



## Review Essay

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# INTERSUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE: COMMENTS ON NORMALITY, ABNORMALITY, AND PATHOLOGY IN MERLEAU-PONTY<sup>1</sup>

Ellen Wells Bernal

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## ABSTRACT

*This review essay treats several essays in the interesting new collection, Normality, Abnormality, and Pathology in Merleau-Ponty, edited by Susan Bredlau and Talia Welsh. I focus particularly on chapters that explore the ambiguous relationships between the embodied person and the intersubjective world. I also explore ways in which Michael Polanyi's ideas might enrich the discussion.*



## Introduction

*Normality, Abnormality, and Pathology in Merleau-Ponty* (hereafter *NAP*, 2022) is a new collection of articles that seeks to extend Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity to our understanding of normality, abnormality, and pathology. Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was an eminent philosopher who called attention to the incoherencies of modern accounts of perception. With inspiration from the earlier phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), he proposed an extensive philosophical reform that incorporated evidence from contemporary studies of neurology, Gestalt psychology, and many other fields (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [hereafter *PP*], 2012). Merleau-Ponty in his earlier works explored in depth the interconnections between embodiment and the social world, but he later observed that he had nonetheless overemphasized the standpoint of individual consciousness in perception. Therefore, his later works were intended to branch out from “the philosophy of ‘consciousness’” and bring these earlier conclusions to “ontological explication” (1968, 183). Scholars have noted remarkable similarities between the insights of Merleau-Ponty and those of Michael Polanyi (1891–1976). Polanyi explored incongruities between modern empiricist accounts of scientific discovery and his own firsthand experience as an accomplished scientist. His claim that all knowing has a tacit-explicit structure led him to a revised understanding

of human achievement in science, religion, and art. For orientation purposes, this review article begins with a brief comparison of the two philosophers. I will then reflect on selected chapters in Bredlau and Welsh, primarily from the standpoint of Merleau-Ponty, but I will also explore several themes in Michael Polanyi that could be brought to bear on normality, abnormality, and pathology.

### Merleau-Ponty and Michael Polanyi: Common Approaches

A detailed comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi is not practicable here, but an overview may help orient readers who are less familiar with one or the other. Both philosophers critique taken-for-granted accounts of how knowledge is achieved. They engage and extend insights from Gestalt psychology in their understanding of embodiment and intersubjectivity. Literature suggests that the two philosophers had no personal contact and only limited awareness of each other's ideas. However, Marjorie Grene (1910–2009) noticed similarities and encouraged Polanyi to read Merleau-Ponty. When he finally followed her suggestion, Polanyi's response was at times somewhat disparaging: "These remarks foreshadow my analysis, but I find among them neither the logic of tacit knowing nor the theory of ontological stratification" (Polanyi 1969, 222; Mullins 2022; Lowney 2010 and 2014). At other times, Polanyi "seems to have regarded Husserl's 'reduction' and perhaps Merleau-Ponty's 'embodiment' as philosophical moves on the way toward something like his theory of tacit knowing" (Mullins 2002, 26). Polanyi correctly observes that Merleau-Ponty did not outline a specific structure of knowing. But in my view, Merleau-Ponty's description of the primordial body schema offers a subtler and perhaps more promising account of embodied being-in-the-world. These themes are explored in secondary literature (Mead 2008; Bernal 1980; Lowney and Verhage 2009; Mullins 2022).<sup>2</sup>

### Conceptual Reform

Both philosophers discern the conceptual and existential problems resulting from the modern era's pervasive yet unacknowledged assumptions about human knowing. They would agree that while science, and to a lesser extent intellectualist philosophy, have led Western man to an "unprecedented breadth of knowledge," these viewpoints "simultaneously served—first subtly and later critically—to undermine the human being's existential situation on virtually every front: metaphysical and cosmological, epistemological, psychological, and finally even biological" (Tarnas 1991, 325; see also Cannon 2021; Polanyi 1962). Merleau-Ponty named these false pictures "intellectualism" (the idealist pursuit of certain knowledge through universal doubt) and "empiricism" (the notion that scientific knowledge is achieved by the impersonal recording and association of sense-data). Likewise, Michael Polanyi called attention to the incongruity between "empiricist" or "positivist" accounts of the way scientific discovery occurs and his own lived experience as an accomplished scientist. Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi each attend to the discrepancies between these received accounts and the way that knowing actually takes place. In their critiques, both Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi draw supporting evidence from a range of scientific studies and, in particular, from Gestalt psychology research.

