

*Phenomenology*  
*Феноменология*

## EXPRESSION AS A SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM OF OTHER SELVES

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**Abstract.** This article reflects a particular aspect of Merleau-Ponty phenomenological understanding of expression which solves the problem of other selves. As part of the solution I have explained Merleau-Ponty's concepts of materialism and intellectualism and the introduction of embodied subjectivity. When we understand embodied subjectivity as the constitutive aspect that refers to the totality of an individual, this enables us to understand the concept of expression both in terms of bodily gestures and also from the perspective of linguistic expressions. When we understand the meaning of expressions in this way the concept of expression thus opens us up to understand others because of the sharing aspect of language as well as the world. It thus explains from the embodied expression to the notion of bodily gestures and from the bodily expression to facial expression in particular and expression in general dismissing the idea that expressions are not the result of our mental states.

**Keywords:** expression; phenomenology; embodied subjectivity; bodily gesture; language

### I

Phenomenological approach to the problem of other selves is considered to be one of the best ways to solve this problem. Phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, Immanuel Levinas, Dan Zahavi, and Shaun Gallagher have addressed this problem and have expressed their own views. Among them Merleau-Ponty stands as one of the unique figures who consistently has made an attempt to solve this problem. In his *Phenomenology of Perception* he dismisses Cartesian Dualism by showing the inadequacy of empiricism and intellectualism and introduces the concept of embodied subjectivity which is remarkable. In this article I have made an attempt to address this problem by explaining why there was a need to dismiss Descartes Dualism and introduce embodied subjectivity. The notion of embodied subjectivity thus becomes the instrument to introduce the concept of expression. Phenomenological understanding of expression refers to constitutive aspect of an individual which doesn't make any distinction between linguistic expression

and bodily expression. Language and the sharing aspect of the world thus give expression a platform to solve the problem of other selves.

Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* analyses the weaknesses of both intellectualism and empiricism. Empiricism expresses the view that our perceptual experiences are the result of the external world. All that is in it thus are governed by the causal principle, and thus the human beings become a part of this mechanism which may be called the physiological mechanism. Empiricism holds that speech has nothing to do with regard to our stimulus response system. Expression is a causal system that results from the physical stimuli. Expression of a word therefore has no meaning in itself. Our speech is constituted by our internal nervous system which is a physical process. The speaking subject is not acknowledged in the process of speaking. On account of this the speaker himself becomes unwanted. Empiricism thus loses something on which it is supposed to build its own foundation.

Intellectualism considers the world as something that is given to our consciousness. Anything that is meaningful thus is the result of the mental processes. For intellectualism speech or expression itself is meaningless but becomes meaningful when it is interfered by the mind. Speech for intellectualists is merely the external signs of the inner recognitions that could be accomplished without external signs which do not contribute anything to the inner self. Intellectualism considers man as only a thinking subject and not a speaking subject. The reason is that it considers speech as something external to our thoughts.

Both empiricism and intellectualism look like they are distinct from one another but Merleau-Ponty finds that they actually support one another's point of view. While empiricism gives importance to sense data in order for its meaning to be obtained, intellectualism requires thoughts to give birth to meaning of our expressions. Empiricism takes into account the objective phenomenon to explain the meaning of the expression, but intellectualism takes into account the subjective phenomenon to explain the meaning of the expressions. Most of our speech seems to stem from the intellect, that is, while we speak there exists an idea in the subject which the speech expresses. In any case the general idea of speech and expression is that ideas are originated in the minds and the speech becomes an instrument to express those ideas. It is something internal which is expressed externally. The first part of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* discusses expression as something which expresses the inner states like feelings and sensations. But the project Merleau-Ponty presented in the year 1952 seems to prove that he wanted to do away with this intellectualist dogma. One important thing that we should know is that Merleau-Ponty introduced expression just in order to avoid Cartesian understanding of the mind-body dualism and thereby understand subjectivity by means of lived embodiment. He thus rejects the understanding of self from the naturalistic and the mechanistic point of view.

