

Prompt: Discuss either Merleau-Ponty's criticism of empiricism or intellectualism - or both - in the introduction. What does it/do they fail to explain? Do you agree with Merleau-Ponty's assessment?

Merleau-Ponty's Criticism of Empiricism and Intellectualism

April 2020

Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, discusses empiricism in chapter 2 and intellectualism in chapter 3 of the introduction. I will explain Merleau-Ponty's argument in terms of his assessment of empiricism, then intellectualism, concluding with the idea that neither theories are very adequate in terms of their ability to explain the world around us.

In chapter 2 of the introduction, "association and the projection of memories", Merleau-Ponty breaks down the problem with empiricism in several sections. He first criticizes the idea of sensations. Empiricism typically holds sensations to be significant, as a way of accessing the world and gaining knowledge. They can also be understood as Humean impressions. Merleau-Ponty takes issue with this view, as he claims that once something is "no longer merely present to [him]," it must "represent something for [him]", and this something is not a real part of consciousness. In other words, as soon as sensation has significance, it is not sensation anymore. It would definitely be a false claim to say that nothing has significance, and everything is just a jumble of sensations. While one can attempt to explain how sensations can give rise to other sensations, like how Humean impressions can give rise to ideas, Merleau-Ponty thinks that this phenomenon is simply "nothing but a constellation of images"; the connections

between the sensations do not depend at all on the nature of the objects that gave rise to the sensations.

Another key point that I found compelling in Merleau-Ponty is his description of empiricism as a “sort of mental blindness”. While empiricism covers some significance that intellectualism cannot account for such as the directness or originary experiences that one has, it removes quite a bit of meaning from the world as we know it. On page 25, MP claims “the empiricist constructions render incomprehensible and all of the originary phenomena that they mask.” They “conceal from us the ‘cultural world’ or the ‘human world’, and from there also conceal the natural world. There can no longer be an “objective spirit”. Meanings disappear, and emotional qualifiers and descriptors disappear. Attempting to deny the clear existence of emotion, meaning, and any type of significance beyond empirical data seems to be blatantly false, and would simply be an act of ignoring real phenomena. From this, MP also claims that our perception of nature is also distorted: “it is absurd to claim that this nature is the primary object of our perception, even if only intentionally: such a nature is clearly posterior to the experience of cultural objects, or rather, it itself is a cultural object.” In sum, empiricism ignores quite important human phenomena that cannot simply be denied, such as one’s ability to know that an object might still be on the table if one closes one’s eyes and does not immediately perceive the object. Empiricism cannot account for intelligibility or meaning at all. In contrast, intellectualism sees meaning and attempts to rationalize and understand the world through reason. However, it does not account for the distinct, direct, and intelligibility that comes from originary experience that belongs to perception. Neither empiricism nor intellectualism fully explain experience, and view perception differently.

In chapter 3, “‘attention’ and ‘judgment’”, MP focuses on intellectualism and what it does not explain. The first point that MP brings up is the idea of attention. For intellectualism, attention is “fruitful”. That is, what attention produces is understanding of the way the perceived object already is in itself. He writes, “since I experience a clarification of the object through attention, the perceived object must already contain the intelligible structure that attention draws out. If consciousness finds the geometrical circle in the circular physiognomy of a plate, this is because consciousness already put it there (29).” Later, MP criticizes attention in terms of its function, “consciousness is no less intimately connected to the objects with which it distracts itself than it is to the ones in which it takes an interest, and the surplus of clarity in the act of attention inaugurates no new relationship (30).” In other words, the act of “attention” is nothing special - it simply reveals what objects already were, but cannot explain how an object can “arouse an act of attention”.

Another aspect of intellectualism that MP discusses is Judgment. As both empiricism and intellectualism have provided an account of how to go beyond sensations. For intellectualism, it's *perception = sensations + judgment (association for empiricism)*. MP draws on certain Cartesian ideas here, and uses the example of the wax mentioned in the meditations. Even if the shape of the wax changes, one can judge the wax to be the same despite that all of its sensible qualities have changed. The role of judgment, then, is to interpret sensations, something that empiricism lacked. As there is this distinction between “sensing” and “judging”, intellectualism does not allow us to make that distinction, “since the slightest glance beyond the pure impression and thereby falls under the general rubric of ‘judgment’ (35)”. In fact, intellectualism assumes the “sensations” remain constant, and everything is judgment. MP then clarifies that “to perceive

in the full sense of the word... is not to judge, but rather to grasp, prior to all judgment, a sense immanent in the sensible” (36). Intellectualism makes the intentionality of perception dependent upon concepts and judgment. It simply ignores too much in terms of the sensible, and relies on judgment too much when it comes to perceptual content. This idea is clarified by the Zollner Illusion. If intellectualism is right, the illusion would just be an error of judgment. Yet, the illusion is motivated by the appearance of the image itself. The appearance is “behind the false judgment”, not constituted by it (37).

In terms of sensation and intellectualism, it is important to acknowledge that one does not “choose” the kind of sensations, but it seems as though something like judgment or interpretation is more under one’s control. Intellectualism places its results - its idealized results of a world determined in itself - into what we now perceive and know. It cannot make sense of the fact that for perception, “An object is an organism of colors, odors, sounds, and tactile appearances that symbolize and modify each other, and that harmonize with each other according to a real logic” (41). This quote sums up what Intellectualism fails to explain, as well as highlights the importance of conducting a genuine phenomenological reduction to understand the world.

I agree with Merleau-Ponty’s assessment. Everything MP has said so far seems to be logically consistent. Neither theory, empiricism nor intellectualism, happen to be completely right one way or the other--but I do think it is possible to find something in the middle.