Merleau-Ponty

Issues and Philosophers: An Exposition

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Dedication

To my students, to my friends, and to the many students and friends of Merleau-Ponty.

Foreword

This manuscript, *Merleau-Ponty: Issues and Philosophers: An Exposition*, is intended and written for upper level undergraduate students, for graduate students, for scholars unfamiliar with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and for Merleau-Ponty scholars interested in the particular issues presented here---with an interpretation that may well differ from those presented elsewhere.

The manuscript is in the form of a short book, with six chapters. It is primarily a detailed exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s resolution of the mind/body problem, his treatment of the relationship between perception and language, his relationship with the great Edmund Husserl, his criticism of Heidegger, his quarrel with Jean-Paul Sartre, and his criticism of both modernism and postmodernism. There are a number of excellent books that provide expositions of various aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. None, however, provide an exposition of the issues and philosophical relationships presented here, in the way they are presented here.

Obviously, books published with reputable publishers tend to be taken more seriously than those simply posted online. Yet, I’ve opted for the latter, and do so for the following reasons. First and foremost, the manuscript is posted online to make it more financially accessible to the reader, especially to students. The cost of a scholarly book frequently approaches, and now even exceeds, the one-hundred-dollar mark. Obviously, given this cost, most students find the purchase of scholarly books to be cost prohibitive, and, unfortunately, this situation steers many students away from engagement with important issues broached and scrutinized by scholarly authors. In a time when market values dominate all others, it is imperative to provide open and easy access to the consideration of other values (for example, and as Plato reminds us, truth, beauty and justice) before they disappear completely. Secondly, since I have had the good fortune to publish a number of books and scholarly essays with a number of reputable publishers and journals, and since I am now in the twilight of my career, it appears less necessary to publish with a scholarly publisher in order to confirm the value of the present work. This confirmation (or not) will be left to the reader him or herself. Overall, my hope here is to provide easy access (by way of a detailed exposition posted online) to the wonderful and compelling works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which deserve to be considered because of their overall value to humanity, regardless of market value.
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Introduction

To the perhaps “parlor game” question about who is the greatest philosopher of the 20th Century, the answer, usually depending upon the philosophical tradition (Anglo-American or Continental, for example) is frequently Wittgenstein or Heidegger. Certainly, the names of Husserl, Russell, Merleau-Ponty, and Quine could also be considered for this august position. Yet, I will not here enter this debate or attempt to answer this question (which in all likelihood is impossible to answer) but would like to offer the following quote of a Marjorie Grene comment about Merleau-Ponty. “Every time I read him I have, once more, the sense that his approach to philosophical problems is entirely, overwhelming right. As with no other thinker, I say, yes, so it is . . .”1 Obviously, many philosophers, throughout the ages, and from different philosophical traditions, have much of value to teach us. Yet, I must agree with the spirit of Grene’s comment: Merleau-Ponty’s works frequently make more sense than most, for they bear a sort of profound common sense that is more clarifying than other philosophical positions. It is with this in mind that I present Merleau-Ponty: Issues and Philosophers: An Exposition. Much can still be gained by reading his works and by grasping the insights that they provide.

Two issues, for philosophy but especially for phenomenology, to which Merleau-Ponty makes an especially important contribution are: the mind-body problem and the relationship between perception and language. The opening first two chapters of this book will address these issues, with Chapter 1, Mind-body Problem, addressing the first, and Chapter 2, Perception Language Relationship, addressing the second. Chapter 3, Relationship to Husserl’s Philosophy will provide a detailed exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Husserl’s thought, with Chapter 4, Criticism of Heidegger: A Brief Note, and Chapter 5, Criticism of Sartre’s Philosophy respectively addressing Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Heidegger and Sartre. The final chapter, Chapter 6, Merleau-Ponty, Modernism, Structure, and Postmodernism, will consider Merleau-Ponty’s embrace of structure and how this allows him to leave modernism behind without fully embracing what now generally falls under the heading of postmodernism. The book thus begins with a consideration of Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to solve two important issues for philosophy and phenomenology, moves to consider Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to his great predecessor Husserl, proceeds to consider his relationship to his well-known predecessor/contemporary Heidegger, considers his criticism of his sometime friend, sometime advisory Sartre, and ends with a consideration of his relationship to modernism, along with his likely relationship to postmodernism, if he lived long enough to encounter its proponents.

Given the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, my hope here is to offer a close, careful and clarifying exposition of his thought, to bring his philosophical insights and solutions to a wider audience. Where and when it is appropriate, I will offer my own critical comments, yet my main goal here is to bring his works to a greater focus of clarity. I have focused on the issues and the philosophers just mentioned
because of the importance of each. With the advent of the postmodernists focus on the constructive power of language, to the point where our perceptual encounter with the world seems to mean little or nothing, it is important to revisit and investigate the relationship between perception and language with great care, something Merleau-Ponty has done, and has done far better than most. With respect to the intractable mind-body problem of Western philosophy (as well as Western science and medicine), Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the issue (i.e., his life-long effort to overcome dualism) offers an abundance of valuable insights. The relationship of Merleau-Ponty to Husserl’s thought should be regarded as a relationship between two of the most important continental philosophers of the 20th Century. Understanding this relationship means understanding ourselves and our Western philosophical, intellectual, and cultural tradition at some of its deepest levels, with Husserl focusing on the isolated intellectual ego and Merleau-Ponty on our lived-through, embodied, perceptual connection to the world and others. Moreover, we should view Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Heidegger and Sartre in a similar light, for their competing philosophical positions reveal much about ourselves and our tradition, with Heidegger leaping beings into Being, with Sartre championing the freedom of the isolated ego, and with Merleau-Ponty judiciously bringing to light the human body’s lived through connectedness with the world and others. And finally, Merleau-Ponty’s embrace of structure as a means of transcending the subject/object dualism of modernism helps us make this move ourselves, yet does so without having to move toward the more extreme philosophies typical of postmodernism.

I should mention that Chapter 4, *Criticism of Heidegger: A Brief Note*, is exactly that: a brief note. Since I have treated this topic elsewhere, in great detail, I offer here a brief presentation of this more extensive piece, referring the reader to the more prolonged treatment entitled “Merleau-Ponty’s Criticism of Heidegger” in *Philosophy Today* Volume 53, Fall 2009. Copyright issues prevent its reproduction here, and, yet, placing Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in the context of the works of other notable continental philosophers, Husserl, Sartre, and the postmodernist who succeeded him, seemed to call for a consideration of his relationship to Heidegger, certainly one of the central figures of 20th Century continental philosophy.

I should also mention that in most cases I have followed a text by text exposition of Merleau-Ponty writings, in the order that they were produced, beginning with the early *The Structure of Behavior*, proceeding to the mid-career *Phenomenology of Perception*, then on to the writings produced in the last period of his life. My hope here is that the reader will be able to see some of how Merleau-Ponty developed his thought but also its continuity.

Finally, I should mention that *Merleau-Ponty: Issues and Philosophers: An Exposition* was originally composed as separate essays and not as six chapters around one central theme. The chapters can thus be read independently of one another, yet each is more comprehensible in relation to the others. Obviously, given the consistency of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, each chapter expresses the core of his embodied
phenomenological philosophy, with some repetition, yet expressed in different ways given the topic at hand. Again, my main goal here is to bring Merleau-Ponty’s thought to its clearest possible expression, yet doing so with my own voice and my own interpretation, with the hope that this interpretation provides some insights not already available.
Chapter 1 The Mind-Body Problem

Anyone familiar with Merleau-Ponty’s works is certainly aware that they are varied and richly multifaceted. Yet one of the main recurring themes that define his works is his attempt to overcome Western dualism, in all its various forms: mind/body, subject/object, idealism/materialism, rationalism/empiricism, etc. In general terms, we must think of dualism as dividing something, anything, into two distinct and usually opposing categories, with categories that are so distinct that it becomes impossible to connect them in any meaningful way. The most general terms that Merleau-Ponty uses in the context of mind-body dualism is “for-itself” for mind, since the philosophical tradition treats the mind as something (even as some sort of substance) that is fully in possession of itself and of the internal relations of its meaningful categories, and “in-itself” for physical nature (and even the human body), since the physical objects of nature are just “dumb,” “dead” things with no awareness, just bits of extended matter in external relationships to one another. Given the opposing properties of the for-itself and the in-itself, it does become impossible to relate them meaningfully to one another, even given the great efforts of idealists/rationalists to place all of nature within the confines of clearly conceived (and abstract) categories, as well as the efforts of materialists/empiricists to reduce mind (consciousness) to neuro-physiological and ultimately physical events. While Merleau-Ponty’s first book The Structure of Behavior mostly offers a challenge to the materialist/empiricist camp, it does also argue against the idealist/rationalist school of thought. Yet it is his second book Phenomenology of Perception that frequently addresses various issues, such as the phantom limb, or, more broadly, attempts to understand human sexuality and human language, etc., by considering both empiricist and rationalist explanations of them. He then attempts to show how these theories fail to explain what is generally grasped as given immediately before us, and, finally, by offering a theory of bodily being-in-the-world that does satisfactorily explain what is given before us. He makes this attempt to overcome these oppositional explanations, to a certain extent at least, by attempting to redefine both mind and matter and, in addition, to blend and interweave them. He attempts this in his early, middle, and late works, with his solution, along with the integration of the terms of the opposing couplets, becoming more and more complete with each new book. Since mind-body dualism, and the difficulty that surrounds a satisfactory description of relationship between the mind and body, has remained so intractable, since a solution would undoubtedly be helpful, and since Merleau-Ponty spends a great deal of time and effort carefully studying this relationship, calling upon physics, biology, neurobiology, neurophysiology, and psychology, which most philosophers do not do, it will be worthwhile to follow his efforts.

We should also point out here that even though this issue can be treated on its own that it has much broader implications for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. His entire philosophical career is devoted to developing a middle ground between materialism/empiricism and idealism/rationalism. This development begins with a straightforward and yet critical scientific treatment of the mind and body in The Structure of
Behavior and ends with the articulation of a philosophical ontology that blends the flesh of the human body with the “flesh” of the world in the posthumously published The Visible and the Invisible.⁴

To understand Merleau-Ponty’s efforts, it will be useful to consider the following: first and foremost, his study of the relationship between body and mind in his early, middle, and late work; secondly, his answer to the question “how is it that the thing only appears at the end of my gaze but also as existing in itself?” in his early, middle and late works, with his answer more completely developed with each new book; thirdly, his treatment of the transition from perception to language in his middle and late work, again with his answer more completely developed in his more mature writings;⁵ and finally, his development of the term “flesh,” with its integration of body and mind, of lived through embodied experience and the world, in his late work The Visible and the Invisible.


The Structure of Behavior: In The Structure of Behavior, after consulting a plethora of studies of neurophysiology and perception (practically the studies of Gestalt psychologist, which, for the most part, have since been confirmed and not superseded), Merleau-Ponty argues that perceptual meaning must be considered to be original. The meanings present to perceptual consciousness cannot be constructed from discrete units of data in external relations, like bricks in a wall, as empiricists claim, nor can they be constructed from the abstract concepts of geometry and logic, as rationalist’s claim. Again, the meaningful gestalt structure of perceptual experience, i.e., whose meaning is greater than a mere sum of its parts, is not yet conceptual and is given in perceptual experience itself. Perception reveals meaningful relationships that are more than just external relationships and, yet, that are not simply the internal relations of conceptual meaning. Perception is original and primordial. It cannot be explained by or constructed from anything else, and it is first. It is there from the beginning and helps explain what will come later.
Given this understanding of perceptual experience, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state the following about the mind-body problem. “Every theory of perception tries to surmount a well-known contradiction: on the one hand, consciousness is a function of the body—thus it is an ‘internal’ event dependent upon certain external events; on the other hand, these external events themselves are known only by consciousness. In another language, consciousness appears on one hand to be part of the world and on the other to be co-extensive with the world” (SB 215, my bracket addition). Yet, again, given his theory of the original meaning of perception, and even though he admits that the world to which the perceiving human body belongs presents itself to this perceiving body as existing in its own right, he goes on to state that both mind and body have a meaning only because they are given in perceptual consciousness (SB 216).

This means that “my total psycho-physical being (that is, the experience which I have of myself, that which others have of me, and the scientific knowledge which they and I apply to the knowledge of myself) is an interlacing of significations such that, when certain among them are perceived and pass into actuality, the others are only virtually intended” (SB 217). Thus, the “subjective” experience that appears to me in my perception of an object, and my perception viewed “objectively” from the outside from the point of view of a third-person, scientific observer, always remain secondary and virtual with respect to one another. Moreover, if it is true that perceptual experience is primary, then this experience (let’s call it “mind” in this case) cannot be constructed causally from the supposedly discrete units in external relations of reductionistic materialism, for then perceptual experience would be constructed by the third-person scientific observer and would no longer be primary, and, furthermore, the properties of a perceptual experience, with its parts related meaningfully (yet not conceptually) cannot be explained by discrete parts in external relationships. Yet Merleau-Ponty certainly does not deny that the body is the ontological seat of the perceptual process. As he puts it, “on the condition that ‘form’ is introduced in nerve functioning a parallelism or a rigorous ‘isomorphism’ could be maintained” between the nerve functioning and what appears to the perceiver (SB 92). However, since perceptual meaning is primary, since it is always richer than any third-person construction of it, and since the form of physiological functioning that is displayed to a third-person perceiver is, first of all, presented to the third-person as a first-person perception, and, secondly, cannot explain the properties of the perceptual form lived through by the primary first-person perceiver as the supposed result of discrete objective events in external relations, then the idea of a strict parallelism between physiological form and perceptual form can no longer be maintained (SB 92).

Again, the significations of my lived through perceptual experience have their origin in perceptual experience, which is prior to the objective constructions and explanations of science, and yet, Merleau-Ponty insists, this field of perceptual experience is “given only as a perspectival view of objects gifted with stable properties, a perspectival view of an objective world and an objective space” (SB 219). Thus, we must conclude that “the problem of perception consists in trying to discover how the inter-subjective world,
the determinations of which science is gradually making precise, is grasped through this field [of lived through perceptions]” (SB 219, my bracket addition). Or, in the context of our present investigation, the problem of the relation of the body to the mind, the problem of the relationship of the body as a worldly object (which science helps to make explicit) to the flux of lived through experiences of the body, is a perceptual problem (SB 219). The mind-body problem must be understood as a perceptual problem because it has its roots in the ambiguity of perceptual experience, or, more specifically, “in the duality of the notions of structure and signification. A ‘form,’ such as a ‘figure and ground’ structure, for example, is a whole which has a meaning and which therefore provides a base for intellectual analysis. But at the same time it is not an idea: it constitutes, alters and reorganizes itself before us like a spectacle” (SB 224). Or, again, a perceptual form is a concrete structure, in which the world is given as existing in its own right, that is meaningful, yet this meaning is not yet the meaning of an abstract idea. Thus perceptual structure is both “worldly” (i.e., is rooted in an openness upon a world that presents itself as existing on its own) and meaningful, since it is related to a perceiver. For example, when considering the well-known gestalt figure that can appear as a vase or as two faces in profile, we must admit that the form has an objective existence, in this case as lines on a piece of paper before the perceiver, but also that the perceiver plays an important role when it comes to the meaning of the form, for the form can be seen as a vase or as two faces. In addition, this meaning, which is present to the aware body subject, since it is rooted in an experience that opens upon a world that presents itself as existing in its own right, provides the basis for more abstract, inter-subjective and “objective” significations. Perceptual structure reveals both a stable, pre-existent structure and a structure that is only meaningful as a perceptual structure. Thus perceptual form presents itself as a real structure that is really only fully meaningful to a perceiving subject. In other words, the mind-body problem is a perceptual problem. Perceptual experience bears within itself the duality of structure and meaning, of the objective and the subjective, of body and mind. We must attempt to solve the problem of this duality by understanding the relation of the flow of perceptual perspectives, which are given personally to the perceiver, and which present a world as existing on its own, to the significations that are formed inter-subjectively and that science is attempting to make more precise.8 As Merleau-Ponty expresses it: “it is a question of understanding, without confusing it with a logical relation, the lived relation of the ‘profiles’ to the ‘things’ [including the human body] which they present, of the [lived through perceptual] perspectives to the ideal significations which are in intended through them”--- to the ideal significations which are the intersubjective attempt to express our perceptual contact with the real world in an objective language (SB 220, my bracket additions).9

We have seen that the mind-body problem is a perceptual problem because of the ambiguity of structure and signification that is present in perception. We have seen that perception reveals concrete, stable structures where they are, existing in their own right, and yet also reveals a meaning that pre-supposes
a perceiver, reveals a structure that ambiguously presents itself as both objective and subjective, as body and mind. The resolution of the mind-body problem will thus involve an attempt to understand the relationship between the flow of perceptual profiles, as they are presented to the perceiving subject, and the existing things that are revealed through them, as well as an attempt to understand how this personal contact with an already existing world gets expressed in the intersubjective language of the “ideal” significations of objectivity. Or, using the language that Merleau-Ponty uses in subsequent texts, we can express the resolution of the mind-body problem in this way: we must attempt to understand how it is that we necessarily perceive the world through our own perception but that what we do perceive presents itself as existing in its own right.

Merleau-Ponty here indicates how to solve the mind-body problem, does so by pointing to the structure of perception, but he does not pursue the solution in detail here. He will sustain this pursuit until the end of his life, continually refining and deepening his answer. As we have just seen, an important part of this solution is intertwined with understanding how objects appear only through our perceptual experience yet also as existing in their own right and, in addition, with understanding the move from perception to the formation of abstract thought. As we will see, for Merleau-Ponty this latter point will involve understanding the movement of perception to language.

Phenomenology of Perception In Phenomenology of Perception Merleau-Ponty continues the line of thought already established in The Structure of Behavior, now expressed in the form of a question. “How are we to understand both that the thing is the correlative of my experience, of the knowing body, and that it rejects the body,” that it exists in its own right (PhP 325)? As he did in The Structure of Behavior, Merleau-Ponty here rejects the idea that the mind or consciousness or perceptual awareness can be understood simply as the causal product of physical events, or, as he puts it, of the in-itself.10 Rather, he turns to the temporal structure of lived through experience to help enlighten the relationship. If we treat self-awareness (or the for-itself) not as a hole in being (as Sartre did11) but as a hollow, as a break in the density of being, as an embodied being that is aware of its being, of its being in a horizon of being (not outside of it), in which there is a awareness of the passing of time, and an awareness of this passing as a dimension of being, and if the for-itself is merely a present awareness that fans out toward the past and future that includes it, then we change the nature of the mind-body problem. If temporality is a movement that is centered in the present, in the present in a wide sense, in the sense that the present is not a discrete unit but the center of aware experience that gradually shades outward, with overlapping boundaries, toward the past and the future, then, again, we change the nature of the mind-body problem, for it is now reduced to the following form. “How is it that a being which is still to come and has passed by, also has a present—which means that the problem is eliminated, since the future, the past and the present are linked together in the movement of temporalization” (PhP 431).
Following Merleau-Ponty’s comments here, we must consider the for-itself as a present awareness that opens to a past and a future, to a temporality that it exists within, while treating the in-itself as the stable past and future horizon that the present opens upon and exists within. In other words, the for-itself and the in-itself are different ways to look at the structure of presence. They are different “sides” of the structure of presence: the aware present fanning out in a temporal horizon and the temporal horizon that includes this presence. Thus the subjective must be thought of as the aware opening out to a stable temporal world structure that the subject exists within, and the objective must be thought of as that which is woven out of this always already existing, stable, temporal, horizontal world structure that the subject opens upon. Or, again, the in-itself is this stable, temporal horizon that the experiencing subject exists within. The experiencing body subject is in it and it is given in this experience as existing prior to and as running beyond the experiencing body subject, and yet the experiencing subject is able to take up this temporal structure and carry forward its stable patterns. I open upon a world that pre-exists me, I bring it to awareness, and I take up its structures within my experience and carry them forward in time (for I am a member of the species that is aware of time, i.e., for I am a member of a species whose very structure of existence fuses with the temporality of nature, i.e., whose very structure of experience is temporal). This, then, is the relationship between subject and object: the subject opens out to a stable, temporal, worldly horizon that the subject exists within but also helps carry forward (with its awareness it helps carry forward, from the past, in the present, toward the future, the structures of experience, to which both the embodied subject and the world contribute), with the always already available worldly horizon subtending the aware subject. Again, this is the relationship between the subject and the world: the subject opens upon the field of the world that is always already there, a stable structure that is revealed in experience, that subtends the subject, that the subject carries forward in the temporal structure of experience. The objective, then, is woven out of this pre-existent field that the subject experiences, acts within, and helps carry forward, in experience, along with others.

Merleau-Ponty thus stresses here, as he has done in *The Structure of Behavior*, that in order to understand the mind-body relationship, that we must understand the relationship between our lived through embodied perceptual experiences of the moment and how these lived through moments are open to the horizontal field that they exist within. Merleau-Ponty also stresses here, as he has done in *The Structure of Behavior*, that bodily perception as a bodily function must be understood, at least in part, as a being formed existentially, i.e., as possessing an aspect of awareness, an operative awareness that is engaged in and entangled with the world, and that consciousness awareness must be understood as a bodily orientation. We must understand the human organism as an aware, functioning, gestalt whole, greater than a sum of its parts, with the subjective “side” and the bodily “side” working together as part of a single, more or less unified whole (PhP 431).
Also following the results of his study in his earlier work, Merleau-Ponty again stresses the following. “. . . the objective body is not the true version of the phenomena body, that is, the true version of the body that we live by: it is indeed no more than the latter’s impoverished image, so that the problem of the relation of the soul to body has nothing to do with the objective body, which exists only conceptually, but with the phenomenal body. What is true, however, is that our open and personal existence rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence. But it could not be otherwise, if we are temporality, since the dialectic of acquisition and future is what constitutes time.”

Again, “our open and personal existence,” which is centered in the present moment of experience, “rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence,” on the structures of past experiences, to which both the embodied subject and the world have contributed. The lived through moment of experience, the aware present, helps carry these along and into the future. The body mind relation must therefore be conceived within the context of this temporal structure, with the stabilized structures of past experience related to and given within the subject’s present openness upon the world (PhP 431-2).

In Phenomenology of Perception Merleau-Ponty also moves to address inter-subjectivity, which, of course, is necessary in order to move from one’s own experiences toward objectivity, and it is temporality that once again comes to Merleau-Ponty’s aid. In particular, the notion of presence, which links one’s presence to oneself to one’s presence in the horizon of the world, opens the embodied experiencing subject to a temporal field that the subject exists within and that the subject helps bring to greater awareness, that is open to other embodied subjects oriented toward this field in similar ways. While it remains true that no subject will ever fully know the lived through experience of another subject, when we understand that the subject’s experience is intertwined with the structure of temporality, then we understand that “two temporalities are not mutually exclusive as are two consciousnesses, because each one knows itself only by projecting itself into the present where they can interweave” (PhP 433). When we understand that the experiencing subject who is aware of him or herself, who is present to him or herself, is also present to the temporal horizon of the world, then we understand that one’s own experience necessarily opens to a broader structure, to a structure that one’s experience exists within, to a structure that others open upon as well, thus providing a basis for an intersubjective contact with the world (See PhP 432-433).12

For Merleau-Ponty a really existing world is given in lived through perceptual experience, but this is not the objective world of science. That world is a cultural construction. It is in front of us as a construction. The real world is given as behind us, or, rather, as existing before us in time, in the temporal horizon.13 When considering the existence of the world prior to (or without) perceptual consciousness, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is wrong for us to place Laplace’s nebula (from which the earth and the human species eventually evolved) before us in time. This nebula is a scientific product, a cultural product. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, it is based on our lived through perceptual openness upon a pre-existent world that presents itself as existing in its own right. The same could be said of the human body. The objective body is not
before us in time. It is a cultural product. Yet it is based on our lived through perceptual experience that opens upon a pre-existent body that presents itself as existing in its own right. When I see my own body, I do not experience a pure object but my body in my lived through current perception, and I am attached to it. I first live through it as my primary orientation toward the world. Then I am able to reflect upon or see it as a body that I have lived through, yet still not as a pure thing. It is always already there as my stable means of being in the world. It pre-exists my reflection, like the world and the objects within it, as a stable set of pre-existent orientations, not as a pure thing in-itself. This changes the nature of the mind-body problem. This relationship can no longer be construed as a relationship between a pure in-itself related to a pure for-itself. We must understand the relationship as the relationship between the body as perceived (by me and others) and the body as perceiving.

Merleau-Ponty fully realizes that by connecting the object to the experiencing body that some will claim that he is undermining the objectivity of the object. This critical view, he states, will likely claim, when considering a cube, that we never see the object with six equal sides, because of perspectival distortion, but that the idea of a cube with six equal sides, the cube as it is in itself, clearly has a meaning for us. Moreover, this critical view is also likely to claim that it is a system of objective relations between the perceiving body and the perceived object that determines the meaning of the object and not the collaboration of lived through perceptual experiences that does so. Merleau-Ponty responds to these criticisms by challenging the claim that the object can be meaningfully separated from the actual means by which it is presented to the perceiver. For example, concepts such as “enclosed,” “inside,” “outside,” and “direction” would have no meaning without the oriented engagement of the aware embodied perceiver, since, for space in itself, a space without reference to the embodied perceiving subject, there is no orientation, no up or down, no left or right. The perception of space, or the perception of any visible object for that matter, presupposes a situated perceiver, a perceiver that nevertheless opens upon a pre-existent world. Thus, the objective conceptualization of the object in-itself bears a meaning because of our original perceptual hold on the world.

14 How do we move from personal, perspectival perception to the world that is also given as public, as existing in its own right? First of all, the world is experienced as existing in its own right. Secondly, the world is experienced as something my experience exist within, as public. I thus experience my experience as opening upon a public field that is open to the experiences of others. Thirdly, language is able to sublimate my experience, my opening upon a public world. a.) As I watch others meaningfully gesturing toward the world, I am able to couple with their gestures. Since consciousness is not just a private interior awareness but an active opening out upon a world that is experienced as public, I am able to capture a glimpse of the other’s meaningful gestures toward the world. Moreover, since language is a gesture that opens out upon a field of already available linguistic significations, I am able to catch a glimpse of the
other’s meaningful gestures within and toward this field. b.) Moreover, since this field of linguistic significations is a sublimation of our perceptual openness upon the world, our common linguistic gestures open upon and reveal a common world. This, then, is how we can express our commonly experienced, public world. This is how we can articulate an “objective” world, that is, how we can correlate the intersubjective reports of perception. And this is how we can articulate our experience about an “objective” body. We correlate the intersubjective linguistic reports of perceptions of it from the outside, and, with regard to the mind-body problem, we must coordinate the linguistic reports of the perceptions of my body from the outside with my reports of my lived through embodied perception experienced from the inside. To understand the relation between the mind and body we must approach the human body from both sides. We must approach the human body as an intersubjectively, linguistically articulated object and as it is lived through experientially and articulated by the experiencing subject. These “sides” share a structure, i.e., my body seen from the outside as a meaningful orientation toward the world and my body experienced from the inside as a meaningful orientation toward the world.15

Nature Merleau-Ponty’s lecture notes published as Nature once again address the dualism of nature and consciousness, or, in the language he once again uses here, the dualism of the in-itself and for-itself. Here, in these lectures, while considering some of the best studies in biology, especially those of Jakob von Uexkull, he reports that the notion of Umwelt or animal environment cannot be understood as either a thing in-itself or as something that simply appears in the “consciousness” of the animal for-itself. Rather it must be understood as the animal’s openness out to a field with which the animal develops intimate relationships, with which it collaborates in the most intimate ways. As the active, interested organism meets the forceful and yet shifting perceptual patterns of the world, there is a sort of co-penetration of each “side” in the other (since each has a profound and simultaneous impact on the other), and thus a co-creation of meaning (NA, 174-178). Even more accurately, the animal subject and the environment form a whole that can be observed from two sides, that of the animal and that of the environment.

More relevant to the current topic at hand, Merleau-Ponty here proceeds to consider the relationship between the body and mind with great care. Numerous studies of the development and repair of a number of different species (including the human species) reveal that, while it true that living organisms are only physicochemical, and that, subsequently, we cannot appeal to another form of causality, as vitalism does for example, the understanding of the life, and of the development and repair of these species, cannot be fully framed in physicochemical terms. Living organisms cannot be understood simply as “the sum of instantaneous and punctual microscopic events,” but must be grasped as “an enveloping phenomena, with the macroscopic style of an ensemble in movement. In between the microscopic facts, global reality is delineated like a watermark, never graspable for objectivizing-particular thinking, never eliminable from or reducible to the microscopic . . .” It is thus from within that we see the development of a global and
oriented living structure, one that remains tied to its microscopic events but that cannot be reduced to them. Again, when we trace the development and repair of a living organism, the axolotl, for example, we see that it develops according to the demands of the organism as a functional whole (Na 140-145). We also see, for certain larvae at least, that casing repairs are variable and also made according to the demands of global functioning (Na 178-183), and we see, for certain injuries to the human eye, that the eye shifts to maintain the clearest vision in the center of its visual field (SB 40-1).16 We can thus conclude, along with Merleau-Ponty, that everything that happens with the development and repair of an organism occurs at the physicochemical level but that it is the global functioning of the organism (with the whole demonstrating properties greater than the mere sum of its parts) that guides development and repair, not physico-chemistry alone (NA 202-207).

When more specifically addressing the human species, Merleau-Ponty insists that “the concern is to grasp humanity first as another manner of being a body---to see humanity emerge just like Being in the manner of a watermark, not as another substance, but as interbeing [as being between or among beings, like the watermark, or like the Gestalt whole that is always greater than the mere sum of its parts], and not as an imposition of a for-itself on the body in-itself” (NA 208, my bracket addition). Merleau-Ponty states here, at the end of his Nature lecture notes, that his concern had been to trace the evolution of the human body. He reminds us that his study of nature, of living beings, of human beings, and of the evolution of the human body, has been carried out as a study of perceived beings. He believes that he has produced a better understanding of the human body through a perceptual study of nature up to and including the development of the perceiving human being. Yet, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, it is the study of the perceiving body that will also help us further understand what has preceded it. Just as nature is a part of and crosses into the perceiving being that it gives rise to, so also the perceiving body crosses back into and helps articulate that which gave rise to it. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “it is the same Ineinander [in one another] that we gradually approach from two ends, an Ineinander that is not that of a thing in a thing, not a de facto Ineinander, but rather one ratified by our lived, perceived Ineinander. Inversely, what precedes will clarify our approach to the human body as perceiving by showing us in what dimension the perceiving body must be sought, and how the invisible is divergence in relation to the visible” (NA 208, my bracket addition). The body as perceived and the body as perceiving (rather than the purely objective body and a transcendent or pure mind) will help clarify one another, for they fold into one another, with each helping to define the other, and this is certainly a new way to attempt to understand the relationship between the body and mind, for it is re-defines both, thus changing the relationship between them.

The Visible and the Invisible It is in The Visible and the Invisible that Merleau-Ponty develops his most complete answer to the mind-body problem. Here he once again states one of the primary issues associated with the mind-body problem and now more thoroughly addresses it. “What is...
virtue of the visible that makes it, held at the end of the gaze, nonetheless much more than a correlative of my vision, such that it imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence?” (VI 131) He once again turns to perception for his answer, this time focusing on touch (because it is less prone to detaching itself from the body than visual perception), and more thoroughly expressing the intertwining of touching and the touched, of perceiving and being perceived.

“...between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kindship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, open finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part.” (VI 133)

We witness here both the need for an aware perceiver and for an embodied perceiver that belongs to and participates in the embodiment of a greater world. We also witness the collaboration (undoubtedly achieved by the evolution of the human body) of the aware embodied perceiver and the world---so much so that they pass into one another. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange” (VI 133). We witness here a final push to overcome an intractable mind-body dualism, especially as it is expressed as a mind for-itself over against a body in-itself, that has made it impossible to relate them meaningfully to one another. In fact, it is their intertwining that creates meaning, and it is now, with this understanding, that Merleau-Ponty is able to supply an answer to the question of how the thing only appears at end of our gaze but as also as existing in its own right. “We can understand then why we see the things themselves, in their place, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than a being-perceived---and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and the body . . . It is that the thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity . . .” (VI 135) My hand can touch because it is simultaneously touched by the world outside of it. It is thus through my aware embodiment, my embodied sentience, that I connect with the embodied world around me, that is, with the world and its objects manifested in physical form. It is through this lived through blending of the aware embodied subject and the embodied world that meaning is formed and that a whole is created that is greater than, and even more real than, either of its parts (VI 139). In fact, it is this blending that allows us to understand how things are visible, for the world’s embodiment appears, in its own place, as existing in its own right, only through the awareness of one of its own embodied beings. And, it is this blending that allows us to understand the perceiver’s corporeity, for the perceiver has a sense of his or her embodiment only because his or her existence blends with the existence of an embodied world. Merleau-Ponty continues here to refine his answer. “It is the body and it
alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that, if it be possible, would coexist with them in the same world” (VI 136). Again, it is through our human **embodiment**, because it is our aware **embodiment** that allows us to participate in the **embodiment** of the world, that we are able to see the embodied things where they rest, existing on their own—because we experience our bodies as existing within this greater world. Yet, again, this world only appears to us in and through our **aware** embodiment.

Careful to avoid some sort of anthropomorphizing, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state the following. “When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our own projections, leaving aside what it can be under the human mask. Rather, we mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible.” (VI 136) Thus our understanding of human perception, its opening out, its gestalt structure, must come from an understanding of the very structure of Being. Perceptual structure is an example of, a manifestation of, the very structure of Being, not the other way around. Yet Merleau-Ponty proceeds to qualify the structure of Being and the relationship between the perceived and our perceiving. “To speak of leaves or of layers is still to flatten and to juxtapose, under the reflective gaze, what coexists in the living and upright body. If one wants metaphors, it would be better to say that the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and the reverse . . . If the body is one sole body in its two phases, it incorporates into itself the whole of the sensible and with the same movement incorporates itself into a ‘Sensible in itself’ . . . There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other” (VI 138). Thus, it is through lived through embodied experience of the world that embodied experience and the world come together and blend. As I experience the world through my body, I meet and blend with the world’s thickness. It is given to me as embodied (like my body), as existent. It meets my flesh through my lived through embodied thickness with its embodied thickness that I live through. Again, the world is given to me in my lived through embodied encounter with the world. In this lived through embodied experience there is a blending of my embodiment and the world’s embodiment. The world is given to me through my embodiment but also as running beyond it, as possessing its own embodiment existence, which my embodied existence exists within and is a part of. Yet, again, even though Being is primary, the only way that it appears to us is through our embodied experience, our embodied perception. Being and the perception of being are given together, yet with Being as still the more primary term, for Being temporally slips away from the present moment of perception and is perceived as always already there.17
Chiasm  It will be helpful here, in our effort to understand Merleau-Ponty’s late treatment of the mind-body problem, to trace his development of the idea of “chiasm” throughout The Visible and Invisible. This is what can be found. Turning specifically to the issue of the mind-body relationship, we see Merleau-Ponty claim that we must “define the mind as the other side of the body-----We have no idea of a mind that would not be doubled with a body, that would not be established on this ground-----” (VI 259). The mind, then, is certainly not another substance or even fully distinct from the body, for it is the body’s aware opening out upon the world. Furthermore, “the ‘other side’ means that the body, inasmuch as it has this other side, is not describable in objective terms, in terms of the in-itself—that this other side is really the other side of the body, overflows into it (Ueberschreiten), encroaches upon it, is hidden in it— and at the same time needs it, terminates in it, is anchored in it. There is a body of the mind, and a mind of the body and a chiasm between them.” It is doubtful that anyone else in the Western philosophical tradition has gone further than Merleau-Ponty in the effort to overcome mind-body dualism, in the effort to weave mind and body together, and in a way that overcomes the antinomies that mind-body dualism tenaciously presents. Here we explicitly see that the mind is the body’s aware opening out upon the world. Or, again, the mind as the body’s other side is “to be understood not, as in objective thought, in the sense of another projection of the same flat projection system, but in the sense of Ueberstieg [overflowing a limit or boundary] of the body toward a depth, a dimensionality that is not that of extension, and a transcendence of the negative toward the sensible.” The mind is the body’s ek-stace, is the body’s aware “leaping out of itself,” an opening out upon the world with which it partially blends but that transcends or runs beyond it. The body, as mind, opens out upon the world with awareness, just as this world rebounds back upon the aware body to reinforce its existence as a body, as a body among other bodies of the world, as a body capable of being perceived from the outside. The mind is the body’s aware opening out upon the world, and the body is a being that is aware of itself as a worldly being existing among other worldly beings. The human body is aware of itself as an embodied being that is aware of other embodied beings, and it is aware that it can be perceived by other embodied beings. The mind and body fold into one another and define one another, i.e., the aware body, the sensing, and the body as sensed, fold into one another and define one another. Moreover, it is by means of this fold that the chiasm or crisscrossing into one another of the surface of the body and the surface of the world occurs. It is the blending of these two surfaces that Merleau-Ponty calls flesh (VI 259, my bracket addition).

Yet, as we have seen, even though the mind and body crisscross into one another, they never completely blend or coincide. The body as seer and the body as seen are not identical. They are the same, Merleau-Ponty says, only in a structural sense. They have the “same inner framework, the same Gestalthafte, the same in the sense of openness of another dimension of the ‘same’ being” (VI 261). Merleau-Ponty describes what he calls the “existentials” of experience as “the armature of the
transcendental field,” as a lived through perceptual (not conceptual) framework to which both the experiencing body and the world contribute. These “existentials” reveal and are meaningful gestalt forms, forms that are greater than the mere sum of their parts, forms that are meaningful wholes (See VI 171, 257). The experience of being, then, is “inflated with non-being or with the possible,” and this means that being “is not only what it is. The Gestalthafte, if one really wanted to define it, would be that. The very notion of Gestalt— if one wishes to define it in its own terms and not a contrario, as ‘what is not’ the sum of the elements— is that” (VI 180-181). Thus, when looking at the relationship between the mind (the body as seer) and the body (the body as seen), we must understand that they share the same Gestalthafte, that each is a part of the same “existential,” that each is a side (obverse and reverse) of the same “existential,” and that, in this case, each side of the “existential” resides in the same being. Yet they are different; they are different dimensions of the same being. The mind is the body’s aware opening out upon and active, meaningful orientation toward the world, and the body (as object) is this world (and other human beings in it) reflecting and looking back at the body as an active, meaningful orientation, with both poles of this experience (one more “subjective” and one more “objective”) manifesting in the same existential or orientational structure, yet in different ways (VI 261).

This is certainly a way of overcoming the mind-body problem presented as a dualism of substances or as a property dualism, with substances or qualities that are so different from each other that they cannot possibly be related to each other. Merleau-Ponty has redefined mind and body in such a way that their relationship to each other is not so problematic. His definitions here even help us overcome another problem: the recognition of the other. Since I am no longer a pure mind, given privately only to myself, and since I am no longer just a body in-itself, since I am now intentionally oriented toward the world through my active body, as the other is as well, when I see another human being, or when the other perceives me, we both perceive another bodily orientation toward the world that is meaningful. Moreover, since our similar orientations open upon a public field in similar ways, we are able to capture a glimpse of what the other perceives. Again, I am here able to recognize the other’s meaningful orientation toward the world as similar to my own but I also recognize it as existing in its own right. In fact, this is just what the recognition of the other requires, the recognition of sameness, of a common humanity, and the recognition of difference, of an aware human being that is not just a projection of my own interior (or, rather, that is not just the introjection of my interior into the interior of the other). In the same way, just as there is a lateral overlapping of the self and other, of my experience as it is oriented toward the world with the other’s experience as it is oriented toward this same world in similar ways, so also there is an overlapping of my embodied experience and my embodiment as it is experienced by others. They are not separate, but fold in upon one another. They are better understood as different sides of the same being.
Flesh Tracing Merleau-Ponty’s development of the idea of the flesh in the posthumous text, we are able to find additional comments relevant to the overcoming of mind-body dualism. We have seen numerous times that Merleau-Ponty asks the following question: how is it that the world only appears at the end of my gaze and yet also presents itself as existing in itself? As we have already seen, here in The Visible and Invisible he provides a direct answer: “it is that the look is itself incorporation of the seer into the visible” (VI 131). Our only access to the world is through our bodies, through our bodily perception of it, and yet the only way the human body can see or touch is to be seen or touched. To be able to touch, one must be capable of being touched. To be capable of being touched, one must have or rather be a body, and be a body in a world of other embodied beings. “The body,” Merleau-Ponty says, “unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation . . .” (VI 136)

We have seen that “it is the body and it alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves” (VI 136). As we have also just seen, the body is a sensible mass, it is a thing (a thing that can be seen, like the things of the world) and it is a mass that is sensible, a mass that can sense, a mass that opens out upon a field of sensible things of which it is a part. This mass that is sensible (i.e., that senses) is aware of itself by segregation from that upon which it opens, by a reflexivity of the body that touches because it is aware of being touched from the outside, that is aware of its existence in the “outside” world, but that is also segregated from it because of this awareness, because it is not just a thing, and because it is aware that this outside is aware of it, can see and touch it. “We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself . . . [the human body is a] double belongingness to the order of the ‘object’ and to the order of the ‘subject’ . . .” (VI 137, my bracket addition). It is this double belongingness that helps us understand the “unity” of the embodied subject and the world.

“There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself surrounded by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact— as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them.” (VI 139)

Because of the body’s ontological structure, it is able to experience itself as perceiving and as part of the perceived world, and it is aware of the former because it is aware of the latter. The body can touch because it is aware of being touched, because it is aware of being part of a world that touches it. Moreover, it is at the juncture of the body as touching and the body as touched by the world that meaning is formed. In
addition, as we have just seen, it is this “unity” of the embodied subject and the world that allows us to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by the flesh. He continues. “It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh, and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it. The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings . . . Nor is it a representation for a mind: a mind could not be captured by its own representations; it would rebel against this insertion into the visible which is essential to the seer.” (VI 140) Here, again, we see Merleau-Ponty eschewing typical dualistic explanations, or, in this case, answers typically given by what might be construed as reductionistic materialism, on the one hand, and an omnipresent rationalism, on the other. He continues to emphasize his alternative to these views. “The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatiotemporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.” (VI 140-141) The flesh, then, since it is an intertwining of the embodied subject and the world, is an oriented world, yet we also see here that it is the world that remains primary.

“For if there is flesh, that is, if the hidden face of the cube radiates forth somewhere as well as does the face I have under my eyes, and coexists with it, and if I who see the cube also belong to the visible, I am visible from elsewhere, and if I and the cube are together caught up in one same ‘element’ . . ., this cohesion, this visibility by principle, prevails over every momentary discordance. In advance every vision or very partial visible that would here definitively come to naught is not nullified (which would leave a gap in its place), but, what is better, it is replaced by a more exact vision and a more exact visible, according to the principle of visibility, which, as though through a sort of abhorrence of a vacuum, already invokes the true vision and the true visible, not only as substitutes for their errors, but also as their explanation, their relative justification, so that they are, as Husserl says so aptly, not erased, but ‘crossed out’. . .” (VI 141)

There is no definitively correct perception, yet the visible remains an ever-present horizon that particular perceptions always remain within, even when shown to be wrong. Moreover, even though a particular perception may be called into question, this occurs because another perception has shown it to be so. Thus when a particular perception is called into question, this does not mean that all perceptions (or perception itself) should be doubted, for, as we have just seen, it is on the basis of a clearly given perception that another is dismissed and, it should again be stressed, every dismissal of a particular perception always occurs within the context of the always already present field of the visible. Furthermore, as we have also just seen, the world’s existence, its existing in its own right, appears through the visible. Or, in other words, we necessarily experience the world though our own embodied perception. The world that appears is the visible world, which presupposes a perceiver, yet what appears through the visible appears as existing in its own right.
Here we should once again mention, as Merleau-Ponty does, the attempt to avoid anthropomorphizing, even while introducing the notion of “flesh of the world.” Here we should stress that when he uses the term flesh to describe the world, he does not mean to say that the world is self-sensing, but that it is intertwined with the flesh and embodiment of the human body, while still remaining primary, and that the world is an open horizon, is a Gestalt structure, with stable but also open-ended and implied meanings, a global whole that is greater than a mere sum of its parts, an open structure that provides a multitude of possibilities. Again, the world is an open (Gestalt) being, yet this being requires an embodied, open subject to more fully reveal and realize it (VI 136).

Given the topic at hand, i.e., the possible resolution of the mind-body problem, we should ask if the concept of the flesh gets us any closer to this resolution. We have seen that it was explicitly developed to overcome the subject/object dualism prevalent in Western philosophy, for embodied awareness and the surface of the world cross into one another, and to overcome the self/other dualism also prevalent in Western philosophy, for, since embodied awareness opens upon a worldly field of which it is already a part, individual awareness is experienced as part of a common field that is open to the experience of others. This notion of the flesh thus provides a plausible way to think of mind and worldly bodies, as well as self and others, in non-dualistic terms.

“Working Notes” Finally, we should turn briefly to “Working Notes” of The Visible and the Invisible. Merleau-Ponty states that in his “Working Notes” that he must “disclose little by little— and more and more—the ‘wild’ or ‘vertical’ world,” and this means that he must “show the intentional reference of Physics to Physis, of Physis to life [or biology], of life to the “psycho-physical” [or the human]… (VI 177, my bracket additions). Two points should be stressed here. First, when Merleau-Ponty states that he is concerned with moving from Physics to Physis, he means that he wants to move from the study of physics as a study of physical being as it is in-itself to the study of physical being as it is revealed via lived through perception, and he makes the same claim with respect to the study of biology and humanity, that each much be approached by way of lived through perception and not studied merely as an object in-itself. (See VI 166-167) Secondly, he argues that each “level” (nature, life, and human life) anticipates (pre-figures and develops towards) the others, with the latter “levels” taking up the former, developing them further, and in such a way that helps clarify the preceding levels, creating a sort of circularity of understanding. (VI 177-178) Again, each of these “levels” will require the use of Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenological method of understanding, each “level” will require our lived through perceptual, sensual, empathic embrace of that which is being studied (VI 178). To a very large extent we have already seen this accomplished in his lectures that came to be published under the title of Nature. (See above) He adds here as well, though, that he will also have to take into account the role of language—which we have also seen briefly above. Here, in the “Working Notes,” he states that speech envelops the alleged silent coincidence. In other words,
there is no complete coincidence of linguistic description and lived through perceptual experience, for speech is being used to creatively express our perceptual encounter with the world. We realize that our linguistic descriptions of our lived through experience uses language creatively, and as such influences the articulation of what is being described, but we also realize that these linguistic descriptions are describing something, something that is really there and that presents itself as existing in its own right. This is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s use of the *fundierung* relation in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where perception acts as the motivation for the linguistic interpretation that is nevertheless needed to bring the perceptual suggestion to a more precise expression (PhP 127, 394). In both the earlier and later text, then, language plays a role in bringing perceptual meaning more fully to light. There is no pure perceptual meaning with which language and reflection simply coincide. Yet there is perceptual meaning, there is something there for language to try express. Because of the open-ended ambiguity of perception, many different linguistic interpretations are possible, and, yet, because perception also presents stable perceptual forms (not fixed, precise essences, which are, in fact, a product of abstract thought accomplished by the use of language) some interpretations are better than others, those that help us clarify the perceptual forms before us and that help articulate them more precisely.

Returning to the “Working Notes,” we should take note of Merleau-Ponty’s comments about Albert Michotte’s work, for they further clarify what Merleau-Ponty means by the flesh of the world. Michotte states (consistent with the perceptual principles of Gestalt psychology) that the appearance of volume in a flat, two-dimensional image is a common feature of perceptual experience: “. . . there can be no question that we do see the depicted objects as extended in depth, that there is the appearance of relief in a perspective picture.” While it is true, that when some subjects are shown flat figures drawn on a page before them, they sometimes see only flat, two-dimensional patterns. Yet it is also easy for them to see these lines, now in perceptive, as a parallelepiped, as a figure with apparent volume in three-dimensional space. Moreover, he proceeds, this happens at the level of perceptual experience itself and is not the result of the rationalist’s intellectual judgment or the empiricist’s projection of memories. It is thus relatively easy to see that in general perception opens out to a voluminous field, to a field that includes open-ended and referential perceptual patterns, to a field of possibilities in an unlimited horizon.

Merleau-Ponty proceeds. “My body is a *Gestalt* and it is co-present in every *Gestalt*.” The human body displays, or rather *is*, a Gestalt structure. As we have seen, it is a whole greater than the sum of its parts. It is an aware functioning system, a global whole, an ensemble in movement. My body “also, and eminently, is a heavy signification, it is flesh;” The human body displays, or rather *is*, a signification that is heavy, that has weight, substance, flesh---because it is formed in the lived relationships between the sensing, sensual body and an *embodied world*. “[T]he system [the human body] constitutes is ordered about a central hinge or a pivot which is openness to . . .” The Gestalt structure of the human body is formed in
relation to the field of the world as it helps form, along with the world, the Gestalt structure of experience. Since these structures are open to the possibility of change, and, yet, since they are also bound to the human body as it is bound to the world, the freedom of future possibilities are bound possibilities. Again, since the human body participates in every Gestalt, “the flesh of the Gestalt (the grain of the color, the indefinable something that animates the contour or which, in Michotte’s experiments, animates the rectangle that “creeps”21) is what responds to its inertia, to its insertion in a ‘world’ . . .” The Gestalt structure is meaningful; it is even animated; it is “alive” with meaning, and this “implies the relation between a perceiving body and a sensible, i.e. transcendent i.e. horizontal i.e. vertical and not perspectival world.” Perception is not a simple collection of discrete sense data passively received, or a simple summed up collection of discrete perspectives, but, rather, is an active, lived through, needful, sensual, aesthetic opening out upon a sensual world that can be both pleasurable and painful. This being the case, we must see that the Gestalt “is a diacritical, oppositional, relative system whose pivot is the Etwas [something], the thing, the world, and not the idea.” Yet this perceptual something is the basis for the idea, for that which comes to be sublimated by language. “The idea is the Etwas upon which the body is centered no longer qua sensible but qua speaking.” Moreover, perception must be understood not as an intellectual representation before a detached, pure mind but as the body’s opening out upon, and relationship to, the world. Again, this means that the perceiver, i.e., the perceiving body, i.e., that to which the perception appears, must not be understood as a pure mind, or as a pure nothingness, but as “an inscription in an open register,” as a structured orientation in a field of possible orientations (VI 205-206, my bracket addition).

Further on in the “Working Notes” Merleau-Ponty again stresses that “the feeling that one feels, the seeing one sees, is not a thought of seeing or of feeling, but vision, feeling, mute experience of a mute meaning . . .” (VI 249) Even more, “the reflexivity of the body, the fact that it touches itself touching, sees itself seeing, does not consist in surprising a connecting activity behind the connected, in reinstalling oneself in this constitutive activity; the self-perception…or perception of perception does not convert what it apprehends into an object and does not coincide with a constitutive source of perception . . .” Once again, we witness here the attempt to avoid the representational view of consciousness of Descartes and the Modernist philosophy that he helped create. The awareness of one’s own experience, the awareness of oneself as an experiencer, certainly does not necessarily imply a detached mind or intellect that constitutes all experience. There is no need here to posit a transcendental ego that rationally constructs experience. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the awareness of one’s own experience, the awareness of oneself an experiencer, is never complete, for the reflected upon always slips away in time. As he puts it, “I do not entirely succeed...in seeing myself seeing, the experience I have of myself perceiving does not go beyond a sort of imminence, it terminates in the invisible, simply this invisible is its invisible . . .” (VI 249) The awareness of oneself is still primarily a perception, not an act of abstract intellectual reflection. The perception reveals,
or even is, an original presentation of an absence, reveals “a non-visible, myself.” In the lived through act of perception, human beings have the capacity to be aware of the perception, have a sort of fringe or marginal capacity to perceive the act perceiving. Yet, this is not yet an intellectual act of reflection that turns the act of perceiving into an object held fully before consciousness and that posits this consciousness as a constituting activity behind the perceptual activity that is responsible for it (VI 249-250). Here again we see Merleau-Ponty redefining or, rather, providing a more accurate description of mind. “My invisibility for myself does not result from my being a positive mind,…an existence as consciousness (i.e. as pure appearing to self), it comes from the fact that I am he who: 1) has a visible world, i.e. a dimensional body, and open to participation; 2) i.e. a body visible for itself; 3) and therefore, finally, a self-presence that is an absence from self.” (VI 250) The experiencer (i.e., the mind) is not a positive thing, is not describable as a noun, but is a lived through act, a lived through act that we can never fully capture as a reflected upon object precisely because its primary mode of existence is that of a lived through act. True, reflection is aware of the awareness in the original act, of the experiencer who is aware, but it can never fully capture this experiencer in its lived through act of awareness. Thus, the awareness of the experiencer always remains partially absent, even from our mute awareness of it. Moreover, the mute awareness of one’s own mute experience is also aware that this experience is embodied, or, even more, that the primary mute awareness is the body’s aware opening out upon the world, and is thus aware of itself as a part of this world and, subsequently, is visible within it. Here again we have a rather radical redefining of the mind and body. Rather than being a for-itself set over against a completely different in-itself, mind is the body’s aware opening out upon the world, while the body is seen as an aware orientation toward the world.

