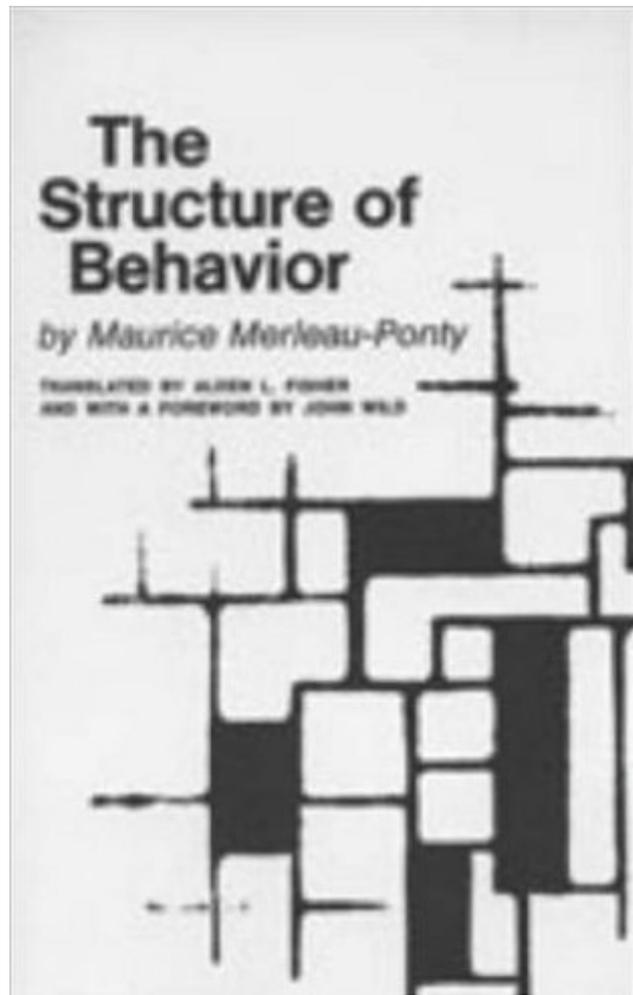


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# The Structure Of Behavior



## Synopsis

At the time of his death in May 1961, Maurice Merleau-Ponty held the chair of Philosophy at the College de France. Together with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, he was cofounder of the successful and influential review *Les Temps Modernes*. However, after Merleau-Ponty's two studies of Marxist theory and practice (*Humanisme et Terreur* and *Les Aventures de la Dialectique*), he alienated both orthodox Marxists and the mandarins of the left—such as Sartre and de Beauvoir. Perhaps his most lasting contribution to the interpretation of human existence was his formulation of a positive philosophical approach to psychology the foundations of which were clearly outlined in *The Structure of Behavior* and later more fully developed in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

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## Customer Reviews

Merleau-Ponty is far better known for his second book, the monumental *Phenomenology of Perception*. *The Structure of Behavior* is an earlier stab at the same themes, and its philosophical views are less developed than on the latter work. Does this make it optional reading for those seeking to understand Merleau-Ponty? Not at all. In the first two chapters of *Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty discusses and critiques the major currents of theoretical psychology in his time (Behaviorism and Gestalttheorie), at a level of detail far beyond that which he does in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In fact, in the initial chapters of the latter work, he repeatedly refers the reader to the earlier one's discussion of psychology. While the *Phenomenology of Perception* is

justly celebrated for its engagement with the facts and findings of empirical psychology, it surprisingly does not reveal Merleau-Ponty's knowledge of the discipline like the present book does. In short, students of his latter work will do very well to read at least the first chapter of this book, probably the first two. One will find it much easier to understand his psychological background after reading them.

