

Words in the Flesh: Merleau-Ponty, Lonergan and Philosophy of Language
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It is no accident that both Merleau-Ponty and Lonergan call language the “embodiment of meaning.” A critical test of a philosophy’s stance on embodiment is found in its view of language. Materialism must claim that words are identical with meaning; there is no thought beyond the limits of its physical expression. Dualism must claim that words are empty vessels for a fully formed idea, for the material world has nothing to add or contribute to the real of the intelligible world. Thinkers like Lonergan and Merleau-Ponty, who strive to reach a more critical philosophical position, must avoid both extremes. The purely materialist view is easy enough to avoid, but the dualist view, which Merleau-Ponty calls “intellectualist,” is much easier to slip into.¹ Lonergan gives a sophisticated account of the role of the human body in cognition, but because this subtlety does not carry over to his discussion to words as the embodiment of thought, he appears to fall into this intellectualist dualism of thought and word. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, is able to show concretely how language can be intertwined with thought by underscoring the importance of the body. Using his system as a model, it is possible to supplement Lonergan’s view with a much richer account of the elemental levels of language.

I.

According to Lonergan, meaning is not a property of the word, but of the intelligence

¹ To avoid confusion, we must point out that while Merleau-Ponty opposes intellectualism to empiricism, it is not the same as idealism, as the student of Lonergan would expect. To Lonergan, the idealists are those who reject the possibility of attaining the empiricists’ idea of truth as “already out there now,” even while they retain this concept of what truth is. But intellectualists do not necessarily cling to the empiricist ideal of language. Their problem is that they reject it too far, arguing that language is almost completely extraneous to meaning.

behind the signs which understands and so has something to say. As Joseph Flanagan explains, “Words have a meaning because they express insights and decisions; in themselves words are only multiple markings on a paper—an experience—that becomes meaningful when experienced intelligently.”² An insight, as an act of understanding, is a flash of clarity still rooted in all the richness of an originary discovery. Yet, this moment is fleeting. It will slip away unless it is formulated conceptually in an “inner word;” one must pare down the tangle of its original complexity to a concept that captures what is essential. There are many ways to formulate an inner word, and the different ways of doing so can multiply further in the outer words of natural languages even while they all express the meaning of the same insight.³

According to Lonergan, then, the word is not *essential* to understanding. The spoken “outer word” can help further clarify or give a “heightened and intensified experience” of one’s ability to mean.⁴ Yet, the insight can be anchored with prelinguistic conceptual formulation alone, and words do not directly contribute to this. Similarly, when coming to understand the words of another, the words themselves are not the meaning, but an experiential source of meaning that the reader or listener must make meaningful. The word, then, is a stepping stone to attain the insight. Thus far, Lonergan falls under Merleau-Ponty’s critique of those who treat the word as an “empty vessel.”

If language is not related to the moment of insight, Lonergan does attempt in various texts to grant it an important role in the overall process of thought and communication. Lonergan says that language can eventually become habitual in use and thus seem to flow out

² Flanagan, “Knowing and Language in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan,” 67.

³ Flanagan, “Knowing and Language in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan,” 54-55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

spontaneously, like the fingers of a pianist know the place and feel of the keys. But before this happens, the words must first be grasped in an insight, which links them to other words, to their terms, and to their sources of meaning in whatever level of the cognitional structure.⁵

When the speaker does master these linguistic patterns, it can guide thought:

The available language, then, takes the lead. It picks out the aspects of things that are pushed into the foreground, the relations between things that are stressed, the movements and changes that demand attention. So different languages develop in different manners and the best of translations can express, not the exact meaning of the original, but the closest approximation in another tongue.⁶

Words, as found within the context of our native language, highlight certain aspects of data.

Lonergan adds that language also “structures the world about the subject”⁷ through grammar, with tenses, moods, voices, categories, structuring our concepts of time and places. This grants language a more important role than a pure intellectualist would admit. Yet, the help it provides seems minimal, and understanding always comes first; even if the words themselves bring out some aspects of the data, they do not actually shape the way we categorize. Language does not actively contribute to the formation of meaning.