Further discussing the role of the experiencing body, in place of the transcendental, rational ego of Modernism, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make one of his most important claims in The Visible and Invisible. “The progress of the inquiry toward the center is not the movement from the conditioned unto the condition, from the founded unto the Grund: the so-called Grund is Abgrund. But the abyss one thus discovers is not such by lack of ground, it is upsurge of a Hoheit [highness] which supports from above (tient par le haut) (cf. Heidegger, Unterwegs zur Sprache), that is, of a negativity that comes to the world” (VI 250, my bracket addition).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, we are not to move, as Kant did, from the experience of the world back to the formal conditions that make this experience possible. We are to understand our experience of the world, as Heidegger suggests, as an opening out upon and being within this world. Our experience provides a vertical openness upon the voluminosity of the world, an openness upon the fullness of being that we exist within, rather than upon the flattened out geometrical representation of the world of the Cartesian coordinate system or the logical representation of the world of Kant’s transcendental categories, both of which appear
in consciousness. This openness out to and participation in the fullness of being is what language, when properly used, should attempt to express.

We have witnessed above that a theory of perception, especially if we consider Michott’s contributions, must include an awareness of the contributions of the perceiving subject, for we are now aware that the perceptual field “lights up” with meaning, that it is “alive”, that the world has a meaningful surface, that it has a sensual surface, that it has flesh. Yet, again, Merleau-Ponty is careful of anthropomorphizing the flesh of the world. “The flesh of the world is not self-sensing (se sentir) as is my flesh-----It is sensible and not sentient. I call it flesh nonetheless (for example, the relief, depth, ‘life’ in Michotte’s experiments\(^\text{23}\) in order to say that it is a pregnancy of possibles, \emph{Weltmoglichkeit} (the possible worlds variants of this world, the world beneath the singular and the plural) that it is therefore absolutely not an object, that the \emph{blosse Sache} mode of being is but a partial and second expression of it” (VI 250, my bracket addition) We must not regard the world as a bare or pure thing (for this an abstraction from our lived through, embodied encounter with the world) but, rather, as a horizon alive with possibilities, as a horizon with which my body always remains in contact even as it runs beyond me both temporally and spatially. In my lived through embodied experience of the world, my embodiment blends with the embodiment of the world. Within my lived through embodied experience of the world, with both the world and my body contributing to the meaning of experience (for they meet and partially blend), the flesh of my embodiment blends with the embodiment (the “flesh”) of the world. Again, Merleau-Ponty is careful to distinguish his view of the flesh of the world from a position that attributes life to all forms of matter, hylozoism. “This is not hylozoism: inversely, hylozoism is a conceptualization------A false thematization, in the order of the explicative-Entity, of our experience of carnal presence.” It is our lived through sensual blending with the world that gives the impression of flesh of the world. It is thus inaccurate to project, from an abstract conceptual level, the concept of life into all forms of matter, for this goes well beyond what is given in our lived through experience. Moreover, it is being as it is lived or experienced that finally provides us with our understanding of our body as lived.

“It is by the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body (\emph{corps propre})--- The flesh of the world is of the Being-seen, i.e. is a Being that is eminently \emph{percipi} [perceived], and it is by it that we can understand the \emph{percipere} [perceiving]: this perceived that we call my body applying itself to the rest of the perceived, i.e. treating itself as a perceived by itself and hence as a perceiving, all this is finally possible and means something only because there is Being, not Being in itself…but the Being that also contains its negation, its \emph{percipi} [its being perceived] . . .” (VI 250-251, my bracket additions).

For Merleau-Ponty, then, Being is \emph{perceived} Being, it is an open \emph{horizon} (not a discrete thing) that includes the perceiver, that the perceiver experiences itself as being within. Perceived Being and the perceiving that reveals it are given simultaneously, yet, Merleau-Ponty says, there is a slippage of perceived Being beyond the act of perceiving, for perceived Being slips beyond, both temporally and spatially, the act of perception.
The investigation of the “Working Notes” fully confirms Merleau-Ponty’s move away from mind-body dualism and toward a new ontology of both the human body and the world. The world must be understood as a multifaceted being that reveals itself in multifaceted ways and in different levels, yet in ways and through levels that overlap and cross into one another. Moreover, the human body must be understood as a prototype of being, a typical model of being. It cannot be understood as just a thing but must be grasped as a dimensional this, as a body that is also an opening out upon and directedness toward the world. The human body as mind is this aware opening out and directedness toward the world (and not a pure for-itself), while the human body as body is seen as a meaningful orientation toward the world and others (and not as a thing purely in-itself).

**From Perception to language** We will see the relationship between perception and language addressed thoroughly below, in the next chapter, yet it should be briefly treated here in the context of the mind-body problem. How, we should here ask, does language express our perceptual contact with the world? To answer this question, we must first address the possibility of intersubjectivity. It has often been said, Merleau-Ponty reports, that we cannot experience another person’s experience. Yet, he proceeds, this is not entirely true, for if we treat consciousness not as a private awareness of an internally given representation but as the body’s openness out upon the world, then our experiences meet and overlap to in the world, like two searchlights illuminating a single field (See SB 185-186). True, I can never literally live what another lives in the first person, but our respective lived through experiences can overlap in the world, at the object, at the foreground of an object presented within a common field. My perceptions are not mine alone, for they open upon, participate within, and are a part of a common public field. Thus, just as there is a crisscrossing of the perceiver and the perceived, so also there is a crisscrossing of my perceptions with those that are lived through by others. Also, just as there is a crisscrossing of an act of perception and the perceived, so also there is a crisscrossing of speaking and hearing. My vocalizations open upon a shared world of sound, which echoes back upon my speech. In other words, my vocalizations are a part of a public world that I live and participate within. Moreover, just as my vocalizations can be heard by others in the common field of sound, so also the other’s speech has a vocal, motor echo within me. It is this crisscrossing of acts of speech, of mine with those articulated by other and of theirs with mine, that shared thoughts can appear as sublimated from the world of perception. “Speech,” Merleau-Ponty says, “prolongs into the invisible, extends unto the semantic operations, the belongingness of the body to being . . .” (VI 118). This, of course, means that speech is not generated *ex nihilo* but that it sublimates our embodied, perceptual encounter with the world and our interactions with each other as we attempt to adapt to it together. How does this occur? Here is Merleau-Ponty tentative answer. “However we finally have to understand [the relationship between perceptual ideality and the “pure” ideality of thought], the ‘pure’ ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things, and, however new it is,
it slips through ways it has not traced, transfigures horizons it did not open, it derives from the fundamental mystery of those notions… that lead their shadowy life in the night of the mind only because they have been divined at the junctures of the visible world . . .” (VI 152-153, my bracket addition) Again, speech and abstract thought are a sublimation of our active, practical, embodied, perceptual, sensual encounter with the world. Yet, we must still ask, as Merleau-Ponty does, “what, across the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects, wishes, speaks, and finally thinks” (VI 176). Merleau-Ponty’s answers this question with an appeal to (his own rather unique) understanding of Saussure’s linguistics, for this understanding allows us to grasp how the social institution of language crosses into the lives of individuals and well as vice versa, rather than treating social institutions as objective social facts set in opposition to the pure consciousness of isolated individual subjects. Language as a system of meaningful symbols is taken up by the individuals who are born into it. The system is composed of already available symbols and significations but these significations would not exist without the aware individuals who take them up, carry them forward, and sometimes reinterpret them according to their own immediate experience, immediate needs, and future goals. We must insert ourselves, Merleau-Ponty says, into a social situation if we wish to understand it. We must be sensitive to it and try to live it as others are attempting to do. We must try to grasp the relationship between the individuals within it and the social institutions and symbolic systems (social rules, sanctions, norms, conventions, etc., usually expressed in language but sometimes only implied) that governs their interaction. We must try to understand how individuals interact with each other within the confines and constraints of various social institutions and symbolic systems, how individuals negotiate with each within the constraints of various social institution, which contain expressed rules and roles for interaction and change. More generally, we must try to understand society as a system in movement, as a gestalt whole that is composed of individuals but that is more than just a sum of individuals, as a meaningful whole within which individuals interact, that individuals take up, to express themselves and be heard, and sometimes to bring about change. Here again, because language crosses into and exists within the mind of the individual, and because the individual exists within various social institutions, especially the institution of language, Merleau-Ponty believes he has found and expressed a way to overcome the dualism of subject and object, mind and body.

**Summary** Merleau-Ponty certainly does not accept mind-body dualism in the sense of a dualism of substances. Nor would he accept the Behaviorist’s reductionistic claim that the mind should be treated only as a third-person reading of another’s overt behavior. In fact, this third-person observation, for Merleau-Ponty, reveals a bodily orientation that helps us gain access to the interior, intentional orientation of an aware body subject. We have seen that, to understand human behavior, some appeal must be made to the lived through awareness of the experiencing subject, and that, even though conscious perceptual events are rooted in neurophysiological events, the conscious perceptual events bear qualities that are irreducible to
them. Moreover, this means that, in the context of the mind-body problem, mind cannot be understood as a simple causal product of neurophysiological events. Furthermore, rather than adhering to the dualism of the mind for-itself and the body in-itself, rather than defining them as totally distinct categories, Merleau-Ponty argues that we must see them as different but also as overlapping. The mind (especially perceptual consciousness) must be understood as the body’s aware orientation toward the world, while the human body must be understood as an embodied orientation toward the world (an embodied orientation that is aware). The mind and body are the same in the sense that they share an orientational structure, yet each from its own side. We have seen that this leads us to the concept of the flesh, to the idea of the flesh as that which is formed as the aware, active, oriented body opens out to and meets the forceful patterns of the world. It is this flesh that is greater than either of its parts, even though it requires both to exist, and it is this flesh that helps us overcome the mind-body dualism. For we can see that they are fundamentally related, since each is one side of the other, i.e., each is a part of a greater (gestalt) whole.

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty first addresses the mind-body problem in *The Structure of Behavior*, but he refines his treatment of the topic throughout his academic career and in subsequent philosophical texts, particularly in *Phenomenology of Perception, Nature*, and *The Visible and the Invisible*. We are now in a position to provide a brief summary of what we have learned from each of these texts.

In *The Structure of Behavior* we saw the mind-body problem can be expressed as follows: “consciousness is [understood to be] a function of the body,” and yet we also realize that “all external events are known by consciousness,” or, to put this in the form of a question, how is it that consciousness is understood as the result of external physical events, and yet that these external events can only be known via consciousness? Ultimately the mind-body problem is a perceptual problem, for perception reveals a duality of structure and signification. Perception reveals the concrete structure of the perceived and reveals it where it rests, in its place, and yet perception also reveals a meaning that can become the basis for more abstract thought. We solve the problem of this duality by grasping the relationship between the flow of perspectives, within which the world is given as existing on its own, as they appear to the perceiver, by grasping the relationship between these perspectives and that which is given within them, and by grasping the relationship between the meanings formed in an individual’s perceptual perspectives with those formed in the perceptual perspectives experienced by others, and by grasping the relationship between the meanings formed in an individual’s perceptual perspectives with those formed in the perceptual perspectives experienced by others, including those experiences of the first individual seen from the outside. Obviously, this is no small task, but at least the parameters for the task have been set before us.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* we observed that the subjective is not to be treated as a pure for-itself, and that the objective is not to be treated as a pure in-itself, for by defining mind and body so “exclusively” we are unable to relate them to one another; we cannot bring them together in any meaningful
way. Rather, the subjective must be understood as the human body’s aware perceptual opening upon a world that is always already there, while the objective must be woven out of perceptual perspectives, out of perspectives that reveal a world as existing in its own right, out of perceptual perspectives which are given within me as my perception opens actively upon the world and which are given to others as we actively open upon the world and attempt to adapt to it together.

This means that bodily perception must be understood existentially, i.e., it must be understood as an aware, operative orientation toward the world, while consciousness must be understood as a meaningful bodily orientation toward the world. The human body has two dimensions or two sides, a subjective side and an objective side, that cross into one another and work together. Again, the relationship between the mind and body cannot be grasped as a pure in-itself related to a pure for-itself but must be seen as a relationship between the body as perceiving and the body as perceived, and, as we have already seen in *The Structure of Behavior*, these experiences must be correlated. Here in *Phenomenology of Perception*, though, this correlation is integrated with the experience of time, for Merleau-Ponty now asserts that the relationship between the mind and body must be understood within the context of a temporal structure. The stabilized structures of the past that were given in my perceptual experiences of a really existing world, and the perceptual experiences lived through by others (including their experience of my body), must be carried forward toward the future in my experience in the present (the “subjective”) and coordinated with the present experiences lived through by others (the intersubjective or the “objective”). To relate the mind and body, we must correlate the experiences lived through by the embodied subject from the inside with the intersubjective reports of the perceptions of this experiencing embodied subject seen from the outside, over time, with the realization that the two experiences will never completely coincide. Moreover, we must attempt to do this by assessing the greater or lesser clarity and adaptability of the perceptions in question.

In *Nature* we observed that the living organism and its environment must be taken together, must be seen as mutually or co-determining. Also, when considering the global life of the species, we realize that nothing happens without a physicochemical foundation but also that the physicochemical alone cannot explain global function and species repair. Rather than a pure in-itself causally determining what appears in the mind for-itself, we must grasp perceptual experience as rooted in the body’s physicochemical functions but as also being irreducible to them. We must thus attempt to understand human experience globally, as gestalt whole, if you will, as a whole that is an integration of body and mind. Merleau-Ponty had already outlined a sort of emergent materialism in *The Structure of Behavior*, but goes further here in *Nature*, for the latter text very carefully considers the evolutionary development of the human body. The human body is a unique species and possesses a unique way of being-in-the-world. True, the human species shares many features with other animal and living species, including those from which it evolved, yet its features include capacities unique to it. The human species manifests a new way of being embodied. The
human species manifests a body that is able to more fully perceive itself perceiving. Moreover, it is the body as perceiving and the body as perceived (rather than a pure mind for-itself and a pure object in-itself) that will help us solve the mind-body problem, for the mind and body are no longer defined in a way that makes them mutually exclusive. Mind and body are two halves of a whole, with mind understood as the body’s aware relationship to the world and with the body now grasped as an oriented, and thus aware, relationship toward the world.

And finally, we observed the following in The Visible and the Invisible: vision reveals an object where it rests, as existing in its own right, and yet this object only appears through our perceptual gaze. How is this possible? We have witnessed Merleau-Ponty earlier work moving toward the answer that he now provides more fully developed. It is possible because the body as touching and the body as touched, the body as perceiving and the body perceived, cross into one another, and this is possible because we now fully understand that the body is a “two-dimensional being.” As we have seen, The Visible and the Invisible expresses this point as follows. The body is a sensible mass (a mass that can be sensed), and as such is at one with all things, is one of them, and the body is a mass that senses, is the embodied being that opens out upon (because it senses) a field of beings within which it exists, is the embodied being that is aware that it is a part of this field of beings, a field that exists in its own right, a field of beings that reflects back upon it because it is aware that it can be seen as one of them. The human body is aware of its own embodiment as it is aware of and is in contact with the embodiment of other beings. It is because of the ontology of the human body that it is capable of uniting these two properties within itself: it is aware of itself as an experiencing being existing among other beings, and it is aware that it is in contact with these beings where they rest. In fact, the human body is this double belongingness, a belongingness to the world and to that which reveals it, to the “objective” and the “subjective.” It is a “two-dimensional being.”

It is through this double belongingness, this lived through blending of the experiencing embodied subject with the embodiment of the world, that a meaning is formed that is greater than either of the two primary parts. Again, as the perceiving body actively opens upon the world, and as the world’s open, ambiguous, and yet also stable patterns (or structures) fold back upon the perceiving body, meaning is formed. This meaning, which has an embodied weight, because of the embodiment of both the perceiver and the world, Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh. It is defined as a sort of element, as a sort of field halfway between the concrete individual and abstract ideas, that both the individual and the idea exist within. It is an oriented field, and it is so because it is created by the coming together of the perceiver and the perceived, by the cohesion of the perceiver and the perceived, by their working together. This cohesive working together overcomes the mind-body dualism that sets the pure mind for-itself over against a pure thing in-itself, for mind and body are now understood as intertwined, for the mind is now understood as the body’s aware openness upon the world, while the body is grasped as an oriented (and thus an aware) being, as a
being that displays an operative intentional relationship to its surroundings. The body as a meaningful subjective orientation toward the world and the body as an oriented bodily structure are two sides of the same being.

Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, when discussing a general theory of truth, we approach the truth (as an approximation of what is) with an agreement of clarifying perceptual perspectives or profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon and engage with the really existing world, and of mine with those perceptual perspectives lived through by others as we actively open upon and adapt to the world together, and do so, over time, with the assistance of a language that is more clarifying than the alternatives and that more clearly assists our adaptation to nature and each other. We must attempt to develop a theory that more accurately articulates (using language, of course) our mutual attempts to more clearly perceive the world and that more clearly assists our attempts to adapt to it together. Thus, when discussing the relationship between mind and body within the context of this theory, we approach the truth with an agreement of clarifying perceptual perspectives or profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon and engage with the really existing world, and of mine with those perceptual perspectives lived through by others as we actively open upon and adapt to the world together, and an agreement of my perceptual perspectives of my own body as I perceive myself with those who perceive me from the outside, over time, using the most clarifying language that we can find and develop.

Consequences and applications: We should again stress that Merleau-Ponty regards nature as multifaceted, that he argues against reductionistic materialism, as well as a nature flattened out in the abstract categories of rationalism. His position can perhaps be characterized as an emergent materialism, with quantitative changes giving rise to new properties or new ways of being, or, better yet, as a “double aspect” theorist, for the unified human body reveals a subjective and objective side, with, more generally, the flesh appearing as the flesh of the world, which is primary and is always found to be already present, and as the flesh of the human body, whose awareness is needed to more fully articulate the world’s being. These general labels can be useful . . . but also abstract and subsequently misleading. Thus, let us set them aside, stressing rather that Merleau-Ponty certainly does not argue for a unified theory of nature, i.e., that all of nature (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) be explained by a single theory with a single set of basic principles or algorithms, but, instead, that it must be regarded as revealing itself in a wide variety of ways. To this point, Robert Vallier, the translator of Merleau-Ponty’s Nature, mentions that he usually translated the French feuillet as “leaf” but that feuillet also means “folio-leaf”, i.e., a large sheet of paper folded in half multiple times to create the pages of a book. As Vallier expresses it, it seems that Merleau-Ponty understood nature as “a kind of endlessly productive doubling of the basic ‘stuff/powers/structures’ of ‘nature’ into many kinds and orders” (Nature, 305, note7). By tracing the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, we have seen, culminating in The Visible and the Invisible, that nature or Being is that which is
revealed through one of its own, through an embodied perpetual awareness, that nature presents itself as always already there but also as an open-ended, ambiguous, multifaceted horizon, as a horizon that is nevertheless replete with stable and regular patterns (not essences, which are abstract products of language and thought). We have seen that nature manifests and reveals itself in a variety of ways, yet in ways that can still be framed and grasped theoretically. In both *The Structure of Behavior* and *Nature* Merleau-Ponty argues that we must understand nature as revealing itself as three general structures, structures that reveal different qualities that are irreducible to one another. These general structures are: physical, vital, and human.24

Let us turn momentarily to Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of causality in each of these three structures, since this will give us a greater sense of the “practical” implications of his multifaceted theory of nature and his dimensional theory of the human body, and since uncovering casual patterns in nature, life and human behavior makes an important contribution to our attempt to understand them.

First of all, we have seen that he, like the empiricist, roots human knowledge in our perceptual contact with the world. Moreover, he even draws heavily from the sciences, yet even while doing so he remains critical of the typical ontology of the sciences, which is usually reductive, treating everything in nature as reducible to discrete things (or units, or atoms, or subatomic particles, etc.) in external relationships to one another, and of the typical epistemology of the sciences, usually tabula rasa empiricism, with its passive collection of bits of discrete data to be associated externally, which (most generally and even unconsciously) assumes that things are already formed by intellectual abstraction into discrete categories. The ontology typically adhered to by the sciences can thus generally be characterized as post-perceptual and pre-dialectical, since it tends to ignore perception as our lived through, primordial openness upon the world, and to ignore what appears in the world as embedded in a system of relations and overlapping levels.

Yet, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, at least some in the sciences are finding their way beyond at least some of these limitations. For some “physical action is no longer conceived as a trace in absolute time and space, passed on from one absolute individual to the other equally absolute individuals. Physical entities…are no longer seen as ‘natures,’ but as ‘structures in an ensemble of operations’” (TFL 91). And some insist on the use of hypotheses rather than generalizations merely generated from discrete individuals by enumerative induction.

The understanding that is provided by Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenological perception reveals that the simplest perception is a figure against a ground, is a meaningful figure that appears within the context of a meaningful field. Perception reveals meaningful patterns that appear within meaningful contexts, and not just isolated units of matter in external relationships. More specifically, when considering causal patterns in nature, Merleau-Ponty believes that we should look for a balance of mechanical forces, rather than singular chains or sequences of isolated events. Here, he states, when attempting to understand
nature, we should call upon the typical methodologies of the sciences, specifically the construction of hypothesis to help frame and understand nature’s balance of forces, the articulation of dependent and independent variables and their relationships, the use of quantitative measures, and so on. It should be stressed, though, that given what Merleau-Ponty has said above about the \textit{fundierung} relationship between perception and language (and, of course, the language used to articulate hypotheses and, subsequently, theories), i.e., that perception motivates certain interpretations but that these interpretations are needed to express the perceived more precisely, means that hypotheses are definitely needed to grasp and articulate the patterns of nature, and that simple induction by enumeration is unsatisfactory (SB 130-132).

When considering \textit{vital} or \textit{living} structures, Merleau-Ponty does not want to attribute pockets of “indetermination” to the physical universe to explain the appearance of structures (living organisms) that “behave” differently. Rather, he argues, since we clearly see qualitatively different types of structures in the world around us, we must account for them. Living things tend to respond to their environment, not mechanically, but according to the norms of their species. Moreover, we can uncover a species norm simply by “an observation of a preferred attitude, statistically more frequent, which gives a new kind of unity to behavior” (SB 159). In addition, these norms tend to reveal flexible behavioral \textit{attitudes} (such as or aggression or complacency) and not just pre-established biological or neurophysiological mechanisms (SB 149).

Finally, to address \textit{human} structure, we have seen above that the structure of perceptual experience must be understood within the context of an interested embodied subject actively meeting the forceful patterns of the world. Human beings are certainly influenced by physical and vital structures, yet the \textit{meaningful structures} of our perceptual field reveal that we must also recognize the contributions of the \textit{aware}, oriented, embodied subject. When studying human behavior, Merleau-Ponty once again insists on developing hypotheses to do so adequately. For example, while studying the relationship between eye movement exercises and the reduction of anxiety while thinking about an anxiety producing event, a hypothesis must be used to frame the relationship between these variables, with the eye exercises as the independent variable and the anxiety as the dependent variable. A hypothesis must be used when studying human behavior for the same reason that it must be used when studying nature, for the field of study is oriented by an aware, embodied perceiver, in this case by the aware orientation of the psychologist as a third-person observer. Yet it is also clear, certainly in this example, that the subjective state of the research subject, the subject’s stated anxiety as he or she experiences and reports it, must also be taken into account and must be coordinated with the objective third-person observations. (See Low 2015, Bernstein 1994: 19-26) Moreover, we should finally add, the meaning that is experienced by the subject must first be treated as lived-through and only subsequently as that which the subject grasps conceptually.
Merleau-Ponty explicitly stresses that nature, life, and humanity should not be treated as “three orders of events that are external to each other,” as has been done in the Western philosophical tradition. Rather, he has revealed that these regions interact, intertwine and even overlap. (SB 190) Moreover, it is phenomenological perception (rather than some other method, either empiricist or rationalist) that has been able to reveal this overlapping with the greatest clarity and that has been able to reveal, nevertheless, the dominant traits of each region, with quantity dominantly displayed in nature, order (or species norms) displayed in life, and meaning displayed by humanity. Here again, when trying to understand each of these regions, and casual relationships within them, we should keep in mind that they overlap and fold into one another, but also the qualitative differences between them (SB 132-133), and this is true of Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of the mind and body as well, as we have witnessed above.
Chapter 2 Perception Language Relationship

Among the last pages that Merleau-Ponty composed in *The Visible and the Invisible*, just before his untimely death, we find the author stating that it is too soon (in his manuscript) to attempt to clarify the relationship between perceptual meaning and the abstract ideas expressed in language. He does however provide a brief indication of the direction he will take: “the ‘pure’ ideality [of the thought produced with the help of language] already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things, and, however new it is, it slips through ways it has not traced, transfigures horizons it did not open . . .” (VI 152, my bracket addition). It is surely one of the great tragedies of the history of philosophy that Merleau-Ponty did not live to further develop his later philosophy, including this move from perception to language and thought. However, we have not been left empty-handed, for, as just mentioned, Merleau-Ponty later writings do at least provide an indication of the direction of his thought, regarding the perception to thought relationship, and, secondly, since he frequently revisits his earlier works, in order to develop them, his earlier works frequently present a great deal of what he will later develop more fully. Thus, by visiting his earlier writings, we can perhaps fill-in his late outline, especially if we are able to integrate the two.

How are we to understand the relationship between perception and language? First, stated very generally and provisionally, we must recognize that there is a sublimation of the perceptual in language. Or, rather, there is a *fundierung* relationship between perception and language. Perception suggests certain linguistic interpretations, with the latter folding back upon the perceived to help articulate it more precisely. Secondly, and just as generally and provisionally, we must recognize that forms of behavior, including linguistic behavior, i.e., words, phrases, sentences, etc., that help express and coordinate our encounters with the perceived world, can become habitual and thus culturally institutionalized. This means that certain word forms, and the perceptual meanings bound up with them, can be carried forward in time in order to be used as the basis for future expressions. In order to pursue these general insights in greater detail, let us begin with Merleau-Ponty’s early works first, for in this way we will be able to see how the (only briefly outlined) position taken in the later works is prefigured in the early writings and, in fact, is developed from them. The hope here is that the earlier works will shed some light on what is only suggested in the later, posthumously published texts.

For this chapter, Merleau-Ponty’s works (those that will be cited this chapter) can be placed in the following chronological categories. **Middle**: *Phénoménologie de la perception*, published in 1945 (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962). **Middle works transitioning or bridging to the later writings**: “Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” a text submitted for his candidacy at the Collège de France sometime in 1951/1952 (“An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty” in *The Primacy of Perception*,}
“Sur la phénoménology du langage,” published in 1952 (“On the Phenomenology of Language”),
“Le langage indirect et les voix du silence,” also published in 1952 (“Indirect Language and the Voices of
Silence”), with these latter two essays also appearing in Merleau-Ponty’s Signes in 1960 and in the English
Nature: Notes, cours du Collège de France, 1995 (Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France,
2003), compiled from lectures presented from 1956-1960, Le Visible et l’invisible suivi de notes de travail,
published in 1964 (The Visible and the Invisible, 1969), with “Working Notes” for this text dated from
January 1959-March 1961. For a more complete list of Merleau-Ponty’s publications by date see Maurice
Merleau-Ponty and His Critics. The presentation that follows will primarily (with some minor exceptions)
present Merleau-Ponty’s arguments/writings in chronological order, in order to follow the deepening and
development of his thought. For the sake of clarity, the middle and transition writings will be numbered.

1.) Let’s now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s middle and transition writings to see if we can provide some
content to his brief sketch, to what he has only briefly outlined, in his later work. Let us first turn to Part 1
Chapter 6, “The Body as Expression, and Speech,” of Phenomenology of Perception. Here Merleau-Ponty
challenges both the empiricist and rationalist attempt to account for language. Empiricism, he argues,
cannot account for language because it reduces language to a third person, objective process and thus
eliminates the speaking subject. And rationalism, he continues, fails because it claims that thought is
separate from language. Both empiricism and rationalism, he asserts, are here refuted with the claim that
words are infused with meaning, that the word’s themselves have a meaning (PhP 174-177).

Yet how do words possess meaning? First of all, Merleau-Ponty states that “insofar as they [words]
persist within me, it is rather as does the Freudian Imago which is much less the representation of the former
perception than a highly specific emotional essence, which is yet generalized, and detached from its
empirical origins” (PhP180, my bracket addition). Thus words persist in me like an idealized image of my
mother or father, not as an explicit conceptual representation, but as an emotional orientation that has a
specific origin but that is also capable of transference and thus of general application. In addition, just as it
is not necessary for me to form an explicit representation of my body and the world in order for me to move
toward objects within it, so also it is not necessary for me to form an explicit representation of words and
the cultural field within which they exist in order to use them meaningfully. As we have just seen, though
now expressed in a slightly different language, words persist in me as existentials, as lived-through
orientation schemas. They are (or can be) persistent existentials that carry the form and meaning of a word
forward in time. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, for me to use a word meaningfully “it is enough that I possess
its articulatory and acoustic style as one of the modulations of my body” (PhP180, see also 235). In other words, the use of a word is possible because it fits within one of the lived-through uses of my body, one of the uses of its motor abilities (PhP180). It is this active gesturing, this active orientation, this motor orientation, this active vocal gesticulation that helps bring verbal meaning into existence. Just as musical notes and rhythms bring musical meaning into existence, so also verbal gestures, rhythms of expressed words, bring linguistic meaning into existence (See PhP182). Obviously, as I seek to express an experience that is poorly formed and new for me, I am frequently able to do so by adopting and adapting already available forms of expression. “The new sense-giving intention knows itself only by donning already available meanings, the outcome of previous acts of expression. The available meanings suddenly link up in accordance with an unknown law, and once and for all a fresh cultural entity has taken on an existence. Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted . . . ” (PhP183). Thus I can use already available expressions to help express previously unexpressed experiences. Yet the existence of these already available expressions presupposes an initial silence or mute meaning that they have already expressed. We must then return to this silence and trace its articulation in human gestures, particularly in language (See PhP184).

Merleau-Ponty turns to a brief consideration of the origin of language in a section of *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled “The Linguistic Gesture.” Is the meaning of a gesture natural, he asks? After all, everyone knows that the smile expresses joy. Yet, on the other hand, is the meaning of a gesture simply established by convention, he continues? For, after all, many different languages exist, with different expressions for similar meanings. Merleau-Ponty does admit that the conceptual meaning of a word does appear to be arbitrary and thus open to conventional definition. Yet, even here he also states that conventional definitions always presuppose a shared world, with at least some shared meaning and shared forms of communication---for example, that pointing to something and uttering a word means naming it. Furthermore, he continues, arbitrary or strictly conventional definitions would no longer appear feasible “if we took into account the emotional content of the word, which we have called . . . its ‘gestural’ sense, which is all-important in poetry, for example. It would then be found that the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of ‘singing’ the world . . . ” (PhP187-188). Thus we should seek the origin of language in the “emotional gesticulation” that attempts to express our emotional, needful, sensual encounter with the world, while, nevertheless, not simply reducing “language to emotional expression,” that is, to a natural physiological template of emotions, for our “psychophysical equipment” leaves open a wide range of emotional possibilities. There is no simple correlate between our psychophysical equipment and specific emotions or how they are expressed (PhP188-189). Yet, it is still in our perceptual (even sensual), needful, emotional encounter with the world that we should seek the meaning of linguistic gestures. To provide a rather simple example, we might imagine the following situation. A group of early hunter-gathers is hunting
small game along a riverbed when one hunter suddenly sees a lion in the bush and fearfully shouts “yahhh!”
If the other hunters hear and understand the fear in this reaction and see what the first hunter is reacting to,
then this gesture/word conveys a meaning (an animal that represents a threat) that may well become
established or “institutionalized” as the group’s word for (threatening) lion. Now, other expressions
certainly could have been used, other emotional responses could have been elicited (for example, to fight
rather than flight), and there is no single expression or emotion that captures the totality of the meaning of
this encounter. There is no single expression or emotional response that is pre-determined to fit this
encounter. Yet, some expressions certainly seem more appropriate than others, and by and large it is the
expression that most accurately captures this encounter that should be adopted.

As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “everything is both manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in
the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behavior which does not owe something to purely biological
being--and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life, and cause forms of vital
behavior to deviate from their pre-ordained direction, through a sort of leakage and through a genius for
ambiguity which might serve to define man” (PhP189). Behavior, then, expresses meanings that are
inherent in the body’s encounter with the world but that also transcends this encounter (PhP 189). “For
example, the knitting of the brows intended, according to Darwin, to protect the eye from the sun, or the
narrowing of the eyes to enable one to see sharply, become component parts of the human act of meditation,
and convey this to an observer.” Moreover, linguistic behavior should be understood in the same way: “a
contraction of the throat, an . . . emission of air between the tongue and teeth, a certain way of bringing the
body into play suddenly allows itself to be invested with a figurative significance which is conveyed outside
us” (PhP 194). Furthermore, “it is impossible to draw up an inventory of this irrational power which creates
meanings and conveys them. Speech is merely one particular case of it.” There are other cases, such as
musical expression and painting, but language is special case, for “it can be reiterated indefinately” and in
ways that remain impossible for both music and painting (PhP 189-190). “We must therefore recognize as
an ultimate fact this open and indefinite power of giving significance--that is, both of apprehending and
conveying a meaning--by which man transcends himself towards a new form of behavior, or towards other
people, or towards his own thought, through his body and his speech” (PhP 194, my italics).

When analyzing this power, Merleau-Ponty argues that “it cannot be said of speech either that it is
an ‘operation of intelligence’, or that it is a ‘motor phenomenon’: it is wholly motility and wholly
intelligence” (PhP 194). Thus, what is needed is a notion that integrates acts of intelligence and motility.
What is needed is what might be called an existential power of projection, for in certain patients both
intelligence and the power of movement remain intact and yet the use of language by the patient appears
flat and uninvolved.

“ . . . the intention to speak can reside only in an open experience. It makes its appearance like the boiling

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point of a liquid, when, in the density of being, volumes of empty space are built up and move outwards. ‘As soon as man uses language to establish a living relation with himself or with his fellows, language is no longer an instrument, no longer a means; it is a manifestation, a revelation of intimate being and of the psychic link which unites us to the world and our fellow men.’” (PhP 196)

It is this existential power of projection that has declined in certain patients and that helps explain a speech that is wholly motility and wholly intelligence, that helps explain that speech is an operative intentionality, a lived, active, aware, meaningful engagement with the world and others.

2.) In a brief text submitted for his candidacy at the Collège de France sometime in 1951/1952, Merleau-Ponty explicitly remarks that his first two books (The Structure of Behavior and Phenomenology of Perception) attempted to underscore the originality of perceptual meaning and that he was preparing works to “show how communication with others, and thought, take up and go beyond the realm of perception . . .” (PrP 3). Yet he also proceeds to make the following claim.

“[K]nowledge and communication with others which it presupposes not only are original formulations with respect to the perceptual life but also preserve and continue our perceptual life even while transforming it. Knowledge and communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation, and the characteristic operation of the mind is in the movement by which we recapture our corporeal existence and use it to symbolize. . .This metamorphosis lies in the double function of our body. Through its ‘sensory fields’ and its whole organization the body is, so to speak, predestined to model itself on the natural aspects of the world. But as an active body capable of gestures, of expression, and finally of language, it turns back on the world to signify it.” (PrP 7)

Thus we see very early on that Merleau-Ponty was interested in the relationship between perception and language, that it was never a question of considering one or the other but, rather, how they cross into and influence each other, and that it is the double function of the body the will help us understand how this crisscrossing relationship is possible.

3.) We see Merleau-Ponty proceeding to make this effort to understand the relationship between perception and language in his The Prose of the World, which was posthumously published, and in his “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” a published version of parts of The Prose of the World. We should briefly consider these texts, for in both Merleau-Ponty continues to refine and develop the mes he has already broached in earlier texts, now claiming that painting and language are comparable because they are similar as acts of creative expression. Just as the painter takes up light, shadows, and colors and makes them express something new, some new “vision” in his or her experience, so also the writer takes up words, phrases, and common forms of expression to express something new regarding his or her openness upon the world (PW 47-48). Thus, in order to follow artistic expression to other forms of human expression, Merleau-Ponty first turns to a detailed consideration of the act of painting, for it is this creative act that will act as a model for others. The painter’s act, he states, is first and foremost an active form of expression, one that sublimates or sublates (in Hegel’s aufheben sense of lifting up and integrating at a new level) our active perceptual openness upon the world and the structures that are formed therein. The artist’s active, lived-
through style takes up, prolongs, and expresses our active perceptual openness upon the world and does so in way that is more integrated (PW 59-61). Artistic expression articulates our perceptual experience in a more unified way and stable way, but it is, after all, perception that is the first act to unify and stabilize the perceptual field and its objects. “All perception…is already primordial expression. This means that perception is…the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs. Perception makes what is expressed dwell in signs, not through some previous convention but through the eloquence of their very arrangement and configuration” (PW 78; see also ILVS in Signs 67). Again, since it is perception that first actively unifies scattered data into a meaningful whole, that first creates the sign as a sign, it is our perception that provides the basis for both artistic and linguistic expression, for the reference to a unified meaning. Painting and writing are similar because they are both creative acts of expression, prolonging the act of perception. Furthermore, “Art is not imitation . . . It is a process of expressing. Just as the function of words is to name—that is, to grasp the nature of what appears to us in a confused way and to place it before us as a recognizable object—so it is up to the painter . . . to ‘objectify,’ ‘project,’ and ‘arrest’. . . Forgetting the viscous, equivocal appearances, we go through them straight to the things they present. The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.”

There is thus a two-way relationship between expression and perceptual experience. Perceptual structures suggest certain interpretations, yet these interpretive expressions, often creative, are needed to bring the perceptual structures fully to light.

Moreover, since perception is already primordial expression, since “perception already stylizes” (PW 60), the artistic act of painting may be regarded as a sublimation of the artist’s perceptual encounter with the world. Merleau-Ponty underlines this point with an appeal to Husserl. “Husserl has used the fine word Stiftung—foundation, institution—. . . to designate that fecundity of the products of culture which continues to have value after their historical appearance and open a field of work beyond and the same as their own. It is thus that the world as soon as he has seen it, his first act of painting, and the whole past of painting create for the painter a tradition . . .” (PW 68; ILVS 59). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty continues, “it is the expressive operation of the body, begun in the least perception, which amplifies into painting and art . . . The first sketch on the walls of a cave founded a tradition only because it gleaned from another—the tradition of perception” (PW 83). Thus, just as artistic expression is an amplification or prolongation of perceptual experience, so also linguistic expression is an amplification or prolongation of perceptual experience, but at a more abstract level.

Even though Merleau-Ponty characterizes painting and language as similar acts of expression, he does proceed to distinguish them. When I try to calculate the area of a parallelogram, for example, I may first posit that it can be seen as two triangles, and from this structure I am able to derive what is needed for
the calculation, the combined area of the triangles. Seeing the parallelogram as a combination of two triangles does not displace or negate the properties of the parallelogram. “This is not just a substitution of one [specific] meaning for another but a substitution of equivalent meanings, in which the new structure is latent in the old one while remaining present in the new. The past is not simply surpassed, it is understood . . .” (PW 104ff; my bracket addition). Language thus helps us understand the events that preceded it. It is not just a recasting or reshuffling of them. “Heraclitus’ writing casts light for us as no broken statues [or early paintings] can, because its significance is . . . concentrated in another way than theirs is in them, and because nothing equals the ductility of speech. In short, language speaks, and the voices of painting are the voices of silence” (Sign 80-81).

“Thus, when we compare language to mute forms of expression such as gestures or paintings, we must point out that unlike these forms language is not content to sketch out directions, vectors, a ‘coherent deformation’, or a tacit meaning on the surface of the world, exhausting itself as animal ‘intelligence’ does in kaleidoscopically producing a new landscape of action. Language is not just the replacement of one meaning by another, but the substitution of equivalent meanings. The new structure is given as already present in the old, the latter subsists in it, and the past is now understood.” (Signs 81)

We see, then, that painting and language are similar because both embrace and sublimate perceptual meaning but also that language has the power to do this in a way that allows for a greater understanding of what preceded it.

4.) In the series of courses offered at the Collège de France between 1952 and 1960 that came to be published as Themes from the Lectures we find that Merleau-Ponty once again addresses the relationship between perception and language.

“There is truly a reversal when one passes from the sensible world, in which we are caught, to a world of expression, where we seek to capture significations to serve our purpose, although this reversal and the ‘retrogressive movement’ of the truth are solicited by a perceptual anticipation. Properly speaking, the expression which language makes possible resumes and simplifies another expression which is revealed in the ‘archaeology’ of the perceived world.” (TFL 4)

Merleau-Ponty continues here by stating that the proper contact with perception (perception as lived-through) leads us to a new understanding of understanding. With the help of Gestalt psychology, he says, we have learned the following. To those who think of the understanding as “a pure power of bestowing significations and the capacity of absolute survey” we must oppose an understanding that is situated in perception.

“For the meaning of a perceived object when picked out from all others still does not stand isolated from the constellation in which it appears; it is articulated only as a certain distance in relation to the order of space, time, motion, and signification in general in which we are established. The meaning of the object is given only as a systematic deformation of our universe of experience, without our being able to name its operative principle.” (TFL 3-4)
Perception thus teaches us that our understanding of the world cannot be fully detached from our engagement in it, cannot be a fully detached intellectual construction of it. We are immersed in a world of experience or our experience is immersed in the world, and, either way, our understanding takes shape in this experience. This immersion must be understood from a point of view situated in it and not form a point of view completely outside or above it. Merleau-Ponty continues.

“Every perception is a perception of something solely by way of being at the same time the relative imperception of a horizon or background which it implies but does not thematize. Perceptual consciousness is therefore indirect . . . in relation to an ideal of adequation which it presumes but never encounters directly.” (TFL 4)

Perceptual consciousness is always indirect. I never enjoy a complete adequation with the perceived. The perceived is never fully possessed in the act of perception. The perception is never fully equal to the perceived because the perceptual horizon, both spatial and temporal, always runs beyond the act of perception. Moreover, if this is the case, if perception is an open-ended gestalt field, then “it would be just as absurd to reduce everything else to this as to impose upon it a ‘universe of ideas’ which owed nothing to it” (TFL 4). Perception is neither the simple basis for language in the sense that language simply copies it nor the simple product of abstract ideas. Perception suggests certain linguistic expressions, certain expressions that nevertheless require creative interpretation to bring the perceived more fully to light. Perception and interpretation must be thought of as crossing back and forth into each other, and it is this theme that Merleau-Ponty here pursues at a deeper level.

“We have studied the phenomenon of movement as an example of this transition and reversal,” as an example of how language resumes the expression found in perception by folding back upon the perceptual structures that motive it, in order to express them more precisely (TFL 4). First of all, Merleau-Ponty continues, the study shows that the attempt to understand motion as a strictly objective event ends in failure, as we have known since Zeno. The study thus reveals “that the simplest perception of movement presupposes a subject who is situated spatially” in the world. Furthermore, “the description of motion as a change in location or variation in the relations between a ‘mobile’ and its coordinates is a retrospective schema . . .” That is to say, the description of motion requires that we “understand how the immediate unity of our gesture is able to spread itself over external experiences and introduce into them the possibility of a transition which from the standpoint of objective thought is unreal” (TFL, 4-5). To continue to make his case for the interaction of the perceiving subject and the “mobile” Merleau-Ponty reports the following details of the study. Two points of light flash in rapid succession upon a screen directly before an observer. The observer reports seeing not two points of light but a single trace of light across the screen. This phenomenon can be explained as follows (TFL 5). “Here what happens is that external forces insert themselves into a system of equivalents that is ready to function and in which they operate upon us, like signs in a language, not by arousing their uniquely correspondent signification but, like mileposts, in a
process which is still unfolding, or as though they were picking out a path which . . . inspired them at a distance” (TFL 5-6). There is thus a reciprocal and simultaneous exchange between the perceiving subject and the data of the environment, with the introjection of each term into the other. It is this exchange that produces perceptual meaning. It is this exchange that allows us to grasp the movement of an object across the perceiver’s visual field, for the unity of the human body and our gestures is projected unto the unity of the object’s motion across the visual field. Merleau-Ponty thus recognizes that it is this active perception that helps produce meaning, and that “perception is already [a form of] expression.” Moreover, he even calls perception a “natural language,” even though it is a “language” that lets what is expressed “adhere in its own way more to the ‘perceptual chain’ than to the ‘verbal chain’” (TFL 6, my bracket addition). We must therefore recognize in perceived movement a sort of pre-linguistic meaning or rhythm that is not yet expressed in verbal gestures and that is not constituted by it.

Merleau-Ponty’s existential or lived through understanding of time helps us understand his analysis here. Time is a dimension of the world, yet the subject must be present in order to recognize the passing of time, for without this awareness there is only the present. Yet, the subject certainly does not constitute time, for in this case time would be reduced to simply what is present before the constituting subject, thus again eliminating the possibility of the passing of time. The embodied, situated, experiencing subject lives within time as a dimension of the world, and is aware of the past flowing into the present and toward the future. An awareness on the part of the subject is needed here to see the moments of time folding into one another and overlapping, yet no subjective synthesis is needed here because the moments of time pass into one another and overlap in the world. In the example offered here in the lecture notes, the data of the study, the flashing lights, are introduced or introjected into the experience of the embodied, situated, perceiving subject. Since the human body must be recognized as an open-ended gestalt whole (for studies have demonstrated this), and since it is thus existentially unified, the data received are unified—here in the sense that the data appear like mileposts, intrinsically indicating what is ahead, yet not doing so with any sort of complete certainty. Thus we already see here in the body’s perceptual experience of the world a structure that is similar to the general structure of language, an open-ended gestalt whole, with parts referring to other parts that are not yet fully present.

Merleau-Ponty comments that we can only understand the above mentioned pre-linguistic “implication” only if “one undertakes an analysis of the subject who is its source and retrace the birth in him of what is properly called expression” (TFL 7). In order to accomplish this, he once again appeals to a study carried out by Gestalt psychologists. The study reveals the following.

“On the one hand, gnosis [or, here, knowledge of space] is founded upon praxis, since the elementary notions of point, surface, and contour in the last analysis only have meaning for the subject modified by locality and himself situated in the space in which he unfolds the spectacle of a point of view . . . On the other hand, gnosic space is relatively independent of the practical expression of space, as is evident from
pathological cases where serious practical impairments are compatible with the ability to handle spatial symbols.” (TFL 8, my bracket addition)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to draw the following conclusion.

“The relative autonomy of superstructures which outlast the practical conditions which generate them...permit us to say with equal truth that we are conscious because we are mobile and that we are mobile because we are conscious. Consciousness, in the sense of knowledge, and movement, in the sense of displacement in objective space, are two abstract moments of a living structure which can very well extend its limits but would also destroy its powers if it were to abolish those limits.” (TFL 8)

Here again, we see that meaning must be located in the body’s active encounter with the world. Yet we also see that some interpretive schemas can outlast some of the practical engagements that originally gave rise to them. However, there are limits to the extension of our limits, for if they extend completely beyond our perceptual engagement with the world they will cease to have meaning. Moreover, insofar as we recognize praxis “as an original domain”, Merleau-Ponty says, we “are in position to understand the strict relations between mobility and all the symbolic functions ...”, between the body’s active involvement with the world and the linguistic schemas that fold back upon it, that help express it, and that gain some freedom of use beyond it, even though this freedom is never complete (TFL 8).

Insofar as we begin with praxis, with the body’s lived-through, active engagement with the world, we will have the opportunity to grasp the relationship between the body’s movement and symbolic expression. The active body (the body in motion) opens upon and interacts with a world that forcefully impacts upon it. The moving body and the world fold in upon one another and perceptual meaning is formed. This relationship (as we have seen it revealed immediately above) is the precedent for the perception to language relationship, for the folding in upon one another of perception and language, with perception as the primary term. The moving, perceiving body interacts with the forceful structures of the world, which are the founding terms, since perception attempts to make more precise what is already there, albeit often in vague and imprecise forms. This relationship between the world and perception is the model for the relationship between perception and language, with perception as the founding term for language, which attempts to express the perceptual in more precise categories.

We should once again reference Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the fundierung relationship. In *Phenomenology of Perception* the phenomenological fundierung relationship is presented as a two-way relationship, with founding and founded terms, each of which influences the other.

“The relation ... of thought to perception is a two-way relationship that phenomenology has called Fundierung: the founding term, or originator—... perception—is primary in the sense that the originated [thought expressed by language] is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from absorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.” (PhP 394; see also 127)
In the context of the present discussion, perception is the founding term for language, which, of course, is founded upon it, yet with this founded term language folding back on the founding term perception in order to express it more precisely. Moreover, this *fundierung* relationship between perception and language is rooted in the more primary *fundierung* relationship between bodily movements (i.e., perception) and the world, with the now founded term perception folding onto the founding term world in order to express it more precisely. Merleau-Ponty thus concludes this particular lecture course with the following claim. “The body is the vehicle of an indefinite number of symbolic systems whose intrinsic development definitely surpasses the signification in ‘natural’ gestures, but would collapse if ever the body ceases to prompt their operation and install them in the world and our life.” (TFL 9)

In another lecture course entitled “The Problem of Speech” Merleau-Ponty states that he will attempt “to illustrate and to extend the Saussurean conception of speech as a positive and dominating function.” In addition, he claims that Saussure’s “definition of the sign as ‘diacritical, oppositional, and negative’ means that language is present in the speaking subject as a system of intervals between signs and significations, and that…the act of speech simultaneously operates the differentiation of these two orders.” He appreciates Roman Jakobson’s Saussurean attempt to distinguish “between the mere factual presence of a sound or phoneme in the child’s babbling and the proper linguistic possession of the same element as a means of signifying.” This of course means that the child must be reflectively aware of these distinctions within a language. Yet when Jacobson analyzes this phenomenon he appeals to an abstract judgmental awareness rather than, as Merleau-Ponty insists, the totality of the child’s lived-through, pre-conceptual experience (TFL 20). Merleau-Ponty also points out that studies do link the acquisition of language to emotional development, yet, he cautions, we should not seek to establish some sort of strict causal link, or chronological sequence of links, between emotional development and the acquisition of language. Rather, Merleau-Ponty seeks to understand the totality of the child’s experience, for all aspects of experience develop together and inform each other reciprocally, as the child forms relationship with the world and other human subjects. This means that “there is thus a sort of spirit of language . . . For language is the system of differentiations through which the individual articulates his relation to the world . . . The Saussurean notion of the diacritical sign [is] . . . interrelated and akin to Humbolt’s idea of language as a ‘perspective on the world’” (TFL 23, my bracket addition).

“Just as the painter and the musician make use of the objects, colors, and sounds in order to reveal the relations between the elements of the world in a living unity . . . so the writer takes everyday language and makes it deliver the prelogical participation of landscapes, dwellings, localities, and gestures, of men among themselves and with us . . . [The writer’s] task is to produce a system of signs whose internal articulation reproduces the contours of experience . . .” (TFL 24-25, my bracket addition)

To order to speak or to write, then, we must attempt to give expression to our lived-through experience, our lived-through relations to the world and others. There is no set blueprint for this translation, for it is an act
of creative expression. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty once again states that the relationship between the means of expression and experience is reciprocal. For, after all, “to speak or to write is truly to translate an experience which, without the word that inspires, would not become text”, and, we could just as well say, without the experience that inspires, would not become text (TFL 26).

Even though Merleau-Ponty doesn’t discuss here the process by which something (in particular language) becomes “institutionalized,” he does address the “nature of institution as the act of birth of all possible speech” in another course entitled “Institution in Personal and Public History” (TFL 26, 39). With respect to a definition of “institution” he here asserts that “what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, not as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future” (TFL 40). Thus the “institutionalization” of experience, this past experience carried forward that helps frame present experience, also provides possibilities for future expressions. It even “produces a table of diverse, complex probabilities, always bound to local circumstances, weighted with a coefficient of facticity, and such that we can never say of one that it is more true than another, although we can say that one is more false, more artificial, and less open to a future in turn less rich” (TFL 44).

