

*"It has long been known that, in man, paying attention to a reflex is sometimes sufficient to inhibit it" (18)*

In keeping with his faithfulness to the description of the known facts (15), Merleau-Ponty here presents a case meant to undermine the classical theory of reflex. The classical theory being, as my understanding allows me, the notion that there exists upon each stimuli-sensitive organ (the eye for example) a number of points which, when excited, direct the excitation down a concrete and linear series of nerves to produce a determinate reflex in the organism. To spell this out, under the classical theory every time an organism is subjected to the same stimulus at the same location, their reaction should be identical in every instance.

The example quoted above proves difficult to the adherent of the classical theory. If we are to understand reflexes as occurring at the mechanical level, or as representations of behavioural dispositions, then how is it that man is able to disrupt this purely electric sequence of events by introducing attention? Where the classical theorist aims to forbid the possibility of any event (above and beyond the purely behavioural) occurring within the organism itself (19), this fact strongly suggests that an event is occurring, an event powerful enough to disrupt the mechanical.

Apart from Merleau-Ponty's use of this fact to undermine classical theory, I find its practical and existential implications significant. If we are to take the body as a generally effective self-regulating system, how much of an impact can conscious awareness of the reflexes lend itself to abnormal functioning or muscular-skeletal degradation? It seems as though the body is imbued with a natural knowledge of operation – we breath involuntarily, our heart beats of its own accord, we digest foods and substances without conscious effort, and even supposing one failed to possess understanding of the various systems that exist in the body (respiratory, circulatory etc.), they would operate nonetheless. It is unlikely that anyone would succeed past the ages of infancy if not for the bodies unconscious self-maintenance.

But once we achieve the more distinguished ages, and become more so acquainted with our bodies, do we learn to pay attention to the body, and even at times to affect it. It is not difficult to conceive of someone, uneducated in the proper or optimal use of their body, through some sort of conscious effort interrupting the normal function of a limb or of the intestines or of the breath. The involuntary processes are disrupted, the natural and (possibly) preferable patterns of behaviour affected by cognization, expectation and maybe even a will to negate. Of course, the opposite can be said just as well, that a person educated in such matters can use their knowledge to improve the functioning of their body or to repair damage done by injury – but this sort of knowledge is not easily attained, and by means of our predominantly sit-down education system systematically stolen from us.

Would we be better then, to remain ignorant of our bodies, and hope that nature and circumstance favour us? Is this the sort of existence the leopard lives, when we picture its supple muscles and elegant crouch to leap? Or is the leopard completely cognizant of its body, by virtue of its freedom from vocabulary, and thus able to direct 100% of its mental capacity to optimal physical functioning? The leopard gets by well enough without attending classes on anatomy, is it not so?