I note here that Gestalt psychology was itself a reaction against the era's empiricist viewpoint, particularly against the "Reflex Arc" theory of perception. The Reflex Arc theory viewed the perceiving subject as a passive recipient of discrete sensations. In brief, the theory proposed a simple "circuit" between an "outside" stimulus, the impression of the stimulus in discrete areas of the brain, and the elicited response from the organism. The person's context and own participation were trivial at best. The Reflex Arc theory

never convincingly explained how the subject “associated” or drew meaning from disparate sensations. But because of the empiricist atmosphere of the era, neuropsychologists assumed that even higher-order experience and perception could be accounted for in this manner. As previously noted, both Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi rejected the empiricist view of perception, and they found research studies conducted from the Gestalt perspective to be particularly useful in their critiques and proposals for reform. Here I will primarily consider Merleau-Ponty’s special interest in the research conducted by Kurt Goldstein (1878–1965) and Adhémar Gelb (1887–1936).

### Gestalt Psychology and Synesthesia

In their research, Gelb and Goldstein observed German army veterans who had sustained brain injuries in World War I. In an experimental format, the investigators studied the sequelae of the veterans’ injuries and observed the patients’ innovative, holistic responses to their situations. They recognized that their approach diverged from that of traditional neurology.

We have concerned ourselves less with what the patients could *not* do and have been guided more by a desire to learn how normal apprehension is modified by brain injury.... Our purpose has been to determine what was contained in the consciousness of these patients. As a result we have relied heavily upon naïve reports and descriptions as given by the patients themselves. (1997, 315)

The case of Johann Schneider, “described by Gelb and Goldstein in 1920...plays a crucial role in Merleau-Ponty’s own conception of embodiment, as he vividly describes in ‘The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motricity’” (Slatman 2022, 22; *PP*, 100–148). If Reflex Arc theory were correct, Schneider’s actions would be discrete and linked to the specific locations of brain injuries. Instead, Gelb and Goldstein observed that Schneider had an *overall* deficit in abstract thinking (Goldstein 2000). For example, while Schneider had remarkable difficulty complying with an abstract request to touch his nose, he could easily do so if he felt the concrete need to use a handkerchief (*PP*, 105). Also, even though Schneider was physically capable of sexual response, he did not seek out sexual relationships. Schneider’s injuries apparently affected his entire being; nevertheless, he was able to develop adaptations through various strategies, one of which was to *imagine* himself in a concrete situation (Bredlau and Welsh, 6).

In life, he [Schneider] says, “I experience movement as a result of the situation, as the sequence of events themselves; my movement and I, we are, so to speak, merely a link in the unfolding of the whole, and I am scarcely aware of any voluntary initiative...everything works by itself.” Similarly, in order to execute a movement upon command, he places himself “within the affective situation of the whole, and the movement flows from this whole, just as in life.” (*PP*, 135)

Partly based on these observations, Merleau-Ponty supports his proposal that people have an “intentional arc,” a primordial orientation towards meaning and intersubjectivity in the world. An injury such as Schneider’s may slacken but will not destroy this intentional arc (Bredlau and Welsh 2022, 6). “Our consciousness, says Merleau-Ponty, is not first of all an ‘I think,’ as Descartes and Kant said, but an ‘I can’ (je peux)” (Slatman, in *NAP*, 24; *PP*, 171).

In a similar fashion, the insights of Gestalt psychology undergird Polanyi's radical approach to personal knowing. He asserted that the full range of human achievement (comprising, for example, physical performances, language, and abstract thought) is based on the integration of tacitly known particulars into a comprehensive whole; knowledge is an extension of our bodies. For both philosophers, then, our embodiment and situatedness are not hindrances to knowing, as both empiricism and intellectualism presume; instead, they are the ground of any knowledge whatsoever. This ground includes a synesthetic unity of the senses. For example, Merleau-Ponty described vision as a remarkable variant of touch: "The look, we said, envelopes, palpates, espouses the visible things...as though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them" (1968, 133).

Given Gestalt psychology's holistic description of the embodied person, and Schneider's evident ability to express himself, it is curious to this writer that Merleau-Ponty did not offer extended accounts of Schneider's self-perception. I wonder how Schneider viewed his participation in research studies over the years. How did he experience his interaction with the researchers? Did he have friends or family members? How did he get along on a daily basis? It would have been interesting for Merleau-Ponty to explore these questions with Schneider, but overall, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of normality, abnormality, and pathology, while undoubtedly rich, are from a third-person perspective.