Again, referencing our existential temporality, an experienced temporality that is a dimension of the stable world upon which our experience opens and with which it blends, Merleau-Ponty states that “I think in the near past, or rather yesterday’s thought passes into today’s thought: there is our encroachment of the passive upon the active which is reciprocal.” We thus once again witness experiences crossing into one another and overlapping, here moments of time. Yet, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to relate the crisscrossing or overlapping of experiences to an essential aspect of any language, intersubjectivity. “Speech passes from the sphere of one consciousness to another by the same phenomenon of encroachment or propagation. As a speaking and active subject, I encroach upon the other who is listening, as the understanding and passive subject I allow the other to encroach upon me. Within myself and in the exercise of language I experience activity in every case as the other side of passivity. And it is thus that ideality ‘makes its entrance’ (Eintritt)” (TFL 118-119). Obviously, an essential step in the formation of ideal meanings is the comparison of one’s own experiences to those lived through by others. Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, one’s lived through embodied experience opens upon a public world that includes it. While Merleau-Ponty does not claim that one individual can literally experience the lived through experience of another, he does claim that, since experience is primarily the body’s openness out upon the world, that human experiences can overlap in the world, can overlap at the things within it, especially as members of the same species focused on similar practical tasks. Since the individual’s experience is fundamentally a relationship to a public world, is fundamentally intersubjective (or, rather, inter-corporeal), the move from one’s own embodied perceptual experiences, which are experienced as opening upon a public world, to the shared, more abstract
world of linguistic meaning, is not difficult to see. Yet, one more step is needed. “It is writing which once and for all translates the meaning of spoken words into ideal being, at the same time transforming human sociability, in as much as writing is ‘virtual’ communication, the speaking of x to x which is not carried by any living subject and belongs in principle to everyone, evoking a total speech” (TFL 119). Moreover, if we wish to understand the development of thought within a culture, and within a culture over time, i.e., though history, then, we must understand it as generated through human experience (not outside of it, as Hegel would have it) and within the context of social institutions, including language.

In a later section of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty repeats what he said earlier about the nature of the word, that the word must be “taken up by a power of speech and, in the last analysis, by a motor power given to me along with the first experience I have of my body and its perceptual and practical fields.” Proceeding from this discussion of how the word is articulated or spoken, he moves on the consider the word’s meaning. “I learn it,” he says, “as I learn to use a tool, by seeing it used in the context of a certain situation. The word’s meaning is . . . first and foremost the aspect taken on by the object in human experience . . .” (PhP 403). This is obviously a complex claim, for the meaning of a word comes from two primary sources, from both the body’s needful, active/passive, lived-through encounter with the world and from how it is used in a certain situation, that is, by how other needful, embodied subjects use language, obviously in groups, as a tool to assist with their adaptation to each other and to various natural and social environmental conditions. Furthermore, as we witnessed earlier, when discussing the meaning of a word, Merleau-Ponty mentions the importance of time, i.e., that past forms, uses, and meanings are institutionalized in such a way that past forms, etc., can be taken up in the present, can be “deformed” in order to express current concerns, and can subsequently be used as the basis for future expressions. As he states it here, late in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “To give expression . . . is to ensure . . . that the new intention carries on the heritage of the past, it is at a stroke to incorporate the past into the present, and weld that present to a future . . .” (PhP 392).

Again in his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states that in order for the word *cogito* to have a meaning the word must come into contact with our lived experience; the spoken *cogito* must have contact with a tacit *cogito*. (PhP 402). Yet he also says that we do not find fully formed, precise meanings in lived-through experience, for experience is open-ended and often ambiguous. “The consciousness which conditions language is only a global and inarticulate seizure of the world . . . , and though it is true that all particular knowledge is founded on this primary view, it is true also that the latter [i.e., the primary view] waits to be reconquered, fixed, and made explicit by perceptive exploration and speech.” (PhP 404; translation altered; my bracket addition) Thus here in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty is fully aware that lived through experience is open and ambiguous and that even though it provides the basis for linguistic interpretations that these interpretations are needed to articulate the lived through more clearly.
As he says earlier in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “visual contents are taken up, utilized and sublimated to the level of thought by a symbolical power which transcends them, but it is on the basis of sight that this power can be constituted.” As we have seen, “the relationship between matter and form is called in phenomenological terminology a relationship of Fundierung: the symbolical function rests on the visual as a ground” (PhP 127). Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the geometer’s abstract construction of a triangle serves as an appropriate example of the fundierung relationship with respect to the relationship between abstract expression and perceptual experiences.

“I ‘consider’ the triangle, which for me is a set of lines with a certain orientation, and if words such as ‘angle’ or ‘direction’ have any meaning for me, it is insofar as I place myself at a point, and from it tend towards another point, insofar as the system of spatial positions provides me with a field of possible movements. Thus do I grasp the concrete essence of the triangle, which is not a collection of objective ‘characteristics,’ but the formula of an attitude, a certain modality of my hold on the world, a structure, in short . . . [The construction of the triangle and its auxiliary hypotheses] express my power to make apparent the sensible symbols of a certain hold on things, which is my perception of the triangle’s structure.” (PhP 386, my bracket addition)

We see here that even the abstract language of geometry expresses our perceptual hold on the world. True, this language helps us draw out and make explicit certain relationships not fully visible, that, for example, a line drawn through the apex and parallel to the base creates three angles whose sum equals 180 degrees, but the basis for these relationships must be found in our perceptual field. Perhaps it will be objected that the example offered here is “loaded” in the sense that geometry deals with spatial and thus visual relationships and, of course, that linguistic expressions about these relationships have their roots in the perceptual. Yet Merleau-Ponty makes the same case even for the abstract algorithms of mathematics. He does not deny that these formulas can be used as abstract calculators. He does not claim that their abstract calculations are meaningless. He does not claim that they must, at each step, refer to some perceived object. He does claim, however, that these formulas will remain virtually meaningless if they do not at some point relate back to a perceived field (See PW 107).

5.) Moreover, Merleau-Ponty makes clear that this is also the way that he intends to interpret Saussure’s linguistics. “Yet try as each word may (as Saussure explains) to extract its meaning from all the others, the fact remains that at the moment it occurs the task of expressing is no longer differentiated and referred to other words -- it is accomplished, and we understand something.” (*Signs* 81) Even though signs and their significations form a system of lateral relations, at some point we must understand that they refer beyond themselves to the world, to a world of perceptual objects that also form a field of relations.

“Saussure may show that each act of expression becomes significant only as in modulation of a general system of expression and only insofar as it is differentiated from other linguistic gestures. The marvel is that before Saussure we did not know anything about this, and we forget it again each time we speak . . . This proves that each partial act of expression . . . is not limited to expanding an expressive power accumulated in the language, but recreates both the power and the language by making us verify...the power that speaking subjects have of going beyond signs toward their meaning.” (*Signs* 81)
It is important to note here that the word “power” is being used in two distinct senses, one referring to the “expressive power accumulated the language,” the other to the more basic power of subjects to express themselves, which is the basis of the power accumulated in the language. We have seen this power in the human subject to speak and express (a bubbling up of expression) outlined above in some detail, and without it human language would be impossible. “Signs do not simply evoke other signs for us and so on without end, and language is not like a prison we are locked into or a guide we must follow blindly; for what these linguistic gestures mean . . . finally appears at the intersection of all of them” (Signs 81). Linguistic gestures mean something because they mean something for human subjects, for subjects who attempt to express their experience of a public and perceptual world that is always already there. As Saussure has taught us, words and their meanings are caught up in a system of relations. Yet these words and meanings must also, at some point, refer to objects in the world, for, after all, they are primarily a sublimation of it. This means that what we mean when we speak “is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said.” Merleau-Ponty continues:

“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.” (Signs 83)

The meaning that language expresses is culled from experience in general, from the body’s lived through openness upon the perceptual field of the world and upon a cultural field of already established meanings, not just from words deferring to other words ad infinitum.

What Merleau-Ponty especially appreciates in Saussure’s linguistics is that it allows us to overcome the untenable separation between subject and object, between sign and signification, between individual and community, a separation that ultimately renders human experience, human communities, and human history unexplainable. Yet, if we understand sign and signification as folding back and forth into one another, if we understand the will to speak and social institutions as folding back and forth into one another, then we have a greater chance of grasping human experience, human communities, and human history. Thus, it is a theory of signs, in particular Saussure’s theory, that helps us overcome the opposition between things and consciousness, that helps us understand human societies and their movement through history, that helps us understand “what, across the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects, wishes, speaks, and finally thinks.” As Merleau-Ponty interprets Saussure linguistics, it allows us to grasp both the presence of the individual in social institutions and the presence of these institutions in individual, it allows us to understand the individual and the social as an integrated whole, albeit as an imperfectly integrated whole, and it allows us to grasp social and linguistic systems as wholes, as an interaction of
mutually influencing parts. Finally, it allows us to more fully understand the relationship between perception and language, for this relationship must be understood as forming a whole, a whole whose parts always already inform one another, yet with perception still remaining the primary term.

We have traced Merleau-Ponty’s comments regarding the relationship between perception and language from his earlier writings, through his works that may be regarded as transitioning or bridging to his later writings, and we have found a rather consistent treatment of this relationship. We have seen that as early as the Phenomenology of Perception, and in his lectures and published essays during the 1950s, a consistent concern for making a claim for the originality of perceptual meaning, but also for the creative and even constructive role that language plays in bringing this perceptual meaning more fully to light. We have seen that the fundierung relationship between perception and language had already been discussed as a two-way relationship in the early Phenomenology of Perception, just as the two-way relationship between the active, perceiving body and the world had already been characterized as a primordial relationship, as a fundamental relationship from which others will, so to speak, draw their inspiration, yet without being reducible to it (See also Signs 21). The body’s relationship to the world as the most fundamental relationship and the fundierung relationship between perception and language are present from the early writings on, but they are discussed in far greater detail in the essays and lectures of the 1950s, especially the relationship between perception and language. We have seen that the body’s two-way relationship to the world, with the body and the world simultaneously influencing each other, yet with the world remaining the primary term, helps us understand perception’s two-way relationship to language, with perception and language simultaneously influencing each other, yet with perception remaining the primary term. To speak freely, then, we can think of the relationship between the earlier Phenomenology of Perception and the later 1950s works as a fundierung relationship, for earlier work influences the later, just as the later works fold back on the earlier to help draw out its meaning and its consequences. The early work remains primary, but the later, transition writings are creative and significantly add to the earlier text. Let us now turn to the author’s late writings to see if the same themes are present in them.

The Visible and Invisible and other later text First of all, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty still embraces a phenomenology that opens upon a pre-existent world and would not accept what is currently being labelled “postmodernism,” with its emphasis on language and the inability of language to refer to anything other than linguistic meaning, i.e., the inability of language to refer to anything beyond itself. He states that the properly reflective philosophy “would not lose sight of the brute thing and the brute perception and . . . would not cut the organic bonds between the perception and the thing perceived with a hypothesis of inexistence. On the contrary, it would set itself the task . . . of reflecting on the transcendence of the world as transcendence, speaking of it not according to the law of the word-meanings inherent in the given language, but with a perhaps difficult effort that uses the significations of words to express, beyond
themselves, our mute contact with the things, when they are not yet things said” (VI 38). Again, this clearly sets him apart from the currently trending philosophy of postmodernism, from the view that language cannot refer beyond itself to capture and express the meaning of the world itself. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty states, “we are not asking ourselves if the world exists; we are asking what it is for it to exist . . .

When we ask what it is for the things and for the world to exist, one might think that it is only a matter of defining a word” or even “that the rules for the legitimate use of the word can be clearly read in a univocal signification. But the linguists teach us that this is precisely not the case, that the univocal signification is but one part of the signification of the word, that beyond it there is always a halo of signification that manifests itself in new and unexpected modes of use . . .” (VI 96). In other words, words always appear in a linguistic and historical context, just as a gestalt perceptual figure (or foreground) always appears within the context of a visual horizon (or background). In both cases, the foreground meaning is nested in a context that is not fully present but that opens out and is rich with implication. In addition, Merleau-Ponty states here that not only does the supposedly univocal definition (of the world and its things) imply and rely upon a horizon of linguistic and cultural significations in order to express its meaning but that it also implies and relies upon our situated-ness in the actual world. The supposedly univocal definition does not solve the problem of defining the world but doubles the problem, for it does not account for how the word gets its meaning from other words or from our actual contact with the world. Merleau-Ponty insists that we must ask ourselves if the field of significations produced by language is a closed system or, rather, if “it does not have a horizon of brute being and of brute mind, from which the constructed objects and the significations emerge and which they do not account for?” (VI 97)43 Of course, Merleau-Ponty answers the latter.

However, he is fully aware of the difficulty (or even the paradox) of trying to grasp a world that is prior to our attempts to express it and that attempts to grasp it through various modes of expression, which may distort what is given. (VI 102). Yet, as he argues elsewhere, since we keep trying to express the world more and more accurately, more and more truthfully, there must be something in our experience that beckons this effort. We do not construct the world, as idealism claims, nor do we enjoy a complete coincidence with it, as realism claims. Rather, “we have with our body, our senses, our look, our power to understand speech and to speak, measurants (mesurants) for Being, dimensions to which we can refer it” (VI 103). We have with our body various ways to measure (experientially, not just mathematically) the world, to reveal it, to couple with it, to adapt to it, and finally to bring it to expression. Moreover, it is speech that is most able to express this encounter. “Speech prolongs into the invisible, extends unto the semantic operations, the belongingness of the body to being . . .” (VI 118, my italics). In addition, the birth of meaning in this active, embodied encounter with the world means that the essence of the thing is not above us but is given as the infrastructure of the perceived thing. That is to say, fact and essence are given together in the perceived object. The gestalt structure of the perceived object is its form, its essence. “As
the nervure bears the leaf from within, from the depths of its flesh, the ideas are [the gestalt structure of experience,] the texture of experience, its style, first mute, then uttered. Like every style, they are elaborated within the thickness of being and, not only in fact but also by right, could not be detached from it, to be spread out on display under the gaze” (VI 119, my bracket addition).

Language, then, is not a veil over things. It does not break the body’s perceptual bond with them. Rather, it is our means to attempt to bring the “mute ideas” of perception to a more precise articulation, especially if we use it correctly, if we attempt to use it to express the whole of our body’s sensible openness upon the world. This is an operative or lived-through use of language, one that we do not organize ourselves but that speaks through us, one in which words “combine through . . . [us] by virtue of a natural intertwining of their meaning, through the occult trading of the metaphor— where what counts is no longer the manifest meaning of each word and of each image, but the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges.” There is a “birth of speech as [a] bubbling up at the bottom of . . . mute experience” (VI 125-126, my bracket additions). That is to say, just as lived perception reveals itself as a gestalt structure, as a figure against a background, as a foreground in the context of an open and implied horizon, as a presence with the context of an absence, as a stable presence within a field of explicit and implicit relationships, so also language reveals itself in the same way. More specifically, in creative acts of speech, we benefit from and can take advantage of the lived-through meanings that have been sublimated from perception and that are lived as part of the organic, structural whole of language. In our acts of speech, the field of meanings that we express ourselves within can provide a multitude of associations that come together as a strain of thought or, rather, as a strain of lived through meaning. As Merleau-Ponty says, these associations come together according to some unknown law, for they are lived through rather than know or constructed reflectively.44

Yet, we should still ask, how does this happen? How do we move from our lived through perceptual openness upon the world, from our meaningful, structural interaction with it, from the perceptual meaning or ideality that is formed in this interaction, to the ideality that is expressed in language? Here, in The Visible and Invisible, Merleau-Ponty begins to express his answer. “With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated” (VI 151). Language, just like an artist’s painting, can take up, within the “tradition” of perception, an already established perceptual meaning in order to move it forward, in order to express something new. And how is this possible? Here again is Merleau-Ponty’s provisional answer.

“However we finally have to understand [the relationship between perceptual ideality and the “pure” ideality of thought], the ‘pure’ ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things, and, however new it is, it slips through ways it has not traced, transfigures horizons it did not open, it derives from the fundamental mystery of those notions . . .
that lead their shadowy life in the night of the mind only because they have been divined at the junctures of the visible world . . .” (VI 152-153, my bracket addition)

Clearly, it is the body’s perceptual hold on the world that provides the basis for more abstract linguistic expressions, even though this “hold” is not explained very thoroughly here. Moreover, it is precisely here that Merleau-Ponty informs us that “we shall have to follow more closely this transition from the mute world to the speaking world” and that he provides only a brief sketch of what this transition might be (VI 154). “When the silent vision falls into speech, and when the speech in turn, opening up a field of the nameable and the sayable, inscribes itself in that field, . . . this is always in virtue of the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech . . .” (VI 154-155, my italics). Here we have the compression of numerous themes of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in just one sentence, or at least the compression of a series of reversibilities that his philosophy has revealed. As the sensing body actively opens upon the world, and the world’s patterns forcefully fold back upon the body, a perceptual meaning is born. As active perceptual meaning gives rise to the active gestures of speech, and as speech folds back upon the perceptual to articulate it more thoroughly, verbal meaning is created. As an active, precocious speech gives rise to a field of meanings, and these meanings rebound back upon speech, artistic and scientific culture begins to take hold and even begins to flourish. Perception and the world fold in upon one another, as do perception and speech, as do speech and ideal significations. Thus, what we have here is a gestalt whole, with all aspects of experience simultaneously influencing each other. Yet it is the body’s active engagement with the world that is primary, that opens the initial pathways for artistic and linguistic expression. We witness this (i.e., the gestalt or dialectical nature of experience that nevertheless prioritizes the world) clearly in the closing lines of last partially completed chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*. We will see momentarily that this is comparable to the fundierung relationship that Merleau-Ponty highlights in his earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*.

“[Meaning] is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear . . . In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests. And what we have to understand is that there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth.” (VI 155)

Let us pursue further what Merleau-Ponty says in his later works about the relationship between perception and language and how it is established. In the “Working Notes” of *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty notes the following:

“Naiveté of Descartes who does not see a tacit cogito under the cogito of Wesen, of significations---But naïveté also of a silent cogito that would deem itself to be an adequation with the silent consciousness, whereas its very description of silence rests entirely on the virtues of language . . .” (VI 179)
As is now well-known, Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the naiveté of the silent cogito is a reference to a position that he took in his earlier Phenomenology of Perception. In The Invisible and Invisible he is more fully aware of the role that language must play in the effort to reveal the perceptual. Yet, as we have seen, he is not unaware of the role that language must perform in his earlier work, including the Phenomenology of Perception, and here in his later work he once again stresses the importance of perception, yet now more fully integrated with language.

“There would be needed a silence that envelops the speech anew, after one has come to recognize that speech enveloped the alleged silence of the psychological coincidence. What will this silence be? As the reduction finally is not for Husserl a transcendental immanence, but the disclosing of the Weltthesis, this silence will not be the contrary of language.” (VI 179)

Here again we see that the perception and language are not opposites. It is not the case that we find a field of perceptual meanings over against a field of linguistic significations. Rather, we find them enveloping each other. Moreover, since Merleau-Ponty invokes Husserl here, let us briefly consider his comments regarding Husserl in one of his late essays on Husserl, entitled the “Philosopher and His Shadow.”

“Reflection cannot ‘go beyond’ this opening to the world, except by making use of the powers it owes to the opening itself. There is a clarity, an obviousness, proper to the zone of Weltthesis which is not derived from that of our theses…When Husserl insistently says that phenomenological reflection begins in the natural attitude . . . , this is not just a way of saying that we must necessarily begin with and go by way of opinion before we can attain knowledge. The doxa of the natural attitude is an Urdoxa. To what is fundamental and original in theoretical consciousness it opposes what is fundamental and original in our existence. Its rights of priority are definitive, and reduced consciousness must take them into account . . .” (Signs 164)

It is clear from what Merleau-Ponty says here about Husserl’s position that he (Merleau-Ponty) accepts our perceptual openness upon the world as primary. Reflection must account for and take off from our primordial openness upon and encounter with the world. He continues.

“There is a preparation for phenomenology in the natural attitude. It is the natural attitude which, by reiterating its own procedures, seesaws in phenomenology. It is the natural attitude itself which goes beyond itself in phenomenology—and so it does not go beyond itself.” (Signs 164)

It is thus the return to the natural attitude that should be phenomenology’s starting point, and this is a return that Merleau-Ponty embraces, yet, as is indicated, not without qualification. Thus, let us pursue an analysis of the above comments a bit further.

Phenomenology, as the description of experience, begins with the body’s perceptual openness upon a pre-existent world. Merleau-Ponty has pointed out that even Kant, as the rationalist extraordinaire, admits that we must begin our account of knowledge with our experience of the world. True, Kant seeks the transcendental (the abstract and even formal) conditions that make this experience possible, but, contrarily, we should point out that it is this experience of the world that is primary and fundamental to everything that
follows. It is the beginning point of all experience and all the analysis that follows it. The idealist, rationalist philosopher admits this but then, as has often been said, pulls the ladder of abstraction up after this beginning point, in order to grasp the essential structures of experience, in order to construct all subsequent experience based upon them. Yet, Merleau-Ponty points out, these abstractions are always dependent upon the prior conditions given in experience, and, furthermore, these abstractions do not, and cannot, match the richness, fecundity, and “presence” of the original openness upon a really existing world. Phenomenology thus opens upon a pre-existent world and, as such, confirms the natural attitude and operates within it. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty comments above, the natural attitude reiterates its own procedure; it goes back and forth phenomenologically. This is reminiscent of Hegel’s phenomenological method as he presents it in the introduction to his *Phenomenology of Mind*. There he states that experience contains its own criteria, for the only reason that we know that one experience is wrong is because it is corrected by another that we accept. We know that our experience that the *stick in the pond is bent* is wrong because we perceive the stick as straight when it is removed from the pond. Experience is continually self-correcting, with perceptual experiences continually correcting each other.

Furthermore, as Merleau-Ponty points out above, for Husserl the reduction to transcendental immanence is never complete, for it always leads to the realization that experience always opens upon a pre-existing world. Merleau-Ponty accepts this and more, for he realizes that the reduction to transcendental immanence requires both reflective thought and language, and yet that there is always something left over: our openness upon a really existing world. However, for Merleau-Ponty, the starting point of being in the world, of “silent” or “mute” perception is never complete either, for, as we have seen, we need language to help express this starting point. Again, just as Husserl’s reduction to transcendental immanence leads to a *Weltthesis*, to a renewal of our evidence of being in the world, so also Merleau-Ponty’s “reduction” to silent perception leads to the awareness that language is always there. With this awareness, however, we are even more fully aware of the silent perception that envelops speech anew, i.e., we have a renewed awareness that speech has its roots in perception. After all, even the abstract algorithms of science and mathematics, which can be manipulated independently of our sense experience, must at some point refer to the sense world if they are to be meaningful. We are aware of a mute perceptual meaning in our experience. It is the horizon of all linguistic expression and yet, again, we have a full awareness of this because it is expressed in language. Moreover, we have seen that for Merleau-Ponty description of perception is always also an interpretation. There are mute perceptual meanings and yet our linguistic descriptions/interpretations are needed to articulate them with greater clarity. Most of what we perceive is thus frequently covered over by these “constructions” or interpretations. Yet these interpretations are suggested by what is already there. What is already there is not seen through constructions composed of a wholly different (linguistic or conceptual) material. Moreover, this means that the meaning of the perceived world is still there, in the
expression, for the expression is bringing what is already there to greater clarity, is articulating it more precisely. Again, as Merleau-Ponty says, perception and language are not opposed or contrary terms, for language helps bring perceptual meaning to a more precise expression. Language helps express perceptual meaning through itself, through the very arrangement of its words. Moreover, if we perceive with fresh eyes, we can perhaps see the world anew, see new perceptual configurations, see a new richness of perceptual meaning. Perception and language continually cross into one another and color one another, yet with our perception of a really existing world as the more primary term (VI 179).50

Now we can more fully understand Merleau-Ponty’s concluding comments to the partially quoted “working note” just above.

“I will finally be able to take a position in ontology, as the introduction [to The Visible and the Invisible] demands, and specify its theses exactly, only after the series of reductions the book develops and which are all in the first one, but also are really accomplished only in the last one. This reversal itself... is not hesitation, bad faith and bad dialectic, but return to Σιγή [silence] the abyss. One cannot make a direct ontology. My ‘indirect’ method (being in the beings) is alone conformed with being------‘negative philosophy’ like ‘negative theology.’” (VI 179, my bracket additions)

We witness here the reference to the Heideggerian-like phrase “being in the beings” and elsewhere Merleau-Ponty speaks about doing ontology “within the zone of transcendence” (VI 213). In both cases here he maintains that a region or level of being always occurs in the context of an open horizon, just as a perceptual figure or foreground always occurs within the context of an open field or horizon or background. In fact, he believes that each region of being always opens to and overlaps with all the others.

“Circularity: everything that is said at each “level” anticipates and will be taken up again... the thematization of language overcomes another stage of naïveté, discloses yet a little more the horizon of Selbstverständlichkeiten------the passage from philosophy... to the transcendental field, to the wild and ‘vertical’ being is by definition progressive, incomplete. This is to be understood not as an imperfection...but as a philosophical theme: the incompleteness of the reduction (‘biological reduction,’ ‘psychological reduction,’ ‘reduction to transcendental immanence,’ and finally ‘fundamental thought’) is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself, the rediscovery of vertical being.” (VI 177-178)51

We disclose certain areas, like biology, psychology, various aspects of perception, etc., but realize that this disclosure is never complete, this “reduction” to one area is never complete. Each of these “regions” or “layers” of being always opens upon and overlaps with all the others. There is always an implied horizon. We can never achieve adequation, i.e., consciousness can never become equal to or one with its object. Moreover, since this is the case, this is how Merleau-Ponty will approach the study of these regions in The Visible and Invisible. Each region will be studied but also studied as it opens upon and overlaps with the others.

This is how he expresses it in Nature: “Our subject: Regarding nature, the concern was to study it as an ontological leaf---and in particular, regarding life, the concern was to study the unfolding of the leaf of nature—regarding the human, the concern is to take him at his point of emergence in Nature. Just as there
is an *Ineinander* of life and physiochemistry—or structure, so too is the human to be taken in the *Ineinander* with animality and Nature . . .” (Na 208). We must not regard these different regions as different “substances”, as has frequently been done in the Western tradition, but as open-ended structures that flow into one another and overlap. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty continues, “because the Nature of which we spoke (it can obviously be only Nature perceived by us) and the mode of being that we described will be clarified by the description of the human body as perceiving: it is the same *Ineinander* that we gradually approach from the two ends . . .” (Na 208).

Here in *Nature* Merleau-Ponty studies nature, life, animal life, and the human body/being in the sequence just listed, in order to more fully understand the human body/being and its evolution from that which preceded it (and with which it overlaps), i.e., nature and life. The study of the structures of nature, life, and animal life was approached through the lived-through perception of the human body, with the hope of more fully understanding the functioning of the perceiving human body, and the study of the perceptual structures of the perceiving human body is approached with the hope of better understanding the structures of nature and life. Each should be studied in an attempt to understand the relationship to the other, and each side should be used to correct and understand the other (*Nature* 208).

We have seen that Robert Vallier, the translator of *Nature*, translates the French term *feuillet* as “leaf” (as he does in the passage: “study [nature] as an ontological leaf”): but that it also means ‘folio-leaf’---a sheet of paper that is folded, almost indefinitely, to create the pages of a book, and that Merleau-Ponty thinks of nature in the same way, that nature folds and unfolds in indefinitely different ways (*Nature* 305).

Thus when Merleau-Ponty speaks about the series of reductions that his *The Visible and the Invisible* is to carry out, he is speaking about the different ways that nature reveals and manifests itself, as, for example, material nature, as living organisms, as animal life and as human life. The studies that he carries out in *Nature* follow these different ways of being and do so through acts of lived-through perception. His studies of nature, life, and animal life, he says, lead to a more complete understanding the ontology of human life, which he also studies in detail, and, inversely, his study of lived-through perception helps us more properly understand each of the preceding regions. Moreover, each of these regions flows into the others and overlap, as do all of these regions with lived-through perception. His studies, then, must be carried out from both ends, in both directions, from nature up to the living, acting, sensing human body, and from the perceiving human body opening back upon these regions to reveal them more exactly. And here again we see the folding into one another of nature and perception, and we see that they are co-determining but with nature as the more primary term.

There is always an implied horizon. When we study one thing, one aspect of nature, there is the horizon of the other aspects. When we shift to them, others are implied, including the first, and so on. This is even reminiscent of Otto Neurath’s well-known epistemological metaphor of repairing a ship on the high
seas for our repairing and correcting the base of human knowledge. We have to repair one part at a time, and always in connection with the other parts in a structural whole. For Merleau-Ponty we have to study one region of being at a time, and always in connection with the other regions in a structural whole, a structural whole with boundaries that remain open, a structural whole that changes over time. “We are making a philosophy of the Lebenswelt,” Merleau-Ponty says, but what precisely is this philosophy of the Lebenswelt? It is a focus on our lived-through perceptual experience and on the world as it presents itself to us through all of its dimensions. The world presents itself to us only through our lived-through perceptual experience but it also presents itself as transcending this experience, as having an existence of its own. The world as we live it is always already there, and is presupposed by all statements that attempt to describe it. Language is needed to describe it more precisely, yet the truth of linguistic descriptions must in fact be measured by the lifeworld, by the world as we live it. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty here again says, there is no antinomy between the lifeworld, along with the universal being that it reveals, and the language that expresses it. For this language is a description (and is thus in a sense a product of the lifeworld, for the description is trying to match the world as closely as possible) that is also a creation (for language is needed to express the world more precisely, is needed to bring the perceptual world out of the darkness of ambiguity). In other words, it is the linguistic interpretation that is the most descriptive, the most clarifying and adaptive, that we should call true (VI 170). Thus, here again we see the folding into one another of the aspects of experience, this time lived-through perceptual experience of the world with our linguistic descriptions of it---yet with perception as the primary term.

In addition, how does the philosophy of the Lebenswelt account for the intersubjectivity of language? “It is indeed speaking that constitutes, in front of myself as a signification and a subject of signification, a milieu of communication, an intersubjective diacritical system which is the spoken tongue [la langue] in the present, not . . . an objective spirit [as Hegel claimed]------The problem is to restore this, in the present and in the past, the Lebenswelt history, to restore the very presence of a culture” (VI 175, the 2nd bracket addition is mine). Merleau-Ponty states here that the tacit cogito that he spoke of in Phenomenology of Perception does not solve this problem. It does help us understand the possibility of language, he says, but it does not help us understand “what, across the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects, wishes, speaks, and finally thinks” (VI 175-176). He does not elaborate an answer here in the “Working Notes” of The Visible and the Invisible, but he does indicate an answer in other texts. Commenting on Mauss’ method of study in anthropology, he states the following.

“We think our way into the [social] phenomenon, reading and deciphering it. And this reading always consists in grasping the mode of exchange which is constituted between men and institutions, . . . through the systematic way in which they govern the use of tools, manufactured and alimentary products, magical formulas . . . , dances, and mythical elements, as language governs the use of phonemes, morphemes, vocabulary, and syntax. This social fact, which is no longer a massive reality but an efficacious system of symbols or a network of symbolic values, is going to be inserted into the depths of the individual. But the
regulation which circumvents the individual does not eliminate him. It is no longer necessary to choose between the individual and the collective.”

Language gives us the key to help answer this question of “What speaks . . .?” It does so first of all because it helps us overcome the subject/object opposition of the western tradition. Instead of trying to understand society and the movement of history as either a strictly objective event or as the result of the intentions of individual subjects, we must try to read how they come together, i.e., read the mode of exchange between subjects and the social institution of language. Subjects are born into the institution of language and learn its rules for proper use, and sometimes even do so subconsciously (speaking, for example, according to accepted rules of grammar without being fully aware of these rules). Subjects “live” these rules, take them up, and use them to express their encounters with the world and others. This is what we must try to read and understand: as whole persons, whole subjects, we must place ourselves in these exchanges in order to try to grasp them, in order to try to understand how subjects interact with all the rule-governed institutions of society---for which language remains a primary model. Thus, when attempting to make sense of a society, and its movement through history, it is no longer necessary to choose between objective socio-economic conditions and the intentions of individuals. We must attempt to understand how they cross into one another, and it is language that is the focal point of this chiasm.

To summarize this section dealing with Merleau-Ponty’s late writings, we have seen that he still maintains that philosophy should not lose sight of brute being or our lived-through perceptual contact with it. Philosophy should attempt to grasp our lived-through bodily, perceptual contact with a world that transcends us. It should not attempt to define the world and our contact with it simply by using word meanings. Language, rather, should attempt to give voice to our mute perceptual contact with the world (See also VI 126). Moreover, appealing to univocal definitions of the world and its objects is certainly out of the question, for words appear in the context of other words, with their meanings varying with these linguistic contexts. In addition, and even more importantly, words appear in varying natural, perceptual, and practical/social contexts, with meanings varying here as well. The univocal definition ignores or fails to capture the relationships of these linguistic contexts, and, furthermore, linguistic context alone fails to grasp the relationships formed in natural, perceptual, and practical/social settings. In fact, the primary role of language is to express our lived-through bodily encounter with these settings. The role of language is primarily to extend the belongingness of our body to the world, to prolong and express, in the more ideal meanings of a more abstract language, our bodily being in and contact with the world with others. Merleau-Ponty has even argued that the essence of things can only be elaborated in the thickness of our perceptual encounter with them, thereby conflating fact and essence. What language attempts to do is express these essences as they are formed in our active, embodied, concrete perceptual encounter with the world, and this means that language is not a veil over things (i.e., a veil over their meaning, their essence) but an attempt
to bring them to light. Speech thus bubbles up in our mute, bodily, perceptual encounter with the world. How does this happen? How do we move from perception to language? Merleau-Ponty’s answer here is only provisional but he does state that the relationship between perception and language must be understood as a “phenomenon of reversibility.” We must understand the significations of perception as a result of the body’s sensual, perceptual encounter with the forceful patterns of the world, as a crisscrossing relationship between them, with the world remaining the primary term, and we must understand the significations of language as a result of the crisscrossing relationship between perception and language, with perception remaining the primary term. Merleau-Ponty states explicitly here in his last work that language is the voice of things and also that perception and language form a dialectical relationship with one another, i.e., form a gestalt relationship, a whole whose parts mutually influence and define one another, for they are aspects of a whole which is a more primary truth (yet with certain aspects of this whole still more primary than others).

**General Summary and Conclusions**

**The middle and transition writings.** For the purpose of the present chapter, Merleau-Ponty’s middle and transition writings and lectures reveal a number of important points. They have consistently revealed the originality of perceptual meaning. They have revealed that perceptual meaning is *fundamental*, not in the logical sense of logically deduced conclusions from fixed premises or principles, but in the sense that lived through, embodied, perceptual experience is the open ended starting point from which our knowledge must begin and to which it must return. They reveal that the *fundierung* relationship between perception and language is rooted in an even more primary two-way relationship between the world and the body (with each term of each couplet simultaneously influencing the other, with the former term remaining more primary). The perception/language relationship must be understood as existing in a *fundierung* relationship with the body/world relationship, with the body/world relationship as the more primary term. The *fundierung* relationship between perception and language has thus already been discussed in the early work as existing in a two-way relationship with the perceiving body and the world, with perception and the world as the primordial source of meaning. The transition writings, according to Merleau-Ponty’s own research agenda, discuss these ideas more thoroughly, more probingly, and with a greater concern for clarifying the relationship between perception and language.

**The later writings.** We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s later works still embrace phenomenology, still embrace the attempt to grasp our “brute perception” as it encounters “brute being.” Moreover, he says explicitly that it is the role of speech to prolong “the belongingness of the body to being,” that language does not oppose our perceptual encounter with the world but helps bring the perceptual world to a more precise expression. Even though Merleau-Ponty here only sketches what he believes the relationship between perception and speech to be, he does say that it must be understood as a “phenomenon of
reversibility,” thus continuing the fundierung theme of the earlier works. He even stresses that the dialectical relationship between perception and speech must not be understood as a reciprocal relationship of parts, one after the other, in need of synthesis, but as a simultaneous reversibility of aspects that already form a structural (gestalt) whole. Thus, we experience the birth of speech as a form of expression bubbling up in the depths of our lived-through, mute perceptual experience and as attempting to bring the perceptual to greater expression, to the point where we realize that perception, language and thought all cross into one another and all help form and manifest a similar gestalt structure.

While Merleau-Ponty’s later writings are (purposely) more attuned to the role that language plays in bringing perception more fully to light, more fully to expression, he is also more fully aware that the silence of perception engulfs language anew. True, language helps articulate the perceptual, but this does not mean that language creates perceptual meaning ex nihilo (or that language is totally responsible for or totally constructs the meaning of the perceived world). Language is influenced by the perceptual and helps articulate the perceptual meaning of the world more clearly. Again, language is not opposed to perception but is a sublimation of it that folds back into it in order to interpret and express it more precisely and clearly, helping to form this meaning as it is brought to expression. As we have already seen above, since perception is frequently imprecise, open, and even ambiguous, different linguistic expressions are always possible, and there is no definitively correct interpretation, yet some interpretations are better than others, for they are more clarifying of and adaptive to what is perceptually present (perceptually present in the wide sense of a stable foreground in the context of a spatial/temporal horizon).

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published The Visible and the Invisible was interrupted before he was able to lay out more precisely the folding or crisscrossing of perception and language into one another. Yet we have also seen that his research and writing up to the composition of this manuscript already contain a multitude of attempts to express what he was moving toward in what came to be his last work. Merleau-Ponty consistently recognizes the originality of perceptual meaning, he consistently treats perceptual meaning as fundamental, i.e., as providing the existential basis for the development of sublimated forms of meaning, and he consistently treats the relationship between perception and language as a fundierung relationship. He consistently treats perception as the founding term for language, but for a language that is in turn needed to grasp and interpret the perceptual and express it as a more fully formed meaning. If anything, Merleau-Ponty’s later works more fully develop what is largely already present in his earlier writings. Yet one way in which his later works do go further is that they are more thoroughly dialectical. For they more fully overcome the stubborn dualisms of Western culture, science and philosophy, the dualisms between humanity and nature, subject and object, self and other, subject and intersubjectivity, the individual and social institutions, for they more fully recognize that the
aspects of nature, society, and human experience all fold and cross into one another, yet with some sometimes playing a more primary role.
Chapter 3 Relationship to Husserl’s Philosophy

This chapter attempts to explore Merleau-Ponty’s complex relationship to Husserl’s philosophy. It has been said that he is one of Husserl’s greatest disciples and yet, also, one of his severest critics. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is similar to Husserl’s in many ways; he does embrace certain aspects of Husserl’s philosophy; and yet he remains critical of significant aspects of Husserl’s thought as well. The present chapter will explore some of these similarities and differences by focusing especially on themes that appear in the later works of both authors. Part I of this chapter will consider the later Merleau-Ponty’s comments on the developments in the later philosophical thought of Husserl. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty’s late essay on the later Husserl, “The Philosopher and His Shadow” (1959), will be considered in detail and will present an exposition with the following sections: Part I. A. 1.) Reduction, 2.) Third dimension, 3.) The Other, 4.) Objectivity, and 5.) Pre-conceptual. Part I. B.) will consider Merleau-Ponty’s critical response to each of the previous 1-5 subsections just listed. Part II. A.) will present an exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s 1959-1960 lecture course “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,” including both his brief summary of the course and his full-length lecture notes. Part II. B.) will present Merleau-Ponty’s critical consideration of Husserl’s ideas as Merleau-Ponty presents them in this lecture course and in his “On the Phenomenology of Language.” And finally, a consideration of how Merleau-Ponty’s The Prose of the World relates to the later works of Husserl will be explored.

Introductory Comments Much has been written about the narcissism of life in advanced, postindustrial, consumer societies. Christopher Lasch’s well know The Culture of Narcissism even characterized the American personality as fundamentally narcissistic. More specific to university and college students, a number of philosophy faculty report that it is very difficult to move students beyond certain aspects of Descartes’ focus on the isolated cogito: the only thing that I experience immediately and directly is my own consciousness, and thus all epistemological and ethical claims must be merely relative, relative to my own private experience. Of course, there are psychological reasons for this stubborn adherence to the isolated cogito or ego: younger students are sometimes still in an egotistical, or even narcissistic, stage of personality development. There are certainly social reasons as well: Western consumer capitalism, with its stress on individualism and individual consumption, certainly has a powerful influence on personality development. And, of course, there are philosophical reasons: the arguments for the reduction of experience to the individual’s own consciousness seem compelling, for, after all, all experience of the world and others is necessarily given through one’s own subjective experience.

The present chapter will not attempt to address the psychological and social reasons for this stubborn clinging to the isolated ego but, rather, will attempt to critically explore the philosophical reasons for doing so—with the (perhaps unrealistic) hope that the attempt to accomplish the latter will have some impact on
the former. More specifically, and as just mentioned, the present chapter will explore a number of Merleau-
Ponty’s writings on this subject, especially focusing on his relationship to Husserl, who also addresses this
issue. There are many similarities, but also some significant differences, between the two philosophers.
Both the similarities and differences between them will be explored, especially with respect to the issue just
mentioned above. This will help clarify the complex relationship between two of the 20th Century’s great
philosophers, and it will also help display Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of the remnants of Cartesians still
found in Husserl’s thought, thus helping us deal with the topic at hand, the move away from Cartesian
individualism. More positively, it will help us move toward an existential phenomenology, where
individuals are engaged in the world together through similarly sensing bodies, as is also claimed by certain
strands of American pragmatism.60

Again, there are many similarities between Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, especially his “later”
philosophy, and what he finds in the later works of Husserl. These similarities will be noted. Yet, the
differences between the two philosophers will also be stressed. Merleau-Ponty does not embrace the
certainty (especially of self-presence) that Husserl still seems to embrace, even in his later studies. For
Merleau-Ponty there is definitely a greater awareness of lived through context, that is, of a context that
cannot be fully captured in cognitive categories, just as a gestalt perceptual figure is given within the context
of an open horizon, for even though a horizon is always present it continues to run beyond perceiver’s clear
vision at its edges, which cannot be precisely fixed, either perceptually or cognitively. Moreover, when the
perceiver shifts his or her attention to the horizon, a new background or horizon shifts into place, a new
horizon that was implicit in the first, but when made explicit is surrounded by another new horizon, and so
on. In short, while Husserl seems to still embrace the reflecting subject’s complete intellectual possession
of the spatial-temporal field of our experience, Merleau-Ponty will argue that our lived through perceptual
experience, which is primary, always outruns any attempt to completely capture or represent it in thought.
Husserl position and Merleau-Ponty critical response to it will be explored in detail below.

One last introductory point should be mentioned here. We should apply Merleau-Ponty’s
understanding of the fundierung relationship61 to his interpretation of the works of other authors. As we
have seen, the fundierung relationship is a two-way relationship in which terms influence each other
reciprocally and simultaneously, yet, nevertheless, with one of the terms remaining more primary.
Perception, for example, influences our linguistic interpretations of what is perceived, yet the interpretation
is needed to bring the perception to a more precise articulation. Language sublimates the perceptual but
does so by folding back upon that which was originally suggested. Again, the two terms of the relationship
mutually influence one other, and this is the way we should understand Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to the
authors he interprets. Merleau-Ponty is influenced by the information he receives from another author’s
text, and yet he actively and simultaneously interprets it. The text and his interpretation mutually influence
one another, and this is certainly how we should read his relationship to Husserl’s texts. He is clearly influenced by them, yet his reading of them is far from merely passive and frequently involves a creative interpretation of the material. And even more, it is clear that when Merleau-Ponty reads other authors he frequently does so with an eye toward what will resonate with his own thought. He does not interject what isn’t there, yet he certainly draws out and further articulates what may be only implied. Merleau-Ponty was already on his way toward the development of his philosophy of the flesh, with the active embodied subject and the world coming together to create a third, more real term, and yet he continues to find both inspiration and support for this direction in Husserl’s thought.

Part I Merleau-Ponty’s late completed essay on Husserl

A.) “The Philosopher and His Shadow”

In “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” originally published in 1959, Merleau-Ponty makes a statement that clearly exemplifies his *Fundierung* relationship to Husserl philosophy. He reads Husserl with great interest and care but tends to interpret him freely. “At the end of Husserl’s life there is an unthought-of element in his works which is wholly his and yet opens out on something else” (Shadow 160). Merleau-Ponty proceeds to comment on five such openings. (The enumeration of these openings, and their headings, are not Merleau-Ponty’s but are used here for the convenience of the reader.)

1.) The Reduction: It is well-known that Husserl’s reduction, on the one hand, was meant to reflectively internalize our experience of the world in order to consider it as a meaning for consciousness, and yet, on the other hand, as Merleau-Ponty proceeds to point out, Husserl recognized, and even more clearly in his later works (“from *Ideen II* on”), that the reduction has a meaning only within the context of the transcendence of the world. Thus Merleau-Ponty finds and emphasizes an existential turn in Husserl’s later thought, i.e., a move in Husserl’s thought toward the actually existent world. He also finds a suggestion in Husserl’s thought that there is perhaps an alternative to the bifurcation of mind and world, suggesting that they are connected—a connection to which we should now turn (Shadow 161-162; *Ideen II, Husserliana*, Bd. IV, 26).

2.) Third Dimension between pure things and pure consciousness: It seems clear, Merleau-Ponty states, that Husserl’s later thought begins to move away from the West’s widely adhered to subject/object bifurcation and from his own attempt to transition from the objective to the subjective (Shadow 162). In his later works, Husserl begins to “look deeper down for the fundamental” (Shadow 163). The problem with the search for the pure thing, within the context of the subject/object bifurcation, the pure thing that Husserl sought in his earlier works, is that it presupposes a purely intellectual attitude—which, in turn, tends to ignore the source of its ideal essences. Husserl came to realize that we know far more from our lived through perceptual contact with the world than we do from our purely intellectual grasps of it, and, furthermore, he came to realize that these two means of “knowing” are quite different. The natural, pre-reflective, lived
through perceptual relationship to the world, which is prior to the conceptual, displays a “primordial faith and a fundamental and original opinion (Urglaube, Urdoxa), which are thus not even in principle translatable in terms of clear and distinct knowledge, and which . . . gives us not a representation of the world but the world itself” (Shadow 163; Ideen II, Husserliana, Bd. IV, 22). In addition, this givenness offers a “clarity and obviousness” that is prior to and different from our conceptual attempts to articulate it. And finally, Husserl seemed to realize that any attempt to go beyond this givenness must do so by utilizing what is given in the first place (Shadow 163-4). The goal of phenomenology and the phenomenological reflection, then, should be to reveal this pre-reflective, pre-cognitive, pre-theoretical experience that is the basis of the theoretical, and that the theoretical goes beyond only by carrying it forward. Phenomenology, then, should not seek to construct the world cognitively but should reveal the pre-reflective, lived through perceptual encounter with the world, which, moreover, is the basis for the abstract idealizations of the supposedly pure object and pure mind (Shadow 165).64

Husserl increasingly realized that there is a layer of experience beneath constituting consciousness that must be recognized and that is seated in the body’s perceptual movement in the world. We must thus attempt to grasp the relationship between the body’s “I am able to” and the properties of the object that are brought to light within this active encounter. Moreover, we must grasp the relationship between the aware human body and the human body as a thing—other than considering the aware body merely as the blind result of the forces of contingent, external causalities encountered by the body merely as a thing. We can accomplish this with an analysis of the body’s capacity of touch. My right hand touches my left hand as an object, but the left hand is capable touching the right. The left hand as a physical thing, is capable of awareness, just like the right hand. The human body is thus capable of accomplishing “a sort of reflection,” to quote a phrase used by the later Husserl. The human body is a thing that is capable of perceiving. The body, then, is a third kind of thing, neither purely physical object nor purely mind, which, in turn, changes the ontological status of all the objects encountered by the human body. The sensible thing can no longer be considered as merely a physical thing in-itself, for it is interwoven with the body’s purposeful operations and is given “in the flesh,” and is given as such precisely because it reflects the perceiver’s incarnation. Again, we witness here a new kind of ontological being, neither pure object nor pure mind but their coming together in a fabric interwoven from the threads of each. This coming together of the embodied subject and the world becomes “the ‘legal basis’ for all the constructions of understanding” (Shadow; 166-167; Ideen II, Husserliana, Bd. IV, 76). Moreover, this changes the character of intentionality, for it can no longer be thought of as merely an intellectual act but must now be understood as the body’s synthesis of its own explorations of the world, a synthesis that must be understood as the coming together of the active, aware body and the world itself. Furthermore, we can no longer think of intentionality as a function of abstract thought because that “would mean forgetting that the sensible order is being at a distance . . . ---and that
things are only half-opened before us, unveiled and hidden.” The sensible world is not fully and clearly
given to us in our conceptual representations but as an open perceptual horizon that we exist within, that
we thus open upon perspectivally, with things half given and half veiled. What we must do, then, is carefully
consider sensible being and the pre-rational structures that are revealed to us perceptually as we are actively
engaged with the world with others (Shadow 167-168).

3.) Perception of the other: When discussing the recognition of the other (i.e., of another human
consciousness, another human person), Merleau-Ponty again finds Husserl moving away from mere
intellectual projection (of one’s own interior into the interior of the other) and toward the body’s reflexivity
as a possible explanation. I am aware of my body as a thing and as a perceiving thing. “My two hands
‘coexist’ or are ‘compresent’ because they are one single body’s hands. The other person appears through
an extension of that compresence; he and I are like organs of one single intercorporeality. For Husserl the
experience of others is first of all ‘esthesiological’ . . . What I perceive to begin with is a different
‘sensibility’ (empfindbarkeit), and only subsequently a different man and a different thought” (Shadow 168;
Ideen II, Husserliana, Bd. IV, 165-166). Thus, when I perceive other bodies (as things) that are like mine,
I perceive that they are also animate or perceiving. I can perceive another perceiving thing or being.

Let’s pursue this insight in greater detail. Of course, it is not possible to directly experience another
person’s private thoughts. However, “I know unquestionably that that man over there sees, that my sensible
world is also his, because I am present at his seeing, it is visible in his eyes’ grasp of the scene” (Shadow
169). This means that “what I perceive to begin with is a different ‘sensibility’ (Empfindbarkeit), and only
subsequently a different man and different thought” (Shadow 168). Moreover, it is the human body that
helps accomplish this awareness of another sensibility, for just as my right hand is aware as it touches my
left hand as an object, the left hand is aware that it is being touched and is thus itself capable of touching,
so also my body is aware, as I shake the hand of another person as an object, that the hand of the other
person is aware of being touched and is thus also capable of touching. I am aware that the other is a touching
and sensing being. My body’s awareness of its circularity, that it can be touched as an object and yet can
also accomplish an aware touching, is extended to other beings who have bodies that appear similar to my
own, and it is this capacity of the human body that paves the way for an inter-corporeality and subsequently
for an inter-subjectivity (Shadow 168). My perceptual experience opens out upon a public field, to a field
that I bodily exist within, that is shared with others, and that is thus not just a projection of my own interior.
Moreover, as I open out upon this public field (and to emphasize what this implies), I am also aware of 1.)
other embodied forms of behavior, and 2.) that these embodied forms of behavior (i.e., other actively
perceiving beings) open upon this same public field that outruns my perceptions, and this paves the way
not only for an inter-subjective world but also for an objective one, albeit in a qualified sense. “[M]y
sensible existents—through their aspect, configuration, and carnal texture—were already bringing about
the miracle of things which are things by the fact that they are offered to a body, and were already making my corporeality a proof of being. Man can create the alter ego which ‘thought’ cannot, because he is outside of himself in the world and because one ek-stasis is compossible with other ek-stases” (Shadow 170). Thus, my body has within its corporeality not only the proof of the existence of things for me but for all embodied human perceivers as well. Merleau-Ponty confirms this point as he continues with this characterization of Husserl’s later thought. “My perceived world and the half-disclosed things before me have in their thickness what it takes to supply more than one single subject with ‘states of consciousness’; they have the right to many other witnesses besides me. When a comportment is sketched out in this world which already goes beyond me, this is only one more dimension in primordial being, which comprises them all...” (Shadow 170). Thus, what we have confirmed here, through the human body and its perceptual openness upon the world, is the sense of the existence of the world, not only for me but for other perceiving bodies as well. We have the coming together my perceiving body, the world, and other perceiving bodies—which conveniently leads us to a consideration of objectivity.

4.) “Objectivity”: For the later Husserl, sensible being is given to the perceiver as private and wild (i.e., not precisely conformable to abstract universal concepts). Yet this presence of the sensible to the individual perceiver, as indicated immediately above, is also read as a presence to all other similarly embodied and perceiving beings. Merleau-Ponty continues with this characterization of Husserl’s thought and proceeds to quote him directly.