I would like to begin by saying I agree with Idiosyncrat in regard to the importance of this work for understanding Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole. I would like to add some reasons why I consider this particular work important especially for those who are interested in phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty was a phenomenologist in the tradition of Husserl and Heidegger. The path Merleau-Ponty follows to phenomenology, especially in *The Structure of Behavior*, is, however, unique. Phenomenology as a general approach to philosophical questions begins with the work of Husserl. Merleau-Ponty belongs to this tradition to the degree that he uses the methods of phenomenology and phenomenological analysis in approaching philosophical problems. But there are some differences in approach between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Unlike Husserl, Merleau-Ponty does not begin his analysis in *The Structure of Behavior* with a 'phenomenological reduction' and he does not attempt to offer, at first, any philosophical arguments for the adoption of the transcendental (or phenomenological) attitude. Merleau-Ponty also does not choose to begin his analysis with "consciousness" as Husserl does, but with behavior which Merleau-Ponty believes is neutral in regard to the classical distinctions between 'mental' and 'physical' (pg. 4). This means that Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, will ultimately ground his phenomenology at a deeper (existential) level, as opposed to merely analyzing explicit, or theoretical, acts of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty summarizes the uniqueness of his method best in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. He writes, "we shall take objective thought on its own terms and not ask it any questions which it does not ask itself. If we are led to rediscover experience behind it, this shift of ground will be attributable only to the difficulties which objective thought itself raises" (pg. 83). This is the method that I think is unique to Merleau-Ponty. Husserl is looking for an apodictic ground for philosophy, and Heidegger is interested in the question of the meaning of Being. Neither of these questions are questions which objective thought asks itself but require a more radical form of reflection (which may be motivated for its own reasons). Merleau-Ponty will only adopt the transcendental, or phenomenological, standpoint after objective thought has led itself into a number of aporias which it is unable to solve on its own. He will begin by simply taking objective thought on its own terms. In order to take objective thought on its own terms Merleau-Ponty chooses to begin *The Structure of Behavior* with

an analysis of the scientific theories of behavior themselves, rather than with some version of the phenomenological reduction. *The Structure of Behavior* analyzes these theories in some detail as well as the reasons for their failures. There are a number of reasons that the scientific theories Merleau-Ponty examines fail to make behavior and perception intelligible; they treat behavior as based on a one way causal relation between stimulus and response, they believe that the stimulus acts on the organism through its own absolute properties as opposed to its place within a larger whole (or Gestalt), they attempt to build up complex behavior from simple reflexes, and they fail to perceive the immanent meaning within behavior treating it instead as meaningless mechanical reflexes built up through conditioning. All of these failures are ultimately reducible to the fact that all of these theories base themselves on an inadequate ontology which treats consciousness as transparent self-presence and nature as purely external *partes extra partes*. Merleau-Ponty will take up the task of elaborating a more adequate ontology in his later works (*Phenomenology of Perception*, and *The Visible and the Invisible*); but his later work largely takes the conclusions of this work for granted. So this is a very important work for those who are interested in Merleau-Ponty and his unique method of phenomenology. [As a sidenote: I should point out that Merleau-Ponty is not rejecting science. In *The World of Perception* he writes, "The question which [contemporary phenomenological] philosophy asks in relation to science is not intended to contest its right to exist or to close off any particular avenue to its inquiries. Rather, the question is whether science does, or ever could, present us with a picture of the world that is complete, self-sufficient and somehow closed in upon itself, such that there could no longer be any meaningful questions outside this picture" (pg. 43)] And as one final note. A number of the reviewers have also drawn attention to the fact that this is a very dense book. That is definitely true. *The Structure of Behavior* is full of references to physiologists most of whom wrote in German or French and so are inaccessible to those of us who do not speak those languages. For those undertaking this book I would strongly suggest reading *Gestalt Psychology* by Wolfgang Kohler, and *The Organism* by Kurt Goldstein along with this book. I found those books extremely helpful in my attempts to understand Merleau-Ponty's text. I would also suggest Koffka's *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* if you have time (I have not had time myself yet, but it is one of the works that Merleau-Ponty references regularly and you should be able to get a used copy in English).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) was a French phenomenological philosopher; he died suddenly of a stroke in 1961 at age 53. He wrote many books such as *The Visible and the Invisible*, *Signs*, *The Primacy of Perception*, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist*

Problem, *The Prose of the World, In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, etc. He wrote in the Introduction to this 1942 book, "Our goal is to understand the relations of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or even social. By nature we understand here a multiplicity of events external to each other and bound together by relations of causality among contemporary thinkers in France, there exist side by side a philosophy, on the one hand, which makes of every nature an objective unity constituted vis-à-vis consciousness and sciences which treat the organism and consciousness as two orders of reality and, in their reciprocal relation, as effects and as causes. Is the solution to be found in a pure and simple return to critical thought? And is there nothing justified in the naturalism of science---nothing which, understood and transposed, ought to find a place in a transcendental philosophy? We will come to these questions by starting from below and by an analysis of the notion of behavior. By going through behaviorism one gains at least in being able to introduce consciousness, not as psychological reality or as cause, but as structure. He observes, "The organism cannot properly be compared to a keyboard on which the external stimuli would play and in which their proper form would be delineated for the simple reason that the organism contributes to the constitution of that form. Since all the movements of the organism are always conditioned by external influences, one can, if one wishes, readily treat behavior as an effect of the milieu. But in the same way, since all the stimulations which the organism receives have culminated in exposing the receptor organ to the external influences, one could also say that the behavior is the first cause of all the stimulations." (Pg. 13) He points out, "I execute the proposed task without knowing what I am doing, just as habits acquired by one group of muscles can be transferred immediately to another: my handwriting on the blackboard resembles my handwriting on paper although the muscles concerned in each case are not the same. There is something GENERAL in our reflex responses, which precisely permits these effector substitutions." (Pg. 30) He says, "there is no reason for asking what guides the chronaxic mechanism and orients it toward ordered movements. When such movements are produced, it is because the necessary conditions for them are united. It is useless to posit a shunting power hidden behind the cerebral mechanisms by which ordered behavior is realized; and the problem of order has no meaning if we make it a second problem of causality." (Pg. 50) He summarizes, "Behavior, inasmuch as it has a structure, is not situated in either of these two orders. It does not unfold in objective time and space like a series of physical events; each moment does not occupy one and only one point of time; rather, at the decisive moment of learning, a now stands out from the series of