Yet, as opposed to pure intellectualism, Lonergan does argue that meaning is not fully isolated from the body. In *Method in Theology*, he distinguishes between two primary layers of meaning. The first is elemental or potential meaning, which occurs in the primary unity of sensed and sense or knower and known, prior to the differentiation of subject and object, and thus prior to conceptualization or formation of the inner word.⁸ This meaning can be expressed through various carriers, including art, symbol, and intersubjectivity. These carriers are all tied to feeling and images, inviting the listener into a pre-objective experiential

⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 577-78.

⁶ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 71.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Doran, “Insight and Language: Steps Toward the Resolution of a Problem,” 410.

identification with this meaning. Lonergan claims these convey an experience that cannot be exhausted by other sources of meaning, but he does not explain further.⁹

From these potential or elemental acts of meaning follow objective acts of meaning. Objectification requires a certain “psychic distance,”¹⁰ transcending the level of experiencing to grasp what is most significant. The carriers of these meanings are language and incarnational meaning. The latter of these is a complex combination of all of the other carriers at once, linguistic, symbolic, artistic, and intersubjective. Yet, as Lonergan describes it in *Method*, linguistic meaning seems much more detached from this elemental basis. He draws a strong contrast between the intersubjective meaning of a smile and linguistic meaning. Where a smile can express many things, linguistic meaning tends to be univocal; it contains distinctions between feelings, desires, wishes, commands, and so forth, where intersubjectivity can be all of these at once; and it communicates what has been objectified and removable from the intersubjective situation, expressing the object rather than revealing the subject.¹¹ How attached is Lonergan to this flat, objective view of language? It is difficult to say. Lonergan twice acknowledges studies that show how aphasia and related psychological disorders disrupt thought, language, and action, which would indicate the interdependence of these things, but once again, he does not explore the implications of this.¹²

The status of objectivity and language can be made clearer if we expand on Lonergan’s discussion in *Insight* on principal and instrumental acts of meaning.¹³ Principal acts of meaning include the formal and full acts of meaning; they correspond to the acts of

⁹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 60.

¹⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹¹ Ibid., 60-61.

¹² Ibid., 86, 255.

¹³ Lonergan, *Insight*, 383.

understanding and judgment that animate the words, and thus are objective meaning. Instrumental acts of meaning, on the other hand, include specific words, gestures, writing, and any other way that these principal acts can be communicated, including these elemental carriers. Meaning that has been *objectified* in a particular act of understanding or judgment can be expressed in many different instrumental acts of meaning. However meaning which is *prior to objectification*, elemental meaning, will depend critically on the particular instrumental acts which still bear all the richness and complexity of the original experience prior to the pruning of conceptualization. This cannot be tied to an explicit principal act of meaning. It would be absurd to try to transfer the insights of Munch's *Scream* into a new painting. Here with painting we see for the first time an expression which is not merely an afterthought of an insight that could function just as well through something else; the expression and the insight are mutually linked. If we could interpret language as somewhat similar to this, words and thoughts could be related in a distinctively non-intellectualist way.

In *Method*, Lonergan cuts this possibility short. He classifies it as a strictly objectified meaning, for the phonetic experience of the words is irrelevant unless the primary meaning is being carried across; they could be easily substituted for other words, unlike the painting.¹⁴ However, by drawing upon ideas from *Insight*, we could soften this position slightly. Lonergan would agree that ordinary or literary language would exhibit a greater dependency on this instrumental meaning than technical language, which really is the pure objective language he means. Yet, this claim remains a tentative defense against intellectualism, because the best kind of instrumental act of meaning to express something is ultimately determined by the principal act of meaning. Simply put, the insights always determine the

¹⁴ Flanagan, "Knowing and Language in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan," 68.

words, even if the words then become a key part of its expression; the words never influence the insights.

Finally, it is in *Insight*, where Lonergan makes his strongest claim of the relation between knowledge and expression; they are “distinct” but “inseparable,” and they interpenetrate.¹⁵ While the insights themselves are not linguistic, a long chain of insights is difficult to run through without expression to anchor them, and so “expression enters into the very process of learning, and the attainment of knowledge tends to coincide with the attainment of the ability to express it.”¹⁶ Yet even here, Lonergan will emphasize clearly that expression always follows meaning, never the reverse.¹⁷ This is more than pure intellectualism would cede, but it is not enough.