“There are ‘objects’ in this absolute of presence ‘which are not only fundamentally and originally present to a subject but (since they are so present to one subject) can ideally be given in a fundamental and original presence to all the other subjects (as soon as they are constituted). The whole of the objects which may be fundamentally and originally present, which constitute a common realm of fundamental and original presence for all communicating subjects, is Nature in its primary and fundamental and original sense.” (Shadow 171; the internal quote is drawn from Ideen II, Husserliana, Bd. IV, 85)

“Husserl,” then, Merleau-Ponty concludes, “redisCOVERS sensible being as the universal form of brute being,” a present being that also includes the possible, and even the partially absent (Shadow 172). Moreover, he continues, the mature Husserl has moved from a reflective and absolute mind constituting a pure object to the body’s pre-reflective openness upon a public world (Shadow 173), and this means that the isolated ego and its solipsist thing, the thing as it is experienced solely by the isolated individual, is no longer primary for Husserl. Rather, he treats it as a “thought experiment,” one that suspends the embodied subject’s relationships to the world and others, but only to understand them more thoroughly (Shadow 173-4). The so-called solipsist layer of experience “is only the haze of an anonymous life that separates us from being.” I experience my experience as opening upon, as part of, as intermingling with, a public field, which I also experience as running beyond me as an individual, as separating out away from me. Here, Merleau-Ponty continues, still commenting on Husserl’s thought, “the barrier between us and others is impalpable.
If there is a break, it is not between me and the other person. It is between a primordial generality we are intermingled in and the precise system, myself-the others.” (Shadow 174, my italics). That is to say, within my own experience, as it opens out upon and crosses into the world as a public field, the world does slip away from me (both spatially and temporally) but I still remain in contact with it as a public field, i.e., as a shared field that I open upon with others. It is this primordial lived through generality that the precise system self-over-against-others as discrete individuals, formed cognitively and abstractly, (illegitimately) breaks away from and regards as illegitimate, precisely because it is not precise. Yet, it is not the case that things, including my body, are first given to me as discrete objects, with this preparing the way for the recognition of the other hidden behind (or inside) his or her objectively constituted body. It is in this lived through primordial generality, which is a corporeal generality, that the thing, the other, and my body are given together, and are given simultaneously. Again, they (the thing, my body, and the other) are given together within this experience of corporeity in general, and they are first given as imprecisely bound together (Shadow 174).

Some, of course, will say that the opening out to the “haze of anonymous life” is, after all, still the personal view of a singular experiencing subject. Yet, with this primordial lived through experience, a public field is given. Moreover, as we have just seen, it is out in this primordial and public field that thing, self and others are first given, given together, and yet given imprecisely, with blurred boundaries between them (Shadow 174). They are not given starting from the position of an isolated, reflective consciousness, one that ultimately constructs the objective world. In fact, as Merleau-Ponty is quick to point out, the idea of constituting this public field from the point of view of a collection of monadic or isolated egos has proven to be problematic, if not impossible (Shadow 175). Rather, it is because of the layer of anonymous, lived-through experience that opens upon a public field that I am aware that my experience is a part of this greater public field that is also lived through by others. Yet, this does not mean that the individual acts in the service of some sort of public or Hegelian Spirit. It does mean that we must find some way of expressing “a primordial We that has its own authenticity,” and Husserl, Merleau-Ponty informs us, turns to the human body as the means that allows us to do so. For Husserl “the reason why the compresence of my ‘consciousness’ and my ‘body’ is prolonged into the compresence of myself and the other person, is that the ‘I am able to’ and the ‘the other person exists’ belong here and now to the same world, that the body proper is a premonition of the other person . . .” (Shadow 175). It is the body’s active being-in-the-world that is primordial, and it is my co-presence to myself, as I am aware of my thrownness into the world, that provides the basis for my co-presence to the other, for we are both primarily a thrownness into the same public field. Since we both experience our own experience as an opening upon a public field, and since we both experience the other’s perceptions opening upon and participating in this same field, we are able to
share experiences; we are thus able to glimpse the perceptual experience of the other; we are aware that we open upon the same field together---the basis, of course, of our judgements about an objective world.

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to consider the relationship of the original to the modified in Husserl’s later thought—revealing somewhat surprisingly Hegelian themes. The relationship between the original and modified is not that of deductive reasoning, with the modified simply drawn from pre-established premises. Nor is it simply the case that the modified is caused by contingent external events. Rather, we must think of this relationship as both continuous and discontinuous, and in the following sense. The modified takes up the original, sublates it (aufheben), i.e., re-expresses it at a more abstract and integrated level, and is thus continuous with it. Yet, the original tends to be forgotten, even if not completely so, for it is now present in a new form, in the form of the modified, thus appearing as discontinues with that which gave rise to it. Within the context of a position like this, “each layer takes up the preceding ones again and encroaches upon those that follow; each is prior and posterior to others, and thus to itself” (Shadow 176). This is reminiscent of phenomenology’s fundierung relationship as a two-way relationship, and, Merleau-Ponty says, “no doubt this is also why Husserl . . . did not hesitate to speak of a reciprocal relation between Nature, body, and soul; and . . . of their ‘simultaneity’” (Shadow 176-177). While it is true that Husserl still adheres to the clarities that are discovered and produced by reflective thought (as we will see below), Merleau-Ponty does find here a counter-tendency in Husserl’s thought toward lived through experience as it opens upon the world, with others, as the ultimate basis for all of our conceptual truths. Merleau-Ponty expresses this point as follows. “So his position would seem to be that since we are at the junction of Nature, body, soul, and philosophical consciousness, since we live that juncture, no problem can be conceived whose solution is not sketched out within us and in the world’s spectacle---our existence should provide means of arranging in our thought what is all of a piece in our life” (Shadow 177).

Again, we find a tension in Husserl’s later thought, for he simultaneously leans towards nature and its “original presentation” and towards the essences expressed in abstract thought. Husserl was aware of this tension and the problem of overcoming it, of phenomenology’s task of grasping the non-phenomenological, of grasping that which is given in experience as existing in its own right (Shadow 178). In fact, Merleau-Ponty reports, Husserl has been aware all along that the reduction to the essential structures of experience is just that, a grasping of the essential and not the things in their entirety---which leads us to the final theme of Merleau-Ponty’s essay.

5.) The pre-conceptual: Merleau-Ponty concludes his presentation of Husserl’s later thought by commenting on Husserl’s realization that an intellectually constructed world isn’t enough, that there is something beneath our cognitive constructions that is meaningful that is not captured or framed by these constructions. The body’s lived through perceptual encounter with the world is always richer than our
conceptual representation of it, and, moreover, it is this lived through perceptual encounter that continues to “nourish” these representations.

“Originally a project to gain intellectual possession of the world, constitution becomes increasingly, as Husserl’s thought matures, the means of unveiling a backside of things that we have not constituted. This senseless effort to submit everything to the properties of ‘consciousness’ (to the limpid play of its attitudes, intentions, and impositions of meaning) was necessary—the picture of a well-behaved world left to us by classical philosophy had to be pushed to the limit—in order to reveal all that was left over: these beings beneath our idealizations and objectifications which secretly nourish them and in which we have difficulty recognizing noema” (Shadow 180).

Merleau-Ponty concludes that Husserl’s later thought “awakened a wild-flowering world and mind,” awakened a non-Cartesian world and mind, a world not reduced to the properties of geometrical space by a mathematical mind (Shadow 181). Things are certainly still present in Husserl’s later philosophy, not as the projection of abstract intellectual essences, but that upon which an embodied consciousness opens and that with which the body is always intertwined. And the other is still present, not as another pure intellectual interior, but as a perceiving, gesturing body, as a body that is sentient and meaningfully oriented toward the world. The mind, of course, is still present too, not as the producer of reduced (and perhaps timeless) essences, but as a continuing effort to bring our ongoing embodied perceptual encounter with the world to expression, and this means that we must also continually attempt to clarify the continual creation of new intellectual and cultural frameworks. From now on in Husserl’s philosophy “the irrelative is not nature in itself, nor the system of absolute consciousness’s apprehensions, nor man either, but that . . . jointing and framing of Being which is being realized through man” (Shadow 180-181). The irrelative, our starting point, that back to which all else must be traced, is our bodily, lived through perceptual encounter with the world, is the intertwining of our actively perceiving bodies with each other and the world.

Part I. B. Similarities and differences between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

The following sections will present a few brief comments summarizing the above sections, by number, and will then proceed to offer a response based on Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.

1.) Husserl’s later use of the reduction internalizes experience but also realizes the transcendence of the world. Merleau-Ponty accepts this in the following sense. The world necessarily appears at the end of my gaze but also as existing in its own right. Proceeding to detail Merleau-Ponty’s own position, with its emphasis on the body, we see that our access to the world necessarily appears through our own lived through embodied perception, yet it is given in this perception as existing in its own right. The Visible and the Invisible first sets this up as a question, to which the book is meant to supply an answer. Let’s begin with Merleau-Ponty’s interrogative. “What is . . . this singular virtue of the visible that makes it, held at the end of the gaze, nonetheless much more than a correlative of my vision, such that it imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence?” (VI 131). Merleau-Ponty proceeds to offer a solution to this question. “It is the body and it alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the
things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that, if it be possible, would coexist with them in the same world” (VI 136). We see immediately here a consonance with Husserl’s later thought above. We access the world through our own embodied experience, and do so because of the two-dimensionality of the body as a thing that can perceive, and not through a transcendental ego that reduces everything to its own intellectual representations. The body is able to come into contact with worldly things because it is one of them, because it is a thing that can perceive. “There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible/tangible of which it is a part, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a visibility, a tangible in itself . . .” (VI, 139). Moreover, “it is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself,” which nevertheless only appears with the assistance of the experiencing human body, which appears through an anonymity that is innate to the perceiving human body, that Merleau-Ponty calls flesh in this late, posthumously published text (VI, 139). This flesh of the world is an intercorporeal being, a being that outruns my perceptions as an individual, a being that “extends further than the things I touch and see at present” (VI 142-143). With the coming together of my lived through embodied experience with the lived through embodied experience of other perceiving subjects as we simultaneously intersect with the embodiment of the world, what is given to us is a common world, with some individual variations. Thus, like the later Husserl, and here in agreement with him, Merleau-Ponty begins with a lived through bodily experience that opens upon a transcendent world. In Merleau-Ponty’s case, as experiencing embodied subjects, we continue to remain in contact with the world even while it continues to run beyond us.

2.) As is well-known, and in agreement with Husserl on this point, Merleau-Ponty embraces, throughout his philosophical life, a third dimension between the subjective and the objective, between pure mind and pure thing, between the subject for itself and the world in itself, going perhaps as far as anyone can go in his last work The Visible and the Invisible, as is demonstrated by quoting an above passage more completely.69

“There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible [i.e., the human body], turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, or when suddenly it finds itself surrounded by them, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact---as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them.” (VI 139, my bracket addition and italics; see also VI 177-178)

Also, as we have seen, the right hand touches the left as a thing, yet the left is capable of touching the right (VI 9, 141, 147-148). There is this reversibility of the touching and the touched within the human body, and, for the later Merleau-Ponty as well as for the later Husserl, this changes the ontological status of both
the human body and the perceived thing. The human body is a third kind of thing, neither pure subject nor pure thing. The human body is a *perceiving thing*. While the perceived *object* must no longer be treated as a pure thing in itself, for it is interwoven with the perceptual activities of the human body, again creating a third kind of thing, neither pure object nor pure mind (VI 131n, 135-155).

Let us explore this third dimension (the intertwining of the pre-reflective, pre-cognitive, active embodied perceiver *and* the world) a bit further, also considering the relationship between it and the abstract thought of language. The pre-reflective, lived through embodied perceptual relationship to the world reveals a “primordial faith” in the world, reveals and offers a primordial contact with it. Moreover, the existential givenness of the world in this primary experience can be taken up and more fully clarified conceptually. This attempt to go beyond the givenness of the world in bodily perception, using language to express it conceptually, still, however, remains in contact with it. (See also *The Prose of the World* below.) As we have seen, Husserl became increasingly aware that there is something beneath conceptual consciousness that we must grasp, that it is presented to us in a way that is different from the way conceptual truths are presented us, that the body’s pre-conceptual “I am able to” is related to the properties of a thing in ways that are primary and not conceptual.

Merleau-Ponty embraces and develops the idea of the body’s active, lived through perceptual contact with the world, embraces it as primordial, that is, as prior to and as the basis for our conceptualization of the world, and he does so as early as *The Structure of Behavior*. Here, after a rather exhaustive analysis of the functioning of the human body, he states that “the facts suggest . . . that the sensorium and motorium function as parts of a single organ,” that they work together as part of the human body as functioning whole (SB 36). In other words, the body’s *perception* must be understood as a *motor* engagement with the world, as an *active* contact with it, as the body’s active attempt to adapt to its regular and forceful patterns. Furthermore, when he here addresses what he refers to as the “antinomy of perception,” i.e., that perception is seen as the product of external worldly events and yet also that it is the aware perceiver who reveals these events, he offers the following solution to it. “[I]t is true to say that my perception is always a flux of individual [or personal] events” and that contingent, particular perspectives are given within the flow of my personal experience. “But it is also true to say that my perception accedes to the things themselves, for these [contingent, particular, concrete] perspectives are articulated in a way which makes access to interindividual significations possible; they ‘present’ a world” (SB 219, my bracket additions). In other words, the world is given through the aware embodied perceiver and yet the world is given as such, as existing in its own right, as running beyond all the individual perspectives that open upon it.

Merleau-Ponty makes a similar point in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Again, after a lengthy analysis, this time of the movement of one’s own body, he makes the following claim. “These elucidations enable us clearly to understand [bodily] motility as basic intentionality. Consciousness is in the first place
not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” ---with a citation here mentioning that “I can” was a phrase typically used by Husserl in his unpublished manuscripts, again demonstrating a certain agreement with Husserl. (PhP 137-138, my bracket addition). Moreover, even though I necessarily approach the world through my own bodily perceptual experience, this perceptual experience must be understood as opening upon a really existing world. It is not the case that I can be sure of my perception, i.e., of what appears to my perceptual consciousness, and at the same time not be sure of the object perceived. This is impossible, for “perception is precisely that kind of act in which there can be no question of setting the act itself apart from the end to which it is directed. Perception and the perceived necessarily have the same existential modality, since perception is inseparable from the consciousness which it has, or rather is, of reaching the thing itself . . .” Thus, to perceive is to reach an existent thing where it rests. Merleau-Ponty continues to make his case. “Vision can be reduced to the mere presumption of seeing only if it is represented as the contemplation of a shifting and anchorless quale. But if, as we have shown above, the very quality itself, in its specific texture, is the suggestion of a certain way of existing put to us, and responded to by us, insofar as we have sensory fields . . ., how can we possibly dissociate the certainty of our perceptual existence from that of its external counterpart” (PhP 374-375). Moreover, it is this external counterpart, as it is presented in our perceptual field, that is the basis for more abstract thought, expressed in language. As Merleau-Ponty puts it here, “words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of ‘singing’ the world” (PhP 187).

As we have already seen immediately above, Merleau-Ponty follows through with these points in The Visible and the Invisible. We have also seen further above that Merleau-Ponty solves the problem of perception, i.e., that the world only appears through my embodied perceptual experience but also appears as existing in its own right, by appealing to the two-dimensionality of the human body. The body touches only because it can be touched from the outside; the body opens out to what it touches on the outside, and is able to grasp what it touches, because it is like the things that it opens upon; it is embodied. Again, the body is a thing that perceives. It can perceive because it is perceived; it can perceive because of its ontological reflexivity. The body opens out because the embodied world folds back upon its (the body’s) own embodiment. Moreover, since bodily perception is a motor function, since perception actively probes the world that impacts it by folding back upon it, perceptual meaning is formed via this probing, via this active adaptation, via this “I can.” Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty here, as he did in his earlier works, relates this active bodily probing to expression and abstract thought. “[M]y mental inspection and my attitudes of mind prolong the ‘I can’ of myensorial and corporeal exploration.” (VI 38) In an abbreviated note he sketches out the following. “Describe the existentials that make up the armature of the transcendental field---And which are always a relation between the agent (I can) and the sensorial or ideal field. The sensorial agent = the body---The ideal agent = speech---All this belongs to the order of the Lebenswelt ‘transcendental,’ that is, of transcendencies bearing ‘their’ object” (VI 171). Again, it is the active, engaged,
bodily subject that Merleau-Ponty seeks to describe here, with the perceiving agent as primary, the speaking
agent as expressing ideal sublimations of the perceiving agent, and with both engaged in, both helping form,
and yet with both ultimately carried by, the field of the world. Thus, here again, we see a kinship between
the later Husserl and the early, middle, and later Merleau-Ponty, with both focusing on the “space” between
pure things and pure conceptual consciousness, with a focus on our lived through active bodily encounter
with the world as a primordial source of meaning.

3.) Regarding the recognition of the other, we have seen above that Husserl moves away from the
Cartesian intellectual projection of one’s isolated consciousness into another similar looking body toward
the reflexivity of the body as the solution of the problem of the genuine recognition of the other. When
perceiving another human body, I am aware that it is a thing that is perceiving. As previously mentioned, I
am aware of my body as a thing and as a perceiving thing. Thus, when I perceive other bodies (as things)
that are similar to me, I perceive that they are also animate or perceiving. I am able to perceive another
perceiving being.

In The Concept of Nature I Merleau-Ponty takes up Husserl’s “founding” of intersubjectivity,
which presupposes the recognition of others, in the deeper perceptual experience of the active embodied
subject. “The experience which I have of my own body as a field of localization of an experience and that
which I have of other bodies insofar as they behave in front of me, come before one another and pass into
one another. There are two properties which illumine one another and are fulfilled together” (TFL 81-82).
Again, the basis for intersubjectivity finds its roots in the aware body’s opening out upon a world that other
embodied perceivers also open upon, for it is here that they cross into one another. Yet, Merleau-Ponty goes
even further in his description of the basis of Husserl’s intersubjectivity in the body’s lived through
encounter with the world by pointing out that this encounter is the foundation of human culture and
knowledge.

“Beneath Cartesian nature, which theoretical activity sooner or later constructs, there emerges an anterior
stratum, which is never suppressed, and which demands justification once the development of knowledge
reveals the gaps in Cartesian science. Husserl risks the description of the earth as the seat of pre-objective
spatiality and temporality, as the homeland and historicity of bodily subjects who are not disengaged
observers, as the ground of truth or the ark which carries into the future the seeds of knowledge and culture.
Before being manifest and ‘objective,’ truth dwells in the secret order of embodied subjects.” (TFL 82-83)

This “grounding” of intersubjectivity and human knowledge in the body’s perceptual openness upon
the world is certainly something that Merleau-Ponty is sympathetic to---which can be clearly observed in
another set of Merleau-Ponty’s lecture notes.

“It is as if my body learns what my consciousness cannot, for this body takes the actions of the other into
account, realizes a sort of coupling with them, or an ‘intentional transgression’, without which I would
never gain the notion of the other as other. Thus the body is not only an object to which my consciousness
finds itself externally linked. For me it is the only way of knowing that there are other animated bodies,
which also means that its own link with my consciousness is more internal and essential.”
We see here not only the body’s lived through connection to other experiencing bodies but we also see that one’s own connection to one’s own body must be understood as lived through, and not simply as an external relationship, and, Merleau-Ponty goes on to say, “the same is true of language.” Since language is a sublimation of our bodily gestures, which are a sublimation of our active perceptual encounter with the world, the lived through expression of language has an internal connection to the body. Language will be more thoroughly addressed below, yet for now we should remain focused on the recognition of the other.

Merleau-Ponty once again addresses the issue in his late *The Visible and the Invisible*. While he admits that the genuine recognition of the other is a difficult problem, since we do open upon the world through our *own* experience, he does argue, as we have already seen, that the other does break into the individual’s own experience, and does so because we open upon the same perceptual field together. When this occurs, when the other’s field of experience overlaps with my own, this means that “my private world has ceased to be mine only; it is now the instrument which another plays, the dimension of a generalized life which is grafted onto my own.” Moreover, as we have already seen above, “at the moment that I think I share the life of another, I am rejoining it only in its ends, its exterior poles. It is in the world that we communicate . . . It is in the lawn before we met that I think I catch sight of the impact of the green on the vision of another . . .” (VI 11). Yet, even though we do live this opening out upon the same field with others, Merleau-Ponty admits that it is still difficult to articulate this as a philosophical thesis (VI 11). However, he turns to the topic once again in a later section of *The Visible and the Invisible*.

“It is said that the colors, the tactile reliefs given to the other, are for me an absolute mystery, forever inaccessible. This is not completely true; for me to have not an idea, image nor a representation, but as it were the immanent experience of them, it suffices that I look at a landscape, that I speak of it with someone. Then, through the concordant operation of his body and my own, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own, I recognize in my green, his green . . . There is no problem of the alter ego because it is not I who sees, not he who sees, because of an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal.” (VI 142)

Here again we see the similarity to Husserl, since for both authors there is a *lived connection with the other*, a connection that cannot be fully articulated in concepts. Contra Descartes, who claims we never know another consciousness, since it is merely the projection of the subject’s own interior into a similar looking exterior, our individual consciousnesses can overlap because they meet at perceived objects and open upon one sole world, upon a perceptual life in general that we all participate in. (VI 11, 41, 110, 139) Secondly, when I perceive another being like myself, since this being, like me, is intentionally engaged in the world through a human body, I am able to glimpse the meaning of the other’s intentional actions or gestures (PrP 118). This “postural coupling,” and our openness upon one sole world, allows humans to experience what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a “lateral universal” (*Sign* 120). That is to say, human beings can share
experiences because as embodied consciousnesses we open upon a public world and gesture within this world in similar ways, in ways that can be glimpsed by others. While it is true that I will never be able to literally and exactly experience another person’s thoughts, I can at least capture a glimpse another’s perceptions, for our perceptions open upon the same world together. Yet, even here, since our bodies are separate and are individuated within the field, our shared anonymous perceptual field is individuated from what is held in common. We open upon the same field but in ways that are laterally different from one another. Or, to put this differently, our individuated experiences overlap in the same field, like searchlights illuminating the same surface, or like flashlights shining on the same object, but from different angles, from different perspectives. Thus, the other is both similar and different ---with both similarity and difference required for the genuine recognition of the other, for without some similarity there would be no recognition of the humanity of the other, and without some difference the other would be reduced to the same, would be reduced to a projection of one’s own interior. (PrP 17-18; for lateral universal see Signs, 120, 139, VI 143; for consciousness as bean of light see SB 185).73

The human body is at one with what it feels and sees, yet because of its reflexivity it is separate from them as well. Thus, just as the possibility of perceiving the other is present in me, in the two-dimensional structure of the human body, since it experiences itself as the original elsewhere, as originally projected outside itself toward the world, so also the possibility of the other’s perception of me is present in me, in the two-dimensional structure of the body, for the inside of the body opens to an outside that folds back upon it. This reflexivity, this outside, is enhanced by the appearance of other human beings who perceive me (VI 135, 145, 254). Again, The Visible and Invisible takes up Husserl’s analysis of the two hands touching. “If my left hand can touch my right hand while it palpates the tangibles, can touch it touching, can turn its palpation back upon it, why, when touching the hand of another, would I not touch in it the same power to espouse the things that I have touched in my own?” (VI 141). Yet, there is a problem, some would say, for the touching of the two hands appears to one sole consciousness, that is, within one landscape, while the problem is to elicit another, to elicit the landscape of another. However, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, this appearance to one sole consciousness as the unifier of the experiences of the two hands has its own problems. For one sole consciousness as a pure “consciousness of” would synthesize the different experiences of the different hands as discrete experiences with no real lateral unity. If my left hand would be a “consciousness of” the right hand as an object, and vice versa, then the left hand and the right cannot belong to the same consciousness, for the right hand remains a pure object for the left, and vice versa, and the “consciousness of” (the subjectivity of each hand) cannot make the lateral transition from hand to hand. (VI 141)

We avoid the problem, Merleau-Ponty reports, “by admitting that my synergic body is not an object, that it assembles into a cluster the ‘consciousnesses’ adherent to its hands, to its eyes, by an operation that
is in relation to them lateral, transversal; that ‘my consciousness’ is not the synthetic, uncreated, centrifugal
unity of a multitude of ‘consciousnesses of . . .’ which would be centrifugal like it is, that it is [rather]
sustained, subtended, by the prereflective and preobjective unity of my body” (VI 141-142, my bracket
addition). Thus the body touching is not a pure “consciousness of” and the body touched is not a mere thing
in itself. The body itself is a synergic awareness of its experiences of the world. The “consciousness of” the
different experiences of the different hands, for example, is surrounded by the body’s lived through
awareness and functioning as a whole, and it is this that allows the different experiences of each hand to
rather seamlessly pass into one another. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty states, that which is experienced by
the different hands, when taken together, “are a Sentient in general before a Sensible in general.” (VI 141-
142)

Moreover, if this is the case, if *my* synergic body experiences these forms of generality, the generality
of all the sensible things upon which my sentient body opens *and* the generality of the human body as
sentient, then it certainly seems possible that these forms of generality are experienced by others as well.
Furthermore, just as I touch myself while experiencing the touching of one of my hands by the other, just
as there is a reversibility of my two hands, so also a reversibility occurs when I shake another’s hand, that
is, as I touch the other’s hand I feel myself being touched by another touching, by another being who
touches. The synergy that occurs in my body, then, the synergy that opens upon a general field, should be
open to other human bodies, with all opening upon a shared field. Moreover, “this is possible as soon as we
no longer make belongingness to one same ‘consciousness’ the primordial definition of sensibility, and as
soon as we rather understand it as . . . a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to
the sentient,” as soon as we understand the sensible as *being* becoming aware of itself through one of its
own, as soon as we understand it as that which is visible returning to itself through one of its own. What
we have here is the revealing of a public world, of a public space that is open to all beings who are
biologically similar, and this of course means that the public, visible world upon which my experience
opens is open to other similarly embodied beings, and this means, to partially re-cite a passage from above,
that “through the concordant operation of [the other’s] body and my own, what I see passes into [the other],
this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades [the other’s] vision without quitting my own, I
recognize in my green [the other’s] green . . .” (142, my bracket additions). Merleau-Ponty believes (like
Husserl, at least in part) that this solves the (Cartesian, Modernist) problem of isolated individuals trapped
in their own private worlds and, subsequently, the problem of the recognition of the other, for we now see
that an “anonymous visibility inhabits both of us” (VI 142). For both Merleau-Ponty and the later Husserl
it is the lived through body and its co-presence with experiencing bodies that are similar that provides the
means to recognize the other and basis for intersubjectivity (since these lived through experiences of each
individual pass and flow into one another in a common perceptual field). 74
A few additional points should be added here regarding the details and qualifications of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the recognition of the other. We witnessed Merleau-Ponty’s appeal to this anonymous perception in his earlier in *Phenomenology of Perception*, but *The Visible and the Invisible* now takes this further, for this anonymous visibility, this generality of one’s sensing and, especially, of the sensible, is now identified as the *flesh* of the world, of that which is given in the moment but that also opens out to what is given everywhere, and to others (VI 142). To return briefly to *Phenomenology of Perception*, we see that perception *is not mine* in the same way that my choice to go to a certain movie *is mine*. I do not choose to perceive or not to perceive. The option is not open to me, as is the option to attend, or not, a certain movie. Perception occurs through me, through the anonymous functions of my body, and thus opens upon a public field. This means that my perceptual consciousness is not trapped in its own interior, that as it opens out upon a public field that it is aware of other perceiving bodies opening upon the same field. I perceive other perceiving beings opening upon the same public field, but doing so from a different place, and subsequently with a different perspective. Thus, when considering the recognition of the other, I am in contact with the other, since our perceptions open upon a common world, but not completely, since the other’s perceptions are individuated in his or her own perspective. There is then a sort of “coherent deformation” of one subject’s perceptions from a common field (Signs 54-55). Our experiences remain in touch with each other, even while not being exactly the same, like two Venn circles overlapping, with a shared space and yet individuated spaces as well. I am in contact with the other who remains at a distance (PhP 364-5). We have already seen Merleau-Ponty attempt to answer the following question: how is it that I am in contact with a world that transcends me? It is the human body, as a two-dimensional being, he says, as a being that can touch and be touched, as a *reflexive being*, as a being that turns back on itself, that can put me in contact with other beings but that also holds me at a distance from them, that creates a gap between touching and the touched. Moreover, in order to more fully understand this gap, we should also consider the role of time. The present moment of experience, Merleau-Ponty reports, is in touch with the past but with a past that remains at a distance. In this sense time displays a gestalt structure, for the present must not be treated as a discrete unit but as continuously opening toward the past and future, with no sharp boundaries between them. Thus, when considering the relationship between the body’s touching and being touched, we must understand that they never completely coincide, for they are separated by a gap of time, even though they overlap one another. The reflective (or reflexive) can grasp the prereflective because it is in contact with it, yet it does not fully possess it because they are separated by the spread of time, and this is similar to the claim that Merleau-Ponty makes about the recognition of the other, for I am in contact with the other, i.e., I perceive another perceiving being, but the other remains at a distance, for I can never fully live the other’s lived through experience. Our experiences do overlap in the perceived public field before us, just my active body can empathetically “couple” with the other’s gestural movements toward the world,
but I can never fully possess the other’s lived contact with the world or the other’s lived through contact with him or herself (PhP 364). I recognize that the other is like me, is a similar human subject, but also that the other is different, that other humans have a lived through life of their own.

4.) Husserl rediscovers sensible being as a universal form of brute ("objective") being, and Merleau-Ponty does as well with his "discovery" of flesh of the world (See VI 142).

We have seen that for Husserl that solipsism is a "thought experiment" and should not be taken as our primordial experience. Merleau-Ponty proceeds to characterize the solipsist layer of experience as only the haze of an anonymous life, and here the barrier between self and other is incapable of being felt at all. In fact, as we have seen, it is because of the layer of anonymous, lived through experience that opens upon a public field that I am aware that my experience is part of a public field that is also lived through by others. Even more, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes here that the basis for this public field, for this primordial We, is given with authenticity because it is given in the human body’s lived through experience. To begin with, I experience a co-presence of my body and my consciousness. Or rather, my consciousness is my body’s opening out, is my body’s active awareness of the world, of an environment that extends beyond me. Here, at least, the prime model for my consciousness is my body’s touch, is the tactile awareness of something outside of it, which rebounds upon it. Things, then, are sensed as existent for me because they are presented to me through my body. My body can sense the existence of other things because it is one of them. It experiences the weight of existence from the inside, so to speak, and is thus able to sense the existence of things coming to it from the outside. My body is thus the proof of the existence of sensible things (VI 140-142). Moreover, I can extend this co-presence of my consciousness with my body, that also extends to the existence of other things, to a co-presence with other embodied experiencing subjects, and this is achieved through a bodily gestural, postural coupling with other gesturing, posturing bodies, as we have seen above.75 Since it is my body that carries me into the world, and since it does so actively, when I perceive other bodies similar to my own perceiving and acting in similar ways, my perceiving, active, operative bodily intentionality partially passes into the other just as the other’s perceiving, active, operative intentional behavior passes into me, as we open onto the world together. Thus our bodies open us to a participation in a common world.

Mention should also be made here of Merleau-Ponty’s arguments against skepticism (with some agreement with Husserl). First, he claims that skepticism regarding perception in general is based on a faulty argument. The skeptic claims that since a particular perception can be doubted, because it is shown to be wrong, that all perception (or perception in general) must be unreliable and thus doubted. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty points out, the perception that is shown to be false is only undermined because another perception has been accepted. The judgment about the stick that looks bent when half immersed in water is shown to be false by observing the straight stick after it has been removed from the water. There is no
single perception that is beyond doubt, but we only know this because particular perceptions have been corrected by others that we accept. Moreover, the corrected perception is not simply wiped from memory, for we retain the knowledge that this particular perception has been corrected. The earlier judgement is not obliterated but is retained as corrected (VI 3-7, VI 36-49, and referencing Husserl: VI 128, 140).

Yet Merleau-Ponty goes further, for he argues that there must be an intrinsic difference between “the truth of perception and the falsity of illusion” for otherwise we would never be able to distinguish them. He does admit, though, that we can sometimes lose our way. We must take into account, then, that perception is not the same as thought, that it is not either completely true on the one hand or completely false on the other.

“I say that I perceive correctly when my body has a precise hold on the spectacle, but that does not mean that my hold is ever all-embracing; it would be so only if I had succeeded in reducing to a state of articulate perception all the inner and outer horizons of the object, which is in principle impossible. In experiencing a perceived truth, I assume that the concordance so far experienced would hold for a more detailed observation; I place my confidence in the world. Perceiving is pinning one’s faith, at a stroke, in a whole future of experiences, and doing so in a present which never strictly guarantees the future; it is placing one’s belief in a world. It is this opening upon a world which makes possible perceptual truth and the actual effecting of a \textit{Wahr-Nehmung} [genuine capturing], thus enabling us to ‘cross out’ the previous illusion and regard it as null and void.” (PhP 297, my bracket addition)

Again, perception is not thought, which is either total or null. Perception is open, ambivalent, indecisive, inconclusive, ambiguous, and thus suggestive of multiple interpretations. Perception, then, “presupposes questioning, doubt, a break with the immediate, and is the [possible] correction of any possible error.” Perception is a sort of adherence to the world but an adherence that allows for variations. At the moment that it (wrongly) embraces an illusion it is, by its very open structure, open to further perceptions and to the possibility of correction. Contrarily, at the very moment that it embraces an accurate perception it is, by its very open structure, open to further perceptions and the possibility of error. There is thus no certainty regarding a particular perception, yet what is beyond doubt is that the world that is revealed through perception always remains, even when particular perceptions are negated. Perceptual consciousness is thus united with the world by the omnipresence of the world, that is to say, a particular perception may be wrong, but perceptual consciousness remains tethered to an already always present world (PhP 294-298, my bracket addition). And while it is true that the world is given to us through our perceptual encounter with it, that is, through the avenues of the human body, it is given as existing in its own right, as pre-existing our experience and as running beyond it, both temporally and spatially (VI 123-125).

Merleau-Ponty also challenges Descartes’ infamous doubt of the world’s existence, widely accepted by philosophers and by students of philosophy. I can be sure of the meaning of my perceptions, he claims, as they appear immediately to consciousness, but I cannot be sure of the perceptual object as it exists outside of my consciousness. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty believes that this is not an accurate description of
the act of perception, for to perceive *means* to reach an object where it rests, and if I state that I’m sure of my perception then I’m sure of the existence of the object that is presented within it (PhP 374). Moreover, Cartesian doubt actually grants a greater sense of reality, a greater sense of existence, to the doubt that appears in consciousness, then to the world itself, yet, in reflection, following Descartes’ own emphasis on certainty, we can also doubt the certainty of the doubt that (only) *appears* to appear directly to consciousness, and we are left with an infinite regress. In addition, Merleau-Ponty points out, the doubt that was introduced as a sort of insurance policy against errors, leads us into a far more injurious situation. The way out of this absurdity of an isolated consciousness trapped within itself is to understand consciousness as it really is, as an opening out upon a really existing world (VI 36-49, 214). “To reduce perception to the thought of perceiving, under the pretext that immanence alone is sure, is to take out an insurance against doubt whose premiums are more onerous than the loss for which it is to indemnify us: for it is to forego comprehending the effective world and move to a type of certitude that will never restore to us the ‘there is’ of the world” (VI 36). Even though we find a tension in Husserl’s thought, with his movement towards existence added to his well-known movement toward essences, and even though he speaks of the absolute presence of sensible objects and of the world, i.e., that these objects are given in sense experience and not constructed by conceptually, Merleau-Ponty still does not accept the description of the “absolute presence” of the sense object in experience. We have just seen that he argues that a particular perception (of a particular sense object) can be doubted, that, while it is given with some certainty, it is not absolute, for perception, even though stable, is open to a variety of possible interpretations and a variety of future manifestations. Yet, Merleau-Ponty does seem to accept the given-ness of the world in a general sense, for, again, as we have just seen, even though we can call into question a particular perception, this is done from the point of view of another that we accept. Even though a particular perception can be crossed out, perception remains, for all negated or crossed out perceptions remain as part of the always already present world, the world that perception always already opens upon. It is therefore better to say that Merleau-Ponty accepts the provisional given-ness of sense objects in perceptual presence but also that this presence is given along with an absence, for perception remains open, and, even though stable, remains an opening out to other possibilities.

We see here a similarity to Husserl’s “primordial faith” in the perceived world, but we also see that Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual faith is less certain than Husserl’s in the following sense. Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual faith seems more attuned to context, for a perception can prove to be wrong, yet with this proof coming from another perception that shows it to be so, and ultimately from the horizon of the world, which always remains, no matter how many specific perceptions have been negated. Now, Husserl embraces this horizon context as well, for he likewise states that the horizon of the world remains, even if belief in specific perceptions prove to be wrong. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty points out, Husserl still seeks to intellectually possess
the entirety of experience. He still seeks a complete conceptual possession of the spatial-temporal horizon of experience in present immanent consciousness, something Merleau-Ponty certainly remains critical of, as we will see in greater detail below.

More broadly speaking, it should be clear that Merleau-Ponty rejects any idea or definition of objectivity as an object in-itself apart from any contact with human perception. As we have already witnessed above that he addresses this with his reference to Laplace. “Nothing will ever bring home to my comprehension what a nebula that no one sees could possibly be. Laplace’s nebula is not behind us, at our remote beginnings, but in front of us in the cultural world” (PhP 432). Yet he also clearly does not accept the currently popular position that regards the objective world as only or merely a cultural or linguistic construct. “What, in fact, do we mean when we say that there is no world without a being in the world? Not indeed that the world is constituted by consciousness, but on the contrary that consciousness always finds itself already at work in the world. What is true . . . is that there is a nature, which is not that of the sciences, but that which perception presents to me . . .” (PhP 432). As has sometimes been said, regarding Merleau-Ponty’s position, there is transcendence within immanence, or, as we have seen above, even though nature is always given to us through our embodied, perceptual encounters with it, it is experienced as always already being there, and as always already running beyond, both spatially and temporally, the very experience that reveals it. When discussing Husserl in a late Working Note in The Visible and the Invisible Merleau-Ponty continues to embrace this position and states the following. “But a sufficient reduction leads beyond the alleged transcendental ‘immanence,’ it leads to the absolute spirit understood as Weltlichkeit [worldiness], to Geist [spirit] as Ineinander [in one another] of the spontaneities, itself founded on the aesthesiological Ineinander and on the sphere of life as sphere of Einfilhlung [empathy or sympathetic understanding] and intercorporeity” (VI 172, my bracket additions). Even though we begin with our own perceptual encounter with the world, this embodied encounter is an intertwining with the world and with the embodied encounters of others also intertwined with it. Our embodied experiences intersect with each other and a world that is always already there, and just as they help create the meaning of this encounter, they do so by bringing to expression what is already there.

5.) We have already seen lived through, pre-conceptual experience discussed above under other headings and therefore need less space to discuss it here. It should suffice to point out a few passages that appear in Merleau-Ponty’s late work.

First, we should cite, once again, in part, what Merleau-Ponty favorably says of the later Husserl above. “The senseless effort to submit everything to the properties of ‘consciousness’ [and abstract thought] was necessary…to reveal all that was left over---those beings beneath idealizations and objectifications which…nourish them” (Shadow 180, my bracket addition). It is clear that this return to the body’s pre-cognitive, per-conceptual, lived through perceptual encounter with the world is one of the fundamental
themes of “The Philosopher and His Shadow” and part of what Merleau-Ponty finds in the later Husserl. It is also clear, for those who have a familiarity with Merleau-Ponty’s body of work, that the focus on the body’s pre-cognitive, lived through perceptual encounter with the world is one of the primary themes of the entire body of his work. This, in fact, is his primary criticism of both empiricism and rationalism, that is to say, they both intellectually construct the world rather than living in it. Secondly, in his “Eye and Mind,” an essay composed and published at the same time as he was composing *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty states the following about science. “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). We must return to this face to face encounter with the real, he says, and we do so by prioritizing the body’s perceptual openness out to and upon a world that is always already there. Everything else is a framing and expression of this primordial encounter (E&M 160). Thirdly, in *The Visible and Invisible* he argues that cognitive essences cannot be regarded as either prior to or separate from our perceptual encounter with the world. “We never have before us . . . essences without place and without date. Not that they exist elsewhere, beyond our grasp, but because we are experiences, that is, thoughts that feel behind themselves the weight of the space, the time, the very Being they think . . .” (VI 115). Existence, then, is not the variation of an essential form. We must look at this the other way around: abstract essences are a variation existence. Moreover, in *The Visible and Invisible* he states even more broadly that our abstract ideas must find their origin in our lived through perceptual openness out upon the world.

“Every ideation, because it is an ideation, is formed in a space of existence, under the guarantee of my duration, which must turn back into itself in order to find there the same idea I thought an instant ago and must pass into the others in order to rejoin it also in them. Every ideation is borne by this tree of my duration and their durations . . . ; behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of all the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other.” (VI 111)

Here again we see that it is the fabric of experience, the fabric of the body’s perceptual experience as it opens upon and intertwines with the world and its temporal duration that is the basis for and that bears our ideas. And here again we see that Merleau-Ponty is largely in agreement with similar thoughts found in Husserl’s later works. Yet, the comments just reviewed above, especially those drawn from *The Visible and Invisible*, were also meant to be critical of the tendencies of idealism and rationalism in philosophy, including these tendencies in Husserl’s thought, in his earlier writings but also insofar as they remain in his later works. The similarity between the later thought of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy will continue to be observed as we consider Merleau-Ponty’s late lecture on Husserl, entitled “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology.” Yet, we will also see Merleau-Ponty raise a number of rather serious criticism of Husserl’s thought.
Part II. Merleau-Ponty’s lectures, unpublished writings, and an additional published essay.

Merleau-Ponty’s brief summary of “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology”

Merleau-Ponty’s brief summary considers Husserl’s late text “The Origins of Geometry.” Most of the ideas that he here finds and attributes to Husserl we will find, frequently in a more developed form, and sometimes differently framed, in Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to point out that in Husserl’s later texts that ideality and historicity have a common source, something between a timeless realm of ideas and the flow of specific, everyday events, (as we have seen above, and Merleau-Ponty restates here) a third dimension that is the source of ideality, a dimension whose stages contain more than what is expressed explicitly in precisely defined concepts (TFL 115). In fact, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, each stage of experience carries not explicit concepts but certain implications, carried forward from the past. As these implications are developed in the present, they open new possibilities for the future. As Merleau-Ponty puts it with respect to an author’s creation (yet the context here makes clear that he also has in mind the broader movement of history), “each stage opens up a field and prepares themes which their author can only see as an outline of what is to come (Urstiftung), but which, when handed down (tradiert) to succeeding generations along with the earliest advances, become useful through a sort of second creation (Nachstiftung)” (TFL 115). This sublimation of past and the generation of future thought from it cannot be understood as proceeding from a timeless realm of ideality, for it is difficult to see how this ideality would enter the mind of the individual and drive the development of thought from the implied to the explicit. On the other hand, if we more properly begin with the origin of thought in our own experience, which exists within and fuses with the worldly dimension of temporality, then we can grasp this historicity of human thought, how it moves through time. Yet, in order to do this, because of the intersubjective nature of thought, we still have to understand how the thought that appears to one individual can exist for other minds. Here Merleau-Ponty answers, following his exposition of Husserl’s text, that it is the human act of speech that makes this possible (TFL 117).

Yet how is this possible, or, rather, how is this accomplished? Again, following Husserl’s thought here, in order to answer this question, we should once again turn first to the historicity of personal thought. “Before anything else within my sphere of consciousness there is a sort of message from myself to myself . . . I think in this near past, or rather yesterday’s thought passes into today’s thought: there is an encroachment of the passive upon the active which is reciprocal” (TFL 118). Thus, we begin to be able to form ideas and ideal thoughts, we begin to be able to move out of our own immediate experience in the present, because the ideas of yesterday pass into the thoughts of today and do so by means of the reciprocal encroachment of the passive and the active. I passively receive memories of the past as I actively take them up and move them toward the future. Moreover, it is speech that gives these integrated past/present/future meanings a stable body, and even more, for speech is the means by which thoughts are able to move from...
one individual speaker to another. “Speech passes from the sphere of one consciousness to another by the same phenomenon of encroachment or propagation. As a speaking and active subject, I encroach upon the other who is listening, as the understanding and passive subject I allow the other to encroach upon me. Within myself and in the exercise of language I experience activity in every case as the other side of passivity. And it is thus that ideality ‘makes its entrance’ (Eintritt)” (TFL 118-119).

The other passively listens to me and actively takes up my thought, as revealed through my expressions, just as I passively listen to the other and take up his or her gestures and thoughts. It is here that we move beyond what is given to the other or to me alone, for speech, which is experienced both passively and actively, with passivity and activity folding into one another, pulls us both into a shared meaning. “No more in my relationship to myself than in my relationship to others is there any question of survey or of pure ideality. There is, however, the recuperation of a passivity by an activity: that is how I think within the other person and how I talk with myself. Speech is not a product of my active thought, standing in a secondary relation to it. It is my practice, my way of working, my ‘Funktion,’ my destiny. Every production of the spirit is a response and an appeal, a coproduction” (TFL 119). Speech, then, must be understood as a coproduction of the past and present, of the passive and active, and of the self and others. Speech must be understood as a coproduction of passive/active subjects engaged with each other and engaged in the world together. Speech must be understood as a sort of co-sublimation of our embodied perceptual encounter with the world together. Yet this still doesn’t fully explain the existence of ideal meanings, meanings that exist even if no one is thinking of them at a particular moment. Of course, Merleau-Ponty continues, this lapse does not mean that these ideals exist apart from speech, “but merely obliges us to introduce an essential mutation in speech, namely, the appearance of writing. It is writing which once and for all translates the meaning of spoken words into ideal being, at the same time transforming human sociability, in as much as writing is ‘virtual’ communication, the speaking of x to x which is not carried by any living subject and belongs in principle to everyone, evoking a total speech.” (TFL 119). It is thus with the help of written language that we are able to explain the existence of ideal meanings and thoughts, meanings that do not have to be currently thought to exist (for they persist in the written word) but must at some point be thought by someone.

Merleau-Ponty also briefly takes up here Husserl’s “Umsturz der kopernikanischen Lehre.” He is in agreement with Husserl’s criticism of the Copernican view of nature, i.e., the view of nature as a mere thing or a mere collection of things.

“Through meditation we must again learn of a mode of being whose conception we have lost, the being of the ‘ground’ (Boden), and that of the earth first of all -- the earth where we live, that which is this side of rest and movement, being the ground from which all rest and all movement are separated, which is not made of Körper, being the ‘source’ from which they are drawn through division, which has no ‘place,’ being that which surrounds all place, which lifts all particular beings out of nothingness, as Noah’s Ark preserved the living creatures from the Flood.” (TFL, 121-122)
Along these same lines, as we have already seen, Merleau-Ponty mentions in “Eye and Mind” that science (with technology) manipulates the world (and does so with great success) but at the price of giving up living in it, and giving up living in it as our ever-present horizon or field or place of rest (E&M 59-61).

Merleau-Ponty also appreciates Husserl’s approach to what we may call an inter-corporeality, for Husserl speaks of a kinship between the lived through human body and the body of the world as a primordial “ground” for human knowledge, of a kinship between the lived through human body and the embodied things within the world, and of a kinship between the lived through human body of one individual with the human bodies lived through by others. Again, Merleau-Ponty values these ideas and they can be found more completely (and sometimes differently) developed in his later thought, as we will see momentarily. For now, though, let us now turn to a consideration of Merleau-Ponty’s actual notes for this lecture course, for it is here that we will see a more detailed exposition of Husserl’s later thought.

**Course Notes for Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology**

Geometry, according to Husserl, is not just the explicit thought of Galileo and other geometers. It exists within a cultural context or horizon, always with implied features, with the suggestion of other ideas that can be developed from its past and present. Past and present ideas are taken up, developed, and, in turn, suggest other developments. There is an internal unity to these ideas that have been developed over time, but this unity is not fixed and can be creatively developed. Moreover, Husserl here moves away from the subjective synthesis of the isolated individual’s experience, so is frequently associated with phenomenology, to speak of the empathy experienced between human beings, which, for Husserl, must be regarded as the basis for a “community of language.” First, the recollection, and then the synthesis of experiences, past with present, must be regarded as inter-subjective. Here language helps articulate (but does not literally create) an intersubjective field, for the “spiritual structure” of ideality already appears “at the hinge of the connection between me and others” (*Limits* 24). Yet there is a problem: just how does the recognition of the other, with the subsequent formation of intersubjectivity, take place? “Husserl’s solution,” Merleau-Ponty informs us, “consists in placing openness to others and openness to ideality into the law of the praxical-perspective, i.e., it consists in turning the others into the other side of my world and in turning ideality into the *Etwas* <“something”> upon which these two sides are articulated, the pivot of the ‘speaking to . . .’” (*Limits* 24). As human beings practically engaged in the world, we are sensitive to and aware of others who are also practically engaged in this world. We are engaged in the same world from many different “sides” or perspectives. This common world is what we *speak to others* about, and this is the primary role of language, that is, to refer speakers to a common world. In addition, language allows us to speak to others about a field of ideal meanings that extends beyond our perceptions of the immediate present. Language lends permanence to the field of ideal meanings (*Limits* 23-24). Merleau-Ponty expresses
Husserl’s position as follows. “Language is virtual communication, the pre-existence and permanence of ideality, because what is expressed changes its Seinmodus ‘ontic mode’ [or mode of being] in it: the words, the texts exist objectively in the fashion of physical things, and, in this permanent existence, they convey their sense as an activity which has fallen into obscurity but which is reawakened and which can again be transformed into activity . . .” (Limits 25, my square bracket addition). The objective existence of language, then, lends a stability to the ideal significations that it refers to, for these ideals appear to be held in existence by the actual existence of the observable words of a language (Limits 25). In fact, Husserl even admits that the ideal meanings require existence in words. The existence of ideal meanings requires historical repetition, requires the identity of a retrieved sense with a present sense, and it is words that help accomplish this.

Here again, Husserl appears to associate the possibility of the identification of meanings over time with our practical engagement in the world. Merleau-Ponty presents this point in a somewhat cryptic lecture note as follows. “Deckung [coincidence]: the identification of one Erzeugung [production] and of its wake. Neither simple passivity nor simple activity therefore, neither association nor survey, but coupling—cf. evocation of the passive as sensible, Empfindlich [sensible] through the ‘I can’ of the body . . .” (Limits 45, my bracket additions).84 In other words, it is within one’s practical activity that the passive and active fold into each other, and that the past is sensed and merges with the present. The lecture note continues its characterization of Husserl’s thought: geometry itself “consists in ‘spiritual’ being . . . engendered by human activity, belonging to our human space. I know this because it is a trace: Friday’s footprint” (Limits 28). In other words, since it is impossible for us to be historically present at the actual empirical origins of geometry, we are left with what might be considered to be its origins, i.e., some practical human activity that presumes a certain human sense (just as Robinson Crusoe realizes that he is not alone on the island by seeing human footprints in the sand, the footprint of a man subsequently called Friday85). Some human sense must accompany the original trace of human activity that we can still presently observe. In the case of geometry, the first written formulas reveal a certain human presence and sense (human beings who were able to create meaningful geometrical formulas), just as the human footprints left in the sand on what appeared to be an abandoned beach reveal a human presence and, presumably, some purposeful human activity.

We must retrace this human sense that has unfolded in human history. We can do this because certain meanings are sedimented in historical experience. They are established as stable meanings that can be repeated and that fertilely suggest future developments—and to which we must return to more fully understand that from which we have arisen, to more fully grasp the pathway of the past to our present. These sedimented meanings act as a trace (or suggestion) of a human sense that is not fully present, or, to some extent at least, is even absent (because they exist in the past). Merleau-Ponty critically stresses here
that this *Stiftung*, this founding or instituting of meaning, must be considered as open or open-ended, not as totally enveloping, not as fully defined (*Limits* 24). We cannot return to the past to fully recapture the human meanings that began to be instituted there, he claims. While Husserl seemed to fully recognize this open-endedness, it also appears that he remained sympathetic to the idea of an all-enveloping thought---which we will turn to momentarily.

It is written language that takes the final step toward the founding of the permanence of meanings constructed by human activity. Here is Merleau-Ponty on Husserl’s position.

“Through the written, meaning is virtually in the world. The permanence of ideal being rests on that of the world as containing virtualities of *Erzeugung* [production]. The ideal world supported by the sensible world. The written as element of the sensible world is *erfahrbar in Gemeinsamkeit* (<‘experience in common’>). As the element of the world of the nameable, it is *Eezeugbar [in Gemeinsamkeit]* [[production in common ground]]: its sensible inter-existence entails also inter-existence of sense . . . it is permanent as meaning, i.e., as element of the sayable and (correlatively) of the speech *Sprechendes Wesen* [[speaking Being]]; it is sedimented sense. This is why sedimentation, forgetfulness, is not a defect of ideality: it is constitutive of ideality.” (*Limits* 57, Merleau-Ponty’s underlined text; my double square brackets)

Merleau-Ponty continues his exposition of Husserl.

