In this essay I will respond to a number of issues raised by Steven Crowell’s excellent essay “The Project of Ultimate Grounding and the Appeal to Intersubjectivity in Recent Transcendental Philosophy.” I will do so by using Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Crowell makes a useful distinction “between two important versions of transcendental philosophy—the neo-Kantian version oriented toward justification of principles and the phenomenological version oriented toward clarification of meaning” (Crowell 31). Using Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, I will support the latter (with some qualification) and criticize the former: the only way to ground knowledge about experience is to use experience itself, and, even though proponents of the first version have moved away from Kant’s belief in an isolated rational transcendental subject, by way of the so-called “linguistic turn,” I will argue that they still untenably seek a priori conditions that are necessary for the possibility of any rational discourse. I will begin with a brief exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as it relates to these issues and will then proceed to specifically address the issues as they are raised by Crowell in his essay.

In his Phenomenology of Perception, when addressing the nature of the subject of experience, including the untenable nature of a transcendental ego, Merleau-Ponty says, “the subject of sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of a quality, nor an inert setting which is affected or changed by it, it is a power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with it.” The subject of sensation is not an abstract intellectual consciousness or an inert setting but an embodied existential subject, an embodied subject that is already and always a part of the world upon which it opens. For rationalism, with its move toward the transcendental rational conditions of experience, sensations become thought about intellectually identified sensations, sensations that are intellectually identified in a whole series of perspectives. Yet if the objects of perception become the abstract conceptual representations of the mind (or merely linguistic expressions), then it is impossible to say “that I see with my eyes or hear with my ears,” since they also become objects of reflection (or merely expressions of language) with no subjective side. (Karl-Otto Apel, whom Crowell rightfully cites as a representative of those who argue for a linguistic/pragmatic a priori, tends to separate the transcendental and the empirical, tends to separate the transcendental conditions for the expression of language from the speaking subjects, as we shall see below.) What we must do, then, is explain or trace the move from the pre-reflectively lived-through perception to the expressions of conceptually (and thus
linguistically) articulated objects, not just intellectually conceive or linguistically express perception from outside of it.

In tracing this move, we will also have to re-think the relation between the for-itself and the in-itself, and this, in fact, is what Merleau-Ponty believes he is beginning with his criticism of the subject of experience as a detached thinker or an inert setting. Moreover, it is with this criticism that he begins to re-define “sensation as co-existence or communion,” as the co-existence of the embodied subject and the world, and as their subsequent interaction and communion (PhP 213). “Let us be more explicit. The sensor and the sensible do not stand in relation to each other as two mutually external terms. . . . It is my gaze which subtends color . . . or rather my gaze pairs off with color . . . and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other” (PhP 214). It is the lived-through interaction between the embodied perceiver and the world that produces sense. Perceptual meaning is formed where the active, embodied subject meets and couples with the world. “Thus a sensible datum which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled problem for my body [not just thought or language alone] to solve. I must find the attitude which will provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of showing up as blue; I must find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. And yet I do so only when I am invited by it, my attitude is never sufficient to make me really see blue. . . . The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place” (PhP 214).

Sensation, then, is not an inert setting, blindly conditioned, as traditional empiricism/materialism has maintained, nor is sensation something that I accomplished, that I think or linguistically create or will. It is accomplished by my body, by my aware and active bodily functions, in a world that pre-exists me. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, "sensation necessarily appears to itself in a setting of generality, its origin is anterior to myself, it arises from sensibility which has preceded it and which will outlive it" (PhP 216). This means that “every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us anonymously.” “So, if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that one perceives in me, and not that I perceive” (PhP 215). This means that there is a pre-personal dimension to perceptual experience and that it is limited by pre-given situations and profiles. I see things from a certain time and place, within a certain horizon of implied possible perspectives, within a horizon of things that are at the moment invisible, that is, not presently in view. Vision thus includes this open dimension, this open horizon of sense that remains implied. Vision, then, is a lived-through sense that is both tied to a situation and open to others. While it is true that my consciousness is co-natural with the event, and that it makes no sense to speak of the event without this awareness, the meaning of the event is not constituted by me but found in the event where it is, along with its horizon.

