Further Considerations of Alienation

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ABSTRACT: “Further Considerations of Alienation” attempts to expand upon an earlier essay entitled “Merleau-Ponty and a Reconsideration of Alienation.” From the point of view of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, this new essay considers modernist rationality and the postmodernist free play of language as forms of alienation. The essay attempts to show that Merleau-Ponty joins the company of Marx, Lukács, Habermas and Heidegger in order to make this case.

This essay will attempt to add to and expand upon a recent publication entitled “Merleau-Ponty and a Reconsideration of Alienation.” While this earlier essay lays out Merleau-Ponty’s alternative to the modernist view of the subject as a rational interior in full possession of itself and a pre-formed rational world, as well as to the postmodernist view that the subject along with the subject’s world is primarily a construction of language, it did not go far enough in emphasizing Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the abstract reasoning of modernism as a form of alienation (at the level of epistemology/ontology, as well as at the level of self/subject and politics). Merleau-Ponty spent much of his professional career criticizing both empiricist and rationalist forms of modernism, primarily for treating the subject and the world as already conceptually and abstractly formed, and the later part of his professional life criticizing both capitalism and communism for their acceptance of a politics based on a pre-established rationality. All modernism as the abstract construction of reality, as well as all contemporary forms of instrumentalism or operationalism as the attempt to construct reality according to a few abstract indices, are alienated forms of experience, since they do not capture the richness of the world as it is originally lived through by embodied subjects engaged in the world together. They attempt to derive or construct experience from conceptual abstractions. Rather, we should begin with experience as it is really lived through by embodied experiencers. Reason, then, comes out of this patterned and shared experience.
Reason is, or should be, an agreement of perspectives/profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon a stable world and of mine with those of others as we open upon the world together. Moreover, all modernist politics as isolated rational individuals in an already rationally determined ethical world or as the rational unfolding of history and the liberation of the proletariat are alienated forms of politics, since they do not account for the embodied subject’s openness upon an imprecise public world and the uncertainty of human history. Moreover, history must be regarded as a structure in the making, establishing a probable, not certain, sequence of future events. In the sense that Merleau-Ponty is critical of modernism’s use of an abstract, alienated reason he joins the company of Lukács, Habermas, and Heidegger, as well as Marx—all of whom make similar claims. The present essay will briefly consider this line of argument in this company of authors and will then proceed to briefly consider Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to it, especially in his later works. It will also briefly consider their implications for postmodernism.

**Marx**

Let us first turn to Karl Marx. Marx’s theory of alienation can be briefly stated as follows: workers in capitalist societies are alienated from Self, i.e., from their own free will, since their labor is directed by the capitalist not by their own choice, thus negating any genuine experience of self-actualization; from the Product of their labor, since there is no personal identification with the object produced according to the plan and command of others; from Others, since the worker’s labor is no longer organic, i.e., no longer consists of the workers collaborating among themselves to choose and design their product and the process by which it is produced; and from their very Human Nature, since human nature is the ability to direct one’s own actions according to one’s own will, in collaboration with others, within context, and under certain limiting conditions, of course.2

**Lukács**

Georg Lukács updates and refines Marx’s theory of alienation in his *History and Class Consciousness,*3 most specifically in the chapter entitled “Reification and Consciousness of the Proletariat.” Extending Marx’s characterization of alienation and Weber’s notion of rationalization, Lukács states the following: “If we follow the path taken by labor in its development from the handicrafts via cooperation and manufacture to machine industry we can see a continuous trend towards greater rationalization, the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker” (HCC 88; see also Habermas4). He proceeds to briefly mention Taylorism (i.e., management’s rational control of the work process5) and how “this rational mechanization extends right into the worker’s
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‘soul’: even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialized rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts” (HCC 88). All reasoning becomes, for the worker, the instrumental reasoning of the calculated and mathematized work process, which “denotes a break with the organic, irrational and qualitatively determined unity of the product” (HCC 88). Thus the worker is alienated from both the labor process, since it no longer represents the worker’s own organic design, and the product of labor, since the worker only contributes a small isolated part of it. Moreover, this degradation of the integrity and unity of the work process for the individual worker also “destroys those bonds that had bound individuals to a community in the days when production was ‘organic,’” i.e., when production was achieved by means of collaboration among community members. And, of course, Lukács’s analysis here implies an alienation from human nature itself (HCC 90).

Habermas

Jürgen Habermas follows Weber and Lukács when discussing rationalization and its expression in language, and does so in the following sense: that various forms of rationalization of the economic/monetary system can become, at least in part, if not totally, detached from the lifeworld and the more holistic communicative rationality of whole persons. “We cannot mistrust our mother tongue,” Habermas says. “For it is through the medium of consensus formation in ordinary language that cultural transmission and socialization as well as social integration come about, in the course of which communicative action is always embedded in life-world contexts. By contrast, the monetary medium functions in such a way that interaction is detached from these contexts. And it this uncoupling that makes it necessary to recouple the medium back to the life world” (TCA2 266, Habermas’s italics⁶). Or to re-phrase this, Habermas seeks to re-enliven the conditions that are necessary for genuine communicative action to take place, since this form of rational exchange has been diminished by the instrumental reasoning and financial calculation of capitalism. Or, yet again, the instrumental reasoning of capitalism is an alienated form of reason, since it wrests its inhabitants from the more authentic collaboration and communication of whole persons attempting to deal with their common experiences of the world as they live them.

Heidegger

Martin Heidegger speaks profoundly about authentic and inauthentic experience, although he does not use the word “alienation,” and his political sympathies are certainly not with the political left, as are the sympathies of the other authors here under consideration.⁷ He offers no critique of capitalism and, generally speaking,
believes that the West has slipped into the inauthentic because it has lapsed into the “ontic” and has “forgotten” the ontological; the West has forgotten the mystery of Being. This “Being,” which is identified with the ontological, is open, behaves more like an action or verb than a thing or noun, is similar to Aristotle’s notion of Being in that it is common to all beings yet cannot be thought of as the most precise abstract category (since there is no conceptual genus more abstract than it to help define it, since everything occurs within it), and is similar, in a broad sense, to the horizon of experience, that is, to the background of experience that is present but only as an implied background atmosphere, that runs to infinity and that includes all things, all discrete foreground objects with their precisely defined properties—which are identified with the ontic.

From Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, Heidegger was right to make the distinction between the ontological and the ontic, yet he was wrong 1.) to separate them so completely and 2.) to proceed to so completely privilege the ontological over the ontic. Merleau-Ponty expresses his point of view as follows:

Heidegger remained fixed in [his] thesis of the pure and simple opposition between philosophy and the sciences of man or, as Heidegger puts it, between the ontological and the ontic. For Husserl . . . the opposition was only a point of departure, which later became a problem and finally a hidden connection between the two kinds of research. Husserl, who defined philosophy as the suspension of our apprehension of the world, recognized the actual being of the philosopher in the world much more clearly than Heidegger, who devoted himself to the study of being in the world.8

If we hold the ontological and ontic more in balance, and even have them cross into one another, as Merleau-Ponty has done, then we connect the ontic and the ontological, the scientific and the philosophical—rather than focusing on the latter at the expense of the former. This will be investigated momentarily.

For now let us turn briefly to Heidegger’s Being and Time,9 in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of his insights. We should consider his theory of truth (Being and Time, Section 44, “Dasein, disclosedness, and truth”) and the related theme of linguistic assertion (Being and Time, Section 33, “Assertion as derivative mode of interpretation”). Both sections will give us a sense of Heidegger’s stand against modernism and, perhaps, what may be regarded as his theory of alienation, or, at the very least, what he regards as inauthentic experience. For the same purpose we should also briefly consider his comments regarding technology. Let us begin with Heidegger’s theory of truth.10

With respect to truth/knowledge Heidegger asks the following question: what kind of being does truth have? Since truth, he says, occurs in Dasein (i.e., in the human being, via human experience), we must proceed to ask: what kind of being does Dasein have? Heidegger’s answer: it is the kind of being that is aware of its own Being, that is aware that it “is.” Since Dasein literally means “being there,”
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i.e., as being aware of ourselves as being out there in the world, Dasein must be characterized as an act, as an aware, living openness upon the world. Since this is the case, we must then talk about truth more as an act than as an object, as is typically done by the standard correspondence theory of truth, which relates one object to another, a conceptual representation to an object in itself. Truth should be understood as a revealing (taken as a lived-through act) of the world. Truth amounts to letting what “is” be experienced, amounts to letting it show itself in the lived experience. When is the assertion “the picture is askew” true, demonstrated? When Dasein lives it, is over in it. The assertion is demonstrated by the lived experience, and only Dasein could demonstrate an assertion in this way. The object does not reveal itself to itself; the object doesn’t know itself. To itself, an object is just dumb, dead, and unaware of itself. Dasein must be there to open or “light up” what “is.” Dasein is required for the uncovering of beings, yet what is uncovered is Being itself, the characteristic that is part of and shared by all beings. Within Heidegger’s system of thought, Dasein, a subject, is required for the uncovering of the Being of beings, yet it is the Being of beings themselves that are uncovered, and it is with this claim that Heidegger attempts to avoid a subjectivism.

Heidegger not only tries to clarify the phenomenon of truth, he also makes an effort to explain the origins of the correspondence theory of truth. As we have seen, the foundation for truth is Dasein, and the foundation for Dasein is being-in-the-world, is our lived openness upon a world that includes us. Likewise, the basis for this structure of being-in-the-world is care—i.e., Dasein’s being ahead of itself, being caught up or absorbed in the objects of its concern. This is what Heidegger calls an inauthentic experience. For truth, however, we need a disclosure of authentic Dasein. Dasein must see itself as Being, as having the possibility of Being, of existing in its own right and being aware of its existence—instead of being lost in some objects of concern. While it is true that in this authentic experience we are also directed toward the objects, i.e., we live in the objects, there is a difference between living in and being lost in these objects. Dasein, in fact, gets lost in its objects of concern because it is trying to avoid its authentic awareness of being-in-the-world, its awareness of its true being and what it must do to realize this being. In both authentic and inauthentic existence, Dasein’s basic structure is “ahead of itself”—Being already in a world—as Being alongside entities within-the-world.” However, in inauthentic experience, Dasein is caught up in the world, here interpreted as the object of concern or fallenness. In authentic experience the world is the object in Dasein’s authentic projects, yet now seen in terms of a self-conscious (not forgotten) past and self-conscious possibilities for the future. Authentic Dasein is still involved with the world, with its concerns and projects, but now it takes them as genuinely its own. The authentic person is not just unconsciously acting out, is not lost in the objects of concern. The authentic
person approaches objects self-consciously, approaches projects with responsibility, and allows the objects to be what they are (still, however, what they are within the context of authentic projects); they are disclosed within the realm of Dasein’s aware possibility for the future. Heidegger also believes that our inauthentic relationship to the world gets repeated in our relationship to other people, i.e., we very easily get caught up or lost in our concern (solicitude) for others, and what others (“the They [das Man]”) may think of us. Moreover, it appears that more and more it is the inauthentic experience that predominates.

In sum, for Heidegger humans are so thrown into the world of our concern (shall we say of consumerism and material things, into our careers, making money, etc.?), that we have forgotten to pause and reflect and consider our more authentic humanity: that we are beings who are aware of our own Being and the Being of the world and its objects. Human beings are aware, possess awareness, are an openness out upon the world, and are not just a thing or an unaware activity. Yet we frequently do not take time to consider who we really are (authentically) and what we really (authentically) want to do and be. It should be emphasized once again that Heidegger does not regard the inauthentic (alienation) as a phenomenon of capitalism but tends to read it more generally as the fallenness or forgetfulness that has occurred in the West. Yet whatever the root cause of this inauthentic experience, Heidegger’s general description of it certainly touches base with the alienation that is similarly described by Lukács and Habermas. Moreover, it seems that these general descriptions are still relevant today and that, perhaps, the linguistic chatter currently generated by many postmodernists is just another way to avoid facing our deeper humanity and our deeper openness upon an already existing world.  