“But in order for there to be truly coproduction, or Deckung [[coincidence]] of the present with the past, there has to be in addition ‘simultaneity’, *Ineinander*, [the present act overcoming itself towards the acts of yesterday or towards those of others, encountering the act again in the coupling, i.e., the passage of one thought into another or into Dokumentierung [[documentation]] . . . The written is the . . . <‘transformation of the original mode of being of the sense structure . . .’> (*Husserliana VI* 371).86 [[C]reation of short cuts, of a synthetic, meta-personal evidence. The written and monumental sense. The written, the book as Speech.]” (*Limits* 58, my double square brackets)

As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “the crisis of European science” that Husserl addresses in his later writings (*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, which includes “The Origins of Geometry”) “is due to *Sinnentleerung* [the emptying out of sense].” Like Heidegger, Husserl is here speaking about the loss of the original human sense of projects that have become blindly repeated. For Husserl, Merleau-Ponty says, “the immediate remedy [for this problem] is historical *Besinnung* [reflection] to reawaken the *Urstiftung* [original founding or institution] and all of its horizons.” The remedy is a historical reflection that is able to grasp the “interior of the history which bears the ideality,” i.e., the human meaning as it has been developed. This seems like a laudable goal, a laudable way to try to escape our present alienation. Yet here Merleau-Ponty immediately questions this goal and asks “can we still do this? Isn’t total reactivation [of the past] impossible?” (*Limits* 32, my bracket additions) And earlier on in his exposition of Husserl, he states that “we still need to know whether Husserl is mistaken to maintain intemporal formulas: *unbedingte Allgemeingültigkeit* <‘unconditional general validity’> (*Husserliana VI* 366). Is there coincidence with the totality of the *Urstiftung*, if the tradition is always forgotten? We shall see [to] it to raise the question. Wouldn’t coincidence be the death of the *logos* since forgetfulness makes
the tradition fruitful?” (*Limits* 20, my square bracket addition). Merleau-Ponty’s answer, to his clearly rhetorical questions, is not fully stated here, but, based on his overall philosophy (as well as the rhetorical nature of his questions, especially the second) must be that a coincidence with the totality of the founding is not possible, (or, more precisely, that an intellectual coincidence in the present with the totality of the founding is not possible), that Husserl is mistaken to maintain intemporal formulas such as “unconditional general validity,” and that a total coincidence with the past world would mean the death of the *Stiftung logos* (the origin with its multitude of open possibilities.) Let us proceed to further consider what Merleau-Ponty says about this text. 87

**B.) Merleau-Ponty’s Relationship to Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology**

We see here once again that Merleau-Ponty presents Husserl as seeking a third dimension, something that can be regarded as a common source of ideality and historicity: the experience of embodied perceiving subject opening upon and intermingling with the public field of the world. Or, to restate this in the context of the ideal and the temporal flow of immediate events, as my lived through experience opens upon and intersects with the public field of the world, I think of the ideal in the closeness of the immediate past, as it passively flows into my present thought, as the present actively folds back into it. Speech helps stabilize the temporal flow of my experience, of the past and present encroaching upon one another, and, in addition, speech helps the movement of thought from one person to another by a similar passive/active encroachment. I passively listen to the others and actively take up their speech, just as they listen to and take up mine. Yet, it is written language that ultimately helps create “ideal significations,” for written language is there (as an object) for all to see and use over time, even if no one is present to think these thoughts for some time.

What we see here in Husserl’s thought, the *Ineinander* (or flowing into one another) of past and present, the *Ineinander* of lived through perceptual experience and language, and the *Ineinander* of speaking and listening, we also find in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. When discussing language in his later works Merleau-Ponty emphasizes a number of forms of chiasm (of *Ineinander*, of crossing or flowing into one another): the chiasm of the (passive/active) embodied perceiver and the perceived object, as the primordial source of meaning; the chiasm between the active, gesturing body and linguistic gestures, as our lived through bodily perceptual encounter with the world sublimated in our linguistic gestures as they fold back on the perceived world to help express it more clearly, with a variety of expressions remaining possible, yet with some expressing more clearly than the others; the chiasm between speaking and hearing; the chiasm between linguistic expressions and the ideal significations they express; and, of course, and more generally, of passivity and activity in human experience as a whole (See VI, 144-145, 149-155, as well as above).

Merleau-Ponty offers little criticism here of Husserl’s *Ineinander* or “dialectical” view of language, with aspects of experience crossing into one another, other than Husserl’s tendency, in spite of this fluid
dialectic, to retain a transcendental and analytic perspective (TFL 120-121). The sense is that he is in agreement with Husserl’s *Ineinander* view of language but remains critical of Husserl’s attempt to grasp, analytically and cognitively, each aspect of language as an explicit act, as something that is fully grasped cognitively or that is even cognitively constructed. It should also be mentioned here that Merleau-Ponty does focus primarily on speech and not written language. It is fair to say that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language is primarily a philosophy of speech, with speech as a sublimation of perception, and with written language as a sublimation of speech, as a more abstract expression of speech, or more simply, merely as speech written down. (Of course, Merleau-Ponty is aware that written language does have new properties, such as continued physical existence, but also that it primarily remains speech that is written down.) Let us return momentarily to the text of *The Visible and Invisible* to clarify these points.

"There is,” Merleau-Ponty says, “vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible/tangible of which it is a part, or when between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a visibility, a tangible in itself . . . It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh . . .” (VI 139). What we see here is not new in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, for throughout Merleau-Ponty’s work we find the birth of meaning in the perceiving body’s interaction with the world, except that this interworld (this mixture of the perceiving body and the world) is now called “flesh.” Yet with this “flesh” Merleau-Ponty takes his philosophy further, for not only is there a reversibility, or *Ineinander*, or chiasm between the visual perception and the perceived, and between the touching and the touched, but there is also a reversibility of the visual and touching systems. And this means that we are open to “if not yet the incorporeal --- at least an intercorporeal being, a presumptive domain of the visible and the tangible, which extends further than the things I touch and see at present” (VI 142-143). My lived through perceiving body thus presumes and opens upon an intercorporeal being, with a possibility of moving toward the “incorporeal,” i.e., toward the “invisible” field of ideal significations. Yet one more step needs to be accomplished before we reach this “invisible” field, and that is the reversibility between the visible and tangible systems and the reversibility of speaking and hearing (VI 144). “This new reversibility and the emergence of the flesh as expression are the point of insertion of speaking and thinking in the world of silence” (VI 144-145). In other words, as our active, sentient (and even sensual) perception meets the embracing and imposing patterns of the world, this active gesture slips toward its expressive sublimation in the active gesture of speech. Since the world is experienced through the human body, with its anonymous and thus intercorporeal structures, the world is experienced as an extension of our perceiving bodies, just as we experience ourselves as an extension of it. We experience ourselves as intercorporeal beings opening upon a shared world that we must attempt to adapt to and express together. Thus the source of the incorporeal, of ideal significations, is our shared bodily attempts to adapt to the world and express it together. The ideal is formed as my bodily perceptions pass,
with the aid of speech, into the bodily perceptions of others, as we bodily open upon and act within the world together. Even though Merleau-Ponty doesn’t mention writing here, he certainly recognizes that it is language that helps us make this final move toward the creation of ideal significations, for it helps move significations from one individual to another, and so on, and from one moment of experience to another, and thus from one shared historical period to another. Moreover, and it is certainly written language that further helps accomplish this latter movement.\textsuperscript{88} Yet, again, for Merleau-Ponty, written language is still primarily speech that is written down.

Now, it should certainly be noted that Merleau-Ponty does not seek to deny or even limit the creative use of abstract thought or the written language that is so important to its expression. Philosophers, logicians, scientist, etc., use abstract, formal, statistical thought, including algebraic algorithms, with great purpose and success. Moreover, when using an algorithm or an algebraic formula, it is not necessary to imagine a specific sense object for each variable. It is certainly not necessary to do this to successfully calculate with these formulas. “Thus nothing limits our power to formalize, that is, to construct increasingly general expressions of the same fact. But however far one proceeds with formalization, its signification remains in suspension, means nothing, and has no truth at all unless we refer its superstructures back to a visible object. To signify, to signify something as a decisive act, is therefore accomplished only when that something’s constructions are applied to the perceived as the source of signification or expression” (PW 106, see also PhP 384ff and VI 149ff). As important as abstract thought and written language are to the development and advancement of human thought (and science and philosophy, etc., etc.), it must remain in contact with our lived through, embodied perceptual encounter with the world, otherwise it will be without substantial meaning.

Here again we witness mostly Merleau-Ponty’s agreement with Husserl, with some suggestion of a critical reading of Husserl’s persistent tendency to envelop everything in abstract thought. Yet, let us now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s “On the Phenomenology of language,” for it is here that he expressly confronts what he regards as the shortcomings of Husserl’s thought.

“On the Phenomenology of Language”

Even though Merleau-Ponty offers little criticism of Husserl in either “The Philosopher and His Shadow” or “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,” he does offer a more critical analysis of Husserl’s view of language in “On the Phenomenology of Language,” which, according to the bibliography of Merleau-Ponty’s works by Francois and Claire Lapointe, was first presented at a colloquium in 1951, first published in 1952, and republished in Signes in 1960.\textsuperscript{89} The essay is clearly conversant with Husserl’s later work generally and with “The Origins of Geometry” more specifically. (Signs 84-85)\textsuperscript{90} Merleau-Ponty here reports that there is an inconsistency in Husserl’s thought, with his earlier work focusing on the construction of the essence of language as the basis for an ideal language and his later work focusing on the actual use
or practice of language as the basis for ideal constructions. The difference here between the early and late characterization of language, Merleau-Ponty reports, can be understood as a shift from an objective to a subjective point of view. He finds this same tendency in Saussure’s thought, as well as in the then common approach to the study of language, with a focus on language understood either subjectively, (synchronously, to use Saussure’s term) or objectively (diachronically, again to use Saussure’s term). Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical pitch here is that the subjective and objective points of view must be integrated rather than simply juxtaposed, as they are in the thought of both Husserl, Saussure, and many others. To accomplish this integration Merleau-Ponty once again turns to the *Ineinander* phenomenon, to the flowing into one another of aspects of experience, the flowing into one another of the perceiver and perceived, of the past, present and future, of self and other, etc. Language as subjective (synchronic) and objective (diachronic) must be understood as flowing into one another as well. Language must be thought of as “an oriented system which nevertheless always elaborates random factors, taking what was fortuitous up again into a meaningful whole -- incarnate logic” (*Signs* 88).

Merleau-Ponty understands that signs express significations by sublimating the human body’s perceptual encounter with the world. Since perception itself is active, is itself a form of expression, the move to sublimate this form of expression in the vocalizations of speech (as another form of expression) doesn’t have to travel too far. For they are both bodily forms of expression. Yet this sublimation gets some help, and does so from language itself, for the meaning of a word, its signification, is also linked to its linguistic context. Speech helps express or sublimate our perceptual encounter with the world and does so by using already available means of expression. Perceptual encounters with the world suggest certain emotive and linguistic expressions and the already available means of expression sympathetic to this emotive, perceptual bodily encounter fold back upon it to help bring it more fully to light. Thus, Merleau-Ponty states, just as the active perceiving body opens upon and aims at the perceptual field of the world that simultaneously folds back upon it, so also the act of speech opens upon and aims at a linguistic field of significations that simultaneously folds back upon this means of expression. Thus this new, integrated view of language must be understood as a system in the making, for it acts as a whole that continually embraces contingent and thus new events by integrating them into its system. This integrated view of language, according to Merleau-Ponty, was not envisioned or foreseen by Husserl.

Moreover, it should be added that Merleau-Ponty here finds another inconsistency in Husserl’s thought, this time with respect to Husserl’s characterization of phenomenology as both a propaedeutic for a seemingly separate consideration of ideal essences and as concrete descriptions that necessarily remain in all abstract constructions. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty’s preference is for the latter view of phenomenology, for, as we have seen, he believes that all abstract constructions have their source in the body’s perceptual encounter with the world. (See also the presentation below of Merleau-Ponty’s *The Prose
of the World.) In addition, as we have just seen with respect to language, abstract thought is expressed with the help of language and must thus not be considered as independent of it, and, yet, as we have also just seen, for Merleau-Ponty at least, abstract significations fold back upon their means of expression, once again indicating an Ineinander relationship, a flowing into one another of speech and signification.

Overall, then, considering all of what we have seen thus far, here and further above, and stated positively, Merleau-Ponty finds in Husserl’s later work a new focus on the lived through human body, a subtle analysis of two hands touching one another, a lived through characterization of time, and the recognition of the other based in the human body’s lived through relationship to the other---all of which appears in Merleau-Ponty’s later thought. More critically, though, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty finds a tension in the later thought of Husserl, with his simultaneous movement toward existence and essences, rather than just an idealistic construction of cognitive essences, as was his tendency in his earlier writing. Merleau-Ponty certainly agrees with and appreciates Husserl’s later movement towards existence, and he also appreciates Husserl’s existential characterization of time, of a present that fades toward the past and future, with overlapping boundaries, rather than as a past, present and future as discrete moments or units of time. Yet Merleau-Ponty remains critical of Husserl’s continued tendency to favor the construction of cognitive essences, including with respect to time. Let us take up the treatment of time by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, for it is here that we will clarify some of the differences between them.

**Temporality**

In Michael Kelly’s excellent overview of phenomenology and time consciousness, he clearly lays out Husserl’s two modes of intentionality with respect to time. The first can be characterized as a meaningful flow of experience from the present away from the past and towards the future, with these moments overlapping with no precise boundaries between them. This is referred to as a horizontal mode of intentionality. The second mode, called transverse intentionality, can be characterized as an objectification of the transcendent object that appears in and through the first mode. For example, as I walk around the exterior of a building, I first see the front, then the side, then the back, and so on, with these lived through moments of experience passively flowing into one another and overlapping. Here I participate in the horizontal mode of operative or latent intentionality (as Merleau-Ponty puts it). Yet, according to Husserl, with the second mode of transverse intentionality, I am able to engage with the library as a transcendent object, as a singular object appearing through and even beyond the flow of experiences, which is intellectually represented in a present “now.”

Merleau-Ponty rejects this latter mode, while embracing the first. Let us briefly consider his position. First of all, for Merleau-Ponty it is lived through experience itself that highlights the present (albeit the present in the wide sense of including and shading into the past and future). “Time exists for me only because I am situated in it, that is, because I become aware of myself as already committed to it . . . Time
exists for me because I have a present. No one of time’s dimensions can be deduced from the rest. But the present (in the wide sense, along with its horizons of primary past and future), nevertheless enjoys a privilege because it is the zone in which being and consciousness coincide . . .” (PhP 423-424). Moreover, if this is the case, that is, if experience is centered in the present of a field, then there is no need for of a reflective synthesis of experience. “There is no need for a synthesis externally binding together the tempora into one single time, because each one of the tempora was already inclusive, beyond itself, of the whole open series of other tempora, being in internal communication with them, and because the ‘cohesion of a life’ is given with its ek-stase”---with the present moment of experience leaping out of itself toward temporal, spatial fields which are experienced as dimensions of a bodily being in the world (PhP 421, see also ek-stase at PhP 70, 430, and Merleau-Ponty’s comment regarding Laplace’s nebula, PhP 432).92

Here we see Merleau-Ponty emphasizing that lived through experience is centered in the present (in the wide sense) and that there is no need for a reflective of intellectual synthesis because the cohesion of experience is given with the subject’s being-in-the-world. Time is a dimension of our being-in-the-world, or, rather, time is a dimension of being, a dimension that the subject’s awareness helps open, with which the subject’s experience fuses, yet also a dimension that runs beyond the subject. We see here that Merleau-Ponty already makes this case (of time as a dimension of being) in his earlier Phenomenology of Perception, but we will see momentarily that he takes this point further in his later The Visible and the Invisible. Moreover, we also see here in the earlier work that Merleau-Ponty argues that it is in the present that the subject’s being coincides with his or her consciousness, for the subject’s being is his or her bodily openness upon the world. The coincidence of being and consciousness is not brought about because the subject’s being is fully present to a reflective, cognitive consciousness. There is no need to posit a reflective subject behind the subject of lived through experience in order to synthesize that experience, for I am present to myself as I am present to the world, with the synthesis of my experience occurring in the world (See PhP 424).93 “Husserl’s error,” Merleau-Ponty states in the later The Visible and the Invisible, “is to have described the interlocking [of moments of experience] starting from a Prasensfeld considered as without thickness, as immanent consciousness . . .” (VI 173, my bracket addition; more on this below).

As we have seen above, in Phenomenology of Perception, the tempora hold together because they are in a temporal field which is a dimension of our being in the world, which runs beyond the perceiving subject. If we consider Merleau-Ponty’s use of the fundierung relationship here in Phenomenology of Perception, if we consider the fundierung relationship as a two-way relationship with one of the terms nevertheless remaining the more primary term, then we can see that when we consider time as a dimension of our being-in-the-world, we consider time as a dimension of experience, that subject helps bring this dimension to light, to awareness, yet the dimension runs beyond the subject as more primary, as a dimension of being. Merleau-Ponty takes this further in the Working Notes of The Visible and the Invisible.
“And in fact here it is indeed the past that adheres to the present and not the consciousness of the past that adheres to the consciousness of the present: the ‘vertical’ past contains in itself the exigency to have been perceived, far from the consciousness of having perceived bearing that of the past. The past is no longer here a ‘modification’ or modalization of the Bewusstsein von... [consciousness of...] Conversely it is the Bewusstsein von, the having perceived that is borne by the past as massive Being. I have perceived it since it was.” (VI 244, my bracket addition)

We clearly see here that the past, and temporality as a dimension, is a dimension of Being, that awareness (or consciousness of...) is not eliminated but that it is carried by a more primary Being. When Merleau-Ponty speaks about the lived through body as opening upon (through its own flesh) and intermingling with the surface of the world, and as thus experiencing the surface of the world as the flesh of the world, it is clear that it is the world that is primary.

“The flesh of the world is of the Being-seen, i.e. is a Being that is eminently percipi, and it is by it that we can understand the perciere: this perceived that we call my body applying itself to the rest of the perceived, i.e. treating itself as a perceived by itself and hence as a perceiving, all this is finally possible and means something only because there is Being, not Being in itself, identical to itself,... but the Being that also contains its negation, its percipi——” (VI 250-251)

Thus we do not have an abandonment of phenomenology here, but a redefining of it. It is no longer Husserl’s prioritizing of intellectual acts of intentional constitution that should be accepted but the body’s lived through, pre-reflective, pre-cognitive opening upon a prior field of Being. We cannot understand Being without the experiencing subject that opens upon it, but it is the Being that is seen that is primary, that is more primary than the being that is seeing and extends beyond the being that is seeing both temporally and spatially.94

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to further distance his phenomenology from Husserl’s.

“The whole Husserlian analysis is blocked by the framework of [cognitive] acts which imposes upon it the philosophy of consciousness. It is necessary to take up again and develop the fungierende [operative] or latent intentionality which is the intentionality within being. That is not compatible with ‘phenomenology,’ that is, with an ontology that obliges whatever is not nothing to present itself to the consciousness across Abschattungen [shadings] and as deriving from an originating donation which is an act, i.e. one Erlebnis [experience] among others... It is necessary to take as primary, not the consciousness and its Ablaufsphanomen [running off phenomena] with its distinct intentional threads, but the vortex which this Ablaufsphanomen schematizes, the spatializing-temporalizing vortex (which is flesh and not consciousness facing a noema [an object of thought]).” (VI 244, a Working Note dated 1960; my bracket additions)95

Again, what is primary for Merleau-Ponty is our embodied thrownness into the world. While it makes no sense to speak of knowledge of being in itself, and that we must threat Being as Being-seen, it is Being with its temporal/spatial field that is more primary because it is given in our experience as extending beyond experience. Furthermore, with respect to time, it is no longer necessary to appeal to Husserl’s transverse mode of intentionality, for the “synthesis” of the object of experience occurs in the temporal structure of the world, in the spatial-temporal vortex that human experience exists within, not in a reflective, cognitive,
constituting consciousness that is in full possession of itself. Thus, even though the later Merleau-Ponty highlights the dual nature of the later Husserl’s philosophy, with its emphasis on both essences and existences, we see here that Merleau-Ponty remains critical of Husserl’s continued prioritizing of the cognitive (even essential) construction of experience. In spite of the similarities found in the later writings of both authors, we find Merleau-Ponty here distancing himself from Husserl’s privileging of the cognitive construction of time and of experience in general.

**The Prose of the World**

Let us turn briefly to one last text in our consideration of the similarities between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, for it is here we will see Merleau-Ponty articulate a number of additional criticism of Husserl, as well as additional similarities. According to Merleau-Ponty’s close friend and posthumous editor, Claude Lefort, Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published *The Prose of the World* was probably written in summer and fall of 1951. Also, as we have already seen, according to the Lapointes’ annotated bibliography of Merleau-Ponty’s works, the first presentation of “On the Phenomenology of Language” was in 1951. We have seen that this essay deals with and cites Husserl’s “The Origins of Geometry.” Thus, Merleau-Ponty was clearly aware of this late text by Husserl when he was composing *The Prose of the World* in 1951. This is confirmed by a citation in *The Prose of the World*, a citation that mentions Husserl’s earlier *Logische Untersuchungen*. In this citation Merleau-Ponty adds the following comment, “Husserl was later to take up repeatedly the problem of the relations between reason and history, to end, in his last writings, with a philosophy in which they are identified.” Claude Lefort here offers the following editorial comment: “This unfinished note mentions only ‘The Origin of Geometry’” (PW 26). And finally, that Merleau-Ponty was here (in 1951, in both “On the Phenomenology of Language” and *The Prose of the World*) fully aware of the main ideas discussed in “The Origins of Geometry” (*Stiftung, Ineinander* of self and world, of self and others, of past and present, repetition that recaptures and transforms the past, the subsequent formation of a tradition, the forgetting of this tradition, etc.) can be witnessed in the following *The Prose of the World* passage.

“The painter himself can never say---since the distinction has no meaning---what comes from him and what comes from things, what the new work adds to the old ones, what he has taken from this, and what is his own. There is a . . . resumption through which he continues while going beyond, conserves while destroying, interprets through deviation, and infuses a new meaning into what nevertheless called for and anticipated it. . . . It is also a response to what the world, the past, the previous works demanded of him, namely, accomplishment and fraternity. Husserl has used the term *Stiftung*—foundation, institution—to designate, first the unlimited fecundity of each present . . . Above all he has used *Stiftung* to designate that fecundity of the products of culture which continue to have value after their historical appearance and open a field of work beyond and the same as their own. It is thus that the world as soon as he has seen it, his first act of painting, and the whole past of painting create for the painter a tradition, that is, Husserl says, the power to forget origins, the duty to start over again and to give the past . . . the efficacy of renewal or ‘repetition,’ which is the noble form of memory.” (PW 67-68)
Thus, Merleau-Ponty is certainly aware of “The Origins of Geometry” in *The Prose of the World* and, even more, certainly considers Husserl’s ideas at a very fundamental level. Merleau-Ponty embraces many of Husserl’s mature ideas (but, it must be said, he has also held similar ideas from the very beginning of his academic career, ideas of reciprocal interpenetration appropriated and adapted from the dialectic of Hegel and Marx, from Saussure, as well as from Gestalt psychology.) There are clearly similarities between the ideas in “The Origins of Geometry” and *The Prose of the World*, yet there are also clear differences, for, as we have already seen above, Merleau-Ponty remains critical of certain aspects of Husserl’s thought, and even of his later, more mature thought. Let us trace some of these late similarities and differences.

Again, and speaking generally, the *Ineinander* [in one another] that Husserl discusses in “The Origins of Geometry,” the *Ineinander* of passivity/activity, of past/present, of previous experience and thought/present experience and thought, of self/others, of past common experience and thought/current common experience and thought, we find in Merleau-Ponty’s *The Prose of the World* as well. First of all, as we have seen, for Merleau-Ponty, human meaning is first formed as the human body actively engages with the forceful patterns of the world, as they flow or cross back and forth into one another. In addition, the *active* aspect of human perception provides the basis for and passes into expression. In fact, we may even say that “all perception and all human action which presupposes it, in short every use of the human body, is already *primordial expression*. This means that perception is . . . the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs” (PW 78). The painter, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to claim, prolongs the already meaningful action of perception, and, as we have just witnessed above, he here makes explicit reference to Husserl. Husserl’s use of *Stiftung* indicates a tradition, a field of meaning that is opened up by certain works and that the painter (or the poet, the philosopher, the novelist, the scientist, and so on) takes up, carries on, and takes further. The painter’s lived through *perceptual* meaning slips into other forms of expression, in this case painting, just as the act of painting is able to fold back upon the perceiver’s perceptual field to help frame or stylize it. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty states that it is because human actions are capable of creating meaning, because they can organize or stylize facts and thus go beyond the merely factual, that we are able to understand the gestures of another person, of a previous age, or of another culture. Since human gestures are comparable as human acts, as acts that have a human meaning, they can slip into one another (*Ineinander*), and they are comparable in the general sense that they are all capable of expressing a human meaning. (PW 79)

Moreover, in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, it should be stressed here that even though the meaning of a human gesture, as creative, as a taking up of the facts that orients them in a certain fashion, as a taking up that goes beyond the facts merely as facts, this gesture remains dependent upon them and would disappear (or, at least, render itself virtually meaningless) if completely separated from them. As Merleau-Ponty puts it here, “cultural expression is ineffectual if it does not find a vehicle in external
circumstances, it can achieve nothing without them” (PW 80-81). Furthermore, it is through the expressive actions of the human body, in contact with the world, over time, that we can develop a sense of history. “It is through our body that we have the first experience of the impalpable body of history...” (PW 83). In fact, human history (as Husserl also said) is the accumulation of previous meaningful experiences, as attempts to adapt to the world together primarily through our bodies, into the present. At its best history is the retention in the present of what was “most true and valuable” in the past (PW 86).

It is at this point in *The Prose of the World* that Merleau-Ponty introduces language, for he believes that painting (the form of expression discussed thus far in his text) and language have something in common. They are both active gestures that take up a common past in order to express something new. They are both gestures that meet the past passively/actively in an attempt to express something new. Even more, (and again reminiscent of Husserl), Merleau-Ponty states, “sedimentation is not only accumulation of one creation upon another but also an integration,” and it is here that we also see how painting and language are different, for language has a greater capacity to integrate its past into its present (PW 100).

When developing his overall theory of language, Merleau-Ponty definitely appropriates aspects of Saussure’s characterization of language as a system of differences, in particular that the meaning of a word must be seen as forming in relationship to other words within the linguistic system. Yet, it should be stated, Merleau-Ponty clearly distinguishes his philosophy of language from the postmodernist positions that claim that language as an interpretative system is not really influenced by anything beyond itself, that, subsequently, does not really refer to anything beyond itself.

“If we... bring into the light what constitutes the price of language, we would find that it is the intention to unveil the thing itself and to go beyond what is said to what what is said signifies. It does not help for every word to refer back to all other possible words for its meaning, because the very moment the word is produced the task of expression can no longer be differentiated or returned to other words--it has been uttered and we understand something... Signs do not simply evoke other signs for us and so on endlessly. Language is not like a prison into which we are locked or a guide whose directions we must follow blindly. For in their everyday use, what signs mean appears at the intersection of all those thousands of signs to which they lead us so easily...” (PW 102-103)

Even though the meaning of a word is formed within a linguistic and social context, we have also seen above that the meaning of gestures (including vocal gestures) also express or voice the body’s perceptual encounter with the world. While it is true that Merleau-Ponty’s early writings certainly focus on the latter, with his later works focusing on the former, these are not mutually exclusive modes for the formation of the meaning of a word. They are not because bodily gestures, i.e., the body’s sublimation of its active perceptual engagements with the world, take place within a social and linguistic context, just as a linguistic framework is developed around the perceptual, practical, worldly interactions of its community members. Thus, the individual’s expressions and the linguistic context of the community flow or cross into one another.
Returning to the comparison of artistic gestures (painting) and linguistic gestures, and the difference between them, Merleau-Ponty stresses that “in comparing language to mute forms of expression . . . we should not overlook the point that language, unlike them, is not content to draw lines, vectors, a ‘coherent deformation,’ or tacit meaning on the surface of the world” (PW 103-104). Language has the ability to integrate more abstractly. To illustrate this, and to provide a contrasting experience, Merleau-Ponty first mentions the ability of a chimpanzee to use a stick to retrieve food outside of its enclosure but can do so only if the stick is projected from the inside of the enclosure to the outside. If the retrieval function is not suggested by the placement of the stick, this function will not occur to the chimpanzee. For the chimpanzee, then, the meaning of the object appears to be tightly connected to its practical function, to how the object is being used in a particular activity at a particular moment. For humans, on the other hand, the abstract use of language has the capacity to transcend immediate practical situations and tasks (PW 104). Consider, for example, the calculation of the area of a parallelogram. One helpful way to do so is to treat the parallelogram as two triangles, which can be achieved by simply drawing a line diagonally from one corner of the parallelogram to another. Now we can simply calculate the area of the two triangles using one of the available mathematical means of doing so, for example, area=one half of the base times the height or $A=\frac{1}{2}(bh)$. Here the new structure (the parallelogram grasped as two triangles with specified areas) allows us to understand the meaning of the old, the original parallelogram, and does so without negating it. Moreover, it is this sort of abstract integration, this sort of sublation or lifting up and integration at a more abstract level (Aufheben), and the understanding that comes with it, that does not seem available in the act of painting.

Yet again, Merleau-Ponty here insists that the ability to integrate thought at very abstract levels does not mean that abstract thought can be meaningfully formed outside all perceptual contact with the world. He mentions Galileo’s formation of the ideal essence of acceleration, with exceptions explained as variations (or adulterations) of this ideal due to various worldly contingencies. Merleau-Ponty proceeds to critically state the following.

“That it [i.e., the ideal essence] appears to us on the basis of ‘particular cases’ is not an accident of its genesis with no essential effect. The signification is inscribed in its content, and if we tried to abstract the signification from the circumstances in which it appears, the signification would vanish before our eyes. The latter is not so much a signification over and above the facts which signify it as our means of passing from one fact to another or the trace of their intellectual generations.” (PW 105, my bracket addition)

The comments directed here to Galileo could be addressed just as well to Husserl’s more idealistic tendencies, specifically to his earlier use of the eidetic reduction. The intemporal essence, once formed (or “discovered” via eidetic variation), was to allow us to understand all variation as a denigration of the ideal essence. Merleau-Ponty certainly challenges this sort of positing of an intemporal essences: “My incontestable power to give leeway, to disengage the possible from the real, does not go so far as to
dominate all the implications of the spectacle and to make of the real a simple variant of the possible; on the contrary, it is the possible worlds and possible beings that are the variants and are like doubles of the actual world and actual Being” (VI 111-112). He does state, as we have already seen above, that “nothing limits our power to formalize, that is, to construct increasingly general expressions of the same fact.” We are thus capable of great abstraction and of thinking, quite successfully, with abstract algorithms and formulas. Yet, as we have also seen above, these abstract formulas, at some point, must relate back to our lived through perceptual world if they are to remain meaningful. (PW 106, PhP 384ff and VI 149ff, discussed below).

Again, humans are capable of thinking at very high levels of abstraction, and this thinking certainly has value. Yet, at some point its calculations must relate back to the world as we live it perceptually, otherwise these calculations remain ineffectual. However, Merleau-Ponty fully realizes that the relationship of abstract thought to perception and to the perceived object is complex.

“The perceived object, with its viscous significations, has a twofold relation to what is understood. On the one hand, it is only the sketch or fragment of meaning which calls for a repetition that fixes the perceived object and finally makes it exist. On the other, the perceived object is the prototype of meaning and alone accomplishes the actual truth of what is understood. To be sure, if we are to understand the sensible as quality, it must contain everything we think, although almost nothing in human perception is entirely sensible, since the sensible is indiscernible. But there is also nothing that we can actually and effectively think without relating it to our field of presence, to the actual existence of the perceived object—and in this sense the field of presence contains everything.” (PW 106-107)

Both of Merleau-Ponty’s full length (and completed) philosophical treatises, The Structure of Behavior and Phenomenology of Perception, spend a great deal of time discussing the nature of sense perception, emphasizing that nothing in our lived experience corresponds to “sense data,” which is actually a product of intellectual analyses. Along with Gestalt psychology, he argues that the simplest perception is a figure against a ground. We cannot go back (or down) any further. Yet, we can go out further, for Merleau-Ponty continues to argue that perceptual form also occurs in the wider context of a cultural and linguistic horizon. However, just as there is no purely perceptual field, since perception occurs in a wider cultural and linguistic context, there is not purely linguistic one either. Perception gives rise to linguistic expressions, just as these linguistic expressions simultaneously fold back upon the perceived to help express it as clearly as possible.99 Here again we witness the relationship of flowing into one another (Ineinander), with perception and language simultaneously influencing each other, yet with perception as the more primary term.

“The formal transparency of the algorithm recaptures a back-and-forth operation between sensible structures and their expression as well as the whole genesis of intermediary significations . . . Although it is characteristic of sedimentation in the sciences to contract a series of operations in the evidence of a single formula which no longer needs to be made explicit for us to work with it, the structure so refined keeps its full sense and capacity for new developments of knowledge only if it retains some relation to our experience and if we begin again, even if by shorter route, to reconstruct it from this basis.” (PW 107)
Thus, again, language and abstract thought are capable of forming useful formulas, but for this thought to remain fully meaningful, especially for future developments, it must at some point relate back to our perceptual world as we live it.

Reminiscent of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to mention that we have access to the past because we remain in contact with it by way of our lived through present, which opens out to and overlaps with it (PW 107-108). Past and present experiences cross or flow into one another, and our conceptualization of the past will be meaningful only if it actually helps retain our contact with this past experience. Of course, we cannot completely recapture our historical past, as Husserl appeared to think, for our conceptual frameworks, even though they may help put us in contact with part of our lived past, cannot capture the whole as it was once lived. After all, conceptual frameworks are, by their very nature, abstract. The best they can do is try to give some partial voice to our lived through encounter with the world. They cannot capture the whole of what was lived as a whole, for what is lived is always richer than its conceptual representation. Moreover, since history continues to unfold, our conceptual attempts to recapture it must be on-going and thus cannot be intemporal (PW 108-109).

Merleau-Ponty here proceeds to once again insist that the meaning that language refers to must not be treated as independent of its means of expression. He insists that a word and its meaning, sign and signification must be seen as codependent, even as flowing into one another (Ineinander) (PW 112). When he carefully considers the power of expression, and the power of speaking and language more specifically, he does so by once again considering the algorithm, for here the relationship between the sign and signification is thought to be in its purest form, with the relationship between them defined conventionally, and thus with no distorting influence from the past or other parts of the present cultural or linguistic field. In fact, some have argued that the relationships between significations are ideal and even pre-exist their expression. The fact that the first ten Arabic numerals can be paired to equal eleven, starting with the highest and the lowest and simultaneously descending and ascending (10+1, 9+2, 8+3, etc.), is true even if most (or even all of us) are unaware of it, and this seems to mean that these significations enjoy an existence independent of the act of expression. Yet Merleau-Ponty disputes this claim. Ideal significations do not pre-exist their expression in language and are not independent of their expressive signs. (PW 119)

“In language signification is fused with the junction of signs; it is simultaneously tied to their bodily composition and blossoms mysteriously behind them. Signification bursts out above the signs and yet it is only their vibration, the way a cry carries outside and makes present to everyone the very breathing and pain of the man crying out” (PW 120-121). Moreover, if significations are intimately tied to their means of expression, then this obviously changes how we think about their ontological status.

“Instead of saying that we establish certain properties of mathematical entities, we would be more exact if we said that we establish the possibility of the principle of enriching and making more precise the relations that served to define our object, of pursuing the construction of coherent mathematical wholes which our
definitions merely outline. To be sure, this possibility is not an empty thing, this coherence is not accidental. But we cannot say that the new relations were true before they were revealed or that the first set of relations bring the later ones into existence. One could say so only if one were to hypothesize the first relations in some physical reality; the circle found in the sand already had equal radii, the triangle a sum of angles equal to two right angles . . . and all the other properties deducible by geometry. If we could subtract, from our conception of mathematical entities, any substratum of this kind, we would perceive it not as timeless but more as a development of knowledge.” (PW 122, my italics of the word “timeless”)

The contrast to Husserl here is clear, at least in this sense: the ideal significations of mathematics are not timeless but are developed in time using a language on which the significations rely for their existence. Merleau-Ponty does not deny the existence of ideal significations, or even that certain definitions imply specific consequences. What he does deny is that these ideals are intemporal, and he does so because they do not exist independently of the signs that carry them. Since language occurs in time, so do the significations that it carries, and just as language is subject to the contingencies of experience, and is influenced by them, so is linguistic or mathematical signification. Furthermore, we can relate this tendency to attribute an intemporal existence to ideal significations, to attribute a pre-existence to the ideal properties of mathematical and geometrical formulas, to our experience of the pre-existent properties of objects in our perceived world. “If we are almost irresistibly tempted, in conceiving the essence of the circle, to imagine a circle traced in the sand which already has all of its properties, it is because our very notion of essence is formed in contact with an imitation of the perceived object as it is presented to us in perception, namely, as more ancient than perception itself, self-contained, pure being prior to the subject” (PW 123, cf. VI 152-153).

We have seen above that Husserl makes a similar claim when he states that the physical existence of written language lends its sense of intersubjective existence and even permanence to the ideal significations that it expresses. Yet, as we have also seen, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism is that Husserl, even in his later work, when considering the re-appropriation of the past, tends toward a complete possession of or intellectual coincidence with the totality of the past in the present, i.e., in “immanent consciousness,” without “thickness,” i.e., in a fully present moment without a temporal gestalt, i.e., a foreground without a horizon. In The Visible and Invisible Merleau-Ponty mentions that one reason why idealism displays the tendency to treat essences as intemporal and even as separated from our actual encounter with the factual world is the assumption of pure knower, a reflecting transcendental subject, a “kosmotheoros,” or, as we have just seen immediately above, as an immanent consciousness fully given in the present. Since the facts are confronted in their place, where and when they are, then, under the assumptions of idealism, “one is led to conceive another dimension that would be a transversal to this fact multiplicity and that would be the system of significations without locality or temporality.” (VI 113) Merleau-Ponty’s counter claim is that we are obviously not pure knowers outside of space and time, that we are embodied perceivers who are necessarily engaged in the world here and now. Moreover, this being the case, “facts and essences can no
longer be distinguished . . . because . . . the alleged facts, the spatio-temporal individuals, are from the first mounted on the axes, the pivots, the dimensions, the generality of my body, and the ideas are therefore already encrusted in its joints” (VI 114). This of course means that essences can never be placed outside of space or time. As we have already seen above, and to partially re-quote a passage already cited above, “we never have before us essences without place and without date . . . because we are experiences, that is, thoughts that feel behind themselves the weight of the space, the time, the very Being they think . . .” (VI 115) It is being itself that holds our experiences together in the flow to time, and it is thus within our experiences of being, through the flow of time, that essences are formed. These essences therefore cannot be meaningfully lifted outside of these experiences and their occurrence in the flow of time.

Merleau-Ponty’s intention here is not to reduce ideal significations to perceptual ones but to trace the connection between these sublimated significations to their perceptual origins. Returning to The Prose of the World, he states the following.

“We are not reducing mathematical evidence to perceptual evidence. We are certainly not denying, as will be seen, the originality of the order of knowledge vis-a-vis the perceptual order. We are trying only to loosen the intentional web which ties them to one another, to rediscover the paths of the sublimation which preserves and transforms the perceived world into the spoken world. But this is possible only if we describe the operation of speech as a repetition, a reconquest of the world-thesis, analogous in its order to perception and yet different from it.” (PW 123-124)

Here again we see that language is creative, that it transforms the perceived world, but also that this is accomplished by repetition, reconquest, and sublimation of the world-thesis.

Continuing this theme of a language sublimates creatively, of a taking up that furthers, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make one of his most important and profound statements regarding the relationship between perception and language.

“The meaning of the perceptual object already is the shadow cast by the operations we bring to bear upon things. It is nothing other than our viewpoint on them, our situation with respect to them. Each vector of the perceived spectacle posits, beyond its aspect at the moment, the principle of certain equivalences in the possible variations of the spectacle. It inaugurates on its own account a style of the explication of objects and a style of our movements with respect to them. This mute or operative language of perception begins the process of knowledge which it cannot itself accomplish. However firm my perceptive grasp of the world may be, it is entirely dependent upon a centrifugal movement which throws me toward the world. I can recapture my grasp only if I myself spontaneously posit new dimensions of its signification. Here is the beginning of speech, the style of knowledge, truth in the logician's sense. It is called forth from its first movement by perceptual evidence which it continues without being reducible to perceptual evidence.” (PW 124-125)

What we have here is a perceptual pre-figuring of grammatical, linguistic, or even logical structure. We have a style or a rhythm of sense meaning, sense meanings strung together in a pattern. We have a rhythmic structuring of sense meaning, a connection of meanings that is neither an external association of isolated sense particulars nor an internal relationship of meaning between abstract concepts. These rhythms or
structures of perceptual meaning and anticipation are sublimated in the structures of language, in a language that continues what it has inherited but that cannot be strictly reduced to it (PW 125). The gestalt nature of perception, the fact that it always presents itself as a figure-ground structure, is sublimated in language, for we must understand language in the same manner: as words, phrases, and sentences within the context of the language as a whole, within a patterned linguistic horizon that can never be made to be fully present and that continues to unfold.

Furthermore, it should also be noted here that Merleau-Ponty has already mentioned in *Phenomenology of Perception* that phenomenology has uncovered a new meaning of rationality, one that does not rely on some sort of per-existent Reason or Logic. Rationality must now be understood as rooted in an agreement of perceptual profiles or perspective, of my perceptual perspectives as they are bound up with the world [*Ineinander*] and of my perceptual perspectives with those lived through by others as we are bound to the world together [*Ineinander*]. The perceived world presents itself in stable patterns, patterns that support the generalities of science, patterns (albeit frequently shifting, overlapping, and even ambiguous) to which the generalizations of science must continually return for confirmation. Moreover, Aristotelean logic (beginning with its so-called “laws of thought,” i.e., the principle of identity, of non-contradiction, and so on), even though not denied by Merleau-Ponty, must now be placed in a broader context, in the context of a dialectical logic (with a structure similar to gestalt perception, as a field of terms in reciprocal relationships presenting stable foregrounds, and with a structure similar to Saussure’s linguistics, at least as Merleau-Ponty interprets it, as a system of terms in reciprocal relationships, or even a system of differences, that help express stable foreground meanings). Again, Merleau-Ponty is not trying to reduce logic, abstract reasoning, or linguistic structure to perception, for, as we have seen, these structures possess new properties and as abstract systems they can be meaningfully manipulated on their own. Yet, as we have also just seen, we must also understand them as sublimations of our encounter with a stable world, as abstract expressions of a world to which they must eventually return if they are to remain effectual.

In sum, we have seen here a number of similarities between later Husserl’s thought and the thought of Merleau-Ponty. Yet, we have also witnessed a number significant differences. In general, we have seen that both Merleau-Ponty and Husserl embrace the following ideas: the *Ineinander* of the embodied subject and the world, of the embodied subject and other embodied subjects, and of perception and language. Yet we have also witnessed some differences between them, with Merleau-Ponty criticizing Husserl as follows. He criticizes Husserl for ultimately regarding *Stiftung* (or founding or instituting) as something that could be fully enveloped or re-captured conceptually, rather than as a patterned open-ended experience with open-ended possibilities. Merleau-Ponty certainly rejects the idea of a total reactivation and conceptualization of the past, for experience continues to unfold in time, cannot be fully captured in a reflective present, and is always richer than thought—-and all this of course undermines the existence of intemporal significations.
We have seen that Merleau-Ponty is also critical of an inconsistency that he finds in the development of Husserl’s thought, of his move from the treatment of language as an ideal essence to the actual practice of language, i.e., from an objective to a subjective point of view. We have seen Merleau-Ponty argue that these points of view must be integrated rather simply juxtaposed, for neither, on its own, can explain human language and its development. We have also seen him address another inconsistency in Husserl’s thought, that between Husserl’s treatment of phenomenology as simply a means to an independent consideration of ideal essences and then as careful descriptions that necessarily remain a part of all ideal constructions. Merleau-Ponty, of course, sides with the latter characterization of phenomenology, for ideal essences and significations do not occur without language, and, moreover, without a language that is primarily a sublimation of experience, which continues to unfold through time. And finally, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty remains critical of Husserl’s understanding of temporality, i.e., as the running-off of the present into the past and toward the future from the point of view of a consciousness fully present to itself. What is primary is not a present consciousness’s awareness of the running-off or shading-out of the moments of time but, rather, the running-off as a temporal-spatial vortex that the experience of consciousness exists within, and rests upon, even while helping to bring it more fully to light. Here again, in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding, we see the fundierung relationship at play. Time as a dimension of the world is the primary term, yet a practical (operative) human engagement in and awareness of the world is needed to help bring this structure of time more fully to light. Intellectual consciousness doesn’t construct time in the present. Rather, intellectual consciousness in the present rests upon the overlapping flow of the actual moments of time.

Political similarities and differences

It is well-known that Husserl does not develop a detailed or explicit political theory. Yet Strauss and Cropsey rightly saw fit to include an essay on Husserl in their now well-known anthology History of Political Philosophy. The essay is written by Richard Velkley and provides a useful overview of what might be considered Husserl’s, if not political theory, at least his “intensely ethical” view of the role of philosophy as a guide for humanity. (HPP 870) In an important essay, John O’Neill also thematizes the significance of the political/ethical implications of Husserl’s philosophy. Husserl believes that reason should be used to establish norms and standards to guide human life, that this in fact is the highest human goal or telos, yet he also believes that Western science, even though he has great respect for it, has become separate from this goal. (HPP 872-73, O’Neill 331) More specifically, he believes that this separation begins with Galileo, and especially with the formalization of the sciences. (O’Neill 332) As is well-known Galileo is deeply concerned with the mathematization of nature, or, more exactly, with understanding nature via geometry, by using the concepts and tools of this tradition, whose “truths,” unfortunately, have simply been taken for granted. Husserl, contrarily, seeks to understand the now largely forgotten origins of geometry in
everyday experience and traces it to the practical need to measure the environment, in order to better control it, with measurement requiring standard shapes. Again, since Galileo assumes the tradition and ignores its origins in the practical activities of life, he tends to take the standards of geometry, which are idealizations of our concrete and practical encounter with the world, as actual properties of the real world. This tendency is passed along to succeeding geometers and, in addition, is extended to other areas as well, such as the attempt to understand causal relations, which are formalized and, subsequently, taken to be a manifestation of the mathematical laws of nature. (O’Neill 333-334) Husserl seeks to combat this formalization of science and Western thought as it separates itself out from the daily activities of the life world and wishes to use reason as a normative guide for humanity.

Merleau-Ponty’s opens his late essay “Eye and Mind” with a claim that sounds quite similar to some of Husserl’s above pronouncements. “Science manipulates things but gives up living in them,” he says. (EM 159) This statement, in general, agrees with Husserl (that the formalization of the sciences has separated it from its connection to the life world, to the world as it is lived through by subjects in ordinary experience), but Merleau-Ponty does not appeal to a reason that is supposedly capable of producing a pure theory that is to be used to guide humanity as a whole. In fact, as we have seen, he thinks that appeals to abstract reason and pure theory (such as that still used by Husserl, even in his later works) fail to accurately account for the complex move from perception to thought, for the role that language plays to help make this move possible, and for the wide variety of intricate communications that language helps make possible. These failures occur because the explanatory principles (such as an abstract reason) become separated from our lived through experience. Even though Husserl is critical of science for this sort of separation, for a formalization of its methods that is separate from lived through experience, he nevertheless remains guilty of this himself, for he expects to capture experience, even its origins, in the cognitive constructions of the present moment, and to do so in a way that treats at least some of these cognitive constructions as intemporal essences. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty is critical of both of these tendencies, of the tendency to cognitively encapsulate experience and the tendency to posit intemporal essences.

Yet, even though critical of these rationalist tendencies, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty is not an irrationalist. In fact, in The Primacy of Perception he even seeks to “rejoin the classical questions of metaphysics” by using reason, yet he seeks to do so by using reason not as a separate principle but as a tracing of the Logos of the perceptual world, which is mute, as it manifests itself in human existence, becomes increasing aware of itself, even with its constant shifts of meaning, and finally attempts to express itself, and to do so to others as clearly as possible (PrP 10-11). In “Eye and Mind” we see that while Merleau-Ponty agrees with Husserl that classical science tended to believe that its formulations grasped the world as it is in itself, he believes that the science (and especially the philosophy of science) of the mid-20th Century tended toward a rather narrow operationalist view that was more concerned with the success
of its formulas and abstract models then it was with the issue of grasping nature as it is in itself. Merleau-Ponty expresses the dangers of this approach as follows.

“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 reign to man and history; if, pretending to ignore what we know of them through our own situations, it were to set out to construct man and history on the basis of a few indices . . . then, since man really becomes the manipulandum he takes himself to be, we enter into a cultural regimen where there is neither truth nor falsity concerning man and history, into a sleep, or a nightmare, from which there is no awakening.” (EM 160)

As we have seen, this characterization of the separation of scientific formalizations from our situations as we live them, in general, agrees with Husserl. Yet, Merleau-Ponty does not appeal to reason (as pure theory) used by humanity to guide humanity. Rather, Merleau-Ponty speaks about the multiple ways nature can be revealed. In fact, the main theme of “Eye and Mind” is the challenge of the metaphysics of Modernism, or, more specifically, of Descartes and Renaissance painters. Merleau-Ponty is critical of the rational, that is to say geometrical, representation of nature by both, and he argues for a much more multifarious being that can be revealed and expressed (more or less clearly) using a wide variety of different modalities, such as contemporary painting (expressionist, cubist, surrealist, etc.), literature, poetry, and the sciences. As he says in a concluding section of this remarkable essay, “because depth, color, line, movement, contour, physiognomy are all branches of Being and because each one can sway all the rest, there are no separated distinct ‘problems’ in painting, no really opposed paths, no partial ‘solutions,’ no cumulative progress, no irretreivable options” (PrP 188). Aspects of nature can reveal themselves in a variety of way, yet no single mode of representation can possibly reveal the fullness of nature. Even all the modes of representation taken together cannot capture the fullness of nature, for all of our representations are always partial, even when taken all together---and yet our attempts are not meaningless. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “if no work is itself absolutely completed, still, each creation changes, alters, clarifies, deepens, confirms, exalts, recreates, or creates by anticipation all the others” and does so because each work is a more or less clarifying expression of an aspect of being, a being that can be partially clarified but that cannot be definitively expressed using a few simple indices, for it is always richer than our representations, always continues to unfold, and is always open to further interpretation (PrP 188-190).

Considering Merleau-Ponty’s own political writings, we see that his early Humanism and Terror explicitly calls into question the One Reason of liberalism, i.e., liberalism’s Rational Man, within whom reason is the same for all. Reason is not already given, he argues. Rather, it is an outcome, the result of the agreements reached by way of the active dialogue of all those attempting to express their experience of the current events and conditions. Moreover, this criticism of One Reason, which is separate from experience and guides it, is also the criticism that Merleau-Ponty, in his later political treatise Adventures of the Dialectic, levels against Communist orthodoxy and its Party’s “rational” steering of history. Here
again, Merleau-Ponty is attempting to move us beyond the metaphysics of one reason and one rational nature, yet he does not abandon the attempt to grasp the *Logos* of our perceptual world and of life as we live it.
Chapter 4 Criticism of Heidegger: A Brief Note

This topic, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Heidegger, has been dealt with in another place, in far greater detail. For this lengthier treatment see “Merleau-Ponty’s Criticism of Heidegger.”105 For now, it is perhaps appropriate enough to offer a brief note, the essence of the more prolonged treatment, sans a discussion of the important political differences between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

Richard Askay and Kevin Aho106 have drawn attention to Heidegger’s comments regarding the human body in the so-called Zollikon Seminars,107 where he provides a brief view of the existential body, one that is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s. Yet, there is also a fundamental difference, which Askay and Aho frame as follows. While Heidegger’s Dasein opens upon a clearing, on the ontological, the abyss of Being,108 Merleau-Ponty remains too tied to the ontic level of beings (Aho 16; see Askay 32-33).

Let us consider this claim. In his early The Structure of Behavior109 Merleau-Ponty makes the case for what we might called “ontological” perception, for a bodily perception that is lived through, that opens out upon the horizon of the world, rather than understood as reduced to a third-person, objective (ontic) process (SB 92-93, 192). Phenomenology of Perception continues this same theme.

“In other words, as we have shown elsewhere, the objective body is not the true version of the phenomena body, that is, the true version of the body that we live by: it is indeed no more than the latter’s impoverished image, so that the problem of the relation of the soul to body has nothing to do with the objective body, which exists only conceptually, but with the phenomenal body. What is true, however, is that our open and personal existence rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence.” (PhP 431-2)

The author clearly stresses the codependence of the lived through perceiving body and the natural body as a collection of stable structures. Yet he expresses this codependence even more clearly in another Phenomenology of Perception passage.

