Expression and *The Structure of Behaviour*

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**Introduction**

As I'm kicking things off today, I'll begin with a (very) brief and general overview of Merleau-Ponty's ideas, then quickly outline the concepts around which Donald Landes’ book is organised. After that, I’ll return to discussion of *La structure du comportement* (*The Structure of Behaviour*, hereafter *SB*), and Landes’ understanding of it—essentially, that the paradoxical logic of expression is implicit in even this early work—before offering some comments: first, that a possible tension exists between Merleau-Ponty’s abiding emphasis upon perception and Simondon’s philosophy, a tension that is not insoluble; and that by also incorporating Simondon’s notion of being as problematic, we can further develop an account of bodily behaviour counter to those, such as Dreyfus’, that emphasise smooth equilibriums.

**Introduction to Merleau-Ponty**

Merleau-Ponty is best known for his focus upon the perceiving body, and for his major thesis, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (*Phenomenology of Perception*, hereafter *PhP*). For him, the body is neither a passive object, nor a subject only in virtue of a constituting consciousness. Concerning the subject of perception, he replaces “consciousness with existence, that
is, with being in the world through a body”. Perception is involvement in the world through the medium of a body. As fundamentally embodied, and consequently immersed in a spatio-temporal world, it is perspectival. The world eludes full and complete apprehension, and extends beyond full spatial and temporal awareness. Hence the appearance of things shades off into ambiguity and indeterminacy. This mode of appearance of things means that they solicit the perceiving body towards their ‘completion’: the body is continually and implicitly motivated towards things as it strives to maintain a grip on experience. This activity is basic in the production of subjectivity and objectivity: as perception spontaneously and prereflectively ‘traces out’ objects, subjects simultaneously ‘find’ themselves in the world and transform things into that world. Perceiving subject and object perceived are mutually constituted through the mediation of body. Thus, subjects are neither outwith the world, nor within it as a mere thing, but inhabit a world of already meaningful entities. Throughout, the body is not explicitly cognised as a body; it is an opening onto or “point of view on the world”. This world is already apprehended as routes and blockages, tools that are intuitive or obscure, places that are habitable or hostile; that is, meaningfully, as possible ways of relating to and acting in it.

**Introduction to Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression**

For Merleau-Ponty, bodily expression does not make public a thought that is already fully possessed, whether by indication (empiricism) or re-

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2. Ibid., 73.
presentation (intellectualism). Rather, words accomplish thought. Only upon expression is a thought realised, and made available for understanding. No interpretative distance exists between expression and expressed. Here is something of a paradox: we know what we meant only after expressing it. This brings us to Donald Landes’ book. As signalled by its title, the book is chiefly concerned with the structure of expression. It suggests that this structure is paradoxical, and that paradox is necessary for and constitutive of expression, and by extension, communication.

If expression accomplishes nascent meaning, rather than externalising an already-determinate internal idea, whence or from what does it emerge? Landes draws upon the late Merleau-Ponty to suggest that speech, for example, occurs against a background ‘silence’. This silence is neither ‘nothingness’ nor “the unspoken and preexisting language of thought”, but a latent, superabundant reserve that is both within, and overflows, the order of manifest expression: “the felt presence of so many possibilities that are never made explicit”.5

Here Landes takes up the work of Gilbert Simondon.6 For Simondon an individual is not self-identical, but exists relative to a dimension he calls preindividual. Individual and preindividual are not discrete substances, but moments within the individuating process that produces

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3 Following Merleau-Ponty, Landes suggests that in empiricist and rationalist accounts of expression, a word in itself has no meaning: it is either a stimulus that indicates the expressed, or an empty envelope for a mental idea. Here, however, expression has meaning.
4 The same goes for embodied expressions. Blushing neither indicates embarrassment, nor represents a discrete mental state, but just is embarrassment. PP
individuals.\textsuperscript{7} The preindividual describes the reservoir of potential ‘before’ resolution into an individual, meaning, action, and so forth. While logically antecedent, it is in fact neither separate from nor prior to individuals, and is retained throughout individuation as potential for further transformation. The preindividual has a particular kind of equilibrium that Simondon takes up from thermodynamics: this equilibrium is \textit{neither stable} (which, properly understood, entails stasis, since all energy has been exhausted) \textit{nor unstable} (which, lacking coherence, is no stability at all), but \textit{metastable}. Metastability indicates a precarious organisation where least modification of some parameter is sufficient to provoke transformation. Preindividual being, then, is a \textit{supersaturated} or \textit{tensed} system, rich in potential energy.\textsuperscript{8}

