Response to Gaia Ferrari’s “Ability within disability: Merleau-Ponty’s method for grounding a phenomenology of disability in the Phenomenology of Perception”
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I will start with some background about phenomenology. I will then situate Ferrari’s interesting and important work within this broader landscape. And, finally, I will raise a few objections to her claims with the sincere hope that they help her address possible criticisms as she further develops her project.

I

Among the major contributions to the phenomenological tradition made by Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, the way it reimagines and revises Heidegger’s idea of being-in-the-world has perhaps been the most consequential one. Phenomenology’s continuing influence on other fields, including recently on cognitive science and medical ethics, owes much to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of our bodily being-in-the-world.

Phenomenologically, the everyday phenomena of navigating any surroundings could be understood at two distinct levels of detail. We could situate entities in that environment in relation to our world, that is, in relation to our projects and our possibilities. Our engagement with other entities can be therefore be understood in terms of how they fit (or do not fit) into our projects. The focus here is on the temporal structure of being human, that is, on the capacity to project into a future and so discover a world that meets (or fails to meet) that projection. But one could take a step further and also investigate the process through which we come to have certain relations and not others with the entities in an environment. Merleau-Ponty’s work, especially the *Phenomenology of Perception*, shows us that the temporal structure of being human — which allows for a projection towards the world and meaningful relations to our surroundings — is itself only possible through an embodied intertwining with the world. In other words, for Merleau-Ponty, one’s project and the possibilities are themselves dependent on the reach and scope of one’s bodily being-in-the-world. It is not simply “intentions” that connect us to entities in the world. Rather, it is our “motor intentions” that carve out our possibilities in relation to our surroundings, that is, in relation to if and how our surrounding entities are either accessible or not accessible for those motor intentions.

II

In her paper, Ferrari makes two major claims. First, she argues that disability (like ability) exists as “material and situational events” instead of being a disruption to the
ontological structure of a human being. Second, she demonstrates — with the example of a blind person — that even within what we call disability, there is a world-forming ability that not only allows for alternative ways of dealing with one’s surroundings but, more importantly, affirms the world-forming capacity that is central to human existence.

Ferrari defends her first claim — about the nature of disability — by showing how disability transforms the condition of a disabled person qualitatively, enabling them to form new meanings and relations to their surroundings. Such a transformation, she argues, cannot be considered a reduction in ability because the new relations are now a part of a new meaningful whole through which a person inhabits their environment; they do not represent a weakened or curtailed state of the former meaningful whole related to their “able” condition. There is nothing that should lead us to call one of these states “normal” either in normative or ontological terms because the two states are simply two diverse ways of engaging with an environment. However, in order to avoid a gross generalization about disability and to explain the cases where individuals do not feel at home in their environment because of a certain disabling conditions, Ferrari introduces the idea of “gradual embodiment.” This notion allows for different levels of bodily adjustment and attunement to the world, leading to diverse experiences of disabilities.

Ferrari’s demonstration of the ability within disability using the example of a blind person represents the final or best level of bodily adjustment and attunement to the world. In the case of a blind person, particularly one who has lived with that condition for a relatively long period of time, we see an ability to form a new world — that is, new ways of perceiving and engaging with one’s environment — that is not inferior to but only qualitatively different from that of a visually able person.

As Ferrari argues, and as I have noted earlier in my remarks, Merleau-Ponty’s idea of bodily being-in-the-world in the *Phenomenology of Perception* provides the needed framework for understanding diverse embodied ways of making sense of our surroundings so that one could engage with them and navigate them in one’s unique ways. For instance, Merleau-Ponty’s ideas help make sense of the blind person’s world in a non-reductionist way, allowing us to see their world as shaped by a different kind of embodiment rather than a lessened ability or inability. The structure and phenomenon of human existence — as bodily being-in-the-world — remains the same in both the blind and visually able person, and so does the core human ability of forming a world.
I will now note two objections to Ferrari’s argument regarding the nature of disability.

i. According to Ferrari, the idea of gradual embodiment is supposed to make a distinction between diverse ways of engaging with the world and the fact that some individuals clearly find themselves unable to fit in their environment due to the way their bodily conditions interact with a given surrounding or tools. With time to reintegrate and a supporting environment, a disabled person could affirm her world-forming ability. This understanding of disability clearly follows from Merleau-Ponty’s notion of different ways of being-in-the-world, and is most easily seen in disability cases where individuals never had a particular ability — for instance if they were blind from birth — or when they have had a substantial period of time readjusting to a lost ability.