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to ask here how it is that rationalism ends up by conceiving the subject as pure consciousness fully aware of itself and fully aware of the object as pure extension. Now it is true, he admits, that if we start with consciousness defined as a purely self-conscious rationality, then, as Kant says, “the I think must be able to occupy all our representations” (PhP 219). Yet why, he asks, must we start with the self defined in such a way? The typical answer is that in order to speak rationally about the subject and the world we must represent them rationally. We are only taking up the conditions that are necessary for the subject and object to be experienced as such, the rationalist proclaims. “And indeed,” Merleau-Ponty confirms, “at the level of constituted speech, such is in fact the significance of world and subject. But from where do the words themselves derive their sense?” (PhP 219). A more radical reflection, he says, should not just produce a result, concepts expressed in language, but it should also be
aware of how the results are achieved. “Radical reflection is what takes hold of me as I am in the act of forming and formulating the ideas of subject and object, and brings to light the source of these two ideas” (PhP 219). Radical reflection, then, seeks to grasp the act as an act, as a verb rather than a thing or a noun, and it remains sufficiently aware of itself to realize that it cannot place itself outside of this act in order to fully grasp or construct it as a thing. Reflection necessarily remains partial and incomplete, even with the additional awareness that it is able to bring to light. Or, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it here, in reference to Kant, the reflective I is expressed in conceptual formulations while pre-reflective experience remains an active openness upon the world. Thus, what is given first, what is primary, is not a pure rational subject and a purely conceived rational object, but experience, openness to a pre-existent world. “What is given is not consciousness or pure being; it is, as Kant himself profoundly put it, experience, in other words the communication of a finite subject with an opaque being from which it emerges but to which it remains committed. It is [quoting Husserl] ‘pure and, in a way, still mute experience which it is a question of bringing to the pure expression of its own significance’” (PhP 219). Thus, we do not experience the world or ourselves as completed by a rational synthesis. We experience both “as an open totality the synthesis of which is inexhaustible” (PhP 219).

This, Merleau-Ponty maintains, brings us to a new conception of the a priori—which, however, still has its origins in Kant’s thought. Kant himself claimed that the a priori is not prior to experience, that experience announces itself as the beginning of all knowledge. Yet, for Kant, an effort must then be made to find the conceptual conditions that are necessary for experience to be possible. Contrarily, Merleau-Ponty argues that as soon as Kant admits that we must begin with experience, he admits that there is no clear distinction between the a priori and the factual, for the necessary a priori conditions are predicated on the experience that is prior to them. Merleau-Ponty will therefore claim, a priori, that all sensation is spatial, but he is able to do so only because all experience is constituted factually in a setting that is space. We do not experience isolated sense data and then bring to them an abstract spatial coordination. As the sentient body lives the sensible world, prior to being abstractly thought, experience takes the form of sensations spread out in space. There is thus, for Merleau-Ponty, an empirical a priori. Since all sensation is given as spread out in space, all sensation is necessarily spatial. Insofar as we can speak of a transcendental emerging form Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, this is it: a certain aspect of experience is given so routinely and regularly (all perception is spatial, for example) that it deserves to be called an empirical a priori; it deserves to be called a transcendental condition, a condition in whose absence experience simply would not take place. Yet for Merleau-Ponty, this abstract condition is given in and by experience itself. It is drawn directly from our experience and is thus open to further alteration by all future experience, even if this alternative is unlikely.

Now, the a priori has traditionally been associated with pure thought or purely conceptual relationships between ideas. As an abstraction, in the principle of logical identity (written symbolically as “A is A”), the predicate term is included in the subject term, and there is no need to go beyond the conceptual relationship between the meanings of the terms to know that this is true. On the other hand, the proposition that “All swans are white” is a posteriori, since we must learn from empirical observation that this is true, that the subject and predicate terms are related as they are. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, since abstract concepts are intimately related to language, and, in fact, cannot occur without it, and since language always occurs in natural, empirical, social, and historical contexts, then even supposedly a priori relationships are situated within prior historical conditions. Consequently, there are no purely conceptual relationships. There are no conceptual relation-
ships that occur outside or independent of the contexts just mentioned above.4