Simondon characterises the individuating process as a ‘dephasing’. Strictly speaking, the preindividual is without phase: it is a “reservoir of intensities and problems”.\textsuperscript{9} Dephasing begins when tension appears between these, that provokes “resolution... and prolongation of those tensions in the form of a structure”.\textsuperscript{10} Individuation is resolution of a tension in the preindividual. The individual \textit{just is} this resolution: a partial solution of the operation that instigates it. Finally, this process is \textit{transductive}:\textsuperscript{11} every individual enters into the preindividual reserve for

\textsuperscript{7} The individual is a “relative reality” in two ‘directions’: not only to the preindividual, but also to an ‘associated milieu’ instantiated alongside it.

\textsuperscript{8} That is, unlike the constituted individual, it is not self-identical. Accordingly, it is inexplicable via the principle of the excluded middle. Simondon, \textit{IL} 25.

\textsuperscript{9} Landes, \textit{MLE} 25.

\textsuperscript{10} “… une résolution des tensions premières et une conservation de ces tensions sous forme de structure” Simondon, \textit{IL} 25.

\textsuperscript{11} Becoming does not happen \textit{to} being, but is being’s propensity to fall out of phase with itself and in so doing, to resolve itself.
subsequent individuations. All structures remain metastable, retaining potential to dephase.¹²

Landes, then, understands expression as such a ‘metastable equilibrium’. This means that it is “precariously stable”: endlessly reconfigured by new expressions that—paradoxically—both draw upon and sustain it, take it up in order to surpass it. New expressions contribute their own latent possibilities to the precarious equilibrium. This is the central paradox of expression, ably captured by the term ‘coherent deformation’. While a given expression relies upon an established order of signification that enfolds past and present, genuine expression is also creation that surpasses that order, taking up the weight of the past and present in order go beyond them. Poetry works within established language, but by some felicitous redistribution or deployment of a latent possibility, opens up a new trajectory of sense. Expression, Landes holds, comprises a “trajectory of metastable equilibriums”.¹³ A new expression neither negates nor replaces a previous one, but prolongs it. This also refers to Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of exscription, wherein each expression—or inscription—simultaneously exscribes all the latent content that overflows it.¹⁴ It prolongs, but points away from, the latent, still indeterminate trajectories that sustain it. This makes expression inexhaustible in principle, though it may be corralled into less open configurations.

¹² In some states of affairs, however, this potential remains unactualised.
¹³ Landes, MLE.
¹⁴ Speech exscribes silence, the visible, the invisible, and so on. Ibid.
Now I'll return to Merleau-Ponty and SB. The account of perception I described earlier is developed in detail in \textit{PhP}, and revised further in later works. However, \textit{SB} is a little different. It seeks “to understand the relations of consciousness and nature: organic, psychological or even social”.\textsuperscript{15} Like \textit{PhP}, it seeks an alternative to realism and idealism: it proceeds from behaviour as agnostic in respect of these, so as to define it anew. Unlike \textit{PhP}, it eschews phenomenological interrogation for philosophical analysis of psychology and physiology. Its principal target is mechanistic behaviourism, that, when rejecting Cartesianism, has too hastily expunged certain aspects of behaviour. Merleau-Ponty aims to reintroduce to behaviour an intentional dimension that is inconceivable in mechanistic terms, without also reinstating intellectualist premisses.\textsuperscript{16} The book not only rejects certain of behaviourism’s ontological presuppositions; chiefly, that nature is the sum of external causal events, and that behaviour is explicable via reflex, as a causal reaction to stimuli located in physicochemical properties of an object. It also suggests that these presuppositions are invalidated by behaviourism’s own findings.