Since truth is expressed in language, and since language has become a dominant contemporary philosophical theme, let us now turn to Being and Time, Section 33, “Assertion as derivative mode of interpretation.” Heidegger first of all states that linguistic “assertion” is important because it relates to fundamental ontology, to the fundamental question of what Being is. He proceeds to discuss what he regards as the three meanings of assertion. 1.) The primary meaning of assertion is “pointing out,” and this means letting an entity be seen for itself. What is pointed out is not a meaning in the sense of a representation, a representation in the mind of a subject that somehow corresponds to the world. Rather the subject is directed toward the object, is over “there” at the object. Thus the thing itself shows itself. What we experience in this first meaning of assertion is the entity in the way that it is “ready-to-hand” (to use Heidegger’s language), as, for example, “the hammer is heavy.” This is the hammer of experience that is “lived through.” This is the expression of the hammer as it is used pre-reflectively by the builder, as the builder perhaps articulates when the hammer is passed off to another worker. 2.) Assertion also means “predication,” Heidegger says. “We’as-
assert’ a ‘predicate’ of a ‘subject’, and the ‘subject’ is given a definite character by the ‘predicate.’” This second meaning of assertion has its foundation in the first. In fact, what we have here is a more precise articulation of what was ambiguously grasped in the first mode of expression. This is where the reflective (“a stepping back” as opposed to the pre-reflective that is lived through) comes into play, for we step back from the hammer as ready-to-hand, as a lived-through entity which points toward a totality of tasks to be done, to view the qualities of the hammer as an objective entity. 3.) This articulation or expression can then be communicated to others, Heidegger says, designating this communication as the third meaning of assertion. Communication lets others see or share in what is articulated in the first and second assertions. Heidegger here makes the point that when we communicate with others we are still primordially directed to the object. The lived relation to the object is still alive. When others understand what we say, they are standing in a like relationship to the object. However, because an assertion gets repeated time and time again, it may lose its original directedness toward the object. The lived-directedness toward the world, the standing in or directedness toward something, tends to be ignored and forgotten. When we lose sight of this lived aspect of experience, we can see how an assertion can become a mere object, rather than a lived-through act. To again use Heidegger’s language, this means that the assertion itself gets turned into something “present-to-hand.” The assertion becomes a thing present-to-hand (in the mind) which is, stands over-against, or is related to (with this relation also taken as a present-to-hand) worldly objects also understood as present-to-hand. This approach has made assertion, experience, and, as we shall see momentarily, truth, into an object, when their essence is not that of an object but rather that of an act, a living, open-ended act.

To reduce the meaning of assertion only to the present-at-hand distorts the experience of expression. At least to a certain extent, it is (or at least can be) an inauthentic (or, we might add, an alienated) experience. Since assertion has its roots in the pre-reflective, the lived experience, we should not start with the categories already formed, as objects or representation in the mind, and attempt to match them to objects already given in an already precisely formed objective world. This is an inauthentic, alienated approach. We must first live through experience, with all its openness and ambiguity, and then attempt to develop and articulate precise and abstract categories out of this experience.

And finally, we should consider Heidegger’s analysis of technology and instrumental thinking in “The Question Concerning Technology.” Heidegger describes poiēsis as a bringing forth, as a moving from concealment into presence (QCT 10). “Bringing-forth brings hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment. . . . This . . . we call revealing,” he says (QCT 11-12). And this revealing he identifies with truth, with the revealing or showing of what “is.” He also describes modern technology as a form of revealing, yet this revealing is not quite the same as poiēsis.
“The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such” (QCT 14). The revealing of modern technology thus frames or, as Heidegger puts it, “enframes,” nature in a certain way, as something that is to supply energy or, more broadly, as something that can be used in some way (QCT 20-21). Thus both poiēsis (as unconcealing) and the enframing of technology must be understood as revealing, but with enframing placing greater demands on nature. Moreover, Heidegger warns us (again, without using the word “alienation”) of a danger: it is possible for the first to be blocked by the second. How do we deal with this danger? Heidegger answers that we must not give in to the temptation to become obsessed with technology itself but must more reflectively attend to what comes to presence through the use of the technology, and we must do so in order to get a better idea of its authentic use for humankind. In this way “we press on past the essence of technology” (QCT 31-32). In this way we press on past what we may consider alienated experience.

The three sections immediately above (on truth, language and technology) that attempt to reveal certain themes in Heidegger’s work certainly indicate that he has a strong sense of the existence of the inauthentic in contemporary societies (and even in Western history). As we have seen, he does not label this experience “alienation” and perhaps tends to regard the inauthentic as a more “common” part of human existence. He, however, does warn us about the pervasiveness of inauthentic experience and does hope for a more authentic age and a return to a greater reverence for the mystical call of Being, to a greater regard for and pervasiveness of what he regards as authentic experience. As mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty has a sense of the ontological but holds it in balance with the ontic. Merleau-Ponty focuses on the balance and connection between the ontological and the ontic, between Being and beings, because they are connected in experience, and thus he does not emphasize one at the expense of the other (the ontological, with Heidegger, or the ontic, with modernism) because they are connected and in balance in experience itself. In this sense, then, he provides an important corrective to Heidegger’s work, as well as to modernism.

**Merleau-Ponty**

Let us now turn to a consideration of alienation, reason, and language in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, for it is here that we find one of the most developed, balanced treatments of the topic. Merleau-Ponty opens what must be regarded as one of the most remarkable philosophical essays in the twentieth century, “Eye and Mind,” with a number of statements that are worth our attention.

Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. Operating within its own realm, it makes its constructs of things; operating upon these indices or
variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. (E&M 159)

Here we see, in just two sentences, what we may regard as a profound sense of the alienation of science from human life as it opens directly upon the world. The abstract reasoning of modernism and the scientific thought that follows it construct and manipulate things, sometimes, as the author goes on to say, with great virtuosity, but they frequently do not capture the fullness of our authentic openness out upon the world. At some point abstract reasoning must connect to life as it is lived by embodied, sensing subjects. If it doesn’t, it remains alienated. Moreover, he proceeds to confront the more current instrumental reasoning of contemporary societies.