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make the point here that each sense has its own specific way of experiencing space, thus rendering Kant’s universal a priori of space untenable and returning it to its origins in empirical experience. A blind patient who has had his vision surgically restored can see but does not recognize what he sees, for visual space appears nothing like the tactile space of his previous non-visual experience. So much so that the patient is even unable to visually recognize his own hand. Yet, contrarily, it is not as if the tactile has no spatial sense at all, since the patient does move his hand towards objects that he sees. Even though there is no abstract concept of space that both the tactile and the visual fit neatly within, the patient’s act of reaching means that the two are comparable at least in some sense. The different senses do communicate with one another, even though there is no exact transposition of one to the other, and the senses do communicate because they are a part of the same body and open upon a common world. In fact, Merleau-Ponty claims it is the isolation of the senses that is artificial and is achieved only with a highly specific and analytic attitude. Any theory, in this case a theory of the a priori and a posteriori, must explain the facts, must explain experience as it is ordinarily lived, as it ordinarily appears to the experiencing subject. Kant’s theory of the purely rational a priori cannot make sense of the different kinds of spatial experience, while Merleau-Ponty here puts forth a theory that is able to do so.

Furthermore, just because there is something that pre-exists the act of linguistic expression, this does not mean that ideas (like Euclid’s geometry) express some eternal truth that somehow pre-exists our language. What pre-exists the linguistic expression is not abstract thought but the temporal/spatial world of perception—which all language attempts to express. This means that all the truths that are expressed in language rest upon the temporally unfolding world of perception, and that they rest upon an accumulated past. Moreover, this means that the truths of Euclid’s geometry themselves are expressed in a tradition, in a discipline of knowledge that has a history and a past—and if this history was lost, its ideas would have to be recreated. Time thus provides a model by which we can understand linguistic acquisition. For Merleau-Ponty time is not a collection of discrete moments, with a moment that fully occupies present existence and past moments that disappear as soon as they no longer present. Time, rather, is a gestalt, with the present gradually shading into the past and toward the future. Here the past does not have to be explicitly recalled by the present but remains on the horizon and thus continues to influence the present, even without an explicit act of recall. Human existence thus continues to carry the past as the present moves toward the future. Time, then, is an atmosphere, a natural process, that we exist within and help accomplish because we are aware of the unfolding of the process. Human thought, then, occurs and is acquired in this same process, this dimension of time. There is no intellectual achievement, no truth, no truth of reason that does not occur in time and that is not acquired in history. Truth, then, is built out of past accomplishments and past errors, for at least part of our view of truth is conditioned by our errors, by what we discover is not true (PhP 393), “Thus,” Merleau-Ponty is able to conclude, “every truth of fact is a truth of reason, and vice versa.” Moreover, he proceeds to detail how this is achieved:

The relation of reason to fact, or eternity to time, like that of reflection to the unreflective, of thought to language or of thought to perception is this two-way relationship that phenomenology has called Fundierung: the founding term, or originator—time, the unreflective, the fact, language, perception—is primary in the sense that the originated is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from reabsorbing 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)

Our experience does not open upon a pre-existent truth, either in the form of facts or essences, but upon concrete things and events in a way that allows us to take them up and carry them forward. This temporal nature of experience is what allows us to connect our experiences with each other and our experiences with the experiences lived-through by others. Experience opens to a world and a temporality that the experiencer exists within and is a part of. “All consciousness is, in some measure, perceptual consciousness,” even our consciousness of the abstract truths of reason, for all consciousness is temporal, and as such each moment of experience that is carried forward from the past is drawn together with other experiences. Thus every moment of experience, including that of abstract reasoning, occurs within a context of past experiences that motivate the truths of the present. This means of course that there is no thought that is completely given to reflective consciousness, that there is no thought that is fully present to reflection that appears without a background of presuppositions (PhP 393–95).

However, even though all thought occurs in some prior context, all thought, all words would mean nothing if I did not take them up from within, if I was not aware of them and did not carry them along. Thus, I cannot simply be equated with a series of acts of consciousness, as Hume argued, for these acts are held together by an awareness that pulls them together. Yet, this awareness is not that of a reflective self outside of time, but that to which the individual acts appear. Should we then assume that language possesses us without our awareness, that it leads us along to express our world in a certain way without our being aware of it? Merleau-Ponty answers that “this would be to forget half the truth,” for words would be meaningless if they did not somehow connect with our experience as we live it, “if the spoken cogito did not encounter within me a tacit cogito” (PhP 402). This tacit cogito is indeclinable, for without it there is no meaning or consciousness, without it there would be nothing for the word “cogito” to refer to. Yet this lived-through perceptual consciousness, as we have seen, has only a partial or provisional hold upon the world and itself. It has a partial hold on the world because this hold is perspectival, and it is only a provisional hold on itself because the pre-reflective temporally slips away from the reflective. Human subjectivity “does not constitute the world, it divines the world’s presence round about it as a field not provided by itself; nor does it constitute the word, but speaks as we sing when we are happy; nor again the meaning of the word, which instantaneously emerges for it in its dealing with the world and other men living in it” (PhP 404). This pre-reflective contact with oneself, the awareness of awareness, which constitutes human subjectivity and human existence, exists prior to any act of linguistic expression. In fact, it is that which allows any linguistic expression to take on a meaning.