Merleau-Ponty’s chief conclusion is that biological reactions do not reduce to organismic parts or localised stimuli.\textsuperscript{17} Animals do not exist within a world of bare objects that impinge unilaterally and mechanically via objective properties. A stimulus only \textit{is} a stimulus because the

\textsuperscript{15} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Structure of Behaviour}, trans. Alden J Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 1. “By nature we understand here a multiplicity of events external to each other and bound together by relations of causality”.

\textsuperscript{16} We might say, alluding to the book’s original title, that he will shift from causally-organised behaviour to meaningfully-organised comportment. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, \textit{La structure du comportement} (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013).

\textsuperscript{17} This does not make necessary an entelechy that organises responses: this presumes that there \textit{are} separate units in need of organisation.
organism inaugurates and projects around it a vital environment, or *Umwelt*, that “gives momentary meaning to all of the local excitations”.\(^{18}\)

Animals respond to certain aspects of the external situation according to what, for them, makes *sense*: they do not encounter objects as mere things, but relative to vital needs:\(^{19}\) activity organises around the attractive or repellent, which do not reduce to physicochemical properties. Accordingly, ‘stimuli’ are not elementary properties, but the arrangement *between* organism and milieu.

**The Structure of Behaviour (2): From Living Form to Human Order**

Merleau-Ponty offers the concept of *form* to describe this arrangement irreducible to mechanism. Form exists for active organisms. It does not describe a mere “additive whole”,\(^ {20}\) but “total processes whose properties are not the sum of those which the isolated parts would possess”.\(^ {21}\) The reciprocal relation of organism and milieu is “the creation of certain relations” that compose “a unity of meaning” or signification.\(^ {22}\) Situation and reaction are internally linked: they are “two moments of a circular process”\(^ {23}\) that constitutes the structure that is “the mode of activity proper to the organism”.\(^ {24}\) Behaviour traces animal being-in-the-world as it carves out an opening onto the world, or “that part that is adequate

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 218. Without vitalism, or without this having mere subjective reality.

\(^{21}\) Merleau-Ponty, *SB* 49.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 87.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 130.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 130. That animals contribute to this process suggests that stimulus cannot be defined independently of organism.
to it”.\textsuperscript{25} This signification that is vital behaviour is \textit{part of} the organism’s reality, which is “not substantial but structural”.\textsuperscript{26}

The move from lower to higher behaviour does not entail a new category, only differentiation between “degrees of integration”.\textsuperscript{27} Merleau-Ponty specifies three such \textit{Gestalten}: physical, vital and human. \textit{Physical} order describes an equilibrium constituted relative to an external limit, whose activity tends towards rest.\textsuperscript{28} Only with the biological or vital order does behaviour appear.\textsuperscript{29} Here, an organism “executes a work beyond its proper limits”,\textsuperscript{30} to actively establish its \textit{Umwelt} “with respect to conditions which are only virtual and which the system itself brings into existence”.\textsuperscript{31} Within this living behavior, Merleau-Ponty differentiates further between different degrees of autonomy.\textsuperscript{32} In \textit{syncretic} forms, behaviour is fully submerged in a concrete situation. In \textit{amovable} form, behaviours relate to contextual \textit{signals}, but remain correlated with situations \textit{like} those from which they emerged.\textsuperscript{33}

The \textit{human order} adds a “third dialectic”:\textsuperscript{34} production of \textit{new} structures. Thanks to \textit{symbolic} form, behaviour can be liberated both from specific