Now,  $\hat{A}^{\text{TM}}$  acquires a particular value and summarizes the groupings which have preceded it as it engages and anticipates the future of the behavior; this  $\hat{A}^{\text{TM}}$  transforms the singular situation of the experience into a typical situation and the effective reaction into an aptitude. From this moment on behavior is detached from the order of the in-itself  $\hat{A}$  and becomes the projection outside the organism of a POSSIBILITY which is internal to it. The world, inasmuch as it harbors living beings, ceases to be a material plenum consisting of juxtaposed parts; it opens up at the place where behavior appears. (Pg. 125) He concludes, "The object of the preceding chapters was not only to establish that behavior is irreducible to its alleged parts  $\hat{A}$ . Does not the cogito teach us once and for all that we would have no knowledge of any THING if we did not first have a knowledge of our thinking and that even the escape into the world and the resolution to ignore interiority  $\hat{A}$  which is the essential feature of behaviorism, cannot be formulated without being transformed into consciousness and without being transformed into conscious and without presupposing existence for-itself  $\hat{A}$ . Thus behavior is constituted of relations; that is, it is conceptualized and not in-itself, as is every other object moreover  $\hat{A}$ . behavior is not a thing, but neither is it an idea. It is not the envelope of a pure consciousness and, as the witness of behavior, I am not a pure consciousness. It is precisely this which we wanted to say in stating that behavior is a form. (Pg. 127) He asserts, "Thus behavior remains defined  $\hat{A}$  as an imitation of things; consciousness remains a part of being. The integration of matter, life and mind is obtained by their reduction to the common denominator of physical forms. It matters little that the ultimate explanation is always physical if the physical structures posited in nerve functioning imply relations just as complex as those which are grasped by consciousness in the actions of a living being or a man. A complex physical structure is less  $\hat{A}^{\text{TM}}$  than the atoms of consciousness of the old psychology. (Pg. 135) He summarizes, "In the preceding chapters we have considered the birth of behavior in the physical world and in an organism; that is, we have pretended to know nothing of man by reflection and have limited ourselves to developing what was implied in the scientific representation of his behavior. Aided by the notion of structure or form, we have arrived at the conclusion that both mechanism and finalism should be rejected and that the  $\hat{A}^{\text{TM}}$  the  $\hat{A}^{\text{TM}}$  and the  $\hat{A}^{\text{TM}}$  do not represent three powers of being, but three dialectics. Physical nature in man is not subordinated to a vital principle, the organisms do not conspire to actualize an idea, and the mental is not a motor principle IN the body; but what we call nature is already consciousness of nature, what we call life is already consciousness of life and what we call mental is still an object vis- $\hat{A}$ -vis consciousness. (Pg. 184) He concludes, "the behavior of

another expresses a certain manner of existing before signifying a certain manner of thinking. And when this behavior is addressed to me—when the cultural objects which fall under my regard suddenly adapt themselves to my powers, awaken my intentions and make themselves understood by me—I am then drawn into a coexistence of which I am not the unique constituent and which founds the phenomenon of social nature as perceptual experience finds that of physical nature. Consciousness can LIVE in existing things without reflection, can abandon itself to their concrete structure, which has not yet been converted into expressible signification; certain episodes of its life, before having been reduced to the condition of available memories and inoffensive objects, can imprison its liberty by their proper inertia, shrink its perception of the world, and impose stereotypes on behavior; likewise, before having conceptualized our class or our milieu, we ARE that class or that milieu. (Pg. 222) This book (which was part of the basis for awarding his doctorate degree) will interest not only those studying Merleau-Ponty, but those looking for critical analyses of behaviorism.

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