## II

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project was to synthesize all the chaotic experiences and bring them under the purview of embodied subjectivity. It is through such kind of experiences that the original meanings are given to the subject. Our experiences thus are never coherently given such that we can draw knowledge out of it. Knowledge however has to be extracted from such unthematized experiences. In the same manner bodily expressions are meaningful even if they are incoherent or inappropriately expressed. There must therefore be some kind of synthesis of the expressions in order to give rise to meaning. Embodied subjectivity thus has to be understood in this manner so that expression becomes neither the result of internal cognitions nor the result of external behaviour, but something that refers to the totality of both.

Embodied subjectivity thus is the way we grasp the world or have an understanding of the world. It is a kind of phenomenal body by means of which we gain knowledge of the external world in a manner that is different from the knowledge gained from the objective body. It is a self which is primarily embodied, and so embodiment thus leads us to show that we are embedded in the world. The expressive body of another individual is not a means to understand his experiences but to understand that his body is an embodiment of his experiences.

We will explain expression from the perspective of embodied subjectivity and thereby try to solve the problem of other selves. But before we understand expression from this perspective it is important that we understand expression from the perspective of language, though we will not detach language from the embodied subject.

When we try to understand expression from the perspective of language we find that expression in this is not totally innovative, we may find them used innovatively but they are not altogether anew. We learn languages that are taught to us and so we are not the creator of words and languages but we exploit those words and expressions. Thus language is already instituted in the world. Language is something that inhabits us and expression enables us to understand one another. Expression here therefore is not totally new rather our familiarity with language enables us to use them in such a manner that these expressions seem to be new every time we express them in our dialogue. Expressions are also not absolutely new because of the fact that language has been already there prior to our expressions.

When we try to understand expression by way of analysis of thought and speech we find that we can't make a distinction between speech and thought though these are different in terms of their meaning but when we try to understand them in relation to expression these are simultaneously given. Thought has a sense or is meaningful when it is expressed in terms of words which become a speech. Speech may be understood as the act of expression but the sense or meaning of thought and speech is not understood separately because thought and speech are

intervolved. Another important aspect of thought and speech is that our thoughts are not something that is externally attached with words nor speech has meaning of its own, and therefore thought and speech go simultaneously and expression thus becomes the manifestation of this process. We thus don't understand expression both in thought and speech as something inner such that expression becomes an instrument to express something meaningful i.e. outer. Our attempt here is to understand expression from the embodied subject's point of view not referring to the internal and external aspects of an individual. Foultier says;

Before the new meaning has been expressed there are only the already constituted meanings scattered around the world and there is nothing inside us that can help us: what we tend to call the "Inner", our thoughts and emotions, doesn't become what it is until it has been expressed (Foultier, 2010).

Since language has been already there prior to our expression and so anything that we express meaningfully is not altogether new but is expressed innovatively. So any kind of expression that we think new is not actually a new kind of expression, in the sense that this new expression has not been previously expressed. Such meanings are already available in the world in different forms and are expressed in different manners that are meaningful and understandable to others. So there is nothing called inner thought and emotions that once expressed are completely new. Often we understand expression as the outer manifestation of our internal thought process but here Foultier points out that that is not the case because of the fact that expression becomes meaningful only when it has been expressed and all meaningful expressions are expressions that are already available in many different ways.

### III

Merleau-Ponty says that whenever I move around I don't have to enquire about my movement. It is enough if I understand it or I am aware of it. In the same manner I don't have to think about which words are to be pronounced and speak about, it is enough that I am able to speak. He says,

I reach back for the words as my hand reaches towards the part of my body which is being pricked; the word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and it is part of my equipment. I have only one means of representing it, which is uttering it, just as the artist has only one means of representing the work on which he is engaged; by doing it (Ponty, 2002).

