Recasting Objective Thought:
The Venture of Expression in Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy

Anna Petronella Foulter
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Anna Petronella Foulter
To my father, Hans Fredlund
(1939–2009)
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Works by Merleau-Ponty


Note on the Use of Translations

In the following, I give references first to the original text, then, when appropriate, to the English translation. However, translations have frequently been altered in order to correspond more closely to the original. When not otherwise specified, the translations are my own.
But words have been used too often; touched and turned, and left exposed to the dust of the street. The words we seek hang close to the tree. We come at dawn and find them sweet beneath the leaf.

Virginia Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*

The philosophical climate of the interwar period in France was marked by the rebellion – initiated in particular by Henri Bergson – against the official neo-Kantian idealist philosophy and a turn from its abstract reason towards “the concrete” (“le concret”): the other (“autrui”), facticity, flesh, historicity, existence. In this pursuit, Husserlian phenomenology and Heidegger’s existential analytic had a pivotal influence, as did the sentiment that philosophy must be “widened” through a debate with literature and art, expressed by thinkers such as Gabriel Marcel and Jean Wahl.¹ Thus, among intellectuals of his generation, Merleau-Ponty was not alone in believing that philosophy must be made anew and that the manner of writing it was crucial in this process.² When he writes that we must form a new idea of reason that can embrace also the experience of “unreason” (“déraison”) and non-sense,³ or that phenomenology “plunges into the perceived [sensible],”⁴ this is not a call for

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⁴ S 30/21: “La philosophie qui […] est tout le contraire d’un survol” […] s’enfonce dans le sensible …”
a coinciding of thought and an immediate form of experience that we would have to put into the proper words, but the recognition that expression is part of the very process where things show themselves at the most fundamental level, of phenomena, and that expression is thus, as he writes, “never finished”.\(^5\)

Throughout Merleau-Ponty’s career there is an acute awareness that philosophical expression shares the predicament of innovative writers and artists who struggle to surmount an expressive tradition that they are at the same time bound up with: his early analysis of the painter Cézanne is perhaps the most well-known example,\(^6\) but the endeavour both to understand expression philosophically and to use it in a transformative way becomes more explicit as his thought evolves. In the beginning of the 50s, he states the desire to formulate a “concrete theory of the mind [esprit]” through an idea of expression that would cover all forms of language, from gestures to formal and mathematical discourse.\(^7\) Here as well the creative use of language is the point of departure, exemplified by the prose of Proust, Stendhal, and Artaud, among others. In a thought experiment of sorts, spoken forms of expression are compared with tacit forms such as painting, sculpture and music in order to expose the manner in which meaning is bound to a material realisation. This analysis is continued in the ontology of his last period where philosophy is explicitly said to be, together with art, “creation”.\(^8\)

What is more, Merleau-Ponty wanted from the outset to widen philosophy in the direction of the empirical sciences such as biology, physiology, neurology, experimental psychology, as well as the social sciences of linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. In this respect, there is a major difference between his variant of phenomenology and those of Husserl, Heidegger or Sartre.\(^9\) As he writes in Signs: “Philosophy is everywhere, even in the ‘facts’,

\(^5\) SNS 9/4: ‘L’expression, donc, n’est jamais achevée.’


\(^9\) For this reason, Merleau-Ponty has been a major source of inspiration for the recent efforts to “naturalise phenomenology” in an exchange with cognitive science, by researchers such as Fransisco J. Varela, Jean Petitot, Evan Thompson, and Alva Noë. See for example Varela, Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991, or Petitot, Varela, Bernard Pachoud and Jean-Michel Roy (eds.), Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.
and it nowhere has a domain where it is protected from life’s contagion.”

His style is therefore characterised by a certain eclecticism, where summaries of empirical experiments, studies of animal behaviour and human pathologies are inserted into philosophical arguments written in an elaborated, often metaphorical manner. In addition, his accounts of other philosophers’ thoughts are always to some extent sympathetic – “refutations are not very interesting”, as he states in an interview – trying to draw out the reasonable content even though – and perhaps especially when – this leads to contradiction at an argumentative level.

All this means that Merleau-Ponty is a demanding philosopher to read: his thought “cannot be neatly pigeonholed in familiar conceptual or historical categories”, as Taylor Carman and Mark B. Hansen aptly put it. Besides, the phenomenological quest for die Sachen selbst, the things as they show themselves, is from the outset a questioning of its own possibility, and the phenomenological method is thus never taken for granted. Even the first person perspective, so often claimed to define phenomenology, is not a given point of departure for Merleau-Ponty; following on from his conviction that the experiencing and thinking subject is embodied, inherently tied to others and to its world, and thus never transparent to itself, we can learn as much of its structures through the study of other people as from the description of the first person point of view. In addition, due to his untimely death, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is in a very literal sense unfinished, and a large part of his writing consists of manuscripts and working notes that were never prepared for publication. For this reason, the interpretation of his last work cannot avoid being conjectural to a certain degree.

10 S 163/130: “La philosophie est partout, même dans les ‘faits’ – et elle n’a nulle part de domaine où elle soit préservée de la contagion de la vie.”


13 Also by researchers who desire to naturalise phenomenology: see e.g. Roy, Petitot, Pachoud, and Varela, “Beyond the Gap: An Introduction to Naturalizing Phenomenology”, in Petitot et al., Naturalizing Phenomenology, p. 19.

14 In other words, the investigation “from within the subject” that Merleau-Ponty claims to perform in Phenomenology of Perception (see infra, footnote 56) is also not necessarily made from a first-person perspective, as the descriptions in this book are to a large extent made from a third person point of view.

15 Merleau-Ponty died unexpectedly in 1961, at 52 years of age, from a heart attack.
Summary of the Thesis

In general terms, this thesis addresses the issue of meaning in the phenomenological sense – as comprising both perceptual and linguistic meaning – and its relation to expression as the taking up of this meaning, therewith repeating, transforming or congealing it into gestures, artworks, utterances, ideas or theories. My general conviction is that, contrary to the predominant view in the literature, the problem of expression was of fundamental importance to Merleau-Ponty from the very beginning, in that it was intrinsically related to the overcoming of “objective” or “high-altitude thought”. Admittedly, there is an evolution of his philosophy in this respect: from the early stance where the recasting of certain basic categories is taken as pivotal for the development of a new form of thinking, with arguments drawn also from various empirical and social sciences, to what appears to be an effort at an all-pervading reformulation of philosophical language during the last years. However, as is evident from the course notes, scientific results are still of great significance in the later period – together with an intense study of philosophers like Descartes, Husserl, Heidegger and writers like Proust, Claudel or Valéry. On the other hand, as I will argue, the remoulding of categories was never for Merleau-Ponty a matter simply of finding a few, better adapted concepts, but from the outset an endeavour to think philosophical arguments through to a point where they reveal their inherent inconsistencies. Only on this basis, he thinks, can philosophy be written anew.

In the present “Introduction”, I first describe Merleau-Ponty’s notion of objective thought and how its overcoming from an early stage is bound up with the renewal of philosophy’s categories. The interchange with behavioural science and experimental psychology plays a fundamental role in Merleau-Ponty’s first book, The Structure of Behavior,16 whereas phenomenology combined with Kurt Goldstein’s organismic approach to pathological behaviour is of chief importance in Phenomenology of Perception.17 In order to challenge the dichotomies of objectivist ontology, Merleau-Ponty explores notions derived from both contemporary science and philosophy, such as behaviour, Gestalt, body-proper, corporeal schema, existence, outlined below. The phenomenological ideal of presuppositionlessness is a guideline here, but rather than being the pursuit of a sphere free from cultural and intersubjective influence, it has the form of a struggle with the expression of philosophy as part of the questioning of philosophy’s very possibility. This is the reason why Merleau-Ponty turns to a more thorough examination of language and expression in the light of an exploration of modern linguistics,

which leads to the last effort at reformulating philosophy as an ontology of the flesh. These questions are explored additionally from different angles in the essays: I discuss the interpretation of the notion of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in Essay 2, “Incarnated Meaning and the Notion of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology”. I also address the related concept of corporeal schema in Essay 5, “Towards a Phenomenological Account of the Dancing Body: Merleau-Ponty and the Corporeal Schema”, and to some extent in Essay 4, “Language and the Gendered Body: Butler’s Early Reading of Merleau-Ponty”, where I also in some detail describe his criticism – characterised as a form of genealogy – of objective thought.

I further discuss the issue of a so-called “turn” in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in relation to, first, the role that language and expression is supposed to play in capturing phenomena or things as they show themselves and, second, to this experience itself and how its primordiality is to be understood. I argue that the primordial or “brute” experience of perception is at no stage of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development considered as an immediate layer of meaning untouched by culture. Rather, it is in setting out from the language that we already have access to that we can formulate a description rich and eloquent enough to present the fluidity of lived phenomena. In this sense, the philosopher’s effort will resemble that of the artist or writer who tries to renew the language of her particular medium and must grapple with expressions that have been “used too often” in order to capture a meaning that exists only after the expression is achieved. Recasting philosophical expression is thus a risky enterprise, and this is a point I explore further, particularly in Essay 1, “‘The First Man Speaking’: Merleau-Ponty and Expression as the Task of Phenomenology”.

Whereas Essay 1 focuses especially upon creative expression in painting and to some extent in literature, Essay 3, “Merleau-Ponty’s Encounter with Saussure’s Linguistics: Misreading, Reinterpretation or Prolongation?”, deals with verbal language generally speaking, and Essay 5 discusses expression in bodily terms and in particular in the art of dance. Additionally, Essay 4 examines bodily expression from the point of view of feminist phenomenology, exploring the sense in which discourse can become embodied not only as a presupposition of creative acts, but also as a limitation upon one’s being.

Moreover, the construal of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development as constituting a “turn” often appeals to Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Saussure’s linguistics, seen as a fundamental impetus in this process. I take issue with this understanding in Essay 3, both as concerns the interpretation of Saussure that it is based on and regarding its influence upon Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.

Related to the phenomenological function of expression is also the issue of the phenomenological reduction and its role in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Below I outline his views and briefly summarise the literature on the
matter, giving prominence to an interpretation, throughout his works, of the reduction as a creative act. Since the philosopher can no longer, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, be the high-altitude thinker, the “king on his desert island”, he is part of the world to be described. As little as the expressions used in the description of the world, this world itself is fully determined beforehand, and phenomenology for Merleau-Ponty leads inevitably to ontology. In the last texts, this is formulated as a question of how vision can emerge in Being: how there can be a creature that is part of the world and at the same time experiences this world, or in other words, how the eye can see.

Whereas most commentators who give prominence to the issue of expression in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy focus on his later work and on how language can be said to express Being – I discuss the most important interpretations in this regard towards the end of this introduction – I concentrate in the essays on the early and middle periods. The main reason is that an approach to meaning and expression appears in these texts that has not been sufficiently explored, and that the teleology inherent in the common reading of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy with his last work as its starting point runs the risk of missing certain crucial aspects of his thought.

In the last section, I give an overview of the reception of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, with the main focus on France and the French-speaking world.

Finally, I present the essays and give a note on earlier publication where appropriate.

Objective Thought and its Categories

Already in his first two essays, “Christianisme et ressentiment” from 1935 and “Être et Avoir” from 1936, we find the outline of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical program: that of obtaining a standpoint beyond the opposition of realism and idealism or empiricism and intellectualism, with their common reading of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy with his last work as its starting point runs the risk of missing certain crucial aspects of his thought.

In the last section, I give an overview of the reception of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, with the main focus on France and the French-speaking world.

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18 S 21/14: “roi dans son île déserte”.

19 An issue treated in Merleau-Ponty’s last published text, again from the point of view of painting, L’Œil et l’Esprit / “Eye and Mind” (OE), transl. Michael B. Smith, in Johnson (ed.), Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics and VI.

20 In the section entitled “The Issue of Expression in the Literature”.

21 The former is a review of the French translation of Max Scheler’s book Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen, the latter, as the title indicates, a review of Gabriel Marcel’s work Être et Avoir. Both reviews were published in La Vie intellectuelle, 1935 and 1936 respectively, and have been reprinted in the anthology Parcours, 1935–1951, ed. Jacques Prunair, Lagrasse: Verdier, 1997 (P1).

22 Since Merleau-Ponty is above all interested in what these forms of thought have in common, he does not always make a clear distinction between the epistemological and ontological perspectives. In his mature thought he mostly uses the latter terms, where “intellectualism”
mon understanding of conscious life as a “compound of impressions” – that is, as an indifferent mosaic without an inherent or “natural” meaning.\textsuperscript{23} Although Merleau-Ponty’s awareness that the search for such a standpoint involves a reconstruction of philosophy itself – if it is not to be a mere version of the former positions\textsuperscript{24} – is gradually radicalised until the end of the 1950s when his final and unfinished ontology was taking shape, this philosophical itinerary is heralded at an early point through remarks on the necessity of “recasting our categories”.\textsuperscript{25}

Merleau-Ponty uses a variety of terms for the form of thinking that he seeks to overcome. In his first book, \textit{The Structure of Behaviour}, he calls it “causal thought”, “realism”, or “realistic analysis” (“analyse réelle”), and in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} he mostly speaks of “objective thought” or sometimes “the prejudice of determinate being”,\textsuperscript{26} whereas he later often uses the expression “flying-over” or “high altitude thought” (“la pensée de survol”) to describe the form of thinking that looks on from above, attempting to stretch over the world and explain it from a distance. In general terms, objective thought sees the world as a “universe”: a fully achieved totality, whose parts exist \textit{partes extra partes} and are constituted solely by external and mechanical relations.\textsuperscript{27} The perceiving and knowing subject itself is considered either as a part of matter or as a separate substance in the tradition inherited from Descartes. However, in both cases perception is characterised in elementistic terms, as constituted by ultimate atoms (impressions or sensations) corresponding to physiological units (stimuli), according to the “con-

\textsuperscript{23} P1 22: “L’empirisme et l’idéalisme subjectif interprètent la conscience comme un composé d’impressions. Ces philosophies […] nient qu’un contenu de conscience puisse avoir naturellement un sens; la conscience est faite d’états qui reçoivent secondairement une signification”.

\textsuperscript{24} Cf. Merleau-Ponty’s description of his project in an interview from 1946, \textit{P1} 66: “La \textit{Phénoménologie de la perception} essai de répondre à une question que je me suis posée dix ans avant et que, je crois, tous les philosophes de ma génération se sont posée: comment sortir de l’idéalisme sans retomber dans la naïveté du réalisme?” Theodore F. Geraets, \textit{Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendentale. La Genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu’à la Phénoménologie de la perception}, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, also calls it the fundamental preoccupation of Merleau-Ponty, pp. 31f.

\textsuperscript{25} In the 1936 review, \textit{P1} 40: “Nous aurons donc à refondre nos catégories.” Assuredly, this remark is made in reference to Marcel, but we find a similar line of thought as early as 1933, in a “Working Project on the Nature of Perception”: “dans l’état présent de la philosophie, il y aurait lieu […] peut-être de refonder certaines notions psychologiques et philosophiques en usage”. (“Projet de travail sur la nature de la Perception”, in \textit{PPCP} 13; translation by Forrest W. Williams as “The Nature of Perception: Two Proposals (1933)”, in \textit{Texts and Dialogues}, p. 75.)

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{PP} 62/510: “le préjugé de l’être déterminé”.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{PP} 85/73: “la notion d’un univers, c’est-à-dire d’une totalité achevée, explicite, où les rapports soient de détermination réciproque.”
stancy hypothesis”: for the empiricists the combination of sensations is governed by laws of association, whereas the rationalists or “intellectualists” give the synthesising role to judgement.

Common to empiricists and intellectualists, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a reliance upon mutually excluding categories, at the core of which are, on the one hand, the conception of a wholly determined universe with objects that are absolute, purified of all ambiguity, and, on the other hand, of thought as transparent to itself, fully in charge of its own processes. Whereas the elementistic paradigm of empiricism dominated scientific psychology in the first part of the last century, intellectualism was a strong current in France with its Cartesian heritage and prominent Neo-Kantian philosophers such as Jules Lachelier, Jules Lagneau, Alain and, particularly important for Merleau-Ponty, Léon Brunschvicg. However, rather than distinguishing certain individual thinkers, objective thought is a general propensity that belongs to science as well as to common sense; in the same vein, intellectualism can be said to characterise certain tendencies in many otherwise diverse thinkers, like Descartes, Kant, Husserl and Sartre.

Since perception – in Merleau-Ponty’s broad sense of “knowledge of existences” – is directed towards objects as its teleological result, we transmit the categories of objectivity to the perceptual experiences themselves: we understand constitution from what is constituted. “The thing is for our existence much less a pole of attraction than a pole of repulsion. We ignore ourselves in it, and this is exactly what makes it a thing.” Objective thought

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28 This expression was coined by Wolfgang Köhler, in 1913; see further Essay 2, “Incarnated Meaning and the Notion of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology”, pp. 100f.
29 PP 60/50: “La pensée objective […] ne connaît que des notions alternatives; à partir de l’expérience effective, elle définit des concepts purs qui s’excluent”.
30 See further Essay 2, pp. 93f.
32 PP 50/42; cf. SC 240/224.
34 “La chose est pour notre existence beaucoup moins un pôle d’attraction qu’un pôle de répulsion. Nous nous ignorons en elle, et c’est justement ce qui en fait une chose.” PP 374/324.
is, as it were, “the natural result” of perceptual experience;\(^{35}\) our notion of this experience is constructed on the basis of our preconceptions of the object: we transfer into consciousness the properties that we have found in things.\(^{36}\) Focusing on the object, we forget experience and its perspectivism: the perceived thing seems to be seen from nowhere, or rather it is “translucent, it is shot through from all sides by an actual infinity of gazes intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing hidden”.\(^{37}\)

But the elementistic characterisation of perception does not correspond to phenomena: as the Gestalt psychologists had shown, atomic sensations are not to be found in living experience. Rather, perception is structured by wholes: figures given against a background, an open horizon of former and further experiences. The knowing and experiencing subject cannot be understood in the elementistic way: if my access to the world is transformed into blind, juxtaposed processes and my body is considered as one of its objects, objective thinking “ignores the subject of perception”.\(^{38}\) Through Gestalt theory, contemporary neuropsychology and Husserlian phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty learned that consciousness must be understood as an active and embodied subjectivity, as a living body whose unity is distinct from that of the scientific object.\(^{39}\)

The Gestalt of Behaviour

The notion of Gestalt (“forme” in French) or structure that is at the heart of the argument in *The Structure of Behavior*, serves the purpose of challenging the dichotomy between idealism and realism. As he puts it in an essay from 1945, discussing the philosophical meaning of Gestalt theory:

[…] by revealing “structure” or “form” as an irreducible ingredient of being, [Gestalt psychology] calls into question the classical alternative between “existence as thing” and “existence as consciousness”, it establishes a communication between and, as it were, a mixture of the objective and the subjective …\(^{40}\)

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35 *PP* 86/74: “une pensée ‘objective’ […] qui finalement nous fait perdre le contact avec l’expérience perceptive dont elle est cependant le résultat et la suite naturelle”.

36 *PP* 11/5. See also Essay 2.

37 *PP* 83/71: “L’objet achevé est translucide, il est pénétré de tous côtés par une infinité actuelle de regards qui se recoupent dans sa profondeur et n’y laissent rien de caché.”

38 *PP* 240/214: “La pensée objective ignore le sujet de la perception”. *Ignorer* in French often means “be unaware of”; Merleau-Ponty clearly makes use of this ambiguity here.

39 *PP* 203/179: “Nous avons reconnu au corps une unité distincte de celle de l’objet scientifique.”

40 “Le métaphysique dans l’homme”; “The Metaphysical in Man”, *SNS* 150/86: “en révélant la ‘structure’ ou la ‘forme’ comme un ingrédient irréductible de l’être, [la psychologie de la
There are several reasons why Merleau-Ponty at this stage devotes himself to the concept of behaviour. First, this notion is, as he writes in the “Introduction” to The Structure of Behavior, “neutral with respect to the classical distinctions between the ‘mental’ and the ‘physiological’ and thus can give us the opportunity of defining them anew”.41 Second, by situating himself at the level of scientific psychology, Merleau-Ponty intends to perform an internal critique of this science and show the necessity of a philosophy of structure. Further, since the main philosophical current in France at this time was intellectualism, the positive sciences seemed to him to be a necessary counterpoise in order to avoid the “short road of reflection” that more often than not gives us “an impoverished knowledge of ourselves”.42 Psychology can in this way, as Renaud Barbaras writes, “release a transcendental perspective”,43 although the transcendental must here be thought anew: not as that of a pure consciousness which would have been revealed by the “short road”, but as behaviour, which is neither thing nor consciousness but Gestalt.44

The scientific analysis of behaviour, Merleau-Ponty writes, defines itself in opposition to what is given in our naïve, everyday attitude.45 What the latter grasps from the inside as a goal, an intention, a meaning, a value, or in general as properties of structure, the former defines externally as a causal relationship between partial physical and chemical processes. Thus classical behaviourism understands behaviour as a sum of reflexes, as “a set of punctual reactions causally produced by excitations that are also punctual”.46
classical theory of the reflex that serves as the basis for behaviourism had been surpassed, however, by the physiology contemporary with Merleau-Ponty, and the Gestalt psychologists had conceived studies and experiments that refuted the constancy hypothesis as well as the elementistic assumptions governing psychology.\(^\text{47}\)

The question is then whether classical behaviourism can be amended or whether one will have to change methods.\(^\text{48}\) Ultimately, this problem concerns the definition of objectivity itself: it is perhaps no longer defensible to conceive of the objective world as consisting of parts external to one another and opposed to the world of the subject, a consciousness entirely present to itself. The “new mode of ‘comprehension’” that Merleau-Ponty searches for in *The Structure of Behavior*, which can capture value and significance as inherent determinations of the organism, will involve a radical shift of methodology: abandoning “causal or mechanical thinking for dialectical thinking”, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in a footnote added in 1942.\(^\text{49}\)

As one might expect, there is no simple answer to the question of how this new form of thinking is to be achieved, but it is, as we will see, clearly related to the issue of philosophical language. If a mechanical connection is such that cause and effect can be decomposable into elements with a “one-to-one correspondence”,\(^\text{50}\) in a dialectical relation, on the contrary, “each partial action is determined by its signification for the whole”.\(^\text{51}\) It is not so much the matter of a Hegelian dialectic, however, where oppositions would be eliminated, but rather one that maintains the oppositions in a living communication.\(^\text{52}\) But dialectical thinking is no straightforward alternative to scientism, since it might itself turn out to be a form of objective thought where oppositions are upheld but in radical contradiction.\(^\text{53}\) Thus, in later

\(^{47}\) See further Essay 2.

\(^{48}\) *SC* 8/10: “Suffit-il de l’amender ou bien doit-on changer de méthode?”

\(^{49}\) *SC* 3/226: “la notion nouvelle [de comportement] ne pouvait recevoir son statut philosophique que si l’on abandonnait la pensée causale ou mécanique pour la pensée dialectique”.

\(^{50}\) *SC* 174/160: “Une action mécanique […] est celle où la cause et l’effet sont décomposables en éléments réels qui se correspondent chacun à chacun”.

\(^{51}\) *SC* 218/202: “des rapports dialectiques où l’effet de chaque action partielle est déterminé par sa signification pour l’ensemble”.

\(^{52}\) In *Vers le concret*, of unquestionable importance to Merleau-Ponty, Wahl defined dialectics as the maintenance of oppositions, “an active and intense oscillation between ideas” (op. cit., p. 24: “une oscillation active et tendue des idées”).

\(^{53}\) As in Sartre’s *L’Être et le Néant*, where the ontological categories can in the end be defined as pure negativity and pure positivity: *VI* 98–99/69. Cf. also *Les Aventures de la dialectique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1955 / *Adventures of the Dialectic*, transl. Joseph Bien, London: Heine- man, 1974 (AD), pp. 274/204, where dialectics is described — here as well in contrast to that of Sartre — as “the global, primordial cohesion of a field of experience wherein each element opens onto the others” (“la cohésion globale, primordiale d’un champ d’expérience où chaque élément ouvre sur les autres”).
works, the alternative to objective thinking is more often termed “radical reflection”, “hyperreflexion” or even “hyperdialectics”. Within The Structure of Behavior there is also a tension that has been identified by Theodore Geraets between a methodological stance where experience is described from the point of view of an external observer in scientific terms and one that relates it as it is lived from the inside. The latter perspective is further developed in Merleau-Ponty’s major book from 1945, Phenomenology of Perception, where the hesitation regarding these positions is overcome, in Geraets’s view. A more extensive study of Husserl’s philosophy in the years following upon the completion of The Structure of Behavior was of great import in this process.


55 Geraets, Vers une nouvelle. See further Essay 2.

56 In “Titres et travaux”, one of the texts Merleau-Ponty presented when candidating for the Collège de France, he describes the difference between the two books in similar terms: the first “studies perceiving man from the outside, and tries to disentangle what is useful [for philosophy] in the experimental research whose approach is from the point of view of the external spectator”, whereas the second “starts within the subject, in order to show how our acquired knowledge invites us to conceive the relations between its body and its world” (“La Structure du comportement, considérant de l’extérieur l’homme qui perçoit, et cherchant à dégager le sens valable des recherches expérimentales qui l’abordent du point de vue du spectateur étranger, […] Phénoménologie de la perception se [place] à l’intérieur du sujet, pour montrer […] comment le savoir acquis nous invite à concevoir ses rapports avec son corps et son monde”, P2 13).

57 Although not published until 1942, the year of its completion is indicated in the first editions of the book as 1938.

58 Up to this point, Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl had been very selective. He probably attended Georges Gurvitch’s lectures on contemporary German philosophy at the Sorbonne between 1928 and 1930 (see Geraets, Vers une nouvelle, pp. 6–7; a summary of the course on Husserl was also published in 1928); he certainly listened to Husserl’s famous lectures in 1929, that were subsequently published in French translation by Gabrielle Peiffer and Emmanuel Levinas: Méditations cartésiennes. Introduction à la phénoménologie, Paris: A. Colin, 1931. Geraets (op. cit., pp. 28–31) contends that Merleau-Ponty overcomes his philosophical hesitation through first the encounter in 1938 of the special issue of Revue internationale de philosophie devoted to Husserl, and in particular the important text “Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem” as well as the analysis of it by Eugen Fink; and second, his week-long visit in 1939 at the Husserl Archives in Leuven, where he studied transcriptions of the unpublished manuscripts of Ideas II, “Umsturz der kopernikanischen Lehre in der gewöhnlichen weltanschaulichen Interpretation. Die Ur-Archè Erde bewegt sich nicht. Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum phänomenologischen Ursprung der Körperlichkeit, der Räumlichkeit der Natur im ersten naturwissenschaftlichen Sinne. Alles notwendige Anfangsuntersuchungen” (first published in Marvin Farber (ed.) Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl, 1940) and the third part of Crisis (Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie, ed. Walter Biemel, Husserliana, vol. VI, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969). He also consulted a copy of Erfahrung und Urteil: Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik (ed. Ludwig Landgrebe, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 1976 (1939)), that had just been published in Prague but was difficult to get hold of since the Ger-
The construction of behaviour in general as a composition of isolatable pieces, and of pathological behaviour in particular as a subtraction of functions from healthy performance, is not tenable, as abundant examples show. The neurologist Kurt Goldstein, for instance, whose ideas were of fundamental importance for Merleau-Ponty’s thought, had used numerous case studies of animals and humans to show how the transference of habits does not fit the elementistic conception: due to structural similarities between the two situations, “a person whose right hand has been amputated does not need, properly speaking, to learn to write with the left hand”. Whereas classical pathology would understand illness and lesion by enumerating the reactions preserved and those that were abolished, Goldstein pointed to cases that did not fit into this picture. For instance, an aphasic person can pronounce a word if it is inserted in a sentence, but not if it is isolated; i.e., he can perform the very same act – pronouncing a certain word – in one case but not in the other. The difference between the two situations is that in the former the pronunciation of the word is situated in a concrete and affective context, whereas in the latter it is “gratuitous” – it is an act of naming where the object and the word function as representatives of a category.

An analogous example is the patient Schneider (referred to as “Sch.”) who was injured during World War I by a shell splinter at the back of his head, and whose case was a recurrent point of reference for Merleau-Ponty. Schneider’s numerous disorders involved perception, motricity, memory, intelligence, language, and also sexuality, and would in the classical conception have required a hypothesis of multiple lesions so that the parallelism between physiological location and psychological reaction could be upheld. However, all evidence pointed to a unique lesion in the occipital region; the parallelism in question would therefore have to be modified into a functional or structural parallelism, where consciousness and organism were no longer considered as being “made up of a myriad of events external to each other”. Or perhaps it would be necessary to give up the notion of parallelism entirely; if space is understood as a multiplicity of parts external to each other, the higher forms of behaviour will not occur in space. The physiological reality of the brain cannot be represented in objective space, according to Merleau-

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59 As I mention in Essay 4, p. 165, esp. footnote 761, Goldstein created the Hospital for Brain Injury in Frankfurt during World War I in order to rehabilitate brain-injured soldiers. (See “Kurt Goldstein”, in A History of Psychology in Autobiography, vol. V, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967, p. 149.) The perhaps most well-known patient is “Sch.”, whose case was studied by Goldstein and his co-workers – in particular the psychologist Adhémar Gelb – during the war and throughout the twenties.

60 SC 41/229.

61 SC 68/63: “gratuites”.

62 SC 84/76: “faites d’une poussière d’événements extérieurs les uns aux autres”.

Higher forms of behaviour take place in something that Merleau-Ponty provisionally calls “virtual space”\(^\text{64}\). In other words, the classical theories cannot account for behaviour either in its development or in its normal functioning: they are occasionally applicable rather as descriptions of certain illnesses and, thus, cannot elucidate real pathological cases as transformations of healthy behaviour.

Thus, it seems as if a far-reaching revision of our ontology is required. But will the notion of form or *Gestalt* provide an escape from the realist prejudice of objective thought – the construction of the world as a “mutual exteriority of homogeneous parts”?\(^\text{65}\) According to Merleau-Ponty, contemporary physiology and pathology were irreconcilable with physiological empiricism\(^\text{66}\) as well as with a dualism between matter and form, sensation and perception. However, the Gestalt theorists did not take their results seriously enough: in preserving the idea of a parallelism between structures – Köhler’s famous “isomorphism” – rather than as a correspondence between atoms, they did not question the implicit ontology of science and for this reason remained prisoners of realism.\(^\text{67}\) Yet, if we reflect properly on the notion of form and draw the ontological conclusions from it, this parallelism cannot be upheld: the Gestalt goes beyond the alternative between empiricism and intellectualism, the rupture between “a chaos of elements and a higher system that would organise them”.\(^\text{68}\) Instead, it allows for a demarcation between different types or levels of organisation, which Merleau-Ponty elaborates in *The Structure of Behavior*.\(^\text{69}\)

\(^{63}\) *SC* 79–80/72.

\(^{64}\) Borrowing an expression from H. Wallon. *SC* 99/90: “espace virtuel”.

\(^{65}\) *SC* 80/72: “l’extériorité mutuelle de parties homogènes”.

\(^{66}\) That is, “the thesis according to which the functional structures realised by nerve activity would be reducible to the association by contiguity created in the course of experience”, *SC* 99–100/90.

\(^{67}\) *SC* 146/136, *PP* 61/51. See further Essay 2.

\(^{68}\) *SC* 100/91.

\(^{69}\) See further Essay 2.
The Body- Proper and its Schema

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, the notion of behaviour is largely replaced by that of “existence” but serves a similar purpose.\textsuperscript{70} *Existence* in French was the common translation of Heidegger’s *Dasein* and is another term for what Merleau-Ponty calls the living body or body-proper, *corps propre*: it is an incarnated subject who belongs to a world, finding access to the world and to itself through the fact that it is a movable part of this world and hence a viewpoint upon it.

As the subject in the course of the phenomenological reduction\textsuperscript{71} breaks off its familiarity with the world – putting its opinions about the world within parenthesis in order to understand its own inherence in it – it learns nothing from this procedure, Merleau-Ponty writes, other than “the unmotivated upsurge of the world”.\textsuperscript{72} The world breaks through as something that was there before I began to reflect, and the processes of my own bodily subject are a part of this world – they occur before my explicit taking a stand in their regard. Hence, they constitute a kind of pre-personal subject.

As a consequence, in Merleau-Ponty’s description, the meaning of the world is not constituted in the non-worldly immanence of a transcendental ego. The incarnated subject might indeed be called “transcendental” in the sense that it is a perspective upon the world and a condition of its appearance. But the world is at the same time a condition of the experience of the subject; it is *already there* when the subject is born.

Clearly, the birth of the subject is not a mere empirical event. It is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a “transcendental event”: not just the individual’s coming into the world, but also, and therewith, “the coming to itself of the world”.\textsuperscript{73} The world is originally given to the subject through an intentional-

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\textsuperscript{70} In a footnote to *SC* added in 1942 (according to Geraets, *Vers une nouvelle*, p. 124), Merleau-Ponty makes the surprising remark that in his view, when John B. Watson “spoke of behaviour he had in mind what others have called *existence*” (“A notre avis […], Watson avait en vue, quand il parlait de comportement, ce que d’autres ont appelé l’*existence*”), *SC* 3/226. This is a telling example of the way Merleau-Ponty interprets other thinkers: rather than simply dismissing their ideas, he points to what leads us astray as well as to what is fruitful about them.

\textsuperscript{71} The phenomenological reduction or *epoché* (in its different forms) is the fundamental methodological operation of Husserlian phenomenology, where all our opinions of the world “are put within parenthesis” or “disconnected”, so that a pure and unprejudiced description of phenomena – of the world as it presents itself to transcendental consciousness – can be achieved.

\textsuperscript{72} *PP* viii/lxxvii: “cette rupture ne peut rien nous apprendre que le jaillissement immotivé du monde”.

ty that Husserl in his later texts called functioning or operating intentionality, which constitutes the ground for act intentionality: the relation of consciousness to an object. Functioning intentionality is the anonymous intentionality through which the world and life form a unity, and which in Merleau-Ponty becomes tied to the body.

Perception is for Merleau-Ponty what makes us know existences and is thus characterised as the presence of the bodily subject to its world, or as a “dialogue” between subject and world where meaning originally breaks forth. The inherence of the body in a world, however, is a fact that is not necessary in itself. Since the ego is a bodily and worldly subject it has, even as transcendental, a contingent ground. As a consequence, it can – in distinction to a pure transcendental ego – change in its most fundamental structures: it can be wounded, for example. Moreover, the living body that is a necessary condition of the human being’s experience of the world is not just a body in general, but one’s own body. Not just the fact that we have a body, but that we have this particular body is a condition for the world as it is given in our experience. This is why Merleau-Ponty calls it “le corps propre”: one’s own body, the unique body that belongs to and is me.

The unity of the body-proper is constituted by what Merleau-Ponty, following Henry Head, Jean Lhermitte and Paul Schilder, among others, calls the “corporeal schema”: a dynamic structure that integrates the body’s skills and habits and forms a precondition of cognitive processes. Rather than my body being an object or an instrument that I handle, it is the instruments I make use of that become incorporated in the body-proper. This means that the unity of the body is also a unity with the world it is situated in: the corporeal schema determines the position of the body in relation to the tasks we are engaged in. As little as I need to find my hands when installing myself at the keyboard I am used to working on, do I need to find the keys for typing. Moreover, skills are transposable: I do not need to learn typing all over again when I switch keyboards. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty calls the bodily schema a “system of equivalences”, in that it regulates not only the relation

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74 This notion was introduced by Husserl in *Krisis*, § 59.

75 The distinction between consciousness and body is very simplified and at worst misleading; the operating intentionality of the body is also a kind of consciousness but a non-objectifying – non-thetical in Husserlian terms – one, in distinction with the thetical consciousness, which is directed towards and passes judgements about objects.

76 This “paradox of contingency”, in Paul Ricoeur’s words, is the theme of G. B. Madison’s study *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (French ed. 1973), Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981 (the quotation is from Ricoeur’s “Foreword” to this book, p. xix).

77 *PP* 107/93: “les actions dans lesquelles je m’engage par l’habitude s’incorporent leurs instruments et les font participer à la structure originale du corps propre”.

78 *PP* 165/142: “un système d’équivalences”.
between our posture and our movements as well as that between our different sense perceptions, but also makes a transposition possible between another person’s movements and my own perception.\footnote{See further on this issue Essay 5, “Towards a Phenomenological Account of the Dancing Body: Merleau-Ponty and the Corporeal Schema”.
}

**Phenomenological Reflection**

In fact, the body-proper does not appear so much by means of the phenomenological reduction as through its failure. According to Merleau-Ponty, the reduction must always remain incomplete, even going so far as to call it the “greatest lesson of the reduction” in a famous quote.\footnote{\textit{PP} viii/lxxvii: “Le plus grand enseignement de la réduction est l’impossibilité d’une réduction complète.”
}

Through the phenomenological reduction we do not reach a pure, world-constituting consciousness, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, but an active perceptual subject grounded in a world that it cannot simply distance itself from and describe indifferently, since it is itself worldly. Any reflection upon the world will take place in it and therefore change exactly that which it is a reflection upon. It can never capture itself completely.\footnote{It can, however, capture its own predicament in what he will later call a “hyperreflection” (\textit{surréflexion}): a reflection upon the very conditions of reflection (\textit{VI} 61/38).
}

We saw that the classical theories of perception cannot account for perception in its normal development and functioning, just as little as they can account for the pathological cases as transformations of the former. Nor is the essence of “normal” perception determined once and for all. The ultimate condition of perception is certainly the body as a pre-personal, anonymous subject: its sense organs are an original opening towards the world and precede personal activity. But the perception of a thing, according to Merleau-Ponty, is also an act, it takes part in a tradition that it not only recreates but also transforms.

Merleau-Ponty wants to show that consciousness is not transparent to itself, that its thoughts and experiences are not spread out in front of it, fully determined in content and meaning. Instead, consciousness must be understood as participating in the opaque, ambiguous facticity it is trying to understand and in the birth of its meaning. Ultimately, notions such as consciousness, subjectivity and objectivity might have to be abandoned altogether, as Merleau-Ponty suggests in his final working notes.\footnote{He writes, for example, that my glance is part of what challenges the distinction between consciousness and thing, and thus “requires a complete reconstruction of philosophy” (\textit{VI} 246/193: “Mon ‘regard’ est une de ces données […], qui défie l’analyse […] de l’existence comme conscience et l’existence comme chose, et qui exige une reconstruction complète de la
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Being the theoretical formulation of our everyday thinking, of our natural attitude, objective thought cannot simply be left behind. It will reveal itself in the expressions we use, which are not merely the property of philosophers and scientists, but often belong to everyday language. Therefore, we cannot refute objective thought merely by proposing an alternative, better theory. This is what intellectualism tries to do in regard to empiricism, and it only ends up with two substances instead of one, two mysteries, instead of one. Rather, Merleau-Ponty wants to perform an archaeology or genealogy of objective thinking. In order to “awaken the perceptual experience buried beneath its own results”\(^8^3\), he examines how this form of thought arises from perception’s forgetting of itself in favour of the object in order to expose its internal inconsistencies.\(^8^4\)

What is needed, then, is a new kind of thinking, which does not “ignore itself” in the object, but is capable of recovering the experiences in which the meaningful object arises. This is phenomenology, or what Merleau-Ponty also calls “radical reflection”, in contrast with the analytical reflection of Descartes or Kant.\(^8^5\) Radical reflection is a reflection upon itself as reflection of an unreflected, which does not neglect itself as an event in the world. Analytical reflection, on the other hand, seeks refuge at a site beyond time, space and being, from which it tries to reconstruct experience and its necessary conditions. This reconstruction, however, can at best be incomplete, since it forgets precisely its dependency upon the lived world that is its origin. Radical reflection, which strives to capture the object in its appearance, in its “nascent state”\(^8^6\) is a form of wonder in the face of the world\(^8^7\) – not the retreat to a transcendentally pure consciousness, but a stepping back in order to “watch the transcendences spring up”, a distension of “the intentional philosophie”) and that the problems posed in *Phenomenology of Perception* “are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’–‘object’ distinction” (VI 253/200: “Les problèmes posés dans *Ph. P.* sont insolubles parce que j’y pars de la distinction ‘conscience’–‘objet’”). Cf. also infra, pp. 33f.

\(^8^3\) *PP* 77/64: “Pour réveiller l’expérience perceptive ensevelie sous ses propres résultats”.

\(^8^4\) Cf. *PP* 86/74: “this passage [from objective thought to the experience behind it] will only be motivated by its own quandary” (“ce passage [de la pensée objective à l’expérience derrière elle] ne sera motivé que par ses propres embarras”). This is an important reason for Merleau-Ponty’s returning time and again to Descartes: as he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the great merit of Descartes’ philosophy is that it assumes the contradiction between what can be known clearly and distinctly by the understanding and what can only be known by life (the union between soul and body), but obscurely, and not by the understanding (*PP* 52/44).

\(^8^5\) Indeed, Husserl also used the term “radical reflection”, and it is not entirely clear to what extent Merleau-Ponty believes his use to differ from that of the older phenomenologist.

\(^8^6\) For example: *PP* xvi, 48, 69, 140/lxxxv, 40, 57, 122: “à l’état naissant”.

\(^8^7\) This was Eugen Fink’s formulation of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. See *PP* viii/xiii, and Fink “Die phänomenologischen Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik”, *Kant-Studien*, 38 (317–383), 1933, pp. 331 ff.
threads that bind us to the world” which makes them appear to us as such.\textsuperscript{88} This effort to “learn to see the world again” is an aspiration that phenomenology has in common with art forms such as painting and literature. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty refers as much to Proust, Valéry or Cézanne as to Descartes or the “three H’s” of mid-20th century philosophy.\textsuperscript{89}

The incarnated ego is thus not a mental substance united with a body, whose properties can be fully determined, but an empirical moment of the world: not only as contingent as the former, but also a transcendental condition of the world’s appearance, a necessary opening towards the world and towards other subjects. A body-less subject would be divine, liberated from space and time, and all events would be present for it, not in a relation of knowledge but in a perpetual creation. The subject can have a perspective upon the world only because it is itself worldly, and the object is an object only as given in a perspective. Or rather, the body-proper is neither subject nor object in the usual sense of these terms.\textsuperscript{90} At the level where things have not yet been constituted as objects of objective thought, the mutually exclusive categories are not applicable.\textsuperscript{91} It is not here a question of either–or: subject or object, inner or outer, meaning or sign, essence or existence. Instead, it is a question of neither–nor, of the in-between.

The Ontology of the Flesh

In his last, unfinished philosophy, Merleau-Ponty goes still further in his subversion of the traditional categories, to an extent that certain commentators have seen this version of his ontology as a response to a dissatisfaction with his earlier work, or even as an acknowledgement of its failure.\textsuperscript{92} In claiming that the embodied subject is both empirical and transcendental, both worldly and a condition of the world’s appearance, the phenomenology of perception seems to have remained caught in a dualism, while somewhat mollified: “The problems posed in Ph.P. are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’–‘object’ distinction”, Merleau-Ponty writes.\textsuperscript{93} The

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{PP} viii/lxxvii: “La réflexion [radicale] […] prend recul pour voir jaillir les transcendances, elle distend les fils intentionnels qui nous relient au monde pour les faire paraître…”


\textsuperscript{90} See for example \textit{PP} 231/204–5.

\textsuperscript{91} On this issue, see Essay 1, “‘The First Man Speaking’: Merleau-Ponty and Expression as the Task of Phenomenology”.


\textsuperscript{93} VI 253/200: Quoted \textit{supra}, footnote 81.
relation between ourselves and the world, this “dialogue” that takes place in perception, and the inescapable vulnerability of a carnal subjectivity cannot be conceived on this basis: even the notion of an embodied consciousness is insufficient if we want to understand precisely how an empirical event – “a given fact of the ‘objective’ order” such as a cerebral lesion\(^{94}\) – can impact on the transcendental order.

With the concept of the flesh, “chair”, that is central to Merleau-Ponty’s last ontology, this relation between (active, non-thetical) consciousness and world is brought back upon a common origin where perception – or vision, which Merleau-Ponty prefers at this time – is a “dehiscence” of the flesh where being turns over onto itself.\(^{95}\) The flesh is described through terms such as reversibility (“réversibilité”), chiasm (“chiasme”), crisscrossing (“recroisement”), but this inversion is “always imminent”, always characterised by an “écart” or separation: the hand trying to touch the other hand’s touching of an object can never fully succeed, never wholly coincide with it, just as the chiastic reversal of a phrase always results in a transformation of meaning.\(^{96}\)

The notion of flesh has, as Merleau-Ponty famously writes, “no name in traditional philosophy”\(^{97}\); it is neither matter, nor soul, nor substance, and should rather be compared to the ancient term “element”.\(^{98}\) Of course, the concept has a precedent in the Husserlian notion of “Leib”, the living body in contrast with the purely physical body, “Körper”, through the French translation of Cartesian Meditations where this distinction is introduced.\(^{99}\) Further, it is related to the phenomenological “principle of principles”, according to which everything that presents itself “in the flesh” (“leibhaft”, Fr. “en chair et en os”) “is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being”.\(^{100}\) For Merleau-Ponty at this stage, however, “in the flesh” is not as for Husserl a mode of givenness, but, as Barbaras puts it, “the originary presence

\(^{94}\) Ibid.

\(^{95}\) VI 201/153, OE 85/144. Cf. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, “Introduction: The Value of Flesh: Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy and the Modernism/Postmodernism Debate”, p. 11: “Because the flesh accomplishes its narcissism only by separating itself into two ‘parts’ – because it is this ‘dehiscence’ – it cannot see itself seeing, touch itself touching.”

\(^{96}\) As in “eat to live, do not live to eat”.

\(^{97}\) VI 183/139: “I’l on sait qu’il n’y a pas de nom en philosophie traditionnelle pour désigner cela”.

\(^{98}\) VI 184/139: “La chair n’est pas matière, n’est pas esprit, n’est pas substance. Il faudrait, pour la désigner, le vieux terme d’’élément’ […]”


\(^{100}\) Ideen I § 24, 43–44: “daß alles, was sich uns in der ’Intuition’ originär, (sozusagen in seiner leibhaften Wirklichkeit) darbietet, einfach hinzunehmen sei, als was es sich gibt …” Emphasis in text.
against the background of which all givenness can be thought”;\textsuperscript{101} the presence of the sensible also accounts for the givenness of the non-sensible, the intelligible, which is also, in a broader meaning, originary.\textsuperscript{102} For this reason, Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh a “general thing”, an “incarnated principle” that, as it were, binds together the sensible and the intelligible regions.\textsuperscript{103} Merleau-Ponty writes that the most elementary sensible such as a colour is not a \textit{quale}, but a “concretion of visibility”, which carries with itself “tufts” of meanings, or invisibles:

The red dress \textit{a fortiori} holds with all its fibres onto the fabric of the visible, and thereby onto a fabric of invisible being. A punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar, it is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops, and advocate generals, and also in the field of adornments and that of uniforms.\textsuperscript{104}

Thus, rather than being a layer upon the visible, the invisible is integrated in it, or in other words “the visible is pregnant with the invisible”.\textsuperscript{105} If the flesh now encompasses both the individual living bodies and the element of the world, the relation between body-proper and world is still described in terms of the corporeal schema, the encompassing Gestalt that constitutes the hinge or pivot between me and the other, my living body and the world. But in this final period, the goal is said to be the formulation of a thinking “entirely outside of the philosophy of subject and object”.\textsuperscript{106}

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\textsuperscript{102} Hence, the “splitting of the originary” (“le dédoublement de l’originaire”) in the title of Barbaras’s essay.