Thinking “operationally” has become a sort of absolute artificialism, such as we see in the ideology of cybernetics, where human creations are derived from a natural information process, itself conceived on the model of human machines. If this kind of thinking were to extend its dominion over humanity and history; and if, ignoring what we know of them through contact and our own situations, it were to set out to construct them on the basis of a few abstract indices . . . then, since the human being truly becomes the "manipulandum" he thinks he is, we enter into a cultural regimen in which there is neither truth nor falsehood concerning humanity and history, into a sleep, or nightmare from which there is no awakening. (E&M 160)

Similar to Heidegger’s comments on technology, Merleau-Ponty here remarks that operational thinking may well be useful, and even clarifying, but that we must from time to time place this thinking within the context of the whole of human experience, otherwise we may well simply become a manipulandum within the context of an abstract algorithm or, as we have just seen, even worse. “Scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the ‘there is’ which precedes it,” he says (E&M 160). We must attempt to avoid the inauthentic (alienated) thinking of overly abstract thought and return to the “there is” of the world. Clearly referencing Heidegger’s thought here, his word for “Man,” i.e., “Dasein,” which, as we have seen, literally means “being-there,” being outside of ourselves toward the world, Merleau-Ponty sees the human subject as an embodied awareness opening out upon the field of the world, as an aware, embodied relationship to the world and, of course, to other human beings.

Further, associated bodies must be revived along with my body—”others,” not merely as my congeners, as the zoologist says, but others who haunt me and whom I haunt; “others” along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being as no animal ever haunted those of his own species, territory, or
habitat. In this primordial historicity, science’s agile and improvisatory thought will learn to ground itself upon things themselves and upon itself. (E&M 161)

With the theme of intersubjectivity in mind, with language as a means to help achieve it, and similarly to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty developed an expressive or gestural theory of language, that language expresses (at a sublimated level) our lived-through, embodied, perceptual encounter with the world. He says explicitly that a word’s meaning must be related to the body’s lived-through (even emotional) encounter with the world and by how the word is used by others in the context of lived-through action, by how the word is used in various active social contexts. Perception itself, he says, is already a “primordial expression,” and this is true because all perception involves movement, i.e., an aware, active orientation toward the world and others, an active orientation toward and grasping of worldly patterns. Moreover, this is what makes communication possible, for our active perceptual gestures tend to be oriented toward the world in similar ways. Furthermore, just as perceptual meaning is formed at the lived-through intersection of the active, sentient body and the compelling patterns of the world, so also linguistic meaning is formed at the lived-through intersection of perceptual and linguistic gestures and the lived-through intersection of the linguistic gesture and its expressed meaning. Perceptual gestures give rise to linguistic gestures that fold back upon them to help articulate them more precisely; and linguistic gestures express a meaning (including abstract thought) which cannot be considered separate from it, since it is brought into existence by this very expression, that folds back upon its means of expression to help give it a stable form. Again, the abstract thought that human beings are clearly capable of and that clearly enhances our ability to adapt to each other and nature cannot be separated from the language that gives rise to it (or, for that matter, cannot be completely separated from the perceptual gestures that this language is a sublimation of). Thought is accomplished by language, by human beings who live with one another and attempt to adapt to the world together by communicating with one another, and is always tied to linguistic expression (as a sublimation of our perceptual encounter with the world). It does not have a life of its own, either in the mind or some realm of ideas or in nature in itself. This is how Merleau-Ponty expresses it.

What we mean is not before us, outside all speech, as sheer signification. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said. With our apparatus of expression we set ourselves up in a situation the apparatus is sensitive to, we confront it with the situation, and our statements are only the final balance of these exchanges. Political thought itself is of this order. It is always the elucidation of a historical perception in which all our understandings, all our experiences, and all our values simultaneously come into play—and of which our theses are only the schematic formulation.
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This, then, is what we must get to or get back to. This embodied openness, with others, upon the field of the world is the authentic way to understand human experience and to ground human knowledge (which is fundamentally an open yet stable relationship between oneself, the world, and others). This is also the authentic way to attempt to understand political experience and to ground political reason. We must first live the world as active, interested, embodied subjects along with other active, interested, embodied subjects. Then, within this context, we must attempt to express our experience and our needs in dialog with others in order to improve our situations, in order to successfully adapt to (or more successfully adapt to) the world and each other. Moreover, instead of just using the psychological, social category of “alienation,” we could also use the epistemological category accuracy or the logical category comprehension, for we should use the theoretical categories that most accurately describe experience and the logical categories that can actually grasp experience as it is normally lived.  

Merleau-Ponty’s use of phenomenology’s Fundierung relationship is enlightening here (PhP 127, 394). He accepts this relationship as a two-way relationship that nevertheless privileges one of the terms. For example, the relationship between perception and language is a two-way relationship, with both terms influencing each other simultaneously, yet with perception remaining the primary term. Perception suggests certain linguistic or even theoretical interpretations, yet because perception is open and ambiguous, as well as replete with stable patterns, there is no definitively correct interpretation, different interpretations always remain possible, yet some are certainly more clarifying and accurate than others. Moreover, perception is most accurate when it achieves a maximum of clarity and richness (PhP 250-251, 302, 318). When viewing a painting on a museum wall, for example, if I stand too close or too far away from it, I will not be able to perceive it very well. Furthermore, it is the body that knows the proper distance from which to perceive a given object with a maximum of clarity, or, rather, it is in the body’s lived-through interaction with the world, with both contributing to the perceptual experience, yet with the world remaining the primary term, that the maximum of clarity is achieved. Now, as we have seen, even the most abstract linguistic expression is a sublimation of our perceptual encounter with the world, and even the most abstract expression must relate back to our perceptual openness on the world, if it is to express something meaningful for us. And, in addition, if an expression (or a connected sequence of them in a theory) aligns, or calls up, or gives voice to the perceptual orientation that is the most clarifying, or that is more clarifying than other expressions (or theories), then this is the expression (or theory) that should be accepted. To use the language of the philosophy of science and the criteria of evaluating scientific theories (with which Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is in general agreement), we should accept the theory that provides the greatest comprehension (i.e., that clarifies or describes
most accurately), that is the most comprehensive (i.e., that explains/describes all that needs to be explained), that is the most consistent (or whose ambiguities or inconsistencies stem from the events themselves), that is the simplest explanation (i.e., that avoids the addition of unnecessary hypothesis), and that is testable (at least in the broad sense of enhancing our adaptation to nature and each other). Moreover, we escape the difficulty of meta-theoretical justification of these criteria because they can be generated from experience itself.²¹

