



BOOK REVIEWS

Susan Bredlau. *The Other in Perception: A Phenomenological Account of Our Experience of Other Persons.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018. ISBN 9781438471716. ISBN 9781438471723 (pbk.). Hardcover \$95. Paperback \$31.95.

This concise and interesting book makes the case that human perception is “an interpersonally significant activity” (1)—that is, perception is infused with relationships with others. One way to construe Bredlau’s discussion is to see it as a further exploration of the nature of a person and the “problem of meaning” that Polanyi’s middle and late writing treats.

In her clearly written but dense philosophical book, Bredlau starts with an introductory discussion of the peculiar character of human awareness of others, which provides a helpful overview (a roadmap).

Her first chapter reviews Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s treatments of perception, intentionality, and embodied being-in-the-world. Husserl focused attention on describing things human beings perceive. He saw that some elements of human perception are always more prominent, but what is prominent and what is not changes, so perceiving is shifting and temporal. When we see one thing, we see other surrounding things with some things more determinate than others—but, as Polanyi puts it, our focal attention may rapidly change. There is dynamic variability in perception, and this degree of determinateness means the structure of perception has figure and background. Bredlau does an admirable job of unpacking some of Husserl’s more difficult descriptions of these matters. Husserl emphasized the “outer horizon” of perceiving with

its “determinable indeterminateness” and thus declared that seeing is through an “aspect” (7).

Experience presents us with real objects, but we recognize them as exceeding our experience. Our consciousness of things is such that we recognize them as “offering more to consciousness than we are conscious of” (8). The “horizons” that are “constitutive of the object of our perception are thus not further *objects that we perceive*” but “the *immanent meaning of all of the things that we perceive*” (8). Husserl’s notion that objects are “transcendent” is his clarification of “the way in which these things exist *within* our experience” (9). When Husserl contends consciousness is “intentional”—i.e., about some transcendent object—he is pointing out that the object “is given with the meaning that it exceeds our experience of it” (9). He shows that “our experience is a *presentation* of the world, not a *representation*,” and thus the intentionality of consciousness is “objective” in that it is “always already occupied with a reality that is given as transcending it” (10).

Merleau-Ponty uses Husserl’s framework for understanding perception to show how perception is embodied and, as such, is expressive. Perception has a profoundly bodily character, which is constitutive for meaning and experience: it is not because I perceive the stairs that I am able to walk up and down them, but it is because I am able to walk up and down the stairs that I perceive them. “Stairs” are a possible meaningful reality for a moving being, and this meaning is a practical rather than theoretical insight rooted in action in a particular world. This view is Merleau-Ponty’s bodily take on Heidegger’s *In-der-Welt-sein* with its distinctions between *zuhanden* and *vorhanden*, and Bredlau

succinctly and clearly lays out this account. She might have covered some of the same ground using Polanyi's ideas about action and its tacit roots, or she could have linked her account to that of von Uexkull's discussion of the *Umwelt*, which Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty apparently knew in addition to Husserl. These additions would have enriched her work.

Bredlau focuses on the importance of the "inexplicit, lived sense of one's acting body," which Merleau-Ponty calls a "body schema" (12). This emphasis leads Merleau-Ponty to consider consciousness (which for Husserl was always about something) as beyond thinking but concerned with possible doing, with "I can," which focuses on the "projects sustained by our bodies" (12). Both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger thus affirm that persons "first exist in relation to the world: we are always already meaningfully engaged with the world" (13). Merleau-Ponty makes clear that perception as practical and bodily engaged is the human way "of having a world" (13) and a life. The continuity and stability of our worlds and lives are grounded in the body's habits, but living beings do develop new habits; learning is a transformation of our engagement with the world. Our bodies as habitual live in a past world, but that past world is transformed as the body answers to the present and the future.