Merleau-Ponty is trying to tell us that just as I am able to speak and express something spontaneously that is meaningful so also my bodily gestures are expressions that are meaningful in its own way. Since language becomes a part and parcel of our life as we become so much familiar with it and so we don't think which words are to be expressed and which are not, while we have dialogue with others. In the same manner our expressions have meaning even if we express them

abruptly. So it is this kind of expressions that we are concerned about and this becomes a revelation to understand others without going to the internal aspects of a self. Merleau-Ponty again states that:

The spoken word is a genuine gesture and it contains its meaning in the same way as gesture contains its. This is what makes communication possible. In order that I may understand the words of another person it is clear that his vocabulary and syntax must be already known to me. But that doesn't mean that words do their work by arousing in me representations associated with them and which in aggregate eventually reproduce in me the original representation of the speaker. What I communicate with primarily is not representations or thought but a certain lack which is asking to be made good, so my taking up of this intention is not a process of thinking on my part but synchronizing changes of my own existence, a transformation of my being (Ponty, 2002).

Here Merleau-Ponty doesn't make a distinction between the meaningfulness of linguistic expression and the expression of bodily gesture just as we found in the above statement. This makes us understand how bodily gestures and utterance of words have similar meaning which makes communication possible. It is a statement that makes us understand others merely by an individual's bodily gestures. The bodily gestures of the other however don't invoke any internal system. Hence it is not representation rather a kind of modification in my existential set up. Merleau-Ponty also mentions that before I understand someone completely I already know something about that person because we share the same language. Understanding of others therefore is not a kind of representation rather a kind of existential transformation explain that occurs in the case of an individual. It is a kind of modification that constitutes the totality of the self as such. That is what Merleau-Ponty is trying to tell us when he says that certain lack asking me to make good or a synchronizing changes of my existence.

According to Merleau-Ponty from the phenomenologists' perspective there is no dichotomy between what we think and what we express. If it were to be then there would not be any link between what we think and what we express but the fact that we fall short of words to express all our feelings and experiences itself proves that thought and expression go hand in hand. Merleau-Ponty says: the thinking subject is in a sort of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken or written them (Ponty, 2002, pp. 183 – 209). Thought and expression go hand in hand and therefore there can be no expression without thought but there can be thought without expression which we may call as pure thought. Merleau-Ponty however doesn't talk about this kind of thought. He rather is concerned about thoughts that are expressed. In the case of expression therefore an individual does not completely remain aware of which words are to be pronounced and which are not. Thought and expression therefore happens simultaneously. If all of our thoughts were to be mere internal and the result of our

mental processes only, then we perhaps wouldn't be able to learn from one another. We also wouldn't be able to communicate with one another and so there would be many problems that we wouldn't be able to solve. So to understand the speech and thereby the expression of an individual is to be awakened by our constitutive self where some kind of pre-thematic meaning is already given to us. And therefore it is not something that we decode them, we rather understand others in the manner that we understand ourselves. Merleau-Ponty thus says everything happens as if the other person's intention inhabited my body or as if my intentions inhabited his body (Ponty, 2002, pp. 215 – 240). This is possible because we share the same world as well and the inhabitation of language makes us familiar to one another. There is therefore a kind of interrelationship that is held between two individuals as we are meaningfully able to respond one another. So when we take up the sharing aspect of the world and language and understand them by means of embodied subjectivity then we won't face the problem related to other selves. Merleau-Ponty again reiterates saying that: in the embodied expression meaning is spread all across the gesture itself (Ponty, 2002, pp. 192 – 218). Understanding the other self as the embodied subjectivity thus proves that we needn't invoke meaningfulness of all our expressions as the result of our inner mental states. If meaning is spread all across the gesture of an individual then it is enough that we understand expression as a manifestation of the constitutive self. This kind of understanding of embodied subjectivity becomes a ground of proof to state that expression can be one of the means to solve the problem related to other selves.