Let us here return to and pursue Merleau-Ponty’s above comments, now in greater depth. Science must return to the perceivers lived-through openness upon the world and must also grasp this experience as an intersubjective one. If we wish to understand this embodied perceptual openness upon the world accurately, and not as an alienated intellectual construction, we should turn to the artist, he says, for the artist paints with his or her aware, oriented body by expressing a certain hold upon the world, and not by simply using detached thought to create an abstract representation. Moreover, the artist’s perception must be understood as an active, interested, engaged movement (E&M 162-169). In fact, all perception involves movement and would be impossible without it, would be impossible without an interested palpation with the eyes, as well as with the hands, without our taking hold (in an active, lived-through synthesis) of the information presented to perception. Yet perception would also be impossible without this information, without guidance from the world’s perceptual patterns. Thus the perceiver perceives only by way of an intimate bodily involvement with the embodied perceived, only by way of their mutual influence upon one another, only by way of their mutual encroachment upon one another. The embodied perceiver and the world are intertwined and even encrusted in one another, and this means that we must abandon the attempt to understand perception by adhering to the classical ontology of mind/body dualism. It is only by developing an ontology of mutual encroachment and promiscuity of mind and body that we are able to understand perception. Perception must be (and can only be) understood as appearing within the context of the active, lived-through bond between the sentient (even sensual) human body and the embodied world (though the world is embodied differently). Perception can no longer be understood as Descartes’s (alienated) abstract “thought of seeing,” as an intellectual representation of a visual object in itself, as a disembodied rational mind mirroring an already existing rational world in itself. Descartes (with much of Western science following) compares visual perception and the impact of light on the eye to the impact of things on a blind man’s cane, and then again to copper engravings, in both cases reducing perception to an interpretation of “signs” that must be intellectually deciphered, and thus in both cases destroying human perception as it is ordinarily lived. In the first case we lose the open voluminosity of perception, and in the second we reduce perception to the primary quality of extension, to an abstract geometric representation in
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the mind of the thing’s spatial extension in the world. Descartes has in this latter case made one property of a particular object, or, worse, one way for human beings to represent the spatial extension of objects (via geometric extension), into a characterization of space itself (E&M 169-178). Rejecting Descartes’s intellectual construction of perception by using abstract conceptual properties, since this cannot account for perception as it is ordinarily lived, Merleau-Ponty developed, as we have just seen, a new non-dualist ontological exchange between the situated, embodied human perceiver and the embodied world. This view is thought to be more accurate and thus more authentic and less alienated than the conceptual construction of experience by either of the two dominant forms of modernist dualism, rationalism or empiricism, because it more accurately describes the human experience of perception. It is the theory that is more clarifying, that makes greater sense of human perception as it is actually lived through.

Merleau-Ponty says in an early work that one of the most significant contributions of phenomenological philosophy is the overcoming of Western philosophy’s traditional dualism by bringing together the subject and object in lived-through, embodied experience and, subsequently, by being able to development a new form of rationality (PhP xix-xxi). Reason is not to be thought of as already existing in either the mind for itself or nature in itself. Rather it must now be regarded as an agreement of perspectives, of mine as I actively open upon a stable world and of mine with those of others as we actively open upon this stable world together. Merleau-Ponty certainly does not deny the traditional principles of abstract logic (say, for example, identity, non-contradiction, or excluded middle, or, for that matter, the use of class concepts in categorical syllogisms) but he does claim that these principles and class concepts are abstractions from our more open and ambiguous experience. Again, Merleau-Ponty does not deny abstract, Aristotelian logic, but seeks to place it in the context of a dialectical experience, of experience that is open, relational, with a stable foreground appearing in the context of an open-ended, implied and shifting horizon. There are stable perceptual patterns in this experience, and we can even think about them using abstract logical principles and abstract class concepts, yet these principles and concepts must be regarded as temporary, provisional, abstract guidelines to help us understand and adapt to nature and others, and they are not to be taken as providing a metaphysics of nature or mind. This not only sets Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy against modernist thought but also against postmodernism as well, with its claim that there is no accurate or stable thought about the world or ourselves. Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, stable patterns are revealed in our embodied, perceptual openness upon a relatively stable world. Again, this is not a world of fixed essences (i.e., abstract concepts projected into the world) but of a really existing world of stable perceptual patterns, patterns that give rise to a probable
occurrence of events and thus to the possibility of a probable human knowledge, expressed in more or less accurate linguistic description.

Merleau-Ponty thus does not eliminate reason; he expands it. Within the context of his philosophy, and contrary to much of the Western philosophical tradition, reason is not separate from the human body and its desires and interests. For Merleau-Ponty, as for the American pragmatists, it evolved with the human body as a way to adapt to the world. We see the world according to interests, and we seek to adapt to this world according to our own individual interests and according to the interest of our primary interest groups. Reason, as we have seen, must thus be regarded as an agreement of perspectives upon the world, of mine and mine with others as we actively negotiate each other and with the world together. Yet there is a tendency to take our individual reasons and the reasons of our primary interest group as the reasons, as reflecting the one and only reason, especially when they grant us a privileged position within our society. This tendency is already evident in Plato—who takes his ideal, rational “forms” (and the “forms” of his class) as eternal essences. It is a tendency that Heidegger has pointed out as our thoughtless “forgetfulness” of the ontological and our subsequent “fallenness” into the ontic. And it is a tendency that is certainly evident in the instrumental reasoning of modernist capitalist societies, as Marx, Lukács, and Habermas have pointed out. Capitalism doesn’t create this tendency but certainly takes advantage of it, either consciously or unconsciously. We find Marx, Lukács, Habermas, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty all calling us to be aware of alienated forms of experience. We must guard against them and seek to center our lives (and abstractions about them) in our more immediately lived-through and holistic experience of the world and each other.