However, first-person accounts are a significant focus in the Bredlau and Welsh volume, as I will discuss. In my treatment of several chapters, I will also briefly note other themes familiar from our general overview of Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi. These include a critique of intellectualist and empiricist descriptions of knowing; an endorsement of the intentional arc; and an exploration of the meaning of sensory perception, lived space, and intersubjectivity.

### Bredlau and Welsh: On Intersubjectivity

Part I of Bredlau and Welsh's new collection of essays has primarily a theoretical focus. In this short review, I shall focus only on some chapters selected from Part II, "Practical Phenomenological Applications of Merleau-Ponty's Theories of Normality, Abnormality, and Pathology." I consider the strategies that the authors use to extend Merleau-Ponty's insights, in particular the ways that first-person descriptions of abnormality (life-writing) and fictional accounts can enrich these approaches.

The chapters in Part II explore the themes of intersubjectivity and abnormality. The essays share certain concerns that are voiced from the perspective of "Critical Phenomenology." As Magri and MacQueen explain in *Critical Phenomenology: An Introduction*, this new framework explores the social ambiguities experienced by those who self-describe or are described by others as "abnormal" or "deviant." "Classic phenomenology," represented by Merleau-Ponty, already had a strong emphasis on reflection; critical phenomenology applies this approach to the tangled relationships "between embodied experience, social identity, and power relations...thus [it] seeks to better identify the context-dependent character of first-person experience" (2023, 3). Critical phenomenology acknowledges that the body is the horizon that makes experience possible, but "it is also the site through which social identities are made visible" (3). This perspective invokes the subtle interweaving of person and world, unlike sociological research that assumes a simple "causality" between social structures and the individual. Another distinction is that critical phenomenology seeks to transform, not merely describe, the social structures that create unfair practices (44). This intention is more implied than explicitly discussed in the Bredlau and Welsh collection, but it could be drawn out in future explorations.

## Selected Chapters in Bredlau and Welsh

The chapters that I will treat are distinguished by their attention to first-person and fictional narratives (*NAP*, Part II). As previously noted, Merleau-Ponty most often discusses normality and abnormality from the perspective of an observer; the chapters I have selected both supplement and interrogate Merleau-Ponty's more objective style. For example, Adam Blair's essay, "Meandering Peripheries: A Ground without Figure for Relief" (*NAP*, 119–139), questions whether his left eye's ambiguous visual field complicates Merleau-Ponty's account of Gestalt formation.

Blair was born with morning glory syndrome in his left eye. The underdeveloped optic nerve causes a vague, dream-like visual field that seems incapable of forming a complete Gestalt.<sup>3</sup> To what extent does this atypical visual style interrogate Merleau-Ponty's view of perception? Blair worries that Merleau-Ponty excludes from consideration perceptions that by their very nature are vague and unclear. This is an interesting idea worth pursuing, but, on the other hand, Merleau-Ponty does affirm the existence of some ambiguous experience.<sup>4</sup> He remarks that Cézanne "wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization." The lived perspective cannot be reduced to geometry or simple photography (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 13–14; see also Cashell 2016). For that matter, even Merleau-Ponty's dialectical argument gradually reveals a more ambiguous account of perception. Blair may be correct, however, that indeterminate phenomena need more attention in Merleau-Ponty.<sup>5</sup>

### The Insight of Dispossession

While Blair's discussion considers Merleau-Ponty's writings on vision, Whitney Howell extends the philosopher's consideration of lived spatiality in "The Insight of Dispossession: Examining the Phenomenological and Political Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Account of the Spatial Level" (2022, *NAP*, 141–164). I will trace the general lines of her argument and then raise questions based on Merleau-Ponty's writings on Gestalt formation and the intentional arc.

Howell's discussion takes as its starting point Merleau-Ponty's chapter, "Space," and in particular his attention to psychological studies of abnormal perception (Howell, *NAP*, 141–142; *PP*, 311). One study observes a research participant's response to wearing goggles that cause an inverted perception of the environment and of his own body. The subject is gradually able to "right himself." "From the third day to the seventh day, the body is progressively brought upright and appears to be finally in the normal position, above all when the subject is active.... External objects increasingly have an appearance of 'reality'" (Howell, *NAP*, 143; *PP*, 255). In another study, a participant is asked to look at a mirror image that makes a room appear to be slanted. In this case, the subject needs only a few hours to regain a "normal" perception (151–152; *PP*, 260–261).