But I think Ferrari would agree with me that disabilities cannot always be understood in terms of a simple absence of an ability, as in the case of a blind person. In many cases disabled individuals never reach a plateau in the loss of their ability so as to then create new stable set of relations with their surroundings. In these cases, the world recedes, so to speak, from the disabled person as soon as they manage to create a new and unique set of relations because their degrading ability now has even less access to their surroundings or the tools they use. This case is presented by a philosopher Ferrari cites, S Kay Toombs, who suffers from Multiple Sclerosis. Her degrading physical condition makes newly learnt engagement with her environment useless or inadequate as the illness advances, forcing her to consciously relearn — again and again — the associations that helped her navigate her everyday environment. Although she is able to affirm her world-forming ability, the need for her to do so frequently, and the severe burden this imposes on her, is precisely what distinguishes her situation from that of an able bodied person. To be sure, the able bodied person’s relationship to their environment also changes over a long period of time, but modifications to one’s ability does not require one to relearn those abilities in new ways, let alone do so repeatedly.

ii. Ferrari’s paper aims to clarify Merleau-Ponty’s use of pathological cases in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. She argues against a possible misunderstanding that could conflate the natural attitude with what is normal. Ferrari’s preferred example of pathology throughout her work is that of the blind person. However, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the blind person’s case is brief. The major example of pathology in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is that of a person suffering from what Merleau-Ponty calls “psychological blindness” or what others have called a form of visual agnosia. The case is usually referred to as the Schneider case after the name of the patient whose
condition Merleau-Ponty analyzes at length in order to make some of his central points in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In Schneider’s case, his disability is not that he cannot see, but that he cannot make abstract movements, that is, movements that are posed as a task in an experimental setting such as pointing to his nose (as opposed to habitual tasks, such as wiping his nose, which Schneider could perform easily).

Without getting into the details of the case and Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, I will point to the upshot of that analysis. Merleau-Ponty argues that the “fundamental disorder” at the root of Schneider’s visual agnosia is not related to the visual sense, rather it has to do with a disturbance and deficiency in the fundamental structure of how Schneider relates to the world, or, to put it differently, a disturbance in his being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty’s radical idea is that the fundamental way in which consciousness relates to the world, or “has a world” through the body, can become ill, or can become “disabled.” Such an illness or disturbance does not refer to one or another way of relating to the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, the diversity of ways in which individuals uniquely relate to their surroundings, such as represented by a blind person’s way of being, is to be expected given the diversity of the “intentional arc that projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, or physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation …” (137). Each individual’s intentional arc has a different content and thus what they project on to their surroundings and how the surroundings relate back to them is unique. However, it is this intentional arc itself, which is present in “normal” individuals, that “goes limp” in Schneider’s disorder. Disability, as seen in this case of pathology, does not provide a new way of affirming one’s world-creating ability. Rather, in Schneider’s case, the world-creating ability is itself disrupted by his illness.

Therefore, against Ferrari, I would like to suggest that the prominent case of pathology in the *Phenomenology of Perception* indeed points to a dichotomy of ability and disability, or of normal and ill subject. However, this dichotomy is not the same as the one explored and critiqued by Ferrari. Her focus is on different ways of inhabiting one’s surroundings under the assumption that everyone has the same basic capacity for an intentional arc, for a bodily being-in-the-world. In contrast, some cases of pathology, especially those with which Merleau-Ponty compares “normal” individuals, represent the breaking down of or disturbance in this basic capacity to have a world. Indeed, the ability or inability to form and project a meaningful unity on to the world is a different set of dichotomy than any dichotomy in the ways of creating such meaningful unities. The former is Merleau-Ponty’s primary concern with pathologies in the *Phenomenology of Perception*; the latter is what Ferrari emphasizes in her work.

References