essentialist theories of behavior assume, as well as their twin materialist variants, that it is necessary to identify certain external objective properties mechanically implying certain mental properties. These theories consider certain aspects of consciousness – those which can be described in terms of socially shared beliefs – as mere epiphenomena. Hayek attacks namely the (holistic) sociology of knowledge. If his conception of the mind is valid, he writes, "it would appear that the whole aim of the discipline known under the name of 'sociology of knowledge'…is fundamentally misconceived" (Hayek, 1952 p. 192-193). In particular, for him, Marxist sociology of knowledge is incorrect because, like objectivistic psychologies, it "aims at explaining why people as a result of particular material circumstances hold particular views at particular moments" (p. 192-193). It considers individual beliefs as an epiphenomenon of the economic structure, intended precisely as something existing 'out there' as a pre-given context.

In *The Sensory Order*, the Austrian scholar does not mention Durkheim's approach to sociology. However, there is a clear incompatibility between the latter orientation and his work in cognitive psychology. Unlike Marx and Durkheim, Hayek argues that the meaning that behavior carries out for the agent is not an epiphenomenon of context, but the cause of his action. Therefore, the Austrian scholar calls his approach "*verstehende* psychology" (Hayek 1952, p. 192). This kind of psychology, he points out, implies the defense of the idea of 'freedom of

the will" (p. 193). It "will…never be able to explain why we must think thus and not otherwise, why we arrive at particular conclusions" (p. 192). It also undermines "the belief that we can at any one moment of time both act on some knowledge and possess some additional knowledge about how the former is conditioned and determined" (*ibid*.). "To us human decisions must always appear", Hayek (p. 193) argues, "as the result of the whole of a human personality – that means the whole of a person's mind – which…we cannot reduce to something else".

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