In both experimental situations, the subject is at first confronted by the incongruity between his visual field and his taken-for-granted body schema (*PP*, 255–256). Merleau-Ponty considers this ambiguity as further evidence of the deficiencies of both intellectualism and empiricism. In brief, the philosopher's position is that while the subject intellectually "knows" that his vision is artificially altered, this awareness does not by itself bring back a sense of normal orientation. By the same token, although one could argue that the "stimuli" issuing from the experimental environment have not changed, the research participant perceives them differently and must, over time, reorient his body and reframe his perception. Once the subject

achieves the newly constructed body schema, he can rely on it without explicit focus for the duration of the experiment.<sup>6</sup>

Howell claims that the taken-for-granted constructs revealed by the experiments on abnormal vision are also present in our everyday lives. We experience the comforting spaces of our homes and regular places of employment and renewal (*PP*, 131). We “possess” these spaces as welcoming entities and an inviting theatre for our actions; there is an implicit pact between ourselves and the world (Howell, *NAP*, 145; *PP*, 261; Russon 2022). Howell then points out some of the many experiences that cause a sense of what she terms “dispossession.” When we visit a new city or set ourselves the task of learning a new skill such as dancing, our situation will closely resemble that of the experimental subjects we have just discussed. We will need time to embody the newly encountered space (*PP*, 294; Howell, *NAP*, 148).<sup>7</sup> For Howell, these circumstances reveal that every act of perception has a hidden basis of already established knowledge and, more importantly for her argument, that every act of perception is at the same time an act of forgetting that closes off other dimensions of experience.

Howell’s idea of possession and dispossession, seeing and failing to see, is echoed in an intriguing novel, *The City and the City* (Miéville, 2006).<sup>8</sup> Two fictional cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma, share the same boundaries and occupy the same space but have diverging role expectations, traditions, and languages. The residents must maintain a strict separation between the two cities or face sanctions from a mysterious organization known as “Breach.” This requirement is complicated by the fact that from an objective point of view, many streets and spaces are adjacent or even intersecting, that is, they are “grosstopically” congruent. When this is the case, residents of the two different cities must deliberately “unsee” or “unhear” one another. For Howell, these maneuvers call to mind “the extent to which our possession of space always entails exclusions, even as it activates our capacities in a particular environment.... Once we have established particular modes of interaction within the spatial level, other possibilities retreat below our awareness” (150). Howell suggests that this forgetting can lead to a failure to recognize others’ perspectives and the social injustice that they may experience. She suggests that we need to be “dispossessed” of our taken-for-granted beliefs in order to gain a broader awareness of social inequities such as gerrymandering, redlining, and situating industrial plants and expressways near underserved neighborhoods.

Howell’s claims are innovative and intriguing, in no small part because she bases them not on Merleau-Ponty’s writings on intersubjectivity and politics but rather on his description of lived spatiality. I think, though, that several areas would benefit from a broader consideration of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas.

First, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty (and Polanyi) base their epistemologies, in part, on certain findings of Gestalt psychology. The philosophers each affirm that all knowing is the achievement of the embodied person. The person relies on previously established, tacitly held knowledge to form new understandings and discoveries; this creative process underlies all knowing. The philosophers, of course, greatly elaborate on this key insight throughout their many works. One noteworthy instance is Merleau-Ponty’s “intentional arc,” which, as we have previously discussed, is always present and active, even in situations of bodily injury.

I think it would be helpful for Howell to give greater consideration to the positive, creative aspects of intentionality. To this writer, the negative connotations of “dispossession,” such as “deprivation,” “disinheritance,” and “seizure of property,” tend to imply that already familiar constructs are often misguided and highly resistant to change. I suggest that more neutral terms such as “reframing” or “reconsideration” would better encompass Merleau-Ponty’s framework, in particular his first encounter with Paris, when he finds himself developing a lived space of the city. (See Howell, *NAP*, 144; *PP*, 294). Merleau-Ponty does

not describe a “dispossession” or “foreclosure” of previously established spatiality; in fact, these prior learnings provide important clues for creating a new sense of familiarity. So, for Merleau-Ponty, preestablished frameworks are flexible and the source of our knowing, and as a rule they do not lead to “forgetting” other possibilities.