What the contemporary philosopher John Russon adds to the kind of discussions of being-in-the-world in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty is an illuminating description of the temporal structure of experiential meaning in terms of the analog of the temporal structure of musical meaning. Russon thus provides in his analysis of the dimensions of musical experience a "basic 'logic' for understanding the larger structure of the world that contextualizes our everyday experience" (17). Music has a "propulsive character" since notes are in relation, and we allow music, through the body's openness, to take us down a path. Russon argues that in fact

all experience has this kind of "felt momentum" or "rhythm" that is concerned with "temporal relations of expectation and resolution" (18). Russon thus analyzes music in terms of three layers. In music there is melody (concerned with sequence), rhythm (concerned with repetition), and harmony (concerned with simultaneous sound). But this is not only the case in musical experience: all experience has "interrelated temporalities" that interact, and thus there is a "polytemporality" in experience (19).

Bredlau's second chapter moves to a deeper discussion of the phenomenological approach to the experience of others. Much of the modern philosophical tradition has focused on the "problem of other minds" since it assumes "'my point of view' . . . can never be the object of the direct experience of another person" (23). Modern psychological theory more or less concurs with these dominant philosophical views, although psychologists often contend that there is an indirect experience of the consciousness of others since we can be conscious of other human bodies from which we make inferences. Phenomenologists, and particularly Husserl, have not found this standard account acceptable. Husserl argues that we can be "aware of others as making perceptual sense of their physical situation," and he dubs this the relation of "pairing" (29). Pairing does not claim that we perceive "other people as such, but, instead, we perceive the surrounding world as perceived by those others" (29). To use Polanyi's terminology, perception of living beings is molar rather than simply molecular. To be a person is to spend most of our time perceiving the natural and cultural world we inhabit, and Husserl took this to be a key to the human experience of other people.

Perception is thus creative, practical, and embodied "rather than duplicative and disembodied" (30), and Husserl argues that perceiving is rooted in the body's position and that perceiving others recognizes the body as here and another body as there. But another body is not simply

present there rather than here because we experience another body as perceiving things. Insofar as this is the case, we “can experience *the world as it is oriented* around this other human body rather than as it is oriented around our own body” (32). This is the theme of “orientation” in Husserl, who contends that a rich understanding of orientation recognizes human experience of the world as a setting or workshop for our projects rather than a mere collection of objects with spatial position. We are at home in the world, and this reflects our ability to “carry out the projects that are meaningful for us” (32). These insights of Husserl, of course, are also part of Heidegger’s account, where they are discussed in terms of “the primordial spatiality of being-in” (32), and of Merleau-Ponty’s account of “our practical relations to things as ‘lived space’” (33).

Since seeing others involves seeing things as oriented around another human body, we thus see someone as quickly darting across the street ahead of the traffic, according to Husserl. Human bodies are engaged in projects, and this “pairing” means that in perception “we find ourselves in a world as perceived by the other rather than simply by us” (33). This pairing relation in perceptual experience undercuts the premise of the “problem of other minds.” Merleau-Ponty develops ideas akin to Husserl’s “pairing” in terms of the practical self-experience of the body as involved with the body of another: “...the very way we inhabit our bodies—our ‘body schema’—is intersubjective, and our behavior ongoingly attests to this sharedness of experience that underlies our sense of reflective individuality” (43). Bredlau thus emphasizes a “shared body schema” (34) that is concerned with what Polanyi would call our elements of tacit awareness of both our own body and perceived bodies that hold possibilities of engagement: I see the glasses on the table as within my reach and the reach of the bodies of my dinner guests and thus as offering possibilities of a certain kind (such as the possibility of a toast). My guests also likely see such possibilities. While

perceptual experiences do not appear to be identical, they are never completely cut off from one another” (36), and thus they offer the possibility of perceptual learning or skill development. If one is not a soccer player who sees the changing field and positions of players, it is possible, with a suitable apprenticeship and practice, that one might eventually become something closer to a connoisseur of the game. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s account of our perceiving the world in terms of the shared body schema is an account that shows “the world begins as a co-inhabitation” and that persons are always already engaged as participants in “a collaborative experience” (37).