\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid., 105.]
\item[Ibid., 139. We might suggest that form has objectivity, albeit of an ontological status other than that of its contiguous material parts.]
\item[Ibid., 133.]
\item[It is “obtained with respect to certain given external conditions” that might be “topographical… as in the distribution of electrical charges on a conductor; or… conditions which are themselves dynamic, as in the case of a drop of oil placed in the middle of a mass of water”. Ibid., 145.]
\item[“… which is to say that… actions are not comprehensible as functions of the physical milieu”. Ibid., 159. “… one says of a man or of an animal that he behaves; one does not say it of an acid, an electron, a pebble or a cloud except by metaphor” (2/225 fn.3).]
\item[Ibid., 145-6.]
\item[Ibid., 145-6.]
\item[This turns on whether the structure is “submerged in the content, or… emerges from it to become… the proper theme of activity” Ibid., 103.]
\item[Ibid., 105.]
\item[Ibid., 162.]
\end{itemize}
situations and species-defined ‘functional values’, to become the “proper theme of the activity that tends to express it”.\textsuperscript{35} It is available for a plurality of points of view, and can take objects as simultaneously available for multiple uses.\textsuperscript{36} This furnishes the existential capacity of “orientating oneself in relation to the possible”.\textsuperscript{37} This inaugurates the human world proper, and makes possible “new cycles of behaviour” (which amounts to the same thing).\textsuperscript{38} For humans, projects and purposes, and values underpinning these, appear against a structured, human background: ‘nascent perception’ is of a human milieu. Yet such structures can be thematised, abstracted, accorded ”new significance”, and finally surpassed.\textsuperscript{39} This makes the human dialectic ambiguous (or, paradoxical): the self-same activity that engenders what apparently determinate structures has “as its meaning to reject them and to surpass them”.\textsuperscript{40}

Landes on Merleau-Ponty and Simondon

Landes finds a paradoxical logic implicit in even this early work. Merleau-Ponty’s critique of reflex reveals a form of paradoxical, “directed activity between blind mechanism and intelligent behaviour”.\textsuperscript{41} Even basic, animal behaviours are orientated according to “current

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 120. Put otherwise, behaviour “no longer has only signification, [but] is itself signification”. Ibid., 122.

\textsuperscript{36} As “two aspects of an identical thing”. Ibid., 116. Put otherwise, human symbolic behaviour introduces a new element: human action takes place, as it were, ‘under a description’. The same movement means something different—\textit{is} a different act or behaviour—according to the description or context.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 176.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 162.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 179.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 176.

\textsuperscript{41} Landes, \textit{MPE} 64.
positions and *potential* movements*,42 addressed to a future situation that is not yet actual: what Landes calls, in his language of expression, a “future paradoxical ideal weight”.45 Even simple behaviour, then, “is *expression*”:44 activity wherein an interior expresses itself on the outside, where the interior does not preexist, but is produced though, the expression.

Similarly, more complex behaviours “respond to the situation by playing forward a past that is thereby paradoxically altered”.45 Bodily behaviour and gesture has its own kind of intelligence or “expressive creativity”:46 it is a “moving expression of its past and present towards a future that is present as metastable”.47 Landes suggests that nascent perception is *already* paradoxical, or ambiguous, as always self-transcending towards the ‘virtual’. The form or sense that grounds activity, then, is not only taken up but transformed: every activity “institates new lines of force” in an existing field. This makes the human situation dynamic: activity is “creation in the face of an evolving situation”, orientated in virtue of ”unpredictable future encounters”.48

**Response (1): From Form to Information**

While recognising that Landes claims only that Merleau-Ponty tends *towards* the kind of equilibrium Simondon will eventually describe, a cursory response to this encounter might still wonder whether a tension exists between their respective positions concerning perception and

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42 Ibid., 64.
43 Ibid., 64.
44 Ibid., 60.
46 Ibid., 64.
47 Ibid., 64.
48 Ibid., 72.
sense. For Merleau-Ponty, bodily experience is founded in perception. This emphasis upon perceptual primacy obtains throughout his work: there is always presupposition of, and grounding in, primordial perceptual sense. In SB, form plays this role.

In Simondon’s problematic, however, the preindividual is an ontogenetic operation that exists, as it were, one stage earlier. The preindividual cannot correlate with perception or, crucially, any notion of sense. It is by nature prior to the individual, whereas sense, however indeterminate or paradoxical, is a relation between individual and milieu that is already individuated, to a greater or lesser extent.