Neither the body nor existence can be regarded as the original of the human being, since they presuppose each other, and because the body is solidified or generalized existence, and existence is perpetual incarnation. The same reason that prevents us from ‘reducing’ existence to the body or to sexuality, prevents us also from ‘reducing’ sexuality to existence: the fact is that existence is not a set of facts (like ‘psychic facts’) capable of being reduced to others or to which they can reduce themselves, but an ambiguous setting of their inter-communication, the point at which their boundaries run into each other, or again their woven fabric. (PhP 166)

To express this using Heidegger’s language, when considering the human body and lived through perception, neither the ontic nor the ontological should be regarded as primary. Lived through human existence (or lived through perception) cannot be reduced to the material body, which must itself be understood as stabled structures of existence, as the body oriented toward the world in certain favored ways. Nor can the human body be reduced to the lived through. They must be integrated. The body must be understood as an aware orientation toward the world, and the lived through must be understood as an aware bodily orientation. The human body is both ontic and ontological, and is a blend of both.
Merleau-Ponty addresses Heidegger directly, along with a lengthier treatment of Husserl, in his lecture notes entitled “Phenomenology and the Science of Man.” He considers Husserl first, for he is particularly interested in Husserl’s own “double envelopment” of facts and essences, of the ontic and ontological. Husserl’s intuition of essence begins, and must begin, with the perception of particular facts. Then, using the free variation of these facts in the imagination, Husserl attempts to find, with the aid of a rational intuition, their essential structure. (PSM 70) Yet, again, the grasping of the essence must take off from a contact with the facts. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the relation between perception and Wesenshau [intuition of essences] is one of founding [Fundierung]; perception serves as a ground, or pedestal, on which an insight into essence is formed” (PSM 68, the first bracket is mine, the second is Merleau-Ponty’s). It is here that Merleau-Ponty speaks of Husserl’s double envelopment. (PSM 68) Facts suggest a certain interpretation, yet the interpretation is needed to more precisely express the meaning found in the facts. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty reports, this double envelopment is really Husserl’s way into eidetic phenomenology, for Husserl seeks to maintain contact with the sciences, particularly the social sciences, using this contact with the facts provided by the sciences as the necessary starting point for the philosophical intuition of essences. Merleau-Ponty proceeds to point out that Heidegger rejects this relationship.

“But Heidegger defines the attitude of the philosopher without recognizing any restriction on the absolute power of philosophical thought. For example, at the beginning of Sein und Zeit (3rd edition, Halle, 1931, p. 45), he said that the task of philosophy is to explore the natural concept of the world, independently of science, by the primordial experience we have of it. To determine the structure of this natural world, he adds, it is not at all necessary to have any recourse to ethnology or to psychology. These disciplines presuppose a philosophical knowledge of the natural world, and one can never find the principle which will enable us to order psychological or ethnographical facts by making inductions from these facts. In order to do this the spirit must first possess the principle.” (PSM 94)

Merleau-Ponty therefore concludes the following.

“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.” (PSM 94, my bracket)

Obviously, it is Husserl that Merleau-Ponty follows here, not Heidegger. Thus, we must qualify the claim made by Askey and Aho. While it is true that Heidegger places a greater emphasis on philosophy than science, on the ontological than the ontic, on Being than being, and that Merleau-Ponty seeks to maintain greater contact with the sciences, with the ontic, and with being, it is not true that Merleau-Ponty simply remains at the level of the ontic. Merleau-Ponty takes the ontological seriously, opening his philosophy to this orientation, yet, like Husserl, he seeks to also make sure that it is related to the ontic. In fact, he moves back and forth between, realizing that they must remain connected, and more, that they must be integrated.
Without this connection and integration, we leap into mysticism, as is the case with Heidegger’s philosophy. With this connection and integration, we find a more balanced and thorough understanding, as is the case with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.\textsuperscript{112}
In order to form a complete picture of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre’s philosophy we should consider three of Merleau-Ponty’s primary texts, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part Three, Chapter 3, “Freedom,” *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Chapter 5, “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism,” and *The Invisible and the Invisible*, Chapter 2, “Interrogation and Dialectic.” Throughout these texts, Merleau-Ponty rather consistently criticizes Sartre’s dualistic ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself, his dualism of for-oneself and for-another, and his stress on the radical freedom of the subject. Merleau-Ponty was not critical of Sartre’s later attempt to speak of the meeting of the subject and the world (through labor), of his attempt to speak of intersubjectively established goals, or of his attempt to speak of the limits to human freedom imposed by external situations. Rather, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism is that given Sartre’s ontological dualism, and his view of the radical freedom of the subject, that it is difficult or even impossible to speak of the coming together of the subject and the world, of the subject with others, and of (undeniable) limits to the subject’s freedom. Let us now turn to the details of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre in the three texts just mentioned above.

The final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, entitled “Freedom,” opens with a lengthy description Jean-Paul Sartre’s view of total freedom, a view that claims that the individual creates and chooses all meaning. Nothing outside of me can determine who I am, for I am always free to interpret the world in any way that I wish. Moreover, within the context of a philosophy of total freedom, it is impossible for the external world, with its complete determinism, to interact with the freedom of the subject, which is total. Even internal motives, Sartre claims, cannot influence my freedom, for if they did I would not be totally free. The typical discussion of motives is thus misleading, for we often imagine ourselves considering the range of motives and choosing according to the motive that appears most appropriate to us. Yet for Sartre it is not the motive that leads to the choice, but the choice that confers value on the motive. Nothing can limit the individual’s freedom.

The alternatives, then, in Sartre’s philosophy, seems to be total freedom or total determinism, total freedom or none at all. This view of freedom, however, is incomprehensible, since it is not associated with human action, but really exists prior to it. “By defining ourselves as a universal power of *Sinn-Gebung*, we have reverted to the method of the ‘thing without which’ and to the analytical reflection of the traditional type . . .” (PhP 239). Yet we are confronted with the conditions of reality, and thus human freedom/meaning is not just centrifugal but centripetal as well, or, rather, it is created at the intersection of the two forces. If freedom is to mean anything, it must enter the world (and, it must do something). If it is to mean something, it must proceed from situations in which it already finds itself. True, “we have indeed always the power to interrupt, but it implies in any case a power to begin, for there would be no severance unless freedom had
taken up its abode somewhere and were preparing to move it” (PhP 438).

Sartre’s view of freedom goes so far as to say that human choice confers all meaning and value on the world around us. Whether or not a large rock or crag is an obstacle to my climb or a vantage point from which to view the surroundings depends upon my choice. I, after all, choose the projects that determine the meaning of the crag. While this is true, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to claim that it is true only of our specific endeavors and not of our own body’s general relation to the world. True, I can choose whether or not to climb this crag before me, but what determines its character as an obstacle also has to do with its relations to the capacities of the human body. “Insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose” (PhP 440). In addition, because these intentions are related to the anonymous functions of the body, they carry with them certain general and social meanings. These intentions “are not simply mine, they originate from other than myself, and I am not surprised to find them in all psycho-physical subjects organized as I am” (PhP 440). Gestalt psychology, in fact, has shown that human perception is lawful in the sense that human beings perceive the world in typical ways. The dots below, for example, tend to be perceived as six pairs (PhP 440).

. .         . .       . .        . .       . .         . .

Now, neither Merleau-Ponty nor the Gestalt psychologists deny that other perspectives are possible, for neither denies that we can shift our perceptual perspective, yet this shift still relies on the given perceptual patterns and proceeds from them. Without these patterns “we would not have a world” but some sort of formless *hyle* (PhP 440). Thus, “there is an autochthonous significance of the world which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence has with it, and which provides the ground of every deliberate Sinngebung” (PhP 441).

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty maintains, because human beings are creatures of habit, because we tend to slip into certain favored ways of interacting with the world and each other, we must recognize the statistical frequency with which these modes will appear. For Sartre, on the other hand, the probable does not really exist, since his subject projects all meaning and is thus free from deterministic patterns, even probable ones. For Merleau-Ponty there are stable patterns in perceptual, personal and social life. There are favored ways of perceiving the world as well as favored psychological and sociological ways of being-in-the-world, and if this is true, then we will be able to find a basis for the probable in experience itself. The probable is not just a fiction. We have just seen above that for Sartre there is total freedom or none at all. We are either totally free or totally determined, for within the context of his philosophy the interaction
between freedom and determinism are impossible. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, as we see throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, human experience should not be pushed into such mutually exclusive categories. Human consciousness opens to the world through the body; or rather human consciousness is the body’s awareness of and openness upon the world. As such, human consciousness is a part of a situation that it blends into through the body, and that it is able to take up with at least a degree of awareness. Thus, humans are both conditioned and free, and at the same time.

We also find this same ambiguous mixture in the relationship between the individual and history. The individual as a free consciousness is never completely defined by social roles or objective social relationships, for individuals assimilate these conditions and yet attempt to move beyond them. Consequently, to properly account for a social event, such as a revolution, we must not appeal to objective conditions alone, for we must also understand how these social conditions are brought to awareness by the experiencing subject. In addition, to properly understand a social event, we must not reduce it to the abstract decisions arrived at by isolated subjects, for this returns to the Kantian “conditions of possibility” for something to occur, which we have already seen criticized above. What we must discover are the actual conditions of the revolution, not the possible conditions of any revolution—which are, after all, based on abstractions from actual events. The revolution is not before the subjects involved as a clear and distinct representation that is the same for all. Rather, individuals and groups tend to work toward the change and improved conditions that are elicited by the specifics of their actual situation. Of course, common links can be formed between individuals and groups, since many people within a particular society will have similar experiences and experience similar difficulties. Revolutionary movements are not blind. Human beings do act in the world with awareness and we do act with shared conscious goals in mind. Yet these goals are not based on the abstract judgments of isolated individuals and detached universal intellect. These goals begin with various lived-through conditions that frequently suggest their own resolution, if not positively as some circumstance to move toward, at least negatively as conditions which can no longer be tolerated.

Here again Merleau-Ponty speaks of an operative or lived-through intentionality that is the basis for the more abstract judgments of an intellectual project, and he mentions that the mistake of objective thought, either materialist or idealist, is that it by-passes this concrete and lived-through intentionality. Idealism especially “by-passes true intentionality, which is at its object rather than positing it. Idealism overlooks the . . . positive indeterminacy of these modes of consciousness . . .” (PhP 446). Intellectual intentionality and intellectual projects in general have the meaning they do because they are rooted in our operative or existential interaction with the world and others. However, for Merleau-Ponty, this does not mean that intellectual projects are *caused* by existential circumstances. Rather, they are motivated by them—and motivation does not eliminate freedom. I may for example be motivated to change my situation, yet this does not mean that I *must* change it. I may, like many, choose to live with it or even to reinterpret it.
Furthermore, the future that I envision, if I do seek change, is left open to a variety of possibilities. The lived world and my existential projects do not strictly determine certain possibilities; they suggest them. And while it is true that once a goal has been reached that I can look back and trace the path to its achievement, this path was not determined prior to its being traveled. It may be suggested along with others, but is only determined by the actual choices and steps taken along the way.

Of course, another issue here is the constitution of social relationships, how an individual relates to others to form social relations. The idealist, or at least the subjective idealist, may claim that the only thing each individual really has is his or her own experience, and consequently that there is no genuine experience of or relationships to the other. Yet, Merleau-Ponty counters, if we do have the experience of others, which we clearly do, there must be something in our experience that accounts for it, that motivates it.

“I must, therefore, in the most radical reflection, apprehend around my absolute individuality a kind of halo of generality or a kind of atmosphere of ‘sociality’. . . . I must apprehend myself from the onset as centered in a way outside myself, and my individual existence must diffuse round itself, so to speak, an existence in quality. The For Themselfs--me for myself and the other for himself--must stand out against a background of For Others--I for the other and the other for me. My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity; each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual [since no one knows exactly who I am or experiences my experience exactly as I do], and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general [since our experience opens out upon a public space]. Our being in the world is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity.” (PhP 448, my bracket additions)

I recognize around my personal life a public space, an atmosphere of generality. First of all, this is so because my personal life rests upon the general and anonymous functions of my body. My body carries me into the world whether I will it or not, and I am able to recognize its forms and functions in other human beings as well. It is, in fact, because we have similar bodies that open upon the world in similar ways that we are able to catch a glimpse of each other’s experiences. Secondly, since I experience my own experience as opening upon a public space, since I experience my own experience as a relationship to a public world, I can, at least to a certain extent, experience what others experience, for our consciousnesses meet or overlap at the thing—like, as we have already seen, two searchlights illuminating the same field. Thus, my experience opens to general significations or meanings that are shared by others, including the socially instituted meanings of our culture—the socially constituted role of teacher, husband, or friend. Moreover, it is these intersubjectively defined meanings that allow us to form a sense of history, which is not the result of some arbitrary decision on my part, nor merely the result of fortuitous events. “Which means that we confer upon history its significance, but not without its putting that significance forward itself. The Sinngebung is not merely centrifugal, which is why the subject of history is not the individual. There is an exchange between generalized and individual existence, each receiving and giving something” (PhP 450). The subject is born into the world of already constituted significations, takes them up, interprets them, and attempts to move them forward.
“We therefore recognize, around our initiatives and around that strictly individual project which is oneself, a zone of generalized existence and of projects already formed, significances which trail between ourselves and things and which confer upon us the quality of man, bourgeois or worker. Already generality intervenes, already our presence to ourselves is mediated by it and we cease to be pure consciousness, as soon as the natural or social constellation ceases to be an unformulated this and crystallizes into a situation, as soon as it has a meaning—in short, as soon as we exist.” (PhP 450)

As the preceding passage indicates, general meaning crosses into the individual life, and vice versa, not only at the social level but at the level of natural perception as well. While it is true that the color red that I perceive before me fills my consciousness in a unique way, in a way that no one else can access directly, it is also true that for me to experience this red that my body must adjust to a certain wavelength and a certain vibration of light. I must use my body in a way that demonstrates a familiarity with the world of colors and with this particular modulation of my visual field. By using the anonymous powers of my body I am able to concretely experience the general field of colors. “The concrete color red, therefore, stands out against a background of generality, and this is why, even without transferring myself to another’s point of view, I grasp myself in perception as a perceiving subject, and not as unclassifiable consciousness” (PhP 451). The individual, then, has some sense of both the individuality and generality of experience even before taking up the perspective of other perceivers. The experience of red is mine because I experience it through my own body, which I direct and can move about in a way that I can direct no other body and no other consciousness can direct mine, and the experience of red is general because my body must adjust to general aspects of the world, in this case to the general quality of color.

What the above quote also indicates is that we must not begin, as Sartre does, with a consciousness that is totally unique and thus unclassifiable. We must not begin with a subject that is (for all practical purposes) outside of the body and the world, outside of time and the relationships with others. The reflection that gives the impression of an absolute flow of consciousness appearing like a stream beneath a detached (or totally free) subject is secondary, for it comes second in time and is derived from and subordinate to our more primary perceptual openness upon the world. This means that the flow of experience takes shape as the gaze of an incarnate consciousness opening upon a perceptual field, and it is only through its presence to the field, through which it is present to the world, that it is present to itself. The Visible and the Invisible says this even more explicitly, for the later text claims that if we focus on the tactile experience rather than visual experience, which gives the impression of being everywhere at once, and thus as detached from the body and its situatedness, we discover that the touch cannot occur without the body and therefore without being immersed in the world. To touch from the inside of the hand means to be touched from the outside by the world. Reflection on the tactile thus reveals that experience is our incarnate perception of a field that opens upon the world and others, reveals a field that I appear within and that is not simply spread before me as a detached knower or consciousness.
Furthermore, if the subject, as Sartre claims, creates itself at each moment, we may ask how it is that the moments of experience, by themselves, connect with each other, and how it is that they present a world, others, and a time that exists prior to the subject? First of all, what is given is not an isolated subject with an individual sense of temporality, but a public field, a temporality upon which the individual’s experience opens as a public dimension of reality. In Merleau-Ponty’s work time is a model for subjectivity, since both display an *ek-stasis*, a leaping out of the present toward a past and future that the present is a part of. The subject’s present moment of experience opens to something that includes it, the spatial/temporal dimension of the world.

[What we find, then,] “is the taking up of each subjectivity by itself, and of subjectivities by each other in the generality of a single nature, the cohesion of an intersubjective life and a world. The present mediates between the For Oneself and the For Others, between individuality and generality. True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest.” (PhP 452)

For Merleau-Ponty, then, consciousness is not a nothingness, as it is for Sartre, for even in reflection consciousness is always present to itself as it is present to the world. Consciousness takes up the world and carries it forward, and it is in doing so that consciousness experiences its freedom, its freedom to interpret, its freedom to begin anew at each moment (PhP 452). For Sartre we are condemned to be free, since even not choosing is a sort of choice—in this case to maintain the *status quo*. The human subject is totally free at each moment to create him or herself and even the meaning of his or her own surroundings—which means that at each moment the subject is responsible for all meaning, including the meaning of nature, history and time. Contrarily, for Merleau-Ponty, if we recognize time as a dimension of reality, then we no longer need to recreate all of the meaning of nature, history, and self in each moment. According to Merleau-Ponty, a completely objective time, a time without subjective awareness, makes little sense, since there would be no awareness of the passing of time, only an eternal now. Yet, the subject does not create time but opens upon it as a natural dimension and helps bring it to awareness, for the subject is aware of the passing of time, of the present gradually shading into the past and toward the future. The subject, then, rests upon this pre-personal dimension and does not need to sustain it at each moment, as Sartre’s subject must. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “as long as we place in opposition, with no mediator, the For-itself and the In-itself, and fail to perceive, between ourselves and the world, this natural foreshadowing of a subjectivity, this pre-personal time which rests upon itself, acts are needed to sustain the upsurge of time, and everything becomes equally a matter of choice, the respiratory reflex no less than the moral decision . . .” (PhP 453). He proceeds to distinguish his view from Sartre’s. “As far as we are concerned, consciousness attributes this power of universal constitution to itself only if it ignores the event which provides its infrastructure and which is its birth. A consciousness for which the world ‘can be taken for granted’, which finds it ‘already
constituted’ and present even in consciousness itself, does not absolutely choose either its being or its manner of being” (PhP 453).

Human beings are never purely an in-itself or a for-itself. We are a mixture of the two. “The generality of the ‘role’ and of the situation comes to the aid of decision, and in this exchange between the situation and the person who takes it up, it is impossible to determine precisely the ‘share contributed by the situation’ and the ‘share contributed by freedom’” (PhP 453). We naturally synthesize the in-itself and the for-itself in the lived-through act. The lived present (in the wide sense discussed above) holds together subject and body, consciousness and world, just as it holds them apart. The present opens to a past and towards a future that runs beyond it yet with which it remains in contact. “By taking up a present, I draw together and transform my past, altering its significance, freeing and detaching myself from it. But I do so only by committing myself somewhere else . . . My freedom can draw life away from its spontaneous course, but only by a series of unobtrusive deflections which necessitate first of all following its course--not by any absolute creation” (PhP 455). I am born into certain natural and social situations. I am even born with a certain style or manner of being. These pregiven situations do not prevent my freedom but provide a way into it. For it is by taking up what I am that I am able to move in different directions.

To summarize, we have seen here in *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the book’s chapter on freedom, that Merleau-Ponty is critical of Sartre’s dualisms, of the for-itself and in-itself and of the for-itself and for another, as well as of Sartre’s stress on the radical freedom of the subject. According to Sartre, nothing external to me can determine who I am, for I decide the importance and meaning of these events. Even internal motive cannot determine my freedom, for, again, I choose the meaning of the motives and their power over me. For Sartre, the subject is the power of *Sinn-Gebung*, is the power to freely giving meaning. Merleau-Ponty more accurately argues that humans must be understood as a reciprocal and simultaneous exchange between centrifugal and centripetal forces. We are not free to interpret worldly situations anyway we wish because human consciousness is embodied and as such is subject to the forces of nature. We do not experience a formless field of nature (hyle) but typical perceptual patterns (see Gestalt laws of perception, not conceptual or logical laws). Moreover, humans also fall into patterned ways of acting and interacting with others. The body thus provides typical ways of perceiving and our habits provide typical ways of acting and interacting with others. Furthermore, since habits or typical ways of acting and interacting tend to become socially and culturally institutionalized, communities provide typical forms of behavior (from formal laws to customs to rules of etiquette, etc.). Here, individuals take up the typical patterns of social behavior that are available to them to make them their own and, sometimes, to move them in a different direction. Here, the individual and the social cross into and help define one another. With respect to the recognition of the other, Sartre does claim that we are immediately aware of the other because of “the look” of the other.115 I immediately recognize the power that the other has to see and “label” me this
or that. Yet for Sartre, the power that I give the other to label me is a power that I control. Yet still, I cannot ignore the presence of the other, even though I am free to control the power the other has over me. Since all others are also free, we are all basically free individual subjects with no real form of social alliance between us. For Merleau-Ponty the other is likewise present in the individual’s perceptual field. Yet for Merleau-Ponty the perceiving subject is aware of opening out upon a public world through his or her perceiving body. Perception opens upon a public space, upon and within a field of time and space that runs beyond the subject and that is open to the perceptions lived through by others. Moreover, the perceiving subject is aware of other perceiving subjects because their perceiving bodies aim at and act within the world in ways that are similar to my own meaningful encounters with the world. I am able to “couple” onto the behavior of others. I am able to vicariously experience (to some extent, at least) their experience because it opens to the same world as my behavior and in similar ways. This experience of another oriented, and thus aware, human subject is given in the range of my experiences. Thus here we have some possibility of the experience of intersubjectivity (which is not possible in Sartre’s philosophy, at least in the early manifestations of it), with the individuals sharing the typical meanings of a specific social field, with the individuals and the social “each receiving and giving something.” Merleau-Ponty has also pointed out the difficulty Sartre’s has with temporality, for if the subject creates all meaning in each instant, as his position implies, then we are left with the problem of connecting the instants. Yet, is the subject responsible for the connection of the moments of experience? This seems unlikely. Merleau-Ponty provides a more plausible explanation: my experience must be understood as opening upon a temporal/spatial field that I exist within. I am not responsible for the synthesis of time and space, for they are synthesized within being, as my experience helps reveal it. Overall, then, it makes more sense to say that we are a mixture of the for-itself and in-itself rather than to set them apart as exclusive ontological categories.

Adventures of the Dialectic

Adventures of the Dialectic contains a lengthy chapter on Sartre entitled “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism.” It represents a rather vigorous criticism of Sartre’s philosophy in general and of his social philosophy in particular. It is approximately three to four times longer than the other chapters of Adventures of the Dialectic and is rich in subtle analysis. The exposition provided here will summarize only a few of the chapter’s main points.

Here, Merleau-Ponty once again argues that the elements of Sartre’s social ontology are too exclusive for an individual to form any meaningful relationships with either other human beings or with nature. Sartre’s theory of consciousness, in fact, is reminiscent of Descartes’, in the sense that it separates consciousness from the world, from others, and even from the impulses of its own body, in order to attain, in Descartes’ case, belief without doubt, in Sartre’s case, the radical freedom of individual consciousness. Merleau-Ponty expresses Sartre’s view this way: “For Sartre, conscious awareness is an absolute. It gives
meaning,” and he immediately appeals to Marx for a claim that runs counter to the individual’s creation of all meaning, to a claim that grounds consciousness in the social and natural world. “For Marx, conscious awareness . . . has its place in history . . . At its birth it is already in a truth that judges it” (AD 115). Merleau-Ponty extends his appeal to the young Marx: “Marx . . . thought there were relationships between persons ‘mediated by things,’ and for him . . . all the realities of history . . . belonged to this mixed order. For Marx, there was, and for Sartre there is not, a coming-to-be of meaning in institutions. History is no longer for Sartre, as it was for Marx, a mixed milieu, neither things nor persons, where institutions are absorbed and transformed and where they decay” (AD 124). “In Sartre, there is a plurality of [free] subjects but there is no intersubjectivity” (AD 205). According to Merleau-Ponty, then, Sartre has no place for history to occur, for there is no true overlapping of one consciousness with another or of consciousness with nature. With Sartre’s view of the radical freedom of individual consciousness, each consciousness is responsible for everything that it is and does. Each consciousness is free to create all meaning.

“For [Sartre as well as for Husserl] . . . consciousness, which is constitution, does not find a system of already-present meanings in what it constitutes; it constructs or creates. The difference—and it is immense—is that Husserl sees even in this praxis an ultimate problem: even though consciousness constructs, it is conscious of making explicit something anterior to itself, it continues a movement begun in experience. ‘It is voiceless experience, which must be brought to the pure expression of its own meaning.’” (AD 138 note)

Here, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that Husserl’s philosophy, which is often thought of as more idealist than Sartre’s, must actually be regarded as more worldly. For consciousness, in Husserl’s view, does not create meaning ex nihilo. It opens up unto a world of at least partially constituted meanings in order to take them up and complete them.

Merleau-Ponty admits that some of Sartre’s pronouncements do get close to expressing the interworld, the milieu which is a mixed combination of things and consciousness, as may be witnessed in Sartre’s following claim: “We dominate the environment by work, but the environment dominates us in turn by the rigidified swarm of thoughts we have inscribed there” (AD 139, quoted by Merleau-Ponty). Yet Merleau-Ponty continues to claim that this does not get Sartre any closer to Marx, since for Marx this mixed milieu contains social tensions that can constrict or relax, while for Sartre “social intentions” disappear as soon as the individual reflects. For Sartre, there are no social intentions or institutions, there are only individuals with intentions (AD 139-140). Contrarily, Merleau-Ponty makes the following claim.

“For [Marx] it is indeed man who makes the unity of the world, but man is everywhere, inscribed on all the walls and in all the social apparatuses made by him. Men can see nothing about them that is not in their image. They therefore do not at every moment have to reassemble and recreate themselves, and this is why there is sense in asking whether the movement comes from them or from things...Their landscape is animated; it is there, as well as in them, that tension accumulates. That is also why the lightening flash which will give its decisive meaning to all this is not for Marx a private happening in each consciousness. It goes from one to the other, the current passes, and what is called becoming conscious or revolution is the advent of an interworld.” (AD 143)
For Merleau-Ponty, social and historical analysis must somehow account for this institution of human meaning and action, must account for certain established habitual ways of interpreting and acting in the world. This analysis must recognize the inertia of history, its density, which is not the density of a pure thing (a pure in-itself), as well as recognize its human meaning, which is not a meaning purely constituted by an isolated individual (by a pure for-itself). Furthermore, in order to be complete, this analysis must supply an ontology that will accommodate and allow for this mixed milieu of human meanings. Merleau-Ponty provides this ontology, as we have seen above, in his major philosophical works and in the preceding chapters of *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Sartre’s social ontology remains to exclusionary, with its dualistic ontology of pure consciousness set against pure matter, and its emphasis on the radical freedom of individual consciousness.

We can see the difference between the two philosophers more clearly if we consider Merleau-Ponty’s comment on their respective views of freedom. As we have already seen, Sartre’s view of the freedom of consciousness is total, for it can create any meaning it wishes, without regard to its body, its past, others or the world. As we have already witnessed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, particularly in its closing chapter on freedom, for Merleau-Ponty the freedom of individual consciousness is never total, since consciousness is necessarily embodied and necessarily opens upon a pre-existent world, both natural and social. *Adventures of the Dialectic* expresses his view as follows.

“My thoughts and the sense I give to my life are always caught in a swarm of meanings which have already established me in a certain position with regard to others and to events at the moment when I attempt to see clearly. And, of course, these infrastructures are not destiny; my life will transform them. But if I have a chance to go beyond them and become something other than this bundle of accidents, it is not by deciding to give my life this or that meaning; rather it is by attempting simply to live what is offered me.” (AD 197)

We cannot throw off our past or completely break with it. Yet what we can do is “interrupt” it. We do not have to continue to blindly “act out” behavioral patterns formed in the past (as children sometimes do), because we can gain a reflective awareness of them. With the help of reflective awareness, and much concerted effort, established patterns of behavior can be gradually changed. However, we cannot simply wave a wand of free will (as Sartre seems to think we can do) to eliminate, or change, or totally free ourselves from the past. Freedom, for Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen in his earlier work, is the ability to consciously take up our past, our character, and our habitual forms of organizing our world to use them as instruments to make sense of our world, to use them as means of expression. This conscious resumption of the past has a freeing quality to it because it is no longer simply a blind repetition but a useful instrument that can be continually sublated.

In his effort to challenge the Cartesian and Sartrean “detachment” of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to argue that consciousness “is in fact what it does” (AD 198). “Whether it is a question of action
or even of thought, the fruitful modes of consciousness are those in which the object does not need to be posited, because consciousness inhabits it and is at work in it, because each response the outside gives to the initiatives of consciousness is immediately meaningful for it and gives rise to a new intervention on its part . . .” (AD 198). Consciousness for Merleau-Ponty is not the Cartesian ego cut off from the world and aware only of its own representations. Rather, it is rather a relationship to the world; it is être a, an aware bodily being-at the world. Consciousness is primarily the body’s active being in the world. It is praxis.

Further characterizing the difference between the Sartre’s view of consciousness and his own, Merleau-Ponty makes the following claim. “A meaning, if it is posited by a consciousness whose whole essence is to know what it does, is necessarily closed. Consciousness leaves no corner of it unexplored. And if, on the contrary, one definitely admits of open, incomplete meanings the subject must not be pure presence to itself and to the object” (AD 198). As we observe in Merleau-Ponty’s study of language, there can be no full presence of consciousness to itself or of the object to consciousness, for presence is always occurs within a context, within difference; presence always appears against a gestalt background of differential and shifting temporal and spatial elements that help articulate it as the foreground. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty says in The Invisible and the Invisible, the lines of force between the background and the foreground are themselves not fully present or visible. They are the “invisible” shifting lines of force between the background and foreground. These lines shift with the participation of the perceiving body subject, a body subject that is itself situated in a certain concrete time and place. As the body subject changes perspective with respect to time and place, the figure shifts against the background. The experiencing body subject thus participates in the perceptual gestalt and the form it takes; it participates in and helps create the lines of force between the foreground and background that help present the foreground. The perceptual norms through which the body perceives, the levels according to which the world appears, Merleau-Ponty calls existentials (VI 171, 180, 248, 257). Here in Adventures of the Dialectic, using language that we have also seen above, he states that “a perceived thing . . . [is simply] a certain variation in relation to a norm or to a spatial, or colored level, it is a certain distortion, a certain ‘coherent deformation’ of the permanent links which unite us to sensorial fields and to the world” (AD 198). Therefore, the perceived thing is not fully present to a consciousness that is fully present to itself. It presents itself as a stable yet shifting perceptual pattern to a body subject that is primarily a perceptual openness upon the world.

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make similar claims, first about human actions, then about consciousness and its relations to others.

“Like perceived things my tasks are presented to me, not as objects or ends, but as reliefs and configurations, that is to say, in the landscape of praxis . . . [Moreover] if one takes into account a consciousness thus engaged, which is joined again with itself only across its historical and worldly field, which does not touch itself or coincide with itself but rather is divined and glimpsed in the present experience, of which it is the invisible steward, the relationship between consciousnesses take on a completely new aspect. For if the subject is not the sun from which the world radiates or the demiurge of my pure objects, if its signifying
activity is rather the perception of a difference between two or several meanings—inconceivable, then, without dimensions, levels, and perspectives which the world and history establish around me—then its action and all actions are possible only as they follow the cause of the world . . .” (AD 199, my bracket addition)

For Merleau-Ponty, then, there is no coincidence either of consciousness with itself or of consciousness with things. Since consciousness is the body’s openness unto the world, in order to see or touch, the body must be capable of being seen or touched. There is a crisscross or partial blending of touching and the touched, the seer and the seen. Yet, the body as toucher or seer never exactly coincides with the body as touched or seen, for, as we have seen, experience is caught in something that runs beyond it, the temporal/spatial field of the world. This lived-through field, because it has horizons that always remain open, can never be captured as a fully present object because reflection upon it necessarily occurs in time. For Merleau-Ponty, then, the only way the subject can experience itself is by glimpsing itself across the field of lived experience, which is its primary mode of being and always presents itself as existing prior to reflection.

Merleau-Ponty continues by further differentiating his philosophy from Sartre’s, now explicitly addressing the possibility of intersubjectivity.

“At the very heart of my perspective, I realize that my private world is already being used, that there is ‘behavior’ that concerns it, and that the other’s place in it is already prepared, because I find other historical situations to be occupiable by me. A consciousness that is truly engaged in a world and a history on which it has a hold but which go beyond it is not insular. Already in the thickness of the sensible and historical fabric it feels other presences moving, just as the group of men who dig a tunnel hear the work of another group coming toward them.” (AD 199-200)

Within Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, the body subject only gains access to the world and to others through its own perspective. Yet, instead of this perspective being the means by which the subject is excluded from the world and others (as with Descartes and Sartre), it provides access to them. Since consciousness is a bodily relationship to the world, and, furthermore, since individual consciousness rests on the body’s anonymous functions, the individual’s experience opens to a world that includes it and others. Just as the profiles of my perception of the university library slip into one another as I walk around its exterior, so also my perspectives slip into those of other people as theirs slip into mine, for each perspective opens upon a publicly available field, a world that we can communicate about and manipulate together with a great deal of success.

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make the following claim about such an engaged bodily consciousness interacting with others in a common world.

“A consciousness that is truly engaged in a world and a history on which it has a hold but which go beyond it is not insular. Already in the thickness of the sensible and historical fabric it feels other presences moving, just as the group of men who dig a tunnel hear the work of another group coming toward them. Unlike the Sartrean consciousness, . . . consciousness can see [the other], at least out of the corner of its eye. Between
its perspective and that of the other there is a link and an established way of crossing over . . . Neither in private nor in public history is the formula of these relationships ‘either him or me,’ the alternative of solipsism or pure abnegation, because these relationships are no longer the encounter of two For-Itselfs but are the meshing of two experiences which, without ever coinciding, belong to a single world.” (AD 200, my bracket addition)

The foregoing makes it clear that Merleau-Ponty believes that Sartre’s theory of consciousness cannot account for the interaction of consciousnesses and the formation of a common world and history. In fact, he concludes his chapter on Sartre by even more explicitly making this claim.

“The question is to know whether, as Sartre says, there are only men and things or whether there is also the interworld, which we call history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made. If one sticks to the dichotomy, men, as the place where all meaning arises, are condemned to an incredible tension. Each man, in literature as well as in politics, must assume all that happens instant by instant to all others; he must be immediately universal. If, on the contrary, one acknowledges a mediation of personal relationships through the world of human symbols . . . , if, on the contrary, one agrees that no action assumes as its own all that happens, that it does not reach the event itself, that all actions, even war, are always symbolic actions and count as much upon the effect they will have as a meaningful gesture and as the mark of an intention as upon the direct results of the event—if one thus renounces ‘pure action,’ which is a myth (and a myth of the spectator consciousness), perhaps it is then that one has the best chance of changing the world.” (AD 200-201)

According to Merleau-Ponty, then, the basic terms of Sartre's philosophy are view is too exclusive, for these terms separate consciousness from the world, others, from its own body and even from the past. For Sartre consciousness is not subject to external influences and is (ultimately) free to create all meaning. Here in Adventures of the Dialectic, Merleau-Ponty counters Sartre’s claim with an appeal to Marx’s mixed milieu, to the region of intersubjectivity that contains established practices that are mixed with things. Throughout all the chapters of Adventures of the Dialectic history unfolds as the relationship between people mediated by things, and, throughout the chapter on Sartre we have seen that Sartre’s social ontology cannot account for these exchanges. Merleau-Ponty attempts to provide a social ontology that can. Since the natural world is impressed with human meanings, and since the social world is replete with customary ways of acting and interacting, there is a social atmosphere that is not simply the creation of an isolated consciousness. Conscious individuals live in this atmosphere. They intersect with it, and because they intersect with it, the tensions that appear in the atmosphere can also fuse into them—and vice versa. The increased awareness of and participation in this atmosphere Marx called revolution. It is this social atmosphere that Merleau-Ponty emphasizes in Marx writings, it is the individual’s interaction with this social atmosphere that he works out and refines in his later writings, and it is this social atmosphere that escapes Sartre’s dichotomous social ontology.

The difference between Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s social ontology was made more explicit by considering their respective views of freedom. For Sartre, an isolated consciousness is free to create all meaning, while for Merleau-Ponty an incarnate subject opens to and is caught in a web of already established meanings, meanings that are taken up and “deformed” in order to express something new. For
Merleau-Ponty consciousness is primarily a bodily relation to the world. It is not a pure for-itself, as it is for Sartre. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no direct presence of consciousness to itself or to its object—as in the Cartesian tradition. Consciousness as a relationship to the world opens to a field of differential elements, to a shifting spatial and temporal gestalt. Perceptual consciousness necessarily outruns, both spatially and temporally, all reflection upon it. Consciousness is thus in contact with itself only across this open spatial and temporal field. Consciousness is a recognition of and participation in a field of differential meanings—both perceptual and social. Incarnate consciousness takes up this perceptual world and social atmosphere in order to live, to express, and to create its own meaning. Incarnate subjects interact with each other in this natural and social atmosphere in order to gain recognition, and it is in this exchange that freedom is expressed and history occurs.

The Visible and the Invisible

The Visible and Invisible, Chapter 2, Interrogation and Dialectic, devoted to a discussion of Sartre’s philosophy, opens with a reference to “perceptual faith.” It is right, Merleau-Ponty says, that philosophy has made the effort to suspend our belief in perception, to reflect upon it, in order to better understand it. Yet this reflection goes wrong when it transforms perception into “reasons” grasped or constructed by abstract thought expressed in propositions and sentences. Since perception is not an intellectual, linguistic representation, since this approach does not help us understand perception but obscures it, our perceptual relationship to the world must be understood differently. Sartre makes this attempt (VI 51).

As he did in Adventures of the Dialectic, Merleau-Ponty once again presents Sartre’s position as an ontological dualism, a dualism of consciousness and world, of the for-itself and the in-itself, of nothingness and being. According to Sartre, consciousness is immanence, transparent, clear to itself, yet empty, a nothingness, with the world as completely transcendent, completely outside of consciousness (VI 51). Moreover, the nothingness of consciousness means that there is no ego or self within or behind it.116 Since consciousness is pre-reflective subjectivity, by its very nature it is not an object before a reflective ego. It is pure subjectivity, purely the flow of subjective experience, and this means that it is simply an opening out upon the plenitude of being. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, “it is with this intuition of Being as absolute plenitude and absolute positivity, and with a view of nothingness purified of all the being we mix into it, that Sartre expects to account for our primordial access to the things . . .” (VI 52). In fact, “the intuition of being is solidary with a sort of negintuition of nothingness . . ., with the impossibility of our reducing ourselves to anything whatever— a state of consciousness, thought, an ego, or even a ‘subject.’” Thus, as Sartre frames his philosophy, his philosophy of negation is a philosophy of Being (VI 53). Yet, even though an intertwining of nothingness and being is impossible given mutually exclusive terms of his ontology, nothingness and being, Sartre claims, cannot be thought without each other (VI 55).
Consciousness knows itself only in a concrete situation, only as that which is not the things upon which it opens (VI 56).

Moreover, even though my consciousness opens me to the world through my situation, and even though I am aware that my visible exterior is open to the perceptions of others, in Sartre’s philosophy I have no direct and positive experience of the consciousness of the other (VI 61). This of course also means that there is really no world that is shared between us. Yet, according to Sartre, because the other, as a nothingness, opens upon a situation, just as I do, this creates some “shared” space for me and the other and even for the intervention of third parties. Subjectivity, Sartre claims, is defined through contact with a situation, and this exposes the subject to “the look” of the other and also exposes the subject’s relationships to others to possible objectification by third parties (VI 63).

Departing from his exposition of Sartre’s philosophy, and more critically now, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state that “it is in appearance only that the immanent consciousness and the transcendence of being are reconciled by an analytic of Being and Nothingness: it is not being that is transcendent, it is I who hold it at arm’s length by a sort of abnegation; it is not the world that is thick, it is I who am agile enough to make it be yonder” (VI 70). Moreover, while it is true that “the look” of the other wrenches me out of the flow of my own subjective experience, for Sartre, this occurs only if I allow this to take place (VI 71). Thus, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, Sartre’s philosophy remains a subjectivism with no real, meaningful exchange between consciousness and thing, or, for that matter, between consciousnesses. Binary oppositions, Merleau-Ponty says, remain in Sartre’s philosophy in all their rigor (VI 70).

Merleau-Ponty continues, raising other critical questions regarding Sartre’s notion of the for-itself: is the *cogito* of Sartre’s philosophy simply our pre-reflective experience? If so, it is difficult to see how it is nothingness, for it is filled with the thickness of experience. Or, is the *cogito* prior to this pre-reflective experience, behind it in some sense, something Sartre wants to avoid. These issues are never resolved in Sartre’s philosophy. Furthermore, and more generally, “either the analytic of being and nothingness is an idealism and does not give us the brute or pre-reflective being we seek, or, if it is something else, this is because it goes beyond and transforms the initial definitions” (VI 76).

Moving to the development and expression of his own thought, here relative to Sartre’s and the character of the *cogito*, Merleau-Ponty states that “it is necessary and it suffices that the other’s body which I see and his word which I hear, which are given to me as immediately present in my field, do present to me in their own fashion what I will never be present to, what will always be invisible to me, what I will never directly witness—an absence therefore, but not just any absence, a certain absence and a certain difference in terms of dimensions which are from the first common to us . . .” (VI 82). For Merleau-Ponty there is thus a recognition of the other, of another human consciousness, yet without direct access to the other’s consciousness. I am aware of another consciousness, yet as an absence, as something that I do not
have direct access to, because I am aware of another *gesturing body* that opens upon and engages with the world as I do. Our embodied consciousnesses open upon and participate in the same public space, the same public world, but do so from different angles, from different perspectives. Thus, even though I cannot literally think another person’s thoughts, I can perceive another perceiving being, as his or her act of perception open upon the same world between us. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it here, the other “can look at me — me, the invisible— only because we belong to the same system of being for itself and being for another; we are moments of the same syntax, we count in the same world, we belong to the same Being” (VI 83). For Merleau-Ponty, my experience is a part of and rests upon the anonymous functions of the human body as it carries me into a public world whether I will it or not. True, my experience is individuated within this public field. No one else experiences my experience exactly as I do. Yet since I experience my experience as primarily opening out upon a public space, I can catch a glimpse of the experiences lived through by others because they meet out in the world, like search lights illuminating the same field but from different angles. Sartre’s ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself, and of the for-itself and for-another, cannot accommodate this explanation, cannot account for a shared world, for in his philosophy the public world is something that *my* agility helps make yonder, with the power that the other has over me ultimately the power that I *give* to the other. Sartre’s philosophy remains a subjectivism (VI 83).

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty argues, being In-itself-for-itself is more than imaginary, as Sartre maintains. The imaginary breaks up, even disappears, with inspection and analysis. (VI 85) The world does not. It remains even if particular perceptions prove to be false. Merleau-Ponty continues with the following claim.

“Our point of departure shall not be being is, nothingness is not . . . but: there is being, there is a world, there is something; in the strong sense in which the Greek speaks of τὸ λέγειν, there is cohesion, there is meaning. One does not arouse being from nothingness, *ex nihilo*; one starts with an ontological relief where one can never say that the ground be nothing. What is primary is not the full and positive being upon a ground of nothingness; it is a field of appearances, each of which, taken separately, will perhaps subsequently break up or be crossed out (this is the part of nothingness), but of which I only know that it will be replaced by another which will be the truth of the first, because there is a world, because there is something—a world, a something, which in order to be do not first have to nullify the nothing.” (VI 88)

The world does not arise because of my nothingness, out of my consciousness as a nothingness, but, rather, I experience the world as always already there, as a worldly presence that I exist within. Moreover, Sartre’s ontological categories of nothingness and being are too abstract. They can perhaps be thought of as an introduction to a process, with the subject and object becoming more and more intertwined and more and more concrete. This process we call the dialectic, and it is a process that we do not really find in Sartre’s philosophy, for nothingness and being remain Sartre’s primary terms, remain terms that are primarily fixed, and mutually exclusive (VI 79).
“In sum, therefore, whether in the relations within being or in the relations of being with me, dialectical thought is that which admits that each term is itself only by proceeding toward the opposed term, becomes what it is through the movement, that it is one and the same thing for each to pass into the other or to become itself, to leave itself or to retire into itself, that the centripetal movement and the centrifugal movement are one sole movement, because each term is its own mediation, the exigency for a becoming, and even for an auto-destruction which gives the other.” (VI 90-91)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state here that it is just this sort of dialectical thinking that has alluded Sartre and that he has tried to apply to Sartre’s “dichotomy of Being and Nothingness?” (VI 91) His stance here towards Sartre, it appears, seems more amiable than it did in Adventures of the Dialectic. In a sense, he is here providing the dialectic that Sartre needs to correct Being and Nothingness, in order to provide the dialectic that he needs for the Critique of Dialectical Reason. As we have seen, within Sartre’s philosophy, the openness upon being in-itself is really nothingness, for the anonymous observer in me, “pushes before itself a zone of void where being no longer is, but is seen. It is therefore my constitutive nothingness that makes the distance from being as well as its proximity . . .” (VI 99). This must be corrected, Merleau-Ponty says, for the horizon of the perceptual world is there because my perception opens upon the world, not because my vision, my nothingness, holds something at arm’s length (VI 100). Criticizing Sartre, now with a further nod to his own position, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state that philosophy “cannot reconstruct the thing and the world by condensing in them . . . everything we have subsequently been able to think and say of them; rather, it remains a question, it interrogates the world and the thing, it revives, repeats, or imitates their crystallization before us. For this crystallization which is partly given to us ready-made is in other respects never terminated, and thereby we can see how the world comes about. It takes form under the domination of certain structural laws . . .” (VI 100). Philosophy is necessarily interrogative, for it is always in pursuit of an ongoing process, a process that is stable but whose terms continually refer beyond themselves to be themselves. In Sartre philosophy, his basic terms remain fixed.

Here in The Visible and the Invisible, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty once again remains critical of Sartre’s ontological dualisms, of the for-itself and the in-itself and of the for-itself and for-another, as well as of Sartre’s continued stress on the freedom of the individual subject. Conscious is still an immanence set against a transcendent nature in-itself. With this for-itself and in-itself, Merleau-Ponty says, Sartre expects to account for our “primordial access” to the world. Yet, Merleau-Ponty points out that what Sartre claims to achieve along these lines is really only “apparent,” for Sartre still explains the world’s transcendence as something brought about by the subject, by the subject’s own abnegation. Moreover, even though Sartre’s later works (more on this below) recognize the other, and even some sense of intersubjectivity or of shared goals, he still adheres to a social ontology of isolated individuals, with intersubjectivity induced by “the look” or threat of some third party or group and “chosen” by the isolated individual. Of course, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty not only criticizes Sartre’s position but also
develops an alternative philosophy, one that recognizes from the start that embodied individuals immediately open upon a shared public world, to a world of which they are always already a part. Furthermore, we have also seen that Merleau-Ponty points out that Sartre cannot develop a meaningful dialectic by starting with, or, rather, by rigorously maintaining, dualisms of the for-itself and in-itself and of the for-itself and for-another. A truly dialectical philosophy is a philosophy that attempts to understand terms as relational, and to understand terms in all their on-going relationships.

**Summary of Merleau-Ponty’s three text criticism of Sartre**

Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre in the three texts considered above remains consistent, even given the supposed changes in Sartre’s philosophy, which will be addressed below. We have seen throughout that Merleau-Ponty remains critical of Sartre’s dualisms, of his ontological dualism of the for-itself and the in-itself, and of the dualism of the for-itself and the for-another, as well as the radical freedom that Sartre accords to individual subjects. Contrarily, Merleau-Ponty seeks to describe not only how the embodied subject and world are intertwined but also how individual subjects are able to share a public space. Moreover, given that this is the case, the individual’s freedom must interface with forces of nature as well as with present social conditions. Individuals meet and take up natural and social conditions and, usually with great effort, are sometimes able to move them (particularly social conditions) in a different direction. To use a sailing metaphor, for Merleau-Ponty our boats must contend with the currents of the ocean and with the prevailing winds of the atmosphere. We can use the forces to direct our ship in various directions but we cannot escape them. For Sartre, we seem to be free to move our boats anywhere we wish, regardless of our circumstances. While the freedom of the individual is addressed through Merleau-Ponty’s three primary texts on Sartre, we have seen that it is treated at length in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In *Adventures of the Dialectic* Merleau-Ponty repeats his earlier criticisms of Sartre’s dualism and argues that given his starting point makes it impossible to develop an adequate theory of intersubjectivity and of the social movement of human history. Citing Marx favorably, Merleau-Ponty argues that history must be understood as relationships between people mediated by things. Sartre’s dualism cannot adequately account for the truly intersubjective event, whereby individuals working in concert with each other, with shared goals, transform nature together. Moreover, Sartre’s radical view of individual freedom, that the individual at each moment is responsible for his or her own interpretation of events, precludes the cohesion of social meaning through time. In *The Visible and Invisible* Merleau-Ponty remains critical of Sartre’s dualisms and here stresses that, given the rigidity of these dualisms, a truly dialectical philosophy is not possible.

**Simone de Beauvoir’s Criticisms of Merleau-Ponty (on Sartre’s behalf)**

Simone de Beauvoir rather vigorously (and even angrily) maintains that Merleau-Ponty does not give an accurate portrayal of Sartre’s philosophy. She claims against Merleau-Ponty that Sartre’s philosophy is not a philosophy of the subject, of a free for-itself, set against nature in-itself, since for Sartre the subject
is always embedded in a situation. (*Debate* 449) She also claims that his philosophy of history accounts for the difficult move from one historical situation to another by appealing to purposeful human projects. (See *Debate* 465 for her favorable comparison of Sartre to Marx) She cites many passages from Sartre’s work “demonstrating” that Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation is wrong.

**In Defense of Merleau-Ponty**

Fully aware of Sartre’s philosophy, what Merleau-Ponty claims is that Sartre still adheres to his dualistic ontology of the for-itself and in-itself (which makes their coming together problematic), and the exclusive experiences of for-oneself and for-another, (which makes their coming together in an intersubjective field problematic), while, in each case, maintaining a preference for the individual subject. (See AD 139-140 and below.) Moreover, the exclusivity of these pairs renders a philosophy of history problematic.

Let us look at a few passages to confirm the above point. True, as de Beauvoir says, “Sartre has always insisted on the reciprocal conditioning of the world and that of Ego . . .” (*Debate* 450). Merleau-Ponty is certainly aware of this but finds another tendency on Sartre’s thought, as is indicated in the following passage drawn from *Adventures of the Dialectic*.

“Sartre has always thought that nothing could be the cause of an act of consciousness. In the past Sartre spoke at least of ‘mild forces’ and ‘motives.’ Today he still speaks of ‘the reciprocal conditioning of both progressive impoverishment and permanent revolution,’ [CP 278] but for him this is statistical and secondary thought. In all strictness, the proletarian is not the condition of the militant, and the fact that the revolutionary will does not arise completely armed out of misery is enough for Sartre to act as if it did not arise from it at all, and to see it appear *ex nihilo* as an ‘invention,’ a refusal of the worker’s condition, a ‘conversion’ by which the worker ‘dies and is reborn.’ Lagneau said that to live will always be to take the trouble to live. He who takes this trouble is not the worker overwhelmed with misery and fatigue. It is that in him, beyond despair and also beyond hope, that says ‘no’ to this life and transforms it into another. One must not even speak of decision here, that is to say, of the deliberation between possibilities and of the motives which prefigure it. ‘Freedom has descended on me like an eagle’ is more or less what Orestes said in *The Flies*. In the same way, the revolutionary will of the militant is more himself than his life. It does not come out of what he was but out of the future, out of nonbeing, where from now on he places himself.” (AD 106, my bracket addition) 121

Obviously Merleau-Ponty’s point here is that Sartre view of the freedom of the individual trumps the reciprocal exchange between the subject and his or her environment. He continues.

“Because for Sartre the other is not a vague double of myself, because, born in the field of my life, the other overturns it, decenters my freedom, and destroys me in order to make me reappear over there, in a gaze which is fastened on me, it is not, as with Kant, beyond this life, or even, as with Lagneau, prior to life…; it is in this life . . . Yet, at this very moment and in this passing to the outside, something attests to the fact that we remain within the philosophy of the subject. It is precisely that the Party, like the militant, is pure action. If everything comes from freedom, if the workers are nothing, not even proletarians, before they create the Party, the Party rests on nothing that has been established, not even on their common history.” (AD 108)
Alright, good, for Sartre the other is present to the subject in life and not beyond or prior to it, yet, since for Sartre the individual’s freedom must remain unconditioned, the will of the worker remains unconditioned, i.e., not rooted in actual events. Here again the idea of reciprocal exchange between the subject and environment is bypassed for the idea of a completely free subject.