We don't derive meaning only from the speech alone, it is also stated that some of the most complicated meanings are also understood from the bodily gestures. This Merleau-Ponty calls us existential signification (Ponty, 2002, pp. 444 – 469) and a particular mode of being in the world (Ponty, 2002, pp. 217 – 242). Therefore, whenever we are trying to understand an individual, we are not only trying to understand from their mere speech alone but also from their bodily gestures. So, from the phenomenological perspective we can say that it is a mistake to state that thought can be expressed without relating to the expression of bodily gestures. We think it is possible because we think that our thoughts are independent of our bodily gestures. But in fact each and every thought of ours certainly have bodily basis in them and are expressed through them. The meaning of every speech thus is always dependent on its embodied expression within a given situation and time. So, in our day to day lives the expressions that we make are not simply reiterated but are expressed in its own way depending on a given situation. Speech therefore is not pure innovation and pure repetition. Meaning of language cannot be determined outside of a given context and so at the time of expression between two individuals a kind of immediate and pre-conceptual understanding is expressed. Meanings are immanent to their expression and so the moment we try to understand them outside of its context it fails in its meaningfulness. It is on account of this reason pretension

has no place in embodied subjectivity which would have been a threat to solve the problem of other selves.

When we talk about the expressivity of a face we need to understand that it is a structural property belonging to the totality of the individual as such just as we understood the bodily gestures. However, all the qualities that are expressed in our faces seem to be drawn from our internal source which actually is not the case. J. P. Commetti in this regard says:

In the face and in the expression of the case, the face is everything and nothing is hidden. A significant and perhaps inevitable mistake would be that of making this experience the object of an explanation instead of seeing it as the crux of a question, which is what happens if one sees the face as the expression of some sort of mental state (Cometti Jean-Pierre, 2002: 75).

We always understand facial expression as the expression of our inner mental states but Commetti here is trying to tell us that we can understand facial expression as the genuine expression of the face as such. Phenomenology therefore is the only method where we can explain expression without referring to the mental states. And as I have stated above that the project Merleau-Ponty took regarding expression is just to get out of the difficulty related to Cartesian Dualism.

Common sense tells us that whenever someone expresses something it is an undeniable fact that we understand them without any difficulty. But the question is: how come we understand the meaning of those expressions all of sudden? Or how come we understand the other instantly of what the other expresses? Malcolm Budd states that: the solution lies in the fact that no mental state or condition is required in order for them to understand (Budd, 1989). Cometti says that: The fact that meaning resides in use, the immediacy of understanding and of meaning are their very conditions (Cometti Jean-Pierre, 2002: 81). This is a clear sign that be it facial or bodily gestures expression when we understand from the phenomenological perspective becomes a medium to understand others. The phenomenological concept of expression thus explains that no mental state is required for the meaningfulness of expression. Expression is also meaningful because of the fact that their understanding as well as their meaning becomes their very condition. So there is nothing that exists before expression has been accomplished. Expression thus is a kind of idea where meaning is not preloaded before it has been expressed; it rather is the result of the expression itself. So all our gestural expressions have meaning in its own way and this can be equally applicable in both ways to understand the expression of oneself as well as the other and so we come to the conclusion that there exists no problem of other selves.

#### **IV**

We began with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodied subjectivity by analysing empiricism and intellectualism where we stated that the embodied self



is different from the objective self. Embodied subjectivity is something that refers to the constitutive aspect of an individual not bifurcating the self into matter and mind. We thereby tried to structure the understanding of expression in terms of language, thought and speech, and the inseparable relation between language and bodily gestures. In language and bodily gesture we understood that just as linguistic expressions have meaning of their own so also gestural expressions are also meaningful even if they are expressed abruptly. This gave us a fair chance to state that expression is a structural property that belongs to the totality of an individual and linguistic expressions can't merely be understood without bodily expression. This Merleau-Ponty called as the existential signification. In the bodily expression there exists a kind of pre-thematic meaning on account of which we find others' intention inhabiting in me just as my intention in him. This is possible because language is already available to us from the very beginning and also on account of our shared world. Finally, facial expression often misunderstood from the psychological perspective proves that in the face and in the expression of it face is everything; nothing is hidden.

So from the gestural expression I came to facial expression and then expression in general. I have systematically tried to prove that expression understood in this sense can be a solution to the problem related to other selves.

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