Landes combines Merleau-Ponty and Simondon to give a robust notion of the potential for transformation within the order of expression. The body draws upon something latent within past and present, to create a future difference. He calls bodily movement a “paradoxical response”, insofar as it plays forward the past and present towards “a new situation, something that comes from an alternatively-configured one that shares neither its content nor its material form, but its sense”.

I wonder whether conceiving this operation in terms of shared sense might not inhibit creative expressive potential, even if this is not fully grasped until the gesture is completed. A tension exists, then, between Merleau-Ponty’s position, where form is the “ultimate ground”, and Simondon’s, where the foundation resides in the movement, as yet incommensurable with form or sense, out of which sense emerges. This runs the risk of turning form into something that exists in advance and then undergoes transformation, rather than something that is, as it were, composed through and as transformation.

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49 Ibid., 64.
50 Ibid., 68.
I offer this tension as a topic for discussion. However, a potential response might be to bolster the processual dimension of sense, by supplanting the priority of form with the process of taking-form: the movement from preindividual towards sense,\(^51\) that Simondon calls information. This is the “formula of individuation” that regulates how, in this case, sense, will emerge, but does not preexist this operation, and is gradually elaborated through the transductive process of individuation.\(^52\)

**Response (2): From Equilibria to Problems**

We could build this out further by recalling Simondon’s assertion that being is inherently problematic. As noted, a problem emerges when a burgeoning tension within the preindividual reservoir of some domain leads to dephasing. This dephasing is the elaboration of the problem; the individual, by individuating itself, resolves the tension. Returning to bodily behaviour, this could be understood as a problem of varying orientation within a diverse world that ceaselessly insists in ways that are only partially predictable, and that solicits expressive responses.

Making problems central to expressive bodily behaviour allows us to avoid a tendency to overemphasise minimisation or even elimination of tension, as epitomised by Hubert Dreyfus’ notion of skilful coping.\(^53\) Dreyfus claims that in learning, agents gradually surpass general rules from which learning begins, to eventually respond spontaneously, non-reflexively but intelligently to the situation in question. This entire

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\(^51\) Is metastability the metastable of the expressed, or does the expressed express the metastable?

\(^52\) “… l’information est la formule de l’individuation, formule qui ne peut préexister à cette individuation” Simondon, *IL* 31.

process is guaranteed by the propensity to maintain what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘optimal grip’: the tendency to implicitly reorient the body in order to discern its object most adequately relative to current concerns. For Dreyfus, this is not merely an important aspect of, or even structure within, embodied experience. It is strongly normative: we are at our most human when coping, which is intelligent but spontaneous smoothing over tensions in activity.

As we have seen, *SB* already provides a different, arguably more nuanced, take on this phenomenon. For Merleau-Ponty, overcoming structures and creating new ones is characteristically human, which precisely involves thematisation of, not immersion in, a behavioural context. Indeed, skillful coping might be closer to what Merleau-Ponty would consider *amovable*, or even *syncretic*, behaviour, correlated tightly with a context. While in *SB* human behaviour shuttles between degrees of integration, only creatively surpassing structure expresses their proper being. Moreover, by enjoining Simondon to suggest that behaviour is a moving trajectory of metastable equilibriums, Landes only strengthens this reading. For Simondon, problems or paradoxes are centrally implicated in the emergence of the new. They indicate that something cannot be straightforwardly absorbed into the existing state of affairs, that it demands a creative response. Behaviour is a continual tension and release. A spontaneous grip on the world, that instigates a bodily form or sense, occurs alongside the creative inauguration and resolution of problems as the body moves through more or less familiar situations. The crucial difference is this: for Dreyfus elimination of tension is a *telos*. This, Jack Reynolds suggests, denies problems and
tensions them their “incendiary power”. Problems and paradoxes, however, introduce something irreducible to the current equilibrium, that can surpass it towards the future. Problems are not something accidental that some individual needs to solve to restore a stable equilibrium. Building from Landes’ reading of the metastability of behaviour, we can suggest that formation of and response to problems—and the concomitant creative instigation of merely metastable equilibriums of sense—is a foundational aspect of expressive bodily being.