Later in *Adventures of the Dialectic* Merleau-Ponty comments on Sartre’s resistance to the thought of social intentions.

“For Marx, good and evil come from the same source, which is history. For Sartre, the social whole never starts moving by itself, never yields more movement than it has received from ‘inassimilable’ and ‘irreducible’ consciousnesses; . . . It is because in reality, for him, as soon as one reflects, there is nothing there. Intentions without consciousness are phantasms. Intention without consciousness: this monster, this myth, is a way of expressing that, reflecting on events, I find a meaning which could have been put there either by myself or by another subject . . . There is no real intention in the social whole, no meaning immanent in signs. Sartre has not changed since *The Psychology of the Imagination* [in 1940], where he rigidly distinguished between the ‘certain,’ the meanings of pure consciousness, and the ‘probable,’ that which emerges from the phenomenological experience; or, if he has changed, it is in the sense that he expects even less of the probable.” (AD 140, my bracket addition)

Merleau-Ponty is here pointing out Sartre’s inability to develop an adequate philosophy of history because he lacks any notion of social whole, of meaning and intentions in social institutions, in culture or linguistic signs, because he will not relinquish his hold on the pure consciousness of the individual. We also see Merleau-Ponty mention explicitly that Sartre’s ideas have not really changed since his early1940 emphasis on the “meanings of pure consciousness.” Of course, Merleau-Ponty here also means that Sartre’s ideas have not changed since *Being and Nothingness* (*L’Être et le néant*), published in 1943, and he states this explicitly a few pages later in *Adventures of the Dialectic*.

“Contrary to appearances, being-for-itself is all Sartre has ever accepted, with its inevitable correlate: pure being-in-itself. The mixed forms of the For Others [*du Pour Autrui*] urge us at every moment to think about ‘how nothingness comes into the world.’ But the truth is that it does not come into the world or that it remains there only for a moment. Ultimately there is pure being, natural and immobile in itself, a limpid mystery which limits and adds an outside to the transparency of the subject or suddenly congeals and destroys this transparency when I am looked at from outside. But even then there is no hinge, no joint or mediation, between myself and the other; I feel myself to be looked at immediately, I take this passivity as my own but at the same time reintegrate it into my universe.” (AD 142)

Merleau-Ponty’s claim here is that Sartre’s earlier philosophy, with its exclusive categories of for-itself and in-itself, and for-oneself and for-others, remains too exclusive to be able to form an adequate social philosophy or philosophy of history, ultimately because Sartre’s defaults to the freedom of the for-itself.

**Interview with Sartre, 1975**

Here are a number of statements by Sartre that are pertinent to the topic at hand, i.e., to Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Sartre’s philosophy as remaining tied to the dualism of nothingness and being, with an emphasis on the freedom of the individual subject. “I consider myself a Cartesian philosopher, at least in *L’Être et le Néant,*” Sartre says (Int 8), and proceeds to mention that he discovered the dialectic late
in his philosophical development: “After L’Étre et le Néant” (Int 9). He proceeds to say that he tried to give an account of it in Critique de la raison dialectique (Int18). He also mentions that he does not think there is a break in his thought, even though there is evolution, and that his “great discovery was that of the sociality during the war, since to be a soldier at the front is really to be a victim of a society that keeps you where you do not want to be and gives you laws you don't want” (Int 11, 12-13). Furthermore, he states, “since I believe only in individual consciousness and not in a collective consciousness, it is impossible for me to provide, just like that, a collective consciousness as historical synthesis” (Int 19). Moreover, he states explicitly that his ontology “has not changed. L’Étre et le Néant deals with ontology, not the Critique de la raison dialectique” (Int 41). To the claim that Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre missed “an interworld” (that is, an intersubjectivity) in his philosophy, Sartre responds: “I admit neither that I have the same philosophy as Merleau-Ponty nor that there is this element of interworld” (Int 43). And finally, Sartre is asked if he thinks Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms stem from a misunderstanding or from genuine and fundamental differences between their philosophies. He provides the following answer. “I believe that there is a fundamental incompatibility, because behind his analyses Merleau-Ponty is always referring to a kind of being for which he invokes Heidegger and which I consider to be absolutely invalid. The entire ontology that emerges from the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is distinct from mine. It is much more a continuum than mine. I am not much of a continuitist; the in-itself, the for-itself, and the intermediary forms that we talked about a moment ago -- that is enough for me. For Merleau-Ponty, there is a relation to being that is very different, a relation in the very depths of oneself.” (Int 43)

He also states, a little further on, that in his philosophy, unlike in Merleau-Ponty’s, “consciousness is not engulfed in a body nor is the body engulfed in the world” (Int 44).

These passages demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty’s claim that Sartre’s ontology remains dualistic is accurate, and, if this is so, then Sartre’s attempt to develop an interworld, a meeting point between subject and object and a meeting point between self and others (an intersubjectivity), or a genuine exchange between consciousness and nature, remains problematic.

Another criticism of Merleau-Ponty: Remy Kwant, a first-rate expositor and interpreter of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, questions why Merleau-Ponty did not take into account Sartre’s Critique when he was writing The Visible and the Invisible? Merleau-Ponty persists in citing Sartre’s Being and Nothingness.124 Kwant states that The Visible and the Invisible chapter on Sartre, entitled “Interrogation and Dialectic,” was written in “1959 or 1960,” and proceeds to make the following claim. “In the meantime Sartre had published Critique of Dialectical Reason, which is a long exposition of dialectical thought as well as a philosophy of history. Merleau-Ponty was obviously aware of this book. In a note of June, 1960, he wrote that Sartre’s philosophy of history is based on the practice of the individual [VI 256]; this evidently refers to Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason. It is one of Sartre’s main theses there that the practice of the individual is the raison constitutante, i.e., the principle of the intelligibility, of history. This book implies some important changes in Sartre’s philosophy. It is remarkable, therefore, that in the chapter in The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty does not confront himself with the Critique of Dialectical Reason.” (Kwant 131, my bracket addition)
Yet, according to an editorial note written by Merleau-Ponty’s close friend and posthumous editor, Claude Lefort, the primary text of *The Visible and the Invisible* was composed in March and June of 1959 (although there are “working notes” written as late as 1961). Obviously, this means that the March and June 1959 composition was written before the 1960 publication of Sartre’s *Critique*. Merleau-Ponty resigns from *Les Temps Modernes* and “breaks” with Sartre in 1953. Even though there was some reconciliation between the two authors in 1956, there seems to be no evidence that Merleau-Ponty read the manuscript of the *Critique* in its preparation stage, before its publication. It is therefore likely that Merleau-Ponty did not have a detailed knowledge of the *Critique* when he composed “Interrogation and Dialectic.” Furthermore, with respect to Merleau-Ponty’s “working note” of June 1960 that references the individual and history, Sartre had already written about the individual and history in “The Communists and Peace” and “A Reply to Claude Lefort” in 1952 and 1953 in *Les Temps modernes* as well as in his even earlier “Materialism and Revolution” (“Materialisme et revolution”) which was published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1946, an essay which Merleau-Ponty cites in his “Marxism and Philosophy” (“Marxisme et philosophie”) in the same year. Merleau-Ponty here in “Marxism and Philosophy” states the following. “The question has sometimes been raised, and with reason, as to how a materialism could be dialectical; how matter, taken in the strict sense of the word, could contain the principle of productivity and novelty which is called dialectic,” and he here makes a general reference to Sartre’s “Materialism and Revolution.” Merleau-Ponty continues to provide his own answer to the question, which differs from Sartre’s. “It is because in Marxism ‘matter’—and, indeed ‘consciousness’—is never considered separately. It is inserted in the system of human coexistence where it forms the basis of a common situation of contemporary and successive individuals, assuring the generality of their projects and making possible a line of development and a sense of history.” Merleau-Ponty’s stress here is on a “system of human coexistence where it forms the basis of a common situation of contemporary and successive individuals,” while Sartre’s stress is on individuals who must attempt to form social relationships. While Sartre talks about the necessity of seeing the individual in a situation, about forming social relationships to transform particular situations through work and action, he still does so (by his own admission, as we have witnessed above) from the point of view of his *Being and Nothingness* ontology, where his starting point is the in-itself and the for-itself, the for-itself and for-another . . . and the free individual subject. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty’s starting point is a *system of human coexistence*. With respect to the dialectic, Sartre published *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr* in 1952, and states that “I delved deeper into the dialectic beginning with *Saint Genet* and I think that the *Critique* is a truly dialectical work” (Int 18). Thus Merleau-Ponty was certainly aware of Sartre’s ideas of the individual and history and could have well been aware of his dialectic before the publication of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Thus the “working note” that Kwant mentions is not definitive with respect to
Merleau-Ponty’s awareness of the *Critique*. Yet, even if he was aware of the *Critique*, since the working note mentioned by Kwant was written in June of 1960, the same year as the publication of the *Critique*, this does not change the fact that “Interrogation and Dialectic” was composed a full year earlier.

In the absence of some sort of citation or other form of textual evidence, it is difficult to know if Merleau-Ponty was aware of Sartre’s *Critique* when he originally composed “Interrogation and Dialectic.” Given the time line regarding the publication of these texts, it is highly unlikely that Merleau-Ponty was aware of any of the details of Sartre’s *Critique*, although he certainly could have been aware of Sartre’s *Saint Genet*, published in 1952. Yet, this does not really matter, for his criticism of Sartre in *The Visible and the Invisible* is still relevant given what Sartre has said about the development of his philosophy. Merleau-Ponty is not criticizing Sartre’s embrace of dialectical thinking (which begins to appear in *Saint Genet*) or of intersubjective experience (which occurs to some extent in Sartre’s *Critique*). He is critical of Sartre’s attempt to embrace dialectical thinking and intersubjectivity given his dualistic ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself and his continued embrace of the more or less complete freedom of the individual subject. By his own admission, as we have seen, Sartre still adheres to this dualistic ontology in his late *Critique*. Thus, whether or not Merleau-Ponty was aware of the *Critique*, his criticisms remain valid, for they are aimed at a thought that tries to get a dialectic (and an interworld, i.e., intersubjectively shared experiences and goals) from a rigid dualism.

If we look at Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, especially Part Three “Being-For-Others”, especially Chapter One, section IV, “The Look,” and Chapter Three, section III, “‘Being-with’ (Mitsein) and the ‘We’”\(^{131}\), we see that Merleau-Ponty has provided an accurate account of Sartre’s social ontology. Sartre offers the following example to illustrate his position. A man arrives home earlier, and, as he approaches his apartment, he hears his lover talking to another man in the apartment. In a fit of passion, absorbed in his own flow of subjective feeling, he bends before the door to peer through the keyhole. Suddenly, the door of another apartment down the hall swings open, exposing the jealous lover to “the look” of a surprised neighbor. This illustration captures, Sartre thinks, his social ontology, for the jealous subject is first defined by his (or her) flow of immediate subjective experience, yet the free subject is inescapably exposed to the critical “look” of others. Given Sartre’s view of freedom (that nothing can define the subject from the “outside,” that nothing can define the subject other than the subject’s own choice), the subject is thrown into a Hellish situation, with each free subject pitted against the external interpretations of others. I must constantly assert my freedom to define myself in the face of those who would define me otherwise. Furthermore, this conflict with the other can never be resolved, for each is free to think for him or herself, and, as such, there is no genuine *mitsein*, no being-with the other, no intersubjectively shared experiences, interpretations, or goals. Moreover, just as the other attempts to label and define me from the outside, my relationship to others is also labeled by “the look” of third parties.
It clear that Sartre’s *Critique* attempts to address the lack of *mitsein*, of being-with others, of intersubjectively determined goals in his earlier work, for the *Critique* admits that a genuine sharing of goals is possible. However, when Sartre articulates his later position he still maintains the same ontology of his previous, earlier works. Isolated individuals, he says, can form genuinely shared goals when they are faced with a common threat (“the look” of a threatening third-party). However, again, Sartre’s view of the individual and the individual’s relationship to others remains the same. Individuals remain free subjects. The for-itself and the for-another, the for-itself and the in-itself remain Sartre’s fundamental categories. Yet, given these categories, given that they are exclusive of one another, it is difficult to see how Sartre can maintain that there is a genuine sharing of experience, a genuine intersubjectivity.\(^{132}\)

**Comments**

Could it be that Sartre is correct? Could it be that all we have are individuals, who are free, focused on their own interest? The fused group only comes about when there is an external threat, with “the look” of a third-person or party perspective. Perhaps this is true in “bourgeois societies,” in the West, with its extreme emphasis on the individual. Perhaps this is true of human nature, at least as manifested in Western societies, in and since the modern period.

Yet, we should not mistake human nature with how it is realized in one-time period or in one type of society. Merleau-Ponty himself stresses that we humans are a mix of nature and nurture, nature and culture. We do have natural propensities but these are taken up and articulated through specific cultures. Humans clearly have the capacity for individuation, but also for a strong sense of family and community. Sartre takes the manifestation of human nature in Western societies, with its extreme emphasis on individuality, and makes it his ontology. Merleau-Ponty insists that we should not forget our shared world, especially of childhood, from which we can individuate as adults, yet with this community sense remaining.

We have many counterexamples to the characterization of human nature as primarily individually oriented. The Japanese society (as well as many others) is far more community oriented then Western societies. Also, even in the West, the family frequently displays a strong coupling and even identity with other family members. In the military, soldiers, especially those who face battle together, frequently have a profound sense of brotherhood. Moreover, and more academically, a variety of studies confirm a stronger sense of community than individuality in societies around the world. In his “Individualism-Collectivism and Personality” Harry Triandis states the following: “The individualism-collectivism cultural syndrome (Triandis, 1996) appears to be the most significant cultural difference among cultures. Greenfield (2000) calls it the ‘deep structure’ of cultural differences. While there is a myriad of cultural differences, this one seems to be important both historically and cross-culturally. Almost 100 publications per year now use this dimension in discussing cultural differences (Suh, 1999).”\(^{133}\) Also, George Rupp makes the case (with
strong political implications) that many societies around the world have a stronger sense of family and community than they do of individuality.\textsuperscript{134}

Thus, it is clear that cross-cultural empirical studies reveal a human nature that is capable of both a highly developed sense of individuality and a powerful sense of community. As mentioned, Merleau-Ponty’s own use of psychological studies reveals a human nature that is at first communal. Early childhood is profoundly familial, with the child’s identity extending to and including others. With development and the right kind of loving, community support, the child may reach a healthy sense of adult individuality—yet one that remains embedded in social relations. Compared to Sartre’s philosophy, it is Merleau-Ponty’s social ontology that more accurately represents the human capacity for both individuality and community and for the sense of individuality that has its origins in and remains rooted in a sense of community. In fact, the acute sense of isolation and loneliness that is widely felt in Western societies indicates, even with all the stress on individual freedom, that many have a longing for a stronger sense of belongingness.\textsuperscript{135} Moreover, it is Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, rather than Sartre’s, that can more clearly account for the formation of social groups and the movement of history.

\textit{Adventures of the Dialectic} Epilogue\textsuperscript{136}

Merleau-Ponty’s primary goal in \textit{Adventures of the Dialectic} is to trace and evaluate the use and development of the dialectic by a number of 20\textsuperscript{th} Century authors. He addresses the dialectic in Weber, Lukacs, Lenin, Trotsky, and Sartre. The book’s final chapter expresses his own view of the dialectic, formed (in part) in interaction with authors just mentioned, as well as with his own more philosophical writings. Given the topic at hand, Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Sartre’s philosophy, the emphasis here has been on the book’s chapter on Sartre. Yet, since the primary motive for Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre is to show that he has difficulty developing a political philosophy as well as a related philosophy of history, primarily because he cannot adequately connect the individual with the community, it makes sense to briefly consider the last chapter of \textit{Adventures of the Dialectic}, for it is here that he lays out his own political view, relative to Sartre (as well as the other authors just mentioned), as well as his view of the dialectic.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy commits us to the following. Perception is active. It actively meets the world, takes it up, and interprets it (bodily, perceptually, not yet conceptually). Perception is thus a form of expression. Furthermore, we should interpret the creative act of painting as a prolongation this active perceptual expression. The act of perceptual expression thus opens another tradition: just as perception takes up what is already available and orients it in new ways, so also the act of painting takes up what is already present (the perceptual field, other paintings, artistic styles and techniques, etc.) and orients it in new ways. We may also say that it is the unity (granted, only provisional) of perceptual perspectives that helps us understand the unity of experience through time, i.e., human history. “It is through our body that we have the first experience of the impalpable body of history . . .”, Merleau-Ponty says.\textsuperscript{137} To further help
account for the sense of history, Merleau-Ponty calls up Marx. In Marx’s philosophy, he reports, “what accounts for there being human history is that man is a being who externalizes himself, who individualizes himself by appropriating certain goods and thereby enters into conflict with other men.” Since we labor in the world via our bodies, since we thus labor in a public space, we enter into an arena in which we struggle for recognition and in which we must compete with others. The social relationships that guide our interactions with others (for example, the workplace relationship of owner to employee), and how individuals within these relationships seek to change them over time, we call human history.

Marx, then, gives us a specific view of history, a view of a moving society that is “a holistic system moving toward a state of equilibrium, the classless society which cannot be achieved without individual effort and action, but which is outlined in the present crisis as their solution—the power of men over nature and mutual reconciliation of men” (HT 130). For Marx, then, human history is moving toward the resolution of conflict and ultimately toward the universal recognition of each person by all the others. In Humanism and Terror, Merleau-Ponty is sympathetic to Marx’s general view of history but even here (and more so later) is skeptical about its projected outcome, a proletarian revolution and the subsequent arrival of a truly just, truly universal society. Later, in Adventures of the Dialectic, Merleau-Ponty is more critical of the view of history of the mature Marx, which stressed the immanent movement of economic events, which, in Soviet party politics, was supposedly understood by party elites. Here in Adventures of the Dialectic he seeks to understand history, as did the young Marx, by stressing the relationship between aware individuals as these relationships are mediated by material conditions and social institutions, including, for Merleau-Ponty, the social institution of language. In fact, it is language that more thoroughly helps us understand intersubjectivity and history, that helps us understand the formation of societies and their movement through time.

Merleau-Ponty’s later works (dating from his post-war writings to his death in 1961) continue to develop the role that language plays in the attempt to understand human experience, intersubjectivity and history. His important inaugural lecture at the Collège de France is once more worth our attention. He explicitly addresses the important role of language here and states that it provides yet another means to overcome the dichotomous relationship between oneself and others. Language is a means for the speaking subjects to share meanings, for the expressed meanings of each to cross into the meanings experienced by all others. As we have seen above, for Merleau-Ponty it is the synthesis of bodily perceptions, as they open upon one sole world, that helps us understand the synthesis of artistic styles and periods, that ultimately helps us understand the continuity of human experiences through time, i.e., history. Since perception is a form of expression, we can see how this form of expression might be prolonged or sublimated in other, more abstract forms expression such as speech. Speech can also be a means of bringing together my own experiences, and bringing them together with the experiences lived through by others. Here in the inaugural
lecture he takes this further, for we see that he appeals to language as an important means of not only bringing together the individual with other individuals but also the individual with social institutions. Merleau-Ponty thinks that language helps us further understand this public space where human experiences overlap each other. Language helps us further understand human intersubjectivity and even the movement of human history. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty even draws a parallel between linguistic expression and the movement of history. Just as the will to express and the available linguistic system cross back and forth into one another, so also the active labor power of individuals and the available social institutions cross back and forth into one another. And just as changes in the linguistic system come about because tensions are perceived by the individuals who use it, by those who live and express within it, so also changes in social institutions come about because tensions are experienced by the individuals who live and work within them. In order to account for the movement of a society through time, then, we must consider the tensions within this particular social, economic, political system and how they are resolved by the individuals who live them.

This attempt to understand history, i.e., to understand it as the relationship between people attempting to resolve tensions within the context of material conditions and social institutions, is what allows Merleau-Ponty to say the following in *Adventures of the Dialectic*. “There are subjects, objects, there are men and things, but there is also a third order, that of the relationship between men inscribed in tools or social symbols. These relationships have their development, their advances, and their regressions. Just as in the life of the individual, as in this generalized life there are tentative aims, failure or success, reaction of the result on the aim, repetition or variation, and this is what one calls history” (AD 38).

Returning to the political left and the idea of class conflict as the driving engine of history, we must now understand that class consciousness cannot be understood simply as a subjective mental state or simply determined by an objective set of conditions, i.e., simply in terms of an objective relationship to the means of production. Class consciousness must be understood as “polarized [human] existence, [as] a possibility which appears in the proletariat’s situation at the juncture of things and his life” (AD 47, my bracket additions). *Adventures of the Dialectic*, then, certainly does not deny here that history has a *sens* (a meaning and direction), even though it denies the immanent development of a proletarian revolution. We observe here that a certain praxis, a certain means of organizing behavior and interacting with others, can and does polarize human existence. This particular polarization, with the specific problems that it contains, may well suggest a certain range of solutions and a certain range of open ended possibilities. These solutions and possibilities are not already written in human nature or events, as modernists (either capitalist or communist) have claimed, but, given human nature (that certain truths and values may be suggested by an experience that is nevertheless made more precise by certain social, cultural, and linguistic expressions), and given a specific social system (capitalism, not feudalism), certain solutions and possibilities may well
be suggested, may well appear as more probable than others—something postmodernists tend to deny. Societies do have a meaning and a direction, a continuity over time, from the past, through the present, to the future, as well as a discontinuity, a break with what has previously been framed by and done within certain institutions. History, as we have seen, must be understood as the relationship between people mediated by things and social institutions, and social institutions must be understood as human relationships (to each other and to nature) that have become “set” or “habitualized” as established ways of acting and interacting with one another.

This, in then, is how we should account for history. Its *inertia* (its lack of change or its continued movement in one direction) is accounted for by the stability (or rigidity) of various social, political, and economic institutions, with its *progressive* movement (or, as Merleau-Ponty argues, its increased democratization) grasped by recognizing that the human beings, who must live in institutions that are not always satisfactory, must nevertheless assimilate them, but may also attempt to change them. This view of history “supposes a logic of history based on the immanent development of each order of facts, of each historical sequence, and on the self-suppression of the false, and not on a positive principle which would govern things from outside” (AD 69). That is to say, we cannot evaluate social institutions from the outside, supposing some sort of objective criterion, but we can criticize them for their own shortcomings, for their contradictions, for their inadequacies, for the fact that they cannot resolve their own tensions given their current composition. We should understand societies, not objectively, but through a “cross-growth” of the various sectors of society, “through the ‘internal mechanism’ of a conflict which has grown by itself to the point of destroying the social structures in which it had appeared” (AD 92). Again, changes in societies occur not just as the result of the movement of things or economic conditions alone but as a cross growth of all the elements and sectors of the society as a holistic system. As individuals assimilate all the institutions of all the regions of a society, in order to operate and gain recognition within them, conflicts frequently arise, and it is through the resolution of these conflicts that history is formed. It is the resolution of these conflicts that Merleau-Ponty refers to as the rationality of history.

Mentioning Trotsky’s philosophy of history here, Merleau-Ponty agrees that there is “no guarantee against non-sense than this step-by-step confirmation of the present by that which succeeds it . . .” (AD 77). Neither Merleau-Ponty nor Trotsky holds that there is a rationality outside of history (again, as modernists claim) that guides or drives it. Historical rationality is the movement of history itself (just as perceptual rationality is the movement of our perception). Rationality is the successive confirmation of social/political solutions by those that succeed them—especially if these solutions include greater awareness and participation (just as perceptual rationality is an agreement of successive perspectives, especially if this rationality is open to all perspectives). History still has a *sens*, a meaning and a future direction; true, this future must be sensed, and stated, by the politician, the statesman, or perhaps even by the philosopher; it
must be confirmed by those living through it; and it must still be accomplished to be realized. Yet, this sens is still suggested by present conditions (capitalism, for example, not feudalism) that outline a certain range of possible and even probable future events (something that is denied by postmodernists).

To express the dialectic in the language of the philosophy of history, and to summarize the discussion of the dialectic as it is expressed in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, we can say, first of all, that Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that history can be understood as the immanent movement of things or ideas, rejects the idea that the dialectical movement of history occurs either in material conditions or ideas alone. We have seen, to the contrary, that he embraces a more holistic dialectic (put forth in various ways by Weber, Lukacs, and Trotsky), which is in agreement with his own more philosophical studies. This dialectic insists on looking at the interaction of all of the aspects and all the regions of society. They must be seen as coming together and forming a gestalt whole, where each aspect influences and is influenced by all the others. The movement of history must therefore be understood as a cross-growth of all these regions. Society, then, must be understood as a mixed milieu, as an intersubjective phenomenon where the lives of individuals come together and come together with things and social institutions, including the institution of language. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty accepts the young Marx’s notion of praxis, where conscious individuals impress human meanings onto the natural world by means of individual and collective labor. When human beings subsequently act into the natural world and a social milieu, with its symbolic and linguistic institutions, we necessarily find ourselves surrounded by already established human meanings. The natural world already contains visible human forms, and the social/linguistic world is replete with *already established* meanings, with institutionalized ways of acting and interacting, of expressing and thinking, and is thus prone to inertia. The incarnate subject consciously opens to a natural and social world that already includes the subject and others, that already includes established meanings, institutionalized means of expression and habitualized forms of human relationships. Each individual must consciously take up these institutions, yet often without conceiving the whole, in order to express him or herself and to gain recognition within them. It is this interaction that drives the movement of history, the creation of new economic, social, cultural, linguistic forms in order to be better understood and more thoroughly recognized. History, in fact, occurs as the relationship between people mediated by the inertia of things, of economic conditions, and of social institutions, including language, as these people attempt to negotiate more satisfying conditions. The rationality of history, then, is the confirmation of past moments by those that succeed it. At each moment of history, a society is composed of various institutions that regulate the interactions of its citizens with each other and with nature. If these institutions are successful, if they manage this regulation with little tension, these institutions will in all likelihood be confirmed by succeeding generations. However, if they produce tension, if they do not allow for successful adaptation to nature, or if they regulate human interactions in a way that is regarded as unjust by their participants, then conflict
will emerge and remain until the tension is reduced, until new institutions and regulations are formed. Historical rationality, then, is the society’s resolution of its problems and its confirmation of its relative successes.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the problems of the materialist dialectic in *Adventures of the Dialectic*—history as the immanent movement of things, the Party’s privileged awareness of this truth of things, and, finally and more specifically, the Soviet Union’s Korean War policy—leads him to the following political pronouncement: “This situation can end only with the birth of a noncommunist left.” “[A noncommunist left] is a necessary condition for knowledge of the U.S.S.R. because it confronts what we know of communist reality with communist ideology; and it is, at the same time and without paradox, the condition of a modern critique of capitalism because it alone poses Marx’s problems again in modern terms. It alone is capable of a perpetual confrontation and comparison of the two systems.” (AD 225)

It is clear here that Merleau-Ponty does not abandon the political left, for he wishes to continue to criticize capitalism from the point of view of an updated Marxism, a revised Marxism that he himself has tried to contribute to by abandoning an authoritarian communism based on the supposed necessities of a strictly materialist dialectic.

In an attempt to discover the truth of the two dominant political systems in the 20th century, Soviet communism and Western liberal democracies, rather than simply repeat their respective ideologies, Merleau-Ponty remains critical of both while borrowing from each. In true dialectical fashion, he integrates a noncommunist left with what he calls a new liberalism. This new liberalism does not rely upon a pre-given rationality or truth, but rests upon a rationality that remains to be established by human beings that open to the world in similar ways. This new liberalism listens to all voices, and tries to take them all into account, refuting them only by pointing out their own inconsistencies. With no position outlawed, the truth of any position is not complete until it takes into account the insights of its opposition. Merleau-Ponty expresses it this way: “We see now in what sense one must speak of a new liberalism; it is not a question of returning to an optimistic and superficial philosophy which reduces the history of a society to speculative conflicts of opinion, political struggle to exchanges of views on clearly posed problems, and the coexistence of men to relationships of fellow citizens in the political empyrean. This kind of liberalism is no longer practiced anywhere” (AD 225). He continues: “If we speak of liberalism, it is in the sense that . . . we expect progress only from a conscious action which will confront itself with the judgment of an opposition. Like Weber’s heroic liberalism, it lets even what contests it enter its universe, and it is justified in its own eyes only when it understands the opposition” (AD 226). This last statement is strikingly similar to what is now called multiculturalism, and it is a statement of multiculturalism that is based on the human body’s openness upon the world. It is a view that we have seen developed in *Adventures of the Dialectic* as a dialectical philosophy, and it is a view that Merleau-Ponty already expressed at the end of *Humanism and Terror*.
Moreover, the Merleau-Ponty of *Adventures of the Dialectic* quite positively believes that the parliamentary democracies of the West provide at least a minimum of access to open discussion and debate--positive, because they do provide at least a minimum of access, and have been the best attempt yet to do so, but also negative, because this access is only minimal. Furthermore, because classes still exist, because representatives of the wealthy can more freely manipulate information, ideology and the political process itself, obfuscation, mystification, and unjust control endure, and it is these practices that the political left should be sensitive to, point out, and criticize. Criticism from the point of view of the political left thus remains important, for classes still exist, for the capitalist system continues to exploit a significant portion of the population—some more than others—while disproportionately rewarding a few, with both wealth and power. In fact, in his introduction to his late collection of essays entitled *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty will say five years after the publication of *Adventures of the Dialectic* that Marx’s ideas should continue to be used as a heuristic device, while, at the same time, the details of Marx’s theories should be reevaluated, reworked, and up-dated to account for changing circumstances and the advances of human knowledge. This is certainly sound advice, for many of Marx’s ideas remain insightful—for example, and speaking in general terms, Marx’s analysis of class, with its reports of the inequality of wealth and power, his theory of alienation, his theory of exploitation, etc.—yet we must never take these ideas for granted and must always rethink them according to our own times and circumstances.\(^\text{139}\)
We should revisit Merleau-Ponty’s late essay “From Mauss to Levi-Strauss,” for it is still well worth reading, especially since it provides a viable way between the extremes of modernism and postmodernism. The essay explicitly challenges modernism, embraces a structural, dialectical approach, but does not go as far as many postmodernists who (after Merleau-Ponty’s untimely death in 1961) “run” with structural themes as fast and as far as they can go. The balance of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy remains one of its most attractive qualities, for his balanced explanations often provide greater clarity than his more extreme competitors. Let us trace here what he explicitly says about the short-comings of modernism and how to get beyond them using a structural approach, and, based upon what he says, let us also consider what he might have said about postmodernism had he lived to encounter the writings of its proponents.

Merleau-Ponty’s stated purpose for “From Mauss to Levi-Strauss” is, once again, to find a way between the subject/object dichotomy that has dominated Western thought for two millennia, and certainly since Descartes. He first applauds Marcel Mauss for insistently claiming that simply noting correlations in data (the standard modernist, objective approach) is not enough in our attempt to understand other cultures and human societies generally. We must find a way into the beliefs of the people of another culture, as they are lived by its residences (the subjective approach). Obviously both Mauss and Merleau-Ponty are here calling for a phenomenological approach, to properly enhance the objectively collected data. Yet, conversely, this phenomenological approach occurs in an objective context, for we must intuitively think our way into the lived through behavior of others in another culture and do so in a way that allows us to understand “the mode of exchange which is constituted among men by means of the institution” (Signs 115)

In our attempt to understand others, lived through behavior is very important, but we must grasp this behavior in the context of rule-governed institutions, usually institutions that must be understood as symbolic systems. Merleau-Ponty is here bringing together phenomenology and the structural linguistics, and thus brings together the subjective and objective. Yet he rejects the structuralist’s characterization of these structures as universal and immutable in nature. He rejects structures understood as fixed essences. Here, he is more in agreement with the post-structuralist or postmodernist characterization of a linguistic structure as an organic system of relationships that is relative to a group and that is continually unfolding in time, in short, as neither universal nor immutable. Yet, unlike both structuralism and postmodernism, with their diminishing of the subject almost to zero, Merleau-Ponty insists, as we have just seen, that we must retain a significant role for lived through experience. In order to understand the behavior of people of another culture (or even of another demographic group within our own), we have to understand both the lived through experience of its individuals and the regulation of this experience by the society’s social-symbolic institutions. Moreover, we have to understand that the individual’s experience and the
society’s symbolic institutions cross into and influence one another, for language is internalized by individuals and symbolic systems bear a meaning (which would not be possible without the lived experience of those who use the language). Thus, when attempting to understand human societies, we need to take account of experience as it is lived by the individuals as they form relationships of exchange (in a broad sense, not just monetary exchange) within these societies. We need to consider the coming together, the chiasm, of the individual’s experience and the society’s social institutions, particularly the institution of language. This also means that Merleau-Ponty embraces structure in the sense that the individual’s experience and the structures of the natural and social environment form a structure, form a Gestalt whole, as they cross into one another. And this also means that Merleau-Ponty embraces structure in the sense that individuals must be seen in context, in a field or network of relationships with other individuals and with social institutions.

Yet, it should also be mentioned here that Merleau-Ponty, by focusing on relationships, does not focus just on the “space” between individuals (or words), as Derrida’s postmodernism does. For Merleau-Ponty the relationships are vitally important, for they help define what (or who) a person, a thing, an idea, or a word is. Yet the constant referring (or “deferring” and “differing,” to use Derrida’s terms) elsewhere does not erase the original trace (as it does for Derrida). For Merleau-Ponty there is still presence in the context of absence, still a stable meaning in the context of open-ended relationships. (More on this below.)

For Merleau-Ponty there is still an awareness of oneself, still a presence to oneself. Yet Merleau-Ponty is fully aware that this self-presence is not complete, for it is spread out with the flow of time. He is also fully aware of the power of language to frame human experience, including the experience of oneself. The question thus becomes how this presence is mediated by language. If we once again consider Merleau-Ponty’s use of phenomenology’s fundierung relationship, we see that just as this relationship must be used to understand the relationship between perception and language, with each crossing into and affecting the other, yet with perception remaining the primary term, so also it must be used to understand the relationship between self-perception and language, with each crossing into and affecting the other, yet with self-perception remaining the primary term. Surely language helps frame and articulate our self-perceptions, but there is something there to be famed and expressed: our own lived through experience and how this experience of the world and others rebounds and crosses back into us. Moreover, with the awareness of one’s own experience, Merleau-Ponty recognizes, as just mentioned, that there is an awareness of this experience over time. The moments of experience overlap because they open out upon the temporality of the world. The moments of my experience hold together because they hold together in the world, and the fact that they do hold together allows us to understand the formation of a sense of self over or through time. I am aware of my experiences. I am aware that they do not just fly about anywhere but occur in a temporal sequence and occur in one place, centered in my body. These experiences are the basis for my more precise
and articulated sense of self, which nevertheless must be framed by the cultural and symbolic tools that are available to me in my time and place in history. Again, it must be stressed that for Merleau-Ponty the *fundierung* relationship is a two-way relationship, with each term helping to define the other. Language helps frame experience and can do so in a variety of ways. Yet some expressions are better than others, for they are able to articulate this experience, to bring it out of its ambiguity, in a way that is more precise and clarifying, just as a certain distance between a perceiver and a painting on a museum wall is more clarifying. Thus, the linguistic expression plays a constructive role, but, there is something there for language to express, a relatively stable and meaningful world.

In his effort to overcome subject/object dualism, which is prevalent in modernism, Merleau-Ponty stresses here that, like human beings themselves, “the social . . . has two poles or facets: it is significant, capable of being understood from within, and at the same time personal intentions within it are generalized, toned down, and tend toward processes, being mediated by things” (*Signs* 114). What we have here, expressed in the latter part of this conjunction, are personal intentions that become generalized as social intentions. But what does this mean? What are social intentions? Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, social intentions are institutionalized ways of thinking, behaving, feeling, and intending. Their origin is in the lives of individuals, in their lived through experience, as we see expressed in the first part of the conjunction. Yet, they can be generalized from this experience. Moreover, these generalized structures can then act back upon the individual’s experiences in a way that helps frame them. As an example, we might think of a business that has an explicitly stated mission, articulated by the owner or a board of trustees, with specific goals and objectives, with stated means for achieving these goals, and even with feedback loops to measure success. When an individual is hired by this company, he or she is expected to get “on board,” to understand the goals of the organization and to act accordingly. These actions should also include an understanding of the implied or unspoken “rules” for interacting with others in the company and with those outside of it when acting on the company’s behalf. Again, what becomes the institutionalized rules have their origin the owner’s intentions, or in the articulated experience of all in the company accumulated over time, with the expectation that these rules will be followed by those who are employed there. Now, if there are such things as *social intentions*, then we must not attempt to understand the social by simply noting objective changes or the correlation of objective data. We have to understand how people live the events of their community and how the lived through and the community’s institutions cross into one another. We must understand how people live their “exchange,” their interaction, with others within the context of rule-governed social institutions, just as we should understand how the subject’s construction and articulation of sentences expressed to others are governed by the rules of a language (sometimes understood only implicitly). These rule-governed institutions must be understood as systems of symbols, which have meaning, of course, and, as such, i.e., as a network of symbolic values, limit and guide the
individual’s experience and behavior. Or, to express this in another way, the individual’s behavior, with its meaning, gets framed by the institutionalized rules that guide behavior. The difference between Merleau-Ponty and postmodernists here is that, when attempting to understand the relationship between the subject and society, Merleau-Ponty retains the subject (though not the Cartesian, modernist one) while postmodernists seem to minimize (almost to nothing) the significance of the subject. According to Merleau-Ponty, we must not understand society (or a society’s culture or its language) as a system independent of its “subjective” participants but as meaningful ways of interacting that are institutionalized within symbolic systems (written and spoken). The individual frames his or her meaningful behavior and meaningful speech according to the (again, sometimes implied) rules of society’s symbolic systems, rules that have been sublimated from the lived through experience of the subjects within this society. Here the individual’s experience and the linguistic framework, the symbolic system, cross back and forth into one another, and, together, form a whole.

To sustain the above example, when an individual enters a place of business, perhaps for his or her first job, he or she must learn the rules, both implicit and explicit, that govern the interaction of the employees with customers, each other, and with the hierarchy of managers, from assistant, to mid-level, to upper management, etc., including what, how, and with what tone, can be said to others, both individually and in group meetings. Here the individual meets a specific social institution that must be grasped (sometimes without fully understanding the whole), inculcated, and used to guide his or her own behavior, as well as his or her attempts to introduce change. The individual and the social institutions cross into one another. The individual lives in and absorbs various social institutions, primarily expressed in language, makes them his or her own, and uses them to regulate his or her behavior, sometimes changing them, sometimes not, and this is how we should attempt to understand a society and even a society’s movement through history.

As already mentioned, these symbolic systems are variable and must not be understood as fixed, formal essences. They are systems in the making, for they are able to absorb new information or local changes by bringing about structural changes within the system as a whole. Furthermore, we must think of society as both a structural whole and that this structure can behave differently at different times and in different circumstances. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “society is itself a structure of structures: how could there be absolutely no relation between the linguistic system, the economic system, and the kinship it employs? But this relationship is subtle and variable. Sometimes it is a homology. At others times (as in the case of myth and ritual) one structure is the counterpart and antagonist of the other” (Signs 118). This means that social researchers must grasp what is appropriate in a particular time and for a particular place, and it also means that it is local problems that tend to generate certain mythical structures. Different peoples in different parts of the world have created similar myths, not because of some universal archetype innate
in the human mind or present in some (inscrutable) field of ideal forms, but because a particular structure happens to help solve local problems. Merleau-Ponty does not deny that universals exist, but, as we have seen, he does question how they exist. Again, as we have seen, he does not accept that they are immutable essences. He does accept that general structures can be generated from the similarities of societies, or, rather, from the similar experiences that people live through even in different societies. He turns to the study of kinship as an example.

“The search for the elementary in kinship systems is going to be directed through the variety of customs toward a structural schema they can be considered variants of. From the moment that consanguinity excludes union---that the man gives up taking a wife in his biological family or his group and must go outside to form a union which requires, for reason of equilibrium, an immediate or mediate counterpart---a phenomenon of exchange begins which may be complicated indefinitely when direct reciprocity gives way to a general form of exchange. Thus models must be constructed that bring out the different possible combinations and internal arrangements of different types of preferential marriage and different kinship systems. Our ordinary mental equipment is inadequate to reveal these extremely complex multidimensional structures; and perhaps we shall have recourse to a quasi-mathematical form of expression which we shall all the more be able to make use of now that mathematics is no longer limited to quantitative relationships and what is measurable. One can even dream of a periodic table of kinship structures comparable to Mendeleev's periodic table of chemical elements.” (Signs 118)

Thus we can generate a universal to help us understand kinship and other social relationships in different societies, and, even though Merleau-Ponty references Mendeleev’s periodic table of chemical elements, frequently thought of as precise and immutable, the universal that Merleau-Ponty speaks of is imprecise and changeable. Furthermore, and as we have already seen, Merleau-Ponty insists that these “formal structures” must have a lived component, for they are enacted by the living subjects of particular societies. In fact, he says, “this process of joining objective analysis and lived experience is perhaps the most proper task of anthropology” (Signs 119). The formal structures help make sense of the lived through experiences, and yet the formal structures must be understood as being generated from the lived through experiences themselves. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty continues, the social whole is lived by individuals as a synthesized system, for the individual’s experience is itself an intersection of all the aspects of a society. This, of course, means that “we can gain some knowledge from this synthesis which is ourselves” (Signs 119). We live the various aspects of the system as “unified” subjects; we live the social whole; we are it, and therefore have access to it from within it. Merleau-Ponty continues.

“Furthermore, the equipment of our social being can be dismantled and reconstructed by the voyage, as we are able to learn to speak other languages. This provides a second way to the universal: no longer the overarching universal of a strictly objective method, but a sort of lateral universal which we acquire through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self. It is a question of constructing a system of general reference in which the point of view of the indigenous, the civilized, and the mistaken views each has of the other can all find a place---that is, the constructing of a more comprehensive experience which becomes in principle accessible to men of a different time and country.” (Signs 120)
Here we see that even though Merleau-Ponty rejects much of what he finds in modernism, with its rational essences and one rational world, he does not deny the effort to discover rational explanations of our world and of the many societies and cultures within it. Yet the reason that Merleau-Ponty embraces is one that is based on our perceptual encounter with the world. Perception is structured and patterned, yet these patterns are neither logical nor based on the mere association of isolated sense data. They are gestalt patterns, meaningful structures, meaningful wholes. This is a decidedly existential, phenomenological notion of rationality, one based, in Merleau-Ponty’s case, on the human body’s lived through encounter with the world, one that reveals meaningful perceptual patterns, one that seeks an agreement of perceptual profiles, of mine as I actively open upon the world and of mine with those of other people as we actively open upon the world together. This means that rationality is not merely formal and is not to be confused with empty universal form. It is perceptual, with relatively clear foregrounds and implied and open-ended backgrounds, and it is lateral, with the overlapping of experiences that are never completely identical. When discussing the experiences of an individual, Merleau-Ponty stresses that there are similarities and differences, an overlapping that is never complete. When discussing experiences shared by different individuals, he stresses that there are similarities and differences, overlapping experiences that never reach complete identity. Yet especially when considering the similarities and differences between cultures, Merleau-Ponty stresses that “at the point where the two cultures cross, truth and error dwell together, either because our own training hides what there is to know from us, or on the contrary because it becomes, in our life in the field, a means of incorporating other people’s differences” (Signs 120).

Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s lateral universal embraces both similarity and difference in experience, like overlapping Venn circles can reveal what is common and what is different. As I look at the Rodin sculpture before me, I realize that the person across from me in the museum space sees the same object but from a different angle. We open upon the same world but from different perspectives. I realize that we open upon the same field, that our experiences overlap because our bodily experiences open upon the same object, but also that I will never literally be able to experience what the other experiences because these experiences are lived and individuated in our respective bodies. There is a realization that some of our experiences are the same, but also that there are differences. This is also true of our encounter with other cultures. I can experience other cultures as a variation of my own, and yet can also experience my own as a variation of the others, with the anthropologist hopefully being able to construct a way for us to see all as various human ways of bodily being in the world. In doing so the anthropologist should take care not to takes side, not to reduce one culture to another, and take care to attempt to find an intelligible framework that helps us make sense of all, at least laterally. Moreover, it is by focusing on language that the anthropologist is able to do this, for, as we have seen, language helps us bring the subject and object together and to thus understand all societies as their coming together in variable ways. In addition, language acts as the vehicle for both
reason and unreason, and does so simultaneously. Just as perception presents a stable foreground in the context of an imprecise background or horizon, so also language articulates stable meanings in the context of an imprecise linguistic and cultural horizon. The precise and rational always occurs in the context of the open and implied, and we should attempt to understand this relationship. We should attempt to understand that our precise and rational explanations arise in an implied and imprecise context, in a context that helps give the rational its meaning (Signs 122). Furthermore, sometimes social structures are rigid and inflexible, allowing little or no variation in individual behavior, while at other times they are flexible and permit great freedom of individual behavior.

“At the level of elementary structures, the laws of exchange, which completely envelop behavior, are susceptible to static study; and man, without even formulating them in an indigenous theory, obey them almost like the atom observed the law distribution that defines it. At the other end of the field of anthropology, in certain complex systems, structures explode and, with regard to determining the spouse, become open to “historical” motivations. Here, the exchange, the symbolic function, and society no longer work as a second nature as imperious as the other and effaces it. Everyone is invited to set their own exchange system; in this way, the boundaries between cultures is cleared, and for the first time, no doubt, a world civilization becomes the order of the day.” (Signs 124)

Here again we must understand the individual subject in relation to his or her social surroundings, to the social structures that the individual helps form. Yet, we also see this relationship is variable, for it is sometimes rigid and sometimes allows great variation. What is especially important, though, is the crisscrossing relationship between the individual and social structures, for it is this crisscrossing that allows us to understand the human meaning of a society. It is worthwhile to consider what is perhaps Merleau-Ponty’s clearest statement of this crisscrossing between the individual and social institutions, specifically to the institution of language.

“The theory of signs, as developed in linguistics, perhaps implies a conception of historical meaning which gets beyond the opposition of things versus consciousness. Living language is precisely that togetherness of thinking and thing which causes the difficulty. In the act of speaking, the subject, in his tone and in his style, bears witness to his autonomy, since nothing is more proper to him, and yet at the same moment, and without contradiction, he is turned towards the linguistic community and is dependent on his language. The will to speak is one and the same as the will to be understood. The presence of the individual in the institution, and of the institution in the individual is evident in the case of linguistic exchange.” 142

It is clear here that Merleau-Ponty seeks to surpass the thing/consciousness dichotomy that is so ingrained in the modernist approach and modernist scholarship, which frequently attempts to understand human societies using typically objective methods. Since human societies have a human dimension, we must understand how the objective and subjective cross into one another. We must attempt to understand the presence of social institutions in the individual, as well as the individual in the institutions. We have seen above some of Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to articulate and grasp this crisscrossing relationship, particularly with respect to the relationship between the subject and the social institution of language, and below we see
him state the need to understand the relationship between the subject and social institutions broader than language, even though symbolic systems are an essential part of them.

“The reciprocal relations between the will to express and the means of expression correspond to those between the productive forces and the forms of production, and more generally, between historical forces and institutions. Just as language is a system of signs which have meaning only in relation to one another, and each of which has its own usage throughout the whole language, so each institution is a symbolic system that the subject takes over and incorporates as a style of functioning, as a global configuration, without having the need to conceive it all. When equilibrium is destroyed, the reorganizations which take place comprise, like those of language, an internal logic even though it may not be clearly thought out by anyone. They are polarized by the fact that, as participants in a system of symbols, we exist in the eyes of another, with one another, in such a way that changes in language are due to our will to speak and to be understood. The system of symbols affects the molecular changes which occur where a meaning develops, a meaning which is neither a thing nor an idea, despite the famous dichotomy, because it a modulation of our coexistence.” (IPP 55-56)

This statement, that attempts to sketch how we are to understand human beings in relationship to human societies, how we are to even understand the movement of human history, by overcoming the dichotomy between the subject and object, by weaving them together, is a profound improvement over the modernist approach that merely operates within the dichotomy. And it is so because it makes more sense, because it clarifies more than it obfuscates. It does so because it refuses to treat and study social relationships as mere things, or treat and study the lives of human subjects merely as epiphenomena, or, on the other hand, treat and study human subjects as individual rational interiors who can dominate the world.

We have witnessed above that Merleau-Ponty clearly seeks to go beyond modernism, and seeks to do so in a variety of ways, by overcoming subject/object dualism, by focusing on structures whose parts are defined by their relationship to the whole, rather than on discrete units of that are merely associated, and by focusing on systems of symbols to grasp the crisscrossing and coming together of the subject and object. Yet, even with his focus on linguistic structures as symbolic wholes that are constantly undergoing change, something also claimed by many postmodernists, his position is decidedly different from theirs. This difference can be most clearly understood by considering the respective significance that is given to the subject’s lived through perceptual experience, with Merleau-Ponty assigning more and postmodernists assigning less. Let us look more closely at the relationship between the subject and social/linguistic institutions, at the difference between Merleau-Ponty and postmodernism, and, especially, how the subject is to be most sensibly re-conceived in the 21st Century.

The modern subject and postmodern subject

We should begin with a brief characterization of the modernist subject and set the postmodernist subject in relief against it. The modern notion of the subject has its roots in Descartes. The modern subject is accessed via self-reflection; the modern subject is internal, self-contained, independent, rational, a singular and immutable substance. Furthermore, the modern subject is the center of activity, as a causal
agent. In addition to helping us define the modern subject, Pauline Rosenau informs us that postmodernists seek to downplay the role of this subject “as a focus for analysis as the ‘preconstituted centre of the experience of culture and history’ (Giddens 1984: 2).” She also points out that the more extreme postmodernists, referred to as “skeptical postmodernists,” question the veracity of the isolated, rational subject of modernism, and, in addition, “question the value of a unified, coherent subject such as a human being, a person, as a concrete reference point or equivalent character (Baudrillard 1983a: 167; Booth 1985; Derrida 1978; Foucault 1970: 261--62; Wellmer 1985: 436-49). The subject, they contend, is fictitious, in the extreme a mere construction (Edelman 1988: 9) . . .” (PSS 42). With Nietzsche, the postmodernists challenge the modernist subject as “fixed, substantial, selfhood,” and some regard, as did Nietzsche, the subject as “lacking in consciousness, willful, vengeful, and power seeking (Nietzsche 1979: 79-97)” (PSS 44.)

Thus, postmodernism jettisons the subject as the center of activity. The self-contained, independent, rational subject of modernism and humanism is challenged and rejected. Generally, postmodernists argue that the subject is a part of a larger social/linguistic structure and that the individual’s intentions mean little or nothing when it comes to bringing about social change. Yet, somewhat inconsistently, postmodernists still maintain the importance of the individual, as long as this “does not imply that people are free, conscious, self-determining human beings.” Postmodernists thus seek to retain the individual, yet one that is nearly anonymous, one that is merely a placeholder in the social system, one that merely plays a specific role as they are defined by the social system. As Rosenau points out postmodernists seek to replace the modern subject, yet, as she also points out, “inventing the post-modern individual will not be easy,” given the need to maintain the aware individual and the individual’s perspective, while, at the same time, rejecting the humanist, modernist subject (PSS 53).

Rosenau also draws our attention to a work by Ferry and Renaut, specifically to their characterization of the postmodern subject (PSS 53). This is what Ferry and Renaut have to say. 1.) After Heidegger, the subject must not be characterized as internally independent and in rational control, but as ek-stase, as a leaping out of itself toward a preexisting world that the subject should “let be.” 2.) After Deleuze and Guattari, the subject should not be characterized as rational and integrated but as a spontaneous and disorganized “desiring machine.” And 3.), after Lipovetsky, the postmodern subject must be regarded as merely a patchwork of fragmented experiences. Lipovetsky puts it this way. The individual must now be seen as random, detached, adjusting freely to new systems, with little sense of personal identity, with little sense of a stable, unified personality. “The individual,” Lipovetsky says, “is breaking up into a heteroclitic patchwork, into a polymorphic combination, the very image of postmodernism”---ultimately leading to “the disparate fragmentation of the self, the emergence of an individual obeying multiple logics in the manner
of the compartmentalized juxtapositions of pop artists or the flat and chancy combinations of [the artist Valerio] Adami.\textsuperscript{145}

**Merleau-Ponty’s response to the modern subject:** It will be helpful to take up Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of the modern subject by turning to his criticism of Husserl, who largely remains in the modernist tradition. As we have seen above, Husserl maintained that there were two modes of temporal intentionality, a horizontal mode, with overlapping moments of the past and future shading out from an almost indistinguishable present, and a transverse mode, which recognizes the horizontal mode but pulls these overlapping moments together in order to posit a singular transcendent object. Thus the second mode is reflective and cognitive, and, for Husserl, requires a transcendental awareness, the awareness of a transcendental ego which is needed to synthesize the lived through moments of experience. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that Husserl’s mistake was to describe the spread and synthesis of time from the point of view of transcendent immanence, from the point of view of a reflective and cognitive consciousness that appears to place itself outside of the flow of time because of the need to synthesize it. We have also seen that he argues that the synthesis of the different moments of experience comes from flow experience itself as these moments open upon a stable world and overlap with each in the field of the world. This renders the modernist, Cartesian, Husserlian subject superfluous. There is no need for a transcendental ego to synthesize the moments of time, for the synthesis occurs as the subject opens upon the stable temporal field of the world, as the moments of this field overlap and flow into one another. There is no need for a transcendental ego, but because the moments of time flow into one another from the present out toward the past and future, because they continuously overlap and flow into one another, the subject of experience is able to form a stable sense of self (an existential ego) over or through time. There is no internal, reflectively given, rational, transcendental subject that is independent of the world. Yet, a stable sense of self is possible because there is a continuity of experience through time.