\textsuperscript{103} Other proposed titles of the work were “The Origin of Truth”, or “Genealogy of the True” (\textit{VI} 9/xxxiv: “L’Origine de la vérité”, “Généalogie du vrai”).

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{VI} 174–175/132: “À plus forte raison, la robe rouge tient-elle de tous ses fibres au tissu du visible, et, par lui, à un tissu d’être invisible. Ponctuation dans le champ des choses rouges, qui comprend les tuiles des toits, le drapeau des gardes-barrières et de la Révolution, certains terrains près d’Aix ou à Madagascar, elle l’est aussi dans celui des robes rouges, qui comprend, avec des robes de femmes, des robes de professeurs, d’évêques et d’avocats généraux, et aussi dans celui des parures, et celui des uniformes.”

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{VI} 269/216: “le visible est prégnant de l’invisible”. For the notion of pregnancy (“prégnance”), see Essay 2.

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{VI} 260/207: “tout à fait hors de la philosophie du sujet et de l’objet.”
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Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophical Turn?

Merleau-Ponty’s contemporaries often reproached him for dissolving the problems of dualism in ambiguities, plunging into the immediate, lived experience and therewith running the risk of abandoning the possibility of rational thought altogether. Ferdinand Alquié formulated such a criticism in an article published two years after *Phenomenology of Perception*, and its title, “A Philosophy of Ambiguity”\(^{107}\) was made famous by the Belgian philosopher Alphonse de Waelhens, although he used it as a positive characteristic of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.\(^{108}\)

Alquié contends that in searching for a philosophy beyond the alternatives of empiricism and rationalism, Merleau-Ponty mingles the two ontological categories of dualism into one, describing the human as “in-itself-for-itself”, “objectivity-subjectivity”, transcendent-immanent, and thus as a fundamental equivocality.\(^{109}\) And such a philosophy cannot be thought, claims Alquié.\(^{110}\) Retorting that Merleau-Ponty’s human being is not a composition of subjectivity and objectivity but rather a being in-between, neither one nor the other, would not help: for Alquié such a characterisation is not philosophically understandable. Even though he admits the richness of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of lived reality, the result is a philosophy without truth, where everything is relative, art as much as mathematics.\(^{111}\)

A similar, but more sweeping, criticism is later formulated by for example Jean Piaget, who claims that ambiguity is a pseudo-solution to the opposition between lived experience and the universe of science, which he even calls “pitiful”.\(^{112}\) Just as Alquié and other critics from that period, such as Jean-

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\(^{110}\) Although not in the sense of Descartes for whom the union between soul and body could not be thought by understanding (see supra, footnote 83): Alquié considers Cartesian dualism as perfectly thinkable in contrast with Merleau-Ponty’s “monism”. Ibid., p. 58: “je ne puis penser cette ambiguïté où sont confondus les termes dont la contradiction faisait problème” and p. 68: “[Merleau-Ponty] croit devoir abandonner le dualisme, et les philosophies de l’analyse, qui seules restituent en sa vérité le drame humain”. Merleau-Ponty is called “moniste” at several places, for example p. 61: “son exigence est totalitaire et moniste”.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., p. 62: “De la variation de certains concepts scientifiques, il conclut à la totale mobilité du vrai, et va jusqu’à comparer la découverte mathématique à la création d’une symphonie.”

Toussaint Desanti\textsuperscript{113} or Émile Bréhier,\textsuperscript{114} Vincent Descombes rages a few decades later against what he regards as Merleau-Ponty exalting immediate experience as something absolute; as such, Descombes sees him relapsing into a form of – albeit “reformed” – idealism.\textsuperscript{115} In like manner, G. B. Madison suggests that the phenomenology of perception was an “impossible project”, due to Merleau-Ponty’s affirmation of the existing world as the ground of the subject and simultaneously a lingering idealistic vocabulary.\textsuperscript{116}

All these authors diagnose the idealist disease alleged to have contaminated Merleau-Ponty’s thought as related to its supposed point of departure: the “immediate” (“l’immédiat”). Every philosophy that raises the immediately given to an absolute status will meet with the same difficulties, irrespective of whether it is called “the things themselves”, “sensations” or “lived experience”.\textsuperscript{117} Descombes contends that phenomenology in general, and that of Merleau-Ponty in particular, is brought up against a problem in expressing or making explicit the meaning of living experience, since this expression is always of experience and can therefore never coincide with it; it will always come too late, and this explains, according to the younger philosopher, why Merleau-Ponty calls the task of phenomenology “infinite”. But, writes Descombes, this is only another way of saying that it is “unrealisable”, since “a promised land which we will reach at the cost of an ‘infinite journey’ is indistinguishable from a land which is eternally prohibited”.\textsuperscript{118} He further picks up the argument of Jean-François Lyotard,\textsuperscript{119} who pointed to an inner impossibility pertaining to the search for the originary, immediate experience: the philosopher who tries to capture an experience more primordial than lan-


\textsuperscript{114} Bréhier puts forward his criticism in the discussion following Merleau-Ponty’s talk at La Société française de Philosophie in 1946, published in \textit{PPPC}, see pp. 73–74/28.

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Le Même et l’Autre}, p. 88: “Voici donc ce qui fait l’originalité de l’idéalisme réformé, mais non surmonté, par Merleau-Ponty”.

\textsuperscript{116} Madison, \textit{The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty}, p. 32; cf. pp. 268f.

\textsuperscript{117} This is the verdict of Alquié, p. 61, Desanti, p. 69, Descombes, p. 85. An even more radical view is put forward by Thomas F. Slaughter, in “Some Remarks on Merleau-Ponty’s Essay ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ ”, \textit{Man and World}, 12:1 (61–69), 1979, p. 61, where he writes that for Merleau-Ponty, “the locus of meaning is in the individual and in that individual’s particular perspective”.

\textsuperscript{118} Descombes p. 77; p. 60: “La phénoménologie se charge ainsi d’une tâche qu’elle dit elle-même ‘infinie’ (ce qui est une manière discrète de la dire irréalisable, car une terre promise à laquelle nous arriverons au prix d’une ‘marche infinie’ est indiscernable d’une terre interdite à jamais)”.

guage is foredoomed to failure, as it must be captured in language, and thus it is no longer primordial.  

Now, how pertinent is this criticism? Is Merleau-Ponty just like Husserl committed to “a battle of language against itself to attain the originary”? It is true that Merleau-Ponty several times quotes, with assent, Husserl’s famous statement from *Cartesian Meditations* that “it is the pure and, so to speak, still dumb experience which must be brought to the pure expression of its own meaning”. Does the task of phenomenology for Merleau-Ponty amount to gaining access to a level of experience more primordial than language, and is the problem of expression for him – at least up till the second half of the 40s – a matter of translating the meaning of this level into words? Is it because Merleau-Ponty has not succeeded in liberating himself from Husserl’s faith in primordial meaning that the problem of ambiguity appears in the phenomenology of perception?

In a short text written in the beginning of the 1950s, Merleau-Ponty seems to voice his critics’ point of view, describing his own former phenomenological studies of perception as suffering from a “bad ambiguity”, in that they contain “a mixture of finitude and universality, interiority and exteriority”. The remedy for this ambiguity would be the “good ambiguity” found in the phenomenon of expression:

… a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements: which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single fabric.

This self-diagnosis seemingly points to a turn in his philosophical development, a view that has been common among commentators. The turn is understood more or less radically as a shift from a focus on perception and experience to an emphasis on issues of expression and language, or from

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120 Descombes, pp. 61f.; 77f.
121 Lyotard, p. 45; 68: “un combat du langage contre lui-même pour atteindre l’originaire”.
122 *Cartesianische*, §16: “Der Anfang ist die reine und sozusagen noch stumme Erfahrung, die nun erst zur reinen Aussprache ihres eigenen Sinnes zu bringen ist.” Cf. *PP* x, 253–254, 337–8/lxxix, 228, 305: “C’est l’expérience pure et pour ainsi dire muette encore qu’il s’agit d’amener à l’expression pure de son propre sens”.
124 Ibid. “Mais il y a, dans le phénomène de l’expression, une ‘bonne ambiguïté’, c’est-à-dire une spontanéité qui accomplît ce qui paraissait impossible, à considérer les éléments séparés, qui réunit en un seul tissu la pluralité des monades, le passé et le présent, la nature et la culture.”
phenomenology to ontology. James Schmidt, for example, locates the shift to the time after the publication of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, when Merleau-Ponty began reading and teaching Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics.\textsuperscript{125} It has even been argued, most notably by James Edie, that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy underwent a “linguistic turn” during those years.\textsuperscript{126} Edie writes:

Whereas he had originally begun with the very Husserlian thesis that linguistic meaning is “founded” in the perceptual articulation of objects, in his final work he was attempting to understand the perceptual articulation of the world on the analogy of linguistic structure.\textsuperscript{127}

In his monograph from 1991, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, Renaud Barbaras declares that Merleau-Ponty’s whole philosophy must be understood in the light of the last texts, in spite of their unfinished character.\textsuperscript{128} Even though Barbaras sees *The Visible and the Invisible* as constituting an “ontological turn”\textsuperscript{129} this means above all a radicalisation of one and the same project, namely that of getting hold of the primordial layer that is to be found not only in experience but in Being itself. The last philosophy, however, is


\textsuperscript{126} See Edie, “Foreword” to Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* (English transl. Hugh Silverman, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and *Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976 (the chapter “Merleau-Ponty’s Structuralism”, a longer version of the earlier foreword) and *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Language: Structuralism and Dialectics*, Current Continental Research 206, Washington D.C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology & University Press of America, 1987. Without going as far as Edie, Bernard Waldenfels still sees the relation between Merleau-Ponty’s earlier and later philosophy as a “reversal”: if Gestalt theory in the first period served to understand semiology, he writes, in the later work “this relation is reversed: here language is instructive of perception and not the other way round” (“Diente früher die Gestalttheorie dem Verständnis der Semiologie, so kehrt sich dieses Verhältnis nu eher um, die Sprache ist instruktiv für die Wahrnehmung und nicht nur diese für jene”), *Der Spielraum des Verhaltens*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980, p. 159. More recently, Leonard Lawlor has argued that there is a “rupture” in Merleau-Ponty’s thought in his last courses: here “language is no longer secondary to and derived from original consciousness” but on the contrary “fundamental”, “Essence and Language: The Rupture in Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy”, *Studia Phenomenologica: Romanian Journal of Phenomenology*, 3:3–4 (155–62), 2003, p. 156.

\textsuperscript{127} Edie, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, p. 53. I discuss this issue further in Essay 3, “Merleau-Ponty’s Encounter with Saussure’s Linguistics: Misreading, Reinterpretation or Prolongation?”.

\textsuperscript{128} De l’être, p. 12: “It seems to us that the earlier works acquire coherence and consistency in light of *The Visible and the Invisible*, ensuring that we can read them only by means of the reformulation to which they finally give way.” (“Il nous semble que c’est à la lumière du *Visible et l’Invisible* que les travaux antérieurs acquièrent cohérence et consistance, de telle sorte que nous ne pouvons les lire autrement qu’à travers la reprise à laquelle ils donnent finalement lieu.”)

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid. p. 16: “ce tournant ontologique”.
distinguished by an awareness of the importance of reforming the categories that the ontology is formulated in. Thus, if Barbaras speaks of a “turn” it is in order to emphasise the radicality of the conceptual innovation in the last texts.130

Common to these interpretations is the idea that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project should be described in a Husserlian vein: the aim is to attain a pure experience, not yet tarnished by language and culture. The problem of expression, in this context, would then be to find adequate terms to capture the meaning of this experience without distortion. In this conception, the philosophical inquiry would have two moments: first, we must get access to the experience below the sedimented tradition; second, we must translate this mute meaning into an appropriate vocabulary.

Such a naive opinion of the possibility of attaining a pure experience would then characterise the early Merleau-Ponty, whereas towards the end of the 40s he begins to realise that language itself – and also other forms of expression, such as painting – is always a carrier of philosophical culture, and that the phenomenological project can only succeed if we examine the role of language in our experience. But this role of language can also be understood in different ways. Either we see it as crucial in a new sort of phenomenological reduction: when we have seized primordial experience beyond the sedimented tradition, we must find a language that has itself been purified of prejudice so that it can thoroughly mirror the experience we have attained. Or we understand the pursuit of a new philosophical idiom as part of the first movement: the effort to get hold of a primordial experience would be one with the search for a language that can express it. Only if the new role of language is understood in the second sense would we be permitted to speak of a “linguistic turn”.131

Now, there is no doubt that perception as a primordial level of experience appears to Merleau-Ponty at an early stage as the point of departure for philosophy. In the project descriptions from 1933 and 1934, his aim is said to be an examination of the nature of perception,132 his main work from 1945 is dubbed “phenomenology of perception”, and the summary of this work the following year is designated “the primacy of perception and its philosophical

130 Something similar can be said about Françoise Dastur’s interpretation, in Chair et Langage. Essais sur Merleau-Ponty, La Versanne: Encre Marine, 2001: she both emphasises the continuity in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development and wants to see it proceeding in a “turn” comparable to – and to some extent influenced by – that of Heidegger (9f., 191f.).

131 Cf. Essays 1 and 3.

132 “Projet de travail sur la nature de la perception” (1933) and “La nature de la perception” (1934) were applications for research grants to La Caisse Nationale des Sciences, published for the first time as appendixes to Geraets, Vers une nouvelle, and then in Le Primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques, Grenoble 1989 (PPC); translations by Forrest W. Williams appear in Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture, eds. Silverman and James Barry Jr., Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 1992 under the title “The Nature of Perception: Two Proposals (1933)"
consequences”. But is it therefore justified to speak of Merleau-Ponty’s view of perception, even in his earlier thought, either as giving access to the “immediate” in an absolute sense – as Alquié, Desanti, Piaget or Descombes do, and more recently also Richard Shusterman\textsuperscript{133} – or at least as a mute experience whose meaning is independent of language?\textsuperscript{134} And is it correct to describe his philosophical evolution in terms of a more or less radical turn, implying a renewed assessment of the roots of language in experience? The above-mentioned quotation on the still mute experience that the phenomenologist should return to and express reoccurs in Merleau-Ponty’s last philosophy\textsuperscript{135} indicating either that his point of view in this regard has not been profoundly altered, or that the meaning of the phrase has been transformed.\textsuperscript{136} The concept of “perceptual faith” ("la foi perceptive") – the fundamental conviction that in perception we attain the world itself – is, however, crucial also in the latter texts.

In other words, there is no unanimity among Merleau-Ponty scholars as to the character of his philosophical development. Martin Dillon, among others, disagrees with the “linguistic turn” interpretation in his well-known study \textit{Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology},\textsuperscript{137} arguing that there are shifts of emphasis as far as language is concerned, but the basic idea that language is a \textit{founded} phenomenon remains, founded upon the embodied experience of the world: perception. Likewise, in Douglas Low’s interpretation, the “reflective meaning” expressed by language is a sublimation of the perceptual contact between body and world throughout Merleau-Ponty’s career; Hugh Silverman even contends that language for Merleau-Ponty – as for other phenomenologists – is an “afterthought” in comparison to the fundamental self-world relation.\textsuperscript{138} More recently, Steven Priest has claimed that “Merleau-Ponty

\textsuperscript{133} See for example Shusterman, “The Silent, Limping Body of Philosophy” (in Carman et al., \textit{The Cambridge Companion}), where the allegation is repeated that Merleau-Ponty is “celebrating the primacy and sufficiency of nonreflective ‘primary consciousness’” (p. 158), a “pure, primordial state of unified experience” (p. 175), “beneath all language and concepts” (p. 159).

\textsuperscript{134} Madison, for his part, seems to have changed position with regard to Merleau-Ponty’s early philosophy and claims in an article from 1992 that perception here is “linguistic through and through”, thereby prefiguring poststructuralism in certain respects (“Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?”, in Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (eds.), \textit{Merleau-Ponty: Hermeneutics and Postmodernism}, New York, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, p. 92). What is more, Madison contends that Merleau-Ponty, in his aim to uproot objectivism, ends up in a work with “no positive theses” (p. 85) and that \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} then, in spite of its title, is not a study of perception.

\textsuperscript{135} VI 171/129.

\textsuperscript{136} As Jacques Taminiaux claims. I discuss this issue in Essay 1.


thinks the role of language in philosophy is overestimated by twentieth-century philosophy”.

However, although Merleau-Ponty’s remarks on this issue sometimes point in different directions – as when he writes: “it is on the basis of [the experience of ourselves] that all significations of language are assessed, and precisely through it that language comes to have any meaning for us” – he does nowhere in the early philosophy indicate the possibility of an immediate experience purified of language and culture. On the contrary, he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* that if the phenomenological return attains a level that could be termed “immediate”, it is not in the sense of “a solitary, blind and mute life”, but rather as “the structure, the spontaneous arrangement of parts”, and in the conference from 1946 he explicitly states that “description is not the return to immediate experience: one never comes back to it”.

Descombes’s criticism was based on the presupposition that lived experience is thought of as something achieved – it is a “promised land” that we

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139 Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, The Arguments of the Philosophers, London/New York: Routledge, 2003 (1998), p. 175. He continues: “Merleau-Ponty thinks that no problems outside the philosophy of language may be resolved only or essentially by the inspection of language.” It is not clear, however, what textual evidence Priest has for these categorical claims. To my knowledge, there are two places where Merleau-Ponty addresses this issue more or less directly: one is an interview from 1960 where he criticises, it is true, Anglo-American analytic philosophy: not for focusing upon language, however, but for retreating “into a universe of thought where contingency, ambiguity, and the concrete have no place” (Chapsal, *Les Écrivains*, p. 156: “La philosophie analytique des Anglo-Saxons est une retraite délibérée dans un univers de pensée où la contingence, l’ambigu, le concret n’ont pas de place.”) The second is his intervention after Gilbert Ryle’s presentation at the conference “La philosophie analytique” in Royamont in the same year. In reference to Ryle’s exposition of analytic philosophy, Merleau-Ponty says: “On hearing him saying this, I thought: I can’t really see what separates us.” (La Philosophie analytique, Cahiers de Royaumont Philosophie no. IV, Paris: Minuit, 1962, p. 94: “En l’écoutant à ce moment, je me disais: je ne vois pas bien ce qui nous sépare”, a work that is listed among Priest’s references). Both texts are available in English, *Texts and Dialogues*, citations on p. 9 and p. 66.

140 *PP* x/xxix: “c’est sur cette expérience [de nous-mêmes] que se mesurent toutes les significations du langage et c’est elle qui fait que justement le langage veut dire quelque chose pour nous”.

141 And in this renewed sense of “immediate”, Merleau-Ponty writes, the other’s mind is as immediate as my own. *PP* 70/58: “L’immédiat était donc une vie solitaire, aveugle et muette. Le retour au phénoménal n’offre aucune de ces particularités. […] le psychisme d’autrui devient un objet immédiate comme ensemble imprégné d’une signification immanente […]” Plus généralement c’est la notion même de l’immédiat qui se trouve transformée: est désormais immédiate non plus l’impression, l’objet qui ne fait qu’un avec le sujet, mais le sens, la structure, l’arrangement spontané des parties. Mon propre ‘psychisme’ ne m’est pas donné autrement […]”

142 *PPCP* 77/30: “la description n’est pas le retour à l’immédiat: on n’y revient pas”.

143 To be sure, Descombes admits that the subject for Merleau-Ponty is “unfinished” (“inachevé”), but he argues that this merely implies a “reformed idealism”, since the object is also unfinished (*Le Même et l’Autre*, p. 88; 71). Strange argument indeed, as it is precisely because consciousness never coincides with its object that it is unfinished and opaque.
need to attain. Nevertheless, it is precisely this idea of an inner givenness as a level of experience whose positive meaning the subject has absolute access to, whether she succeeds in formulating it in adequate words or not, that Merleau-Ponty denounces. “Discourse”, writes Descombes, “simply manifests externally (ex-presses) that which, dumb and implicit, was already present internally.”144 But Merleau-Ponty’s phrase the “text of experience” that Descombes refers to in order to justify his interpretation points in the opposite direction: the meaning of a text is hardly immediate or absolute, since it gets its signification only as part of a culturally constituted, linguistic system.145 Moreover, the preceding sentence (which Descombes has, interestingly, left out) states: “there is no experience without discourse [parole]”.146

Barbaras, too, states that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is driven by the demand to “return to experience in its brute state, going against the idealisations sedimented there” – a task that Barbaras admits is in principle impossible to accomplish.147 This formulation, however, does not in itself explain why we cannot attain this level of “brute” experience. Of course, going against the stream is more difficult and time-consuming than going with it, but it is not impossible “in principle”.

The problem is also more complex: it is a matter of capturing experience before it has congealed into finished objects, before the concepts that we use have fossilised into clichés. At the same time, we must in doing this set out from the existing terms: in other words, not simply “go against” the sedimented idealisations but do it with the help of them.148 Yet, for Barbaras, it is only in The Visible and the Invisible that philosophical interrogation itself becomes a problem for Merleau-Ponty – and even becomes the philosophical question that must be posed if the others are to be conceivable – whereas in

144 Ibid., p. 78; 62. “Le discours ne fait que manifester au dehors (ex-primer) ce qui, implicite et muet, était déjà là au dedans.”

145 PP 388/353: “le sens premier de la parole est cependant dans ce texte d’expérience qu’elle essaie de proférer”; Descombes, Le Même et l’Autre, p. 79; 62.

146 PP 388/353: “il n’y a pas d’expérience sans parole”. In fact, Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasises that expression is not a translation of an already existing signification, and that there is no “inner” thought independent of words; for example PP 213/188–89: “What tricks us here, what makes us believe in a thought that could exist for itself prior to expression, are the already constituted and already expressed thoughts that we can silently recall to ourselves and by which we give ourselves the illusion of an inner life. But in fact, this supposed silence is buzzing with words, this inner life is an inner language.” (“Ce qui nous trompe là-dessus, ce qui nous fait croire à une pensée qui existerait pour soi avant l’expression, ce sont les pensées déjà constituées et déjà exprimées que nous pouvons rappeler à nous silencieusement et par lesquelles nous nous donnons l’illusion d’une vie intérieure. Mais en réalité ce silence prétendu est bruissant de paroles, cette vie intérieure est un langage intérieur.”)

147 Barbaras, De l’être, p. 11: “la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty vaut avant tout […] par cette exigence incessante et par principe inaccomplie de faire retour à l’expérience en son état brut, à rebours des idéalisations qui y sont sédimentées”.

148 For this issue, see Essay I.
the earlier texts, “the possibility of a philosophy that allows experience itself to speak is taken for granted”.

Now, this disregards both the earlier passages where Merleau-Ponty gives prominence to the revision of the philosophical categories and the question at issue throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, regarding the possibility of a “radical reflexion” in contrast with the traditional philosophical reflection that takes access to its object for granted. I would claim that Merleau-Ponty, rather than going from naivety to insight about philosophical language and philosophy itself as a problem, moves from a narrower towards a more far-reaching emphasis on language and a conviction that the phenomenon of expression is part of “the phenomenology of phenomenology” of the inquiry into the very possibility of philosophy.

For this reason, a study of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression should pay attention not only to this phenomenon as he describes it at a theoretical level, but also to how it takes shape in his own texts. The conflicting interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s thought are certainly related to the fact that the pursuit of new forms of expression, of “fluid” categories that are better apt for capturing the polysemic character of experience, is a fundamental element of his philosophical work. In that respect, the French phenomenologist is rather opposed to the Anglo-Saxon philosophers who first advocated a linguistic turn, thereby having in mind the development of a language rid of the ambiguities of natural languages. However, there are clear connections with ordinary language philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell.

The Phenomenological Reduction

Not only Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Husserl in general, but in particular his description of the phenomenological reduction has been a matter of debate in the secondary literature. As indicated earlier, in Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation the reduction brings us back to a being-in-the-world, a situated subject inherently tied to other subjectivities. But if the reduction, as Husserl

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149 Barbaras, *De l’être*, p. 16: “la possibilité d’une philosophie qui laisse parler l’expérience même est posée comme allant de soi”.

150 On the notion of fluid categories, see *infra*, footnotes 164 and 471.

151 In the “Foreword” to *PP* Merleau-Ponty writes: “Far from being, as has been believed, the procedure for an idealist philosophy, the phenomenological reduction is the procedure of an existential philosophy: Heidegger’s *In-der-Welt-Sein* only appears against the background of the phenomenological reduction.” (*PP* ix/lxxviii: “Loin d’être, comme on l’a cru, la formule d’une philosophie idéaliste, la réduction phénoménologique est celle d’une philosophie existentielle: l’*‘In-der-Welt-Sein’* de Heidegger n’apparaît que sur le fond de la reduction phénoménologique.”)
writes, takes us from the natural attitude to the absolute life of consciousness with its noetico-noematic unities, a “residuum” of the hitherto accepted real world from which it is separated by an “abyss”, then it seems that Merleau-Ponty must either have distanced himself from Husserl’s thinking with its strong idealist tendencies, or have read him in a very unscholarly way in order to “save Husserl from himself.”

Both Madison and Barbaras believe that Merleau-Ponty’s early philosophy (up to and including *Phenomenology of Perception*) ultimately fails due to the persisting influence of Husserl’s transcendental idealism at this time. Only when he, towards the end of his life, abandons the idealist vocabulary does his philosophy approach maturity, according to this reading. Martin C. Dillon, on the other hand, contends that Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Husserl is at bottom “an extrapolation of his own philosophy”, and, more recently, Taylor Carman has claimed that Husserl’s phenomenological reductions “are fundamentally incompatible with [Merleau-Ponty’s] own philosophical commitments”. However, as Dan Zahavi has convincingly argued, this unfavourable interpretation both of Husserl and of Merleau-Ponty’s reading of him suffers from limited textual support. If we take Husserl’s research manuscripts into consideration, as Merleau-Ponty himself did, it will appear that Merleau-Ponty’s reading was indeed “visionary if not to say revolutionary”.

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152 As Husserl writes in *Ideen I*, §49 (called “Das absolute Bewußtsein als Residuum der Weltvernichtung”): “Zwischen Bewußtsein und Realität gähnt ein wahrer Abgrund des Sinnes” (*Husserliana* III/1, p. 93).


158 Ibid., p. 7. Merleau-Ponty’s reading was visionary, of course, due to his limited access to the manuscripts – as I explain supra, footnote 58, he consulted certain at the time unpublished manuscripts, as well as a rare copy of *Erfahrung und Urteil*, during a week-long visit in Leu- ven. Further, a selection of manuscripts was deposed in Paris between 1944 and 1946: *Cartesianische Meditationen* in German, the third part of *Krisis*, a transcription of the course from 1909, *Idee der Phänomenologie und ihre Methode*, as well as a number of texts from group C, on the problems of time consciousness (these manuscripts remained in Paris until 1948). Merleau-Ponty also had the opportunity in 1950 to study some manuscripts relating to the possibility of an intentional psychology, and it is possible that he consulted certain texts that were deposed in Paris between 1959 and 1960 (see Van Breda, “Merleau-Ponty et les Archives-Husserl”).
There remains the difference, though, that whereas for Husserl the reduction was a change of attitude based upon a deliberate decision, which turned the subject from the world given in the natural attitude to the transcendental region, for Merleau-Ponty it is rather a state that “the phenomenologist falls into”, as Sara Heinämaa writes.\textsuperscript{159} As Rudolf Bernet has shown, Heidegger as early as in \textit{Sein und Zeit} conceived a new two-step version of the phenomenological reduction: the first step is when the familiar ready-to-hand fails and its embeddedness in a manifold of references is disclosed, and therewith the entanglement of \textit{Dasein} and world; the second step comes with the anxiety that overwhelms \textit{Dasein} and tears it away from falling into the inauthentic world of \textit{das Man}, revealing its own innermost possibilities of being.\textsuperscript{160} For Merleau-Ponty, it is rather a number of case studies\textsuperscript{161} from contemporary biology, physiology, neuro- and psychopathology, etc., that function as tools for breaking our familiarity with the world.\textsuperscript{162} The normality that we take for granted suddenly manifests itself as contingent and vulnerable; in the light of pathological examples the conditions for and the meaning of our relation to the world and to ourselves come into view.

Moreover, if objective thinking is a product of our everyday attitude and appears in the concepts of science and philosophy as well as of ordinary language, it seems that the problem of expression can in no way have been secondary to Merleau-Ponty at this time. The “new kind of thinking” that he calls for does not just require a couple of new technical terms to formulate a set of internally coherent theses that better explain our experiential evidence. It requires us to question the very notion of “thesis”, of “coherence”, of “explaining”, of “evidence”.\textsuperscript{163} It requires, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, an entirely

\textsuperscript{159} In her fine essay “From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty’s Interpretation of Husserl’s Reduction”, in Toadvine et al., \textit{Merleau-Ponty’s Reading}, p. 131. Her reading takes as point of departure Merleau-Ponty’s reference to Fink’s formulation of the reduction as “a ‘wonder’ before the world” (\textit{PP} viii/lxxvii: “un ‘étonnement’ devant le monde”) and clarifies this idea through Descartes’ analysis of wonder.


\textsuperscript{161} Of which the most famous one is Schneider, see \textit{supra}, pp. 27f. as well as Essay 4.


\textsuperscript{163} For this reason, I do not agree with Komarine Romdenh-Romluc who describes objective thought as a set of hypotheses that “are open to revision/rejection in the face of recalcitrant evidence”, \textit{Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception} (Routledge Philosophy Guidebook), London and New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 35. Merleau-Ponty’s criticism is not, as Romdenh-Romluc claims (p. 31), an empirical procedure showing that observations do not correspond to hypotheses, but a phenomenological inquiry that questions the very terms “empirical”, “observation”, “hypothesis”, etc.
new kind of terms, that do not lay claim to unequivocalness but rather are “flowing”, or “fluid”, and therefore more suitable for the realm of primordial experience.

Thus, a further phenomenological tool that will take on increasing importance throughout Merleau-Ponty’s short career is the abovementioned recasting of the categories and ultimately the transformation of philosophical language. For this reason, I would disagree with those commentators who, much as in a certain tradition of Wittgenstein scholarship, try to extricate a theory of language from Merleau-Ponty’s idiosyncratic writing, as if that style of writing was a mere ornamental etching, hindering our sight through the clear window of truth. I would argue to the contrary that Merleau-Ponty’s style is the result of an effort to overcome the dualism of objective thinking. A new form of philosophical expression is needed precisely for the reason that the world is not, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, an already achieved and determined extension, simply waiting around for our language to reproduce its meaning. Rather, the specific meaning of the world that appears in our living experience has to be expressed, and it is the task of philosophy to describe what is involved in this primordial act of expression. But this description must itself be an expression. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in the preface to the Phenomenology of Perception: “Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing a truth into being.”

Hence, the solution to the “bad ambiguity” referred to in the “Unpublished Text” cited earlier – the hinge of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical turn, as it has been argued – is an act of expression. That is why Merleau-Ponty towards the end of his life struggled with a set of unprecedented philosophical terms, such as “flesh”, “chiasm”, “intertwining”. It is clear, however, that the need for a new philosophical conceptuality is not something that Merleau-Ponty discovered after the publication of the Phenomenology of Perception. The bad ambiguity of dualism, with its hybrid notions, its mix-

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165 This is, of course, another point of similarity with Heidegger’s thought.

166 James Edie is quite explicit in his study Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Language, p. 3: “Already as a student I pretty much came to the conclusion that Merleau-Ponty really would have liked to be more rigorous in his arguments if he could have been but that it was simply beyond him.”

167 PP xv/xx: “la philosophie n’est pas le reflet d’une vérité préalable, mais comme l’art la réalisation d’une vérité”.
ture of in itself and for itself with its hybrid notions, its mixture of in itself and for itself, is the all-pervading theme of this work.168

The Issue of Expression in the Literature

One of the first studies to take the problem of expression seriously as integral to Merleau-Ponty’s thought rather than merely a topic among others, is Jenny Slatman’s *L’Expression au-delà de la représentation: Sur l’aisthèsis et l’esthétique chez Merleau-Ponty*, from 2003.169 Even though the parallel between the phenomenologist and the artist (or poet) in Merleau-Ponty is fairly obvious, and pointed out by for example Forrest Williams as early as 1954,170 the ramifications of this profound comparison have not been thoroughly examined before.171

Slatman argues that the crucial role given to artistic expression in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology implies a “transformation of philosophy to a ‘figurative philosophy’ located between art and pure, conceptual philosophy”.172 Just as painting can give access to the world in the state of its appearance and thus operate as a form of phenomenological reduction, writing takes on a similar role in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, in particular towards the end of his career. Slatman attributes this poetic function of language to the use of metaphor, which corresponds in her interpretation to the role of the icon in his studies of painting: her thesis is that Merleau-Ponty, in his analysis of painting, replaces the classical understanding of ideality as *eidos* with iconicity, in the sense of an intrinsic connection between image and object rather than the external relation of representation.173 She writes that

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168 See, for example, *PP* 68, 92, 105/56, 79, 91.
171 Jerry H. Gill undertakes the interesting project of studying Merleau-Ponty’s own linguistic usage, in particular of metaphors, in *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1991. Unfortunately, the result is mainly an enumeration of metaphors, “geographic”, “textile”, “artistic”, etc., where little attention is paid either to the historical context of the terms or to the consequences of this language for philosophy itself.
172 *L’Expression au-delà*, p. 3: “une transformation de la philosophie en une ‘philosophie figurée’ étant située entre l’art et la philosophie pure et conceptuelle”.
173 Ibid., p. 157: “Justement parce que le tableau naît dans la réversibilité entre la chair du corps du peintre et la chair du monde visible, il faut avoir un rapport intrinsèque entre la peinture et le monde. L’icône exprime cette relation. […] L’icône est l’image du visible avec son invisible.” (“Precisely because the painting arises from the reversibility between the flesh of the painter’s body and the flesh of the visible world, there must be an intrinsic link between the painting and the world. The icon expresses this relation. […] The icon is the image of the
the metaphor in Merleau-Ponty is not, as in the classical Aristotelian conception, opposed to the literal meaning, but “it ‘mobilises’ the constitution of meaning in general in order to prevent its ‘use’ – in the double meaning of this word – into congealed concepts”.174

Barbaras has earlier interpreted Merleau-Ponty’s use of metaphor as giving access to being in an original sense, characterising metaphor in terms of a tension, at the level of the utterance, between the sentence and the metaphorical expression inserted there; at the level of interpretation, between a literal reading, challenged by the semantics of the terms, and a metaphorical interpretation; and finally in the copula itself, which states both an identity and a difference of similarity.175 In this way, the metaphor “shatters the closure of language and initiates us to a correspondence at the heart of the world”: in other words, it reveals a primordial metaphoricity of Being itself.176 Slatman follows Barbaras’s analysis, although she criticises his conclusion that this metaphoricity of Being actually restores the literal sense to the metaphor: she argues that Barbaras thereby reinstates a metaphysical distinction between the literal, original meaning and the figurative meaning that Merleau-Ponty’s writing aims to overcome.

For Slatman, the metaphor is, much like the icon, a “shifting image” (“image bougeante”), an “essence that comprises its own genesis”.177 It works at two levels: first, it construes a textual image in relying upon imagination; second, it breaks with ordinary language and thus reveals the relation between Being and the person who allocates meaning to Being.178 In emphasising that the metaphor functions to uncover the meaning-instituting relation rather than the primordial meaning of Being, Slatman seems to escape the opposition between natural language and poetic language (expressing the proper meaning of Being) that Barbaras’s analysis hinges upon.

Although Barbaras at several places contends that the original meaning of being is veiled or even masked by ordinary as well as scientific language, he concludes by claiming that “the categories of language do not by themselves
constitute a mask upon the world”. Rather, it is “an illusion proper to the practice of language” which makes “the meaning grow autonomous with regard to the reference and become a closed semantic unity, essence, whereas it actually remains scattered in the world”. This process, however, which makes an originary meaning solidify into a veil over the “deeper meaning of Being”, is postulated but never analysed. In fact, the fundamental distinction that is operative in Merleau-Ponty’s reasoning, between speaking and spoken, instituting/creative and instituted/acquired expression, is here interpreted as an opposition between a primordial meaning of Being, which is “scattered in the world” where language is born as poetry, and the congealed significations of ordinary and scientific language.

But in fact, Merleau-Ponty’s distinction cuts across the divisions between language and other forms of expression: the petrified forms of language and signification can be found in scientific parlance as well as in ordinary language and in art – even perception is loaded with stereotyped forms, and this is why phenomenology as an effort to capture the world “à l’état naissant”, in its state of being born, is needed in the first place.

Slatman conversely makes the effort to deal with Merleau-Ponty’s writing concretely by claiming that its metaphoricity is not simply due to his use of a number of metaphors, but rather due to a creation of a certain network of metaphors that are repeated throughout the text, therewith “encircling a centre of signification without ever touching it in a precise manner”. Thus, the figured character of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy does not, in her inter-


180 Ibid., p. 287: “C’est seulement par une illusion propre à l’exercice du langage que le sens s’autonomise vis-à-vis de la référence et se fait unité sémantique close, essence, alors que, en vérité, il demeure toujours épars dans le monde.”

181 Ibid., p. 286 “Si [la métaphore] suspend bien la visée référentielle, c’est pour faire apparaître un statut plus originaire de la référence, un sens plus profond de l’Être, au regard duquel les catégories du langage institué apparaissent alors comme des abstractions et finalement des masques.”

182 And inversely, scientific discourse also contains categories that open our access to the world in its nascent state, or Being: this is why Merleau-Ponty continuously returns to empirical psychology, physiology, biology, embryology, physics, linguistics, sociology, and so on.

183 See further Essay 1.

184 Slatman relies upon an article by Michel de Certeau, “La folie de la vision”, Esprit, 66 (89–99), 1982, where Merleau-Ponty’s later writing is analysed as a “network of synonyms” repeated in an incantatory manner: “des mots s’y répètent, […] incantatoires à la manière d’un refrain dans un poème” (p. 90).

185 Slatman, p. 212: “une répétition de mots qui encercle un ‘centre’ de signification sans jamais le toucher d’une manière précise”.

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pretation, consist in the employment of particular terms that each has a fig-
urative meaning, but in the repetition of metaphorical synonyms that dis-
place the meaning. For this reason, he does not simply replace the congealed
philosophical terms with living metaphorical ones, but with a row of them,
whose relation to one another remains indeterminate: “chiasm”, “reversibil-
ity”, “encroachment” (“empiètement”), “infringement” (“enjambement”),
“intertwining” (“entrelacs”), and so on.

Still, although she explicitly states that the contrast between indirect and
direct, instituting and instituted language is analytical and not factual, Slat-
man’s analysis also has a tendency to fall back upon an opposition be-
tween ordinary, conceptual, “sedimented” language and metaphorical writ-
ing. Paradoxically, the figured character of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking is
described as “an open philosophy, without concepts or sedimented signifi-
cations […] A philosophy that expresses itself metaphorically”, whereas this
metaphorical expression is constituted in opposition to a conceptual lan-
guage that it at the same time repeats: “As repetition, expression creates a
new meaning in taking the given tradition as a point of departure”.

However, creative expression is never described by Merleau-Ponty as
originating from simply the repetition – as differing-deferring – of acquired
expressions, but rather as a hazardous enterprise that might result in fail-
ure, and if it succeeds is sometimes depicted as a “metamorphosis”, an
answer to a demand coming from the world and from the works of this
world.

But, because he has perceived within himself the need to speak, the
birth of speech as bubbling up at the bottom of his mute experience,
the philosopher knows better than anyone that what is lived is spoken-
lived, that, born at this depth, language is not a mask over Being, but –
if one knows how to grasp it with all its roots and all its foliation – the
most valuable witness to Being, that it does not interrupt an immedia-

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186 Slatman, p. 132, 206.
188 Slatman, p. 154: “philosophie figurée”: “c’est-à-dire une philosophie ouverte, sans concepts ou significations sédimentés […] une philosophie qui s’exprime métaphoriquement”.
189 Ibid., p. 144: “Comme répétition, l’expression constitue un nouveau sens à partir d’une tradition donnée.”
190 Ibid.: “La répétition produit des différences sans se référer à une identité antérieure ou ultérieure. De cette manière, elle est le principe du paradoxe de l’expression.”
191 As I argue in Essay 1.
192 PM 95/68.
tion that would be perfect without it, that the vision itself, the thought itself, are, as has been said, “structured as a language”, are articulation before the letter, apparition of something where there was nothing or something else.193

The Reception of Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy

After the first big conference on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in Paris in 1981, organised by l’Institut mondial des hautes études phénoménologiques (“the international institute for phenomenological research”), its director Anna-Theresa Tymieniecka submitted a manuscript for an anthology based on the papers of the conference to the Parisian editor Aubier. The manuscript remained undealt with in the publishing house for seven years. Only in 1988, when Merleau-Ponty had been added to the official curriculum for l’agrégation – the prestigious competitive examination for teachers in France – in philosophy, was the book finally published.194 But still in the beginning of the 90s, when Merleau-Ponty had been dead for 30 years, the number of titles by or on Merleau-Ponty in French bookshops could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and he seemed a forgotten philosopher. During that decade, however, the situation started to change radically: his books were reedited, his literary remains – some shorter articles and above all many of his course notes – have since largely been edited and published and now total a dozen volumes.195 A great number of monographs have been pub-

193 VI 167–168/126: “Mais, parce qu’ayant éprouvé en lui-même le besoin de parler, la naissance de la parole comme une bulle au fond de son expérience muette, le philosophe sait mieux que personne que le vécu est du vécu-parlé, que, né à cette profondeur, le langage n’est pas un masque sur l’Être, mais, si l’on sait le ressaisir avec toutes ses racines et toute sa frondaison, le plus valable témoin de l’Être, qu’il n’interrompt pas une immédiation sans lui parfaite, que la vision même, la pensée même sont, a-t-on dit, ‘structurées comme un langage’, sont articulation avant la lettre, apparition de quelque chose là où il n’y avait rien ou autre chose.” Emphasis in text.


lished in his home country; conferences, research seminars and journals are dedicated to his thought. Nowadays, he has his own shelf in philosophically oriented bookshops; publishing companies for students edit introductions to diverse aspects of his thought, which has come to be part of general French education.

While certain of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical compatriots had worked in relation to his thought, in particular perhaps Simone de Beauvoir, Mikel Dufrenne, Michel Henry, Paul Ricœur and Gilbert Simondon but also more unusual thinkers such as the rabbi Marc-Alain Ouaknin, research on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy was mainly pursued outside of the French academic world until 1991, when Renaud Barbaras published his monograph *De l’être du phénomène. Sur l’ontologie de Merleau-Ponty*, which formed the prelude to a veritable explosion in Merleau-Ponty studies during the following two decades.

At first, it was mainly Italian philosophers who took charge of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical heritage. In Germany, studies on his philosophy were published at an early stage from the 70s onwards, but also in Holland, Spain and Portugal research was devoted to the French phenomenologist. On the American continent, too, Merleau-Ponty studies have a solid history: *Phénoménologie de la perception* was translated for the first time in 1962 and *Le Visible et l’Invisible* in 1968. Several monographs were published

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196 A trilingual (English, French and Italian) journal for Merleau-Ponty research, *Chiasmi international*, is appearing since 1988.
197 Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy was one important source for Beauvoir’s understanding of woman in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949.
203 By Colin Smith.
204 By the American philosopher Alphonso Lingis, who spent part of his studies in Paris.
in the US already in the 60s, and in 1976 the American Merleau-Ponty Circle (internationalised and still active today) was founded, whose yearly conferences have had an important role for Merleau-Ponty scholarship in North America. Research has also been vital in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, not to mention Japan where philosophers took interest in Merleau-Ponty at a time when his name was barely mentioned in his home country; some of his works were translated into Japanese already towards the end of the 50s, and a Japanese Merleau-Ponty circle was created in Tokyo in 1983.

The beginnings of Merleau-Ponty scholarship in the French language, then, were rather slow. It is true that Merleau-Ponty had only published his first two books when the Belgian philosopher Alphonse de Waelhens wrote his classical study of his philosophy, *Une Philosophie de l’ambiguïté. L’Existentialisme de Maurice Merleau-Ponty*; this title, “a philosophy of ambiguity”, became a formula that influenced the view of the French phenomenologist for quite a long time. The Swiss Pierre Thévenaz concludes the series of essays he wrote the year after with a text on Merleau-Ponty, calling attention to the originality of this young philosopher whose thought had already been subject to an extensive study. Except for that, there are two monographs of some significance written in Merleau-Ponty’s lifetime: one by Joseph Moreau, *L’Horizon des esprits. Essai critique sur la phénoménologie de la perception*, the other by the Dutch Remy C. Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*.

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206 On Merleau-Ponty scholarship in Mexico and Argentina, see Mario Teodoro Ramírez Cobián, “L’attualitá di Merleau-Ponty in Messico (e in Argentina)”, *Chiasmi international*, 1 (37–44), 1999.

207 An important reason for the Japanese attention is of course the general interest in phenomenology in this country, since the 20s when a number of Japanese philosophers visited Husserl’s and Heidegger’s lectures in Germany. See Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982 (1959), pp. 668 ff.


209 First published in 1951 (op. cit.).

210 Reedited in *De Husserl à Merleau-Ponty. Qu’est-ce que la phénoménologie?*, Baconnière: Neuchâtel 1966.

211 Ibid. p. 110.

212 Paris: P.U.F., 1960. As the title indicates, Moreau there presents a criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

In connection with Merleau-Ponty’s unexpected death the journal Les Temps modernes, founded by Sartre and Beauvoir, edited a special issue in the following autumn where Sartre himself contributed. The first version of his essay, “Merleau-Ponty vivant”, exposed his personal grief to the extent that he wrote a wholly new version for publication. At that time, Xavier Tilliette wrote two essays on Merleau-Ponty, one of which was developed into a book with the title Merleau-Ponty ou la Mesure de l’homme.

In 1963, Jean Hyppolite held a lecture in Oxford entitled Sens et existence dans la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and in the same year André Robinet’s introductory book Merleau-Ponty. Sa vie, son œuvre avec un exposé de sa philosophie was published. A few years later, a comparative study of Merleau-Ponty and Bergson by Augustin Fressin came out, La Perception chez Bergson et chez Merleau-Ponty, and in 1971 the Canadian Théodore F. Geraets published an important study of Merleau-Ponty’s early thought entitled Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendentale. La Genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu’à la Phénoménologie de la perception. The same year, François Heidsieck’s book L’Ontologie de Merleau-Ponty was published, and the journal L’Arc released a special issue on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, devoted in particular to his posthumous works. Another Canadian philosopher, Gary Brent Madison, brought out his study La Phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty. Une recherche des limites de la conscience in France in 1973. The year after, Luce Fontaine-de Visscher’s Phénomène ou Structure? Essai sur le langage chez Merleau-Ponty was published in Belgium. Two years later, a thesis by Michel Lefeuvre came in print, Merleau-Ponty au-delà de la phénoménologie: Du corps, de l’être et du langage, and in 1977 another Canadian, Hubert Wal-

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214 The original version has been translated into English and published as “Merleau-Ponty (I)” in Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 15:2 (128–154), 1984.