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty criticizes abstract (alienated) reason both epistemologically and politically, and that he develops a new ontology to help him do so. 22 We have briefly considered his epistemological and ontological arguments above. Let us now briefly reconsider these arguments in the context of his political writings. In the opening pages of Humanism and Terror, 23 Merleau-Ponty argues that Marx accepted (as does Merleau-Ponty) certain liberal values, such as individual conscience, knowledge based on truth and rational discourse, the rule of law, and even that these values had been ushered into history by capitalist societies. Yet Merleau-Ponty proceeds to claim, with Marx, that these values have not yet been established in capitalist societies. Liberal principles were being lauded but not being practiced. This is how he expresses the misuse of reason. “With the assumptions of impersonal Reason and rational Man, and by regarding itself as a natural rather than an historical fact, liberalism assumes universality as a datum whereas the problem is its realization through the dialectic of concrete intersubjectivity” (HT 35 note). And, he continues: “everything in politics as in the theory of knowledge shows that the reign of universal reason [both liberal
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and communist] is problematic, that reason like liberty has to be made in a world not predestined to it” (HT xli). Furthermore, he continues, here again following Marx, the supposed universal reasons of liberalism are often the reasons of the dominant capitalist class. “It does not show much love of reason to define it in such a way that it is the privilege of a Western elite released of all responsibility toward the rest of the world,” he says (HT 187).

According to Merleau-Ponty, then, writing about capitalist societies in the mid-twentieth century, liberal values were being praised but were not practiced. When they were being practiced they were not being applied universally but being used to protect and enhance the interest of a Western elite. And, finally, the supposed universal rationality upon which these values were being based was being assumed. To overcome this liberal position, he says (in other works, some of which we have witnessed above), we must develop an ontology that moves away from the Western ontology of dualism and, more specially addressing politics, from the ontology of the isolated individual, whose individual rational consciousness supposedly grasps the unbiased, pre-established, rational nature of both the natural and social/political world. An obvious problem with this ontology of the isolated individual consciousness is that it lacks a genuine theory of intersubjectivity—now that it can no longer assume the rationality of its elite class is the universal rationality. Merleau-Ponty challenges the notion of the isolated individual in complete contact with his or her own private interior with the counterclaim that consciousness “is in fact what it does.” Consciousness is primarily perceptual consciousness and is thus primarily a pre-reflective, embodied being-in-the-world, is primarily an embodied relationship to a public world/space that surrounds the subject just as it extends beyond the subject. Moreover, since perceptual consciousness primarily opens upon an already existing public world, what the individual is able to experience is also open to other embodied perceivers. I may not be able to literally experience another person’s thoughts, but I am able to perceive another person’s perceptions. This is possible because we are similarly (though not identically) embodied, because our perceptual functions are “anonymous” (i.e., because they are bodily functions they are thus not just mine, not just the result of my choice or will, and carry me into the world whether I will it or not) and “general” (because as bodily functions they bear some likeness to the bodily functions of other embodied beings and carry us into an already existing public world in similar ways). Moreover, since all perception involves movement, is an active orientation toward the world, when I perceive other perceivers, when I perceive the perceptual gestures of others, the anonymous perceptual movements of my own body are able to recognize something familiar in these gestures. Psychologists recognize, as does Merleau-Ponty, a sort of “postural impregnation” or postural coupling that human beings are able to experience. Thus, again, to a degree, I can experience another person’s experience because our bodies open
upon a public world in similar ways (like beams of light illuminating a common surface), and because I am able to sympathize and even empathize with the perceptual gestures of others. However, there is also individuation, since human beings do occupy individual bodies, since no two human bodies are exactly the same, and since no two human beings have exactly the same personal history. There are certainly similarities between individuals, and even statistical averages, but not identical sameness. There is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a “lateral universal.” That is to say, there are similarities, likenesses, family resemblances between individuals, but no pre-existing, identical, rational human essence.

From Merleau-Ponty’s point of view, for Sartre (and much of the Western tradition since Descartes, with respect to epistemology, ontology and politics), each person with respect to both knowledge formation and political life “must assume all that happens instant by instant to all others.” Each individual person “must be immediately universal.” As we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty the experience of each person opens upon a shared public world, from which each person individuates, although never completely. Human experience is thus both public and personal, with both crossing into one another. With this new way of trying to understand the human person, with this new ontology of the individual as an embodied openness upon a public natural and social world that folds into the individual subject, Merleau-Ponty has provided a new “type of being in which a junction of subjects can occur” (AD 200). This new ontology, with its crisscrossing elements, and the dialectical thought that it now accommodates, “provides the global and primordial cohesion of a field of experience wherein each element opens to others.” This new dialectical thinking must be “conceived as the expression or truth of an experience in which the commerce of subjects with one another and with being was previously instituted. It is a thought which does not constitute the whole but is situated in it.” Moreover, “it is incomplete so long as it does not pass into other perspectives and the perspectives of others” (AD 204).

With respect to this new ontology, and the dialectical thought that it is now consistent with, Merleau-Ponty states the following:

Nothing is more foreign to it than the Kantian conception of an ideality of the world which is the same for everyone, just as the number two or the triangle is the same in every mind, outside of meetings or exchanges: the natural and human world is unique, not because it is parallelly constituted in everyone or because the ‘I think’ is indiscernible in myself and in the other, but because our differences open onto that world, because we are imitatable and participatable through each other in this relationship with it. (AD 204)

“Because we are imitatable and participatable through each other in this” embodied, perceptual openness upon and relationship to the world, we are able to move toward a shared understanding of both the natural and social world. This shared “rational” world is not already established, will never be definitively es-
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tablished, and certainly must not be conceived as already existing in the minds of an elite class. It remains to be established in an open, non-coercive dialog with and debate between equals.