In sum, words are not *completely* passive vessels of ideas for Lonergan. Language is helpful in reminding us of the insights we have been collecting, bringing out certain aspects of data, or refining the spatiotemporal structure of experience. The elemental rootedness of words may help express insights. Yet, because insights themselves are fully independent from words, words do not substantially add anything to ideas. There is only one direction of influence: from insights to words, and never words to insights. According to Lonergan, “[l]anguage is constituted by articulated sound and meaning,”¹⁸ which is to say, language does not itself have a constitutive role in meaning. When Lonergan says meaning “finds its greatest liberation” though its “embodiment in language,”¹⁹ it seems that this verbal “body” carries the animating spirit of thought passively without helping form it in any concrete way.

¹⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, 579.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 577.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 611-12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁹ Lonergan, *Method in Theology.*, 70.

This is quite a strange claim for a thinker whose own interpretation of embodiment is not dualist. To provide a more robust account of language, we will need to plunge words more deeply into the system at both ends; words must be related to the process of thinking itself, and words must at the same time be rooted in elemental meaning. This is precisely the answer of Merleau-Ponty.

II.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis will give words a much more active role, for as he says, "at the very moment language fills our minds up to the top without leaving the smallest place for thought..., and exactly to the extent that we abandon ourselves to it, it passes beyond the 'signs' toward their sense."²⁰ Yet he does not hold for the simple unity of thought and words, and so he is not an empiricist. Rather, meaning always exceeds its signification in words, for speech "prolongs into the invisible"²¹ of consciousness. While he does not parse out this thinking in slow motion, as Lonergan does, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that thought is "instantaneous," moving forward "in flashes."²² Unlike Lonergan, words themselves, and not only preverbal concepts, are an anchor for thought: "A thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist even for itself."²³ There is no "internal" realm sealed off from language and the world. Rather, as he says, "this supposed silence is alive with words, this

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 244-45.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 118.

²² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 206.

²³ Ibid.

inner life is an inner language.”²⁴

Merleau-Ponty confirms this through everyday experience of language. If intellectualism’s claims are right, we would expect to experience ourselves constantly translating thoughts into words, or words back into thought, but when we read or speak the understanding is usually instantaneous. And when we stumble in communication, looking for the meaning we want to express, we do not possess a fully formed idea detached from its expression, we have a vague sense of meaning that can only come to us once we call up its word. Finally, where Lonergan would say multiple expressions stem from the same insight, Merleau-Ponty would argue these different expressions all express different insights - otherwise, why should a multiplicity of expressions exist at all, and why should we choose one as more suitable than another?

If it is true that thought and language are so intimately connected, it is irresponsible to analyze them according to traditional methods, which separate these out as entirely different things and then try to put them back together. Rather, they are related from the start, and this leads us to several further conclusions. Words, he says, “bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman’s net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed.”²⁵ This sea of living relationships is the network of meanings in which each word is embedded, and it is through these that one lives and understands one’s mode of being in the world.²⁶ Words are not merely univocal, for they are formed by their implicit relation to each other and the context in which they are spoken.

The linguists teach us... that the univocal signification is but one part of the signification of the word,

²⁴ Ibid., 213.

²⁵ Ibid., xvii.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," 274. See also *The Visible and the Invisible*, 102, 119.

that beyond it there is always a halo of signification that manifests itself in new and unexpected modes of use... language is itself a world, itself a being.²⁷

This network of meanings ties the word to a three-dimensional world inexhaustible by a single insight. By stressing that meaning was found in the principal acts, Lonergan does not properly account for the fact that we can receive meaning from the elemental richness of the words themselves. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, argues that the word itself is not a univocal sign but a complex and living collection of significations that can recast the nets of the linguistic network to draw up new depths of insights; in a sense, the word can itself choose new words and initiate new insights.

Like Lonergan, Merleau-Ponty also mentions studies of aphasia, alexia, and other cases of brain damage known to disrupt speech. Yet, unlike Lonergan, he tries to give an account of what this means for thought. If an intellectualist form of language were true, a brain-damaged patient's inability to articulate a word like "blue" should have no effect on their understanding of the color. Studies show, however, that when patients lose the word, they also lose their ability to categorize. They retained only concrete particulars and the ability to compare similar qualities from one step to the next.²⁸ This shows that they had not simply lost a container for a meaning when they lost the word, but that they had lost the insight itself.

