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Layers of Distortion: An Argument in Favor of Idealism

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty provides an account of the human consciousness or experience of time. In this paper, I will explain Merleau-Ponty’s view that time is a network of intentionalities, or a combination of realism and idealism, and a dimension of our being. Then, I will discuss his argument that the idealist view does not offer an accurate description of human time consciousness as it fails to provide a “psychic trace of the past to make consciousness of the past understandable” in the present (179). I claim that Merleau-Ponty’s need for a “psychic trace” of the past to have idealism is impossible if during the act of remembering, the human consciousness distorts memories and creates new versions of them for us to experience in the present. Therefore, such a trace need not and does not exist. Finally, I consider two objections to my idealist view: time seems to exist independent from an individual’s consciousness because time occurs before and after a person’s life and the ideas of the past and memory cease to have any meaning. To address the first objection, I share Merleau-Ponty’s idea of collective human consciousness for time and conclude by adopting this realist notion, that there is a part of time that exists outside of the individual, we must accept the view that time is a network of intentionalities. Finally, to respond to the second objection, I mention that if distorted memories are similar enough to what occurred in the past, we can have consciousness of the past in the present.

Merleau-Ponty describes time as a network of intentionalities and dimension of our being as the intersection of realism and idealism. The realist believes that time is an objective characteristic of the world and exists outside of our minds. Everyone brings his or her consciousness into time when interacting with and understanding the world. The idealist, on the other hand, thinks that time is a construction of an individual’s consciousness. Time is and depends on the subject. Under this view, a person’s experience of time is the product of his or her mind.

Now, Merleau-Ponty takes the notion that time is a part of the world of from realism and that retentions, retaining the past, and protentions, anticipating the future, arise in our consciousness from idealism to constitute his network of intentionalities. He says that time is a dimension of our being because we are time and time is one of the parts of us that enables us to understand the world around us. Merleau-Ponty believes the human experience of time does not entail passing through individual present moments as in a linear fashion. Rather, it is one where the present moment recedes into the past and is replaced by the moment ahead of it. As more moments come and go, the original present moment is pushed deeper into the past through layers of time. Merleau-Ponty describes remembering akin to reaching into a pond of a particular depth and grabbing a rock. Insteadof passing through every moment in time before the memory, as would occur with a linear experience of time, we reach through the layers of time and take hold of the memory (485).

To support his view, Merleau-Ponty provides a criticism of the idealist view of time. He says that time cannot exist solely in the human consciousness as this requires a “psychic trace of the past to make consciousness of the past understandable” in the present (179). Here, Merleau-Ponty says that in order to make sense of the past in the present, we must have direct contact with the past and bring our experience of it to the present. We not only have to recognize past events as a memories but also have them at our fingertips. It seems that we must have consciousness of the present and the past moment at the same time. Another issue is that while one’s awareness of a past moment exists and continues in the present, it does not provide any contact whatsoever with the past (480). So, the closest we can get to the past is only an abstraction of it.

Merleau-Ponty’s idea that we need a “psychic trace” of the past in order to have idealism is unfounded if our retentions are not retentions of the past events themselves but distorted versions of the retentions created by our consciousness in the present. If we stir up memories of the past in the present, our perception of the memories themselves may not be entirely accurate or correct. We could be creating new, altered versions of the past in the present, a present past. So, we are essentially conscious of the past, though it is a different past, in our experience of the present. There can be no “psychic trace” of the past when remembering because we create a new version of the past in the present, and there is no need for such a trace with an altered past. Perhaps a past event truly happened, but it does not exist in our consciousness as we have replaced it with an altered version. Recalling the same moment at a later point in time would also be a distortion, separating the past from our memory of it. Retentions, rather than reaching into the layers of the past, would be creating layers of distortion between the present and past.

Examples of recalling distorted versions of the past in the present are manifold. For example, people tell the same stories differently every time, not just for dramatic effect but perhaps because their memories are altered each time they try to remember the details. The quality of memories changes over time causing them to lose many of their distinctive features and become skewed. Also, people can be convinced that they experienced something that did not actually happen to them and are able to recall the experience. This poses an interesting problem of creating memories that have no grounding in the past. The idea of déjà vu, having a vague recollection of experiencing a present moment before, is another interesting case to consider. In addition, many people have issues with their short and long term memory, causing their memories of the past to be altered or disappear entirely.

The view that the past is distorted in the present consciousness causes two major problems. The first issue is that time would only exist during the lifespan of an individual; however, everyone seems to understand that time existed before and will exist after him or her. Merleau-Ponty addresses this objection by considering a collective human consciousness (503). While the idealist views time as part of one’s consciousness, Merleau-Ponty suggests time could consist of an aggregate of human consciousness so that it continues to exist. However, this idea leads to accepting the idea of a realist account of time consciousness as well since we have to assume that a part of time is outside of ourselves, in others’ perceptions, making time an objective part of the world. Therefore, if we wish to hold onto the idea of an aggregate consciousness, we must agree to Merleau-Ponty’s network of intentionalities and leave behind idealism.

The second issue that arises is that the traditional understanding of the past and memory ceases to have any meaning. If we keep on constructing new versions of the past every time we do a retention of the past, then it seems that we do not have any true memories and can make up the past as we please. This would mean that the past does not exist and perhaps never did because we cannot recall it. The ideas of the past and memory would be meaningless. All we would have is the present and our present past, altered memories created by our consciousness in the present that that have no grounding in the past.

In order to address what becomes of the past and memory, we should think about how distorted and altered these memories created in the present might be from those in the past. It could either be the case that the new memories have been distorted so much from the original ones that they are not connected in any way to the past, have been semi-distorted so there is some connection to the past and the original memories, or have been are altered so slightly from the original memories that if we were able to examine the original memories and the present version of memories, we would barely notice a difference. If the new versions of our memories are quite similar to the actual memories and events that occurred in the past, then it does not seem that we should abandon the ideas of the past and memory. While we cannot achieve accuracy in our recollection of the past, many may believe we are close enough to equate the two allowing us to consciously experience the past in the present. This would provide the “psychic trace” Merleau-Ponty was looking for in order to have idealism. However, as we cannot have a complete, accurate recollection of the past in the present, some may continue to question whether we do have a past and memories.