And yet, this tacit lived-through awareness must wait to be expressed. There is a meaning to lived-through experience, but this meaning needs further perceptual confirmation and expression in language to be made more precise. But, it could be said, if subjectivity cannot grasp itself in act, that is, if it is never fully present to itself, how then does it come about? How does that which is lived-through, which is not a thinking act, become so? Merleau-Ponty answers that it is true that the subject of lived-through experience is not an intellectual subject, that this subject does not think the world but perceives it. However, since the subject is not a thing, the subject is aware. The subject is a composite whole that is aware of itself, that realizes that the whole precedes its parts. “My vision, for example, is certainly ‘thinking that I see,’ if we mean thereby that it is not simply a bodily function like digestion or respiration, a collection of processes so grouped as to have a significance in a larger system, but that it is itself that system and that significance, that anteriority of the future to the present, of the whole to its parts” (PhP 404). However, since
all vision involves an operative intention, and since intention by its very nature leaves aspects of the object yet to be perceived, no vision is complete. The operative intentional vision of the lived subject is aware of objects but this awareness is also aware of them as incomplete. Vision is thus aware of itself as reaching the world but it is not a thinking of seeing in the sense of being fully present to itself and its object as it perceives. Perception is aware of itself and is aware of itself as reaching the world, yet it is aware of reaching a world that is already there, and that is thus not constituted by the subject, and, in addition, it is aware that it cannot grasp itself as fully constituted, since pre-reflective perception always temporally slips away from the act of intellectual constitution.

We have seen above that the world is inseparable from our perception of the world—even though its independent existence is also given to us in this perception. What this means here, what it means to experience an always already existing world that is nevertheless given only through perception, is that the lived-through perceptual field is always already meaningful, that there is no hyle that waits to be formed by the reflective concepts of a transcendental rational subject. I am not a transcendental ego rationally synthesizing the moments of experience from outside of them. I am “one single experience inseparable from itself, one single ‘living cohesion,’ one single temporality which is engaged, from birth, in making itself progressively explicit, and in confirming that cohesion in each successive present.” This awareness of and confirmation of preceding experiences that pulls them into the present and projects them into the future without which experience would be impossible is the truth of the “I think.” However, we must understand the “I think” as “I belong to myself” while belonging to the world, as a synthesis in the making, not as a transcendental ego outside of time, space and the world, that is a complete possession of itself and the world (PhP 407).

“...”

We are in the world, which means that things take shape, an immense individual asserts itself, each existence is self-comprehensive and comprehensive of the rest. All that has to be done is to recognize these phenomena which are the ground of all our certainties. The belief in an absolute mind, or in a world in-itself detached from us is no more than a rationalization of this primordial faith. (PhP 409)