All this is evidence that speech is not simply a sign produced by thinking; speech and thought are "intervolved," and word is not the clothing, but the very "embodiment" of thought.²⁹ In fact, the body grounds language from the very beginning. We would have no access to the world in perception, and thus nothing to speak of and no way to speak, if the

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 96; also 118, 125, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," 243-44.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 204.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

body were not always already among perceptible things. Our spontaneous relation with the environment yields perception, but from these lived experiences, the need for expression bursts out of us “like the boiling point of a liquid.”³⁰ When we turn to others this spontaneity of expression manifests in gesture, and communication begins. This sharing of meaning is possible “because our bodily gestures can slip from one human body to another.”³¹ All higher meaning is founded on this bodily origin.

Words, then, are a specialized kind of gesture, and they retain this character of a bodily action, a “taking up of a position in the world of meanings.”³² This is clearest to us in “creative language,” where we try to express a thought in words for the first time. For example, if we try to explain a taste, an experience, an impression, or a new philosophical idea, we grasp at metaphors and impressionistic language, and we do not simply translate a preverbal concept into the right word, but we can sense ourselves feeling our way into its meaning as we speak. If these gestural roots of words do not always seem obvious to us, this is because we are accustomed to what Merleau-Ponty calls “empirical speech,” or the conventional meanings of a language community. This is simply creative speech that has been absorbed and used to the extent that its latent creative origins are forgotten. Scientific or technical language is a specialized example of this. Such language certainly has its place, but we must not forget its gestural origins. The impression of exactitude given by technical language, which seems to transparently link to the thoughts themselves, is only illusory, for it is not the pure idea but a “more manageable derivative.” “There is no vision without the

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 228; *The Visible and the Invisible*, 126.

³¹ Low, “Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of Reason,” 115. See also *Phenomenology of Perception*, 208.

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 225.

screen” of language and sensibility,”³³ and thus no purely objective language which leaves its bodily origins behind.

So, language is grounded in the body. It is also itself is a body for thought, if a “less heavy, more transparent” one.³⁴ These two statements are actually one and the same, if we understand the unique role of the body in Merleau-Ponty’s thought (which, incidentally, earned him Lonergan’s praise).³⁵ Especially in his later work, the body is not the outer shell for the spirit, nor a thing among other things. Rather, the body, as “flesh,” is a chiasm or intertwining with the world; that is, they are the reversible sides of the same fabric, a hinge. A hand can only touch if it is itself tangible; thus, the body is the overlapping of the world as perceived and the world as perceiving. By saying language is a body, Merleau-Ponty is calling it a hinge between signifying and signified, intertwined with both thought and the embodied world of experience. This reversibility “manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as by a sublimation of the flesh.”

Thus, Merleau-Ponty argues that although thought is not reducible to language, language has an active role in understanding. Not only does it anchor and guide thought, but it also helps formulate insights and enriches them with new meaning in expression. Because of its gestural origins, language does not simply posit relations; it is both “intelligence” and “motility,” or a certain way of living experience.³⁶ This is true even if convention builds up uses that forget this life of words and mutes the originary experience that first shaped the words. In sum, for Merleau-Ponty language incarnates meaning. Where we saw Lonergan

³³ Ibid., 150.

³⁴ Ibid., 153.

³⁵ Lonergan, *Phenomenology and Logic*, 271-2.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 226.

detached insights from language, and seemed to detach language at least partially from elemental meaning, for Merleau-Ponty, language is the body, and thus the hinge, on which both sides turn.

III.

Lonergan and Merleau-Ponty are not opposites. If placing the above accounts side by side shows their differences, it also highlights their similarities—if we might be permitted to expand the places Lonergan did not develop.

The key problem for Lonergan was the unidirectional flow of influence, insights directing bland, passive words whose nature was largely unexplored and unclarified. Merleau-Ponty was able to argue for a mutual relationship between thought and word because he showed what language had to offer, a welling-up of lived experience still bristling with preobjectified complexity. The first step, then, is to solidify Lonergan's position by taking a clear stance on the elemental grounding of words. Merleau-Ponty's support for his position rests on the claim that speech is a continuation and refinement of wordless gestures, and technical language is then a sedimentation of this original creative level, even if it can forget these gestural origins. Lonergan already has all the right pieces to match Merleau-Ponty's theory; we simply need to draw them out and link them together. First we must place language not as a parallel but as an outgrowth of "intersubjective meaning," which is roughly the same as Merleau-Ponty's "gesture." Lonergan does claim to hold the historical "priority of poetry,"³⁷ which would make creative or literary language the mode in which words are first shaped. Just like Merleau-Ponty, Lonergan then believes technical language to be a later

³⁷ Method, 73.

development; we must then simply clarify that even in this technical, objectified language, the elemental layer is never lost. It is still present, even if covered over.