222 For these works, see infra, footnote 194.


In other words, out of almost four decades of French-language publications on Merleau-Ponty, a dozen are monographs, seven were published in France and merely five were written by his compatriots.

Nevertheless, several volumes of Merleau-Ponty’s work were edited in the 60s by his student and friend Claude Lefort: the last unfinished project under the title *Le Visible et l’Invisible* in 1964 and the manuscript from the beginning of the 50s as *La Prose du monde* in 1969. The collection of essays *Sens et Non-sens* from 1948 was reedited in 1966, and two small volumes with course notes were brought out in 1968: *Résumés de cours. Collège de France 1952–1960*, likewise edited by Lefort, containing the summaries of Merleau-Ponty’s courses at Collège de France, and *L’Union de l’âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson (1947–48)*, adapted by Jean Deprun, a student at École normale supérieure, on the basis of the late philosopher’s course at this school, and compared with notes of the students.

In the preface to *Résumés de cours* Lefort advises against further publication of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical remains, and Tilliette takes a similar approach.233 Lefort considers that these pages, which in bygone days – to Merleau-Ponty’s audience – were brimming with meaning, have now become mute.234 A strange argument, indeed, that would make most historical

228 Freiburg: Université de Fribourg, 1978.
233 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
As we saw earlier, the injunction has not been respected, and new volumes are still being prepared for publication.\textsuperscript{235}

As mentioned earlier, it is possible to speak of a turn in Merleau-Ponty scholarship, in particular since the beginning of the 90s, with an increasing number of articles and monographs on his thought. The interest has come not only from philosophers, but also from researchers in other areas, such as feminist theory, psychology, art theory, dance theory, and more recently environmental studies and cognitive science. There has been a growing focus on issues of language and aesthetics,\textsuperscript{236} and an awareness that expression was fundamental to Merleau-Ponty’s very philosophical method, at least in his later period. The emphasis on expression often goes hand in hand with an aim to reconsider other basic philosophical issues, such as subjectivity\textsuperscript{237} or corporeality.\textsuperscript{238}

\textsuperscript{235} It should be noted that there are important differences between the volumes comprising Merleau-Ponty’s literary remains: \textit{Le Visible et l’Invisible} and \textit{La Prose du monde} are both constituted by unfinished manuscripts and working notes prepared by his student Claude Lefort, whereas \textit{Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne} contains course notes that were approved by Merleau-Ponty himself before their first publication in \textit{Bulletin de psychologie} (in the years 1949–1952). Most of the texts in \textit{Parcours} and \textit{Parcours deux} were published in Merleau-Ponty’s lifetime and \textit{La Causerie} contains texts written by Merleau-Ponty for radio and broadcasted in 1948. \textit{L’Union de l’âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson} (1947–48), ed. Jean Deprun, Paris: J. Vrin, 1997 (1978) is compiled of course notes from the audience, \textit{La Nature} is based partly on notes taken by students, partly on the philosopher’s own notes, whereas the \textit{Notes de cours 1959–1961} is composed of notes transcribed by Lefort and Stéphanie Ménasé and \textit{L’Institution/La Passivité} prepared by Dominique Darmaillacq, Lefort and Ménasé. The other volumes all contain notes selected and transcribed by different editors with no direct acquaintance with Merleau-Ponty.


For a long time, commentators had a manifest preference for Merleau-Ponty’s later writings. This was due partly to its poetic and evocative style, partly to the influence of Barabara’s work, and of course partly to the publication in the mid-90s of Merleau-Ponty’s course notes from the same period.239 But for more than a decade, focus has returned to Merleau-Ponty’s early work, not least to his “masterwork” (“maître-livre”) Phenomenology of Perception.240 This comes especially from a more analytically oriented tradition, at the intersection of cognitive science, neuroscience, philosophy of mind and phenomenology.241

The Essays

In Essay 1, “‘The First Man Speaking’: Merleau-Ponty and Expression as the Task of Phenomenology”, my aim is to establish an understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s view of creative expression and of its phenomenological function, setting out from the intriguing statement in his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” that the painter (or writer or philosopher) finds himself in the situation of the first human being trying to express herself. Although the importance of primary or creative expression in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is well known, there is no consensus among commentators with respect to how this notion is to be understood and of its apparently paradoxical relation to experience in his philosophy. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty seems to presuppose that there is an original meaning pre-given in experience; on the other hand, expression is described as a hazardous enterprise, since the meaning to be expressed does not exist before expression has succeeded. In


order to resolve this tension, I explore the significance of the precariousness of creative expression, arguing that it must be related to its other side: the constituted, all too often petrified meaning that we must start out from. I review much of the extensive literature on the issue, and I take a closer look at Balzac’s short story referred to in Merleau-Ponty’s early essay in order to clarify the argument.

Merleau-Ponty’s view of meaning and in what sense it is given in perception is discussed from the angle of Gestalt theory in Essay 2, “Incarnated Meaning and the Notion of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology”. Although it is well known that Gestalt psychology had an important impact on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy throughout his career, there is still no detailed study either of its influence on his ideas or of his own understanding of the notoriously polysemic notion of Gestalt. Yet, this notion is key to understanding Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental project of overcoming objective thought and its inherent dichotomies. By indicating how signification or ideality can be immanent in, rather than opposed to, matter, it compels us to redefine both consciousness and the world it is bound up with. The aim of this article is to clarify Merleau-Ponty’s notion of Gestalt against the historical background that he refers to, including Kurt Goldstein’s theory of the organism that was crucial for his interpretation of it. One of Merleau-Ponty’s main insights was that an ontology of Gestalten required a structural difference between different orders of being, rather than a structural similarity (isomorphism) as the Gestalt theorists believed. There is a circular relation between the organism and its environment in the sense that the organism contributes to structuring the excitant rather than simply responding to it, and the Gestalt can be seen as describing this larger whole. In the last analysis, the Gestalt reveals itself as a cluster of related meanings that I aim to sort out in the essay.

Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics is another decisive influence on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, pivotal in particular for his later thought. The prevailing judgement of his encounter with Saussure’s linguistics is that, although important for the evolution of his philosophy of language, it was based on a mistaken or at least highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Saussure’s ideas. Significantly, the rendering of Saussure that has been common both in Merleau-Ponty scholarship and in linguistics hinges on the structuralist development of the Genevan linguist’s ideas. Essay 3, “Merleau-Ponty’s Encounter with Saussure’s Linguistics: Misreading, Reinterpretation or Prolongation?”, argues that another reading of Saussure, in the light of certain passages of the Course of General Linguistics, forgotten by the structuralists, and of the manuscripts related to the published works, shows to the contrary that Merleau-Ponty’s account was sustainable. An understanding of Saussure’s ideas that does not flinch from their paradoxical features can elucidate Merleau-Ponty’s views on language and expression, in particular as regards the “diacritical” notion of meaning that he derives from them. Moreover, the
“linguistic turn” in his philosophical development, identified by James Edie for example, does not seem to have been so clear-cut as has previously been believed; the influence of Saussure’s thought had certainly begun before he wrote *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Essay 4, “Language and the Gendered Body: Butler’s Early Reading of Merleau-Ponty”, addresses the debate about the relation between language and the living, gendered body as it is understood by defenders of poststructural theory on the one hand, and different interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology on the other. Through a close reading of Judith Butler’s 1989 essay on Merleau-Ponty’s “theory” of sexuality as well as the texts her argument hinges on, I claim that Butler, in her criticism of the French philosopher’s analysis of the famous “Schneider case,” does not take its wider context into account: neither the case study that Merleau-Ponty’s discussion is based upon, nor its role in his phenomenology of perception. Yet, although Butler does point out certain blind spots in his descriptions regarding the gendered body, it is in the light of her questioning that the true radicality of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas can be revealed. A further task for feminist phenomenology should be a thorough assessment of his philosophy from this angle, once the most obvious misunderstandings have been put to the side.

Finally, Essay 5, “Towards a Phenomenological Account of the Dancing Body: Merleau-Ponty and the Corporeal Schema”, discusses the dancing body from a phenomenological perspective, against the background of the philosophical conception of the lived body in tradition. In the very young discipline of dance theory, there is a shortage of philosophical concepts and analyses that I believe phenomenology can partly remedy. Although Merleau-Ponty has not written on dance other than in passing, I argue that his thoughts on the body-proper are useful in order to elucidate bodily expression in general and the significations that the dancer’s body manifests in performing a choreographic work in particular. The dynamic notion of the corporeal schema that he appeals to can make us understand how significations are inscribed in the body, and thus how something such as an expression or a choreographic language can exist in dance. Further, the specific forms of spatiality that Merleau-Ponty considers are opened up by artworks, within and beyond the concrete space of the physical body, gives us a clue to the elaboration of a phenomenology of dance.
Note on Earlier Publication


The differences between the article version and the thesis version of the essays are, first, that all quotes in original language that were removed from the former due to limited space have been added here; second, references and spelling have been made consistent throughout, and, third, typographical and other errors have been corrected. Essays 1 and 2, “‘The First Man Speaking’: Merleau-Ponty and Expression as the Task of Phenomenology” and “Incarnated Meaning and the Notion of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology”, have been accepted for publication with minor changes by Chiasmi international and JBSP respectively.
“The First Man Speaking”: Merleau-Ponty and Expression as the Task of Phenomenology

Surely all art is the result of one’s having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, where no one can go any further.

Rainer Maria Rilke

In Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” from 1945 we find the striking remark that “the artist [...] speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before”, and further down on the same page, “the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a cry”.

This text deals with artistic expression in the particular context of doubt. In spite of devoting the last thirty years of his life exclusively to painting – to the extent that he did not even attend his beloved mother’s funeral – Cézanne questioned his own vocation and talent, and he wondered whether the novelty of his painting was not perhaps due to an accident of his body – his eye troubles, for example. This setting is intriguing since it is not clear what philosophical function this psychological doubt performs. Not many com-

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244 DC 32/69: L’artiste [...] parle comme le premier homme a parlé et peint comme si l’on n’avait jamais peint”; “l’artiste lance son œuvre comme un homme a lancé la première parole, sans savoir si elle sera autre chose qu’un cri”.

245 This story is told by Émile Bernard in his “Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne” (1907), in 1926, p. 41.
mentators have examined the weight of Cézanne’s doubt, in spite of its being the very title of the essay.246

Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the post-impressionist painter Paul Cézanne is well documented, and for someone familiar with the French phenomenologist’s work it is easy to see why he was so fascinated by this painter. Cézanne’s aim was to paint “from nature”, to depict nature as it appeared to him in all its complexity and concreteness.247 He called his own method “réalisation”248 – to make or to become real – which was translated by Rainer Maria Rilke into German as “Dingwerdung”, the becoming of a thing.249

In Merleau-Ponty’s words, Cézanne wanted to paint things as they come into being, “matter as it takes on form”.250 This sounds strikingly similar to Merleau-Ponty’s view of the task of phenomenology: to develop a new kind of thinking, which can capture the meaning of the world as it comes into being.251 Thus, commentators have pointed out that Merleau-Ponty’s description of Cézanne’sendeavour in this essay can be read as a characterisation of his own philosophy.252


247 Cf. for example Cézanne’s letter to Émile Bernard of 12 May 1904, in Paul Cézanne Correspondance, John Rewald (ed.), Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1978 (1937), pp. 301–302; Paul Cézanne: Letters, transl. Seymour Hacker, New York: Hacker Art Books, 1984, p. 297: “I am proceeding very slowly, nature appears to me very complex; and the road is never ending. One must see the model clearly and feel it right; and then express oneself with distinction and force. […] He must be wary of the literary mind, which so often leads the painter out of his true path – the concrete study of nature […] The Louvre is a fine place to study, but it must be only a means. The real, the great study is the endless variety of the natural scene.” (“Je procède très lentement, la nature s’offrant à moi très complexe; et le road est jamais fini. On doit voir son modèle clairement et se sentir très juste; et encore s’exprimer avec distinction et force. […] L’esprit littérateur, qui fait si souvent le peintre s’écarter de sa vraie voie – l’étude concrète de la nature […] L’étude réelle et prodigieuse à entreprendre, c’est la diversité du tableau de la nature.”)


249 DC 23/63: “la matière en train de se donner forme”.


Cézanne’s efforts to paint from nature would seem to be crucial for an understanding of the issues of expression that Merleau-Ponty was to struggle with for the rest of his life. As we know, for Merleau-Ponty, language and expression in general must be understood as a dialectic between on the one hand a primary, creative, “authentic” form of expression – what he in Phenomenology of Perception terms “speaking speech” (“parole parlante”) – and on the other hand a secondary, constituted form – spoken speech (“parole parlée”). However, when he compares the artist’s task to that of the first human being speaking, it may look as though, for Merleau-Ponty, creative expression is a matter of going beneath culturally constituted significations in order to capture a pre-cultural, pre-scientific level of meaning: “nature at its origin”, as he puts it in reference to Cézanne’s painting.

In this sense, expression would play a role similar to that of Husserl’s epoché, a point of view that has often appeared in the literature: Galen A. Johnson, for example, writes that, for Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne’s work presents us “with a paradigm for prescientific perceptual experience of the natural world”, whereas Isabel Matos Dias claims that Merleau-Ponty’s Cézanne exercises “the epoché, in pushing aside what prevents us from seeing, culture, our habits and our prejudices”. In a similar vein, Gary Brent Madison contends that in Merleau-Ponty’s reading, Cézanne’s pictures present nature, “not that of civilised man who has surrounded himself with cultural worlds which hide from him the natural world, but that which the first man on earth could have seen”. For Renaud Barbaras, the Husserlian standpoint of Merleau-Ponty’s first two main works is a problem, since “the possibility of a philosophy that allows experience itself to speak is taken for granted”. This is also the view of Yves Thierry, for whom language at this stage remains “essentially determined by a silent [muets] thought underlying speech”.

254 DC 23/64: “la nature à son origine”.
257 Madison, The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, p. 79.
It would seem, then, that when Merleau-Ponty writes, “Cézanne’s difficulties are those of the first word”, his statement implies that the aim of the artist – and, by extension, of the phenomenologist – is to capture a level of meaning as yet unsoiled by culture. This interpretation apparently fits well with a passage from Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* that Merleau-Ponty likes to quote as a formula of the task of phenomenology, “It is the [...] still mute experience that we are concerned to lead to the pure expression of its own meaning.”

However, in “Cézanne’s Doubt”, as in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty is also quite explicit about the non-existence of a pre-given meaning, ready to be translated into expression. At one point he writes: “The meaning of what the artist is going to say is not anywhere, either in things, which as yet have no meaning, or in the artist himself, in his unformulated life.” And at another: “Before expression, there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, will prove that there was something rather than nothing to be found there.”

Several commentators call attention to a tension or “hesitation” in Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation of phenomenology in this regard. In an arti-

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260 *DC* 33/69: “[l]es difficultés de Cézanne sont celles de la première parole”.


262 *DC* 32/69: “Le sens de ce que va dire l’artiste n’est nulle part, ni dans les choses, qui ne sont pas encore sens, ni en lui-même, dans sa vie informulée”. Emphasis in text.

263 *DC* 32/69: “Avant l’expression, il n’y a rien qu’une fièvre vague, et seule l’œuvre faite et comprise prouvera qu’on devait trouver là quelque chose plutôt que rien”.

264 Thierry, *Du corps parlant*, for example on p. 42, identifies a hesitation between an analysis that sees language as intrinsic to all the subject’s relations to its world, and a fundamental position where “an irreducible distance is maintained between a perceived signifying, but silent [muet], world, and a universe of discourse [...]” (“une position de fond qui maintient une distance irréductible entre un monde perçu signifiant, mais muet, et un univers du discours qui certes s’enracine dans le premier, mais d’une certaine manière vit de l’oubli de cet enracinement”). The tension between expression and a silent (“silencieuse”) experience is also an important theme of Mauro Carbone’s study, *La Visibilité de l’invisible. Merleau-Ponty entre Cézanne et Proust*, transl. coll., Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2001, see e.g. pp. 15, 79–80. More radically, Étienne Bimbenet, *Nature et Humanité. Le Problème anthropologique dans l’œuvre de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris: J. Vrin, 2004, maintains that Merleau-Ponty’s endeavour to trace rationality back to experience in its state of appearance runs the risk of imprisoning experience in a lived but solitary point of view; p. 191: “Quelles que
cle from 1977, Jacques Taminiaux gives a fruitful account of this tension, which appears particularly in Merleau-Ponty’s repeated citation of “the little phrase” from *Cartesian Meditations* quoted earlier. Taminiaux writes that at the outset, in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, “Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher of the body, of the gesture...” interprets this phrase in a very Husserlian mode, as indicating the secondariness of language with respect to the original level of meaning in consciousness. Yet, in the very same text the phenomenological method is described as a wonder (“étonnement”) before “the unmotivated springing forth of the world”; it is not the clarification or reflexion of a being that is already given (“*un être préalable*”) but “like art, the realisation of a truth”, or, in other words, a creative expression.

Taminiaux argues that this tension can be traced back to two different conceptions of the relation between experience and expression. One of these perspectives Taminiaux calls *positivist*: in this case, experience is thought to precede expression, the phenomenological reduction is understood as a return to a primordial experience whose meaning is already given, and the aim of expression is to adequately capture the pre-given significations of experience. The other perspective is that of *art*, where “there is no primary signification prior to expression”, and the reduction is itself a creation of meaning. In Taminiaux’s interpretation, this tension is not recognised as such at the time of *Phenomenology of Perception* but becomes explicitly thematised in his later philosophy: here expression – and philosophy – is “creation, but with a support of which it is nevertheless not a reflection”.

If we accept Taminiaux’s account in a preliminary way at least, there are two intersected themes here and two intersected tensions: the first theme concerns the relation between expression and experience and – since expression in the strong or authentic sense is clearly, for Merleau-Ponty, a way to the phenomenological reduction – there is a tension with regard to what the phenomenological method is supposed to be. The second theme relates to the

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soient la lettre et les déclarations expresses de la *Phénoménologie de la perception*, une tendance obstinément archéologique insiste qui, enfermant le vivant dans ses milieux de vie et l’expérience vécue dans son absolue sincérité, semble interdire tout retour à la communication rationnelle”.


266 PP viii/lxxvii: “le jaillissement immotivé du monde”.

267 PP xv/lxxxiv: “comme l’art, la réalisation d’une vérité”.

268 Taminiaux, p. 103; p. 143: “En ce cas il n’y a pas de signification primaire antérieure à l’expression [...]”.

269 Ibid., p. 107; p. 146: “[La philosophie] est création, mais avec un support dont elle n’est pourtant pas le reflet.”.
question of how to understand the phenomenological sense of expression and in what way this primary form relates to what is termed (among other things) “secondary” expression. In both cases, there is a dichotomy looming, particularly threatening for Merleau-Ponty, whose whole philosophy strived to undermine reasoning in dichotomies, or more generally in terms of the bad ambiguities of either—or.

How, then, is the claim that Cézanne’s paintings reveal “nature at its origin”,270 “the background [fond] of inhuman nature”,271 “primordial perception”,272 “the reserve [fonds] of mute and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built”,273 to be reconciled with the idea that there is no meaning “before” expression? After all, must there not be something there that the painter is struggling to express? And how is the dialectic between the two forms of expression to be understood, if we are not to fall back into a simple dichotomy between an expression that translates the meaning of an original, primordial nature, and one that is cultural and therefore secondary?

Painting from Nature

Already in his twenties Cézanne had come to believe that nature must be the lodestar of art274 and came at first to be attracted by impressionism: the exact study of the appearances of nature, outdoors, sur le motif. Soon, however, he abandoned the impressionist techniques. In Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation this happened because impressionism pictured only the instantaneous sensation of the thing – its atmosphere, so to speak – whereas Cézanne wanted to find the solid object behind the atmosphere.275 But to depict the thing in its “own gravity”?276 must, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, involve a capturing of it in its state of appearing: neither as a collection of impressions, nor as a pure

270 DC 23/64: “la nature à son origine”.
271 DC 28 66: “le fond de nature inhumaine”.
272 DC 26/65: ”la perception primordiale”.
273 DC 32/69: “[le] fonds d’expérience muette et solitaire sur lequel sont bâtis la culture et l’échange des idées” – an allusion to the passage quoted earlier (footnote 261) from Husserl’s Cartesianische Meditationen: “It is the pure and, so to speak, still mute experience which we are concerned to lead to the pure expression of its own meaning.”
274 See for example Cézanne’s letter of circa 19 October 1866 to Émile Zola, p. 122f.; p. 116f.
275 DC 21/62: “The object is no longer covered by reflections, lost in its relationships to the air and the other objects, it seems subtly illuminated from within, light emanates from it, and the result is an impression of solidity and materiality.” (“L’objet n’est plus couvert de reflets, perdu dans ses rapports à l’air et aux autres objets, il est comme éclairé sourdement de l’intérieur, la lumière émane de lui, et il en résulte une impression de solidité et de matérialité.”)
276 DC 20/62: “pesanteur propre”.
object of thought, but as the thing is being born to our senses.

In the minds of Cézanne’s contemporaries this was a hopeless, and therefore self-destructive, effort.

His painting would be a paradox: pursuing reality without giving up sensation, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without outlining the contours, without framing the colour, without drawing up either the perspective or the picture.277

Émile Bernard called Cézanne’s procedure a “suicide”, writes Merleau-Ponty,278 in the sense that he refused himself all means to reach the reality he was aiming at279 and believed that the failure of his painting was due to his excessive self-doubts.280

But what Merleau-Ponty found in Cézanne was a painter who struggled to escape the traditional alternatives of “senses or intellect, the painter who sees and the painter who thinks, nature and composition, primitivism and tradition”.281 In other words, his work – and, of course, Merleau-Ponty’s – could be described as a challenge of the dichotomy of, on the one hand, empiricism and realism and, on the other hand, intellectualism and idealism. To paint “matter as it takes on form” is to refuse to make a choice between these alternatives. As a consequence, his painting will appear paradoxical only if we try to apply to it the very dichotomies that Cézanne was calling into question.

277 DC 21/63: “Sa peinture serait un paradoxe: rechercher la réalité sans quitter la sensation, sans prendre d’autre guide que la nature dans l’impression immédiate, sans cerner les contours, sans encadrer la couleur par le dessin, sans composer la perspective ni le tableau.”

278 In Merleau-Ponty’s words, DC 21/63: “C’est là ce que Bernard appelle le suicide de Cézanne: il vise la réalité et s’interdit les moyens de l’atteindre.” See Bernard, “Une conversation avec Cézanne”, in Sur Paul Cézanne, p. 135: “Mon vieux maître ne s’obstina-t-il pas à un suicide?”

279 Forrest Williams has pointed out that this paradoxical approach is precisely what phenomenology is about: to discover in experience intentionally given objective structures, op. cit., p. 172. Cf. Madison, The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, p. 77: “It is in this paradox – expressing nature itself without any abandonment of ‘sensation’ – that Merleau-Ponty locates the supreme significance of Cézanne’s work. The ‘meaning of his painting’ is summed up for him in Cézanne’s attempt to escape from this apparent antinomy: either nature as it is ‘in itself’ or our ‘subjective’ impression of nature, an antinomy which, on the philosophical level, is that of realism and idealism.”

280 As Bernard puts it in his memoir, “Souvenirs”, p. 26 (my emphasis): “Far too gifted, he went too far in his reflexions over the reasons to act. If only he had acted without so many doubts about what might be the best thing, he may not have reached the absolute, he may perhaps have ceased to be a case, but he would have given us some magistral pieces.” (“Trop bien doué, il allait trop loin dans la réflexion et la raison d’agir. S’il avait agi sans tant de doutes sur ce qui pouvait être le mieux, il n’eût pas été à l’absolu, il eût peut-être cessé d’être un cas mais il nous aurait donné des pages magistrales.”)

281 DC 22/63: “Cézanne cherche toujours à échapper aux alternatives toutes faites qu’on lui propose, – celle des sens ou de l’intelligence, du peintre qui voit et du peintre qui pense, de la nature et de la composition, du primitivisme et de la tradition.”
In Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation, then, Cézanne wanted to paint “nature in its origin”, a primordial world upon which our sciences are constructed. Now, it seems that the apprehension of the world that we are familiar with – to wit, what Husserl calls “the natural attitude” – relies upon the very dichotomies that Cézanne’s paintings are challenging. As a consequence, the world his paintings present to us will appear unfamiliar and strange: it is a world where one is uncomfortable, “où l’on n’est pas bien”, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, as if humans had somehow not yet left their trace there. Cézanne’s art performs a phenomenological reduction of sorts upon our habitual ways of conceiving the world, and this is the sense in which it reveals “the background of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself”.

The Question of the Given

When Merleau-Ponty compared the predicament of an artist with that of the first human being expressing herself, it suggested as we saw that the difficulties of expression have to do with representing an original meaning given in nature, independently of the traditionally constituted means of doing so. Notwithstanding, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the weight Cézanne attached to “going to the Louvre”, to studying the inherited tradition and its techniques as well as the empirical sciences of nature. If the difficulties of the artist were comparable to those of the first human being in that they were a matter of inventing entirely new techniques, more suitable – in Madison’s words – for depicting nature “as the first man on earth could have seen it” than the old ones, then it would seem that the artist should run as far from the Louvre as possible and put all his energy into learning how to experience primordially again.

We saw that there was no meaning “before expression” in Merleau-Ponty’s view. The “primordial” experience and the “inhuman nature” in which our culture and science are anchored can be compared to a “vague fever”, something that “appears in a confused way”: only “after expression” can we say what was there – and whether there was something there at

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282 DC 23/64: “la nature à son origine”.
283 DC 28/66.
284 Ibid.: “La peinture de Cézanne met en suspens ces habitudes et révèle le fond de nature inhumaine sur lequel l’homme s’installe.”
286 Madison, The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, p. 77.
287 DC 32/69.
288 DC 30/68.
all. In other words, the opposition that Merleau-Ponty still admits of, between the spontaneous order of perceived things and the human order of ideas and sciences, must not be placed on a par with a nature–culture dichotomy. When Merleau-Ponty uses the term “nature” in the sense of a level below the cultural, it is within scare quotes, indicating that he distances himself from this notion as traditionally understood.

If there is no meaning to be found before expression, then a formulation such as Madison’s, “as the first man on earth could have seen it”, becomes problematic. Merleau-Ponty does not contend that Cézanne’s paintings represent what the first man on earth could have seen – as if there were such a thing as the first man on earth and what he (she) might have seen. He must not be taken to affirm the existence of a pre-cultural attitude, or of a first, God-like, metaphysical subject.

Neither a not-yet-human, a savage (or an ape, as Bernard framed it) nor a transcendental ego emerging from out of nowhere is equipped to express the world in the state of its appearing. It is only a human being, Merleau-Ponty writes, who can reach right down to the roots of constituted humanity. In consequence, it must somehow be by means of constituted humanity that its roots can be captured. Somehow, the inherited ideas and techniques have to be learned and then forgotten, or rather, transcended. As Cézanne himself puts it in a letter, the painter indeed has to “go to the Louvre” and learn from his predecessors, but afterwards he must “hasten out of there” to the close study of nature.

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289 DC 32/69.


291 On this point, my interpretation is clearly at odds with that of Bimbenet, who claims that for Merleau-Ponty, speech is “nothing more than a sublimation of perceptual silence” (p. 218: “La parole ne représente jamais qu’une sublimation du silence perceptif”), and that language should be analysed “on the basis of the theme of the ‘first word’, thus against the background of a natural or prehuman silence which would precede it” (p. 219: “Il s’agirait alors de ressaisir le langage à partir du thème de la ‘première parole’, donc sur le fond d’un silence naturel ou préhumain qui le précédait”).


293 DC 28/67: “Mais seul un homme justement est capable de cette vision qui va jusqu’aux racines, en deçà de l’humanité constituée.”

294 See DC 29/67: “Il s’agissait, toute science oubliée, de ressaisir, au moyen de ces sciences, la constitution du paysage comme organisme naissant.”

295 Cézanne, 13 Sep 1903, p. 296: “Couture used to tell his students: Keep good company, meaning: Go to the Louvre. But after seeing the great masters who rest there, on must hasten
At this point, we have to recall the distinction between primary and secondary expression. In “Cézanne’s Doubt” this distinction is not made explicitly but is presupposed. The essay as a whole can be seen as a study of primary expression, and at one point Merleau-Ponty refers to a secondary painting and a secondary speech as “what is generally meant by culture”: the mere linking of ready-made ideas.  

To express authentically, on the other hand, is something other than merely putting old ideas together, or repeating what has already been said. It is a hazardous enterprise because, as we have seen, what is expressed does not exist prior to its expression. This is exactly what distinguishes primary expression from secondary expression. In the latter case, we may very well say that there is a meaning given “before” expression, but only because this meaning is the result of preceding, originary acts of expression. When it comes to these acts of expression in themselves, however, they take place in a situation comparable to that of “the first human being” expressing herself: they have to capture a not-yet meaning, a not-yet clear idea, a “vague fever” or “mute” experience of viscous, vibrating, vanishing appearances.

Thus, only after the expression has been achieved can we see that there was anything there to be expressed at all. Furthermore, the work accomplished does not simply present a picture: it aspires to truth. The artwork actually captured what was somehow there. Merleau-Ponty writes,

The meaning Cézanne gave to objects and faces in his paintings presented itself to him in the world that appeared to him. Cézanne simply released that meaning: it was the objects and the faces themselves as he saw them that demanded to be painted, and Cézanne simply expressed what they wanted to say.  

The statement “Cézanne simply expressed what they wanted to say”, reads in French, “ce qu’ils voulaient dire”. Merleau-Ponty is here exploiting the literal meaning of the expression “vouloir dire”, which in standard French to leave and to revivify oneself through contact with nature, with the instincts and with the artistic sensations within us. (p. 292: “Couture disait à ses élèves: Ayez de bonnes fréquentations, soit: Allez au Louvre. Mais après avoir vu les grands maîtres qui y reposent, il faut se hâter d’en sortir et vivifier en soi, au contact de la nature, les instincts, les sensations d’art qui résident en nous.”)

296 DC 32/69: “Cette peinture ou cette parole seconde est ce qu’on entend généralement par culture.”


298 DC 35/71: “Le sens que Cézanne dans ses tableaux donnera aux choses et aux visages se proposait à lui dans le monde même qui lui apparaissait, Cézanne l’a seulement délivré, ce sont les choses mêmes et les visages mêmes tels qu’il les voyait qui demandaient à être peints ainsi, et Cézanne a seulement dit ce qu’ils voulaient dire.”
simply denotes “to mean”. The passage could therefore also be translated as “Cézanne simply expressed what they meant.” Thus, the original meaning of appearing things is something that they call for, that they want the human being to express.299

The expression is, to use a Husserlian term that Merleau-Ponty appropriated motivated by what was to be found, although scattered and vague, in nature. In retrospect, this “joining of the wandering hands of nature”,300 as Cézanne himself labelled his aim, appears as the truth of nature. In a similar way, the work of an artist is tied to his life by a relation of what Husserl called “motivation”, so that after the fact – in the light of his art – we can determine what it was in the artist’s life that gave rise to this particular art: before expression, his “morbid constitution”301 may be an occasion of his failure as well as of his success. It is possible that Cézanne “on the occasion of his nervous weakness, conceived a form of art which is valid for everyone”.302 This meaning can only be determined after the fact of an achieved expression: in the case of Cézanne, his work reveals a “metaphysical meaning of his illness”.303

The Cry and the Cliché

Before expression, there is a not-yet meaning “scattered” or “wandering” in the world, which calls for expression by a human. Primary expression is motivated both by these vibrating appearances and by the contingencies of

299 Jonathan Gilmore points out that the English word “realization” in itself carries this double meaning of grasping a truth that was already available and of “bringing it into being”, “Between Philosophy and Art”, in Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (eds.), The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 303. This is of course also true of the French term réalisation.


301 DC 18/61: “constitution morbide”.


303 DC 35/71: “Il y a un rapport entre la constitution schizoïde et l’œuvre de Cézanne parce que l’œuvre révèle un sens métaphysique de la maladie”.

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the life of the human expressing it. In retrospect the expression will have been of what the things “wanted to say”, as well as of what that particular human being – in this case Cézanne – “wanted to say” or meant. If Cézanne’s art discloses a metaphysical significance of his illness, it turns out to have an existential significance, too. Or in other words, in revealing the meaning of the world, Cézanne’s successful expression will also reveal the specific meaning of his life. “The truth is that that work to be done called for that life.”

We are beginning to see what is at stake in the act of expression, “at what risk [dans quel risque]” it is accomplished. It is the predicament of a human being launching the first word, “not knowing whether it will be anything more than a cry”. In the last section I argued that Merleau-Ponty’s reference to “the first human being” and “the first word” ought not to be interpreted as an affirmation of a pure, “savage” form of human existence, preceding the culturally determined form, with a privileged access to primordial experience. Nevertheless, the opposition of “the first word” to a mere cry calls for an explication.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the cry from a poem in the following way:

[Poetry] is distinguishable from the cry, because the cry makes use of the body as nature gave it to us, i.e. poor in expressive means, whereas the poem uses language, and even a particular language, in such a way that the existential modulation, instead of being dissipated at the very instant of its expression, finds in the poetic apparatus a means of making itself eternal.

Merleau-Ponty is here elaborating upon what characterises an artwork in general, a painting, a piece of music or a poem. Hence, poetry, in the quote above, will be exchangeable for painting.

Clearly, “the cry” is not an arbitrary example; rather, it indicates the existential-metaphysical significance of expression. The phrase “not knowing whether it will be anything more than a cry” reminds us that a human cry is an expression of pain, of anguish, or of fear – as when we cry for help or when our existence may be in danger. But a cry can also be an animal’s cry: *un cri*, in French, can be that of a bird, a mouse, a pig – or an ape. In

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304 Ibid.: “La vérité est que cette œuvre à faire exigeait cette vie.” Emphasis in text.
305 DC 8/3: “On verra par l’exemple de Cézanne dans quel risque s’accomplit l’expression et la communication.”
306 PP 176/152: “[La poésie] se distingue du cri parce que le cri emploie notre corps tel que la nature nous l’a donné, c’est-à-dire pauvre en moyens d’expression, tandis que le poème emploie le langage, et même un langage particulier, de sorte que la modulation existentielle, au lieu de se dissiper dans l’instant même où elle s’exprime, trouve dans l’appareil poétique le moyen de s’éterniser.”
307 To be sure, a cry can also be one of joy, just as tears can be of happiness.
fact, the cry of an animal seems to be precisely what is meant by nothing “more than a cry”, and the word of the first human being that which distinguishes her from the ape. If this is true, then a mere cry would in her case have to be a cry in vain: a sound that does not come through as an expression, and thus comes through as a cry for help. It would be what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls an “inaarticulate sound”: the futile effort to name a supposedly private experience. Only expression will show that there was “something rather than nothing to be found there”, and if there was it would no longer be private – it is expression that makes us human.

Now, if the cry “makes use of the body as nature gave it to us: poor in expressive means”, this means that it may sometimes be hard to distinguish a cry of joy from one of pain, for example, but it is still not an animal’s cry. Neither does it seem as if the cry is in any literal sense “dissipated at the very instant of its expression” – to the extent that it is an expression, it must be part of some form of language and hence rely upon a “poetic [or linguistic] apparatus”. Rather, the cry that is dispersed at the moment of its utterance is precisely what is meant by the mere cry: that which did not come about as a human expression, and vanished as an echo among the mountains.

Expression for Merleau-Ponty is an act with no guarantee. As he puts it in the preface of Sense and Non-Sense: “It is like a step taken in the fog, of which no one can say if it is going to lead anywhere.” Because Cézanne’s art is not “what is generally meant by culture”, or secondary expression, he has to found culture anew – speak “as the first man spoke” and paint “as if no one had ever painted before”. Nonetheless, Cézanne must do this as a human; he has to rely upon a language – a pictorial apparatus in this case, by means of which the appearance is arrested in its flight. Otherwise, it would merely be an inarticulate patch, like a cry stuck in his throat.

“We live in a world where language is instituted” – we are humans, surrounded by the results of previous expressions. Our plight is not that we have to invent the word “help” when we are in danger, but instead that what we say about our most personal experience is likely to come out as merely a

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309 DC 32/69.
311 DC 32/69: “Cézanne […] parle comme le premier homme a parlé et peint comme si l’on n’avait jamais peint”.
312 PP 214/189: “Nous vivons dans un monde où la parole est instituée.” Emphasis in original.
platitude. Therefore, Cézanne certainly has to know the tradition but only in order to forget it again, in favour of the close confrontation with nature.

Thus, it seems that the risk we are running is not that what we are trying to say is too much ours, that it is too private, but rather that it is not ours at all. This aspect of the problem of expression lingers in the background of both “Cézanne’s Doubt” and Phenomenology of Perception. In the chapter on expression and language in the latter work, Merleau-Ponty again refers to “the first man who spoke”, note the scare quotes, confirming that we are not dealing with a historical thesis of sorts but with a statement about the general precariousness of expression. Alongside the writer and the philosopher as instances of efforts to primary expression – or what he in this chapter calls authentic or originary speech – we find the child who begins to speak as well as the person in love who wants to reveal his feelings. The latter example is particularly telling: the person who wants to express his sentiments of love for someone does not lack words and phrases. Quite the contrary, he knows far too many and has heard them all too many times before.

To be sure, Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly deal with the issue of expression gone stale, or the cliché. His focus is continuously on the complementary aspect of expression: the creative effort. There is nothing in his work equivalent to Heidegger’s shrill analysis of the everyday chatter of Dasein in Being and Time. This is all the more surprising as the inevitable conclusion of our previous study is that authentic expression is motivated both by the vibrating appearances desirous to become meaning and by the hitherto achieved meanings about to petrify. In particular, Merleau-Ponty’s own thought is motivated by the philosophical tradition and its all too solidified propensity to repeat itself.

The Other and the Establishment of Tradition

In his piece “The Unknown Masterpiece”, Honoré de Balzac tells the story about the painter Frenhofer and his life work, La Belle Noiseuse, which is kept hidden in his studio. Frenhofer appears in this philosophical short story as the master of masters, whose wisdom concerning the arduous task of expression is conveyed to a younger master and an even younger novice. His artistic manifesto is a veritable painting from nature, a seizure of life so consummate that art is transformed into life itself. “‘You’re in the presence of a woman, and you’re still looking for a picture. […] Where’s the art? Gone,

314 In a footnote on PP 208/530, and again on PP 217/193.
vanished!’”^315 Frenhofer exclaims, when his masterpiece *La Belle Noiseuse*, towards the end of the short story, is revealed to his two colleagues and admirers.

However, all the two younger painters can perceive on the canvas is a chaos of undetermined colours and outlandish lines, except in a corner of the painting where a delicious, living foot juts forth, a “escaped from an incredible, slow, and advancing destruction”.^316 Frenhofer is convinced of his success, until he overhears the youngest of his colleagues whispering to the other that there is nothing on his canvas. Hearing this comment, Frenhofer bursts out in rage, but finally realising the truth he begins to cry: “‘Nothing, nothing! And after working ten years!’”^317

The story illustrates the momentous role of the other in the act of expression. Frenhofer is no buffoon, but a veritable master, his knowledge about painting is immense and his studio is full of admirable pieces. Nonetheless, he is no authority on his own work, and his masterpiece will only achieve this status when it has been perceived as such by others. An act of authentic expression must, in Merleau-Ponty’s language, “come to life for other people”^318 in order to *be* an act of expression:

> It was from the approval of others that [Cézanne] had to await the proof of his own worth. That is why he questioned the picture emerging beneath his hand, why he hung on the glances other people directed toward his canvas.\(^319\)

Thus, the possibility that other people understand a picture or a wording seems to be a condition for it being an expression.\(^320\) Only when it is capable of “[awakening] the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others”,\(^321\) of being communicated, can it become a meaning. It can then be part of a general acquisition – a tradition for other humans to depart from. As Merleau-Ponty writes in a later text, “what we call [an

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^316 Ibid., p. 305; p. 41: “échappé à une incroyable, à une lente et progressive destruction”.

^317 Ibid., p. 306; p. 43: “Rien, rien! Et avoir travaillé dix ans!”

^318 DC 33/70: “Le peintre n’a pu que construire une image. Il faut attendre que cette image s’anime pour les autres.”

^319 DC 44/75: “C’est des autres, de leur assentiment qu’il doit attendre la preuve de sa valeur. Voilà pourquoi il interroge ce tableau qui naît sous sa main, il guette les regards des autres posés sur sa toile.”

^320 In *EP* 36/30, Merleau-Ponty writes: “Expression presupposes someone who expresses, a truth which he expresses, and the others before whom he expresses himself.” (“L’expression suppose quelqu’un qui s’exprime, une vérité qu’il exprime, et les autres devant qui il s’exprime.”)

^321 DC 33/70: “réveiller les expériences qui l’enraceront dans les autres consciences”.

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accomplished expression] is successful communication”.322 

But even if it is true that it is only from the approval of others that the artist will get the proof of his own worth, this endorsement can be no guarantee. A repetition of petrified meanings may also be understood and is often the only thing that is understood: the two men, perceiving nothing but a jumble of bizarre patches in Frenhofer’s painting, might have been Cézanne’s adversaries, leering at what we today believe is a masterpiece.

When an artwork is successful, Merleau-Ponty says, “it has the strange power to teach itself”;323 when the new form of expression is taken up in another act of expression by another, “on his own account”, as he writes in Prose of the World.324 When this new language has been acquired, I am transformed: it “has made me capable of understanding it”.325 So it is, for example, when Rainer Maria Rilke writes to his wife that Cézanne’s painting has succeeded:

When I remember how confused and insecure one was confronted with the first things, they were there in front of me together with a name I had never heard before. And thereafter for a long time nothing, and all of a sudden one has got the proper eyes…326

Surely, the circuit is always ajar. Expression can never be perfected – only the creation of a Platonic idea would be a fully achieved expression. In the visible world, to the contrary, meaning is incarnated and needs therefore to be assumed yet again, in a new act of expression. The expression that comes closest to being achieved is actually that which is about to congeal and die.

The Philosophical Function of the Doubt

Merleau-Ponty relates Bernard’s story about how Cézanne, upon hearing about the painter Frenhofer at a dinner, stood up from the table agitatedly pointing at himself. Cézanne was moved to tears and declared that he was Frenhofer.327 Rilke comments in his letters on this event: “Zola had not un-

322 PM 41/28: “ce que nous appelons [une expression accomplie], c’est la communication réussie”. Emphasis in original.
323 DC 33/70: “elle a le pouvoir étrange de s’enseigner elle-même”.
324 PM 41/28–29: “[La communication réussie ne l’est que] si celui qui écoute, au lieu de suivre maillon par maillon la chaîne verbale, reprend à son compte et dépasse en l’accomplissant la gesticulation linguistique de l’autre.”
325 PM 20/13.
326 Rilke, p. 26; p. 43: “Wenn ich mich erinnere, wie befremdet und unsicher man die ersten Sachen sah, als sie mit dem neugehörten Namen zusammen vor einem waren. Und dann lange nichts, und plötzlich hat man die richtigen Augen…”
327 DC 31/68. Bernard, p. 41f.
nderstood what was at stake; it was Balzac who had foreseen or forefelt that in painting you can suddenly come upon something so huge that no one can deal with it.”

Balzac’s short story is not about a clown who mistakenly believes he can paint, but about the hazardous demands of expression. In a similar way, Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the first human being expressing herself does not, as I argued, affirm the possibility of a pre-cultural form of experience. Rather, the phrase rhetorically exposes the human predicament as such: torn between the hollowness of the clichés and the doubtfulness of the expression aimed at, we are striving to give our life and the world meaning.

Against this background, the initially puzzling significance of Cézanne’s self-doubt becomes discernible. Far from being simply a peculiar and perhaps pathological trait of his personality, his radical doubt dramatises human existence. It has a metaphysical dimension, in that it functions like an emblem of the precarious relation between the contingencies of the world and its necessary, meaningful structures.

Jean-François Lyotard has written that “Merleau-Ponty certainly would not have been a great commentator on Cézanne if ‘Cézanne’s doubt’ hadn’t been his own”, without further commenting on what kind of doubt it would be. Obviously titling a philosophical essay “Cézanne’s doubt” resonates with another well-known doubt: Descartes’ methodological doubt in the Meditations on First Philosophy. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the results of Descartes’ metaphysical doubt are not tenable: it is no less difficult for me to know whether I have perceived something than to know whether there is something there. The seeing of a thing – what Descartes calls the thought of seeing – is no more certain than the existence of the thing, according to Merleau-Ponty.

Yet, we are inclined to believe that our experiences are more certain than that which they are experiences of, since we are deluded by what Merleau-Ponty calls “objective thought”: the prejudice of a world whose objects are completely achieved and determined, an absolute exteriority, “without folds”. When we reflect upon our experiences of these objects, we have a

328 Rilke, p. 24; p. 38: “Nicht Zola hatte begriffen, um was es sich handelte; Balzac hatte vorausgeahnt, daß es beim Malen plötzlich zu so etwas Übergroßem kommen kann, mit dem keiner fertig wird.”
332 PP 231/204: “sans replis”.

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tendency to transfer the categories of objectivity to them, and the subject is correspondingly posited as pure, self-transparent interiority.333

This is why a new kind of thinking is needed, a new kind of reflection, a radical reflection, in contrast to the “analytical” reflection of objective thought, or what he later terms “la pensée de survol”: a thinking which “looks on from above”.334 Radical reflection does not take the already constituted meanings of objective thought for granted and hence does not betray the unreflected experience which is its presupposition. It is a reflection that strives to capture the primordial, “mute” experience that objective thinking originates from.

This originary level of experience is thus the world in its state of appearing; it is not a layer of immaculate nature whose meaning we could simply contemplate and then represent in appropriate words or colours. In fact, we can distinguish also between a primary and secondary form of perception, where the latter is our everyday, empirical perception that takes the acquired significations of finished objects for granted and, therefore, obscures the primordial form of perception.335 In order to capture the fundamental level of experience – the “‘world’s instant’ that Cézanne wanted to paint”336 – we need to use some form of language. In other words, its contemplation is not mute but a form of expression.

It seems that the language with which Merleau-Ponty contrasts the originary form of experience is secondary, acquired language with its congealed meanings, not language in general. Indeed, to claim that primordial experience makes up a layer of silent meaning, which it is merely a question of properly putting into words, would be again to conflate the categories of that which is constituted and achieved with that which is not yet constituted, but in the process of being born. Primordial experience is mute precisely because we cannot speak about it in the concepts of objective thought.

On that account, the tension that we encountered earlier, between what Taminiaux called a “positivist” and an artistic view of the phenomenological method and of the relation between expression and experience in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, is not so great after all: in his earlier work, too, philoso-
phy can be described as “creation, but with a support of which it is nevertheless not a reflection”.337

Thus, if reflection is to become radical reflection and avoid being caught in the categories of objective thinking, it must be a second-order reflection, an act that takes itself into consideration as something that participates in the unreflected as an act. We saw that Cézanne wanted to paint things as they appear to us in their original meaning, beyond the conventional distinctions: neither our impression of things, nor the extended objects of analytical reflection, but the solid, factual, undeniable things. Just as Descartes’ doubt was a form of thought, Cézanne’s metaphysical doubt – and Merleau-Ponty’s own – is a form of reflection. Merleau-Ponty at several places characterises radical reflection as a creative act. It seems then that reflection, in order not to be analytical, must be expression. Merleau-Ponty’s effort to describe meaning as it first bursts forth before us involves “forging” the concepts needed.338 Those concepts must themselves be used in expressive acts if they are to make sense.