It is appropriate here to mention that Charles Taylor has made the claim that both Hegel and Merleau-Ponty (as well as others) accept Kant’s refutation of idealism and use it to undermine the modernist claim that human knowledge is primarily and essentially a conceptual representation, in the mind of the isolated rational individual, of an already rationally structured world. Kant essentially argued that the unity of experience would be impossible without the stable objects of the world, since the connection of experiences (or ideas) to one another requires some stable content—which can only be provided by the world. Consciousness, than, must be regarded not as an isolate awareness of a private rational interior but as a relationship to the world. Consciousness must be regarded as in the world and at the world’s objects. Yet there is an inconsistency in Kant’s thought, since he slips back into idealism with his claim that we must turn back from experience to the conceptual, a priori conditions that allow this experience to be possible. With this move, according to Hegel, Kant assumes that there is a separation between our knowledge, as a conceptual representation of the object, and the object as it is itself. Yet, Hegel continues, this is Kant’s fun-
damental mistake, i.e., to separate consciousness and our knowledge of the world from the world itself, since the only way we can possibly be aware that our knowledge is not reaching the object is to have some experience of the object that we are not reaching. Hegel’s answer to the question of the criteria by which to judge our knowledge of the world is that the criteria must come from experience itself and not to be assumed or introduced from outside of experience. He thus answers the skeptic by saying that the only way that we can call one claim into question is by another that we accept, thus refuting the skeptics belief that the unreliability of one knowledge claim leads the unreliability of all knowledge claims. Merleau-Ponty follows Hegel (and even Husserl) here with the claim that the “crossing out” of one belief does not lead the annihilation of all knowledge claims, since this crossing out relies on another claim that is accepted, and, even more, always remains within the context of the horizon of the experienced world. Even negated beliefs remain within it, even if now as only crossed out. When discussing myth in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty admits that myths, like theories, act as general explanations, as general ways of conceptually ordering our world. Myth, in fact, is half way to theory, but, problematically, it cannot be proved or disproved. Thus it doesn’t go far enough. Yet modernist theory goes too far, since it claims to be completely objective. It claims to stand outside of the theoretical explanation and to grasp the objective evidence for it. As we have already seen above, Merleau-Ponty argues against the possibility of standing outside of our theoretical orientations, that they must flow from experience itself, remain situated within it, even though we can make some judgment about which theory is the most clarifying. Moreover, he states that we must focus on our bodily being-in-the-world, on our active engagement with the world, and on our operative intentionality. We must construct explanations that make sense of our perceptual, operative engagement in the world. And we must test these explanations against our actual perceptual, operative experience of the world. As our experience changes or gets more precise, we must adapt our theory, and we must do so continually.

In a 1952 prospectus of his work, in which Merleau-Ponty briefly states what he believes is the significance of his first two books, *The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*, the author also maps out the direction of his future research. He believes that his early works have established the originality of perceptual meaning, i.e., that this meaning cannot be derived from anything else, and that his future work will lay out the move beyond perception to language that is necessary to arrive at an intersubjective expression of truth. He believes that his work as a whole “would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics.” We have already witnessed this “metaphysics” above, i.e., we have seen that consciousness must be understood as the body’s openness upon a shared or public world. Truth and a theory about what is real (i.e., a metaphysics) must be based upon this shared perceptual world. As I open upon it, with interests and desires, and as I open upon it with others, whose interests and desires I must negotiate, truth is achieved with the agreement of profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those lived through by others, as we actively open upon the world together. This agreement, this “lateral universal,” will not be perfect or without residual differences. Yet, hopefully it will be enough for us to successfully adapt to the world together, and to do so in a way that recognizes the ethical value of all. Also, for Merleau-Ponty, the very act of the recognition of the other human being involves both sentience and sentiment, and involves them both together, since perception overlaps with the body’s motor functions. The perception of the color red, for example, tends towards abduction, while blue favors adduction (PhP 209). Moreover, since perceptual consciousness must be understood as an active relationship to the world, and since intentionality must be understood primarily as an opera-
tive intentionality, i.e., as the body’s aware, active engagement in the world, when I perceive another person’s behavior, when I perceive this person’s active engagement in the world, I am able to catch a glimpse of the meaning this behavioral orientation. Thus it is through this sort of “postural impregnation” or postural coupling, accomplished by the perceiving, sentient, feeling body that I am able to glimpse another person’s meaningful orientation toward and engagement in the world, that I am able to see another person’s humanity. In fact, the body’s very interaction with the world and others, from birth, is sensual, and thus frequently involves pleasure and pain. The mother’s or father’s gentle caress (or harsh re- buke) is sensed by the child as a sentiment. The body’s very interaction with its environment, from birth, is needful and involves a “negotiation” with the world and others to enhance pleasure and avoid pain. For this negotiation to succeed, the child must develop a “reality principle,” must check her perspectives against the world and those lived through by others (as we have just seen above). Moreover, this recognition of the other, both worldly and human, will advance through stages, as Merleau-Ponty recognizes, and as both Piaget and Kohlberg have demonstrated, if not in detail at least in broad outline. This latter point will be dealt with in greater detail below, but for now we should emphasize that sentence and sentiment are not experienced as isolated avenues of experience but are given together as intersecting elements of the whole of experience. This is the way Merleau-Ponty expresses this holistic nature of experience in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

> At the frontier of the mute and solipsist world where, in the presence of other seers, my visible is confirmed as an exemplar of a universal visibility, we reach a second or figurative meaning of vision, which will be the *intuitus mentis* or idea, a sublimation of the flesh, which will be mind or thought. But the factual presence of other bodies could not produce thought or the idea if its seeds were not in my own body. Thought is a relationship with oneself and with the world as well as a relationship with the other; hence it is established in the three dimensions at the same time. And it must be brought to appear directly in the infrastructure of vision. Brought to appear, we say, and not brought to birth.