Yet, from this follows other consequences that Lonergan may be more reluctant to accept. One we grant them elemental status, words can never be univocal signs or passive anchors for insights. Their bodies, still rooted in lived richness of undifferentiated experience, are complex and weighty, spilling out on all sides in this “living sea of relationships” that binds them to other words and experiences. Yet Lonergan has little, if any, interest in the three-dimensional nature of words. Despite place where he claims language is univocal, in *Insight* he does admit that words are found together in “typical patterns,” and “possess their own retinues of associated representations and affects.” But instead of showing how this can direct thought, Lonergan dismisses this as a matter of psychology rather than a matter of meaning.³⁸ He says, “these sensitive routines, these typical patterns are able to carry the meaning of words only because initially there occurred the insights that linked words intelligibly not only with one another but also with terms of meaning and with sources of meaning.”³⁹ Insights must come first. The concern that drives Lonergan here should not be taken lightly: if the influence was mutual, if words could initiate understanding, is it possible to preserve the transcendence of intelligibility?

Robert Doran offers a possible solution by suggesting that some data appearing on the empirical level are “already infused with intelligence and rationality.”⁴⁰ The reception of this data could make up a “minor formal and actual intelligibility,” thus allowing us receive sedimented insights of others, as in the conventions of language. This is prior to the more

³⁸ Lonergan, *Insight*, 577.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁴⁰ Doran, “Insight and Language: Steps Toward the Resolution of a Problem,” 420.

fully developed reflection in the “major formal and actual intelligibility,” where the originary meaning of language takes place, on which this sedimentation is founded.⁴¹ As Doran points out, Lonergan himself claims that while most of the time the levels of cognitional process operate according to their proper hierarchy, the free images and utterances which occur at the level of experience “commonly are under the influence of the higher levels before they provide a basis for inquiry and reflection.”⁴² If this is true, language can be a constitutive force that is not yet a full insight, but more than elemental meaning; it is a place in between where language intelligibly shapes our experience before we critically turn to it. The influence of thought and expression can finally be multi-directional without compromising the importance of insight.

This leads us to a final question: Lonergan is not a dualist. The body in his philosophy plays an important and multi-directional role in understanding; the patterning of experience can be critical for receptivity to insights, and yet this itself occurs without the initial influence of insight. Why would a thinker who holds this important grounding role for the body leave the flesh of words as so inconsequential? Somehow, when Lonergan chose the word “embodiment” to express his insight about thought and expression, he did not allow the word to have any guiding effect on his understanding. Lonergan’s intellectualist approach to language closed his eyes to the positive directions his own words might suggest to him. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, pursued this image very deliberately, using his studies of the body to help clarify and demonstrate what he meant by language. Lonergan treated the word like a univocal sign in a technical language, while Merleau-Ponty “grasp[ed] it by its

⁴¹ Ibid., 412.

⁴² Lonergan, *Insight*.

roots and all its foliage,”⁴³ tracing its significations where they led.

We must be careful here. While Merleau-Ponty’s fruitful attention to his language demonstrates the potential ability of words to direct insights, Lonergan’s failure to notice his language simultaneously proves the potential ability of insights to ignore the guidance of words. The fact that Lonergan does not follow the direction the word “embodiment” suggests shows that there is still some degree of transcendence of insight over words. Words guide, and can help produce new insights, but they do not force. Thinkers do not always have to be attentive to the insights each word offers. But what this means, and to what extent understanding can really ignore the words that frame its world is another conversation, one in which Lonergan would issue a challenge for Merleau-Ponty, who does stray dangerously close to the other side of the spectrum, linguistic empiricism.

Let it suffice for now to conclude that we have examined one side of this difficult balance between linguistic materialism and dualism, and seen that the sparseness of Lonergan’s account leaves it prey to intellectualism. Yet, using Merleau-Ponty as a guide, his system can be drawn out more thoroughly to give language a more fitting role as the incarnation of thought.

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 126.

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