Now, does this mean that the original expressive operation is ultimately veiled in mystery? Merleau-Ponty does not hesitate to admit this when he speaks about “this intrinsically obscure operation whereby we have eternalised within ourselves a moment of fleeting life”.339 This is for internal reasons: in order to capture the process of expression we cannot perform an analytical reflection, a self-transparent reflection outside of time – the reflection must itself be an act of expression. At the same time, the expressive operation can itself be the object of radical reflection, and the hammering out of new concepts concern this process itself.

Primary and Secondary Expression

In order to fully understand the function of creative expression in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, I believe one would need to disentangle all the interrelated terms that Merleau-Ponty coins on the subject during his career. I can only give the outline of such an examination here. There is, in Phenomenology of Perception and contemporary texts, a primary, authentic or originary level of expression, speaking speech, where a meaning is formulated for the first time and where signification inhabits the sign: sometimes he talks about living, gestural, or emotional meaning at this level. On the other hand, there is secondary, constituted or empirical expression and the corresponding lev-

337 Cf. supra, footnote 269.
338 PP 121/106: “Nous avons […] à forger ici les concepts nécessaires …”
339 PP 446/409: “l’opération foncièrement obscure par laquelle nous avons éternisé en nous un moment de vie fuyante”.
els of meaning or signification: notional, conceptual, intellectual. Here, the sign is related to its signification in an external way; the expressions are conventional – sedimented acts of speaking speech\textsuperscript{340} – and may be called a simple translation of thought.\textsuperscript{341} However, since expression is our way of getting access to the originary level of experience, one can also, as we saw earlier, speak of primary or authentic and secondary or empirical perception.

In the period of The Prose of the World, where Merleau-Ponty more explicitly examines different forms of language and expression, he often uses the notions speaking and spoken, constituting and constituted language (“langage”),\textsuperscript{342} creative use of language and empirical use of already established (“d\textsuperscript{é}j\textsuperscript{a} fait”) language,\textsuperscript{343} and sometimes simply speech (“parole”) and language (“langue”), as well as indirect or lateral versus direct language or signification.\textsuperscript{344} Yet, as with the former distinctions, this is a dialectical one, and the opposition between direct and indirect signification must not be understood as mutually exclusive.\textsuperscript{345} Even though there is a sense in which we have an acquired language at our disposition, with signs and their corresponding significations, it is never fully achieved, and one does not choose a sign for a signification “the way one searches for a hammer to drive in a nail or pincers to pull one out”.\textsuperscript{346} The idea of “an absolutely transparent expression” is an illusion.\textsuperscript{347}

On the other hand, speaking, living language is always a “gesture of taking up [reprise] and recovering [r\textsuperscript{éc}up\textsuperscript{ération}]”\textsuperscript{348} of spoken language, which bends “the resources of constituted language to an unprecedented usage”.\textsuperscript{349}

\textsuperscript{340} PP 229/202.
\textsuperscript{341} PP 193/169.
\textsuperscript{342} See e.g. PM 17, 22, 123, 127/10, 14, 87, 90.
\textsuperscript{343} E.g. in the essay Le langage indirect et le voix de silence”, in Signes, Paris: Gallimard, 1960 (S) / “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, transl. M. B. Smith, in Johnson, Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics, pp. 56/82.
\textsuperscript{344} PM 64/46, and again “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, in particular S 54, 94/transl. 80, 112.
\textsuperscript{345} No more than that between the visible and the invisible, so important for the later work. Cf. Signes/ Signs, transl. Richard Calverton McCleary, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 30/21: “It would be better to speak of the visible and the invisible, pointing out that they are not contradictory […]” (“il vaudrait mieux parler du visible et de l’invisible, en répétant qu’ils ne sont pas contradictoires”).
\textsuperscript{346} PM 64/45: “[La parole vraiment expressive] ne choisit pas seulement un signe pour une signification déjà définie, comme on va chercher un marteau pour enfoncer un clou ou une tenaille pour l’arracher.”
\textsuperscript{347} PM 156/110: “[Le langage ordinaire procure à l’homme] l’illusion d’une expression absolument transparente et qui a atteint son but.” Cf. S 58: “En apparence, point de lacune ici, aucune silence parlant.” (“On the face of it, there are no gaps, no speaking silences here.” Translation in Johnson, 1993, p. 84.)
\textsuperscript{348} PM 26/17.
\textsuperscript{349} PP 446/409: “… ployant à un usage inédit les ressources du langage constitué”.
It is “the operation through which a certain arrangement of the already available signs and significations comes to alter, then to transfigure each of them and finally to secrete a new signification”.350

In his later work, a distinction is made in terms of the *logos endiathetos* – “meaning before logic”,351 the “brute or wild Being”, “the ‘amorphous’ perceptual world”352 – and *logos prophorikos*: “the ‘Logic’ that we produce”,353 that is “uttered”,354 the description of this perceptual logos.355 This distinction is the point of departure for Jenny Slatman’s analysis of the phenomenon of expression also in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier work, and she sees it as a development of that between speaking and spoken speech or language.356 However, this distinction is made at another level than that of language in the sense of a human production: it concerns the relation between the meaning of the world that “proposed itself” to be described by the painter or the philosopher – for example, the “prehuman world” that Cézanne wanted to paint – and the meaning produced in this description.357 The *logos prophorikos* is characterised by Merleau-Ponty as “*Gebilde*” (structure, shape, image), the “‘logic’ that we produce”, a creation that is not self-sufficient but a response to the demand of the *logos endiathetos*. For this reason, the very opposition between authentic expression and constituted, empirical expression seems to be built into this latter notion of the uttered logos, if it is to adequately capture the logos of the perceived world. Moreover, the distinction between speaking and spoken speech is not abandoned in *The Visible and the Invisible*.358

350 PM 20/13.
351 VI 222/169: “du sens avant la logique”.
352 VI 223/170: “[l]’Être brut ou sauvage”, “[l]e monde perceptif ‘amorphe’”.
353 Ibid.: “la ‘Logique’ que nous produisons”.
354 N 274/212: “Le Logos au sens du langage, λόγος προφορίκος, le langage proféré, dit tout sauf lui-même, il est, comme le Logos silencieux de la perception, réticent, λόγος ἐνδιαθετος. […] Il y a un Logos du monde naturel, esthétique, sur lequel s’appuie le Logos du langage.”
355 VI 233/179: “la description du λόγος perceptif est usage du λόγος προφορίκος”.
357 VI 223–224/170. The notion of *logos endiathetos* is arguably not absent from *Phenomenology of Perception* either, as can be noticed in passages such as PP 368–367/333: “The unfolding of sensible givens beneath our gaze or beneath our hands is like a language that would teach itself, where the signification would be secreted by the very structure of the signs, and this is why it can literally be said that our senses interrogate the things and that the things respond to them.” (“Le déroulement des données sensibles sous notre regard ou sous nos mains est comme un langage qui s’enseignerait lui-même, où la signification serait sécrétée par la structure même des signes, et c’est pourquoi l’on peut dire à la lettre que nos sens s’interrogent les choses et qu’elles leur répondent.”)
358 See e.g. VI 168/126, where he speaks of “ready-made language” (“le langage tout fait”) versus “speaking speech” (“la parole parlante”) and “operative language” (“langage opérant”),
Even though the distinction between primary expression – “speaking speech” – and secondary expression – “spoken speech” – is brought up by virtually all commentators upon Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression, their exact relation to one another, and to their corresponding levels of meaning, has, to my knowledge, not yet been thoroughly examined.359 Most commentators agree that these forms of expression are mutually dependent upon one another – as Bernard Waldenfels puts it, expression always takes place in between the “extremes of pure innovation and pure repetition, but cannot reach either of them”.360 According to Françoise Dastur, speaking and spoken speech are “two modalities of speech”,361 in Étienne Bimbenet’s words, they are “intertwined”,362 whereas Lawrence Hass puts their relation in terms of “an interwoven duality”.363 In a more elucidatory way, Jenny Slatman emphasises the analytical character of the distinction between speaking and spoken speech, as two moments of language that are in fact intermingled and “contaminate” one another.364

Notwithstanding, in bringing the peculiar feature of expression back to the idea of repetition, understood as a Derridean différance of sorts, Slatman tends to gloss over this important insight and forget precisely what is distinctive about creative expression, namely, its precariousness. If creative expres-

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359 I am thinking here in particular of the profusion of intermingled terms that Merleau-Ponty relies upon to formulate his thoughts on expression and language, summarised above, and the question of how they are interrelated: “primary” versus “secondary”, “transcendental” versus “empirical” speech, “constituting”, “operating”, “conquering” or “instituting” language versus “constituted”, “acquired” or “instituted” language; “primordial”, “gestural” or “emotional” meaning or signification, “living” or “incarnated” or “indirect”, “lateral” meaning versus “notional”, “conceptual” or “intellectual” meaning or signification, “common”, “conventional”, “already available”, “direct” meaning, and so on.


362 Bimbenet, p. 140: “l’entrelacement des paroles parlante et parlée”.


364 Slatman, p. 132: “Dans tous les performatifs, les deux s’entremêlent. C’est seulement une distinction analytique [entre] deux ‘moments’ du langage : d’un côté, il est générateur et, de l’autre, il est produit ou sédiment. Mais en réalité, la genèse et la sédimentation sont toujours en un rapport de ‘contamination’.” Thomas Baldwin constitutes an exception in this respect, claiming in a recent article that Merleau-Ponty with this distinction only reformulates the old subject–object dichotomy: “Speaking and Spoken Speech”, in Baldwin (ed.), Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception, London and New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 88, 93. Yet, it is quite clear from the texts that the notions of speaking and spoken speech do not refer to ontologically separate categories.
sion was a matter of simply repeating earlier acts of expression, therewith displacing and transforming their meaning, it is hard to see why the painter or the writer would have to “communicate at risk” (“dans le risque”). It is not obvious why the distinction between primary and secondary expression, speaking and spoken speech, would be needed in the first place. Even though the idea of a continuous alteration of the meanings of language – or what Bimbenet calls a “play of language with itself” – is not incompatible with Merleau-Ponty’s writings on expression, the institution of meaning in art, literature and philosophy is of an order where the access to an originary appearing of meaning is dependent on a transformation of given expressions that is radically new.

Cézanne and the Deflagration of Being

In his last published essay “Eye and Mind”, Merleau-Ponty returns to Cézanne and to the idea of an existing, “brute” world that art in general and the painter in particular draws upon, no longer in an effort to “seize” its meaning but rather to “transform it into painting”. It is a world “almost mad”, since the “light, lighting, shadows, reflections, colour” have “like ghosts” only visual existence and only exist “at the threshold of profane vision, they are not ordinarily seen”. In this text, painting is described as “a ‘visible’ to the second power”, an “icon” of the first visible, and the contrast is mainly between “profane” vision and the “voracious vision” of painting.

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365 “[Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty]”, Parcours deux, 2000/“An Unpublished Text by Merleau-Ponty”, 1964, pp. 45/9: “La grande prose est l’art de capter un sens qui n’avait jamais été objectivé jusque-là et de le rendre accessible à tous ceux qui parlent la même langue. Un écrivain se survit quand il n’est plus capable de fonder ainsi une universalité nouvelle, et de communiquer dans le risque.”

366 Bimbenet, p. 214: “la peinture reconduit le langage à sa vérité native, qui est celle de […] ‘l’avènement’ du sens dans le jeu du langage avec lui-même”. In a similar fashion, Stefan Kristensen, Parole et Subjectivité. Merleau-Ponty et la phénoménologie de l’expression, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2010, refers to the operation of speech that “in every moment invents new significations” (“l’opération de la parole invente à chaque moment de nouvelles significations”), p. 128.

367 OE 13/123: “Or l’art et notamment la peinture puissent à cette nappe de sens brut […]”; OE 16/123: “le peintre change le monde en peinture”.

368 OE 26/127: “le monde du peintre est un monde presque fou”. OE 29/128: “Lumière, éclairage, ombres, reflets, couleur […] ne sont pas tout à fait des être réels : ils n’ont, comme les fantômes, d’existence que visuelle. Ils ne sont même que sur le seuil de la vision profane, ils ne sont communément pas vus.”

Merleau-Ponty is here not explicitly looking for expression’s achievement and authenticity, but it is “mute [muet] Being that itself comes to show forth its own meaning”.370 Painting becomes a figure of the relation between the living body and the world or, more precisely, of how something such as vision can appear in the world: a vision that is a means “for being present from within at the fission of Being”.371 The world that Cézanne searches for is precisely “this deflagration of Being”372 – in contrast with the dominated world of “flying over” thought.

Whereas in “Cézanne’s Doubt” the painter picks up and transfigures into painting something that “would without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things”,373 in “Eye and Mind” the gestures of the painter that are “most proper to him […] seem to emanate from the things themselves, like figures from the constellations”.374 At the same time, even in the earlier text, the meaning of things “offered itself” to the painter, and his expression of it was “what they wanted to say”.375 The difference is then not so much that between a persisting belief that the meaning of experience is given independently of every effort to express it, and the mature insight that the expression of an original experience will always be productive of meaning. There is rather a change of focus; from the endeavour in the earlier philosophy to subvert the categories of objective thought,376 via the more thorough-going examination of expression and language in the middle period, he enters into the domain opened up by this study: the \textit{logos endiathetos} that he undertakes to formulate in adequate terms.

Conclusion

The painter, the writer, the philosopher and all of us who want to express something new – the child, or the person in love who wants to express his

371 OE 81/146: “La vision [est] le moyen […] d’assister du dedans à la fission de l’Être”.
372 OE 65/140: “cette déflagration de l’Être”.
373 DC 30/68: “ce qui sans lui reste enfermé dans la vie séparée de chaque conscience: la vibration des apparences qui est le berceau des choses”.
374 OE 31/129: “Ses actions les plus propres […] il lui semble qu’ils émanent des choses mêmes, comme le dessin des constellations”.
375 DC 35/71: ce qu’ils voulaient dire”. Emphasis in original.
feelings – share the predicament of the first human being who does not know whether her expression is going to be anything more than a cry. Before the new meaning has been expressed, there are only the already constituted meanings scattered around the world, and there is nothing inside us that can help us: what we tend to call the “inner”, our thoughts and emotions, does not become what it is until it has been expressed.  

Even though Merleau-Ponty emphasises the productive side of expression and language, his whole philosophy can be seen – in exemplifying the creative effort – as a struggle with the complementary aspect of expression: the self-defeating tradition we may be trapped in, the empty truism. After all, the predicament of the lover expressing his feelings is not, as we have seen, really the predicament of the first human being. Rather, it is the predicament of a human being with a long tradition behind her, who has heard all these platitudes about love in her life and wants to say something else, something new – or something that, in his mind, might be closer to a cry.  

The risk Merleau-Ponty runs, and the risk he is aware of running, is that of not transcending objective thought, and hence being stuck in the bad ambiguities of the either–or. His philosophy as expression cannot simply invent a new terminology for itself but must take up an already constituted meaning and assume it in a new gesture of expression that, if it succeeds, transforms this meaning.  

Furthermore, as we for the most part live our lives under the spell of objective thought, the world “in its stage of appearance” … on the hither side of objectivism’s petrified categories – will seem unfamiliar to us. It is a world où l’on n’est pas bien, where our being is not at ease, a world close to madness.

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377 Even the Cogito, as Merleau-Ponty writes in PP 463/426: “The tacit *Cogito* is a *Cogito* only when it has expressed itself.” (“*Le Cogito* tacite n’est *Cogito* que lorsqu’il s’est exprimé lui-même.”)
Incarnated Meaning and the Notion of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology

Although the importance of Gestalt theory for Merleau-Ponty is widely acknowledged, no one has yet examined its influence on his philosophy in detail. More often than not, monographs on his general thought mention its significance, but rather parenthetically, and the concept of Gestalt, with the related notions of form and structure, in Merleau-Ponty is rarely analysed against this background. Moreover, the Gestalt theorists are sometimes made to include thinkers such as the neurologist Kurt Goldstein, whose


work was without doubt of great significance for Merleau-Ponty in this context, but precisely in that Goldstein criticised certain basic tenets of Gestalt theory.

Of course, to give a thorough account of the ideas of Gestalt psychology in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, as well as the role of Goldstein in his own development of the notions of Gestalt and structure, is a task that, as Renaud Barbaras writes, “could be dealt with in a satisfying way only within the framework of a book”. Yet, the Gestalt functions as a key to certain fundamental issues in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, which need to be outlined. First, this notion has a pivotal function in Merleau-Ponty’s struggle to overcome the classical dualisms of what he terms “objective thought”. Second, there is the related question of meaning or signification as an incarnated phenomenon, rather than as an impossible union of thought and extension, rationality and sensibility, where understanding the Gestalt is crucial: Barbaras claims that it serves as “the thing itself” in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Third, in order to clarify the epistemological as well as the ontological status of the body-proper in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, I believe that we need to take the question of the Gestalt seriously, in particular through Goldstein’s development of it.

Merleau-Ponty explicitly concerns himself with the notion of Gestalt in several periods of his career. First of all, there are the early project descriptions regarding the nature of perception from the early thirties, leading up to his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, finished in 1938, where references to the Gestalt psychologists as well as to Goldstein abound – and also to several other theorists at the junction of philosophy and other disciplines, for example the psychiatrist Paul Schilder, the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget or the biologist Frederik Buytendijk. Then there is his main finished work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, where in particular the first part deals with Gestalt theory and related themes, although this issue is arguably of major importance for an understanding of the whole work. It is mainly in relation to these first works, especially *The Structure of Behavior* and...
the first few chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception*,\(^\text{384}\) that Gestalt theory has been discussed (if at all) by Merleau-Ponty scholars.\(^\text{385}\)

The second group of texts where Merleau-Ponty examines Gestalt psychology and Goldstein’s organicist theory is constituted primarily by the lectures at the Sorbonne, 1949–1952,\(^\text{386}\) but also to some extent by the lectures at the Collège de France, from 1953 and onwards.\(^\text{387}\) And finally, there is the last unachieved work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, where the notion of Gestalt appears in the context of his auto-criticism of his earlier philosophy.\(^\text{388}\)

Barbaras distinguishes two phases in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking of the Gestalt. To the first phase belong his two major phenomenological books where the notion is called upon as a “descriptive sample in order to criticise objective thought”,\(^\text{389}\) but only from the point of view – and to the benefit – of a philosophy of consciousness (albeit a perceptual one). However, Barbaras contends that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of perceptual consciousness, and thus of the notion of Gestalt, in this period is unsatisfactory: it is only negatively defined. There is no radical questioning of the basic categories –

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\(^{385}\) With the exception of Robert Vallier, who to some extent examines the notion of Gestalt in relation to animality in Merleau-Ponty’s courses on Nature, in “The Indiscernible Joining: Structure, Signification, and Animality in Merleau-Ponty’s *La nature*, *Chiasmi international*, 3 (187–212), 2001. However, in claiming that the Gestalt is for Merleau-Ponty a “structure that signifies” (p. 194), “the idealized perception of relations” (p. 192) and thus that “the things give or show themselves to us as signs” (p. 194), Vallier transforms it to precisely an intellectualist notion, whereby it loses its critical power.


\(^{389}\) Barbaras, “Merleau-Ponty et la psychologie”, pp. 151–152: the Gestalt “est invoqué à titre d’échantillon descriptif pour critiquer la pensée objective”.

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the conceptuality is “out of step with its object” — and for this reason Merleau-Ponty does not “fully exploit the philosophical potentialities of the form”. There is, as Barbaras stated in his first book, a lingering dualism in Merleau-Ponty’s early philosophy.

In the last period, by contrast, the notion of Gestalt is thought in and for itself and positively, according to Barbaras, in a way that forces a profound revision of our categories. The framework of a philosophy of consciousness is abandoned, and Merleau-Ponty writes that “the Gestalt contains the key to the problem of the mind”. At this point, the Gestalt is described as “the system of equivalences around which every sensible thing is arranged”, and must be spelled out through the notion of “pregnancy” ("prégnance"). Further, Barbaras maintains that the corresponding subject should no longer be defined in terms of perceptual consciousness, but rather as a motor bodily subject.

Although I believe that all these specifications with regard to the notion of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty’s last work are of utmost importance for a further elaboration of his thought, I don’t agree that they point to a radical reversal in his philosophy. The notion of “pregnancy” is of course a direct heir to the Gestalt principle of Prägnanz or the “tendency to best form”, describing the organisation of the perceptual field into dynamic wholes whose meaning is autochthonous, rather than added by the intellect; bodily motility was at the heart of the perceiving subject already in The Structure of Behavior and Phenomenology of Perception, and in the lectures at the Sor-
bonne from 1949 and onwards Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasises the contribution of the Gestalt theorists when it comes to understanding the intimate connection between perception and action. Further, the bodily schema that in the earlier works served to clarify the body-proper and its circular relation to the surrounding world was already characterised as a “system of equivalences”, and is precisely taken to be an alternative category that undermines the elementistic and mechanistic consciousness of objective thought (in the form of either empiricism or intellectualism).

Challenging the Elementistic Paradigm

Generally speaking, the Gestalt psychologists took issue with the understanding of consciousness that still characterised scientific psychology in the beginning of the last century. According to this conception, all mental processes, such as perception, emotions and thought, and in the end human behaviour at large, can be divided into a number of ultimate elements or atoms, which in their turn should correspond to certain units at the physiological level. Ultimately, this idea goes back to British empiricism: the elements are impressions or sensations, giving rise to ideas and organised into perception and cognition, in conformity with mechanical laws of association. But the Gestalt theorists were equally in disagreement with rationalist, neo-Kantian or nativist views of perception, where form is imposed upon the material of the senses by the intellect. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty uses their results also as an argument against intellectualism.

The aim of this paper is to clarify Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the Gestalt, against the historical background that he refers to in developing his ideas. Contrary to Barbaras, I believe that the early works with their often detailed accounts of the experiments and tenets of the Gestalt and other theorists are essential for an understanding of this concept in the whole of Merleau-

399 See for example MPS 181/139.
400 PP 165/42, “le schéma corporel est justement ce système d’équivalences”.
401 Barbaras also makes the quite curious remark that Merleau-Ponty “obviously distances himself” from Gestalt psychology, and that it is only in the working notes written in the last years of his life that “the Gestalt remakes its appearance”, “Merleau-Ponty et la psychologie”, p. 151. But as noted earlier, Merleau-Ponty deals repeatedly with Gestalt theory in his lectures and writings in the 50s.
402 Mitchell Ash, Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890–1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 (1995), writes that these “elementistic and mechanistic assumptions about consciousness [were] shared explicitly or implicitly by all attempts to present psychology as a natural science in the nineteenth century”, p. 60.
403 Ash lists major erroneous interpretations of Gestalt theory as a neo-Kantian or Cartesian epistemology on p. 433.
Ponty’s philosophy. However, this clarification is no easy task, since Merleau-Ponty never gives a straightforward elucidation of his own perspective on the Gestalt, but rather a number of related statements that sometimes point in different directions. Further, he alternates between different terms that are sometimes, but not always, interchangeable: besides “form” (the standard French translation of Gestalt, that he in later texts often leaves untranslated), he often uses “structure”, but also “whole”, “constellation”, and so on.

Gestalt theory properly so called was founded during the second decade of the 20th Century, by the philosopher Max Wertheimer, the psychologist Kurt Koffka and the physicist Wolfgang Köhler. They challenged psychology’s current frame of reference and its terminology, but within a scientific context. In Germany, at this time, psychology – including experimental psychology – was still taken as belonging to philosophy. Naturally, the sciences where experimental methods were already established had served as a point of reference when scientific psychology was elaborated. The prevailing paradigm at this time – the predominant conception of scientific method and terminology – implied, on the one hand, the presupposition that one must identify fundamental components and their governing laws, and on the other the demand that these laws be formulated in accordance with classical mechanics. According to the famous nineteenth century physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz, one should use physical models of explanation also for bio-

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404 It should be noted that “form” (forme in French) is not an entirely unproblematic translation: as we shall see in the following, Gestalt theory is precisely critical of the conception of perception as constituted by matter that is formed in a certain way, either by mechanisms of association or by a superior intellectual function. The idea is rather that perception is not shapeless matter organised by categories or other intellectual functions, but what we perceive has an inherent order, it organises “itself”. For this reason, the Gestalt is the opposite of a pure form. In German it refers to a structured whole, often with the implication of a concrete entity (see Köhler, Gestalt Psychology: An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology, New York: Liveright, 1947 (1929), p. 177). Cf. Paul Guillaume, La Psychologie de la forme, Paris: Flammarion, 1979 (1937), p. 5, who proposes the terms “structure” or “organisation” as translation.

405 Embree claims to find in Merleau-Ponty a terminological difference between the terms Gestalt/form and structure, in that the latter would “designate specifically how a gestalt is organized” (p. 94). However, this is a quite occasional usage; for the most part “structure”, “form”, “organised whole”, etc., are employed to complement each other (as in SC 88/79: “un phénomène de structure ou de ‘forme’”, my emphasis). One reason for this terminological variability is certainly that the notion of form is, as explained in the preceding footnote, highly ambiguous; another that the diverse expressions approach, as it were, a complex and all-pervading phenomenon from different angles, much in the way the network of metaphors in his later philosophy are used to, in Jenny Slatman’s words, “encircle a ‘centre’ of signification” (L’Expression au-delà de la représentation: Sur l’aisthésis et l’esthétique chez Merleau-Ponty, Leuven: Peeters/Paris: Vrin, 2003, p. 212: “mots qui encerclé[nt] un ‘centre’ de signification”).

406 Only in 1941, psychology became an independent discipline in Germany. Ash, p. 7.
logical processes, and it was his so called “constancy hypothesis” that still guided the study of perception in the beginning of the twentieth century. In conformity with this principle, stimulation of the sensory organs determines the content of perception in a univocal way: independently of the circumstances, a certain stimulus always gives rise to one and the same sensory reaction or sensation. The nervous system was considered as a network of separate pathways: Helmholtz compared it to a bundle of telegraph wires.

However, the mechanistic view of perceptual processes will unerringly lead to a division of functions between those that are physiological or “peripheral” and the psychological or “central” ones; a dualism that is manifestly an heir to the classical dichotomy between matter and form or sensibility and reason. But the simple sensations postulated as the ultimate constituents of perception are nowhere to be found in real experience, which gives us complete phenomena – human beings, animals, things, clouds, shadows – rather than isolated impressions or conglomerates of these. Since we are never directly aware of these sensations, they are presumed to be the psychological counterparts to physiological stimuli, such as retinal images.

Under the assumption of the constancy hypothesis, even very simple perceptual phenomena are difficult to explain. One example is the famous optical-geometrical illusion presented by the German psychiatrist Franz Müller-Lyer in 1889: short auxiliary lines added to parallel lines of equal length, in order to form arrow heads on one line and tails on the other, make one longer than the other. Another is the well-known ambiguous figures such as Rubin’s vase, where one can see a white vase against a dark background or two dark profiles against a white background. Clearly, similar stimuli are here not followed by similar perceptions: when I see the white vase I have a different perception from when I see two dark profiles, although the stimuli are the same.

Even though ambiguous figures of this kind may not be ubiquitous in our everyday experience, organised wholes are fundamental to perception. But how do we proceed from the reception of individual sensations to grasping their organisation in a spatiotemporal order? Why do we divide up the world in the way we do, and not in another – why do we apprehend, for instance,

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408 Die Lehre von den Tonempfindungen als physiologische Grundlage für die Theorie der Musik, Braunschweig: Friedrich Vieweg & Sohn, 1877 (1862), p. 245.


410 This illusion is discussed by Merleau-Ponty, PP 12/6–7.
things and creatures as the primary constituents of the world, and not the spaces between them.\footnote{We see [...] the things and not the holes between them", was the formulation of Wertheimer's friend and collaborator Erich von Hornbostel; see Koffka, Principles of Gestalt Psychology, New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1963 (1935), p. 208.}

In order to fill the gap between stimuli or sensations and the actual, organised perception where no such constituents can be distinguished, one resorted to explanations in terms of "local signs"\footnote{The philosopher Hermann Lotze, working in Göttingen, postulated that there were what he called "Localzeichen" in the retina which gave rise to the experience of depth, Medicinische Psychologie, oder Physiologie der Seele, Leipzig: Weidmann'sche Buchhandlung, 1852, pp. 331f. See also Ash, pp. 53f.} or "unnoticed sensations"\footnote{The hypothesis on "unbemerkte Empfindungen" was formulated by Helmholtz, but defended also by Stumpf, see Köhler 1913/1971.} on the empiricist side, or judgmental errors on the intellectualist (to use Merleau-Ponty's term). Yet, as Köhler argued, assumptions of unconscious psychic elements can never be confirmed, and do not stimulate productive research.\footnote{Ibid.} As for the judgmental errors, there are several arguments against this hypothesis. First of all, the judgements claimed to be responsible for the errors cannot be confirmed in experience either, so that we would have to assume "unnoticed judgments" as well.\footnote{Ibid., p. 15, cf. Ash, p. 136.} But more importantly, when we contemplate ambiguous figures, for instance, the change of aspect comes spontaneously, even against our will. In cases where the other image is hard to discover, reasoning doesn't help us, but rather to the contrary: the figure appears suddenly, in its entirety. Even the experienced psychologist, who knows that the lines of the Müller-Lyer illusion are of equal length, will see them as unequal.\footnote{Ibid., p. 26. Cf. Olivier Reboul, "Imaginer et percevoir: Alain, la Gestalttheorie et Merleau-Ponty", in L'Homme et ses passions d'après Alain, vol. I. Paris: P.U.F., 1968), p. 110: "Mais le plus grand psychologue du monde a beau savoir que, dans l'illusion de Muller-Lyer, les deux flèches sont d'égale longueur, il les verra inégales à chaque fois; de même, le plus grand physicien ne verra jamais, au cinéma, une succession d'images fixes, mais, comme nous tous, des images en mouvement."}

It seems that the reliance upon elementistic principles, without postulating hidden and unverifiable mechanisms, precludes an adequate account of perception. "The constancy hypothesis always leads to the assumption of unperceived givens", writes Aron Gurwitsch, and observes that the classical gulf between appearance and reality is resurrected at the level of consciousness.\footnote{Gurwitsch, "Quelques aspects et quelques développements de la psychologie de la forme", Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique, 33:2 (413–471), 1936, p. 20 (emphasis in text), cf. p. 31.} For this reason, the Gestalt psychologists undertake to challenge the ele-
mentistic presuppositions or “metaphors”. Such a goal demands a radical revision of the very categories one is working with, in psychology and physiology.

The Origins of Gestalt Theory

The concept of Gestalt was introduced towards the end of the nineteenth century, by the Austrian philosopher Christian von Ehrenfels. In his paper “Über ‘Gestaltqualitäten’”, this notion is for the first time given a philosophical function, as it is used to characterise the organisation of perception that the empiricist theory cannot account for. Ehrenfels set out from the example of the melody, which would become of chief importance also for the later Gestalt theorists. In the simplest case, a melody is composed of a series of tones. The empiricist contends that the perception of a melody analogously consists of a succession of tone impressions. Can the melody’s particular kind of unity be explained on the basis of the association of discrete tone impressions? It seems that melodies often appear as such even before my perceiving the separate tones. Should we therefore appeal to an intellectual function that synthesises the tones into a melody before they reach consciousness?

Ehrenfels referred to Ernst Mach’s observation that melodies – just as spatial forms – are immediately given in our experience, and therefore cannot be the result of an associative or intellectual activity. However, he did not accept Mach’s conclusion that the musical interval corresponds to a particular type of impression; if we take Mach’s remark seriously, we have to accept that the melody is not so much a sum of tone impressions, as something new in relation to the collection of separate tones. According to Mach’s

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[418] To use Ash’s expression, p. 67. The Gestalt theorists were neither the only researchers with this ambition, nor the first ones: important precursors were the physiologist Ewald Hering, Henri Bergson (whose work was translated into German in the beginning of the century – see Ash, p. 69), William James (on whose thought Stumpf was lecturing in Berlin), Wilhelm Dilthey and Husserl. Wertheimer as well as Koffka and Köhler had studied with Stumpf, and the latter – who had also been the teacher of Husserl – had a crucial influence on the development of phenomenology (cf. Spiegelberg, The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982 (1959), pp. 51f.).

[419] Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie, 14:3 (249–292), 1890 (transl. in Smith, Foundations). According to Ash, p. 88, this article was “the founding document of Gestalt theory”.

[420] In fact, von Ehrenfels – the “father” of Gestalt theory – was, as well as several of the younger gestalt psychologists, a devoted musician. See Smith, “Gestalt Theory”, pp. 11–12, and Ash, pp. 89, 103f.

[421] In 1886, Mach was an Austrian physicist and philosopher, and one of the precursors of logical positivism.
own principles, an impression can be related to any other impression; hence it is hard to see how one type of impression would accomplish the particular kind of unity that is made up by a melody. In order to show that the melody could not be understood as a summative compound of its elements, Ehrenfels used two principal arguments, which were later taken up by Wolfgang Köhler. First of all, presume that a certain series of tones $t_1, t_2, t_3, \ldots t_n$ is perceived by a subject $S$ as a melody. Now suppose that $n$ different subjects perceive the same series of tones such that each apprehends one tone impression. Should we then say that $S$, who perceives the whole melody, has something more than the $n$ subjects taken together? This was Köhler’s first Gestalt criterion. The Austrian philosopher, however, held this argument to be conclusive only if combined with another one, concerning the transposability of melodies that Mach had pointed to, and that Köhler called Ehrenfels’s second criterion. It is the latter which is supposed to give a proof of the existence of Gestalt qualities.

Two summative composites resemble one another more, the more their components resemble one another, but this is not valid for melodies. We can play a melody in different keys, and speak of the same melody even though not one of the composite tones is the same. It is even far easier to recognise a melody than a tone; only few people have the capacity to perceive absolute pitch. As a consequence, the melody must be something else than a sum of individual tones; it is characterised by a formal quality: what Ehrenfels calls a “Gestalt quality”.

The conclusion is, as Paul Guillaume sums up Ehrenfels’s position in his classical study of Gestalt theory, that a Gestalt “is something other or something more than the sum of its parts”. Now, we must be careful with these two depictions that here appear as synonymous. Ehrenfels holds that the Gestalt is something new in regard to the sensible qualities corresponding to the separate tones, although it is neither an additional sensation as Mach believed, nor a form of judgment. But what is new is at the same time something more than the complex of sensations it is dependent upon:

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422 Ehrenfels, pp. 251f./84f.
424 Ibid. p. 37.
426 A common method of learning to remember particular intervals, in order to, for instance, facilitate singing a prima vista, is to exemplify the intervals with the introductory tones of known melodies. Ehrenfels mentions this phenomenon on pp. 260–261/91–92.
427 Guillaume, p. 17: “Une forme est autre chose ou quelque chose de plus que la somme de ses parties.” Emphasis in text.
By a *Gestalt quality* we understand a positive content of presentation bound up in consciousness with the presence of complexes of mutually separable (i.e. independently presentable) elements. That complex of presentations which is necessary for the existence of a given Gestalt quality we call the *foundation* [*Grundlage*] of that quality.\(^\text{428}\)

Now, in what way can a particular quality transform different collections of tones that have nothing in common into the same melody? If the individual sensations need not be the same in order to constitute the same melody, in what sense is the Gestalt quality dependent on the former? Why does a Gestalt quality pertain to certain complexes of sensations and not to others? And what is it? It is neither an impression, nor the result of an intellectual act, according to Ehrenfels. By what capacity do we have access to it, then, and where is it to be found: in us, or in the things we perceive? The very confusion of a qualitative “new” and a quantitative “more” in the characterisation of the Gestalt quality shows that Ehrenfels had not liberated himself sufficiently from the elementistic perspective.

Ehrenfels’ argument touched empiricism to the quick, and had important theoretical consequences, since he believed that Gestalt qualities were not only found in the visual and auditory spheres – as spatial forms and melodies – but in all experiences, also non-perceptual ones.\(^\text{429}\) The two Ehrenfels’ criteria were, as we will see, taken up by Merleau-Ponty and integrated into his development of the idea of Gestalt. As David Murray remarks,\(^\text{430}\) Ehrenfels’ study also anticipated Edgar Rubin’s enquiries into the relation between figure and ground in perception,\(^\text{431}\) which would be of such importance for the Gestalt psychologists – and for Merleau-Ponty. Notwithstanding, his conception of the Gestalt was insufficient for the researchers who in the beginning of the 20th century wanted to recast the very foundations of classical psychology.


\(^{429}\) Besides shapes, diverse musical and other sound phenomena, movement Gestalts, colour complexes, changes, bodily expressions, emotions, artistic and literary appearances, etc. See Ehrenfels, pp. 268f./97f. Cf. Smith, “Gestalt Theory”, p. 15.


The Constancy Hypothesis Refuted

The Gestalt theorists Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka were clear that the Gestalt had to be something else than a sum of impressions: the very idea of experience consisting of ultimate constituents is called into question. A Gestalt is not a sum of properties with an additional quality, but phenomena in our experience are intrinsically Gestalts. Rather than being explained by their components, as psychologists had presupposed, their components must be explained with the total form as a basis. Wertheimer writes:

[…] what I experience at each place in the melody is a part which is itself determined by the character of the whole. What is given me by the melody does not arise […] as a secondary process from the sum of the pieces as such. Instead, what takes place in each single part already radically depends upon what the whole is.432

A decisive argument against the constancy hypothesis and for Gestalt theory was presented by Wertheimer in his article “Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung” from 1912, on the perception of motion.433 Here Wertheimer discusses the so-called φ-phenomenon, setting out from experiments performed in Frankfurt two years earlier together with Köhler and Koffka.434

These experiments studied the stroboscopic effect, which had been known since the middle of the nineteenth century:435 when two immobile light sources flash alternately at certain intervals, a motion is seen between them. Wertheimer used on the one hand an apparatus he had devised with a frame and sheets with suitable openings for the light, and on the other hand a

432 Wertheimer, Über Gestalttheorie, Erlangen: Philosophische Akademie, 1925, p. 47 (transl. in W.D. Ellis, A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1938, p. 5): “ist es vielleicht nicht umgekehrt so, daß das, was ich da überhaupt habe, was ich auch an dem Ort der einzelnen Töne habe, was da in mir entsteht, ein Teil ist, der sich auch in sich bestimmt von dem Charakter des Ganzen? Daß das, was mir in der Melodie gegeben ist, sich nicht irgendwie aufbaut […] sekundär auf der Summe der einzelnen Stücke an sich, sondern daß das, was im einzelnen vorhanden ist, entsteht, schon radikal abhängt von dem, wie sein Ganzes ist”.

433 Zeitschrift für Psychologie, 61 (161–265), 1912 (reprinted in Drei Abhandlungen zur Gestalttheorie (1925), Erlangen: Philosophische Akademie/Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967). This is, according to Murray, “the first major paper of the Gestalt movement”, p. 11. Even though Wertheimer’s paper published earlier the same year, “Über das Denken der Naturvölker: I. Zahlen und Zahlgebilde”, Zeitschrift für Psychologie, 60 (321–378), 1912, outlines several Gestalt theoretical ideas, it was only the article on motion that contained a program of research for Gestalt theory. Cf. Ash, p. 125.

434 This experience is discussed by Merleau-Ponty, PP 312ff./281f.

435 The stroboscope was invented in 1833.
wheel-tachistoscope that permitted rapidly alternating visual stimuli. At certain intervals the experimental subjects saw, instead of two flashing points, a light that moved between the two points: this was the stroboscopic effect. Clearly, here the perception of movement does not have a counterpart on the stimulus side, where there are only two light flashes.

Wertheimer also applied the sheets and their openings so that he could compare the apparent motion with real motion: on the one half the light was really moving, whereas on the other half there were two stationary alternating lights that brought about the apparent motion. It turned out that the observers mostly could not distinguish between the apparent motion and the real, and if there was a difference it was qualitative; one gave a more forceful, vivid impression, was a “better” motion than the other. And most noteworthy: it was the apparent motion that came across as best!

Furthermore: at a certain interval between the flashes the observers reported that they saw a motion without a moving object – this was what Wertheimer called the “φ-phenomenon”.

Just as the hearing of a melody, the perception of motion holds a central place in the Gestaltists’ criticism of the elementistic theories. When Wertheimer examines the stroboscopic effect, he wants to understand what it means to see a movement in general, not just clarify a perceptual curiosity. When he, as he writes, starts with an “illusion” in order to understand perception as such, he is an advocate of phenomenological method: we need in

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436 Invented by Friedrich Schumann, Stumpf’s former assistant who became the director of the psychological institute at Frankfurt shortly before Köhler arrived there – and then Mr and Ms Koffka, whom Schumann offered positions at the institute.

437 The different versions of sliding sheets as well as the objects exposed in the tachistoscope are outlined in Wertheimer “Bewegung”, pp. 102–105. He describes the contrivance of the instrument on pp. 15–16.

438 Between 200 and 30 milliseconds. At an interval beyond 200 ms one sees two successive flashes, at below 30 ms one sees the two lights flashing at the same time, at different spots. In fact one has to count with the intensity of the flashes, their distance and certain other variables in order to obtain exact values. Ibid., pp. 18f.

439 The experiment is described by Wertheimer on pp. 8f. and pp. 102–103.

440 In particular at the optimal level, at 60 ms, where the motion appeared most clearly. To a large extent, Wertheimer made use of observers well trained in perceptual experiments – Köhler together with Kurt and Mira Koffka in particular – who should therefore be less susceptible to illusions of this kind, if these were to be explained in terms of judgments, etc. But he also had recourse to experimental subjects without any experience of psychological experiments. Ibid. p. 16.

441 Ibid., p. 14.

442 Slightly below 60 ms.

443 In other words, “stroboscopic motion” is an illusion of moving objects (patch of light, shadow, colour, etc.) with stationary stimuli, whereas in the φ-phenomenon, the observer perceives a “pure” motion, motion without a moving object. See Wertheimer, op. cit., pp. 62f.
the first place to examine “the psychologically given”, and only afterwards to ask what physical fact that corresponds to it.  

In the stroboscopic experiment there are just three principal types of perception with no intermediary stages. At a lower speed, one observes two successive flashes, at the optimal stage a distinct motion, at a higher speed two simultaneous flashes. But there are not, as the elementistic theories predict, a number of transitional stages between motion and rest, in the sense of a less distinct motion, that resembles rest, and of which it would be hard to say if it is motion or rest. Rather, the observers spontaneously describe the motion in the interposed stages as a “poorer”, “not so pretty”.  

The experimental subjects are often struck with amazement over this motion that manifests itself in a very palpable, “obtrusive” way, but without anything that moves. The background does not change, and the motion is clearly seen to pass over it, but without appearing as a contour, colour variation, etc. It is a kind of pure “across [hinüber]”, a “twist”. In other words, these phenomena are not mental add-ons to what is given, but appear in an objective manner, just as colours and forms, and consist in this “across” with its particular character: they have, writes Wertheimer, a dynamic nature.  

Whereas both empiricism and intellectualism held motion perception to be based on a continuous series of impressions of the object’s spatial positions, Wertheimer shows that dynamic perception cannot be built up from static impressions. If the movement is slower and the observer tries to focus on the moving object in all its phases, motion has even a tendency to vanish. As Merleau-Ponty writes: “Movement disappears at the very moment when it conforms most to the definition given to it by objective thought.”  

Now, if dynamic phenomena cannot be traced back to static impressions, then they cannot be thought to correspond to a sum of individual excitations of nerve endings either. For this reason, there must according to Wertheimer be a basis for the φ-phenomenon already at the physiological level. Towards the end of his article he proposes the hypothesis of certain cross- or trans- 

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444 Ibid., p. 8: “die Untersuchung muss das psychisch Gegebene zu beschreiben und zu erforschen suchen”.
445 I have discussed this issue in my ”När illusionen gäckar filosofin: Merleau-Ponty och gestaltteorin”, Divan, 1–2 (27–32), 2008.
446 Wertheimer op. cit., p. 31: “slechtere […] nicht so schöne Bewegung”.
447 Ibid., pp. 62f.
449 Ibid., p. 67.
450 Ibid., p. 69.
451 PP 312/282: “Le mouvement disparaît au moment même où il est le plus conforme à la définition qu’en donne la pensée objective.”
verse functions ("Querfunktionen"), a term that Merleau-Ponty will often return to. The idea is that two spots stimulated centrally, in this case by projections of light, under certain conditions – when they are sufficiently close to one another, at least functionally if not geometrically – give rise to a “physiological short-circuit” of sorts: the excitation would then sweep “across” the two spots in analogy with the φ-phenomenon in perception. Even though this short-circuit is based on the excitation of individual cells it is in itself a global occurrence which is not a sum of these excitations.

If Wertheimer’s experiment produced a serious counterexample to the constancy hypothesis, Köhler’s influential article from 1913, “On Unnoticed Sensations and Errors of Judgment”, gave it a “damaging critique”. In order to explain the cases where perception did not seem to correspond to stimuli in the way predicted by the constancy hypothesis, its defenders appealed to various unconscious phenomena as subsidiary hypotheses. Köhler now showed that such assumptions were untenable. First, when it came to unnoticed sensations, there was no possibility to confirm their existence as by definition they cannot be perceived; their only function is to save the hypothesis. The alternative explanation of “errors of judgment”, on the other hand, does not actually explain phenomena such as apparent motion, since intellectual processes don’t come into play in perceptual illusions, and in cases where they actually do, they rather have the opposite effect: the illusion is reinforced. Köhler’s conclusion is that both these auxiliary assumptions “may inadvertently lead to the neglect of valuable material and the blocking of scientific progress”. In the end, we must give up the constancy hypothesis.

This hypothesis is also incompatible with another fundamental aspect of perception, namely another kind of constancy: that of perceptual objects with regard to transformations of the proximal stimuli. We perceive a human being at large distance as a person of normal size, despite the fact that the

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452 Sometimes “transversal and overall processes [Quer- und Gesamtvorgängen]”; Wertheimer, op. cit. pp. 87f. and 91f.
453 Ibid., p. 88.
455 This hypothesis also has an impact on the understanding of other psychological functions, such as memory, recognition, etc., where it would also be a matter of calling forth the overall occurrence rather than the individual excitations. Ibid., p. 92.
456 Köhler, “Unbermerkte Empfindungen”.
457 In Smith’s words, “Bibliography”, in Smith, Foundations, p. 347.
458 Gurwitsch, Studies, p. 59: “the unconscious as a kind of basement of the soul, the place of ideas which are not actually given” (“La place de la psychologie dans l’ensemble des sciences”, Revue de synthèse, 8:2 (169–185), 1934, p. 173: “L’idée de l’inconscient – cave de l’âme où repouéraient les représentations non pas actuelles instantanément”).
459 Köhler, “Unbermerkte Empfindungen”, p. 34.
image on the retina is much smaller than when she is closer. We apprehend a
colour as relatively constant even when the lighting changes, and so on. This
constancy is of course not absolute, as anyone knows who has tried to
choose the colour of wall paint, but if perceptual objects changed to the same
degree as the proximal stimuli they would alter incessantly. Under the ass-
sumption of the constancy hypothesis, this fundamental trait of perception
must be called an illusion.\textsuperscript{460} An easier solution, however, is that “we regard
as the ‘immediately given’, and in any case as the biologically primary ‘real-
ity’, not ‘sensations’, but […] \textit{things}.”\textsuperscript{461}

Laws of Perception and their Foundation

Wertheimer’s findings in the experiments on the φ-phenomenon – that per-
ception of motion was organised into optimal stages which pass into one
another in an “abrupt, sudden” manner, while the interposed forms were
either assimilated to the optimal ones or appeared as “poorer” versions –
were subsequently generalised into a characterisation of perception as such.
Wertheimer makes a first step towards such a general theory in 1914, when
he presents a rough idea of a Gestalt theoretical principle\textsuperscript{462} that will become
the crucial one of the “Gestalt laws” thought to govern perception, but also a
principle for science in general.\textsuperscript{463} This was the law of the best form or
\textit{Prägnanz}, and the idea behind it is that perception strives for order, tends
towards the “best” form under current circumstances: the simplest, most
symmetrical, most stable.\textsuperscript{464}

Just as the optimal phases of motion perception were described by exper-
imental subjects as prettier or better than the interposed ones, it can be
shown that other structures are privileged in perception, for example the
circle or the right angle, and that angles coming close to 90° are assimilated
into it, as a “poorer” right angle.\textsuperscript{465} Angles intermediary between the right

\textsuperscript{460} Whereas the experience obtained by perceptual experiments where this constancy is abol-
ished – often through various screens with openings – is supposed to present the “real” sensa-
tions. Examples of such experiences are plentiful in the Gestalt psychology literature, and a
non-scientific version of this “analytical attitude” is simply the painter who squints (\textit{PP} 262/

\textsuperscript{461} Köhler, “Unbermerkte Empfindungen”, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{462} This happened at the congress of the Society for Experimental Psychology in Göttingen.
See Ash, p. 133.