I also suggest that Howell might further elaborate on the role of the embodied person in reframing perception. As Tarnas observes, we have a tendency in modernity to posit seemingly objective models to explain personal and social processes (1991, 325–332). While abstractions such as these provide useful analytical maps, they tend to exclude consideration of the person who is actively engaged in perception and knowing. As we have discussed, the conceptual reforms of both Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi are concerted efforts to address and overcome this problem.

In contrast to descriptive models, in actual life the revision of a cultural ethos is complex and ambiguous, requiring personal reflection on events. For example, Merleau-Ponty’s article on World War II has a meditative, almost journalistic style that allows us to grasp one interpretation of history. “The War Has Taken Place” was published in the first issue of *Les Temps Modernes* (Merleau-Ponty 1964c). The essay looks back to 1939 and 1940, when Nazi forces invaded Poland and began their occupation of France. Merleau-Ponty calls attention to the way intellectuals’ taken-for-granted assumption that there was a common thread of humanism throughout Europe, including the universal ideals of fairness and personal freedom and the assumption that intellectual argument could resolve conflict, at first led to a “failure to see” the meaning of the occupation. Only gradually did scholars come to understand that their system of belief was not universal after all; it was contingent on the particular time and place of pre-war Europe and France. They witnessed cruelty daily, including mass deportations of adults and children to concentration camps. France had become a police state, and intellectuals were forced into difficult choices about collaboration and resistance. Merleau-Ponty’s essay describes these events in all their temporality and ambiguity. In my opinion, details and perspectives such as these are required if we are to understand the course of history. Still, Howell’s essay is a creative and successful elaboration of Merleau-Ponty’s account of lived spatiality.

### Moving without Movement

James Rakoczi’s chapter in this new collection has a long and at first confusing title, “Moving without Movement: Merleau-Ponty’s ‘I can’ and the Memoirs of Bodily Immobility” (*NAP*, 165–185). Rakoczi explores the complexities faced by people with locked-in syndrome (LiS), a state in which the “patient experiences near-total motor paralysis but retains full cognitive ability” (Rakoczi, 165). Rakoczi’s chapter critiques second-order accounts of LiS and wonders whether Merleau-Ponty overemphasizes the place of movement in his description of being-in-the-world.

The taken for granted assumption that movement is the signal aspect of being alive, complicates both our ordinary standpoint and many of Merleau-Ponty’s assumptions about movement. Merleau-Ponty’s project...helped instantiate a conceptualization of bodily integrity that both aids a harmful occlusion of the immobile body and makes certain kinds of theoretical thinking about bodies that cannot move heuristically impossible. (Rakoczi, 165)

Rakoczi begins to explore this incongruity by characterizing research and scholarship surrounding LiS. In general, these accounts have taken one of two different approaches. First, there is quasi-empirical research that seeks to describe what the experience of being locked in is like, often associated with a call for interventions to improve the quality of life. Second, there is philosophical and theoretical research that attempts to derive an understanding of “the normal” from the abnormal.<sup>10</sup> These accounts are informed by an underlying dualism that leads to an abstract philosophical debate about whether people with LiS continue to have a coherent sense of self. Philosophical and fictional accounts worry about the problem of “the continuity of personal identity” when one has an immobile body (Rakoczi, 167–168).

These narratives reduce the situation of a person with LiS to a “mind” within a useless “body,” or even a “living death.” However, first-person accounts, Rakoczi claims, can lead to a different understanding. Dominique Bauby was an accomplished French journalist who suffered a massive stroke that resulted in complete loss of bodily movement, except for an ability to blink his left eyelid. Bauby used this residual ability to “dictate” an entire book to a scribe, obviously a lengthy and complex process. He would painstakingly rehearse, edit, and revise what he wanted to express in preparation for the arrival of his assistant.

My main task now is to compose the first of these bedridden travel notes so that I shall be ready when my publisher’s emissary arrives to take my dictation, letter by letter. In my head I churn over every sentence ten times, delete a word, add an adjective, and learn my text by heart, paragraph by paragraph. (Bauby 1997, 13)

The fact that Bauby’s creative process is interrupted when a nurse enters his room shows that his “intentional arc” is still present, despite his physical limitations.