He says much the same thing in his lecture “The Problem of Speech.”

The relations with others, intelligence, and language cannot be set out in a lineal and causal se ries: they belong to those cross-currents where *someone lives*. Speech, said Michelet, is our mother speaking. Thus while speech puts the child in a more profound relation to she who names every thing and puts being into words, it also translates this relation into a more general idea.

Moreover, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of the recognition of the other, he speaks of recognizing both the sameness and difference of the other, in spite of the claim that he reduces the other to the same. “I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thought. This is no failure to perceive others; it is the perception of others.” If the other remained an absolute other, with no recognition of same ness, then, there would be no empathy or sympathy toward the other, no genuine connection with him or her. Yet, critics rightly claim that if the other is reduced to the same, then there is no real other, just oneself. But it is precisely a balanced position that Merleau-Ponty maintains, that we must recognize the other as different from ourselves but as also similar. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, discussing Husserl, Merleau-Ponty clearly recognizes the problem of the other for Husserl’s transcendental, constituting consciousness, since, he reports, even Husserl recognizes the problem of the other, that there was something outside of consciousness that consciousness could not constitute (PhP xiv). And in “The Child Relations with Other,” as already noted, when discussing the origins of the other for the child, he clearly recognizes that the child empathizes and bonds with the other by way of the experience referred to as a “postural impregnation.”

Thus when Merleau-Ponty speaks of the rec-
ognition of the other, he clearly has in mind that this involves recognizing both the others difference and sameness.

With this brief summary of some of the main themes of Merleau-Ponty philosophy in mind, let us now proceed to consider a number of issues raised by Crowell in his above mentioned essay, “The Project of Ultimate Grounding and the Appeal to Intersubjectivity in recent Transcendental Philosophy.”

As Crowell informs us, even though Kant’s transcendental ego has largely been abandoned by contemporary scholars, some still embrace Kantian style arguments (Crowell 21). Karl-Otto Apel, for example, still seeks to argue for and to establish the conditions of the possibility of rational discourse and genuine intersubjectivity. This is how Apel puts it in “The Problem of Philosophical Foundations in Light of a Transcendental Pragmatics of Language”:

First, contrary to the view of the modern theory of knowledge from Descartes to Husserl, evidential consciousness for me . . . cannot in principle be equated with the intersubjective validity of arguments. The reason for this lies in the mediating function of language, conceived as the transcendental condition of the possibility of an intersubjectivity valid interpretation of the world. 17

And this is how Crowell expresses Apel’s position, drawing from other sources:

Since the “autonomous evidence of consciousness” only becomes philosophically relevant when the philosopher who appeals to it engages in argumentation, it is always “linguistically mediated” and thus implicated in the “a priori of language.” This a priori is not simply a matter of logically syntactic or abstract semantic rules but includes a pragmatic or “performative” dimension tied to conditions of communicative rationality. (Crowell 37) 18