Merleau-Ponty certainly believes that there is an authentic human experience and that human beings can be alienated from it. Certain forms of rationality (or abstract expression), for example, can be detached (alienated) from experience, or at least from experience as an organic gestalt. Authentic experience is our lived through openness upon an already existing and public world—and not this experience already conceived as a combination of discrete parts in external relations to one another or constructed using detached abstract concepts (or, for that matter, constructed by the free play of language). This alienation, however, does not set us on a specific historical path to bring about the overthrow of conditions that engender it. Yet, nevertheless, alienation may well give rise to a significant feeling of malaise (as well as other maladies) and the desire to eliminate it (or them), even if by various means, and even if these means are conditioned by the historical present.

Critical Reflections

To the wholesale and fundamental criticism of modernism offered above by Marx, Lukács, Habermas, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, we should consider some critical evaluation of postmodernism here as well. We should point out here that one of Derrida’s primary criticisms of Heidegger is that he still adheres to a [modernist] philosophy of presence. Yet it seems that Derrida is not being completely fair with respect to what Heidegger means by “presence.” Heidegger’s presence (which involves *Dasein* and Being, with Being as the primary term) is an opening or fanning out, like a gestalt field. Presence occurs (as a verb, as an active state, not as a noun, not as a thing) in the context of the past and future. As is well known, Derrida exploits and explodes this opening out with his notion of the constant deferring of language. The words of a language, he says, following Saussure as well as Heidegger, do not simply refer to discrete objects (or to a discrete self) but defer to other words *ad infinitum*. To a certain extent, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Heidegger is just the opposite of Derrida’s. If we use the language of Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty certainly accepts the notion of a foreground within the context of a horizon, of the ontic within the context of the ontological (of Being), yet, as we’ve seen, while Merleau-Ponty holds the ontic and ontological in balance, Heidegger privileges the ontological. His notion of “presence” is not too present, as Derrida claims, since Heidegger’s presence is more like an atmosphere that fans out toward the past and future, but is too deferring, is too oriented out away from the particular thing toward Being and the future, to the point where the foreground or the ontic is left behind.
Moreover, as Pauline Marie Rosenau reveals in *Post-Modernism and the Social Science*, with respect to the rational subject, postmodernists have significantly downplayed the role of the subject as the rational center of experience and culture. In France the shift went from Sartre's radical view of human freedom, with the subject seemingly creating all meaning, even that of history, to a structuralist view, with a focus on social structures, and even their formal demands, that places the origin of seemingly all meaning in the systems (PMSS 46). Postmodernists maintained the emphasis on social structure and systems but further shifted focus away from formal structure to linguistic systems that were more playful and open-ended. Words, they said, constantly deferred to other words *ad infinitum*. In this sense even the subject was largely to be regarded as a construction of language and human history was no longer be regarded as the intentional plans of individuals (PMSS 42-43). Yet we also witness an inconsistency in postmodern thought, for even though the subject was to be regarded as largely a product of language, an appeal is frequently made to a postmodern “individual” who has the power to freely play with language and thus the very meaning of reality (PMSS 45-46). In this case, since reality is *constructed*, there is no pre-given nature or human nature from which to be alienated. In addition, since this view claims that there is little continuity of the subject’s experience over time, there is little sense of either a stable sense of self or a stable sense of our social political world (PMSS 54-55). Ultimately this leads to a supposedly positive sense of “ironic detachment” (should we perhaps say “alienation”) from the political affairs and struggles of the day (PMSS 140).

Yet it is true that there is still a presence to oneself, an awareness of oneself, as both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have demonstrated. First, this presence is required for human experience, even the experience of language. To make lived-through experience (the subject/self) into a product of language is a form of alienation, and leaves us with the unanswerable question of *who has language*. Secondly, this presence is also an absence; it occurs in the context of time and space; the present is not fully present but fans out toward the horizon, both spatial and temporal. The reflective is connected to lived-through experience, because it is experience reflecting on itself, but reflection does not fully or totally grasp the pre-reflective because it not completely simultaneous with it, since the pre-reflective slips away in time. For both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty the subject’s experience is a relationship to the world, is out in a world that pre-exists the subject. For Merleau-Ponty the subject opens upon a stable world that allows the moments of experience (and time) to hold together. This stable world, in fact, is necessary for experience, is necessary for it to hold together. Even the simple act of counting would not be possible without it, since, otherwise, all we’d have would be flashes of momentary experience. Thus, even though presence does occur in the context of absence, as a fanning out towards the past and future, the present...
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must be stable enough, long enough, for experience to hold together though time, and this stability is provided by the world and its objects. Yet even more, even the use of language to describe the world or the subject’s experience of it would not be possible without this stable experience over time. True, Derrida is right that language helps frame and articulate our world, but there is something there to articulate, even if in different ways. Granted, there is not just one correct interpretation, but, we must insist, some interpretations are better than others. There is an aware, experiential opening upon a stable world. If postmodernists argue that this can be made into anything language wishes, with its constant deferring and erasure, then it is alienated from this original experience.

True, as postmodernists claim, our needs and interests can always be influenced by the society within which we live, but there is something there for these social, cultural, linguistic institutions to influence. Each of us is individuated, is a unique collection of influences, including biological, familial, social, cultural forces which we nevertheless appropriate with some degree of awareness, which we are able to thus “take up” and move or express, through various choices that we make, in different ways. We still do have some awareness of our own stable identity through time, that we are primarily an active engagement in the world, but that we are also aware of ourselves as the focal point of this action, that we are aware that we are a being that is aware of its own Being. This seems correct, i.e., this seems to describe our experience as we live it, as aware beings, and it seems that this awareness is not something that is simply a product of language, for how could language create this awareness if it wasn’t already there? The primary awareness of our own being is not constructed (and certainly not from the outside); it just is. Language may certainly assist in articulating this awareness in one way or another, yet there is something there for it to articulate. Language doesn’t create our aware being; it helps bring it to a more articulate expression; and yet the primary meaning of this expression still has its basis in our actually being aware.