Rakoczi contends that Merleau-Ponty’s description of motility, though promising, needs major revision. His concern is Merleau-Ponty’s claim, “A system of possible movements, or ‘motor projects’ radiates from us to our environment. . . . Even our most secret affective movements. . . help to shape our perception of things” (Rakoczi, 173; *PP*, 5). If phenomenology’s description of being-in-the-world assumes human motion, how should we understand the lived experience of LiS? Rakoczi’s solution is to extend Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “I Can” to the movement that these individuals themselves envision. Descriptions of imagined movement and writing need to avoid the Cartesian framework: people with LiS do not have a disincarnate mind; they continue to rely on their body schema, which is for the most part not active, but there is a primordial framework that continues to embody this person’s life. Even though there is a loss of bodily possibility, the “global, practical” grounding of this notion does not go away (Rakoczi, 172).

Bauby’s language supports Rakoczi’s approach: “My mind takes flight like a butterfly. There is so much to do. You can wander off in space or in time, set out for Tierra del Fuego or for King Midas’s court” (Bauby 1997, 16; Rakoczi, 172). This is an analogous situation to ones in which patients create narratives to explain away loss of function (Rakoczi, 173). Despite injury and immobility, some people maintain a sense of intentionality. Others are less successful. One sufferer with advancing LiS said that he lost his will to move as his paralysis progressed. Another person experienced distortions of space and intersubjectivity, perceiving others as taller and more powerful than usual (Rakoczi, 168–169).

Rakoczi’s conclusion that immobility narratives are not a “*representation of sick bodies* (an ‘I think’) but a *therapeutics of sick bodies* (an ‘I can’)” is well supported by his examples and argument (176). I think, however, that Merleau-Ponty’s grounding of intentionality in movement is not as thoroughgoing or problematic as Rakoczi takes it to be. Merleau-Ponty consistently offers a nuanced and complex description of



being-in-the-world, which overall (with some exceptions) rejects the notion of a disembodied, universalizing mind.

Richard Gelwick's review of another LiS narrative, *Locked Into Life*, draws similar conclusions from a Polanyian perspective (Gelwick 2003; Howell and Hall 2002). James Hall, a Jungian psychiatrist, was en route to present a paper at a Polanyi conference when he suffered a severe stroke. He survived the incident and entered a locked-in state. Although physicians concluded that Hall had no cognitive ability, the patience and determination of his colleagues revealed that Hall was still present and could communicate with a spelling board. Hall was then able to achieve an "independence of mind...thinking and generating freshly from the physical, cultural, professional, and spiritual background of his life" (Gelwick 2003, 37–38). This account of LiS reinforces the Polanyian notion that the mind is always embodied and is "not reducible to its material parts" (Gelwick, 37).

### Health and Other Reveries

Individuals and families who have access to medical technology face new and difficult choices. Joel Michael Reynolds's essay, "Health and Other Reveries: Homo Curare, Homo Faber, and the Realization of Care," explores the haunting existential choices confronting parents when their children are suspected of having genetic anomalies (*NAP*, 203–224). Should they agree to genomic screening (GSTx)? Reynolds suggests that such questions introduce a deep and troubling incongruity into parents' self-understanding: a differentiation between "the human understood as a controller of fate through the creation and use of tools (*homo faber*)" and "the human understood as conspiring with fate through the guidance and practice of care (*homo curare*)" (Reynolds, *NAP*, 205). Conflict between these two roles is a familiar theme in philosophy and ethics, even traceable to the distinction between God as Creator vs. Artificer. Kant's imperative (i.e., that one should act so as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, at all times also as an end and not only as a means) is another example. The distinction is brought forward to the context of research bioethics. Approval from the Institutional Review Board requires an informed consent process that carefully differentiates the role of the research physician, which is by and large instrumental, from that of an attending physician.

The pseudo consent forms that Reynolds imagines in his chapter, such as "Would You Like to Know When Your Child Will Die?" are a startling contrast to the usual informative but bland consent forms in actual research (Reynolds, 206). Reynolds points out that even if parents do decide to opt in, the information gained from the testing is likely to be ambiguous, complicating both medical decisions and everyday family life. The uncertainty can influence a parent's perception of the child, as one mother relates:

I'm constantly questioning "is this because of her disorder?" For example, she's a really bad sleeper so for the longest time I thought "wow, is this her deletion or is it just that she's five months old and she sucks at sleeping like most babies?" (Reynolds, 209)

In addition to confusion about their role, parents with sick children often experience the pervasive disorientation of despair alternating with hope.