\textsuperscript{463} This latter step was undertaken by Köhler. See Murray, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{464} In German, “\textit{Prägnanz}” mainly connotes conciseness.

\textsuperscript{465} Wertheimer, “Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt”, II, \textit{Psychologische Forschung},
4 (301–350), 1923, p. 318: “eine Form nahe der Prägnanzstufe \textit{primär als} – etwa ‘schlech-
tere’ solche erscheint”. Emphasis in text.
and the obtuse or the acute angles are perceived as “unprägnant”, i.e., as a form that is not good or stable.\footnote{Ibid: “Zwischenstufen haben ‘unprägnanteren’ Charakter, konnen evtl. leicht im Sinn der einen oder der anderen Prägnanzstufe gesehen werden” (emphasis in text).} This tendency in perception to privilege certain forms cannot be explained in terms of earlier experience, since the angles we encounter in reality are rarely perfect right angles, and even less so if we consider the proximal stimuli.\footnote{Ibid., p. 333.}

In order to spell out this principle, Wertheimer suggested certain specific laws that he believed govern the organisation of perception, mainly the factors of proximity, similarity, good continuation and closure.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 308f. Cf. also Koffka, \textit{Principles}, pp. 164f.} According to the first law, occurrences close to one another have the tendency to form a group, in relation to what is further away, the second says that those resembling one another tend to form a group, the third that shapes with a common orientation constitute a Gestalt, and the forth that such a grouping takes place where the result is a closed, complete form. These laws (stated very roughly here) are not absolute\footnote{Gurwitsch, \textit{Studies}, p. 29 (“Quelques aspects”, p. 436: “Il faut bien se garder de voir dans ces facteurs des absolus. Ils ne représentent que des spécifications de la loi de prégnance et ne jouent que dans la mesure où ils en assurent l’application”).} but depend on the whole perceptual situation, and others can be formulated as well.

The notion of \textit{Prägnanz} was not fully defined, and has, just as the notion of Gestalt itself, been subject to criticism for this reason.\footnote{See for example Michael Kubovy and James R. Pomerantz, eds., \textit{Perceptual Organization}, Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981, pp. 436f., and Margaret W. Matlin and Hugh J. Foley, \textit{Sensation and Perception}, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992 (1983), pp. 134f.} But as we have seen, this principle was born out of a description of experience, initially from the experimental subjects’ observations, and it is therefore not to be expected that it shall be strictly defined from the outset. From the point of view of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, this may rather be a token of its fruitfulness: new categories must be “fluid” (“\textit{fluents}”) rather than unambiguous formulas if they are to capture the original level of phenomena.\footnote{\textit{PP} 61/51: “l’un de ces concepts fluents qu’il faut bien former si l’on veut revenir au phénomènes”. One example of such a notion is that of the corporeal schema: it is “ambiguous, as are all concepts that appear at turning points in science”, \textit{PP} 114/100.}

We saw that Wertheimer made use of a phenomenological description of sorts: psychological phenomena should be studied without presupposing any scientific hypotheses, rather than be explained away in terms of accessible theories. In order to do justice to these phenomena the research principles, with their elementistic and dualistic terminology, must be remoulded.\footnote{Cf. Ash, pp. 313f.}

When Köhler and Koffka extended the Gestalt concept to the study of ani-
mal and human behaviour\textsuperscript{473} the physiological part of Wertheimer’s theory was of great significance, since it showed that the $\phi$-phenomenon was not just a particular psychological occurrence, but applicable to perception at large as well as to the processes behind it. The idea of wholes that could not be reduced to their constituent parts pointed towards a number of new research projects, and, even more importantly, to a new way of doing scientific research.

The hypothesis of transversal functions had “enthralled” Koffka, he later said.\textsuperscript{474} Koffka had realised at an early stage that the notion of “stimulus” must be redefined: as a function of the real object in relation to the organism and its specific mental set or attitude, rather than a pattern of sensory excitations.\textsuperscript{475} Behaviour in general should not be understood in behaviourist terms, as sums of conditioned reflexes, according to Koffka, but as organised whole-processes. However, he did not know how to give a physiological foundation to this insight. Wertheimer’s idea that also the physiological processes were molar, not molecular, was a solution to this problem, since their properties would now be the same as those of the conscious processes.

And if this is so, our two realms, instead of being separated by an impassable gulf, are brought as closely together as possible with the consequence that we can use our observations of the behavioural environment and of behaviour as data for the concrete elaboration of physiological hypotheses.\textsuperscript{476}

Koffka and especially Köhler further elaborated the idea that Gestalten were met with also at the physiological level. For the Gestalt theorists, it was important to be able to explain why two stationary flashing light points were the source of a perception of motion, if a scientific psychology was to be estab-

\textsuperscript{473} Köhler’s experiments on Tenerife between 1913 and 1915, mainly with apes and chimpanzees but also to some extent with chickens (Köhler, “Optische Untersuchungen am Schimpansen und am Haushuhn”, Abhandlungen der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 3, Berlin, 1915; “Intelligenzprüfungen an Anthropoïden, I”, Abhandlungen der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1, Berlin, 1917; “Die Farbe der Sehdinge beim Schimpansen und beim Haushuhn”, Zeitschrift für Psychologie, 77 (248–255), 1917; “Nachweis einfachen Strukturfunktionen beim Schimpansen und beim Hausa: Über eine neue Methode zur Untersuchung des bunten Farbensystems (Aus der Anthropoïdenstation auf Teneriffa. IV)”, Abhandlungen der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2, Berlin, 1918), showed that animals do not apprehend absolute qualities either. In fact, it seems that only (adult) humans and anthropoids have the capacity to perceive absolute qualities, through the analytical attitude (see e.g. PP 19, 23f./12, 16f., MPS 190/147). These experiments are discussed at length by Merleau-Ponty in SC (see infra pp. 111f.).

\textsuperscript{474} In his lecture “Beginnings of Gestalt Theory”, 18 April 1931. See Ash, p. 132.


\textsuperscript{476} Koffka, Principles, p. 56.
lished. It was not sufficient to give a counterexample to the constancy hypothesis, without pointing to how research could be done without it.

The Theory of Isomorphism

Köhler developed the physiological side of the law of Prägnanz in terms of Ernst Mach’s maximum–minimum principle, which is based on the tendency in physiological processes described by Max Planck to strive for a maximal degree of stability, equivalent to a minimal outlay of energy under prevailing circumstances. Köhler, on his side, claimed that this regularity was fundamental, and that the tendency to the simplest shape – the principle of Prägnanz – characterises not only perception, but physical systems in general and thus reality as such.

Now, in contrast to Wertheimer, who claimed that we need other principles of thought in psychology than in mathematics and physics, Köhler wanted to show that physicists don’t reason the way psychologists believe. For this reason he picked up some terms from contemporary physical theories, such as Maxwell’s field concept, and gave examples of physical systems that must be considered as Gestalten rather than summative complexes.

At this point the earlier mentioned “Ehrenfels criteria” come into the picture. First, a Gestalt is something more than a sum of its parts – a series of tones where each is perceived by a different consciousness is not the same thing as a melody. This criterion is too weak, according to Köhler, since it only states that all tones need to occur in the same consciousness, but nothing about their influence on one another. Moreover, it presupposes that it is possible to speak of impressions independently of the Gestalt they are included in. The second criterion is based on the idea of transposability: Gestalten have structural properties that may remain when the absolute constituents change. Köhler believes that this criterion is too strong: it is a sufficient condition, but not as the former a necessary one. Yet, it points to a typ-

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477 In one well-known experiment related by Mach, a square wire frame is put in soap solution, and a thread tied to a loop is placed on the film formed by the soap: if the film inside of the loop is pierced, the soap film outside will shrink until the hole surrounded by thread forms a circle. In this case, the minimal surface gives rise to a maximum of stability. Mach, *Die Mechanik in ihrer Entwickelung, historisch-kritisch dargestellt*, Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1883, pp. 362–363. Cf. Ash, pp. 184–185.

478 Mach, p. 371.

479 Köhler, *Die Physischen Gestalten*.

480 The Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1879) was the originator of field physics.
ical Gestalt phenomenon, namely that a Gestalt is independent of the particular constituents.\textsuperscript{481}

Furthermore, Köhler gives examples of physical systems that fulfil both criteria: stationary electric currents, the diffusion of a substance in a solution, etc. These structures are called strong Gestalten by Köhler: the mutual dependency is so solid that it is impossible to speak of constituent parts at all, but we rather have moments that co-operate, that “support” one another.\textsuperscript{482} Weak Gestalten, on the other hand, are not immediately dependent on the topography of the system.\textsuperscript{483} In other words, there are various levels of Gestalten, strong, weak, and processes that are completely independent of one another as well as groups that are purely summative. The universe is not “one big gestalt”, as Koffka writes; in fact, Köhler remarked, such a conception would preclude scientific activity altogether.\textsuperscript{484} Next, Köhler develops his thesis of psychophysical isomorphism that Koffka will also rely upon. Rather than a correspondence between psychic and physical atoms, as in the constancy hypothesis, it is here question of a structural equivalence: Gestalten in perception have as their counterpart physiological Gestalten.

Yet, the transfer of the notion of \textit{Prägnanz} to physics indicates a problem in Gestalt theory,\textsuperscript{485} which Merleau-Ponty will take note of. We begin with a phenomenological notion, taken from the description of experience, where it depicts a privileged phenomenon: a good, pretty form. At this point, there is no assumption made about the objective world. Thereupon the notion is transferred to physical reality, where it gets another function.\textsuperscript{486} It will now be used to explain the perceptual process from a physiological point of view: \textit{prägnant} is here the shape that has a high degree of equilibrium and stability.

But do we still speak of the same phenomenon? Can we without further ado compare a descriptive and rather aesthetic concept with an economic principle? As Merleau-Ponty observes, it seems that the theoretical prejudices have merely been reformulated in this way.\textsuperscript{487} Abandoning the constancy hypothesis made it possible to question the very assumption of two corresponding parallel levels, one psychic and one physiological. In describing

\textsuperscript{481} Köhler, \textit{Die Physischen Gestalten}, pp. 35–37.
\textsuperscript{482} Ibid., pp. 114f.
\textsuperscript{483} Ibid., pp. 126f.
\textsuperscript{484} Koffka, \textit{Principles}, p. 22; Köhler, op. cit. p. 156.
\textsuperscript{485} This transfer makes it “the most prominent and most contested legacy of Gestalt theory”, in the words of Gaetano Kanizsa, \textit{Vedere e pensare}, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991, p. 101: “La pregnanza: l’eredità più cospicua e più contestata della Gestalttheorie”.
\textsuperscript{486} As Kanizsa remarks, it now signifies a physiological process, whereas it earlier referred to a phenomenological result. Ibid., p. 106.
\textsuperscript{487} \textit{SC} 102/92: “La physiologie ne pourrait être pensée complètement sans emprunt à la psychologie.”
the relation between psychology and physiology in terms of isomorphism, however, the Gestalt psychologists did not liberate themselves from the dualistic framework.

Behavioural Gestalten

Classical behaviourism understood behaviour quantitatively, as a mosaic of conditional reflexes, and was clearly a version of objective thinking in Merleau-Ponty’s sense. However, the Gestaltists’ experiments as well as the physiological and neurological research of for example Kurt Goldstein, showed that normal behaviour could hardly be understood this way. The reflex is defined in terms of constant reactions to specific stimuli, and such responses are very hard to find since a stimulus does not act by the properties of its component parts but by its properties as a whole. The same partial stimulus can give rise to different effects, depending on the constellation of which it is a constituent, and the effect of a complex stimulus is therefore often “not foreseeable on the basis of the elements which compose it”.

In fact, the reaction of the organism is not a simple effect of this complex stimuli, as the response of a telephone to a certain order of pressed keys. As Koffka had noted, the stimuli must be defined in terms of the relation between the world and the organism. The stimuli and the response form a circuit, Merleau-Ponty writes: the organism offers itself to actions from the outside, and thereby contributes to the form of the exitant. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty insists that there is a circular rather than a linear causality between the organism and its environment: the excitation is already a response, and cannot be defined independently of the organism. The physico-chemical agent is the occasion for the form of the excitation and not its cause.

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488 Goldstein discusses these results in Der Aufbau des Organismus: Einführung in die Biologie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Erfahrungen am kranken Menschen, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1934, chapter II (the English version The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology, Derived from Pathological Data in Man, New York: Zone Books, 1995 (1939) is rather differently structured, thus references are given only to the German text).

489 SC 9/10: “il arrive très souvent que l’effet d’un stimulus ne soit pas prévisible à partir des éléments qui le composent”.

490 SC 15/16f.

491 SC 11/13.

492 SC 31/31.
When my hand follows each effort of a struggling animal while holding an instrument for capturing it, it is clear that each of my movements responds to an external stimulation; but it is also clear that these stimulations could not be received without the movements by which I expose my receptors to their influence. [...] Thus, the form of the excitant is created by the organism itself, by its proper manner of offering itself to actions from the outside.\textsuperscript{493}

Furthermore, in Goldstein’s studies conditional reflexes are revealed as the result of an isolation, due to either injury or disease, or to the laboratory situation.\textsuperscript{494} Far from being the basic components of normal behaviour, the conditional reflexes appear to be pathological phenomena. The most fundamental aspects of an organism, its flexibility, its capacity to learn or to transform its behaviour in the case of injury, are impossible to account for if behaviour is considered in the behaviourist way.

Hence, the necessity of a qualitative distinction between different levels of behaviour, over and beyond the quantitative one between different stocks of action. Merleau-Ponty maintains that the “prejudice” of objective and causal realism with its atomistic postulates must be abandoned, in favour of a new kind of analysis.\textsuperscript{495} This is where the notion of Gestalt comes into the picture, as a descriptive category whose aim is to follow “the natural articulations of phenomena”.\textsuperscript{496} Whereas the categories of objective thought are imposed upon the facts – even when it comes to phenomena that it has itself brought to light they are not adapted to these\textsuperscript{497} – the structural categories are capable of being “patterned on” (“calquées sur”) the phenomena themselves.\textsuperscript{498} Moreover, the distinction between levels of behaviour must concern structure, rather than being, as in Gestalt psychology, a division between orders of the same form.

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\textsuperscript{493}SC 11/13: “Quand ma main, tenant un instrument de prise, suit chaque effort de l’animal qui se débat, il est clair que chacun de mes mouvements répond à une stimulation externe, mais clair aussi que ces stimulations ne pourraient être recueillies sans les mouvements par lesquels j’expose mes récepteurs à leur influence. […] Ainsi la forme de l’excitant est créée par l’organisme lui-même, par sa manière propre de s’offrir aux actions du dehors.”

\textsuperscript{494}Goldstein, p. 106.

\textsuperscript{495}SC 27/27: “le préjugé de l’analyse réelle”.

\textsuperscript{496}SC 45/43: “[suivre] les articulations naturelles des phénomènes”.

\textsuperscript{497}SC 33/33: “Ses catégories ne sont pas faites pour les phénomènes qu’il a lui-même mis en évidence” (Merleau-Ponty here refers to Sherrington).

\textsuperscript{498}SC 63/59: “Loin d’être calquées sur les faits, les catégories de Pavlov leur sont imposées.”
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The Orders of Behaviour

In *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty classifies types of behaviour according to the degree of their attachment to a lived context. He distinguishes between *syncretic*, *amovable* and *symbolic* behaviour,\(^{499}\) while pointing out that these forms correspond to different species of animals only as their most typical behaviour. Whereas symbolic behaviour appears only with the human being, the latter is thereby not shielded from all lower forms of conduct. Inversely, there are no animal species whose behaviour never surpasses the syncretic form.\(^{500}\)

*Syncretic behaviour* is above all found in invertebrates, and could also be called instinctive, writes Merleau-Ponty.\(^{501}\) The animal responds to specific complexes of stimuli or to certain abstract features of the situation. A spider, for example, is incapable of distinguishing between the vibrations of a fly and those of a tuning-fork, since its behaviour is a reaction to particular vibrations and not to other aspects of the fly – if a dead fly is put into its net it will not treat it as bait.\(^{502}\) At this level, the animal is “imprisoned” in the framework of its natural conditions of life, and can react to new situations only in a way that is prescribed by its instinctual equipment.\(^{503}\) Indeed, even syncretic behaviour involves relations of structure, but these are tied to the concrete situation and thus submerged in the material content.

Only with *amovable* or *signal behaviour* do structures appear that are relatively independent of the concrete situation in which they are realised.\(^{504}\) The animals concerned – the vertebrates (rats, chickens, cats, dogs, monkeys and chimpanzees are mentioned by Merleau-Ponty) – can grasp relations and analogies, and are thereby capable of perceiving an event as indicating something else than itself, that is, as a signal. An example is the chimpanzees in Köhler’s famous experiments, one of whom put boxes on top of one another in order to grab the fruit that was suspended out of reach.\(^{505}\) In another case the chimpanzee put a bamboo stick with a smaller diameter together with a thicker one, thereby constructing a tool to get hold of a banana that was placed outside the bars of his cage. Thus the chimpanzees as well as

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\(^{499}\) This is, according to Embree, “Merleau-Ponty’s central contribution to Gestaltist thought”, op. cit. p. 102.

\(^{500}\) SC 113–114/104.

\(^{501}\) Thereby applying a more strict definition of instinctive than what is common – see SC 115/105.

\(^{502}\) SC 107/97.

\(^{503}\) SC 114/104.

\(^{504}\) SC 115/105.

the lower monkeys seem capable of responding not only to spatial and temporal relations, but also, to some extent, to mechanical and static structures.

There is a limit, however, to the animal’s capacity of adapting to the structure of the signal rather than to its material properties. The same chimpanzee who had learned to use boxes as tools for reaching suspended bananas, would not use the one that is offered him if another monkey is sitting on it. For the chimpanzee the “box-as-seat” and the “box-as-instrument” are two distinct objects, and not, as for the human, two aspects of one single thing. To the animal, objects appear as “functional values”, which depend on the actual composition of its field of action.506

If the animal cannot choose as he wishes a point of view of the object – “box-as-seat” or “box-as-instrument” – neither can he put his own body in the place of the thing and look at himself as the goal. For example, the chimpanzees can well make a detour in order to find a fruit that has been thrown out of the window, but are incapable of making the fruit take a detour, if this is what is required for them to reach it.507 The relation between the body-proper and the fruit only has one direction for the animal: from the organism’s body, that moves through space, towards the fixed goal. In other words, the privilege of the animal’s own body and the spatial organisation that this implies cannot be disturbed; the animal does not have the capacity to look at the object as an invariant in the same way as his own body is one, or inversely to treat his own body as an object. It lacks the ability to project a virtual or fictive situation, which makes symbolic behaviour possible – to detach the signal from the immediate, lived situation, from its real here and now, thereby transforming it into a symbol:

If eight similar boxes are placed in front of a child at increasing distances from him and if, without his seeing it, a piece of chocolate is placed in turn in the first, then in the second, then in the third, etc., from the second trial on the child will systematically look for the goal, not in the box where he just found it, but in the next one. The lower monkeys fail.508


507 SC 127/117. In more detail, the chimpanzees “are presented with the task of obtaining a piece of chocolate separated from them by the vertical sides of a box and […] must push the food away from them toward the open edge of the box in order to succeed” (“Les chimpanzés auxquels on propose pour tâche d’attirer à eux un fruit dont ils sont séparés par les rebords verticaux d’une boîte et qui doivent, pour y parvenir, repousser le fruit loin d’eux vers le côté ouvert de la boîte […]”).

508 SC 118/108: “Si l’on place devant un enfant huit boîtes semblables, de plus en plus éloignées de lui, et qu’on mette tour à tour, – sans qu’il le voie, – un morceau de chocolat dans la première, puis dans la seconde, puis dans la troisième et ainsi de suite, dès la deuxième épreuve, l’enfant cherchera systématiquement le but, non dans la boîte où il vient de le trouver, mais dans la suivante. Les singes inférieurs échouent.” The example comes from Revesz, Experiments on Animal Space Perception, Cambridge, 1924.
In order for the animal to be capable of recognising a constant thing under the change of aspects, it would have to treat certain exteroceptive stimuli (the visual perception of a moving object for example) – and certain interoceptive or proprioceptive stimuli (the kinaesthetic experience of his own body taking the same trajectory) as representatives of each other.\textsuperscript{509} This is exactly what symbolic behaviour implies: the ability to “have an object make a detour”, tracing with a gesture “the symbol of the movement which we would have to make if we were in its place”.\textsuperscript{510} Here the structures have emerged from the context to the extent that they are “transposable” from one sense modality to another.\textsuperscript{511} To take another example: when we draw a map of an itinerary, we have to transcribe a kinetic melody into a visual diagram, thereby representing the route from a bird’s eye view that has never been ours. We establish “relations of reciprocal correspondence and mutual expression” between the visual trace and the kinetic melody.\textsuperscript{512}

In symbolic behaviour a structure of a second order is instituted, a relation between relations. The sign is liberated from the material situation and can become “the proper theme for an activity which tends to express it”.\textsuperscript{513} At this level, behaviour does not merely have a meaning or signification, it is signification.\textsuperscript{514}

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A Philosophy of Gestalt
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Gestalt theory had showed that behaviour regarded “geographically”\textsuperscript{515} – the sum of movements executed in physical space – must be distinguished from behaviour in the proper sense of the term: those same movements viewed “in their internal articulation and as a kinetic melody endowed with a meaning”.\textsuperscript{516} Whereas the isolated parts of a structure – in this case the actual

\textsuperscript{509} SC 127–128/117–118.
\textsuperscript{510} SC 128/118: “faire faire un détour à un objet, c’est tracer, par notre geste même, le symbole du mouvement que nous aurions à faire si nous étions à sa place”. Emphasis in text.
\textsuperscript{511} SC 130/120: “transposables d’un sens à l’autre”.
\textsuperscript{512} SC 128/118: “établir entre l’un et l’autre des relations de correspondance réciproque et d’expression mutuelle”.
\textsuperscript{513} SC 131/120: “le thème propre d’une activité qui tend à l’exprimer”. Emphasis in text.
\textsuperscript{514} SC 133/122: “Ici le comportement n’a plus seulement une signification, il est lui-même signification.” Emphasis in text.
\textsuperscript{515} Koffka, Principles, pp. 27f.
\textsuperscript{516} SC 140/130: “ces mêmes mouvements considérés dans leur articulation intérieure et comme une mélodie cinétique douée d’un sens”.

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movements objectively considered – are elements of the physical world, the structural whole that it constitutes is not.\textsuperscript{517} When behaviour is formed, Merleau-Ponty writes, a certain moment of experience emerges from the neutral series of moments of the world, and acquires a general value as a \textit{kind} of behaviour, a habit. Behaviour detaches itself from the order of factual things and becomes the projection of a possibility for the organism.\textsuperscript{518}

Now, if behaviour does not “enfold in objective time and space”,\textsuperscript{519} neither does it occur in an ideal spatio-temporal order: it is not accessible to a pure consciousness. Its structure is “neither thing nor consciousness, and this is what renders it opaque to intelligence [\textit{l’intelligence}].\textsuperscript{520} Rather, it is in perceptual experience that behaviour presents itself, an experience that can be adequately described through the notion of form or structure. In fact, this notion “saves us” from the antithesis between empiricism and intellectualism – on the one hand a philosophy that “juxtaposes externally associated terms” and on the other a philosophy that “uncovers relations which are intrinsic to thought in all phenomena”.\textsuperscript{521} But, Merleau-Ponty adds, “precisely for this reason the notion of form is ambiguous”.\textsuperscript{522}

The concept of Gestalt thus necessitates a transformation of our habits of thought. Notwithstanding, a theory of Gestalt is not sufficient by itself. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the Gestalt psychologists do not pursue this notion to its most important consequences.\textsuperscript{523} Rather, the Gestalt is inserted in the realist ontology out of which the old antinomies between materialism and spiritualism arose: the higher orders of activity are still founded in the physical order, whereby behaviour is treated as a mundane occurrence, “interposed between antecedent and subsequent events” or in other words “really contained in a sector of space and a segment of time”.\textsuperscript{524} Instead of a parallelism between atomic stimuli and reactions, we have a parallelism between struc-
tures. In fact, Gestalt theory does not pose the ontological question radically enough, as to what sort of being pertains to form, but continues to view the world as the all-embracing totality of objective, causally ordered events, in which behaviour is merely a “province”. For this reason, behaviour is still understood as part of physical reality.

Moreover, if the relation between the organism and its environment is circular to some degree, so that the organism contributes to structuring the existent rather than simply responding to it, then it seems difficult to claim at the same time that the Gestalts of the physical, physiological and behavioural levels are simply parallel. Rather, Merleau-Ponty contends that if one is thinking in terms of form, there has to be a structural difference between the physical, the vital (including both syncretic and signal behaviour) and the human orders: otherwise there is no difference between them at all. Matter, life and mind must participate unequally in the nature of form, they must represent different degrees of integration and, finally, must constitute a hierarchy in which individuality is progressively achieved.

It is the notion of Gestalt or form itself that has to be interrogated if nature and idea are to be united in a way that does not merely repeat the aporias of objective thinking and its substantialism. But how is it to be interrogated, from what philosophical perspective? This question is not put explicitly in *The Structure of Behavior*, although at the very end of this book Merleau-Ponty writes that it would have to imply a redefinition of transcendental philosophy; “in such a way as to integrate the very phenomenon of reality”. In his detailed study from 1971 of Merleau-Ponty’s early development, Theodore F. Geraets has shown that there is a

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525 SC 144/134: “Dès lors le comportement ne peut apparaître que comme une province de l’univers physique”.
526 SC 143,146/132–133, 136.
527 SC 143/133: “matière, vie et esprit doivent participer inégalement à la nature de la forme, représenter différents degrés d’intégration et constituer enfin une hiérarchie où l’individualité se réalise toujours davantage”.
528 SC 147/137: “[I]t is not with the help of an external criterion that we will judge the alleged philosophy of form. On the contrary, we would like to return to the notion of form, to seek out in what sense forms can be said to exist ‘in’ the physical world and ‘in’ the living body, and to ask of form itself the solution to the antinomy of which it is the occasion, the synthesis of nature and idea” (“ce n’est pas à l’aide d’un critère extérieur que nous jugerons la prétendue philosophie de la forme. Nous voudrions au contraire revenir à la notion de forme, chercher en quel sens des formes peuvent être dites exister ‘dans’ le monde physique et ‘dans’ le corps vivant, demander à la forme elle-même la solution de l’antinomie dont elle est l’occasion, la synthèse de la nature et de l’idée”).
529 SC 241/224: “il faudrait définir à nouveau la philosophie transcendental de manière à y intégrer jusqu’au phénomène du réel”.

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fundamental hesitation in the French phenomenologist’s first work regarding the way that perception is considered: on the one hand the study is concerned with animal and human perceptual behaviour as its object, on the other hand the person devoting himself to this investigation is engaged in it as perceptual subject. In the latter case, the point of view is perception as it is lived from the inside.\footnote{Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendentale. La Genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu’à la Phénoménologie de la perception. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, p. 39: “un changement de méthode se produit: d’une étude de la perception comme comportement vu du dehors, on passe à une étude de la perception vécue du dedans”.
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There is a shift of methodological standpoint here, that is not clearly acknowledged by the author: “Several times, the experience from the inside infiltrates into the thought of the external spectator [spectateur étranger]”, Geraets writes.\footnote{Ibid., p. 66: “À plusieurs reprises, l’expérience du dedans s’infiltré dans la pensée du spectateur étranger”.} In Phenomenology of Perception, however, this hesitation is said to be overcome: here perceptual experience is described as it is lived from within.\footnote{Ibid., p. 184: “L’hésitation qui se manifeste à la fin du premier livre a été surmontée [dans le second]”. The difference between the two works is described in similar terms by Merleau-Ponty himself in “Titres et travaux. Projet d’enseignement (1951)”: he writes that the first book, “[considère] de l’extérieur l’homme qui perçoit, et [cherche] à dégager le sens valable des recherches expérimentales qui l’abordent du point de vue du spectateur étranger” while the second, “se [place] à l’intérieur du sujet, pour montrer […] comment le savoir acquis nous invite à concevoir ses rapports avec son corps et son monde”, P2 13.
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Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of Gestalt

There is no obvious way to narrow down Merleau-Ponty’s concept of Gestalt; partly because of the methodological hesitation just mentioned, partly since he does not distinctly state how his notion differs from that of the psychologists. In The Structure of Behavior he criticises the theory of isomorphism in claiming that there must be a difference of structure between the physical, the vital and the human orders, but the notions at each level remain rather vague.

Generally speaking, Merleau-Ponty describes the Gestalt as a perceived togetherness ("ensemble") rather than a physical reality,\footnote{SC 155/143.} it forms a joint dependence, to different degrees, between constituents – in contrast with the categories of objective thought where the objects are defined through the mutual exteriority of their parts.\footnote{SC 8/9: “L’objet de science se définit par l’extériorité mutuelle des parties ou des processus.”} For this reason, we have access to it as a
perceptual consciousness, which is not transparent to itself but based on the precognitive structures anchored in the body.

Often, it is characterised much as Köhler’s strong Gestalt, which as we remember was to be understood as the strongest of a range of Gestalten with various degrees of interdependence: “in a soap bubble as in an organism, what happens at each point is determined by what happens at all the others”.535 One criterion is then transposability.536

We will say that there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves.537

However, Merleau-Ponty’s claim here that the Gestalt would be modified by “every change brought about in a single one of its parts” appears as an even stronger demand than Köhler’s: certain tones of a melody may be modified in timbre or rhythm without the melody being transformed as such. On the other hand, the criterion of transposability does not seem to be a sufficient condition either, contrary to what Köhler believed: an arbitrary series of tones may not appear to us as a melody, but it can still be transposed. In other words, it does not by itself single out what makes a series of tones into a unified whole, such as a melody, rather than a random series of notes.

If the Gestalt should be defined in terms of transposability, it must, I would claim, be in a looser sense of preservation of certain structural aspects while the elements are modified. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty often appeals to the term in this sense, in particular when discussing the corporeal schema as a basis of learning, understanding and expression: “What we have called the bodily schema is precisely this system of equivalences, this immediately given invariant by which different motor tasks are instantly transposable.”538 The example of the organ player, who is capable of transferring his knowledge onto an organ unknown to him after only an hour of practice, recurs in his first two books as an example of this structural unity created by what he later calls the bodily schema.539

535 SC 141–142/131: “dans une bulle de savon comme dans un organisme, ce qui se passe en chaque point est déterminé par ce qui se passe dans tous les autres”.
537 SC 50/47: “On dira qu’il y a forme partout où les propriétés d’un système se modifient pour tout changement apporté à une seule de ses parties et se conservent au contraire lorsqu’elles changent toutes en conservant entre elles le même rapport.”
538 PP 165/142: “Ce que nous avons appelé le schéma corporel est justement ce système d’équivalences, cet invariant immédiatement donné par lequel les différentes tâches motrices sont instantanément transposables.”
Besides, when Merleau-Ponty characterised the higher levels of behaviour in terms of their relative structural independency of the material context, he also relied upon a notion of transposability: in the symbolic order of behaviour, structures are precisely transposable from one sense modality to the other, and can be described as second order structures.\(^{540}\) In describing the lower orders of behaviour, by contrast, he does not make appeal to this idea, but rather to different degrees of integration, or in other words the degrees to which the structure is “submerged” in the material content or else emerges from it.\(^ {541}\)

Furthermore, when he develops his criticism of Gestalt theory, in spelling out what is particular for structures of higher orders, Merleau-Ponty’s notion seems more in line with that of Goldstein, for whom the Gestalt must be understood as a larger whole: the organism; what is considered as physical or psychical is then related to its function in this whole. The organic structure or Gestalt is described in terms of an equilibrium obtained, not with regard to “certain given external conditions”, as for the physical form, but concerning “merely virtual conditions that the system itself brings to existence, […] [when it] constitutes a proper milieu for itself”.\(^ {542}\)

Whereas the laws of the best form or Prägnanz for the Gestalt psychologists in the last resort were related to objective, physical conditions, Merleau-Ponty views the good Gestalt as determined in relation to the organism and its intrinsic striving to uphold a certain constancy and order. Relying upon Goldstein’s studies, he maintains that certain behaviours – out of all those that would be possible from an analytical standpoint\(^ {543}\) – are privileged for the organism, and thus performed with a certain simplicity and naturalness.\(^ {544}\) Privileged behaviour is the most convenient and economical, not simply with respect to the external world, but rather “with respect to the task in which the organism finds itself engaged”.\(^ {545}\)

\(^{540}\) SC 128/118.

\(^{541}\) SC 113/103: “selon que la structure en eux est noyée dans le contenu ou qu’au contraire elle en émerge”.

\(^{542}\) SC 157/145: “La forme physique est un équilibre obtenu à l’égard de certaines conditions extérieures données [avec la structure organique], l’équilibre est obtenu […] à l’égard de conditions seulement virtuelles que le système amène lui-même à l’existence, […] [lorsqu’il] se constitue un milieu propre.”

\(^{543}\) Or what Goldstein calls “die isolierende Betrachtung”, i.e., that which considers the organism as composed of parts or elements. Goldstein, pp. 44–45, 220f.


\(^{545}\) SC 147/159: “le comportement privilégié est plus simple et plus économique eu égard à la tâche dans laquelle l’organisme se trouve engagé et ses formes d’activité fondamentales”. Emphasis in text.
The “good forms” determined by the Gestalt psychologists are an instance of this preference for certain perceptual behaviours, according to Goldstein. But this privilege is a function of “the total activity of the organism”\(^\text{546}\) and for this reason not only an expression of the constants of a species, but always related to an individual norm: \(^\text{547}\) “every organism, in the presence of a given milieu, has its optimal conditions of activity and its proper manner of realising equilibrium” \(^\text{548}\).

At the same time, this emphasis on equilibrium should not lead us to assume that the organism mainly strives after order and continuity: this is indeed one basic tendency, but another, equally important for Goldstein, is the tendency to novelty, the widening of its horizon. \(^\text{549}\) The relation between the organism and its environment is characterised by a “fundamental biological law” that Goldstein calls “Auseinandersetzung”: a debate, confrontation or coping. \(^\text{550}\) In privileged behaviour, the organism can cope with the environment situation in a way that corresponds to its essence. \(^\text{551}\) Merleau-Ponty translates this notion in terms of a dialectical relation between the organism and its world; \(^\text{552}\) the reactions of the organism must be understood as gestures directed at a certain “present or virtual” environment. \(^\text{553}\)

All this points to the conception of a signifying unity that is neither an assembly of elements in the empiricist sense, nor an idea of the understanding as the intellectualist demands, but a Gestalt, i. e., a “structure, the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning before us, intelligibility in the nascent state”, \(^\text{554}\) that requires us to “recast the notion of consciousness”. \(^\text{555}\)

\(^546\) SC 160/147: “[le plan privilégié] dépend non pas de conditions locales, mais de l’activité totale de l’organisme”.

\(^547\) Goldstein maintains that there are two groups of constants, first those that express the essence of the species, second the constants that express the essence of the individual organism, op. cit., p. 238.

\(^548\) SC 161/148: “Chaque organisme a donc, en présence d’un milieu donné, ses conditions optima d’activité, sa manière propre de réaliser l’équilibre”.

\(^549\) The result of these two tendencies is cultural creation (“die Schöpfungen der Kultur”), writes Goldstein, p. 196.

\(^550\) Ibid., p. 76.

\(^551\) Ibid., p. 235: “der Organismus in ausgezeichnetem Verhalten in der adäquaten, seinem Wesen am besten entsprechenden Auseinandersetzung mit der gegebenen Außenweltsituation befindet”.

\(^552\) SC 161/148: “Les rapports de l’individu organique et de son milieu sont donc véritablement des rapports dialectiques”.

\(^553\) SC 164/151: “les réactions de l’organisme ne sont compréhensibles […] que si on les pense […] comme des actes qui s’adressent à un certain milieu, présent ou virtuel”.

\(^554\) SC 223/206–207: “Ce qu’il y a de profond dans la ‘Gestalt’ d’où nous sommes partis, ce n’est pas l’idee de signification, mais celle de structure, la jonction d’une idee et d’une existence indiscernables, l’arrangement contingent par lequel les materiaux se mettent devant nous à avoir un sens, l’intelligibilité à l’état naissant.” Emphasis in text.

\(^555\) SC 183/169: “une refonte de la notion de conscience”.

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other words, at the primordial level of experience significations must have a thickness, as they are tied to the possibilities of action of a human organism and lived before they are known, as “significant wholes experienced in an indivisible manner as poles of action and nuclei of knowledge”.

This means that we can define the mode of existence of the primitive objects of perception: rather than being objects of knowledge, Merleau-Ponty writes – ideal terms which are given in a multiplicity of perspectives and stay the same under the apparent transformations – they are lived as realities which call for our action. For the football player the field is not given as a thing, but as “the immanent term of his practical intentions”, it is run through by lines of force, articulated in sectors that solicit certain modes of performance. At the same time, “each manoeuvre undertaken by the player modifies the aspect of the field and stretches out new lines of force there”, exemplifying the dialectic described above.

The notion of consciousness needed here is thus a perceptual one, which can be tied to action; Merleau-Ponty terms it a “network of significant intentions which are sometimes clear to themselves and sometimes, on the contrary, lived rather than known”. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he further characterises this consciousness as

> a non-thetic consciousness, [...] that does not possess the full determination of its objects, a consciousness of a lived logic that does not give an account of itself and of an immanent signification that is not clear for itself [...]”

The properly human consciousness is defined by its capacity of “going beyond created structures in order to create others”, in accordance with the idea that symbolic behaviour is identified through second order structures.

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556 *SC* 179/166: “des ensembles significatifs vécus d’une manière indivise comme pôles d’action et noyaux de connaissance”.


558 *SC* 183/168: “Le terrain ne lui est pas donné, mais présent comme le terme immanent de ses intentions pratiques”.

559 *SC* 183/169: “Chaque manœuvre entreprise par le joueur modifie l’aspect du terrain et y tend de nouvelles lignes de force où l’action à son tour s’écoule […]”

560 *SC* 187/173: “La conscience est plutôt un réseau d’intentions significatives, tantôt claires pour elles-mêmes, tantôt au contraire vécues plutôt que connues.”

561 *PP* 61/50: “l’exemple d’une conscience non-thétique, c’est-à-dire d’une conscience qui ne possède pas la pleine détermination de ses objets, celle d’une logique vécue qui ne rend pas compte d’elle-même, et celle d’une signification immanente qui n’est pas claire pour soi”. Emphasis in text.

562 *SC* 189/175: “Ce qui définit l’homme [est la capacité] de dépasser les structures créées pour en créer d’autres”.

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This notion of Gestalt as pertaining to the individual organism who is related in a circular or dialectical way to its environment, manifestly points forward to the idea of a corporeal schema mentioned earlier that Merleau-Ponty develops from *Phenomenology of Perception* and onwards. The bodily schema is what gives the body its “spatial and temporal, its inter-sensorial and sensorimotor unity”\(^\text{563}\). Through this schema, the football player knows the position of the limbs of his body and how they relate to the lines of force of the field, and this is possible if consciousness is understood in the way outlined above, as an “I can” (to use the Husserlian expression that Merleau-Ponty likes to quote). Further, the unity of the corporeal schema is *dynamic*: it incorporates new habits in itself, and even the instruments of those habits, and thus constitutes a “practical system” together with the external world.\(^\text{564}\)

Much as the organism was described in the earlier work, the body as Gestalt is here characterised as “polarised by its tasks”, and this is why there can be before it “privileged figures against indifferent backgrounds”.\(^\text{565}\)

**The Gestalt of Being**

When Gestalt psychology and the notion of form are discussed in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, it is very much in similar terms as those outlined above. In the lecture notes from the Sorbonne, for example, he mentions as crucial contributions of Gestalt theory on the one hand an active notion of consciousness,\(^\text{566}\) on the other “the idea of *structuration*, i.e. an order that is not added to the materials but is immanent in them, and that is realised through their spontaneous organisation”.\(^\text{567}\) He also emphasises the corporeal schema as what provides me with a system of equivalences and relates the position of my body to the environment as well as to others.\(^\text{568}\)

The final working notes point to a decisive role for the notion of Gestalt in his phenomenological ontology, which was precisely an endeavour to rethink the relation between facticity and ideality or the visible and the invis-

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\(^\text{563}\) *PP* 115/102: “l’unité spatiale et temporelle, l’unité intersensorielle ou l’unité sensorimotrice du corps”.

\(^\text{564}\) *PP* 119/105: “l’espace corporel et l’espace extérieur forment un système pratique”.

\(^\text{565}\) *PP* 117/103: “si mon corps peut être une ‘forme’ et s’il peut y avoir devant lui des figures privilégiées sur des fonds indifférents, c’est en tant qu’il est polarisé par ses tâches”.

\(^\text{566}\) *MPS* 181/139: “Les gestaltistes nous demandent de renoncer à cette conception d’une conscience contemplative, détachée de l’action: ils la remplacent par celle d’une conscience active pour qui le corps est l’instrument d’exploration du monde.” Emphasis in text.

\(^\text{567}\) *MPS* 195/150: “Le grand mérite de la psychologie de la forme est la mise en évidence de l’idée de *structuration*, c’est-à-dire un ordre qui n’est pas surajouté aux matériaux, mais qui leur est immanent et qui se réalise par leur organisation spontanée.” Emphasis in text.

\(^\text{568}\) For example *MPS* 311/247.
ible. Due to its unfinished state we do not know exactly how this ontology was going to be worked out, but the highly suggestive terms that Merleau-Ponty elaborates here point to a form of philosophy that would have much in common with art, in that it also uses “eloquent language”. To a large extent, his statements on Gestalt resonate with the earlier descriptions: it is “a principle of distribution, the pivot of a system of equivalences”, it has a generality in that it is transposable, it has or is a “heavy signification” and my body itself is a Gestalt in this sense: the system it makes up is organised about “a central hinge or a pivot which is openness to..., a bound and not a free possibility”. At the same time, Merleau-Ponty contends that the Gestalt arises from “polymorphism” – a “wild being”, “dimensionality”, “flesh” (“chair”) – and although consciousness is described in conformity with the earlier works as a motor, “functioning” intentionality, the notion of Gestalt is said to situate philosophy beyond the distinction between subject and object.

Moreover, the Gestalt is here characterised as “pregnancy” (“prégnance”), and Barbaras has rightly pointed out the importance in the final ontological project of this notion. Whereas in earlier texts, prégnance referred to the implicit presence or incarnation of meaning in the world, in the last working notes he appeals to this term as a further argument against the Gestalt theorists, in pointing to the Latin connotations (more evident in the English language) that the psychologists did not grasp: as generativity, parturition, “power to burst open”, fecundity. In this sense, the mode of existence of Gestalt may well be described as “pregnancy”, as Barbaras claims, and it seems to play a similar role as the corporeal schema, as when Merleau-Ponty writes that pregnancy calls for an “accurate focusing”,

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569 The degree to which the last manuscript and the working notes from the same period bear witness to a radical alteration of Merleau-Ponty’s thought cannot be assessed here, although I believe that a detailed reading from the point of view of Gestalt would shed considerable light on this issue.

570 VI 258/205: “C’est un principe de distribution, le pivot d’un système d’équivalences”.

571 VI 259/205: “[Mon corps] est signification lourde [...]; le système qu’il constitue est ordonné autour d’une charnière centrale ou d’un pivot qui est ouverture à …, possibilité liée et non pas libre”.

572 VI 260/207: “Montrer que, la Gestalt surgissant du polymorphisme, cela nous situe tout à fait hors de la philosophie du sujet et de l’objet.”

573 E.g. PP 490/453: “this pregnancy of signification in the signs that might well define the world” (“cette prégnance de la signification dans les signes qui pourrait définir le monde”); or “Titres et travaux”, P2 20: “In the perceived, matter is already pregnant with a form” (“Dans le perçu, la matière est déjà prégnante d’une forme”).

574 VI 155, 262/115, 208: “Prégnance: les psychologues oublient que cela veut dire pouvoir d’éclatement, productivité […], fécondité”.


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so that the good form can appear, and hence implies motility.\footnote{VI 262/209: “La prégnance est ce qui, dans le visible, exige de moi une juste mise au point, en définit la justesse”. Emphasis in text.} While the corporeal schema, however, in the earlier work marks the intimate tie between body-proper and world, pregnancy is in \textit{The Visible and the Invisible} rather what makes it possible for this “enigmatic” relation to occur,\footnote{Cf. \textit{L’Œil et l’Esprit}, Paris: Gallimard, 1964 / “Eye and Mind” (\textit{OE}), transl. M. Smith, in G.A. Johnson, ed., \textit{The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting}, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993, pp. 18/124, “The enigma stems from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen” (“L’enigme tient à ceci que mon corps est à la fois voyant et visible”).} and thus for Being to appear to itself.

At the same time, the Gestalt is compared to “a diacritical system”, an idea that makes its appearance already in the lecture notes from the 1950s.\footnote{Cf. MSME 174, Merleau-Ponty writes: “Le schéma corporel comme système diacritique”, or in MPS 78/60, where he clarifies the diacritical concept of signification in comparing language to a Gestalt.} On the face of it, the notion of linguistic meaning as determined solely by differences between the signs that constitute a natural language as a whole seems quite distinct from that of the Gestalt as a spontaneous organisation of elements.\footnote{Cf. MPS 499/401: “La ‘Gestalt’ est un ordre qui s’établit spontanément par l’interaction des éléments en présence sans destin préétabli.”} Admittedly, the meaning of those elements can only be determined in relation to the whole they are part of, but they are not for that reason merely negatively defined: a tone that is part of a melody is not devoid of properties outside of that melody.\footnote{In Toadvine’s interpretation, the Gestalt is diacritical at the outset for Merleau-Ponty, but this is clearly a result of a conflation of perceived structures with differential relations (op. cit., pp. 33, 42).}

What diacritically determined meaning has in common with Gestalt meaning seems to be that neither is positively determined in any straightforward way. They are not given before a thetic consciousness:\footnote{MSME 180: “la qualité comme structure (i.e. signification tacite, diacritique, non-thétique)”.} whereas the sign has meaning in relation to language as a systematic whole, as re-enacted by a linguistic subject, the Gestalt only appears to a motor subject of perception. In the latter case, the system would be the network of actual and possible experiences constituted by the body-proper in connection with its world.\footnote{Cf. MPS 542–3/437.} Merleau-Ponty himself draws attention to the disparity between diacritical meaning at the level of perception and of language: “there is all the same this difference between perception and language, that I see the perceived things and that the significations on the contrary are invisible”\footnote{VI 214/267: “il y a tout de même cette différence entre la perception et le langage que je vois les choses perçues et qu’au contraire les significations sont invisibles”. Emphasis in text.}. For
this reason, he introduces the notion of a “relative positivity” that characterises perception, and that we have to give a philosophical account of.