Conclusion

We have learned from Marx that it is better to direct one’s own activity according to one’s own will, with an awareness of one’s own likes and dislikes, and in dialog with other equals, than it is to have one’s actions directed by others, according to their interest and design. The “proof” of this claim is of course given in one’s own experience, and, for those that deny this proof, we might ask them to try experiencing each alternative for a month, or, better yet, even for a year, and it would be hard to believe, indeed, that they would still maintain this denial. From Lukács and Habermas we have learned that the modernist labor process has become increasingly controlled by calculative, instrumental reasoning focused on efficiency.
and profit, to the point where this reason has become disassociated from the very personality of the workers themselves. Work has become about how efficiently one can put on a bolt or enter a numerical figure in a spreadsheet. It is not about the more authentic and creative expression of the workers who collaborate and reason, as whole persons, with one another in a lifeworld experience. We have learned from Heidegger that the authentic is centered around a genuine awareness of ourselves as beings who are aware of our Being and that the inauthentic can be characterized as a loss of this awareness, as being caught up or lost in the world of things and our daily concerns about them, as well as in what society and others expect of us. We have also seen that technology reveals only a narrow range of what the world has to offer us, and that technological activity reveals or exercises only a narrow range of what human experience and activity are capable of. And finally, we have learned from Merleau-Ponty, in agreement with Heidegger on this point, that technology and technological activity come face to face with the real world only on rare occasions and that we must from time to time place calculative algorithms and reasoning in the context of the whole of human experience, otherwise we risk becoming a *manipulandum* in these very formulas. We have also learned that the old mind/body dualism of Western philosophy and culture, especially with its view of an already formed rational world (confirmed either rationally or empirically), is no longer tenable. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty does not deny traditional logic but regards it as an abstraction from experience, and not as a metaphysics or an ontology. He places traditional logic in a broader, dialectical context, and develops an ontology of regional reciprocity to allow him to do so. Reason then must be understood as an agreement of embodied perspectives, of mime as I actively engage with a world that folds back upon me, and of mine with those of others as we actively engage in and seek to adapt to the world together. We have also learned that political experience should not be framed as isolated, rational individuals already in possession of rational universals. We must frame political experience as individuals opening upon a shared public world that all are aware of and sensitive to. It is within the context of this shared world, where individuals (should) dialog and debate with equals about getting their needs fulfilled, that we must attempt to move toward shared values, and then attempt to live with differences. Marx, Lukács, Habermas, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty all warn us about alienation and call us to a more authentic experience. It seems that this warning and this call are still relevant today, and perhaps even more so, given the denial of alienation by postmodernists, given the distraction of postmodernist wordplay, and yet, still, given the increased pervasiveness of instrumental thinking. It seems that their call is still appropriate today: we should seek to ground truth and values in our own concrete, embodied experiences as we dialog about and seek to adapt to the world together as whole persons.
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Notes

5. Taylorism is known as the design and control, by management, of the work process as an assembly-line production that breaks the work process into isolated and measured steps that reduces skilled labor to repetitive functions easily performed by unskilled laborers, who can easily be replaced.
7. Heidegger’s unfortunate sympathy for German Nazism is now well known. For a convenient overview see Thomas Sheehan, “Heidegger and the Nazis,” The New York Review of Books 35(10) (June 16, 1988), 38–47. The influence of this sympathy on Heidegger’s philosophy remains a point of contention, however, with some claiming that there is no influence and others claiming that the influence is from little to significant. Personally, I believe that the influence is not insignificant. For example, the special importance that Heidegger places on the revelation of Being to the German people seems consistent with German nationalism. His regard for intellectual hierarchy, with philosophy and its privileged access to the ontological placed above science and the ontic, in order to properly guide them, displays a bias for philosophy (and even for a few select philosophers and politicians) and even displays a certain anti-democratic, non-empirical approach to the development of human knowledge. His separation of the ontological from the ontic, with his call for the mystical revelation of the former, appears to lift us out our concrete involvement in current socio-economic events and to significantly downplay personal responsibility for them. Heidegger, obviously, and this is widely accepted, makes many profound and useful philosophical points that are not related to Nazism, but he should still always be read with care and with his dangerous political sympathies in mind.
10. The following section provides a loose exposition of section 44, “Dasein, Disclosedness, and Truth.”
Douglas Low


13. The experience of space, for example, occurs for the perspective and point of view of a particular embodied individual (let’s call this the ontic) but opens out to a general sense of space that includes the individual and his or her perspective (let’s call this the ontological). To properly understand the experience of space, then, we must take into account both the ontic and the ontological and, moreover, how they connected, since this is the way they appear in experience. If we focus on only one or the other, we do not account for the experience as it is typically lived, and we leave out an important aspect of that experience.


20. In the language of logic, the facts of experience must be deducible from the categories of the explanation.

21. See Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Context: A Philosophy and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013), chap. 2, “Method and Ground,” where it is argued that Merleau-Ponty, like the early Hegel, grounds knowledge in experience itself; that the way we know that one perception is false is because another reveals it to be so; that experience itself reveals whether or not we have grasped the entirety of an event or only part of it; that perceptual experience itself presents itself as stable over time; that, when attempting to adapt to the world with others, it is the simpler explanations that tend to work best; where it is argued that the correctness of an idea can be confirmed when it clarifies our environment and thus assists our adaptation to it.

22. Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-humanism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007). Coole’s first-rate book highlights the point that Merleau-Ponty was trying to overcome the ontology of the isolated rational individual of Descartes and the modernist tradition; see 160–64. She quotes the
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See also David Pettigrew and François Raffoul, eds., Disseminating Lacan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 85, where J. B. Pontalis summarizes and quotes Merleau-Ponty’s comments at the 1960 Bonneval Colloquium: “Only, this primordial symbolism, must we not seek it, rather than in language as such—‘It makes me uneasy to see the category of language occupy the entire field’—in a certain perceptual articulation, in a relation between the visible and the invisible that M. Merleau-Ponty designates by the name of latency, in the sense that Heidegger gives to this word [Verborgenheit], and not in order to specify a being that would conceal itself behind the appearances. Perception, on condition of not conceiving it as an operation, as a mode of representation, but as the double of an imperception, can serve as a model, and even the simple fact of seeing: ‘to see, this is to have no need to form a thought.’ M. Merleau-Ponty recalls that in his view, the opening to being is not linguistic: it is in perception that he sees the birthplace of the word.”