A few critical comments should be offered here regarding Apel’s philosophy, for his main argument takes us back to the conditions of possibility of experience, to intellectual presuppositions, rather than remaining with experience itself, and, subsequently, rather than seeing language as a sublimation of experience that folds back upon it. More specifically, Apel is moving here from the evidence of personal, individual consciousness to the intersubjective validity of language as if they were completely different, as if language transcends personal consciousness, rather than tracing how they are connected, how perceptual consciousness is sublimated in language, how language folds back upon perception to help express more precisely what is motivated by perception, rather than grasping the chiasm between personal perception and intersubjective language. As we have seen, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, from its very beginning perceptual evidence for me occurs in the context of an experience that opens upon a shared public world. (Apel admits that the self is formed in relation to others, but for him this other is the linguistic other.) Moreover, we have already seen that perceptual experience, which already has a general side, is expressed in language, but, even more, expression itself (the means of expression, the vocal gesturing) must be grasped as a prolongation of perceptual experience. Since perception is already an active orientation toward the world, and since the word’s meaning, in part, expresses our lived-through active, interested, and even emotional encounter with the world, linguistic or vocal gesturing must be seen as a prolongation of this active perceptual encounter. Here in Apel’s work, the intersubjective expression of language transcends, rather than sublimates, personal perception. Even though Apel seems to admit that all experience must be related to the subject’s first person experience, Crowell rightly informs us that “Apel insists that this [first person] intuitive moment can have only an empirical function—evidence can only confirm what the argumentation community establishes” (Crowell 38). 19 But, we must respond, what the argumentative community establishes must be based on something, must be a sublimation of something, otherwise the intuitive consensus of language is empty and arbitrary. We have already seen
that linguistic consensus cannot be based on logic alone, since logic itself is an abstraction from experience that is patterned but also imprecise, open (for example, the front of the building opens to the back that is implied), and dialectical (with aspects influencing each other simultaneously). Also, abstract disciplines like logic and geometry have a history and occur in historical and cultural context—which remain imprecise, like a gestalt background. The consensus, then, in the most fundamental sense, must be based upon a perceptual experience that from its very beginning opens upon and intersects with a shared publicly perceptible world that continually runs beyond us.

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy accounts for how individual perception crosses into the anonymous functions of the body that carry the perceiver into a public world, whether willed or not. We have seen that his philosophy accounts for how an individual perceptual perspective, say of a room around a particular perceiver, occurs from a particular place but also opens out to and overlaps with other possible perceptual perspectives and even to a space in general. We have seen that his philosophy accounts of how an individual’s speech sublimates the perceptual and thus helps create but also opens upon an intersubjective field of linguistic meanings that crosses back into it. Yet we now see that Apel’s philosophy does not account for the crisscrossing into one another of the personal and the impersonal, of the personal and the intersubjective, of the perceptual and the linguistic. We now see that this amounts to a sort of dualistic thinking, with linguistic, intersubjective consensus set against individual perceptions, instead of having them cross into one another. Or, insofar as Apel does discuss the interchange of linguistic consensus and individual perception, perception plays only a secondary role of confirmation that comes after the linguistic consensus, but that plays no role in creating the consensus in the first place. Yet, again, we should respond, there can be no linguistic consensus without the original contribution of perception, since the consensus is created by working through or from our openness upon a publically perceptual world, is created by way of our sublimation of our shared perceptual life. Individual perceptions, which open upon and cross into a public field that crosses back into it, provide the basis for the consensus. Individual perceptions do not just provide confirmation for the linguistic consensus as an afterthought, as if the linguistic consensus came first, established who knows how. True, the consensus supports all the individual perceptions; it helps confirm each individual perceptual perspective. Yet it is also true that each individual’s perspective helps give rise to and provide the basis for the consensus. And true, I must ground knowledge in my experience, but, from the very beginning, this experience is never taken completely as mine, since it opens upon and intersects with a public field that includes others. The evidence of individual perceptual consciousness is thus philosophically relevant because it first appears to an experiencing subject as he/she opens upon a publicly perceivable world, and speech is philosophically relevant as an attempt to provide evidence because it helps articulate the subject’s openness upon this publicly perceptible world. In addition, this consensus should not and cannot confirm what is not originally drawn from the perceived. It doesn’t create the perceptual meaning. It can help express and articulate more precisely what is there. It can help frame it, and it can help frame it in a variety of ways, but the measurant (the intersubjective language) is measured against the measure, against our common perception of a really existing world. Perception, then, acts as the primary term for the creation of linguistic expressions as well as for their confirmation, and this means that the linguistic consensus doesn’t come prior to the facts but is based upon them. In brief, Apel’s transcendental argument claims that communication presupposes rules. These rules, he admits, are not primarily logical but pragmatic and performative. A speaker, he says, must recognize when his or her utterance breaks the rules of a particular
language game, and these rules are not empirical but ultimate. But, as we have just seen, these rules, acting as part of our linguistic framework, should not be regarded as ultimate grounds for the possibility of experience and communication about it but as abstractions and generalizations from it; they flow from and are suggested by experience, by a perceptual world of stable structures that we attempt to adapt to together. They don’t make experience possible but are drawn from our experience. Thus it is the perceptual experience of a publically shared world that provides even the sense of our linguistic a priori.