Russon extends these ideas in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty by arguing that “significant people with whom we are involved . . . function more as aspects of the form of our perception than as its contents or objects” (39). Our relations with significant others structure and become a context in which action unfolds, and this action has rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic dimensions. Habits are formed and persist in new contexts, thus a troubled “pairing” with a parent becomes “the continuing ‘harmony’ of his interpersonal affairs, even if explicitly—‘melodically’—he takes himself to have distanced himself from her” (40). Bredlau thus contends, using Russon’s framework expanding earlier phenomenological accounts, that “we carry ‘our’ others with us as the meaningful context of all our experience, even when we are no longer ‘actually’ engaged with those others” (43).

In her third chapter, Bredlau turns to pairing in the early experience of the child and further explores implications of Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s views. The imitative action of a small child should be seen as “perceptual structures rather than perceptual contents” (47). That is, they are ways of experiencing rather than simply objects of experience. Behavior thus expresses an orientation. When an adult plays with an infant, the infant picks up the playfulness of the game. The infant perceives

through certain actions the intentionality presented. For the child, interaction becomes “the discovery of a world as a landscape of shared possibilities of play” (49). Bredlau warns that to focus too intently on the imitative character of action can lead to overlooking the collaborative character of action. Small children participate in a meaningful world enacted by the bodies of caregivers. Clearly, Bredlau wants to emphasize the bodily participative knowing even of infants: “In situations of joint attention and mutual gaze, we witness parent and child co-enacting a shared world...” (52). Discussing some of the research on infants, Bredlau argues that even young infants experience others as aware of them, and this shows in the way the actions of infants and caregivers in play periods are coordinated like figures engaged in a dance. Infants not only perceive caregivers but perceive them as perceiving, and this enables infants. The experience of perceiving thus appears first to be public and only later becomes private.

Bredlau moves from her conclusion that even small children perceive caregivers as perceiving and collaborating to the conclusion that the affective nature of pairing essentially involves trust. Her discussion of “participatory sense-making” (62) emphasizes the emotional significance of sense-making for the child. Pairing understood as perceiving the perceiving other is a matter of trust for the child: in entering into their caregivers’ perception of the world, infants ‘live’ their caregivers as reliable guides to this world” (64). Using Russon, Bredlau explores the ways in which infants enact their trust in caregivers.

The final chapter turns to sexual experience as a powerful example of pairing relations between adults. Sexual experiences, like experiences in early childhood, involve perceiving the other as perceptive: “...in sexuality, we desire the other’s desire” (72), although this is primarily a bodily intentionality. Bredlau leads the reader through the discussions of sexual experiences in Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir,

and Russon. Children have their place in the shared world of the family where they discover already created meaning. Adult experience is, however, more oriented toward “establishing shared worlds” (74) with unfamiliar persons. In sexual experiences, this reckoning with the unfamiliar “takes place in bodily intimacy” (74), and this means, as Merleau-Ponty understood, that sexual desire is a matter of bodily intentionality: “...our bodies do this of their own accord” (75). However, the bodily intentionality of sexuality is an experience of other bodies not merely as objects but as subjects. Bredlau unpacks this subjectivity using Hegel’s account of the recognition of another subject and Beauvoir’s discussion of sexual experience (a somewhat labored review, to this reader). Bredlau thus argues that sexuality is a “fundamental way that we experience that there are other subjects in the world and we desire these other subjects to recognize us as subjects” (80). This means “our bodies seek validation of our *subjectivity*, but of our subjectivity as *embodied*” (85). She emphasizes that sexual desires must be pursued in concert with the other rather than in opposition to the other. Sexual situations are situations of great vulnerability, like childhood intimacy, and thus sexual intimacy is “ultimately a matter of trust” (87). Following Russon’s discussion, she reviews scenarios that block the openness and creativity of sexual experience.

The Other in Perception aims to clarify the role of other people within lived experience. Others affect us intimately, and this has a bearing on both healthy development and fulfillment. As Bredlau’s discussion makes clear, persons always “are already involved with others, and how we care for and are cared for by others is highly consequential” (93).

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