Conclusion

As should be clear from the above discussion, I do not agree that the notion of Gestalt and the consciousness perceiving it are merely negatively defined in Merleau-Ponty’s first works: i.e., as “more than”, “other than”, “not reducible to” the sum of its elements. Rather, this notion is polysemic throughout his career: there is the general definition of a figure that detaches itself from its background, or that of a self-organisation of the perceptual field making an immanent signification appear. There is also the criterion of togetherness in one and the same consciousness (Köhler’s weak Gestalt) – which would indeed be a purely negative definition if it was taken alone – and that of transposability (Köhler’s strong Gestalt), which itself can be interpreted in several ways: from the strongest of a total dependency of all its aspects, to the weaker and more plausible implying a preservation of certain structural features while the constituents are modified. Gestalt also appears as a structure of behaviour at different levels: the syncretic forms that are submerged in a concrete situation, the signal behaviour where they are more independent of the material context, and finally symbolic behaviour where structures are transposable between different senses and we hence can talk about a structure of structures.

As a higher order structure in this sense, the Gestalt is comparable to Goldstein’s conception of the organism, or to Merleau-Ponty’s own later notion of the corporeal schema. The good form or Prägnanz would then correspond to the equilibrium that an individual organism is striving for, with respect to the task it is engaged in. The organism and the environment are related to each other in a circular or dialectical way, much as the bodily schema forms a practical system with the world. They are dynamic notions that help us understand how meaning can be incarnated, and how consciousness can be an active part of this unity.

Finally, there is the definition of structure in diacritical terms, both at the linguistic and the perceptual level. This idea is not completely worked out, but should clearly not be understood as a purely negatively defined meaning.

Cf. also MSME 203: “il reste à différencier le signe diacritique du niveau ‘naturel’ et du niveau ‘culturel’”.

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in the structuralist sense,\textsuperscript{584} but as a relative positivity: the sensible world is a system of equivalences, upon which the world of significations rests.\textsuperscript{585}

Merleau-Ponty learned from Gestalt theory that philosophy is not self-sufficient: it has its own prejudices, and sometimes it is an empirical science that drives it to a radical questioning of these preconceptions. Of course, science – experimental psychology in this case – does not \textit{replace} philosophy,\textsuperscript{586} but is in need of radical philosophical reflexion if it is to imply a “disruption” of the objectivist conceptions.\textsuperscript{587}

\textsuperscript{584} For a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of diacriticity in relation to the structuralist conception, see Essay 3.

\textsuperscript{585} Cf. VI 301/247.

\textsuperscript{586} This is an issue Merleau-Ponty discusses in his course at the Sorbonne 1950–52 on “Human Sciences and Phenomenology”. It is published in two versions in \textit{P2} (transl. in \textit{The Primacy of Perception}) and in \textit{MPS}.

\textsuperscript{587} Cf. N 344–5/277.
Merleau-Ponty’s Encounter with Saussure’s Linguistics: Misreading, Reinterpretation or Prolongation?

The influence of Ferdinand de Saussure’s thought on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy is well known, in particular when it comes to its focus on language. According to James Edie, for example, it was through reading Saussure in the latter half of the 1940s that Merleau-Ponty came to take language as “the privileged model of the whole of our experience of meaning”, and, in the opinion of Shuichi Kaganoi, it was “the encounter with Saussure’s linguistic theory that provoked Merleau-Ponty to slip out of [the framework of the theory of the body] and accomplish ‘the passage from the perceptual meaning to the language meaning’”. As Thomas P. Hohler argues, he thereby came to question his previously so fundamental principle of the primacy of perception and foreshadowed his last philosophy, where the language system became the model for the ontological interpretation of being.

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James Schmidt talks about Merleau-Ponty’s “pioneering role” when it came to the reception of Saussure’s ideas in France. It is, in general, believed that he gave several courses on Saussure’s linguistics at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. The first explicit reference to Saussure by Merleau-Ponty occurs in “The Metaphysical in Man”, first published in 1947. Besides the lecture notes from the course on “Consciousness and Language Acquisition”, it is particularly in the essays from 1951–52, as well as in the manuscripts from the same period, that Saussure’s views on language are discussed in more detail. This is why Saussure’s ideas have been considered as the impetus behind the so-called “linguistic turn” in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. According to Edie, from 1949 onward Merleau-Ponty’s “expression of discipleship to Saussure is total”.

Nevertheless, the peculiar character of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the Swiss linguist is also an idea that is generally accepted. Maurice Lagueux

595 The notes were taken by students, validated by Merleau-Ponty himself and then published in the journal Bulletin du Groupe d’études de psychologie de l’Université de Paris. They are republished in MPS and were translated first by H. Silverman in 1973 (op. cit.), then by T. Welsh in 2010, in the translation of the full volume of MPS. For reasons of coherence, I give page references to the latter translation, although the quotations given in the essay are frequently based on Silverman’s version.
598 Edie, “Foreword”, p. xix. The same point is made in Edie, Speaking, p. 89.
speaks of a “deviation” in Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Saussure. Paul Ricœur judges Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy to “exclude any contact with the science of language”, notably that of Saussure, and Gary Brent Madison suggests that Merleau-Ponty confused Saussure’s ideas with those of H.J. Pos and of Walther von Wartburg. Moreover, according to Edie, Merleau-Ponty “interprets Saussure very much to his own purposes”. Schmidt speaks of the “idiosyncracies” of Merleau-Ponty’s exposition of Saussure and has “Reading (and Misreading) Saussure” as a section title, and, finally, Kaganoi asserts that Merleau-Ponty uses most of the linguist’s notions “against Saussure’s intentions”. Thus, although Saussure is said to have functioned as a “catalyst” of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, Merleau-Ponty’s reading was “curious”, even “perverse”, and full of misunderstandings. According to Schmidt “even his admirers admit that the things he purported to find in Saussure are simply not there to be found”. At best, it seems that Merleau-Ponty “reinterpreted” or “transformed” Saussure.

602 Edie, Speaking, p. 107.
603 Schmidt, pp. 105, 168.
604 Kaganoi, p. 155.
605 Watson, p. 58.
607 Madison, p. 322.
608 Schmidt, p. 107.
610 Lagueux, p. 358. See also Kaganoi, p. 156.
611 According to Mauro Carbone, for example, Merleau-Ponty “sometimes distorts, or, more often, transforms, the theses of Saussure, in order to reveal the thickness of the being of language” (“[nous avons vu] Merleau-Ponty, dans le but de réveiller l’épaisseur d’être du langage, déformer parfois et, plus souvent, transformer les thèses de Saussure” La Visibilité de l’invisible. Merleau-Ponty entre Cézanne et Proust, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2001, p. 72. Cf. also Carbone, “La dicibilité du monde. La période intermédiaire de la pensée de Merleau-Ponty à partir de Saussure”, in François Heidseick (ed.), Merleau-Ponty. Le Philosophe et son Langage, Grenoble: Recherches sur la philosophie et le langage, 1993.
Nevertheless, read in the light of more recent interpretations of Saussure’s linguistics,\textsuperscript{612} which take the numerous manuscript sources into account.\textsuperscript{613} Merleau-Ponty’s reading does not seem to be entirely in contradiction with “Saussure and his initial definitions”.\textsuperscript{614} Of course, there is no evidence that Merleau-Ponty read anything other by Saussure than the \textit{Course in General Linguistics}. But it seems perfectly admissible to use sources unknown to Merleau-Ponty in order to throw light upon his interpretation, especially given the highly unfinished character of Saussure’s work.\textsuperscript{615}

“Misreading” Saussure?

Now, what are the main points of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Saussure to which commentators have raised objections?

Firstly, Merleau-Ponty claims at an early stage that Saussure’s linguistics legitimates “the perspective of the speaking subject who lives his language \textit{[langue]} (and perhaps modifies it)”.\textsuperscript{616} It accomplishes a “\textit{return to spoken,}


\textsuperscript{614} Ricoeur, “New Developments”, p. 11.


\textsuperscript{616} \textit{SNS} 152/87: “la linguistique de Saussure légitime [… ] la perspective du sujet parlant qui vit sa langue (et éventuellement la modifie)”.
living language [langue]” that can be compared to the position of language in Husserl’s later thinking and even be designated as “a phenomenology of speech [parole]”. This seems to contradict Saussure’s clearly stated opinion that linguistics should deal not with speech, but with the language system, “la langue”: “One should not confuse the linguistics of speech with linguistics properly so called, which has the language system as its sole object of study.”

Related to this point is Merleau-Ponty’s allegation that “Saussure […] made a distinction between a synchronic linguistics of speech and a diachronic linguistics of language [langue],” which seems to deny the twofold division of linguistics by Saussure, where firstly, the study of language, “la langue”, is separated from that of speech, “la parole”, and, secondly, the former is in its turn divided into diachronic and synchronic linguistics.

A third difficulty is the idea that Saussure “challenged the rigid distinction between sign and signification that seems imperative when one merely considers instituted language [langue], but becomes muddled in speech”. Against Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation it is maintained that Saussure, rather than challenging this distinction, presents it “as one of the foundations of his analysis”. A fourth and related problem is Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of Saussure’s notion of arbitrariness, as “only apparent”, whereas in Schmidt’s view, for example, in reality, the arbitrariness of the sign was “the first principle” of Saussure’s linguistics.

A fifth issue, interconnected with the second one, would be that Merleau-Ponty historicises Saussure’s project in declaring that he “could indeed have

619 CLG 38–9/19–20: “il ne faudra pas confondre [une linguistique de la parole] avec la linguistique proprement dite, celle dont la langue est l’unique objet”. On this quotation, see infra, footnote 691.
620 S 107/86: “Saussure […] distinguait une linguistique synchronique de la parole et une linguistique diachronique de la langue”. The quote is from “Sur la phénoménologie du langage”, a paper given in Brussels 1951. Cf. also PM 33f./23.
621 RC 33/19: “[Saussure] mettait en cause la distinction massive du signe et de la signification qui paraît s’imposer à ne considérer que la langue instituée, mais qui se brouille dans la parole”.
622 Lagieux, p. 356: “cette distinction […] loin d’être mise en cause par Saussure, se donne comme l’une des bases de son analyse”.
624 CLG 100/67.
sketched a new philosophy of history”, 625 in spite of the fact that the linguist, in Schmidt’s words, “conceived his entire project in isolation from history”. 626 Finally, we have Ricœur’s contention that Merleau-Ponty “misses the structural fact as such” and hence any dialogue with modern linguistics, 627 an important reason for what Ricœur sees as the “partial failure of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language”. 628

With regard to the first two points mentioned above – the claim that Saussure formulated a linguistics, or even a phenomenology, of speech, and that he distinguished between such a synchronic linguistics of speech and a diachronic linguistics of language – there is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty, at least terminologically, is misusing Saussure’s notions. In the latter’s well-known definition of language (“langage”) as, on the one hand, the faculty of language, and on the other hand, language (“langue”) plus speech (“parole”), it is clearly only la langue that is the focus of Saussure’s analysis, either in a diachronic or a synchronic way. 629 Moreover, if speech could be related to any of these forms of study, it would seem to be the diachronic one, as Saussure writes that “everything that is diachronic in language [langue] is only so through speech”. 630

Yet, as is clear from his lectures on the acquisition of language from 1950, Merleau-Ponty is perfectly familiar with Saussure’s understanding of the distinction. 631 It seems, then, that Merleau-Ponty’s talk of a “synchronic linguistics of speech” two years later cannot simply be dismissed as “obvi-

626 Schmidt, p. 107.
627 Ricœur, Conflit, p. 245; Conflict, p. 249: “le fait structural, en tant que tel, est manqué”; cf. Ricœur, “New Developments”, pp. 11f.
628 Ricœur, Conflit, p. 244; Conflict, p. 247: “le demi-échec de sa philosophie du langage”.
629 See CLG 25, 139/9, 98.
630 CLG 138/98: “tout ce qui est diachronique dans la langue ne l’est que par la parole”. Emphasis by Saussure’s editors.
631 He writes, for example, in MPS 84–5/65 (emphases in original): “From the diachronic point of view, language [la langue] is considered in the succession of time, according to a longitudinal slice, and appears to us as a series of fortuitous events. […] From the synchronic point of view, that is, considered in its totality at a moment of its becoming, language [la langue] appears as tending toward a certain order, as forming a system.” (“Du point de vue diachronique, c’est considérer la langue dans la succession du temps, selon une coupe longitudinale, elle nous apparaît comme une suite d’événements fortuits. […] Du point de vue synchronique, c’est-à-dire considérée dans sa totalité à un moment de son devenir, la langue apparaît comme tendant vers un certain ordre, comme formant un système.”) Kagano has noticed this circumstance, p. 156, although he claims that Merleau-Ponty “came to correctly understand Saussure” in spite of the fact that the course just quoted was held two years before the paper cited earlier (see above, footnote 620).
ously an error”, as for example Ricœur believes, but seems rather to be “his own intentional reinterpretation of Saussure”, as Kaganoi writes.

Following Lagueux, Schmidt links this “misreading” of Saussure to the third point mentioned above: Merleau-Ponty’s “idiosyncratic interpretation” of his notion of the sign, or in other words, the claim that Saussure “challenged the rigid distinction between sign and signification”. In the text quoted, the summary of Merleau-Ponty’s 1953–54 course at the Collège de France, this “challenge” is related to the aspect of Saussure’s theory that was for him most fundamental, namely, the idea that meaning is “‘diacritical, oppositional, and negative’”. I quote the full text:

He challenged the rigid distinction between sign and signification that seems imperative when one merely considers instituted language, but becomes muddled in speech. Here, sound and meaning are not simply associated. The famous definition of the sign as “diacritical, oppositional, and negative” means that language [la langue] is present to the speaking subject as a system of spreads [écarts] between signs and between significations, that speech operates in one gesture the differentiation in these two orders, and finally that one cannot apply the distinction between res extensa and res cogitans to significations that are not closed and to signs that only exist in their relation to one another.

In Lagueux’s interpretation, Merleau-Ponty has the distinction between the signifier and the signified in mind here. Saussure, as we know, defined the sign as a union of an acoustic image or signifier (“signifiant”) and a concept or signified (“signifié”), neither of which is determined in a positive way, but only negatively, in their difference with all the other signifiers and signifieds in the linguistic system.

In what way, then, could the distinction between signifier and signified be said to have been challenged by Saussure? Again following Lagueux, Schmidt affirms that Saussure was rather “introducing a distinction, within

633 Kaganoi, p. 156. For him, Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation is biased by his reading of Pos, and implies a refusal of the objective study of language (see pp. 156–7).
634 Schmidt, p. 108.
635 RC 33/19.
636 In spite of the quotation marks in Merleau-Ponty’s text, this is not a citation from Saussure, who never used the term “diacritical”.
637 RC 33–34/19–20: “Il mettait en cause la distinction massive du signe et de la signification qui paraît s’imposer à ne considérer que la langue instituée, mais qui se brouille dans la parole. Ici le son et le sens ne sont pas simplement associés. La fameuse définition du signe comme ‘diacritique, oppositif et négatif’ veut dire que la langue est présente au sujet parlant comme un système d’écarts entre signes et entre significations, que la parole opère d’un seul geste la différenciation dans les deux ordres, et que finalement, à des significations qui ne sont pas closes et des signes qui n’existent que dans leur rapport, on ne peut appliquer la distinction de la *res extensa* et de la *res cogitans*.”
the sign itself”. Moreover, it is not at the level of speech, _parole_, that the differentiation takes place in Saussure, but at the level of the linguistic system, _la langue_.

Hence, not only does Merleau-Ponty place speech at the centre of the Saussurean theory, whereas in reality it was the language system that should be “the integral and concrete object of linguistics”.

He also shifts the focus, according to Smith, first “from the already existing system of differentiations to an act which fuses together sound and meaning”, and then “from the plane of ideas to the plane of perception”, or, in other words, from the structural level to the semantic one that Saussure is said to have excluded.

The other misunderstandings are believed to follow from this change of focus: the act of speech rather than the language system is thought by Merleau-Ponty to be the object of synchronic linguistics. Moreover, his understanding of the relation between signifier and signified is, as opposed to Saussure’s, seen as non-arbitrary, even symbolic. Furthermore, the allegation that a “new philosophy of history” might be based on Saussure’s ideas is, in Schmidt’s interpretation, a consequence of this displacement.

“Language Is Not a Nomenclature”

However, it seems that the overall point of the quoted passage is a quite Saussurean one. Merleau-Ponty sees the linguist as calling into question the dichotomy between thing and consciousness: it is precisely because signs are defined diacritically that the “rigid distinction” between sign and signification is challenged: “one cannot apply the distinction between _res extensa_ and _res cogitans_ to significations that are not closed and to signs that only exist in their relation to one another”.

The discussion in “Consciousness and Language Acquisition” further clarifies this point (my emphases):

> [L]anguage […] is not a sum of signs corresponding to a sum of ideas, but rather it is a unique whole [ensemble] where each word takes its

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638 Schmidt, p. 108; his emphasis. Lagueux discusses this point on pp. 356f.

639 _CLG_ 23/7: “l’objet à la fois intégral et concret de la linguistique”.


641 _EP_ 56/55, quoted above.

642 Schmidt, pp. 102f.

643 Interestingly, in his discussion of this passage, Schmidt ends his quote just before this sentence, and therefore misses Merleau-Ponty’s whole point: see p. 108.
signification through the others as a mass that is progressively differentiating itself […]\textsuperscript{644}

Language is \textit{neither thing nor mind} [esprit], it is immanent and transcendent at the same time, and its status remains to be found.\textsuperscript{645}

[L]anguage puts up an invincible resistance to all efforts that seek to convert it into an \textit{object}. But quite obviously it is not to be confused with \textit{mind} either: it \textit{resists the distinction sign–signified}.\textsuperscript{646}

Indeed, a language [langue] is \textit{not a nomenclature, a sum of signs attached to the same number of significations}; words are interdependent systems of power with respect to one another. Nowhere can we confront \textit{a word} and \textit{its signification}.\textsuperscript{647}

Language [la langue] in its functioning transcends the \textit{habitual distinction of pure meaning [sens] and pure sign}.\textsuperscript{648}

It appears from the quotations above that Merleau-Ponty does \textit{not}, as Lagueux and Schmidt believe, refer to the contrast between signifier and signified when he claims that Saussure challenged the distinction between sign and signification. Rather, he is talking about the traditional dichotomy between consciousness and things, applied to language, or, in other words, the “nomenclaturism” that Saussure criticises: “the conception of language as an inventory of names for things”.\textsuperscript{649}

In fact, the radical novelty of Saussure’s ideas consisted in the rejection of the idea that the universal structures of thought could be identified independently of the language they are formulated in, or, in other words, the assumption that language is a translation or representation of thought, with its origin in the general grammars of the 17th century.\textsuperscript{650}

\textsuperscript{644} MPS 11/4: “le langage […] est] non pas une somme de signes correspondant à une somme d’idées, mais un ensemble unique, où chaque mot prend sa signification par les autres, une masse en train de se différencier progressivement”.\textsuperscript{650}

\textsuperscript{645} MPS 11/5: “Le langage n’est ni chose ni esprit, à la fois immanent et transcendant, son statut reste à trouver.”

\textsuperscript{646} MPS 11–12/5: “le langage oppose une résistance invincible à tous les efforts pour le convertir en objet. Mais de toute évidence, il ne se confond pas non plus avec l’esprit: il est rebelle à la distinction signe–signifié”.

\textsuperscript{647} MPS 83/63–64: “En effet une langue n’est pas une nomenclature, une somme de signes attachés à autant de significations; les mots sont des systèmes de pouvoir solidaires les uns des autres. Nulle part on ne peut confronter \textit{un} mot et sa signification”. Emphases in the last sentence in original.

\textsuperscript{648} MPS 83/64: “La langue dans son fonctionnement transcende la distinction habituelle du pur sens et du pur signe”.

\textsuperscript{649} John E. Joseph, “The Linguistic Sign”, in Sanders, 2004, p. 63. See also \textit{CLG} 97/65.

In effect, if Saussure is “introducing a distinction, within the sign itself”, as Schmidt claims,\(^{651}\) it is only to show that the bond between them is indissoluble: if we retain only one of them, the linguistic entity vanishes: “instead of a concrete object we are faced with a mere abstraction”.\(^{652}\) According to Saussure, the units of la langue are constituted “between two amorphous masses”, thought and sound.\(^{653}\) The articulation of these levels cannot be separated from one another, and they are therefore compared to the two sides of a sheet of paper,\(^{654}\) or to the duality of a chemical compound, such as water: “Water is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen; taken separately neither element has any of the properties of water.”\(^{655}\)

The distinction between signifier and signified is linked to Saussure’s first principle of general linguistics: the arbitrariness of the sign. The choice that connects a given slice of sound to a given slice of thought, in the “shapeless and confused” masses of sound and thought, is completely arbitrary.\(^{656}\)

This, however, is one of the points at which Saussure’s ideas have been most often misunderstood, and Merleau-Ponty’s interpreters are no exception. Edie, Schmidt, and to some extent Lagueux, intimate that Merleau-Ponty forced his old conception of the relation between sign and meaning as non-arbitrary onto Saussure’s theory.\(^{657}\) According to Edie and Schmidt, there is in Merleau-Ponty a “symbolic” understanding, lingering from Phenomenology of Perception, of the relation between signifier and signified\(^{658}\) that is diametrically opposed to Saussure’s intentions.\(^{659}\) The principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, writes Schmidt,
means – if nothing else – that there is no resemblance, no natural bond between signifier and signified. The sole reason for preferring the sound “‘kat” to any other possible series of sounds […] as a way of signifying small, carnivorous mammals who shed hair on furniture is that it is an established convention among speakers of English to use the sound-image “‘kat” to signify the concept “cat”.

However, this passage is a typical illustration of the nomenclatural conception of language that Saussure endeavoured to overcome! The idea of a sound that is distinguishable independently of its meaning, conventionally linked to a likewise identifiable concept – “small, carnivorous mammals who shed hair on furniture” – is not reconcilable with the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign and the differential character of meaning. In Saussure’s view, meaning “is created with the formation of the sign itself”.

When it comes to Merleau-Ponty’s point of view in Phenomenology of Perception, both Edie and Schmidt make reference to a passage where Merleau-Ponty suggests that there might be a dimension of language that is not arbitrary. Schmidt draws the conclusion that the “arbitrary relation between signifier and signified is thus only apparent” in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language.

Yet, nowhere in this text does Merleau-Ponty contend that “the signifier does indeed bear a certain resemblance to what it signifies”, as Schmidt claims. His proposal is that, if we took not only the conceptual but also the “emotional” meaning into account, we would find that the unities of language extract and “literally express [the] emotional essence” of things.

Nevertheless, the expressive representation in question is not a function of a resemblance between word and object, but of the language as a systematic whole. Merleau-Ponty asks us to perform a thought experiment where “the mechanical laws of phonetics, the influences of other languages, the rationalisation of grammarians” and so on are disregarded in order for us to imagine, at the origin of each language, “a somewhat restricted system of expression,

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661 In Joseph’s words, op. cit., p. 63.
663 Ibid.
664 PP 218/193: “On trouverait alors que les mots, les voyelles, les phonèmes sont autant de manières de chanter le monde et qu’ils sont destinés à représenter les objets, non pas, comme le croyait la théorie naïve des onomatopées, en raison d’une ressemblance objective, mais parce qu’ils en extraient et au sens propre du mot en expriment l’essence émotionnelle.”
such that, for example, it would not be arbitrary to call light ‘light’ if we call night ‘night’".\footnote{665}

This passage is cited by Schmidt, but again he interrupts the quotation in a way that alters its meaning: the full stop is put after “it would not be arbitrary”\footnote{666}. However, what is “not arbitrary” is not the original system of expression in relation to the world, but to use the word “light” for light, if we use the word “night” for night. This is an early hint at the notion of the dia
critical character of meaning that will be developed by Merleau-Ponty at the beginsing of the 50s.

A similar idea is apparent in Merleau-Ponty’s course from the academic year 1950–51, on “The Experience of Others”: “Saussure has shown that nothing is fortuitous in language: it is a totality in which the use of each sign is related to the use of all the others; in this sense signs are not conventional.”\footnote{668} Thus, when Merleau-Ponty is speaking about “conventional signs”, he seems to have in mind a version of the nomenclaturist view: the idea that the community, by convention, has decided to use a certain word to refer to a certain concept, designable independently of language.

This interpretation is corroborated in the remainder of the long paragraph of *Phenomenology of Perception* quoted above. Here, Merleau-Ponty writes, “Thus, there are, strictly speaking, no conventional signs, the simple notation of a thought that is pure and clear for itself”.\footnote{669} Furthermore, this view is in agreement with Saussure himself, who does not consider language as “a simple convention”.\footnote{670} Saussure’s emphasis on the arbitrariness of the sign is not simply a statement about the conventional nature of language: obviously,
a conventional view is entirely compatible with the conception of language as a nomenclature. Saussure’s thesis is more radical than that: in fact, the sign is, in its very root, arbitrary.671

The Social Nature of Language

For the reason that signs are arbitrary, language must be a social institution according to Saussure; it is only collective usage that can establish the unity between signifier and signified. Thus, the system of language is tied, through the principle of arbitrariness, to the social community.672 However, this is not a convention in the usual sense, that is, an agreement between parties. Saussure is (also in Course in General Linguistics) unequivocal on this point:

If the signifier may seem to be freely chosen in relation to the idea it represents, it is, on the other hand, not free, but imposed, from the point of view of the linguistic community who makes use of it. The social mass is not consulted, and the signifier chosen by language [langue] could not be replaced by another.673

Now, how is this fundamental aspect of Saussure’s theory to be reconciled with Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that Saussure performed a “return to the speaking subject” comparable to that of phenomenology,674 in that he inaugurated “a linguistics of speech”,675 where it is speech that “operates, in one gesture” the differentiation in the orders of signs and significations?676 Why did Merleau-Ponty displace the fundamental methodological opposition be-

671 Cf. De Mauro’s commentary to CLG 442: “Il est plus légitime de supposer [que l’adverbe ‘radicalement’] a ici [dans ‘le lien unissant le signifiant au signifié est radicalement arbitraire’] son sens plein: le lien est arbitraire radicus, dans ses fondements même, dans la mesure où il relie deux entités semblablement produites grâce à un découpage arbitraire dans la substance acoustique et dans la substance significative”.

672 According to Normand it is in the connection between the principle of arbitrariness and the social character of language that the most important novelty of Saussure’s ideas is to be found, “and also the one most difficult to recognise”, Saussure, p. 127 (“C’est dans la liaison du social et de l’arbitraire […] que se trouve la nouveauté la plus importante et la plus difficile à reconnaître”).

673 CLG 104/71: “Si par rapport à l’idée qu’il représente, le signifiant apparaît comme librement choisi, en revanche, par rapport à la communauté linguistique qui l’emploie, il n’est pas libre, il est imposé. La masse sociale n’est point consultée, et le signifiant choisi par la langue, ne pourrait pas être remplacé par un autre.”


675 PM 33/22: “Saussure inaugure […] une linguistique de la parole”.

tween a diachronic and a synchronic study of *la langue* to concern in the one case *langue*, in the other *parole*?

The point of Saussure’s distinction was, first of all, to determine “the integral and concrete object” of linguistics, namely, language as a system, in contrast to the focus of the so-called “general linguistics” of his time, on language in its historical development. Only from the point of view of the language system could the differential character of signs be understood.

In order to distinguish this object, *la langue*, it had to be separated from the other aspect of language as a whole, *langage*, namely speech, *parole*: the particular, momentary act of the individual, which depends on the social language system. In the *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure characterises the *langue*–*parole* distinction in terms of a separation between what is “essential” and what is “accessory and more or less accidental”, and he compares their relation to that between a symphony and its performance: a symphony has “a reality that is independent of the way in which it is performed; the mistakes that musicians may make in playing it in no way compromise that reality”. For this reason, these two aspects of language must be studied separately, if the confusion, all too common in linguistics, is to be avoided. Language as the totality including both the system and the individual acts is, claims Saussure, “unknowable”.

In the light of these remarks, can Merleau-Ponty’s assertion be defended that “Saussure’s linguistics legitimates […] the perspective of the speaking subject who lives his language [*langue*]”? If the language system is to be studied only in separation from individual acts of speech, themselves comparable to the particular performances of a symphony that they cannot affect in any way, must we not conclude that Merleau-Ponty projected his own phenomenology of perception onto Saussure’s ideas, and that the influence the Swiss linguist exerted on his later thought was quite rudimentary?

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677 *CLG* 23/7: “Quel est l’objet à la fois intégral et concret de la linguistique?”

678 According to Normand, the common assumption governing the science of linguistics in Saussure’s time was that “nothing serious could be said about language” in any other way than from the historical perspective: “System, Arbitrariness, Value”, in Sanders, 2004, p. 92. Saussure himself made important contributions to comparative linguistics, notably with his *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles en indo-européen*, from 1879. For a discussion of the novelty of this work, see Anna Morpurgo Davies, “Saussure and Indo-European Linguistics”, also in Sanders, 2004.

679 *CLG* 30/14: “[on sépare] ce qui est essentiel de ce qui est accessoire et plus ou moins accidentel”.

680 *CLG* 36/18: “on peut comparer la langue à une symphonie, dont la réalité est indépendante de la manière dont on l’exécute; les fautes que peuvent commettre les musiciens qui la jouent ne compromettent nullement cette réalité”.

681 *CLG* 38/19: “Le tout global du langage est inconnaisable”.

682 *SNS* 152/87: “la linguistique de Saussure légitime […] la perspective du sujet parlant qui vit sa langue”.

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Parole, however, has two sides in Saussure’s definition: on the one hand it is a material event, the employment of the faculties of language, such as phonation. On the other hand it is a meaningful, or “semiotic”, one: it is the use of langue to express and communicate a personal thought. It is only for want of a better English expression that “speech” is commonly used as a translation of parole. They are not really equivalent: parole in French can refer also to written language and often translates as “word”, “words”, or “saying”.

Now, the point of the comparison with the symphony was to show the independent character of the system and hence of the study of that system. Just as the electrical devices used in transmitting the Morse code are not essential to the code itself, the vocal organs are secondary in relation to the linguistic system. Hence, it is clear that the physiology of speech cannot be part of the linguistics of la langue.

Nevertheless parole cannot, according to Saussure’s own definition, be reduced to the performance of a piece of music that is independent of its particular executions. This analogy only excluded the physiological side of parole from linguistic study. But what about the act of speech as a bearer of meaning? Saussure is not completely clear on this point. In Course in General Linguistics, it is stated that “what applies to phonation will apply also to all other parts of speech”, but this has no equivalence in the manuscripts, where Saussure only speaks about phonation, and concludes that “the best way to judge value of the part [of langage] parole is to look at it from the point of view of langue”.

This is clearly a methodological choice: it is not a statement about the ontological dependency of speech on the language system. On the contrary, as much as parole is determined by la langue, which is social, speech is also needed for the establishment and the evolution of the language system: “historically, speech always takes precedence”. Moreover, as we have seen, in distinction to the symphony, the language system is not the deed of an individual: it is essentially a social phenomenon. Saussure states, “The community is necessary to establish values that have no other rationale than usage

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683 CLG/E.I 247 B: “Usage des facultés en général en vue du langage (phonation, etc.).” Cf. CLG 31/14.
684 CLG/E.I 329 B: “Il y a une étude qui ne rentre pas dans la linguistique: c’est la physiologie de la parole […]”. Emphasis in text.
685 CLG 37/18: “ce que nous disons de la phonation sera vrai de toutes les autres parties de la parole”.
686 CLG/E.I 339 B: “meilleur moyen pour juger valeur de partie [du langage] parole est de se placer dans langue comme point de départ”. Emphasis and bold type in text.
687 CLG 37/19: “historiquement, le fait de parole précède toujours”.

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and general agreement; the individual alone is incapable of fixing a single one.\footnote{CLG 157/113: “La collectivité est nécessaire pour établir des valeurs dont l’unique raison d’être est dans l’usage et le consentement général; l’individu à lui seul est incapable d’en fixer aucune.”}

Furthermore, Saussure’s notion of \textit{langue} – and as a consequence, the distinction between \textit{langue} and \textit{parole} – is far from self-evident. We know that it is an arbitrarily constituted, socially instituted system of signs, themselves the union of an acoustic image and a concept, defined only in their difference from one another. Apart from these general characteristics, the language system is mostly defined in negative terms,\footnote{See W. Terrence Gordon, “\textit{Langue} and \textit{parole}”, in Sanders, 2004, pp. 78–9.} and, as Normand points out, to speak in French of \textit{la langue}, without qualification, is fairly unusual.\footnote{Normand, “System”, 89. It is even, according to Normand, “a matter of controversy […] whether the general term \textit{la langue} refers to anything at all”, ibid., p. 90. She also claims that most linguists today reject the \textit{langue}–\textit{parole} distinction, in \textit{Saussure}, pp. 117, 125.}

Thus, if speech is not the object of Saussurean linguistics, the study of it can nevertheless throw light upon the science of language. Moreover, Saussure makes a distinction between “linguistics of language system” and “linguistics of speech” as two separate disciplines that must not be confused.\footnote{CLG 36/17: “linguistique de la langue et linguistique de la parole”. The qualification of the former as “the linguistics properly so called” (“la linguistique proprement dite”), \textit{CLG} 38–39/20, is an addition by the editors (see \textit{CLG/E.I} 368 B).} It is therefore not true that “\textit{parole} cannot be studied” according to Saussure, as Schmidt claims.\footnote{Schmidt, p. 107, where he supposedly quotes Saussure: “Indeed, Saussure went so far as to argue: ‘Taken as a whole, \textit{parole} cannot be studied.’” The footnote refers to \textit{CLG} 38/19, where it is said (in Baskin’s translation): “Taken as a whole speech cannot be studied”. This, however, is a rendering of the original: “Le tout global du \textit{langage} est inconnaisable” (my emphasis), and the reason is that \textit{parole} and \textit{langue} cannot be the objects of the same study or science. The stance of Schmidt has been fairly common, however, and Arrivé writes, in reference not to Schmidt but to the Italian-French scholarly context, that this position “is absolutely refuted by the CLG” (Arrivé, p. 40: “Cette position est contredite de façon absolue par le CLG”).} After all, it is only speech that is directly observable, whereas \textit{langue}, the “social product”,\footnote{Saussure writes: “the concrete entities of language [\textit{la langue}] are not directly observable”, \textit{CLG} 153/110: “les entités concrètes de la langue ne se présentent pas d’elles-mêmes à notre observation”. On the language system as a postulate, see Normand, “System”, pp. 91f.} is a theoretical postulate or hypothesis:\footnote{CLG 30/13.} it is

a treasure deposited through the practice of speech in the members of the same community, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain, or more exactly in the brains of a group of individuals; for
language [la langue] is never complete in a single individual, it exists perfectly only in the collectivity.\textsuperscript{695}

The sign is thus a “deposit”,\textsuperscript{696} an “imprint” in the brain:

Language [langue] exists in the community in the form of an amount of imprints deposited in every brain […]. Thus it is something that is in each of them, but that is none the less common to all and beyond reach of the will of the possessors.\textsuperscript{697}

A Phenomenology of Speech?

Why was it so important for Saussure to distinguish the language system from speech? After all, synchronic linguistics “has only one perspective, which is that of the speaking subjects, and its whole method consists of gathering evidence from them”.\textsuperscript{698} Saussure’s “reversal”\textsuperscript{699} in the history of linguistics consisted precisely in this methodological change of approach where the praxis of language provided the point of departure. The speaking subject does not necessarily know anything about the history of his language; “he is faced with a state”.\textsuperscript{700}

The point of synchronic linguistics, then, is to describe what the speaker does without reflecting upon the language he is using. When Saussure writes: “the linguist who wishes to understand this state [of the language system that the speaking subject is confronted with] must make a clean sweep of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony”,\textsuperscript{701} one is reminded of the phenomenological stance. So why was it still not the acts of language that the Saussurean linguist should study, but the language system stored in the brains of the individuals in the linguistic collectivity?

\textsuperscript{695} CLG 30/18–19: “C’est un trésor déposé par la pratique de la parole dans les sujets appartenant à une même communauté, un système grammatical existant virtuellement dans chaque cerveau, ou plus exactement dans les cerveaux d’un ensemble d’individus; car la langue n’est complète dans aucun, elle n’existe parfaitement que dans la masse.”

\textsuperscript{696} CLG/E.I 352 B–E: “dépôt”.

\textsuperscript{697} CLG 38/19: “La langue existe dans la collectivité sous la forme d’une somme d’empreintes déposées dans chaque cerveau […] C’est donc quelque chose qui est dans chacun d’eux, tout en étant commun à tous et placé en dehors de la volonté des dépositaires.”

\textsuperscript{698} CLG 128/90: “la synchronie ne connaît qu’une perspective, celle des sujets parlants, et toute sa méthode consiste à recueillir leur témoignage”. The same point is remade on CLG 291/212.

\textsuperscript{699} Normand, Saussure, p. 39: “Le renversement opéré par Saussure …”

\textsuperscript{700} CLG 117/81: “il est devant un état”.

\textsuperscript{701} Ibid.: “Aussi le linguiste qui veut comprendre cet état doit-il faire table rase de tout ce qui l’a produit et ignorer la diachronie.”
For one thing, if the language system is constituted of signs that are determined in a negative way, only by their difference from one another, it seems clear that the individual acts of speech are positive choices of, for example, a certain pronunciation of an element of the language system, or of a certain order of elements. Hence, we must look beyond the speech act in order to get hold of the system.

In Merleau-Ponty’s reformulation of Saussure’s general framework, the term parole became separated in two: on the one hand what he sometimes calls “parole parlante”, or speaking speech, corresponding to the active usage of the language system with a view to expressing something new, and hence to transforming it; and on the other hand, “parole parlée”, spoken speech, the system constituted through the former activity, and at the same time presupposed by it. The speaking subject is, for Merleau-Ponty, inherently a social and a cultural one whose language has a historical depth. He did not have to make such a rigid choice either between the individual and the social perspective or between the historical and the systemic one.

Saussure’s methodological separation of langue from parole was important in a context where, first, linguistics was mainly historical and not focused on the usage of language by speaking subjects, and, second, where meanings were seen as preformed, ideal entities in the mind or soul of individuals, and language a translation of these thoughts in words. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty does not perceive the same necessity to detach the individual subject and his speech from the language system; instead, he goes directly to the question of parole as carrier of meaning.

Thus, when Merleau-Ponty speaks about a “phenomenology of speech”, he does not have a solitary subject in mind, constituting linguistic meaning solely from the profundity of his transcendental subjectivity. The whole point of his reference to Saussure is, on the contrary, to “overcome the alternative between language [langue] as thing and language as the production of speaking subjects”.702 From “the perspective of the speaking subject” it appears that language is at the same time something that the subject is “submitted” to703 and that she can modify, something that lives only in the possibility of its modification.

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702 SNS 153/87: “la linguistique se trouve devant la tâche de dépasser l’alternative de la langue comme chose et de la langue comme production des sujets parlants”.

703 Ibid.: “chaque sujet parlant […] s’éprouve astreint à de tels modes d’expression qu’il puisse se faire comprendre des autres”. The expression “astreint à” implicates the idea of being forced or compelled to do something.
Ricœur and the Structuralist Reading

In fact, the reading of Saussure that has become predominant, including among Merleau-Ponty scholars, bears the stamp of the structuralists’ development of his ideas, where \textit{la langue} is considered as a closed system, ontologically separated from \textit{parole} and from history.

Ricœur’s criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language in general, and of his interpretation of Saussure in particular, is representative of this approach.\textsuperscript{704} He claims that in making phenomenology into “a theory of generalised language”, Merleau-Ponty “radicalised the question of language in a way that excludes dialogue with modern linguistics”. This is also an explanation for the “partial failure” of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language.\textsuperscript{705}

In Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur claims, and “contrary to Saussure and his initial definitions”,\textsuperscript{706} the system is established in the present moment of speech. In this way, the objective viewpoint, linguistics, is put back into the subject, with its notions of sedimentation and \textit{habitus}. Hence, “the structural fact as such is missed”, in Ricœur’s view, and thus also the challenge that structuralism poses to the traditional philosophy of the subject.\textsuperscript{707} The autonomy of language is abandoned and at the same time the dialogue with linguistics as an objective science.

The problem with Merleau-Ponty’s employment of linguistics, according to Ricœur, is that he skips the study of language proper and goes directly to the subject and its use of language. In Ricœur’s view, we can only understand the linguistic character of speech through an analysis of the language system: rather than looking for the linguistic element in the extension of the gesture, the latter can appear as signifying only “as the semantic realisation [\textit{effectuation}] of the semiological order”.\textsuperscript{708} According to Ricœur, the system must come first in order for speech to be signifying, although it is true that “outside the semantic function in which they are actualised, semiological systems lose all intelligibility”.\textsuperscript{709}

\textsuperscript{704} It first appears in the essay from 1967, quoted above, two years later reintegrated into “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology” (“La question du sujet: le défi de la sémiologie”), published in Ricœur, \textit{Conflit}; \textit{Conflict}.


\textsuperscript{706} Ibid., p. 244; p. 248: “contre Saussure et ses définitions initiales”.

\textsuperscript{707} Ibid., p. 245; p. 249: “le fait structural, en tant que tel, est manqué”.

\textsuperscript{708} Ibid., p. 249; p. 253: “en tant qu’effectuation sémantique de l’ordre sémiologique”.

\textsuperscript{709} Ibid.: “hors de la fonction sémantique dans laquelle ils s’actualisent, les systèmes sémiologiques perdent toute intelligibilité”.
Ricœur’s arguments for the necessity of studying the language system independently of the acts of speech in which they are realised, as well as his conception of such a system, appear more clearly in his essays on structuralism and hermeneutics written at about the same time.\textsuperscript{710} The linguistic system, or \textit{langue}, is here described as “a corpus already constituted, finished, closed, and, in that sense, dead”, where one can “establish inventories of elements and units”, which can be placed “in relations of opposition, preferably binary opposition”, and where “an algebra or combinatorial system of these elements and opposed pairs” can be established.\textsuperscript{711} Moreover, this sort of inventory can only be made if the language system is strictly separated from the usage of language, from discourse or \textit{parole}.\textsuperscript{712}

The idea that a linguistic system is characterised by closure, is, in Ricœur’s view, one of the “axioms” of structural analysis. If language is to be an object of empirical science,\textsuperscript{713} the system, \textit{la langue}, must be separated not only from linguistic acts, or \textit{parole}, but also from history; synchronic linguistics, the study of a given state of the system, is therefore primary. In his analysis, the definition of the sign as determined, on the one hand, by its difference from all the other signs of the system, and on the other as an internal difference between signifying and signified, is a logical consequence of these presuppositions.

Since \textit{innovation} takes place in speech, it is incomprehensible from the structural point of view, Ricœur claims. Change can only be understood once it has been incorporated into the system, as a comparison between different systems. This is where philosophy or hermeneutics comes into play, but not as an alternative opposed to structural analysis: according to Ricœur, the two levels of understanding are both needed. In other words, the model of language as a closed system of signs is necessary in order to ensure the scientific character of the analysis, to rescue us from psychologism,\textsuperscript{714} and to point at the place where philosophy must enter the picture.

\textsuperscript{710} “Structure and Hermeneutics”, “The problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem”, and “Structure, Word, Event”, all collected in Ricœur, \textit{Conflit; Conflict}.

\textsuperscript{711} Ibid., p. 80; p. 79: “un corpus déjà constitué, arrêté, clos et, en ce sens, mort”; “établir des inventaires d’éléments et d’unités […] placés dans des rapports d’opposition, de préférence d’opposition binaire”; “établir un algèbre ou une combinatoire de ces éléments et de ces couples d’opposition”.

\textsuperscript{712} Ricœur writes: “Structuralism leads to thinking in an antinomic way about the relation between language and discourse”, ibid. (“Le structuralisme conduit à penser de manière antinomique le rapport de la langue au discours.”)

\textsuperscript{713} An “empirical science” is described in the following way by Ricœur: “empirical […] designates not solely the role and primacy of observation but also the subordination of inductive operations to deduction and calculus”, \textit{Conflit}, p. 82; \textit{Conflict}, p. 81: “empirique […] désigne non seulement le rôle et le primat de l’observation, mais encore la subordination des opérations inductives à la déduction et au calcul”.

\textsuperscript{714} The general idea that the subject is the bearer of meaning, cf. ibid., pp. 86, 242; pp. 85, 246.
This might be an accurate characterisation of certain versions of structuralism, but is it a correct interpretation of Saussure’s ideas? Ricœur, to be sure, is making use of Louis Hjelmslev’s analysis, but allegedly only for the reason that he seems better to have theorised Saussure’s presuppositions. Moreover, the point of Ricœur’s investigations is to show the insufficiency of the structural approach. In order to become a science, linguistics excludes the very essence of language: to produce novel utterances, and therewith to say something to someone. In the end, the language system and the linguistic act must be considered in tandem.

Yet, was it necessary to separate them so strictly in the first place? Is there another version of Saussurean “structuralism” that does not do “violence to linguistic experience”? Is it even possible to understand the creativity of language from within Saussure’s own system?

Language Is a River

We saw that, according to Saussure, in linguistics the study of parole must be separated from that of langue: if the language system is constituted of signs that are determined only in opposition to one another, the individual acts of speech are, on the contrary, positive choices of elements from the language system. Therefore, they cannot be the objects of the same discipline.

On the other hand, language can, in his view, be studied only from the perspective of the speaking subjects, and it is merely through their activity that the language system exists and evolves. The language system is accessible only through parole. Therefore, linguistic evidence must be gathered from individual linguistic acts, even though the language system is not observable in them in an empirical sense. It seems difficult, then, to grant Ricœur’s interpretation of langue versus parole as opposed in a dichotomous way to one another.

The Canadian linguist Paul J. Thibault has argued against the many misunderstandings of Saussure’s ideas, claiming that they depend to a large extent on a confusion of the methodological distinctions that the Genevan linguist makes, in order to define the object of general linguistics in his sense.

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715 Ricœur: Saussure “stated them in a language that often remained considerably behind the new conceptualisation that he introduced”, ibid., pp. 81–2; p. 81: “Ces présuppositions, Saussure [...] les a aperçues mais les a dites dans un langage qui reste bien souvent en retard sur la conceptualité nouvelle qu’il introduit”.