Reynolds's description of the tension between instrumental and holistic relationships is further imagined in another recent novel, *Never Let Me Go* (Ishiguro, 2005), which begins as the main character, Kathy H., recalls her peaceful, enriching years at "Hailsham," a boarding school in England. But her language

is strange. She is a “carer” for organ donors, and the teachers at Hailsham are known as “guardians.” We gradually come to understand (as do the children) that the school is an institution where cloned individuals are raised from childhood to young adulthood. As adults, the “graduates” will first spend several years as carers of organ donors, then become organ donors themselves. The carer does not seek to bring patients back to their optimal state of health; their purpose is merely instrumental: to return “donors” to a sufficient state of survival to facilitate subsequent donations. Donation is not a voluntary or singular act, motivated by altruism. First, second, third, and (rarely) fourth donations are in the future and will ultimately end in “completion.”

The narrative describes many tragic situations that emphasize the inevitable trajectories of the graduates’ existence. The adult Kathy (still a carer) and her companions, Tommy and Ruth, are intrigued by stories of a nearby boat, and they decide to take a trip to see it for themselves. They find the location but have to approach the boat slowly, since Tommy and Ruth have already reached the donor stage and their health and mobility are severely compromised. They see that the boat is stranded, echoing the futility of their own lives. Even a humble career in the wider society is out of reach. At another point, the friends hear about a woman in the city who resembles Ruth, suggesting that Ruth’s “possible” (i.e., person from whom she is cloned) might be nearby. They mount a trip to the city, but this search is also disappointing and inconclusive. A rumor about a special process that temporarily delays organ donation raises hope but proves to be false. The graduates’ lives serve only as “spare parts” for those who are more privileged.<sup>11</sup>

The fictional world of *Never Let Me Go*, by negative example, reveals the characteristics of a healthy convivial order. For Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity is the primordial ground of being in the world.<sup>12</sup> Both Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi affirm the importance of personal freedom that is situated in a rich and eclectic cultural tradition (for Polanyi, it was a community of scientists). In this world, people are centers of value in themselves, and innovation is encouraged and celebrated. I think that the frameworks of Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi offer a firm ground for critiquing and transforming the “reveries” that, for Reynolds, complicate parent-child relationships in the context of genetic technologies. These concepts would be useful, for example, in educational programs for genetic counsellors.

## Future Directions

There are many promising avenues for future studies of matters introduced in the essays in Bredlau and Welsh. Here, I highlight seven.

### *Disability Studies*

Both literature and activism in this field have grown in volume and complexity since the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Simon 2013). It would be interesting to engage life-writing accounts and theoretical perspectives from the standpoint of Disability Studies. Specifically, are the perspectives in Bredlau and Welsh reasonably congruent with the views of those who identify themselves as disabled?

### *Critical Phenomenology*

Critical phenomenology seeks not only to describe but also to ameliorate social conditions that perpetuate injustice. Are there initiatives and developments that have led to change in the areas of concern raised by Magrì and McQueen (2023)?

The primary focus of Bredlau and Welsh, and of the present article, is the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. As we have observed, Michael Polanyi describes similar concerns and proposals. What can we say or infer about his views on normality, abnormality, and pathology? Polanyi's focus on the structures of knowing and epistemology, rather than on embodiment, raises interesting challenges.

### *The Possibility of Error*

Polanyi's general project is to reform faulty, scientific descriptions of how knowledge is achieved by affirming the essential participation of the knower in all acts of discovery. Polanyi also recognizes that personal knowing implies the confirmation of beliefs that might conceivably be false. Thus, he is interested in the ways that scientific understanding develops over time, even though error and misapprehension can occur. Could this insight help us understand how views of abnormality have developed over time and how they might be revised? (See Venable, 2022.)

### *Errors in Inference*

Reasonable action and perception, according to Polanyi, can be classified in the following manner.

- (a) *Correct* inferences reached within a *true system*.
- (b) Erroneous conclusions arrived at within a true system.
- (c) Conclusions arrived at by the correct use of a fallacious system.
- (d) *Incoherence* and *Obsessiveness* as observed in the ideation of the insane, particularly in schizophrenia (Polanyi 1962, 374). This classification system focuses on mistakes in knowing; as such, its application to problems in physicality is unclear. However, failures in inference could be brought to bear on *accounts* and *social perceptions* of abnormality.