**Merleau-Ponty’s response to postmodernism and the postmodern subject:** It is appropriate here to briefly compare the works of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, especially regarding their respective views of temporality, for this comparison will reveal how Merleau-Ponty’s position is similar to that of a leading postmodernist, but is also different.

For Derrida “\textit{diff\`erance}” is the productive play of signs, the productive play of linguistic meaning. \textit{Diff\`erance} means to both defer and to differ.\textsuperscript{146} “The circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself” (“Diff\`erance” 9) and does \textit{so ad infinitum}. Thus the reference to a thing or a concept or a meaning, is never fully accomplished. The meaning (or thing or concept) is never fully present. There are always implied elements that escape representation. The production of signs always implies this differed meaning, and it also implies a difference of meaning. As Derrida puts it, “each so- called ‘present’ element . . . is related to something other than itself,” to a past and a future.
[This means that the present is constituted by] “what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or future as a modified present . . . An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present . . . In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called spacing, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space (temporalization). And it is the constitution of the present, as an ‘originary’ and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, stricto sensu nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions . . . that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-time, or différance.” (“Différance” 13, my bracket addition)

Thus, we have a constituting of the present that is a dividing. We have a synthesis that is also a dividing. The present bleeds out away from itself (the dividing) into the past and toward the future, yet this bleeding is also a blending (a synthesis) of the past and future with the present. Yet, for Derrida, the synthesis is so fleeting that it is clearly the dividing that he emphasizes. Again, it is différance, as a constant deferring and differing, that is emphasized, and we also see here that Derrida even seems to equate archi-writing and différance with archi-time. Yet, before critically considering these passages, let us briefly consider a few more of Derrida’s pronouncements.

“The sign is usually said to be put in place of the thing itself, the present thing, ‘thing’ here standing equally for meaning or referent.” 147

“Presence, then, far from being, as is commonly thought, what the sign signifies, what the trace refers to, presence, then, is the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace.” 148

“The trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site--erasure belongs to its structure.” 149

“What the trace1 refers to, presence, then is the trace1 of the trace2, the trace1 of the erasure of the trace2.” 150

Trace1 above represents language and refers to trace2, which represents perception, which, according to Derrida, erases itself because its present is only a constant referring (or deferring/differing) elsewhere.

It will be useful to compare Merleau-Ponty and Derrida by considering both in light of Gestalt psychology, in order to reveal their similarities and differences. As is well-known, Merleau-Ponty is deeply influenced by Gestalt psychology. He does not accept all its assertions but he does accept much of its characterization of perception, specifically that the simplest perception is a figure on a ground. Moreover, this perceptual structure is a meaningful whole, and not a mere sum of discrete units or merely an exemplification of abstract forms. Again, the gestalt structure is a meaningful whole that is greater than the mere sum of its parts. The parts (which do contribute to the meaning) also take on meaning because of their relationship to the whole. This is relatively easy to observe when considering the meaning of the spatial structure of perception, the perception of the famous vase that can also appear as two faces in profile, for example. Here the meaning of the parts is clearly related to the whole, with the vase and faces trading places.
as foreground and background. Yet, this whole/part structure is also observable in temporal perception as well. The foreground, the present, appears in the context of a temporal background, with the moments of experience, past, present, and future, overlapping. The foreground present moment is meaningfully connected to the past and future as the present slides through time. Thus the temporal present occurs in the context of absence, in the context of the past and future that appear as background elements. And, of course, we have seen Derrida make very similar claims just above.

It appears then that for both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida that presence occurs in the context of absence. Yet, there is a difference between them. For both, presence occurs in a horizon, but for Merleau-Ponty this figure/ground structure is more stable than it is for Derrida. Moreover, it is more stable for Merleau-Ponty because the structure of perception opens upon a relatively stable world, the spatial/temporal moments of perceptual experience hold together because they open upon a stable world. For Derrida, the moments of temporal/linguistic experience are so radically deferring and differing, undoubtedly because différance is so unencumbered by the world, that the present is reduced to a mere flash, with this flash referring elsewhere. M.C. Dillon stresses something close to this with his argument that Derrida appears to identify temporality with différance. Moreover, if he does make this identification, then he is perhaps reducing the structure of time in the free play of language—to a form of linguistic idealism. Dillon’s interpretation receives support from Derrida’s own pronouncement: “Now I don’t know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists. Perception is precisely a concept . . . And I believe that perception is interdependent with the concept of origin and center and consequently whatever strikes at the metaphysics of which I have spoken strikes also at the very concept of perception. I don't believe that there is any perception.” As we have seen above, Derrida also speaks of the trace of language erasing the trace of perception, again confirming the unencumbered and free play of language. Now he does seem to admit that the trace1 that erases its connection to trace2 also maintains some connection to that which it erases, for otherwise there would be no spacing, for spacing implies a relationship between terms. In addition, the synthesis of which Derrida speaks likewise implies different terms that are pulled and held together. Yet Derrida clearly emphasizes the erasure over connection, and, in doing so, he clearly seems to forget the latter. Yet, if he does this, if he does forget the holding together with his emphasis on différance, then he is left with almost nothing, with just instantaneous flashes of meaning.

It should also be mentioned here, when discussing différance, that Derrida makes reference to Heidegger’s ontological difference, the difference between a thing and its being.

“And thereby one puts into question the authority of presence, or of its symmetrical opposite, absence or lack. Thus one questions the limits which has always constrained—as inhabitants of a language and a system of thought—to formulate the meaning of Being in general as presence or absence, in the categories of being or beingness (ousia). Already it appears that the type of question to which we are redirected is, let us say, the Heideggerian type, and that différance seems to lead back to the ontico-ontological difference.”

("Différence,” 10)
Surely influenced by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible* speaks of the visible in the context of the invisible, in the context of the implied horizon of perceptual experience. As we have seen above, for Merleau-Ponty the invisible, the implied, the opening out toward a horizon that runs beyond us, the more general sense of Being rather than simply the sense of a particular being, remains connected to, and must remain connected to, the more articulated foreground. While both Heidegger and Derrida move more toward the invisible, toward the horizon, toward Being. Yet this “freeing” of Being has a price: Being is seemingly no longer connected to concrete objects of being. Merleau-Ponty philosophy does not do this. Using his typically balanced approach, and to use a metaphor that he uses in another context, he holds on to both ends of the chain, to both the ontic and the ontological, to both being and Being, to both science and philosophy. He recognizes the horizon, the openness of experience, Being, but he refuses the flight into mysticism, the flight into a background without a foreground, into the ontological without an ontic. Moreover, if Heidegger opts for mysticism, which he undoubtedly does, Derrida goes even further, for he accuses Heidegger of remaining within a metaphysics of presence. Derrida embraces the opening out, the ontological, the horizon, with a vengeance, for he prioritizes *différance*, that is, deferring and differing, to the point where *what* defers and differs disappears. Again, for Derrida erasure is prioritized over connection. Perception erases more than it connects, and language erases, rather than connects with or sublimates, its origins in perception. Merleau-Ponty’s view remains more balanced, for presence occurs in the context of absence, with, of course, absence occurring in the context of some presence. For Merleau-Ponty, language is a sublimation of our embodied perceptual openness upon the world. This sublimated language can be creative, but it cannot completely break with our embodied perceptual bonds with the world without rendering itself ineffective or even meaningless. Perception and language cross back and forth into one another and help define each other, with perception remaining the primary term, with language never completely severed from our embodied perceptual bond with the world.

Let us return to the characterization of the postmodern subject provided by Ferry and Renaut above, now with a response based on Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

1.) Response to Heidegger: Merleau-Ponty agrees with Heidegger’s characterization of the subject as *ek-stase*, as a leaping out of itself. Yet, as already indicated there are differences between the two authors. For Merleau-Ponty the embodied subject opens out upon an already existing world, but with the internal and external crossing back and forth into one another. Both the embodied subject and the world must be taken into account, yet, granted, with the world taken as the more primary term. Heidegger, on the other hand, seems to leave the subject behind with his *ek-stace*, with the opening upon a clearing within Being. Again, for Merleau-Ponty the sense of self begins to form where the internal and external cross back and forth into one another, where one’s internal lived through experience meets the forceful patterns of the
world and the points of view that others reflect back to oneself. Moreover, as we have seen, there is a synthesis of experience over or through time, with no transcendental ego needed here, as Husserl maintains. The moments of my experience are able to overlap (with a similarity of meaning) and hold together because experience opens upon a stable world. Since experience does not occur just anywhere, since it occurs in one place, in my body, since the moments of experience are synthesized there, since I am aware of these experiences and aware of them as mine, and since I am aware that others perceive me/my body from the outside, I am able to form an at least somewhat stable sense of continuity and unity of experience through time, i.e., a somewhat stable sense of self identity. Also, since I can get a sense of my own “power” (i.e., a sense of what I can achieve or accomplish) from my attempts to “transform” nature (usually with others), I am able to get a sense of myself (along with others) as an agent (or agents) of change. Thus, against the general thrust of postmodernist thought, at least that of the skeptical postmodernists, Merleau-Ponty reveals a stable sense of self that can perform as an effective agent, yet he does so without falling back into modernism.

2.) Contra-Deleuze: David Michael Levin makes the reasonable case that there is a common misconception of the human body in the Western tradition. “According to this conception, the body is a chaos of drives: turbulent, frenzied, and without any internal principle of organization . . . And it is this body . . . that Freud wanted to repress, to tame and civilize, and that others, from Nietzsche through Deleuze and Garrity, have wanted to encourage,” have wanted to liberate for the purpose of social transformation.156 Merleau-Ponty treats the human body differently, Levin proceeds to point out. For Merleau-Ponty the body is able to sensuously couple with the world. The body fulfills itself in the world and in others, and vice versa. His concern is certainly not to repress the body’s sensuality or to completely “liberate” it. He seeks to find the body’s most balanced coupling with the world. For it is in this balanced coupling that each is most fulfilled in the other.

Since the human body is not a mechanical thing but a lived through and active whole, since the hand is able to feel the sleek and the rough of a surface by its lived through movements, the touching and the touched cross into one another, help articulate one another, and thus help fulfill one another. In addition, since experience is carried into the world by the anonymous structures of the body, the lived through articulations that are expressed by one individual can pass into the lived through articulations experienced by others. Thus, in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, truth and values have their source in the body’s lived through encounter with the world and others. Lived through experience is sublimated in the more abstract expressions of speech, which folds back on the lived experience in order to express it more precisely. No single expression is the correct expression, and different expressions are always possible, yet some tend to be better than others because they are more clarifying. Likewise, no single expression of a moral principle is inexhaustible.157 More can always be said and said in different ways, but some moral articulations tend
to be better than others because they are more clarifying, because they express the sentiments of all participants more clearly than others. Here again, certain sentiments are sublimated in expressions, which in turn fold back upon these lived through experiences in order to express them more precisely. Different expressions remain possible but some seem more clarifying than others. Thus, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, truth and values are to be rooted in the body’s lived through encounter with the world and others. Moreover, if this is the case than we should listen to all experiences, to all voices, to establish both the truth and what is morally acceptable.158

3.) Contra Lipovetsky: The fragmentation of experience is certainly possible, and Merleau-Ponty writes extensively about these experiences, for they help set in relief the normal functioning of the human body and mind and help define norms of human experience. Often, what is characterized as abnormal is brought about by brain damage due to traumatic injury, or a stroke, or by the wide range of diseases that afflict the human condition. It is doubtful that healthy human beings (even if alienated) experience the kind of fragmentation characterized by Lipovetsky above, especially regarding the reference to Adami paintings. This is not to deny the “figurative” meaning of artistic representations, that they represent an exaggerated portrayal of alienation, for example. It does deny that “normal” perception appears like an Adami painting, as Lipovetsky suggests. True, we perceive perceptual patterns that can be and often are open and ambiguous, that are not strictly guided logical forms or abstract geometrical figures. Yet perceptual patterns are meaningful and frequently form regular and stable patterns. They are not splintered chaos.159 Moreover, the negative characteristics mentioned above by Nietzsche (individuals are “lacking in consciousness, willful, vengeful, and power seeking”) are surely part of the human experience but just as surely do not encompass all of it. Even a quick empirical view, especially a cross-cultural one, reveals the opposite human traits as well: increased self-awareness (through education and maturation), cooperation, forgiveness, a willingness to collaborate and share control, etc.

Now, the modern human “agent” is defined as an independent subject capable of effecting change in his or her environment. We have seen that structuralism and postmodernism challenge this view of the agent and argue that the subject is primarily a product of social structures with very little ability to effect social change. Merleau-Ponty’s view comes between these two more extreme positions. Since the subject is embodied and as such is a part of the world, the subject must be influenced by his or her surroundings. Yet, since the embodied subject is aware of and synthesizes the experiences of his or her surroundings, the subject is not just a blind result. The subject actively takes up events and helps give them the meaning they have. This, in itself, indicates a degree of freedom for the subject, given his or her power to interrupt and interpret. Yet, Merleau-Ponty also argues that the subject has the power to move these conditions in a different direction.160 Like being in a boat in a flowing stream or river, I cannot lift the boat or my life out of the currents that influence it, but I can steer the boat or my life in different directions as I am pushed
along by the stream or the forces of history. Politically speaking, Merleau-Ponty certainly calls into question the modernist idea of the isolated “rational man” who nevertheless meets with others to rationally decide what is just for all. He rightfully suggests that this does not exist anywhere and never did. Yet, he does believe that we are necessarily in the world with others, and that given the human propensity to have at least some regard for the view that the other has of us, we have at least some basis for continued discussion about the move toward a society that is fair for all, one that is brought about by aware individuals actively attempting to make a difference.

As a “pluralist,” Merleau-Ponty recognizes different perspectives on events, and as such, the best we can hope for is not a universal view that is exactly and formally the same for all (that modernists claim), but for what he refers to as a lateral universal, one based on the similarity of human experiences because of the similarity of human bodies. We experience the world in similar, not identical, ways. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the body’s access to the world thus opened the way to what is now called multiculturalism, or what is referred to politically as “identity politics,” with members of a particular group sharing a particular viewpoint that may be different from other groups or even the mainstream culture. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy recognizes and respects this sort of pluralism (also recognized by postmodernists) but also maintains some hope for some common understanding among individual groups (typically not recognized by skeptical postmodernists), again referred to as a hoped for lateral universal, with individuals and groups sharing some truths but also maintaining some uniqueness and individuality. In political language, we must try to find some principles that are universal, i.e., that are fair to all, that all can agree to, and then live with our differences.161

Overall, then, Merleau-Ponty develops a subject that is midway between the subject of modernism and postmodernism. Merleau-Ponty certainly rejects (as do postmodernists) the modernist idea of the subject as detached and self-contained. He stresses (as do postmodernists) that the subject is a part of a greater set of social systems, including language. Yet he clearly disagrees with the postmodernist claim that these structures (more or less completely) determine the subject. Merleau-Ponty’s subject is an aware subject that opens upon the world and is formed in relationships to it and to the subject’s social surroundings. Yet, this subject is able to meaningfully take up these surroundings, with greater and lesser awareness, and attempt move them in different directions. In addition, there is a continuity of the subject’s experience overtime because the subject’s embodied experience necessarily opens upon a stable world, where the moments of experience overlap and cross into one another, something not accepted by skeptical postmodernists. It is this continuity of experience that allows the subject to develop a stable sense of self over time. It is this stable sense of self that meets the world with some sense of awareness and perspective. It is this stable sense of self that can attempt to bring about change.
As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy comes between subjectivism and objectivism. Again, we must begin with lived-through embodied experience, with an embodied experience that opens upon and crosses into the natural and social world. Both the subject’s lived through experience and the stable patterns of the natural and social world must be taken into account. Or more precisely, it is at the intersection of the subject’s experience and the forceful pattern of the natural world, as well as with the relatively stable structures of the social institutions, that meaning is formed. This intersection, this crossing into one another of the subject’s experience and the structures of the world and society is what social scientists and philosophers should attempt to grasp. Meaning does not spring full blown from the minds of isolated rational individuals. Nor is it simply the passive result of an objective structure. Nor is it merely constructed by the free play of language. It is the result of the coming together of the embodied subject and the stable (and yet also shifting) structures of the natural and social world.

All citations of Merleau-Ponty’s texts will refer to their English translations.

**Introduction**


**Chapter 1 Mind-Body Problem**


5 See Chapter 2 below.

7 Merleau-Ponty states: “it is true to say that my perception is always a flux of individual events” as well as that these events are given perspectively. “But it is also true to say that my perception accedes to things themselves, for these perspectives are articulated in a way which makes access to inter-individual significations possible; they ‘present’ a world.” (SB 219)

8 That is to say, perceptual form or structure is based in our concrete, embodied perceptual encounter with a really existing patterned world (with a world that is experienced as existing on its own) and is meaningful (and is thus not just a thing), yet this meaning is not yet the meaning or signification of an abstract idea, even though it is the basis for more abstract ideas (including the abstract, “objective” ideas of science). Perceptual experience (or the perceptual experience of the lived-through body as it bonds with its immediate surroundings in the world) thus bears within itself the duality of structure and meaning, of the objective and the subjective, of body and mind. Again, we see this duality in the structure/meaning of that which is perceived, and we will later see it in the fact that the body can perceive itself perceiving, can perceive the human body as a thing that perceives.

9 Again, “it is true to say that my perception is always a flux of individual events and that what is radically contingent in the lived perspectivism of perception accounts for the realistic appearance. But it is also true to say that my perception accedes to things themselves, for these perspectives are articulated in a way which makes access to inter-individual significations possible; they ‘present’ a world.” SB 219

10 See Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Helmholtz’s experiment, SB 77, and also his discussion of the color perception of a gray ring on a red and green background, SB 83.


12 Here, again, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, we see Merleau-Ponty framing the mind-body relationship as a relationship between the experiencing subject and a horizon that runs beyond the subject but with which the subject always remains in contact.

13 “For what precisely is meant by saying that the world existed before any human consciousness? An example of what is meant is that the earth originally issued from a primitive nebula from which the combination of conditions necessary to life was absent. But every one of these words, like every equation in physics, presupposes our pre-scientific experience of the world, and this reference to the world in which we live goes to make up the proposition's valid meaning. Nothing will ever bring home to my comprehension what a nebula that no one sees could possibly be. Laplace's nebula is not behind us, at our remote beginnings, but in front of us in the cultural world. What, in fact, do we mean when we say that there is no world without a being in the world? Not indeed that the world is constituted by consciousness, but on the contrary that consciousness always finds itself already at work in the world.” (PhP 432)

14 “The cube with six equal sides is the limiting idea whereby I express the material presence of the cube which is there before my eyes, under my hands, in its perceptual self-evidence. The sides of the cube are not projections of it, but precisely sides. When I perceive them successively, with the appearance they present in different perspectives, I do not construct the idea of the geometrized projection which accounts for these perspectives: the cube is already there in front of me and reveals itself through them…The thing, and the world, are given to me along with the parts of my body, not by any ‘natural geometry’, but in a living connection comparable, or rather identical, with that existing between the parts of my body itself.” (PhP 204-205)
As we have seen, and now further confirmed, we cannot meaningfully speak about the objective body being the cause of what appears in the mind, for we cannot meaningfully speak about the object in-itself, since it is necessarily given through our embodied perceptions. Moreover, we cannot meaningfully speak about the objective body being the cause of what appears in the mind because perceptual consciousness cannot be understood as simply a result of discrete external events. Perception reveals a meaningful figure/ground structure, with a whole that is greater than a mere sum of its discrete parts. Active bodily perception is a meaningful orientation toward the world. It is neither a passive thing nor a mere collection of bits of data or discrete events.


We should notice here the continuity of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, for we can now observe that he prefigures the chiasm relationship between body and world expressed in *The Visible and the Invisible in Phenomenology of Perception*. “My gaze ‘knows’ the significance of a certain patch of light in a certain context; it understands the logic of lighting. Expressed in more general terms, there is a logic of the world to which my body in its entirety conforms . . . ” (PhP 326). Yet the world still runs beyond the perceiver. “Although a part of our living experience, it [the thing] is nevertheless transcendent in relation to our life because the human body...has running through it a movement towards the world itself” (PhP 326-327, my bracket addition).

Offering a specific example of “unity” of the human body as subject and human body as object, Merleau-Ponty mentions tactile experience and how the hand seems to know the movement required to feel the smoothness or roughness of a surface. Moving the hand too fast or too slowly or pressing on the surface to firmly or weakly will not work, and it is only if the hand and the surface it touches seem to cooperate that the property of the surface appears. This experience can take place only if the body is a two-dimension being, as has been described above. The body touches because as an embodied being it is capable of being touched from the outside. The body touches only because it is an embodied being immersed in a field of other embodied beings. (see above and VI 133)

See Martin Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Dillon was one of the first scholars to highlight the significance of the crisscrossing of relationship between the perceiving body and the world, with the world remaining the primary term (see Chapter 9, “The Reversibility Thesis”, 153-176) and the fundierung relationship between perception and language, with perception remaining the primary term (see Chapter 10, “Language: Foundation and Truth”, 177-223). Dillon’s work has had a significant impact on what I present here.


Here is their abstract: “Certain simple visual displays consisting of moving 2-D geometric shapes can give rise to percepts with high-level properties such as causality and animacy. This article reviews recent research on such phenomena, which began with the classic work of Michotte and of Heider and Simmel. The importance of such phenomena stems in part from the fact that these interpretations seem to be largely perceptual in nature – to be fairly fast, automatic, irresistible and highly stimulus driven – despite the fact that they involve impressions typically associated with higher-level cognitive processing. This research suggests that just as the visual system works to recover the physical structure of the world by inferring properties such as 3-D shape, so too does it work to recover the causal and social structure of the world by inferring properties such as causality and animacy.”

See also “Heider and Simmel (1944) animation” Online:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTNml7QX8E

22 The editor of The Visible and the Invisible provides the following Heidegger reference: Unterwegs zur Sprache (Tübingen, 1959), 13. “Die Sprache ist: Sprache. Die Sprache spricht. Wenn wir uns in den Abgrund, den dieser Satz nennt, fallen lassen, stürzen wir nicht ins Leere weg. Wir fallen in die Höhe. Deren Hoheit öffnet eine Tiefe” (See VI 250, footnote 82). The following English translation is available, on the 3rd page, at http://teachlearn.pagesperso-orange.fr/Heidlang.pdf “Language is--language, speech. Language speaks. If we let ourselves fall into the abyss denoted by this sentence, we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height. Its loftiness opens up a depth.”

23 See http://cogweb.ucla.edu/Discourse/Narrative/michotte-demo.swf

24 See Merleau-Ponty, The Structure of Behavior, Chapter Three, The Physical Order; The Vital Order; The Human Order, with Section II of this chapter devoted to Structure in Physics, Section III to Vital Structure, and Section IV to the Human Order, pages 137-184. See also Merleau-Ponty, Nature, which follows the general structure of The Structure of Behavior sections just mentioned. The First Course of these published lecture notes deals with the Concept of Nature, pages 3-122, while the Second Course deals with the Concept of Nature, Animality, the Human Body, and the Passage to Culture, pages 123-200. The Third Course presuppose what has been established in the first two, pages 201-284.)


Chapter 2 Perception Language Relationship


35 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by the Working Notes*.


39 Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” in *Signs*. Referred to in the text as ILVS.


41 Merleau-Ponty even regards this “as a revision of Hegelianism, which is the discovery of phenomenology, of the living, real and organized relation between the elements of the world.”—a phenomenology that does not rationally construct the world but has brought it to a more articulate expression. (TFL 44-45). Thus, “language is borne by our relation to the world and to others, yet language in turn supports and creates it.” (TFL 117-118; I have made a minor alteration to this translation).


43 We have seen that when Merleau-Ponty discusses how a word gets its meaning he mentions two sources: our bodily, perceptual, emotional encounter with the world and by how a word is used in certain social situations. The latter bears some similarity to Wittgenstein’s “meaning as use” in the context of a “language game”, i.e., a word gets its meaning by how it is used in the context of a certain social situation. Some in both the Anglo-American and Continental philosophical traditions have argued that the meaning that a word takes on in the context of various social settings is arbitrary, and this of course means that there is no criterion for the correctness of a linguistic use or description. In other words, there is nothing outside the hermeneutic system, i.e., no transcendental signified, that can be used to judge the accuracy of the system. This is not the case within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, for the body’s perceptual encounter with the world provides a means to check the accuracy of linguistic use. See Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Saussure below.

44 In order to do this “we need only take language too in the living or nascent state, with all its references, those behind it, which connect it to the mute things it interpellates [or questions, or summons, or calls forth] . . . Language is a life, is our life and the life of the things. Not that language takes possession of life and reserves it for itself: what would there be to say if there existed nothing but things said? It is the error of the semantic philosophies to close up language as if it spoke only of itself: language lives only from silence; everything we cast to the others has germinated in this great mute land which we never leave. But, because he has experienced 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 lived-spoken, that, born at this depth, language is not a mask over Being, but . . . the most valuable witness to Being . . . that the vision itself, the thought itself, are, as has been said [by Jacques Lacan], ‘structured as a language,’ are articulation before the letter . . . But . . . if we consider the speaking word, the assuming of the conventions of his native language as something natural by him who lives within that language, the folding over within him of the visible and the lived experience upon language, and of language upon the visible and the lived experience, the exchanges between the articulations of his mute language and those of his speech, finally that operative language which has no need to be translated into significations and thoughts, that language . . . brings to the surface all the deep-rooted relations of the lived experience wherein it takes form, and which is the language of life and of action but also that of literature and of poetry—then this logos is an absolutely universal theme, it is the theme of philosophy. Philosophy itself is language, rests on language; but this does not disqualify it from speaking of language, nor from speaking of the pre-language and of the mute world which doubles them: on the contrary, philosophy is an operative language, that language that can be known only from within, through its exercise, is open upon the things, called forth by the voices of silence, and continues an effort of articulation which is the Being of every being.” (VI 125-127, my bracket additions)

45 See *The Visible and the Invisible*, 170-171 referencing *Phenomenology of Perception*, 400-409. See also *The Visible and the Invisible* 175-176.


Merleau-Ponty states the following in “Phenomenology and the Science of Man” with respect to Husserl. “One sees in Husserl the idea of a double envelopment. It is true that reflective thought, which determines the meaning or essence, ends by possessing its object and enveloping it. But it is also true that essential insight always understands the concrete perception of experience as something here and now which precedes and envelops it . . . [The essence] presupposes that an individual has appeared and that one has had a view of it. It also presupposes the Sichtlichkeit, the visibility of this individual. Or to put it in another way, it is no insight into essence if one’s reflection cannot turn to a corresponding individual, if one cannot work out ‘a sense of examples’ to illustrate this insight.” This idea of “double envelopment” is comparable to Merleau-Ponty’s use of Hegel’s claim that criteria measure experience but that experience also measures the criteria. According to the Lapointe bibliography (see endnote above) “Phenomenology and the Science of Man” was originally delivered as a lecture entitled Les Sciences de l’homme et la phénoménologie (cours de 1951-1952). Les Cours de Sorbonne. Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire. It was published in English in Primate of Perception, see page 68. My bracket addition.

See also Merleau-Ponty, Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language, trans. Hugh Silverman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). “La Conscience et l’acquisition du language,” Bulletin de psychologie, no. 236, XVIII 3-6 (1964), 226-159. See page 8 where Merleau-Ponty states that phenomenological description puts us in “contact with the facts, helps us understand them in themselves, by reading them, and then interpreting them so as to give them a meaning.” Moreover, he continues, “the criteria for this [phenomenological] method will not be a multiplicity of facts which will serve as proofs for predefined hypothesis. The proof will be in the fidelity to the phenomena, i.e., in the precise hold which we will have of the material used and, to some extent, our proximity to pure description.”

As we have just seen, perceptual meaning itself is indirect, with a somewhat stable foreground always connected to an implied background, to an open-ended horizon. Perception does reveal stable foregrounds and stable structures and even norms but it does not reveal discrete units of positivist meaning. It is language that helps express these meanings more precisely, but even here the words and significations of language are embedded in an open field of perceptual and linguistic significations, in a field of open ended perceptual and linguistic significations in relationships that continually cross into one another, with the perceptual structures and relations remaining the primary term. The silence that he seeks in mute perception is not contrary to language, he says, for language will always be involved in our efforts to bring perceptual meaning more fully to light, i.e., to expression.

Merleau-Ponty “Working Notes” state the following:

“There will therefore be a whole series of layers of wild being. It will be necessary to recommence the Einfühlung [sympathetic understanding], the Cogito several times.----
For example, at the level of the human body I will describe a pre-knowing; a pre-meaning, a silent knowing.
--sense of the perceived: ‘size’ before measurement, the physiognomic size of a rectangle, for example
--sense of the other perceived: Einigung [unification] of my perception of one same man by virtue of existentials which are not literally ‘perceived’ and yet operate in perceptions (Wolff)
--sense of ‘perceived life’ (Michotte): what makes an appearance animate itself and become ‘creeping’ etc.
But I will then have to disclose a non-explicated horizon: that of the language I am using to describe all that------And which co-determines its final meaning.” (VI 178, my bracket additions)

See also Phenomenology of Perception. “Every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality, and is presented to us anonymously. I cannot say ‘I see the blue of the sky’ in the sense in which I say I understood a book, or that I have decided to devote my life to mathematics…Every time I experience a
sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible, and for which I make decisions, but another self, which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects, and synchronized with them. Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some primordial acquisition which prevents my experience from being clear to itself” (PhP, 215–216).

52 Merleau-Ponty, “From Mauss to Levi-Strauss” in Signs, 114-125, see especially 115. My bracket addition.

Chapter 3 Relationship to Husserl’s Philosophy

53 I will focus on Merleau-Ponty’s later works: “On the Phenomenology of Language,” The Prose of the World, both originally composed in 1951, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” originally published in 1959, and “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,” a lecture course delivered 1960. Yet I will also consider his early The Structure of Behavior (La Structure du comportement, 1942) and his great middle work Phenomenology of Perception (Phénoménologie de la perception, 1945), as well as other writings scattered throughout the temporal arc of his career. Merleau-Ponty, throughout his academic career, is sympathetic to Husserl’s more existential tendencies and critical of his tendencies toward idealism and rationalism, especially the tendency to cognitively construct our experience of the world. Yet, it appears that Merleau-Ponty was especially enthusiastic about Husserl’s increased move toward existence in his later thought, which Merleau-Ponty dates as “from Ideen II on,” including “Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem,” in Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie and “Umsatz der korremanentischen Lehre.” Thus (because of this enthusiasm) the focus in the present manuscript on what Merleau-Ponty regards as Husserl’s later works. Moreover, and even though aware of Husserl’s later manuscripts as early as 1939, it is in Merleau-Ponty’s own later works (especially 1959-1960, but as early as 1951) that he seems increasingly inspired by Husserl’s late turn towards existence, undoubtedly because his own works had been increasingly inclined in this direction as well. For text citations see endnotes 63 and 78 below and the bibliography. For Merleau-Ponty’s enthusiasm regarding Ideen II see the comments by its translators on page xvi: “Merleau-Ponty was a very reserved man, but one of us can remembers clearly a conversation with him in which he, with sudden animation, spoke so rapturously of the second Ideas and described his study of it as ‘une experience presque voluptueuse.’” Follow the link below in endnote 63. In addition, in Phenomenology of Perception Merleau-Ponty also cites the following as among Husserl’s late works: Méditations cartésiennes (Paris, Colin, 1931) and the unpublished 6th Méditation cartésienne, edited by Eugen Fink. See Phenomenology of Perception, vii. Mention should also be made of Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl, eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), especially Dan Zahavi’s “Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: A Reappraisal,” 3-29. Zahavi’s mentions the tendency of Merleau-Ponty scholar’s not to take Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Husserl very seriously (4-5). My purpose here is not to challenge the accuracy of Zahavi’s claim or to enter a dialog with other attempts to make sense of the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Husserl. What I offer here is a close reading of what Merleau-Ponty actually says.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology” in Themes from the Lectures at the College de France 1952-1960, trans. John O’Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 113-123. This is a brief ten-page summary of Merleau-Ponty’s course offered in 1960. This summary will be cited and referred to in the text as TFL. It was originally published as “Husserl aux limites de la Phénoménologie” in Résumés de cours, Collège de France 1952-1960 (Paris: Gallimard, 1968). Merleau-Ponty’s actual Course Notes, rather than just the brief summary mentioned immediately above were published as follows: Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, ed. Leonard Lawlor, with Bettina Bergo, Course Notes trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002). The Course Notes will be cited and referred to in the text as Limits.


In personal conversations.


These headings and much of what Merleau-Ponty says about Husserl under them are quite similar to what Merleau-Ponty says about Husserl in his well know Preface in his Phenomenology of Perception. In the introductory remarks of the Preface of Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty’s great mid-career work, Merleau-Ponty states, in less developed form, some of what he articulates about Husserl in his later work. Here is (approximately) what he says in the earlier manuscript: phenomenology seeks to grasp essential structures but only as they make contact with existence. Phenomenology suspends our belief in the world but only to better understand it where it rests. It attempts to describe experience as it is lived rather than to understand it simple as a result of contingent events or as it is conceived by abstract thought. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, further pointing out (as he did in his later works) the frequent tension in Husserl’s thought. Husserl contrarily seeks both a “genetic phenomenology,” a phenomenology that traces its origins, and a “constitutive phenomenology,” a phenomenology that grasps these origins in a cognitively constructed present (PhP vii-viii). Again, Merleau-Ponty’s general comments here are strikingly similar to his later comments on the later Husserl. Let us proceed, with Merleau-Ponty, to pursue these points in greater detail.

The Preface proceeds to discuss the four “celebrated phenomenological themes” as they have come together in experience.

Phenomenology as description of lived through experience. Phenomenology seeks to describe experience and does so, obviously, from the point of view of the experiencing subject. Yet, Merleau-
Ponty proceeds to inform us, Husserl’s philosophy is different from the idealistic turn to the conceptual conditions that are necessary for the possibility of the experience of the world to occur (as we find in Descartes and Kant). Husserl does not want to construct the world conceptually but to bring what exists to the clearest possible expression. Moreover, idealistic philosophies cannot explain a perceptual world that is meaningful but not yet conceptual, that is meaningful even though it does not fit into a precise conceptual framework. (PhP viii-xi) Here we see the same focus on lived through experience, rather than experience conceptualized, that we find Merleau-Ponty focusing on in Husserl’s latter works.

The phenomenological reduction. Merleau-Ponty proceeds to the phenomenological reduction, which, “for a long time,” was regarded as idealists, for the world was treated as a meaning spread out before a reflecting consciousness, as a meaning that is the same for all because all share the same rational mind. Yet this sort of idealistic philosophy knows nothing of the other person, for, by definition, all minds are the same. Husserl, however, recognizes the problem of the other, and this recognition proceeds from the fact that he sees that the experiencing subject has a body, and thus has an exterior, and can thus be experienced from the outside. Moreover, if this is so, if the subject has an exterior that can be viewed by others, then the subject must be in and among the events of the world. And if this is so, if the subject is in the world and is intimately bound up with it, then the only way to grasp our relationship to the world is to temporarily suspend our involvement with it. We must reflect, and this reflection “steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus bring them to notice.” In addition, since Husserl becomes increasingly aware that we are part of the events of the world as they unfold in time, he becomes increasingly aware that any attempt to grasp the temporal flow of experience is always a part of this flow. The pre-reflective experience of the world always temporally outruns our reflective attempts to grasp it. Thus, the reduction is not a retreat into a unifying rational consciousness in the moment, but the attempt to grasp the realization of the prior existence of the world, indicating that a complete reduction is not possible. Husserl’s reduction, then, according to Merleau-Ponty, and as he stresses in his later interpretation of the later Husserl, must not be misunderstood as a retreat into a reflecting rational consciousness in the moment, but as an attempt to grasp our relationship to a pre-existent world. (PhP xi-xiv)

Essences. It is well-known that Husserl used a transcendental reduction (the suspension of belief in the world just considered above), but he also employed an eidetic reduction (a grasping of essences) which is necessarily a part of the transcendental reduction. We must cease to identify with our being-in-the-world if we wish to grasp it, not as a simple fact of existence but as meaning. We must attempt to grasp its essence.

Merleau-Ponty briefly takes up the claim, made by the Logical Positivism, that the meaning of words is a product of historical events. While this is certainly true in part, word meanings would be bare if we did not “enjoy direct access to what it designates.” It is certainly true that language helps us separate the abstract meaning of essences from specific events, but it is also true that this separation is only apparent and that the essences would mean nothing if they did not pass through our contact with actual events. “Husserl’s essences are destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman’s net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed.” Thus, the eidetic reduction is intended to bring to light not words but the world before any conceptualization. Or, to restate this in a language more consistent with the later works of both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, words are to bring to light, or to express more clearly, the mute meaning of our perceptual world.

In addition, Merleau-Ponty, referencing agreement with Husserl, takes a stand here with respect to skepticism that is similar to the one articulated in his later works: we would not be concerned with the distinction between reality and our dream states if the distinction was not already present in our experience. What we should do is clarify the distinction as it is given in our experience not seek to find conceptual criteria for the distinction that come to it from the outside. (PhP xiv-xvii)

Intentionality. Here Merleau-Ponty points out that the notion of intentionality, i.e., that consciousness is always directed toward something, is not new, and that Kant had already considered this as a part of its character. If, as Kant already pointed out, and Husserl also realized, the unity of consciousness requires a relationship to a unified world, the difference between Kant and Husserl is that
for Husserl the unity of the world is lived rather than represented conceptually, as it is for Kant. Husserl, that is to say phenomenology, is not trying to grasp the world intellectually, using “a law of the physio-mathematical type,” but is trying to find expressions that capture and bring to light a unique manner of being-in-the-world. When trying to grasp an historical event, for example, we must not look at just the economy, or just at class relationships, or politics, or ideology, but we must look at all these aspects of society simultaneously as they are lived through by its inhabitants. Husserl sought to grasp this total meaning, and not just a conceptual representation of a few indices, and this is what Merleau-Ponty finds in the later Husserl as well, even more so. (PhP xvii-xix)

As Merleau-Ponty says in his concluding remarks of the Preface, for phenomenology “rationality is precisely measured by the experiences in which it is disclosed.” Rationality exists in the bringing to light the patterns and structures of our lived through world, patterns and structures that are perceptual and open, like those of a Cezanne painting or even of a jazz melody. (PhP xix-xxi) These themes Merleau-Ponty advances in his later works.

63 The Ideen II, Husserliana Bd. IV citation is Merleau-Ponty’s, as written. The title for the full series of Husserl’s collected works is Husserliana: Edmund Husserl Gesammelte Werke. The English translation of Ideen II is Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy - Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution, translated by R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989). Online at: https://archive.org/stream/IdeasPartII/HusserlIdeasII#page/n0/mode/1up I will here reproduce Merleau-Ponty’s citations as written. According to the translators of Ideas II (translators’ comments, pp XI-XIII), the first draft of Ideen II was written by Husserl in 1912, went through numerous revisions, was set aside in 1928, was transcribed at the Husserl Archive at Louvain after Husserl’s death in 1938, and was finally published in 1952. Merleau-Ponty was apparently aware of the transcribed manuscript as early as his 1939 visit of the Archive. We know from H. L. Von Breda’s account that Merleau-Ponty visited the Husserl Archive at Louvain in 1939. Van Breda draws our attention to the fact that Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception (Phénoménologie de la perception, 1945) mentions his visit to the Archive, cites Ideen II on page 92, and also mentions two other Archive texts in his bibliography, Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentele Phänomenologie II and III, and “Umsturz der kopernikanischen Lehre.” Van Breda mentions that the Krisis texts viewed by Merleau-Ponty were IIIA and IIIB. He also mentions that the “first two parts of the Krisis” had been published in Philosophia in 1936. See H. L. Van Breda, “Merleau-Ponty and the Husserl Archive at Louvain” in Text and Dialogues: Merleau-Ponty, eds. Hugh Silverman and James Barry Jr (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), 150, 153. See Ted Toadvine “Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview” in Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl, eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 234.

64 Merleau-Ponty quotes Husserl here: “The soul’s reality is based upon corporeal matter, not the latter upon the soul.” Shadow 164, Ideen III, Husserliana. Bd, V, Beilage I, 117.

65 See Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, translator’s note, for the definition of ek-stase: “Active transcendence of the subject in relation to the world. The author uses either the French word extase, or Heidegger’s form ek-stase . . .” (PhP 70).

66 Merleau-Ponty adds the following: “Perhaps nowhere better than in these lines can we see the dual direction of Husserl’s reflection, which is both an analytics of essences and an analytics of existences. For it is ‘ideally’ that whatever is given to one subject is as a matter of principle given to all others, but it is the ‘fundamental and original presence’ of sensible being that the obviousness and universality which are conveyed by these relationships of essences come.” Shadow 171

67 See also Merleau-Ponty’s footnote 38, Shadow 177.
See also Merleau-Ponty’s following comments: “. . . between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kindship, according to which they are…the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, open finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part” (VI 133). “. . . through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange” (VI 133).


M. C. Dillon rightfully argues that the recognition of the other requires both similarity and difference. See M. C. Dillon, “Écart: Reply to Lefort’s ‘Flesh and Otherness,’” in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 16.

In the Modernist philosophical tradition, the way out of the isolated ego (other than the Cartesian argument by analogy, i.e., that I project my interior into an objective body that appears analogous to my own) is typically an appeal to the universality of reason, which is thought to be possessed by, or at least open to, all individuals. To say the least, this position has proven to be problematic.


Edmund Husserl, “Der Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem,” ed. Eugen Fink, in Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana VI*, Beilage III, pp. 365-86. *Husserliana VI* was published as *Die Krise...

79 In fact, Merleau-Ponty says, "language is 'interwoven' (Verflochten) with our horizon upon the world and humanity. Language is borne by our relation to the world and to others, yet language in turn supports and creates it." (TFL 117-118, translation modified).

80 See also Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the “tree of my duration” in The Visible and the Invisible, 111, cited above.

81 Unpublished text by Husserl.

82 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, editor Leonard Lawlor, with Bettina Bergo, Course Notes trans. Leonard Lawlor, (Evaston: Northwestern University Press, 2002); this is a presentation of Merleau-Ponty’s actual Course Notes, rather than just the summary of the notes seen above. The Course Notes will be cited and referred to in the text as Limits.

83 Leonard Lawlor, the translator of Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, uses “pointed brackets” to sometimes translate Merleau-Ponty’s use of German terms or to provide an English translation of a German passage from a Husserl text cited by Merleau-Ponty. See Lawler’s comment on page xl.

84 In most cases, in this section on Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, I have used the translations of German terms, offered here in square brackets, already provided by Leonard Lawlor.

85 Merleau-Ponty is undoubtedly here referencing Daniel Defoe’s novel Robinson Crusoe.

86 The quote in pointed brackets is drawn from Husserl’s “Der Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem.” See note 24. above). See Lawler’s editorial comment in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology, xliii.

87 Merleau-Ponty continues: “Dangers of a science which is ganz den logischen Aktivitäten hingegeben (Husserliana VI 376) <‘completely given over to logical activities’>: science allows Sinnverwandlungen (Husserliana VI 376) <‘transformation of sense’> which work to the benefit of logical method, but these transformations are distinct from the Ursprung [origin] (Husserliana VI 376 n. 6). One can inherit propositions and the method in order to construct always logically new idealities without inheriting the capacity to reactivate beginnings Sinnesquellen (Husserliana VI 376) <‘sources of sense’>. Therefore Sinnentleerung [the emptying out of sense] during which one continues the Methodik technischen Verwertung (Husserliana VI 378) <‘methodics of technical application’>” (Limits 61, my bracket addition).

88 We must say “further” helps (rather than completely makes possible) for, after all, stories, traditional ways of acting and working, and even culture as a whole can be and have been transmitted from one generation to the next by word of mouth.

Again, it is Husserl’s later thought, as expressed in “The Origins of Geometry,” that Merleau-Ponty cites in *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. It is Husserl’s later thought, as he also expresses it in *Ideen II*, that seems to resonate with Merleau-Ponty’s own developing later thought.


We have seen above that ek-stase is defined as: “Active transcendence of the subject in relation to the world.” (PhP 70). See also Merleau-Ponty’s following comments: “In all uses of the word sens [meaning, direction, sense, way, manner] we find the same fundamental notion of a being orientated or polarized in the direction of what he is not, and thus we are always brought back to a conception of the subject as ek-stase, and to a relationship of active transcendence between the subject and the world. The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects” (PhP 430, the bracket addition is from a note by the translator). See also Merleau-Ponty’s comment that Laplace’s scientific nebula is a cultural construct and not a thing in itself, and that, moreover, we really do not have access to the thing in itself, apart from our perceptual encounter with it. Re-citing the passage already cited above: “What, in fact, do we mean when we say that there is no world without a being in the world? Not indeed that the world is constituted by consciousness, but on the contrary that consciousness always finds itself already at work in the world. What is true . . . is that there is a nature, which is not that of the sciences, but that which perception presents to me . . .” (PhP 432). Nature is only given to us through our embodied perceptual encounter with it, yet it is also experienced as running beyond this perceptual encounter, both spatially and temporally. The world transcends the immanence of our perception.

Merleau-Ponty states: “In the present and in perception, my being and my consciousness are at one, not that my being is reducible to the knowledge I have of it or that it is clearly set out before me—on the contrary perception is opaque, for it brings into play, beneath what I know, my sensory fields which are my primitive alliance with the world—but because ‘to be conscious’ is here nothing but ‘to-be-at . . .’ (‘etre a . . .’), and because my consciousness of existing merges into the actual gesture of ‘ex-sistence.’ It is by communicating with the world that we communicate beyond all doubt with ourselves. We . . . are present to ourselves because we are present to the world” (PhP 424).

This is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s comment regarding Laplace’s nebula in PhP 432. See above.

Merleau-Ponty continues: “. . . latent intentionality . . . ceases to be a property of consciousness, of its ‘attitudes’ and of its acts, to become intentional life—It becomes the thread that binds, for example, my present to my past in its temporal place, such as it was (and not such as I reconquer it by an act of evocation) . . .” (VI 173).


As already indicated, Merleau-Ponty’s 1952 essay “Indirect Language and Voices of Silence” borrows heavily from *The Prose of the World*, which he composed sometime in the early 1950’s but left unpublished. The 1952 essay is republished by the author, without changes, in his 1960 anthology *Signes*. This certainly indicates that he does not abandon the ideas that he was formulating in early 1950’s but rather that they provide a link between his early work, *The Structure of Behavior*, his great middle work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, and his late, posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*.

As already indicated above, Merleau-Ponty is quite explicit about identifying Husserl’s more idealistic period with his earlier *Logische Untersuchungen* and about identifying Husserl’s more existential period with his later “The Origins of Geometry.” Here is Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of Husserl’s
earlier thought regarding the eidetic analysis of language. “This project assumes that language is one of the objects supremely constituted by conscious, and that actual languages are very special case of a possible language which consciousness holds the key to—that they are a system of signs linked to their meaning by univocal relationships which . . . are susceptible to a total explication.” While Merleau-Ponty believes that Husserl moves away from this position in his later “The Origin of Geometry,” as we have seen, he thinks that Husserl still relies too heavily on the total intellectual possession of experience, on a total coincidence of present thought with past experience, and on the “unconditional general validity” of this thought. See Merleau-Ponty, “On the Phenomenology of Language,” in Signs, 84-85, and Limits, 20.

99 See Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of phenomenology’s fundierung relationship in Phenomenology of Perception, 127, 394.


101 Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: “The philosopher is, he says, ‘working in the service of humanity,’ meaning that the philosopher is professionally bound to the task of defining and clarifying the conditions which make humanity possible—that is, the participation of all men in a common truth” (PrP 44-45).


Chapter 4 Criticism of Heidegger: A Brief Note


108 Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Referred to as BT. Translators Macquarrie and Robinson comment on Heidegger’s use of “ontic” and “ontological.” “While the terms ‘ontisch’ (‘ontical’) and ‘ontologisch’ (‘ontological’) are not explicitly defined, their meanings will emerge rather clearly. Ontological inquiry is concerned primarily with Being; ontical inquiry is concerned primarily with entities and the facts about them.” (BT 31)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Phenomenology and the Science of Man,” in The Primacy of Perception. Referred to in the text as PSM.

Here we see Merleau-Ponty following a certain thread in Husserl thought. We have seen above that he also critical of other threads.

It can perhaps be said (and, in fact, must be said) that Merleau-Ponty’s The Visible and the Invisible develops the integration between the ontic and ontological, between the body and the mind, between the human body and the world more completely than any other author.

Chapter 5 Merleau-Ponty’s Criticism of Sartre’s Philosophy

Merleau-Ponty does go on to say that the searchlight metaphor is inadequate for perception because it does not capture the implied context or horizon of perceptual experience. Yet the metaphor is adequate in the sense that it reveals perception’s openness upon a common world.

Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), see 252-302, especially 281-283 for Sartre’s discussion of “the look” of the other. First published as L’Être et le néant: Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique, (Paris: Gallimard, 1943)


The transliteration of λέγω is legó, which means “to say” or “to speak” but also to “lay down to sleep,” and “laying an argument to rest,” as in “bringing a message to closure.” See http://biblehub.com/greek/3004.htm Given the context of the cited passage, Merleau-Ponty appears to mean that being is there in the strong sense of something that can settle an argument. There is the evidence of being, even if this evidence is not absolute.

Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness. First published as L’Être et le néant: Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique, (Paris: Gallimard, 1943)


Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism and Philosophy” in *Sense and Nonsense*, 128.


Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, as cited above, for Sartre’s discussion of “the look” of the other see 252-302, especially 259-283, most especially 280-283, and for his discussion of “being-with” others see 413-430. For a convenient brief version of this “being-with” section see the excerpts of various pages from this section in *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Robert Solomon (New York: University Press of America, 1980), 441-447. See also Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and three other plays* (New York, Random House, 1955), especially 47.
Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique*, see the section entitled “Need,” 79-83, and “The Fused Group,” 345-404, see especially 354, for a discussion of the dialectic between the individual and the social.


George Rupp, *Beyond Individualism: The Challenge of Inclusive Communities* (Columbia University Press, 2015). Rupp opens Chapter 1, “Passionate Conviction and Inclusive Community” with the following statement: “This chapter offers in summary form of the central claim of this book: modern Western Individualism must engage with rather than simply reject the myriad ways that societies worldwide embrace core convictions grounded in particular communities. Individualism as it has evolved in the West is powerfully attractive. Yet it unavoidably encounters concerted opposition from the deeply rooted patterns that it disrupts and in effect would overturn.” 11.


Some passages from my “Merleau-Ponty’s Corpus: A Philosophy and Politics for the 21st Century” in *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Volume 34, 2009 have been used here, although usually re-written.


David Schweickart has made an admirable attempt to provide updated economic (as well as social/political) analyses from the point of view of the political left. See, for example, his *After Capitalism*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

**Chapter 6 Merleau-Ponty, Modernism, Structure, and Postmodernism**


148 Jacques Derrida, “Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from Being and Time, in Margins, 66. Quoted by Dillon, xxv.


151 M.C. Dillon, “Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernity” in Merleau-Ponty Vivant, xxv.


153 See also Jacques Derrida, Ousia and Gramme: Note on a note from Being and Time, also in Margins of Philosophy, 66.


See Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s “Eye and Mind,” where Merleau-Ponty discusses open, non-geometrical perception that is nevertheless stable and meaningful, translated Carleton Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159-190. Revised translation by Michael Smith in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* (1993), ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, Il., Northwestern University Press, 1993), 121-149. We might also add here the “tripper” who experiences a fractured perceptual world while under the influence of the powerful drug LSD reports nothing of this sort during “normal” perception. Moreover, the principles of Gestalt perception have been so widely confirmed that they have practically reached the status of “laws.” Obviously, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, these laws are not to be regarded as unchanging formal essences or logical principles. They state perceptual regularities not fixed formulas.

See Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s chapter entitled “Freedom,” in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

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