716 Ricœur, ibid., p. 85; p. 85: “c’est une décision méthodologique qui fait violence à l’expérience linguistique”.
(i.e., independently of historical considerations), with ontological claims.\textsuperscript{717} This holds for the distinction between diachrony and synchrony, as well as for that between langue and parole: “Saussure clarifies at the outset that the distinction between langue and parole is one between two ‘objects of study’, and not between two independently existing realities”.\textsuperscript{718}

As a result, the structuralist version of the linguistic system – where, as Ricœur writes, “the postulate of the closed system of signs […] summarises and commands all the others”\textsuperscript{719} – is precisely a hypostatisation of what Saussure describes as “the projection of a body on a plane” or a horizontal section of the stem of a plant.\textsuperscript{720} The language system is no more an autonomous entity than a projection of a three-dimensional body has an ontological status of its own; it is an object of study in the cross-section of the totality of language that synchronic linguistics focuses on. As Saussure writes, “the system is only ever momentary”,\textsuperscript{721} while the “river of language [la langue] flows continuously.”\textsuperscript{722} Hence, the idea of a state of the language system “can only be approximate”.\textsuperscript{723} But if language is flowing, it cannot at the cross-section form a closed system. Rather, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of open or fluent significations seems more accurate here.

As we saw, Merleau-Ponty reformulated Saussure’s distinction between speech and language system into one between speaking speech and spoken speech. In his own words, he “extended” Saussure’s notion of parole,\textsuperscript{724} in order to understand the creative function of language. In stressing the productivity of language, he also drew attention to its processual character, as when he writes that “According to Saussure, language [la langue] is a

\textsuperscript{717} Ricœur shows a similar confusion when he takes the example of a dictionary, necessarily limited in extent, to prove that the lexicon of a language is finite, ibid., p. 83; p. 82. Thibault, on his part, does not mention Ricœur’s reading.

\textsuperscript{718} Thibault, p. 9. In fact, a similar point was already made by De Mauro, in his comments to \textit{CLG} 453. See also \textit{CLG} 420f., where De Mauro calls the relation between langue and parole “dialectical”. Nevertheless, commentators have persisted in understanding Saussure’s fundamental distinctions in a dichotomous way. David Holdcroft’s interpretation, \textit{Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, discussed in Thibault, pp. 113f., is a typical example of this position.

\textsuperscript{719} \textit{Conflit}, p. 247; \textit{Conflict}, pp. 250–1: “le postulat de la clôture des signes, résume et commande tous les autres”.

\textsuperscript{720} \textit{CLG} 124–125/87f. To my knowledge, there is only one place at which Saussure seemingly speaks about language as a closed system and it is at \textit{CLG} 139/99: “every idiom makes up a closed system” (“chaque idiome forme un système fermé”). This, however, is an addition by the editors and has no equivalence whatsoever in the manuscripts.

\textsuperscript{721} \textit{CLG} 126; 88: “le système n’est jamais que momentané”.

\textsuperscript{722} \textit{CLG} 193/140: “le fleuve de la langue coule sans interruption”. Cf. also \textit{CLG} 272/199 where he speaks of “the instability of language” (“l’instabilité de la langue”).

\textsuperscript{723} \textit{CLG} 143/102: “la notion d’un état de langue n’est jamais qu’approchative”.

\textsuperscript{724} \textit{RC} 34/20: “Le cours cherchait à illustrer et à étendre cette notion saussurienne de la parole comme fonction positive et conquérante”. My emphasis.
system of signs in the process of differentiating themselves from each other.”

For Merleau-Ponty, expression is always something more than simply repeating an expression that has already been formulated. On the other hand, we can never express from out of nowhere. “Authentic” expression is to take up an already constituted meaning and transform it – this is true whether we talk about verbal expression or about “tacit” forms of expression, such as painting or bodily expression.

Of course, not all expression is authentic in this strong sense; rather, our life is to a large extent pervaded by cliché, or “spoken speech”. The point is that expression must take place within the tension of these two aspects of language: spoken language and speaking language. The effort to understand this productivity of language and expression runs through Merleau-Ponty’s whole work, and cannot be summarised here. However, it is clear that it means something more than just constructing, from a limited number of elements, an unlimited number of phrases, as is common in contemporary analytic philosophy and linguistics. In his view, authentic expression transforms the given elements or forms.

Conclusion

Did Saussure’s ideas occasion a “linguistic turn” in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking? It is certainly the case that issue of language has a crucial role to play in his later philosophy and that the Swiss linguist’s name occurs more frequently than in the earlier texts.

However, Merleau-Ponty was undoubtedly familiar with some Saussurean ideas at an early stage, such as the distinction between langue and parole and the emphasis on synchronic rather than diachronic study of langue. It seems that Merleau-Ponty first came into contact with Saussure through proofreading Aron Gurwitsch’s article “Psychologie du langage” in 1935. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he alludes to Saussure when introducing the distinction between speaking and spoken speech. This is why Roland Barthes, “the mother figure of structuralism”, claimed that it was Merleau-


727 *PP* 229/202: “By taking up a famous distinction [...]” (“en reprenant une célèbre distinction”).


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Ponty who made “the best development of [Saussure’s] notion of language/speech [Langue/Parole]”, with reference precisely to this work.\textsuperscript{729}

The contemporary French linguist Michel Arrivé, whose articles on Saussure do not dodge the most bewildering aspects of Saussure’s writings, avows to admire the “divination” that let Merleau-Ponty “track down the underlying thoughts of the Course”.\textsuperscript{730} Taking up a formulation of Algirdas Julien Greimas he states that “the global interpretation that Merleau-Ponty gives of the CGL ‘seems in many respects as a natural prolongation of Saussure’s thought’”.\textsuperscript{731}

In other words, although the influence of Saussure’s ideas upon Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy was certainly more far-reaching during the latter half of his career, it is less clear that they provoked such a profound rupture as has commonly been believed. Neither does it seem that his interpretation of Saussure was out of order, but rather that some of its paradoxical features can be traced right back to the celebrated linguist’s own thought.


\textsuperscript{730} Arrivé, p. 194: “On ne peut ici qu’admirer la divination qui a fait repérer au philosophe les pensées sous-jacentes du Cours”.

One salient issue in contemporary feminist philosophy has been how to understand the relationship between language or discourse and bodily existence, in particular the gendered body.732 According to Judith Butler, the body is wrapped up in an unstable system of multiple and discursive power relations: not only gender but also sex is constituted by language.733 Some feminist theorists have been concerned by this radical understanding of the culturally constructed character of the body: Susan Bordo, for example, accused Butler of being a linguistic or discursive foundationalist, and Seyla Benhabib reproached her for deprecating the notions of selfhood and agency altogether.734

For this reason, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body-proper has appeared to several interpreters as a fruitful alternative to post-structuralist philosophy in that it gives room to the more “material” aspects of bodily existence: either Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is interpreted as tak-

732 I am indebted to the anonymous referees of Hypatia for valuable comments on this article.

733 This idea was introduced in Butler’s article “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex”, in ed. Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century, Yale French Studies, 72 (35–49), 1986 and developed in particular in her books Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1999 (1990) and Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”, New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1993.

ing into account a pre-given meaning independent of language, or it is his depiction of the expressivity of the living body that is emphasised, as being compatible with and complementary to the poststructuralist point of view.

Some theorists, however, have wanted to reject the phenomenological perspective altogether, either as a consequence of the poststructuralist dismissal of the notion of experience or because of a scepticism towards the transcendental attitude thought to be lingering even in a phenomenology of lived corporeality such as that of Merleau-Ponty. The very possibility of a feminist phenomenology is under scrutiny, and Merleau-Ponty’s thinking has been an important source for the effort to formulate an account of corporeality beyond the traditional dualisms and consistent with the aims of feminism.

Rather than addressing these issues directly, I will here go back to Butler’s early essay “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A


737 For example, Joan W. Scott, “‘Experience’”, in “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’”, in eds. Butler and Scott, Feminists Theorize the Political, New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1992, among other texts, whose position Stoller thoroughly discusses (“Phenomenology”, pp. 707f.).


Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, where she examines Merleau-Ponty’s depiction of sexuality in his work from 1945.\(^{740}\) Although at first acknowledging the promising character of his theory of sexuality as coextensive with existence,\(^{741}\) Butler criticises his analyses for containing “tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality”, which precludes us from grounding a politically significant theory of sexuality on his work.\(^{742}\) However, I believe that a thoroughgoing assessment of Butler’s objections to Merleau-Ponty in this paper, based on a detailed analysis of the well-known Schneider case, will show that her deconstructive procedure is not necessarily at odds with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological descriptions. Silvia Stoller has made clear that Butler’s thought has early roots in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and her attitude even in this highly critical paper remains paradoxical.\(^{743}\) In fact, Merleau-Ponty’s exploration of the wounded body draws attention to the limits of that discursive constructivism Butler sometimes tends to, whereas her uncompromising political stance points out both the radicality of his endeavour, if we read it in the right way, and certain blind spots in his descriptions that need further examination. For this reason, I am convinced that a reading of this early essay is important if phenomenology is to be developed in a feminist direction as discussed above.\(^{744}\)

The starting point for Butler’s analysis is the significant contributions that Merleau-Ponty’s ideas seem to offer feminist theory, in that he makes important arguments against “naturalistic accounts of sexuality that are useful to any explicit political effort to refute restrictively normative views of sexu-


\(^{741}\) This favorable judgment is repeated in Butler’s *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 33.

\(^{742}\) “Sexual Ideology”, pp. 86, 99.

\(^{743}\) Stoller, *Existenz*, pp. 363f. This attitude is clearly formulated by Butler herself when she states that “feminist theory […] has both something to gain and something to fear from Merleau-Ponty’s theory of sexuality” (“Sexual Ideology”, p. 86).

\(^{744}\) Butler’s paper has been discussed by Elizabeth Grosz, who believes she makes “a most convincing case” against the purported neutrality of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas on sexuality (“Merleau-Ponty”, p. 58 and *Volatile Bodies*, p. 221); by Alcoff, according to whom the analysis shows that his “account of sexuality is patriarchal heterosexuality, and […] naturalizes current gender relations” (“Phenomenology”, p. 50); and by Stoller (*Existenz*), who is less convinced by Butler’s reading, although her aim is mainly to show the general compatibility between phenomenology and post-structural feminism: therefore, she gives no detailed assessment of the arguments.
ality”. For Merleau-Ponty, the living body is constituted and continually reconstituted within a field of possibilities that are appropriated and transformed into the body’s own structure. It is, in Butler’s formulation, “the ‘place’ in which possibilities are realized and dramatized”, and she approvingly cites Merleau-Ponty’s statement that the human being is “a historical idea, not a natural species”.

Nevertheless, promising as Merleau-Ponty’s theory might seem when it comes to liberating our understanding from a naturalising ideology of hierarchical heterosexuality, Butler claims that it hides certain normative suppositions about sexuality. First, that it is, after all, heterosexual; second, that masculine sexuality is “characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body”; third, that the sexual relation between man and woman follows the model of the relation between master and slave. So, although Merleau-Ponty “generally tends to discount natural structures of sexuality”, Butler writes, “he manages to reify cultural relations between the sexes on a different basis by calling them ‘essential’ or ‘metaphysical’”.

In other words, the potential that Merleau-Ponty’s ideas appeared to have for feminist theory, in characterising the living body as a historically and culturally constituted “dramatic structure”, vanishes when we recognise their tacit normative, and therefore exclusionary, assumptions. In their appeal to a natural sexuality, these assumptions turn out to contradict his general theory of the living body. Uncovering such presuppositions is indeed the most important task for feminist theory, as Butler understands it: if we read the essay in the light of her later work, her goal is not just to refute an outright normative, naturalistic or biologistic view. Rather it is to show how a certain theory, despite its efforts to the contrary, confirms what she in *Gender Trouble* calls the “heterosexual matrix”: the discursive grid that defines bodies in terms of oppositional and hierarchical gender categories. There can never be a question of refuting or escaping the heterosexual matrix; instead we have to perform a critical, feminist genealogy of those categories from within the discursive field of power that produces the categories of gender.

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746 Ibid., p. 86.
749 Ibid.
750 Ibid.
751 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 9, 194.
752 Ibid., pp. 9f., 42f., 187f.
Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenological Genealogy of Objective Thinking

To what extent is Butler’s feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty justified? In order to answer this question, we have to look at the context of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of sexuality as they appear in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

One thing that must be noted is that Merleau-Ponty does not so much put forward a *theory* of perception and the body but instead carries out his own version of a genealogy, or “archaeology” as he later calls it, in examining the emergence of what he labels “objective thinking” and its inherent contradictions. “Objective thought ignores the subject of perception”, it conceives the world as a complete, entirely explicit and determinate extension, understandable independently of the perceiving and moving body-proper. The objects of this world consist of parts that are wholly external to each other, and the relations between them can likewise only be external and mechanical. Objective thought demands unequivocalness, a reasoning in terms of either–or, and its categories are therefore mutually exclusive.

Objective thought is the thinking of the philosophical tradition, whether it takes the form of empiricism or “intellectualism” (Merleau-Ponty’s term for rationalism). For Merleau-Ponty, empiricism is more naïve than intellectualism since it presupposes that everything can be explained in the guise of objectivity: not only objects, but also the experience of objects: perception. Intellectualism takes one step further since it asks for the necessary conditions of possibility of our objective knowledge. Nevertheless, intellectualism does not question the definition of objectivity itself; therefore, it merely


754 *PP* 240/214: “La pensée objective ignore le sujet de la perception”. *Ignorer* in French is ambiguous: it can mean both “ignore” and “be unaware of”, “not know”. Both senses are clearly in play here.

755 *PP* 60f./50.

756 Merleau-Ponty’s notions should be seen as characterising certain *tendencies* in the history of thought, especially from the so-called scientific revolutions and onward, rather than generic terms supposed to cover all possible definitions of empiricism versus rationalism. Examples given of intellectualists/rationalists are certain propensities in Descartes and Kant, as well as Ernst Cassirer, Jules Lagneau, and Alain. Empiricists are those heirs of Hume who during the nineteenth century tried to explain perception in mechanistic and elementistic terms, and who were subject to the Gestalt theorists’ criticism, so important for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development.
doubles the pure, completely determined objectivity with a pure and absolute subjectivity, fully transparent to itself, into which objectivity is copied.

The consequence of intellectualism’s reflection on the conditions of knowledge is dualism: on the one hand the object, a substance wholly external to itself, pure extension; on the other the subject, a substance wholly internal to itself, pure thinking, untouched by space, time and facticity, with full possession of the world and of itself.

Merleau-Ponty does not criticise objective thinking as if it were just a bad habit, an antiquated custom we had better get rid of. On the contrary, objective thinking comes all too naturally to us. This is, he says, because our perceptual experiences are intentional: they are directed to an object – in a wide sense – that gives unity and organisation to these experiences. When we try to understand the experiences that lead to the object in the first place, we transfer the categories of objectivity to them and understand the constitution from what is constituted. Objective thought is “unaware of itself and installs itself in the things”.

Objective thought is the theoretical version of our everyday thinking – our “natural attitude”. For this reason, we cannot, as phenomenologists, just leave it behind or refute it with an alternative theory. Rather, Merleau-Ponty sets out to show how it is that objective thinking arises, in digging up its hidden conditions and pointing to its internal inconsistencies.

Thus, a theory that would not be caught up in the incoherencies of objective thought would have to constitute a radically new form of thinking: one that accepts indeterminacies and ambiguities, and can therefore capture the coming-into-being of the meaningful object, the birth of categories and reason.

It must not be taken for granted, however, that this new form of thinking that Merleau-Ponty announces in Phenomenology of Perception has already been accomplished. On the contrary, this work should primarily be read as preparing the ground for such thinking, devoted as it largely is to a genealogical critique of objective thought.

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757 It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty does not mean by “constitution” a transcendental ego’s production of transparent meanings, but rather the reconstitution of a nontransparent sense by the perceiving, incarnated subject.

758 PP 31/24: “une pensée qui s’ignore elle-même et qui s’installe dans les choses”. On the French term ignorer, cf. supra, footnote 23.


760 See, for example, PP 139–140, 278f., 419/122, 250f., 382.
One of Merleau-Ponty’s main tools for breaking up objective thinking from within is by taking examples from pathology that cannot be accounted for. One recurrent case is the patient Schneider, who was injured during World War I by a shell splinter at the back of his head. His case was studied by the neurologist Kurt Goldstein and the gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb from the middle of the war and onward, and it is their work and studies based on it that Merleau-Ponty relies upon.\footnote{Schneider was a patient of Goldstein and Gelb at the Hospital for Brain Injury in Frankfurt (later the Institute for Research on the After-Effects of Brain Injuries). Created by Goldstein, its main purpose was to rehabilitate soldiers who had received brain injuries in the war. Goldstein’s writings were of main importance for Merleau-Ponty at an early stage, not least his work Der Aufbau des Organismus. Einführung in die Biologie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Erfahrungen am kranken Menschen, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1934; The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology, Derived from Pathological Data in Man, New York: Zone Books, 1995 (1939).}

Butler’s critique of what she calls Merleau-Ponty’s theory of sexuality hinges upon the latter’s assumption that Schneider’s sexuality is abnormal. I will discuss Schneider’s story at some length, since it is important for the evaluation of Butler’s as well as Merleau-Ponty’s arguments.

The Schneider Case

Traditional psychiatry would have diagnosed Schneider as “psychically blind”, but his troubles manifest themselves in various ways that cannot be explained by a loss of data in the visual field.\footnote{PP 119f./105f.} Merleau-Ponty states that neither empiricism nor intellectualism can account for Schneider’s troubles: empiricism considers the body in purely physiological terms, governed by mechanical laws, whereas intellectualism understands the living body in terms of a symbolic, representational function, which unifies the experiences of the body into an intelligible whole. For Merleau-Ponty, empiricism has an advantage over intellectualism, in this case, since it can account for illness as such, in terms of physical and chemical effects on the body. So although intellectualism has the merit of taking into account the conditions of experience, instead of treating the latter as an assemblage of pure empirical data, it ends up in an absolute consciousness insusceptible to the factual situation, and thus to disease.

If Schneider is asked to point at his shoulder, he is incapable of doing so, although he can perform the exact same movement, “with an extraordinary swiftness and precision”, if it has a concrete further goal, such as if a mosquito bites his shoulder and he wants to slap it, for example.\footnote{PP 120/106: “avec une rapidité et sûreté extraordinaires”.} The only way
for Schneider to execute a movement in abstraction from the concrete situation is to make preparatory movements with his whole body that allow him to “find” his arm or his head, or else to retrieve the complete bodily position that is needed in the concrete case.\textsuperscript{764}

Schneider’s example illustrates Goldstein’s distinction between concrete and abstract attitudes:\textsuperscript{765} abstract movements do no address an actual situation but are those that, for instance, are carried out upon order, such as moving a limb or pointing at a particular part of one’s body.

The case is intriguing since Schneider’s inability to perform movements abstractly can neither be explained in purely physiological terms – he can perform the very same movements in a concrete situation – nor can they be described as a lack of intellectual understanding on his part. He does comprehend the meaning of what he is supposed to do, but in this situation he cannot “find” his limbs. The command lacks what Merleau-Ponty calls motor signification: it merely has an intellectual signification that Schneider must subsequently translate into movements.\textsuperscript{766}

If Schneider is presented with a familiar object outside of its context of use, such as a fountain pen, and is asked what kind of thing it is, he responds: “Black, blue, shiny. And white patches on it. It resembles a stick. Since it is long. It could be some sort of instrument. It glitters. It shines. Could also be coloured glass.”\textsuperscript{767} Through a careful analysis where he is led from one step to the next by language, he can finally recognise the fountain pen. In this procedure, Merleau-Ponty writes, what is given by the senses “suggests” certain significations “in the manner that a fact suggests to the physicist an hypothesis”.\textsuperscript{768} Schneider is groping in darkness: whereas for the normal perceiving subject, the signification or the concrete essence of the

\textsuperscript{764} PP 121/106f.

\textsuperscript{765} The distinction between concrete and abstract or categorial functions was first made by Goldstein and Adhémar Gelb, “Über Farbennamenamnesie” (1924), in Goldstein, \textit{Selected Papers/Ausgewählte Schriften}, eds. Aron Gurwitsch, Else M. Goldstein Haudek and William E. Haudek, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, and developed in several later works. It was also formulated as a difference between showing and grasping (Goldstein, “Über Zeigen und Greifen” (1931), in \textit{Selected Papers}).

\textsuperscript{766} PP 128/113. For an excellent discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Schneider’s case in relation to the French philosopher’s notion of motor intentionality, see Rasmus Thybo Jensen, “Motor Intentionality and the Case of Schneider”, \textit{Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences}, 8:3 (371–388), 2009.


\textsuperscript{768} PP 152/133: “Les données sensibles se bornent à suggérer ces significations comme un fait suggère au physicien une hypothèse […]”.

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object is “immediately readable”, for Schneider the world does not have a physiognomy or style anymore.769

In more general terms, Merleau-Ponty describes Schneider’s troubles as an incapacity to relate to possible and imaginary situations; the future and the past as well as the spatial horizon beyond his immediate grasp do not mean anything for Schneider. When he complains about the weather and is asked if he feels better in winter, he answers: “I can’t say now. Only what’s here at the moment”.770

It seems as if Schneider is imprisoned in the actual situation: he cannot hear the background noise if he is talking to someone, and claims that one can see only what one is looking at. In a conversation he has to deduce the meaning of the other person’s words and can afterwards only recall the general theme of the discussion and the final decision that was made. He can neither remember the other person’s words nor his own: he can recall only what he has said according to the reasons he had for saying it. “There is”, Merleau-Ponty writes, “something meticulous and serious in all of his behaviour, which comes from the fact that he is incapable of playing.”771 Playing involves putting oneself in an imaginary situation, and Schneider cannot relate to the imaginary. He can act only if he has a specific, concrete goal. When the issue of his sexuality is brought up for the first time in Phenomenology of Perception, it is in this context:

Schneider would still like to form political or religious opinions, but knows that it is useless to try […] He never sings or whistles on his own. We will see below that he never takes the initiative sexually. He never goes out for a walk, but always on an errand, and he does not recognise Professor Goldstein’s house when walking by it “because he did not go out with the intention of going there”.772

The problem, says Merleau-Ponty, is neither Schneider’s intellect or his sensibility, but the union and the “existential conditioning” of the two;773 therefore, a third term is needed between the psychic and the physical, called

769 PP 153/133: “immédiatement lisible”; lisible in French can mean both readable, legible and, by extension, visible.
770 Hochheimer, “Psychologische Analysen”, p. 33: “Das kann ich jetzt nit sage. Bloß, was momentan is.” Quoted by Merleau-Ponty, PP 158/137.
771 PP 157/136: “Il y a dans toute sa conduite quelque chose de méticuleux et de sérieux, qui vient de ce qu’il est incapable de jouer”.
772 PP 156–157/136 (my emphasis): “Schneider voudrait encore se faire des opinions politiques ou religieuses, mais il sait qu’il est inutile d’essayer […] Jamais il ne chante ni ne siffle de lui-même. Nous verrons plus loin que jamais il ne prend d’initiative sexuelle. Il ne sort jamais pour se promener; mais toujours pour faire une course, et il ne reconnaît pas au passage la maison du professeur Goldstein ‘parce qu’il n’est pas sorti dans l’intention d’y aller’.”
773 PP 152/132.
“existence”.\textsuperscript{774} We can understand Schneider’s troubles only if we analyse the structure of his illness as part of a total form of being. Schneider’s existence is “[affected] from a certain ‘side’”\textsuperscript{775} – that is, the part of his brain governing vision is attacked – but his whole way of projecting himself to the world is altered. Intellectualism does not make clear how consciousness can be injured at all, and empiricism cannot explain the all-embracing effects that an injury has. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, we have to understand the living body as an expressive unity, whose acts assume a given situation and are sedimented in the world as a natural and cultural history – as \textit{existence} – if we are to account for the vulnerability of consciousness.

\textbf{Butler’s Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty}

Schneider’s case is described in an earlier chapter of \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}: “The Spatiality of One’s Own Body and Motility”.\textsuperscript{776} Thus, it is already supposed to be known when the issue of sexuality is brought into the picture. This is something that Butler does not take into account in her study, nor does she consider any other parts of the work. Instead, she reads out of context the chapter on the body as sexual being as a statement of a full-fledged theory of sexuality.

Butler carries out her critique in three steps. The first aims to show that Merleau-Ponty fails to acknowledge “the extent to which sexuality is culturally constructed”.\textsuperscript{777} The second step is more radical and involves the assessment of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the sexuality of Schneider. Butler argues that Schneider is deemed abnormal in comparison with a culturally constructed normality, which Merleau-Ponty, against the grain of his general arguments, assumes to be a “natural” sexuality. This is the most important part of her argument and the one I will focus on here. The third step is an elaboration upon the results from the former, and involves the claim that Merleau-Ponty’s theory turns out to reify a relation of domination between the sexes, formulated in terms of a dialectic between master and slave.

Butler’s objection to Merleau-Ponty’s handling of Schneider’s sexuality is that he declares it abnormal; thereby, he assumes a certain culturally constructed form of sexuality as the standard of normality. The norm Merleau-Ponty assumes is, according to Butler, that of a “masculine subject as a strangely disembodied voyeur whose sexuality is strangely non-corporeal”,

\textsuperscript{774} PP 142, n.1/520, n.58.
\textsuperscript{775} PP 159/138: “la maladie [atteint] chaque fois la conscience par un certain ‘côté’”.
\textsuperscript{776} PP 114f./100f.: “La spatialité du corps propre et la motricité”.
and a decontextualised, fragmented female body that is the object for the male disembodied desire, described mainly in “visual metaphors”. The heading of this part of Butler’s essay is consequently entitled “Misogyny as an Intrinsic Structure of Perception”.

The basis for Butler’s judgment is Merleau-Ponty’s description of Schneider’s sexual behaviour. In this chapter, we are told that the patient no longer seeks the sexual act of his own volition. Obscene pictures, conversations on sexual topics, the perception of a body do not arouse desire in him. The patient hardly ever embraces, and the kiss has no value of sexual stimulation for him. Reactions are strictly local and never begin without contact. If foreplay is interrupted at that point, there is no attempt to pursue the sexual cycle. During intercourse, intromissio is never spontaneous. If the partner reaches orgasm first and moves away, the initiated desire vanishes. Things happen at each moment as if the subject did not know what to do. There are no active movements, except for a few instants prior to orgasm, which is quite brief.

To Butler it is not obvious that this behaviour is pathological; she even claims that Schneider in the end appears as a “feminist of sorts”. Her more general objection to Merleau-Ponty’s account of Schneider’s sexuality is that it reveals the assumption that the normal subject is a male, disembodied subject gazing at a fragmented female body. This interpretation seems to be corroborated by Merleau-Ponty’s further depiction of Schneider’s case:

For Schneider, it is the very structure of erotic perception or experience that is altered. For the normal person, a body is not perceived merely as any object, this objective perception is inhabited by a more secret one: the visible body is underpinned by a sexual schema, strictly individual, which accentuates erogenous zones, outlines a sexual physiognomy, and calls for the gestures of the masculine body, which is itself integrated into this affective totality. For Schneider, on the contrary, a woman’s body has no particular essence: it is, he says, above all char-

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778 Ibid., p. 93.
779 Ibid., p. 92.
780 PP 181/157: “Un malade ne cherche jamais plus de lui-même l’acte sexuel. Des images obscènes, les conversations sur des sujets sexuels, la perception d’un corps ne font naître chez lui aucun désir. Le malade n’embrasse guère et le baiser n’a pas pour lui valeur de stimulation sexuelle. Les réactions sont strictement locales et ne commencent pas sans contact. Si le prélude est interrompu à ce moment, le cycle sexuel ne cherche pas à se poursuivre. Dans l’acte sexuel, intromissio n’est jamais spontanée. Si l’orgasme intervient d’abord chez la partenaire et qu’elle s’éloigne, le désir ébauché s’efface. A chaque moment les choses se passent comme si le sujet ignorait ce qu’il y a à faire. Pas de mouvements actifs, sinon quelques instants avant l’orgasme, qui est très bref. Les pollutions sont rares et toujours sans rêves.”
acter which makes a woman attractive, for physically they are all the same.\textsuperscript{782}

Here Butler contends that Merleau-Ponty presupposes that “the ‘normal subject’ is male, and ‘the body’ he perceives is female”.\textsuperscript{783}

It must not be forgotten, though, that Schneider is a patient suffering from a series of troubles related to an injury in the occipital region, who himself describes his troubles. Schneider is aware that there are things he would like to do that he is prevented from doing: not only to pursue sexual relationships but also, for example, to establish friendships with other people. In the report elucidating his sexuality, Schneider several times remarks that his behaviour and reactions were “different before”.\textsuperscript{784}

The studies that Merleau-Ponty relies upon for the Schneider case were written at Goldstein’s institute in Frankfurt. Goldstein’s method was that of the “unequivocal description of the very essence, the intrinsic nature of the particular organism”.\textsuperscript{785} The symptoms of the patient should be accounted for in minute detail, and put in relation to his individual needs and tasks.\textsuperscript{786} (This methodology was developed out of dissatisfaction with the traditional methods of biology and their elementistic presuppositions, which not only gave inaccurate theoretical results but also, and above all, were inadequate “in medical practice”.\textsuperscript{787}

Thus, the particular individual is the main object of analysis, so the first part of the assumption attributed to Merleau-Ponty by Butler – that the subject is male – is not hidden at all. Schneider is married, and he has also after his trauma had an affair with a girl whom he made pregnant.\textsuperscript{788} In other words, the assumption of Schneider’s heterosexuality is not the consequence

\textsuperscript{782} PP 182/158 (my emphasis): “C’est la structure même de la perception ou de l’expérience érotique qui est altérée chez Schn. Chez le normal, un corps n’est pas seulement perçu comme un objet quelconque, cette perception objective est habité par une perception plus secrète: le corps visible est sous-tendu par un schéma sexuel, strictement individuel, qui accentue les zones érogènes, dessine une physionomie sexuelle et appelle les gestes du corps masculin lui-même intégré çà cette totalité affective. Pour Schn., au contraire, un corps féminin est sans essence particulière: c’est surtout le caractère, dit-il, qui rend une femme attayante, par le corps elles sont toutes semblables.”

\textsuperscript{783} Butler, “Sexual Ideology”, p. 93.


\textsuperscript{785} Goldstein, Der Aufbau, p. 2; The Organism, p. 25: “[Die eindeutige] Beschreibung der besonderen Wesenheit der einzelnen Organismen”.


\textsuperscript{787} Goldstein, The Organism, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{788} Steinfeld, p. 175.
of a general norm about sexuality, as Butler believes, but of certain known
facts about the patient.\textsuperscript{789}

Given this context, the standard of normality that is presupposed in the
account of Schneider’s sexuality is not “normal male sexuality” and even
less “normal human sexuality”, but rather a healthy Schneider, as he was
before his injury, and as he still sometimes would like to be.

It is also clear that Merleau-Ponty refers to Schneider’s “sexual inertia” in
the context of his general incapacity for acting in situations that do not have
either a habitually or an intellectually defined goal.\textsuperscript{790} As noted, Schneider
could execute a certain movement perfectly well if he had a concrete pur-
pose, whereas he had to “find” his limbs if he were to perform the same
movement abstractly. If he is asked to make a military salute or to make
the gesture of combing his hair, he must put himself mentally in the situation
and show all the other signs of respect, or pantomime the hand that holds the
mirror.\textsuperscript{791} In a similar way, he can act sexually only if another person takes
the lead and creates the concrete situation for him.

In Butler’s view “Schneider is subject to the clinical expectation that sex-
ual intercourse is intrinsically desirable regardless of the concrete situation,
the other person involved, the desires and actions of that other person”.\textsuperscript{792}
But if the descriptions of Schneider’s sexuality are interpreted in the context
of his full story, it appears that he is diagnosed to have a problem, not be-
because he wrongfully takes the concrete situation into consideration, but be-
because he is locked up in it, and not because he fails to perform according to a
misogynous norm for masculine sexuality, but because he does not perform
at all of his own accord. Schneider has no difficulties in going on errands or
accomplishing his job as a wallet manufacturer,\textsuperscript{793} or getting an erection if a
woman touches his penis: but in the erotic situation he does not know “what
is to be done” at each stage any longer. This circumstance indicates that sex-
ual behaviour is not like “blowing one’s nose”. The normal sexual behaviour
that Schneider’s is compared to is rather that which takes place in the open-
ness of a situation where the goals are not set up beforehand, but have to be
continually reinvented, such as when one is singing for oneself or fantasising
or playing, or having a conversation with someone without that “plan settled
in advance”, which Schneider stands in need of.\textsuperscript{794}

\textsuperscript{789} Therefore, it does not seem likely to presuppose that he is in reality homosexual, as Butler
does in the later postscript (“Postskriptum”, p. 185).
\textsuperscript{790} PP 181/157.
\textsuperscript{791} PP 121/107.
\textsuperscript{792} Butler, “Sexual Ideology”, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{793} Where his productivity equals three quarters of that of a normal worker (PP 120/103).
\textsuperscript{794} Merleau-Ponty PP 157/136: “un plan arrêté d’avance”.

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Schneider – A Feminist?

The second part of Butler’s assumption – that the perception of a normal male subject is directed at a fragmented female body – is even more problematic. Butler’s analysis depends on her claim that the sexual schema in Merleau-Ponty’s description becomes a reduction of the body “to its erogenous (to whom?) parts”, and thus decontextualises and fragments it even further.795 This schema, however, must be understood as a version of the bodily schema that Merleau-Ponty appealed to earlier as one of those ambiguous notions “that appear at turning points in science”.796 The bodily schema is the particular unity of the living body that takes place “in between” body and mind, physiology and representation; it is a dynamic unity acquired in interplay with others, where actions are sedimented as habits and become part of the body’s structure.797 This habitual – and thus “culturally constituted” – system of transposition ensures, for example, that a verbal order immediately has a motor significance, or brings about that the gestures of a particular masculine body are integrated into an affective totality that may include a female body.

The erotic perception that Merleau-Ponty refers to as normal is a way of perceiving a body that emphasises the erogenous zones. But nothing in his example indicates that erotic perception is restricted to male perception of females. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty assumes that the emphasis on erogenous zones is what makes the perception of a body erotic, but that does not determine what zones are to be considered erogenous, and by whom.

In Butler’s view, perception appears to have a misogynous structure in Merleau-Ponty, not only because the perceiving body turns out to be male, but also since the body perceived is condemned to be a female essence. In Butler’s view, it is for this reason that Schneider can be called a feminist: by “refusing to endow a woman with an essence, Schneider reaffirms the woman’s body as an expression of existence, a ‘presence’ in the world”.798 The

796 PP 114/101: “la notion du schéma corporel est ambiguë comme toutes celles qui apparaissent aux tournants de la science”.
basis for Butler’s claim is Merleau-Ponty’s characterisation of Schneider’s perception quoted above: “[For him], a woman’s body has no particular essence”. 

Butler’s assumption is that being an existence is opposed to and therefore excludes having an essence. This is true only if essence is understood in intellectualist terms, as a pure eidos, determined once and for all and separated from existence. But the whole point of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is to uproot this dichotomous thinking and show how essences can, as he puts it in the preface, “bring back all the living relations of experience, as the net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed” or, in short, how they can be incarnated in existence.799

What Schneider is incapable of perceiving is a particular essence, that incarnated meaning or style that makes one woman’s living body distinguishable from another body. When Butler writes that Schneider “reaffirms the woman’s body as an expression of existence […] Her body is not taken as a physical and interchangeable fact, but expressive of the life of consciousness”800, she has forgotten that Schneider sees only amorphous patches and has to guess what they are. “Through vision alone, Schn. does not recognise any object”.801 In the street, Schneider manages to distinguish human beings from cars, since, in his own words: “‘Human beings are all alike, thin and long; cars are wide, it is obvious, they are much thicker.’ The patient spreads out his arms.”802 He only recognises a woman’s body with the help of particular, obvious clues, such as hair length, breasts and the triangular form of her genital area.803 As to the “character” that Schneider is said to appreciate in a woman, it has to do with the fact that he distinguishes one person from another only if she takes an interest in him in some way. If this doesn’t happen, people are “all alike”.804

What is more, the allegation that Merleau-Ponty focuses only on “visual metaphors” might be countered by recalling that it is primarily Schneider’s

799 PP x/xxix: “Les essences […] doivent ramener avec elles tous les rapports vivants de l’expérience, comme le filet ramène du fond de la mer les poissons et les algues palpitants.” Linda Fisher points out that feminist theory can hardly avoid essences in this sense, generalisations based on particular experiences: it cannot rely upon singular, ineffable experiences (Fisher, “Phenomenology and Feminism: Perspectives on their Relation”, in Fisher et al., *Feminist Phenomenology*, pp. 28f.).
801 PP 131/115: “Par la vue seule, Schn. ne reconnaît aucun objet”.
803 Steinfeld, op. cit., p. 176.
804 Ibid., p. 177: “[M]omentan sind alle [Menschen] gleich”.

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vision that is impaired; therefore the visual sense is the focus of the descriptions. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty makes numerous references to the tactile sense, contrary to Butler’s claim. In the passage quoted earlier, he wrote: “The patient hardly ever embraces, and the kiss has no value of sexual stimulation for him.” In the same paragraph, we are told that tactile stimulations, in spite of the fact that the sense of touch is not directly affected by the injury and that it functions perfectly well in other circumstances, “have lost their sexual signification”, that “close bodily contact only produces a ‘vague feeling’”. It is only in the situation where his organ is manipulated – touched – by a woman, and where she performs all the activities of sexual intercourse that he is capable of feeling a drive and a sense of well-being albeit for just a few seconds.

Incarnated Effects of Discourse

Butler further criticises Merleau-Ponty’s reference to certain structures of the living body as “metaphysical” or “essential”, as well as labelling the body “a natural self”. Merleau-Ponty would hereby separate a primordial level of biological subsistence, and even of natural sexuality, from a posterior level of cultural signification. In this respect, Butler’s interpretation coincides with that of some of her own critics who, as I mentioned earlier, believe that Merleau-Ponty can help us “renaturalise” the body: reconquer its nondiscursive meaning from the constructions of poststructuralist feminism.

The common presupposition here turns out to be that the gendered body must either be totally constructed – and in that case the mere mentioning of the word “nature” will be a contradiction in terms – or there must be a level of pure bodily meaning, as yet unaffected by culture. Butler writes: “it is unclear that there can be a state of sheer subsistence divorced from a particular organization of human relationships”. But claiming that there are several levels of existence, and that respiration and nutrition are primordial to active, experiencing life, is not to assume that we can come across “a state of sheer subsistence” or a pure, natural meaning prior to culture and discourse. It is only to assume that we, through acts of discourse, can distinguish analytically between events that might be called “natural” or “biological” and discursive incidents in a general sense: between an injury from a falling tree and a wound from a kick in the head by the boot of a skinhead, or between

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805 PP 182/158–9.
806 Cf. Steinfeld, p. 176.
brain-damage, as in the Schneider case, and the psychic (and curable) trauma suffered by the aphonic girl described in the same chapter.  

Furthermore, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of metaphysical significations, it is in the sense of incarnated essences I referred to above rather than a “reification” of cultural relations, as Butler claims: they can always be taken up anew and transformed. In fact, this notion does not appear to be far from what Butler in *Bodies that Matter* calls “materializing” effects of discourse, “constructions without which we would not be able to think, to live, to make sense at all, those which have acquired for us a kind of necessity”.

For Merleau-Ponty, our acts of expression and thinking – of discourse – must be seen as rooted in a world we did not create, and that we can ultimately never view in its entirety. An injury to the occipital region can radically transform not only the patient’s perception of the world, but his very capacity to relate to others. The point is precisely to show that sexuality is not an autonomous apparatus in humans, but that it is “geared into the total life of the subject”.

### Toward a Gendered Body-Proper

Butler’s early reading of Merleau-Ponty’s chapter on sexuality works under the assumption that one particular case of sexual behaviour we are presented with – that of the brain-damaged Schneider compared to a “normal” male (presumably Schneider himself before injury) – can be generalised to a theory of sexuality. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty is here rather offering a “genealogical” critique of objective thought: offering a theory of sexuality at this stage would indeed be premature, given that the stated purpose of the chapter is to show how meaning comes into being for us: it is a step in the archaeological route leading from the constituted object of perception to its constitution in experience.

For Merleau-Ponty, sexual desire is an example of affectivity, and thus of a region that more obviously makes resistance to the dualistic categories of objective thought. It seems to form a realm precisely *in between* subjectivity and objectivity. Through examining that realm, we can come closer to an understanding of being in general, and the “in between” may come to characterise being as such.

The problem with Butler’s position in the article discussed here is that it does not allow for a distinction from within discourse, between discursive events and nondiscursive events, and hence for an adequate description of

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808 *PP 187f./163f.*

809 *Bodies that Matter*, p. xi.

810 *PP 185/161*: “la vie génitale est embrayée sur la vie totale du sujet”.

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the wounded body. Therefore, the sufferings of the brain-damaged Schneider will magically transform him into a feminist of sorts, and the accusation of “discursive fundamentalism” seems founded with respect to her argument here.

Certainly, Butler does not put forward a discursive reductionism in a metaphysical sense, and in her work subsequent to Gender Trouble she endeavours to clarify her position in this respect. When Merleau-Ponty’s ideas appear in her later texts, they are clearly taken to be in line with her own thought; for example, when she in Undoing Gender states, with reference to the by now familiar chapter of Phenomenology of Perception: “to a certain extent sexuality establishes us as outside of ourselves; we are motivated by an elsewhere whose full meaning and purpose we cannot definitively establish”.\(^{811}\) The “deception” she speaks of in the German postscript, with regard to Merleau-Ponty’s work, no longer seems to be at play.\(^{812}\)

We saw that Merleau-Ponty’s critique of objective thought and his efforts to formulate this region “in between”, provide a framework that breaks up and thus points beyond the opposition between sex and gender, body and language, nature and culture. The living body that is at the centre of his account is an expressive and yet brutally material structure that a nonnaturalistic feminist theory of sexuality cannot avoid taking into consideration.\(^{813}\) That being said, Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of “the body as a sexual being” are – rather than “abstract and anonymous”, as Butler writes\(^{814}\) – surprisingly rudimentary in that they hardly mention the question of sexual difference or consider the gendered body as a significant phenomenological example in itself. Even if this were not the place for a radically new theory in the sense that his general philosophy would have demanded, the question remains why his account of sexuality is limited to a few pathological cases and some scattered general remarks, whilst giving such rich and detailed descriptions of the spatiality and the expressivity of the body.

Even though Butler in her 1989 essay fails to recognise the gist of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of sexuality, she discerns a point of weakness that is of

\(^{811}\) Undoing Gender, p. 15. Already in her article on Irigaray, written in 1990 according to a footnote, Butler defends Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy of the flesh (“Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty”, in eds. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss, Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006). In the postscript mentioned, she writes: “I also believe that today I would no longer romanticize Schneider’s asexuality”, a formulation that indicates a certain ambiguity towards her earlier ideas (“Postskriptum, p. 185: “Ich glaube auch, daß ich Schneiders Geschlechtslosigkeit heute nicht mehr romantisieren würde”).

\(^{812}\) “Postskriptum”, p. 185.

\(^{813}\) Note that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of expression is not the literal, mechanistic one that Butler often relies upon (for example, in “Performativity Acts”). As Stoller has shown (in “Expressivity”), it comes rather close to Butler’s own idea of performativity.

\(^{814}\) “Sexual Ideology”, p. 98.
fundamental importance for feminism: concerned as he is with the objec-
tivistic “matrix”, he is not aware of the heterosexual and sexist one. A thor-
ough assessment of his work from this angle is, in my view, a future task for
feminist phenomenology.
Towards a Phenomenological Account of the Dancing Body: Merleau-Ponty and the Corporeal Schema

In the philosophical tradition, the human body has rarely been considered on its own terms, as fundamental to perception and cognition, but more often than not as a supplement to the reasoning faculty of the soul; an appendix that, in addition, is held to constitute an obstacle to true knowledge. When it comes to the dancing body, philosophers are even more reticent: whereas the other art forms, from painting, literature and music to sculpture and architecture, have been examined in depth and even put at the centre of systematic aesthetic reflection (the most famous example being of course Hegel’s philosophy of art), the art of dance seems only recently to have become a worthy object of theoretical consideration.

One obvious explanation for the neglect of dance in philosophy is the disregard of its agent, namely the living body. In feminist criticism of philosophy since Beauvoir this is related to the identification of the body with the female principle, so that the subjugation of woman in patriarchy is explained in terms of the rejection of the physical, vulnerable and mortal side of us.815

The identification of the female with matter, darkness, ignorance and so on goes back at least to the Pythagoreans and their famous table of opposites,816 whose influence on the philosophy of Plato and on the dualist tradition in general is indubitable.817 In a well-known paper, “Philosophers and the Dance”,818 David Michael Levin relates the lack of philosophical writing on dance to the hostility towards the sensuous body in the Western tradition.


816 In this table, that Aristotle presents in Metaphysics 986a22, “male” falls into the same column as “right” and “good”, whereas “female” is in that of “left” and “bad”.

817 I discuss this tradition more extensively in my “Dansens filosofiska kropp: Merleau-Ponty och kroppen som konstverk”, in Ord i tankar och rörelse, Cecilia Roos, Katarina Elam and Foultrier, Stockholm: DOCH, 2013.

He understands this connection between the body and the female principle through the role of dance in society; whereas dance originally occurred “in a ritually consecrated space”, as part of fertility rites, it later developed into an art form, a spectacle, which for Levin means that “patriarchy won out”. Worship of the fecundity of Mother Earth was gradually replaced by celebration of reason and art for its own sake.

By contrast, one of the most renowned philosophers writing in the field of dance, Francis Sparshott, claims that theorising upon dance has a much longer history than is commonly believed. Yet he confirms that it is not so easily integrated into the theory of art in general. He entirely dismisses Levin’s idea that dance was originally a manifestation of the female principle and contends that dance is not so much rejected as overlooked, “historically, prevailing and acceptable justifications available to other arts have not been available to the dance. The ideology has failed to fit”. One explanation that Sparshott brings up in his discussion of the absence of dance in aesthetic systems is the expressive character of the human body as such. In Hegel’s view, dance as “a means of expression” is “subhuman and pre-artistic”, and is thus to be seen as merely a predecessor of art proper.

Although Merleau-Ponty has not written on dance other than in passing, I believe that his conception of the lived body, and his effort to overcome the dualistic metaphysics inherent in our tradition, can be useful for an understanding of dance and choreographic expression. For the French phenomenologist, the living body is expressive in itself and is thereby the origin of other forms of expression and language. In order to call attention to the fact that meaning is incarnated in the body, he compares it to a work of art, and, just as in a painting or a poem, in the living body “expression cannot be

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819 Levin, p. 86.
820 Ibid., p. 87. Levin acknowledges the speculative character of this hypothesis and does not give any precise references. However, the idea that dance was primordially a sacred practice is not controversial; see for example Paul Bourcier, “La première danse fut un acte sacré”, in his Histoire de la danse en Occident I–II, Paris: Seuil, 1994 (1978).
823 Sparshott’s argument is not very fair to Levin, as he attributes to him a rather simplistic empirical thesis of dance as a womanly practice. See ibid., pp. 9f.
824 Ibid., p. 11.
825 Ibid., p. 6.
distinguished from what is expressed”.827 Rather signification “radiates” from the body, or in other words, the body is a “knot of living significations”.828

Now, this should not be taken to mean that the human body is “naturally” expressive and that meaning on the level of the body would be inherent in some biological sense (although Merleau-Ponty’s theory has indeed been interpreted that way). If conceptual meaning is formed by “drawing [pré-lèvement] from” a gestural meaning,829 the latter is still contingent upon the body as a biological entity. At the heart of our bodily existence we are historical and cultural beings, “Man is a historical idea and not a natural species”.830

There are several questions to be posed here. First, if significations are not inborn, how are they inscribed in the body, and how are they expressed? Second, if the human body is in itself compared to a work of art, in what way is dance as an art form distinct from what the everyday body does? And third, does not verbal, conceptual language differ from artistic expression, and can it really be seen as emanating from what is going on in gestures and movement?