### *Physiological "Mistakes"*

Polanyi does not have Merleau-Ponty's intense focus on people with medical conditions such as brain damage, phantom limb sensations, or aphasia. He offers few descriptions of the ways that people experience or manifest physical abnormalities. However, he has considered how machine-like structures can lead to error. He proposes that human life depends on successive levels of boundary conditions. Physics and chemistry provide the basis for physiology, which in turn leads to integrated human function and perhaps to transcendence. Failure in an integrated function, such as vision, can only be understood by reference to the preceding level, which in this case would be physiology. This analysis is especially helpful in categorizing functional breakdowns, such as morning glory syndrome and locked-in syndrome, but does not give access to the experience of these conditions.

### *Child Development*

Merleau-Ponty devotes sustained attention to the origins of intentionality in childhood (Trevarthen 1975; Merleau-Ponty 1964b). Polanyi's remarks are less focused. He holds that intellectual artifacts are transmitted through apprenticeship. A child places confidence in his parents, school, and eventually in the larger society (Polanyi 1962, 207). How might Polanyi's ideas be extended into an account of unhealthy childhood environments that can lead to personal or social disturbances? For example, could one draw analogies between Polanyi's discussion of totalitarian states and the workings of family systems?

### *Abnormal Social Structures, Political Corruption, and Totalitarianism*

Polanyi's chapter, "Conviviality," discusses the foundations of a "community of knowers" and the ways that corrupt political systems can exploit our intellectual and moral passions (1962, 203–245). He is especially concerned about Soviet manipulation of science for political ends. Dynamo-objective coupling, as in Marxism, is also a major problem. Perhaps Polanyi's insights on conviviality could be brought to bear on the issues we have discussed in Bredlau and Welsh, such as unfair treatment and labelling of people with disabilities (Howell, Rakoczi), exploitation of some people for the benefit of others, and the unfortunate tendency in medical care to overlook the personal meaning of illness and treatment (Reynolds).

### Conclusion

*Normality, Abnormality, and Pathology in Merleau-Ponty* is a creative and intriguing compilation of essays that explore, extend, and critique Merleau-Ponty's writings. The chapters take many different approaches, ranging from philosophical analysis to life-writing and fiction. The volume represents an excellent contribution to Merleau-Ponty studies and would be a fine addition to professional education, including social work, Disability Studies, nursing, psychology, and medicine. The theoretical chapters would also be of interest in philosophy seminars.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Many thanks to Phil Mullins and Martin Turkis for their assistance with this paper.

<sup>2</sup>See also the websites of The International Merleau-Ponty Circle, <https://www.merleauPonty.org>, and The Polanyi Society, <http://polanyisociety.org>.

<sup>3</sup>Polanyi would consider Blair's underdeveloped optic nerve as a functional error at the physiological level of organization. "Physiology is the technology of healthy achievements: of wholesome feeding, good digestion, effective locomotion, sharp perception, fertile copulation, etc." (Polanyi 1962, 334).

<sup>4</sup>I suggest that Blair's critique would be more applicable to Polanyi's description of the structure of knowing, which seems to assume clear resolution.

<sup>5</sup>For example, jazz and other musical pieces that deliberately incorporate improvisation are distinct from traditional Western styles that have a taken-for-granted structure of chordal tension and resolution. Contemporary musical performance and ambient music may feature "slow, diffuse melodic lines with no recognizable tempo" (Pawuk 2022).

<sup>6</sup>Polanyi also considers experiments with inversion goggles, and his conclusions about the tacitly held body schema are congruent with those of Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>7</sup>Likewise, David Abram writes that when his family is away, he begins to experience the "neutral" spaces of his house as unfamiliar and disturbing (2010, 31).

<sup>8</sup>Both Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir affirm that fictional accounts offer situated, concrete perspectives that contrast to traditional philosophy's "masculinizing and universalizing" tendencies. (See Merleau-Ponty 1964b; Potear 1993; Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1998).

<sup>9</sup>*The City and the City* does not provide a historical basis for the separation.

<sup>10</sup>We have previously discussed this methodology in Merleau-Ponty, and it is a major focus of the present volume.

<sup>11</sup>It is no wonder that the children are raised by guardians in an institution; their parents are not in evidence. The novel does not describe the "gestational" period; perhaps surrogates are involved. The lives and intersubjectivity of the children are compromised from the beginning.

<sup>12</sup>"A fifteen-month-old baby opens his mouth when I playfully take one of his fingers in my mouth and pretend to bite it... 'Biting' immediately has an intersubjective meaning for him" (*PP*, 368).

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