I will mainly deal with the two first questions in this paper, and only briefly with the third, in order to find out whether an outline of a phenomenology of dance can be extracted from Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

The Living Body and Its World

Merleau-Ponty’s work is rooted in the phenomenological tradition, where the basis of knowledge and experience is neither reason, as an instance separate from and opposed to the physical world, nor sensual experience or behaviour, seen as part of matter and explainable in causal terms. Rather, conscious and experiential life is characterised by intentionality – a directedness towards objects in a wide sense – and can, as a consequence, not be captured in the naturalistic language of the exact sciences. For Edmund Husserl, the “father of phenomenology”, intentionality was above all a property of consciousness, whereas Merleau-Ponty emphasises the more primordial form of

827 PP 177/153: “où l’on ne peut distinguer l’expression de l’exprimé”.
828 PP 176, 177/152, 153: “C’est en ce sens que notre corps est comparable à l’œuvre d’art. Il est un nœud de significations vivantes et non pas la loi d’un certain nombre de termes covariants.”
829 PP 209/184. Merleau-Ponty’s terminology is varying, but in Phénoménologie de la perception he frequently uses the terms conceptual or notional signification/meaning on the one hand, and gestural or emotional signification/meaning on the other.
830 PP 199/174: “L’homme est une idée historique et non pas une espèce naturelle.”
intentionality that is tied to the body in movement. Merleau-Ponty calls it functioning or operative intentionality, after Husserl’s “fungierende Intentionalität”, or sometimes “motor intentionality” or simply “existence”.831

The basic aim of phenomenology is to give a pure, unprejudiced description of our experience, of the world’s givenness and of the way we are directed towards it. All our preconceived ideas and theories about the world, ourselves as well as our relation to it must be suspended, put within brackets, in order for us to get access to the how of the objects’ appearing. At the level of phenomenological description, it turns out that the living body – that Husserl calls “Leib” – differs in an essential way from the body in a pure corporeal sense, the “Körper”.832

In the Cartesian tradition, the human body was precisely a Körper, or in Descartes’ words, “all this machinery of members that appears in a corpse”.833 In order to tell the difference between a moving corpse and a living body – the machinery of members united with a soul – the intellect had to make the judgement, based on clues given by the senses, that, for example, those men hidden by their hats and coats that I see through my window are human beings rather than mechanical dolls.834 Merleau-Ponty points out that the living body is, on the contrary, immediately given to us as such in our experience. Whereas a mechanical doll or a Körper can be explained in mechanistic terms, this is not the case with the living body, Leib; it is itself an experience of the world, not merely a part of it.

In fact, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, it is only as bodily beings, moving around in the world, that we can have experience: perception and movement presuppose one another. When a cat runs by, we see it because we move our eyes and our head, and if we want to touch it we need to stretch out our hands. We bend forward to smell a flower, and put a fruit in our mouth to taste it. Our movements are always related to the sensual world we are sur-


834 Descartes, ibid., p. 93/AT 25: “yet what do I see through the window, except hats and coats which may cover ghosts or dummies worked by springs?” (“cependant que vois-je de cette fenêtre, sinon des chapeaux et des manteaux, qui peuvent couvrir des spectres ou des hommes feints qui ne se remuent que par ressorts?”). Merleau-Ponty discusses this passage on PP 41/35.
rounded by and to the activity we are engaged in; I move differently in darkness than in daylight, or in a well-known environment compared to unknown surroundings. For this reason, it is not, Merleau-Ponty contends, the body in an objective sense that moves, the *Körper*, but what he sometimes terms the phenomenal body.\(^{835}\)

The phenomenal body is the body that *I am*; it is not a body I am attached to, that I need to be united with – like the Cartesian body whose union with the soul must be *sui generis*, impossible as it is to determine how they come together.\(^{836}\) The living body is not a pure thought amalgamated somehow with a pure extension, but incarnated meaning; it presents, writes Merleau-Ponty, “the mystery of a whole [ensemble] that, without leaving behind its *haecceity* and its particularity, emits beyond itself significations capable of offering a framework for an entire series of thoughts and experiences”.\(^{837}\)

Thus, the movements of the living body are not merely certain pathways traced by the body in Euclidian space, whose parts are all exchangeable with one another, but charged with meaning. They have a direction that is determined by my occupation and my motives. In contrast with objects, which simply have a position in space, the living body has a *situation* in space.\(^{838}\) It is devoted to something, if only to sleeping or daydreaming. For this reason, a living body is not just positioned beside a chair, for instance, in the way that a chair is placed beside another chair. I am related to the chair: I can sit on it, I can lean against it, I can climb upon it, ask someone else to sit on it, repaint it or throw it out. In order to further characterise the spatiality of the lived body with its internal relations, Merleau-Ponty says that their parts are “enveloped” in one another, in contrast with objective spatiality where things are simply beside one another.\(^{839}\)

Whereas the parts of Euclidian space are indifferent towards one another, things have meaning for the living body and other living bodies mean something other for it than things. When my body moves in space, it does not simply travel through it, it *inhabits* space, writes Merleau-Ponty, in order to express this particular meaningful relation.\(^{840}\) It is not simply *in* space and time, but assumes space and time; it belongs to them, “I am not in space and

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\(^{835}\) See *PP* 123/108.


\(^{837}\) *PP* 147/128: “Les sens et en général le corps propre offrent le mystère d’un ensemble qui, sans quitter son *écocité* et sa particularité, émet au delà de lui-même des significations capables de fournir leur armature à toute une série de pensées et d’expériences.”

\(^{838}\) Or, to be more precise, it has a situational spatiality, not a positional spatiality as the external objects. *PP* 116/102: “sa spatialité n’est pas comme celle des objets extérieurs […] une *spatialité de position*, mais une *spatialité de situation*”. Emphasis in original.

\(^{839}\) *PP* 114/100: “[Les parties de mon corps] ne sont pas déployées les unes à côté des autres, mais enveloppées les unes dans les autres.” See also the chapter “Space”.

\(^{840}\) *PP* 162/140: “[notre corps] *habite* l’espace et le temps”. Emphasis in original.
in time, I do not think space and time; I am at home in space and time, my body gives itself over to them and embraces them”.

According to Merleau-Ponty, then, it is essential for the living body to have a situation in space, to relate to space as lived, and to constitute an organic whole whose parts are internally connected with one another. Moreover, it is fundamental that it is someone’s own body, a body-proper (“corps propre”): it has its own spatial and temporal perspective on the world, which can only to some extent be occupied by someone else. Another person can go to the place where I am, but she cannot go back in time, and in her perspective will be included a whole range of other situational characteristics: her height, the distinctive features of her sensory organs – she may hear better than I do, or be colour blind, near sighted, etc. – as well as her personal history and background, which all inform her perception of the world. The own-ness in itself, that this body is mine, or rather that I am my body, as my particular destiny, brings these features together.

Thus, the body-proper is not a summative entity, composed of different organs and functions, moving in a geometrical space as a ball in a pinball game. Space in itself is not, as we have seen, an empty vessel, a measurable extension whose parts are all external in relation to one another, partes extra partes. Rather, the space we perceive has directions: we always experience the world from a perspective, and thus the direction an object is located in is not indifferent to me. As the Gestalt theorists said, perceived space is anisotropic, whereas objective space is isotropic: its properties are identical in all directions. In other words, phenomenal space is a meaningful space: sens in French signifies both direction and meaning.

Now, the point is that this phenomenal spatiality is not a subjective, distorted manifestation of space in itself, whose parts would in reality be entirely equivalent to one another and exhaustible by measurement. The cube that I see before me is not “in itself” a geometrical cube with six equal faces, a completed and translucent object, “shot through from all sides by an infinity of present gazes, intersecting in its depth and leaving nothing there hidden”. This is the traditional philosophical and scientific conception; due to our orientation and to the constitution of our senses the world appears to us as charged with significations, whereas the real world would be describable in mathematical terms. Just as Husserl before him, Merleau-Ponty maintains that this is to turn things upside down: rather than the objective space

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841 PP 164/141: “je ne suis pas dans l’espace et dans le temps, je ne pense pas l’espace et le temps; je suis à l’espace et au temps, mon corps s’applique à eux et les embrasse”.
843 PP 83/71: “L’objet achevé est translucide, il est pénétré de tous côtés par une infinité actuelle de regards qui se recoupent dans sa profondeur et n’y laissent rien de caché.”
844 In Krisis.
described by science underlying phenomenal space, it is the latter, experien-
tial, oriented space that is the basis of the objectivistic model. This model is
a construction having its purpose in certain contexts, but becoming problem-
atic if we understand it as a representation of the world in itself. A die is to
be explored through its different aspects, and this is what the die is as such,
“The cube with six equal sides is not merely invisible, but is even inconceiv-
able; this is the cube as it would be for itself; but the cube is not for itself,
since it is an object.”

The tendency of science and philosophy to disregard lived experience and
their ambition to take a God’s eye view of the world, to consider it as a huge
object, exhaustible through mathematical theories and without hiding-places,
Merleau-Ponty calls “objective thought”, and later “la pensée de survol”,
“the flying-over thought”, the form of thinking that aims to dissociate it-
self from the world in order to completely embrace it. Yet, the very move-
ment of thinking can never enter into this picture, and this was why Des-
cartes in the end had to admit that the union between body and soul could
not be thought, but only lived. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, wants to think
this union, or rather, think the particular kind of being that Descartes charac-
terised as a union of body and soul, and that the philosophers and scientists
of his time designated as an assembly of functions or conditioned reflexes.
To this end, in order to “think what most philosophies have considered as
refuse [produit de rebut]”, a new form of thought is needed, with fresh, recast categories.

The Habitual Body and the Corporeal Schema

One such new category that Merleau-Ponty has recourse to is that of the
corporeal schema, “le schéma corporel”: an “ambiguous [notion], as are all
concepts that appear at turning points in science”. It is related to a distinc-

845 PP 236/210: “Le cube à six faces égales est non seulement invisible, mais encore
impensable; c’est le cube tel qu’il serait pour lui-même; mais le cube n’est pas pour lui-même,
puisqu’il est un objet.”

846 This term occurs particularly in “Eye and Mind”: L’Œil et l’Esprit, Paris: Gallimard, 1964
/transl. Michael Smith, in Galen A. Johnson (ed.), The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader:
Philosophy and Painting, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993 (OE), pp. 12,
48/122, 134.

847 Descartes, Correspondance, op. cit.

Verdier, 1997 (P1), p. 39: “Il s’agit ici de penser ce que la plupart des philosophies ont tenu
pour produit de rebut.”

849 PP 114/100: “la notion du schéma corporel est ambigué comme toutes celles qui
apparaissent aux tournants de la science”. This notion was first developed by neurologist
tion introduced by Merleau-Ponty in order to explicate the phenomenon of phantom pain, namely that between the habitual and the actual body. The body-proper is at a fundamental level a habitual body, he writes: it integrates in itself habits that become part of the body’s very structure. Due to the habitual body, I do not need have recourse to reflexion once I have learned to walk or cycle, and even the bicycle I use every day becomes incorporated in this structure. When I learn a new movement, it is largely the body itself that understands, that “catches” the movement: 850

For example, to acquire the habit of a dance, do we not find the formula of the movement through analysis and then recompose it, taking this ideal outline as a guide and drawing upon already acquired movements, such as walking and running? But in order for the new dance to integrate particular elements of general motricity, it must first have received, so to speak, a motor consecration. 851

The actual body, on the other hand, is the body here and now, which overlaps but does not coincide with the former. In the case of the phantom limb, for example, there are gestures that have disappeared from the actual body, but that are still integrated at the habitual level, and this is the reason for the “ambivalent presence” of the phantom limb. 852 With the habitual body we go beyond the actual, present body and experience the objects or tasks at hand as manageable – not just by me, but in themselves. In other words, the habitual level of the body implies a certain generality and impersonality. 853

Merleau-Ponty also uses the metaphor of “intentional threads” to characterise the connection of the body-proper to its environment, threads that remain hidden in the natural attitude but are distended through phenomenological reduction and in this way appear for what they are. 854 When I sit down at my desk, I do not need to find the keyboard or the light switch: my hands already know what gestures to perform, and the rest of the body immediately adapts to the working position. It is this network of intimate ties to the envi-


850 PP 167/144: “C’est le corps […] qui ‘attrape’ (kapier) et qui ‘comprend’ le mouvement”.
851 PP 167/143–144: “Par exemple, acquérir l’habitude d’une danse, n’est-ce pas trouver par analyse la formule du mouvement et le recomposer, en se guidant sur ce tracé idéal, à l’aide des mouvements déjà acquis, ceux de la marche et de la course? Mais, pour que la formule de la danse nouvelle s’intègre certains éléments de la motricité générale, il faut d’abord qu’elle ait reçu comme une consécration motrice.”
852 PP 96/83: “Le bras fantôme n’est pas une représentation du bras, mais la présence ambivalente d’un bras.”
853 PP 98/84–85.
environment that I have “in my hands” or “in my legs” that Merleau-Ponty calls intentional threads.\textsuperscript{855}

A more elaborate example that Merleau-Ponty gives is that of the musician, or more precisely the organist, relying here upon a study made by Jacques Chevalier on habit.\textsuperscript{856} The experienced organist needs only an hour of practice in order to get used to an unfamiliar organ, even though it has additional or fewer manuals and the stops are differently arranged. “He does not learn positions in objective space for each stop and each pedal”, but rather “he sizes up the instrument with his body, he incorporates its directions and dimensions, and he settles into the organ as one settles into a house”.\textsuperscript{857}

As we saw, my body is not something that I have, like an instrument. Rather, the instruments and other objects that I handle regularly are incorporated into the structure of my body. The blind woman does not draw the conclusion that there is an object at the tip of her cane, neither does she feel the object with its help; rather, she feels the object at its tip: “the cane’s furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone […], it has become the analogue of a gaze”.\textsuperscript{858} The cane has become an extension of her body, like a supplementary limb. In a similar way, a pianist playing on his instrument can appear to constitute a unity with it to the extent that one does not really know who is playing whom, whether it is not rather the piano that is playing him.

It is through experience, practice, habit that the habitual body is constituted; I once learned to walk and am now someone who walks, who doesn’t need to prepare myself or think about it in a normal situation. The capacity disappears from focus and becomes something that one simply does. Of course, if that situation changes, if I need to walk very far or in difficult conditions – under a burning sun, on icy ground, for example – then the activity is not entirely familiar anymore. If I get hurt or fall ill, I can temporarily experience an ambivalence between a practice that one – other people in general – can perform but not I. Thus, these notions are dynamic. The habitual body is a living unity; it is not given once and for all. The concept of the corporeal schema is of course related to that of the habitual body: it is the body schema that gives the body-proper its spatiotemporal, inter-sensorial

\textsuperscript{855} \textit{PP} 151/131–132: “Mon appartement […] ne demeure autour de moi comme domaine familier que si j’en ai encore ‘dans les mains’, ou ‘dans les jambes’ les distances et les directions principales et si de mon corps partent vers lui un multitude de fils intentionnels.”


\textsuperscript{857} \textit{PP} 170/146: “Pour chaque jeu et pour chaque pédale, ce ne sont pas des positions dans l’espace objectif qu’il apprend”; “il prend mesure de l’instrument avec son corps, il s’incorpore les directions et les dimensions, il s’installe dans l’orgue comme on s’installe dans une maison”.

\textsuperscript{858} \textit{PP} 167/144: “son extrémité s’est transformée en zone sensible […], il est devenu l’analogue d’un regard”.

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and sensorimotor unity. Just as I cannot perceive anything without moving the body in some way, and the “movements of the body-proper are naturally invested with a certain perceptual signification”, the different senses presuppose one another. Due to the corporeal schema, I know the position of my limbs, although not in a static sense but related to certain (actual or possible) tasks.

The American philosopher Shaun Gallagher has clarified this analysis of the corporeal schema, emphasising that it must be separated from the notion of the body image. Whereas the body image is an intentional object, or in other words something we are immediately conscious of and can conceptualise, the body schema is more accurately what precedes and structures our experience; it is, says Gallagher, “preintentional” and “prenoetic”. It implies an appropriation of motor habits – postures and movements – that are integrated in the body at a “non-conscious” level, and constitutes a presupposition for new movements, for bodily expression, but also for cognitive processes in general: experience, perception, thinking and language. Gallagher calls it “a system of sensory-motor processes that constantly regulate posture and movement”. It gives a holistic apprehension of the body, in contrast with the body image that always presents a certain perspective of the body. The body image, in its turn, does not only include our perception of the body, but also our conceptual understanding and affective relation to it, in Gallagher’s interpretation.

Since the bodily schema functions as a system of transposition, it explains how movements can be learned systematically and not as circumscribed units, as in the case of the organist mentioned earlier. It also makes us understand how the stick of the blind person, the musician’s instrument, or a hat or a car for that matter, can become integrated into the structure of the body as “voluminous powers, the requirement of a certain free space”. In fact, the structure of the corporeal schema corresponds to the structure of the world:

859 PP 115/102.
860 PP 59/49: “Les mouvements du corps propre sont naturellement investis d’une certaine signification perceptive”.
861 PP 116/102: “mon corps m’apparaît comme posture en vue d’une certaine tâche actuelle ou possible”.
865 PP 167/144: “Ils sont devenus des puissances volumineuses, l’exigence d’un certain espace libre”.

the thing that I perceive is also “a system of equivalences that is [...] grounded upon [...] the apprehension [épreuve] of a bodily presence”.866

Furthermore, owing to the corporeal schema, a newborn baby,867 for example, is capable of translating a facial expression it sees on another’s face into movements in its own face, and hence of imitating it.868 There is, in other words, a transposition of sorts taking place not only between my bodily posture, my different senses and my motor tasks in the world, but also between my perception of the other person’s movements and gestures and my own experience, due to this schema.869

In this way, the other person’s movements – even those kinds that I have not seen earlier and that I am myself incapable of performing – can have meaning for us. Some researchers believe that the corporeal schema could therefore be used to explain phantom experience in aplasia, that is, how people with a congenital absence of a limb can have phantom pain: the idea is that they transfer the perception of other people’s bodies to their own corporeal schema.870

The Reflection of the Living Body

It seems that the learning or elaboration of a new style of movement, such as takes place in dance practice, may be described in terms of a passage from bodily image to corporeal schema. The dancer repeats the movements, often according to another person’s instructions; she focuses upon certain limbs or parts of limbs, or on her general posture, and in some dance techniques, particularly in ballet, she also uses a mirror to correct her movements. When she has come to understand how these movements are to be performed, and repeated them a sufficient amount of times, many of them become, to a large extent, incorporated in her body, and either become a starting point for the learning of yet other movements, or, as in repeating a particular choreography, it leaves room for concentrating on more difficult parts, on small details and expressive nuances. As dancer Chrysa Parkinson puts it, “Patterns be-

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866 PP 216/191: “la cheminée est un système d’équivalences qui [...] se fonde [...] sur l’épreuve d’une présence corporelle”.
867 And not just a baby, as already Merleau-Ponty knew, see PP 404/368.
868 This was shown in a famous experiment by Andrew N. Meltzoff and Keith Moore from the beginning of the 80s (see Gallagher, How the Body, pp. 69f.). Merleau-Ponty discusses this form of transposition in a 15-month year old baby, see PP 404/368.
869 PP 196/172.
870 See Gallagher, How the Body, pp. 86f.
come part of the infrastructure of our bodies, and they integrate themselves into how we see, hear and feel.”

Often language is used here, together with other people’s movements, as when a teacher or rehearser explains and shows a part of a choreography. In many cases, movements that we learn assisted by words, or develop with the help of our intellect, will eventually be integrated in the body and become part of it. For this reason, thought cannot be separated from the body but must be incarnated in existence, as Merleau-Ponty contends. Sometimes, then, the reflection at work involves focusing on a body part, sometimes we reflect literally, through a mirror. In both these cases, and in the case where we look at someone else performing the movement and try to imitate it, we employ the capacity to transpose between the senses that is tied to the bodily schema. Even if thought and language are used, fundamentally it is the body who explores the movement and tries to find its way, and here it would seem plausible to speak of a bodily reflection of sorts. It seems that thinking here is, as it were, on the surface; it brushes against the movement, is perhaps not immediately directed towards it or arrives just afterwards.

In Descartes, reflection was always a kind of objectifying thought, whereas the foundation of this form of reflection is in Merleau-Ponty the living body’s own power to reflect, in the sense of our capacity to see our own body, and to touch it. There is, as Jacques Taminiaux formulates it, “a reflective capacity at the very core of perception”, and, once we have seen that the moving body is the heart of perception, it is no longer so surprising that there can be a bodily form of reflection. In general, phenomenological reflection is described by Merleau-Ponty not as the thought of perceiving, but rather a re-actualisation, reenacting (“ré-effectuation”) of perception.

To some extent, the movement style “disappears” from our experiential field when it is incorporated as a habit. The flamenco dancer and the ballet dancer, for example, have different basic upright postures – the ballet dancer slightly more tilted forwards – but this is learned at a very early stage and becomes, as it were, a “natural” part of the dancer’s body that is taken for granted. Merleau-Ponty writes that bodily spatiality – strongly connected to motor intentionality and the corporeal schema – is “the darkness in the thea-

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872 See Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, OE 20/125.
874 See, for example, PP 404/367.
etre needed for the clarity of the performance, the background of sleep or the vague reserve of power against which the gesture and its goal stand out”.

Nevertheless, the characterisation of the corporeal schema as non-conscious, preconscious or prenoetic should not, I believe, be taken to mean that it is not accessible to experience. It is, precisely, a holistic apprehension of the body, to use Gallagher’s term, and Merleau-Ponty himself depicts the experience involved here as “prelogical”, “implicit”, “latent”, and so on. It is not directly given to our consciousness but structures our experience and hence has a transcendental character. Yet, it can be made accessible to reflection, not to thetic consciousness and analytical reflection, but to that other form of reflection that Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls “radical”, which is said to capture things in the state of their appearance.

Neither Merleau-Ponty nor Gallagher is very explicit on this point, but clearly the schema can never be given in full to our consciousness; rather, certain aspects of it can come to our awareness. One particularly obvious situation when this happens is when a dancer shifts between different dance techniques, as when, for example, the ballet dancer needs to take the posture of a flamenco dancer. In the contrast between the two techniques, the body schema appears. I imagine that the contemporary dancer, who according to Susan Leigh Foster has “a body for hire”, must have a particularly plastic corporeal schema.

In contrast with non-dancers, a dancer is constantly working on the development of her habitual body, integrating new significations, and therewith a number of new possibilities of expression. Her body becomes, as dancer Cecilia Roos formulates it, more “finely tuned”, and I believe that the per-

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875 PP 117/103: “L’espace corporel [...] est l’obscurité de la salle nécessaire à la clarté du spectacle, le fond de sommeil ou la réserve de puissance vague sur lesquels se détachent le geste et son but”.

876 This seems to be implied for example by Eric C. Mullis, when he writes, “the body schema functions below the surface of consciousness and, unlike the body image, does not include perceptions, attitudes, or beliefs about the body and is consequently not subject to cultural influence”, “The Image of the Performing Body”, Journal of Aesthetic Education, 42:4 (62–77), 2008, p. 63.

877 PP 231, 269/205, 241.


879 For example PP 140, 278–279, 334–335/122, 250–251, 302.


881 In distinction from that of the more traditional specialised dance techniques, such as ballet, Duncan technique, Graham technique, and so on, which all, according to Foster, “[construct] a specialized and specific body”, ibid., p. 485.

882 Roos, “From Movement out of Reflection in Becoming: The Dancer and the Creative Process”, in Foulter et al., Material of Movement, p. 41.
sistent work on the interchange between bodily images and corporeal schemata, an essential part of the dancer’s activity, gives her a particular mindfulness as regards this process itself.\textsuperscript{883}

\section*{Bodily Signification and the Work of Art}

The notion of the corporeal schema can make us understand how significations are inscribed in the body, as a precondition for the expression of new significations, but also for the apprehension of the signification expressed by other people’s bodies, as when we watch dance. Merleau-Ponty writes, “We say that the body has understood and the habit has been acquired when it has allowed itself to be permeated by a new signification, when it has assimilated a new significant core.”\textsuperscript{884} When we assimilate new habits, new “significant cores”, the bodily schema is transformed. The living body, says Merleau-Ponty further, is a “power of natural expression” that “secretes” a meaning or sense.\textsuperscript{885}

In other words, the corporeal schema endows our body with a systematics; connections are established not only within the body itself in relation to the world, but also between different living bodies and their experiences. This gives us a clue to what corporeal meaning is, and how there can be something such as an expression in dance or a choreographic language. The habitual body is a carrier of cultural significations, and, just as with other forms of signification, they must be taken up in new contexts in order to express something. The very divergence between different corporeal schemata, between a movement style and a present movement pattern, seems, as we have seen, to have an important part to play here.\textsuperscript{886}

Of course, the “language” of the body differs from verbal language in that its grammar is hard, if at all possible, to formulate explicitly, and there is no set vocabulary as with spoken language – except in the quite rare cases of fixed bodily expressions or of mime. However, if we assume that the same


\textsuperscript{884} \textit{PP} 171/148: “On dit que le corps a compris et l’habitude est acquise lorsqu’il s’est laissé pénétrer par une signification nouvelle, lorsqu’il s’est assimilé un nouveau noyau significatif.”

\textsuperscript{885} \textit{PP} 211/187: “[le corps] est un pouvoir d’expression naturelle”; \textit{PP} 230/203: “nous le voyons secréter en lui-même un ‘sens’”.

\textsuperscript{886} This intuition is corroborated by Parkinson (op. cit., p. 83) when she writes, “It is exactly through this paradoxical process of accumulating patterns and reforming them that we can arrive at new ways of making sense.”
comparison can be made between language and the art of dance as Merleau-Ponty makes between language and painting, then dance would belong to these tacit forms of language that differ from verbal forms of language mainly, it would seem, in terms of degree.\textsuperscript{887} Verbal, spoken language lays claim to a kind of independence with regard to its material concretisation to which other forms of expression – such as painting or choreography – could never aspire, and this is the reason why there are dictionaries in the former case but not in the latter.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that all signification is at its root incarnated, all meaning is born out of matter (although this term is not to be understood in the realist sense) and rises above it to different degrees: a novel can be translated into another language, whereas one can speak of a translation from a picture to words only metaphorically. Nonetheless, the translatability of a novel is dependent on both its own style and the competence and creativity of the translator; poetry often needs a poet-translator to be rendered in a foreign tongue, and all those aspects of meaning that are related to musicality, rhythm, allusions, ambiguities, puns, etc., run the risk of being lost in the target language. In fact, Merleau-Ponty contends that even scientific theories and geometrical theorems, which seem wholly independent upon the idiom they are formulated in, what typeface they are set in, and so on, are ultimately anchored in matter: if all copies of Euclid’s Elements burned or mouldered away, together with the people who mastered them, the theorems and proofs would disappear as well – they would not rest in a Platonic heaven, and it is possible that no one would be able to formulate them again.\textsuperscript{888}

For Merleau-Ponty, meaning is not primarily to be understood as a relation between a sign and a concept independent of that sign.\textsuperscript{889} Rather, meaning is fundamentally a form of direction, like a path that is indicated, and this was, as we saw, illustrated by the multiple meanings of the French word sens: meaning, direction, sense. We also noted that Merleau-Ponty character-

\textsuperscript{887} Merleau-Ponty is not entirely clear on this point, but at least there is the hypothesis in the essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” that the “transparency of spoken language” might “simply [be] the highest point of a tacit and implicit accumulation of the same sort as that of painting”, Signes, Paris: Gallimard, 1960 / transl. by M. B. Smith in Johnson, 1993, pp. 94–95/112–113 (“La transparence du langage parlé, […] ne [serait-elle] que le plus haut point d’une accumulation tacite et implicite du genre de celle de la peinture?”). And earlier in the same essay, 58–59 / transl. 84: “It might be that the meaning of language has a decisive privilege, but it is in trying out the parallel that we will perceive what perhaps in the end makes it impossible.” (“Il se peut que le sens du langage ait un privilège décisif, mais c’est en essayant le parallèle que nous apercevrons ce qui le rend peut-être impossible à la fin.”)

\textsuperscript{888} See, for example, PP 447f./410.

\textsuperscript{889} What can be termed, with Ferdinand de Saussure, the “nomenclatural” conception of language; cf. Cours de linguistique générale (eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, 1916), critical edition Tullio De Mauro, Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1972, p. 97. For Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Saussure’s linguistics, see Essay 3.
ises perceived space precisely through its directedness: one part of the perceptual field, for example, the church tower that emerges when I look out on the landscape, points out directions in this field; we see its shadow on the yard, the roof of the parsonage, the village behind and the meadows between it and us. The church indicates the epoch (or several) when it was constructed; it has its own history, and partakes in a larger history of architecture, of the church, of religion, and so on. In a similar way, one part of a painting points out directions in the picture, in other words, different levels of meaning; the painting itself alludes to other paintings, to a painterly tradition, a style, a culture.

We have seen that the body-proper is not given once and for all, as the sum of a range of organs attached to one another and animated, but is instead a meaningful unity, whose significations are dependent on a natural, cultural as well as personal situation. Similarly, meaning – whether perceptual, aesthetic or linguistic – is not lying around as an entity we are to receive as it is, completed, through our senses or our understanding. Rather, it must be taken up by us again in a new act of perception – if it is a perceptual meaning – that can be compared to a communion, or in an act of expression that assumes already constituted expressions and gives them new life. For this reason Merleau-Ponty makes a fundamental distinction between two aspects of expression or language use: on the one hand primordial, authentic expression, where meaning is “in the state of its appearance” as a gestural, emotional signification, on the other hand secondary, constituted expression that presupposes acquired, sedimented significations. In later texts, he speaks of the latter form as an empirical use of ready-made language, the already established signs, whereas the former is a creative, transcendental use that empirical language is an outcome of. These aspects are not diametrically opposed, but rather dialectically related, in that they both resist and are dependent upon one another: creative expression does not occur in an empty space, but always in the context of an acquired tradition that it takes up and transforms. On the other hand, expression is never wholly constituted; it must be appropriated in a new act of expression in order to have meaning.

Sometimes this distinction is put in terms of the incarnation mentioned earlier, that is, the degree of dependency on a material realisation. Whereas a painting can only be reproduced at the cost of an important loss of meaning, a novel is written in view of being duplicated. A choreography is something

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890 PP 246/219: “la sensation est à la lettre une communion”.

891 In *Phénoménologie de la perception* as well as in his later writings on language and expression.

892 This expression, characterising what phenomenological reflection ought to do, occurs repeatedly in *Phénoménologie de la perception* and contemporary texts. See, for example, PP 140/122: “[la pensée] qui prend son objet à l’état naissant”.

893 I discuss these distinctions in more detail in Essay 1.
in between: for the most part it is repeated several times in a number of performances – by the same or different dancers – but of course, even when the dancer is the same, the reproduction is never an exact copy as with the novel. This possibility of reproduction inherent in the production of texts, gives us the illusion that linguistic meaning can stand by itself, entirely detached from its sensible incarnation.

For Merleau-Ponty, however, the signification that is to the highest degree independent in this sense is the one which shows forth in stock phrases; it is the “direct meaning” of empirical language, “the opportune recollection of a preestablished sign”, whereas true expression, language in the primary, signifying sense of the word, is constituted of indirect, lateral significations. It “frees the meaning captive in the thing” and – as Merleau-Ponty writes, quoting Mallarmé – “finally renders the ‘absent of all bouquets’ present”, where the absent – “l’absente”, in the feminine – is the flower as idea.

Now, if the living body is the very origin of expression and comparable to a work of art, in what way is the particular aesthetic expressiveness that we encounter in dance to be understood? How is the difference between the ordinary man walking down the street and a dancer performing a piece of Forsythe to be characterised, given that the body of the former is already an artwork?

The Spatiality of Dance

One clue is given in one of the few remarks that Merleau-Ponty makes about dance. In Phenomenology of Perception he writes,

> It could be shown that dance unfolds in a space without goals or directions, that it is a suspension of our history, that in the dance the subject and its world are no longer opposed, are no longer detached from each other, that consequently the parts of the body are no longer accentuated in the dance as they are in natural experience […]

Thus, what would distinguish dance from movement in general is a particular form of spatiality, opened up within concrete space, in a similar way that

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894 “Indirect Language”, S 56/transl. 82: “le rappel opportun d’un signe préétabli”.
895 S 56/transl. 82: “la parole vraie, celle qui signifie, qui rend enfin présente l’‘absente de tous bouquets’ et délivre le sens captif dans la chose”.
896 PP 333/546: “On pourrait montrer […] que la danse se déroule dans un espace sans buts et sans directions, qu’elle est une suspension de notre histoire, que le sujet et son monde dans la danse ne s’opposent plus, ne se détachent plus l’un sur l’autre, qu’en conséquence les parties du corps n’y sont plus accentuées comme dans l’expérience naturelle”.

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a painting as a work of art dwells in a different space than that which it inhabits as a physical object. The animals painted on the walls of the Lascaux caves “are not there in the same way as are the fissures and limestone formations”, he claims in “Eye and Mind”; “Nor are they elsewhere”. They are, although supported by the rock, of another, imaginary order.

By the same token, dance creates a new space, parallel to that of natural experience, whilst being “moored” in the moving body-proper. We saw that this body is defined not so much by its actual properties and its relation to the concrete world as by its capacities; it is a “system of possible actions”. Likewise, its position in space in the phenomenal sense, its place (“lieu”), is determined by its tasks, “My body is wherever it has something to do”.

In fact, it appears that phenomenal space is for Merleau-Ponty not merely, as for the Gestalt psychologists, anisotropic, in contrast with the isotropic, objective space; it is also, to employ a term he makes use of later, a “polymorphous space”. In this multidimensional realm, various spatialities are enfolded in one another, and new ones may unfold. There are different spatialities created by the senses against the background of a common, synaesthetic space, there are also the diverse anthropological spaces: the space of dreams and of myths, the pathological spaces of the maniac, of the schizophrenic, and of course the spatialities opened by aesthetic perception and expression, those of music, theatre, poetry, painting. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Music insinuates a new dimension across visible space where it unfurls just as, for persons suffering from hallucinations, the clear space of

897 OE 22/126.
898 Ibid.: “Ils ne sont pas davantage ailleurs.” Emphasis in text.
899 Cf. OE 23/126.
900 PP 289/260.
901 Ibid.: “mon corps comme système d’actions possibles, un corps virtuel dont le ‘lieu’ phénoménal est défini par sa tâche et par sa situation. Mon corps est là où il a quelque chose à faire”.
903 PP 256/230.
904 PP 328/297.
905 PP 330/298.
906 PP 330f./299.
907 PP 331f./299f.
perceived things is mysteriously doubled with a “dark space” where other presences are possible.\(^{908}\)

In a similar fashion, the dancer installs a new dimension, a space that, I would say, is not so much “without goals or directions”, as Merleau-Ponty writes in the passage quoted earlier, as entailing other goals and directions than ordinary space, and with another history than the suspended one – that of dance.\(^{909}\) A new world is established that corresponds to the expressive unity of the dancing body, whose significations are comparable to the directions of the painting: the different parts of a choreographic piece point to one another, to the music, to the scenography. The “infrastructure” (to use Parkinson’s term) of the dancer’s body has meaning in relation to that of the other dancers on stage, to dancers trained in other techniques, to ordinary people, etc., and the choreography refers to, contrasts with or breaks with other choreographic styles.

It goes without saying that this analysis would have to be explored in more detail and exemplified if we are to give an adequate account of the dancing body, yet this goes beyond the scope of the present article. For the time being, it should be observed that the anthropological and other spatialities that Merleau-Ponty describes are not mere metaphors, but rather an elaboration of certain findings of the Gestalt psychologists. For example, Merleau-Ponty discusses an experiment related by Max Wertheimer, where the subject is put in front of a mirror that reflects the room he is in at a 45° angle.\(^{910}\) The subject sees the walls, the door, a man walking around there, a piece of cardboard falling, and this happens in an oblique, peculiar space that the subject does not inhabit. However, after a few minutes, this spectacle is as it were dislodged: the directions are no longer oblique but vertical. The objects in the reflected room have become new anchorage points that re-establish an inhabitable space for the spectator, “the miracle occurs that the reflected room conjures up a subject capable of living in it”.\(^{911}\)

This gives us an idea of what is going on when aesthetic expression opens up formerly unknown spatialities. The dancing body, carrying forward the significations sedimented in its corporeal schema, evokes imaginary worlds where our self can put down roots.

\(^{908}\) PP 256–257/231: “[La musique] insinue à travers l’espace visible une nouvelle dimension où elle déferle, comme, chez les hallucinés, l’espace clair des choses perçues se redouble mystérieusement d’un espace noir où d’autres présences sont possibles.”

\(^{909}\) Cf. Roos’s description of the different spatialities that the dancing body can carry within itself, “From Movement”, p. 27f.

\(^{910}\) The experimental subject can only see the room he is in through the mirror. PP 287f./259f. This experiment is described in Wertheimer, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Gestalttheorie*, Erlangen: Verlag der philosophischen Akademie, 1925, pp. 99f.

\(^{911}\) PP 289/261: “cette merveille se produit que la chambre reflétée évoque un sujet capable d’y vivre”. 

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Collective works:


Svensk sammanfattning

Det filosofiska klimatet i Frankrike under mellankrigstiden präglades av en revoltsamtid som i synnerhet inleddes av Henri Bergson – mot den officiella nykantianska filosofin. I arvet efter första världskrigets grymheter och inför samtidens blott alltför påtagliga spörmål framstod det rådande idealistiska tänkandet som obrukbart för den yngre generationen. Man vände sig därför från dess abstrakta förnuft mot vad man kallade ”det konkreta” (”le concret”): den andra människan (”autrui”), fakticiteten, köttet, historiciteten, existensen ... I denna strävan var inflytandet från Edmund Husserls fenomenologi och Martin Heideggers existentiala analytik – formulerad i Varat och tiden från 1927 – avgörande, liksom även tanken att filosofin måste ”utvidgas” genom en diskussion med litteraturen och konsten, som uttrycktes av tänkare såsom Gabriel Marcel och Jean Wahl.


Rakt igenom Merleau-Pontys karriär finns en brännande insikt om att filosofen delar belägenhet med nyskapande författare och konstnärer som kämpar för att övervinna en uttryckstradition de samtidigt är bundna till: hans tidiga analys av målaren Cézanne (i essän ”Cézannes tvivel” skriven 1942) är kanske det mest berömda exemplet, men ansträngningen att både förstå uttrycket filosofiskt och att använda det på ett omgestaltande sätt blir allt tydligare som hans tänkande utvecklas. I början av 50-talet uttalar han en önskan att formulera en ”konkret teori om anden [esprit]” på grundval av ett studium av uttrycket i alla dess former, från gester till formellt och matematiskt språk. Också här är den kreativa användningen av språket en utgångspunkt, och den exemplifieras med Marcel Prousts, Stendhals, Antonin Ar-


Allt detta medför att Merleau-Ponty är en krävande filosof att ge sig i kast med: hans tänkande kan inte ”prydligt sorteras in i välkända begreppsliga eller historiska kategorier”, som Taylor Carman och Mark B. Hansen träffande formulerar det. För övrigt är det fenomenologiska sökandet efter die Sachen selbst, tingen så som de visar sig, från början ett ifrågasättande av sin egen möjlighet, och den fenomenologiska metoden kan därför inte tas för given. Inte ens förstapersonsperspektivet, som så ofta påstås definiera fenomenologin, är en given utgångspunkt för Merleau-Ponty: eftersom hans övertygelse är att det erfarande och tänkande subjektet är förkroppsligat, väsentligen knutet till andra och till sin värld och följaktligen aldrig genomskinligt för sig själv, kan vi lära oss lika mycket om dess strukturer genom att studera andra människor som genom att beskriva erfarenheten ur första personens synvinkel. Dessutom är Merleau-Pontys filosofi, på grund av hans alltför tidiga död, ofullbordad i helt bokstavlig bemärkelse, och en stor del av hans texter består av manuskrift och arbetsanteckningar som aldrig var avsedda för publicering. Av det skälet kan en tolkning av hans senare verk inte undgå att få en viss spekulativ karaktär.

Denna sammanläggningsavhandling diskuterar frågan om mening i fenomenologisk bemärkelse, innefattande både den mening som är given i varseblivningen och den som framställs i olika former av språk och uttryck. I själva verket innebär uttrycket i alla dess former för Merleau-Ponty ett återupptagande av en redan given betydelse – presenterad i varseblivningen eller traderad genom historien – som därmed upprepar eller omformar (och emellanåt förnöjer) denna mening i form av gester, yttranden, konstverk, idéer
eller teorier. Min allmänna övertygelse är – i motsats till en vanlig uppfattning i sekundärlitteraturen – att uttrycksproblemet var av grundläggande betydelse för Merleau-Ponty ända från början av hans filosofiska verksamhet, samt att det var intimt förbundet med hans strävan att övervinna det så kallade ”objektiva tänkandet”.


Dessa frågor utforskas ytterligare från olika perspektiv i essäerna: jag diskuterar tolkningen av gestaltbegreppet i Merleau-Pontys filosofi i essä 2 (i översättning: ”Inkarnerad mening och gestaltbegreppet i Merleau-Pontys filosofi”), liksom det relaterade begreppet om kroppsschemat som jag också
fördjupar i essä 5 ("Mot en fenomenologisk redogörelse för den dansande kroppen: Merleau-Ponty och kroppsschemat"), och i viss utsträckning i essä 4 ("Språket och den konade kroppen: Butlers tidiga läsning av Merleau-Ponty") där jag dessutom går in på hans kritik av det objektiva tänkandet – där karaktäriserat som en form av genealogi.

Gestaltteorins betydelse för i synnerhet Merleau-Pontys tidiga filosofi är välkänd men föga utredd. I essä 2 undersöker jag det mångfasetterade gestaltbegreppet mot bakgrund av de historiska studier och experiment Merleau-Ponty utgick från – inte bara de mest välkända gestaltpsychologerna utan också den tidigare nämnde Goldsteins teori om organismen som var avgörande för hans tolkning. Merleau-Ponty kritiserar gestaltpsykologikernas bland annat för att inte ha dragit de ontologiska konsekvenserna av sina idéer utan suttit fast i ett objektivistiskt synsätt.

Ytterligare diskuterar jag i inledningen den föregivna ”vändningen” i Merleau-Pontys filosofi, i relation till, för det första, språkets och uttryckets uppgift när det gäller att fånga fenomenen eller tingen så som de visar sig, och för det andra denna erfarenhet själv och hur dess ursprungliga status ska förstås. Jag hävdar att den primordiala eller ”råa” varseblivningserfarenheten inte i något skede av Merleau-Pontys tänkande ska betraktas som en omedelbar meningsnivå som är obesmittad av kulturen. Snarare är det just när vi utgår från det språk vi redan har tillgång till som vi kan formulera en beskrivning som är tillräckligt rik och uttryckssatt för att kunna visa på de levande fenomenens flytande karaktär. I den bemärkelsen kommer filosofiens ansträngning att ha mycket gemensamt med konstnärens eller författarens försök att förnya sitt särskilda mediums språk, och måste brottas med uttryck som har ”använts alltför ofta” för att fånga en mening som bara existerar när uttrycket väl är färdigt. Att stöpa om det filosofiska uttrycket är därför en riskabel verksamhet, och detta är en fråga jag undersöker vidare, i synnerhet i essä 1 ("Den första människans tal: Merleau-Ponty och uttrycket som fenomenologins uppgift"). Merleau-Pontys uppfattning diskuteras mot bakgrund av hans förbryllande påstående i essäns ”Cézannes tvivel” att målaren eller författaren befinner sig i en liknande belägenhet som den ”första människan” som någonsin formulerat sig i språk. Jag argumenterar för att relationen mellan uttryck och erfarenhet just måste förstås utifrån Merleau-Pontys analys av uttrycket som en dialyent mellan redan förvärvat språk och skapandet av ny mening med utgångspunkt i och överskridande av traditionen.

Medan essä 1 främst fokuserar på det kreativa uttrycket i måleriet och i viss utsträckning i litteraturen, handlar essä 3 ("Merleau-Pontys möte med Saussures lingvistik: Fellläsning, omtolkning eller fullföljande?") om det verbala språket i allmänhet (se vidare nedan); essä 5 å sin sida diskuterar uttryck i kroppslika termer och i synnerhet i danskonsten. Även om Merleau-Ponty bara diskuterat dansen i förbipående tror jag att hans undersökningar av rörelse och kroppsligt uttryck är fruktbara för ett filosofiskt studium av
dansen. Analytiska termer som kroppsschema och motorisk intentionalitet, tillsammans med beskrivningen av de särskilda former av rumslighet som öppnas upp av den estetiska erfarenheten, är särskilt betydelsefulla här. Även essä 4 undersöker det kroppliga uttrycket, men utifrån den feministiska fenomenologins perspektiv, och går in på hur betydelser är förkroppsligade inte bara som förutsättning för kreativa uttrycksakter utan också som en begränsning av det egna varandet. Judith Butlers tidiga läsning av Merleau-Pontys beskrivning av sexualiteten är utgångspunkt för en diskussion av den fenomenologiska respektive den poststrukturalistiska teorin om språkets relation till den levande kroppen och subjektiviteten.

Karaktäriseringen av Merleau-Pontys filosofiska utveckling i formen av en mer eller mindre radikal vändning hänvisar ofta just till dennes ”idiosynkratiska” tolkning av Ferdinand de Saussures lingvistik, som betraktas som en drivande kraft i den processen. Jag invänder mot den uppfattningen i essä 3, vad gäller både den tolkning av Saussure som den baseras på och dess inflytande på Merleau-Pontys filosofi, och visar att en läsning av Saussure som också tar hänsyn till de manuskript som de publicerade verken är baserade på ofta ger stöd för Merleau-Pontys uppfattning. I själva verket har man ställt Merleau-Pontys beskrivning av Saussures idéer mot strukturalisternas version av dem.


Medan de flesta kommentatorer som framhäver uttryckets problem i Merleau-Pontys filosofi fokuserar på hans senare arbete och hur språket kan sägas uttrycka Varat – jag diskuterar de viktigaste tolkningarna i introduktionen – koncentrerar jag mig i essäerna på de tidigare och mellanliggande perioderna. Huvudskälet är att det i dessa texter finns ett sätt att angripa problemen med mening och språk som inte har utforskats tillräckligt, och att den teleologi som är inneboende i den vanliga läsningen av Merleau-Pontys filosofi där hans sista verk bildar utgångspunkt riskerar att gå miste om vissa avgörande aspekter av hans tänkande.

I introduktionens sista avsnitt ger jag också en översikt över receptionen av Merleau-Pontys filosofi, med huvudfokus på Frankrike och den fransk-språkiga världen.