Crowell mentions that Apel appeals to an “ideal ‘community of sign interpretation’... as something counterfactually anticipated as the horizon of communicative interaction”—which means that no first person can occupy that position. But, Apel still doesn’t want the experiencing subject to dissolve into anonymous linguistic structures—since some subjective intentionality is still needed. Thus, Crowell claims, Apel “equivocates between phenomenological description... of transcendental experience and a neo-Kantian appeal to an anonymous transcendental principle (or ‘regulative idea’)” (Crowell 39). Yet, he continues, “the argument that Apel’s intersubjective turn fails to be self-grounding because it loses connection with the first-person perspective does not, however, turn on a claim of epistemic pre-eminence for the individual subject” (Crowell 40).

According to Crowell, Apel cannot account for my obligation to treat personal needs as intersubjective, social, ethical claims—since he “denies that there is any meaningful ‘outside’ to the community of argumentation,” i.e., there is no subject prior to linguistic exchange, for the subject is only formed in this exchange. Crowell thus concludes, this impasse has been diagnosed by Levinas: the ethical claim of the Other must reach me prior to the constitution of an interchangeable intersubjectivity; hence there is a first-person condition that eludes the transcendental subject (as community of sign interpreters) while making it possible. To ground the interchangeability presupposed by argumentation, a certain “rationalism” in Apel’s approach to subjectivity must be overcome. (Crowell 41)

Yes, we should agree, a certain rationalistic prejudice should be overcome, and it should be overcome by a phenomenological, perceptual, “knowing” subject, as has been described by Merleau-Ponty’s work, and thus not by a return to the subject of either Kant or Husserl, but by the chiasm of perception and language, of self and other, of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Thus here we must disagree with Crowell and claim that Apel’s intersubjective turn does fail to be self-grounding because it fails to ground the intersubjective argument in the lived-through perceptual experience of the community’s individual interlocutors. It fails to integrate (chiasm) the intersubjective with the subjective, the linguistic with the perceptual. (More on this below.)

Crowell does mention that Bernard Waldenfels (whose work is deeply informed by Merleau-Ponty’s, although this is not mentioned by Crowell) does take up a number of criticisms of the “rationalism” offered by both Apel and Habermas (Crowell 41–42). A few of these points should be mentioned. Both Apel and Habermas fail to account for the move from the lived-through (lived-through perception and the lifeworld) to language, from the subjective to the intersubjective. Crowell mentions that for Waldenfels both the “content” of different experiences and their “modes of organization” are specific to “particular historical-cultural lifeworlds” (Crowell 43). If the latter is the case, i.e., if modes of rational organization are specific or even relative, then, as Crowell mentions, one option Waldenfels

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must face is the reconfiguration of reason. This is an option that Waldenfels pursues and he does so by primarily following the reconfiguration already accomplished by Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological rationality becomes, most primarily, an agreement of perceptual profiles, within the individual as he or she opens upon and is actively engaged in the world, and between individuals as they open upon and engage the world together. (This agreement is of course assisted by language.) Yet, Crowell expresses his dissatisfaction with this sort of attempt to ground phenomenology in the lifeworld itself.

Is Waldenfels’ conception of a lifeworld ground a cogent one? Why, for example, does pluralism with respect not only to content but to “modes of organization of experience” not entail a performatively self-contradictory relativization of phenomenology’s own cognitive (and indeed normative) claims? And what (rational?) resources does philosophy bring to the creative cultural dialogue? Do these allow it to clarify—and eventually justify—its own genesis and functioning? (Crowell 43)

We should respond here with Merleau-Ponty’s appeal to what we have seen him refer to above as a lateral universal. Different people in different cultures during different time periods are so many ways of perceptually opening upon a common world, are so many ways of bodily being-in-the-world. Our human bodies open upon, live, and act within the world in similar ways. This similarity is not rational in the sense that each human individual falls exactly within or under an essential class concept. The similarity, rather, is lived-through, open, and ambiguous, with a multitude of differences. Yet there are overlapping experiences, family resemblances, common needs, and similar (not identical) ways of bodily being-in-the-world. It is these similar ways of organizing the world and organizing our world together that become the basis for shared rational systems. (More on this below.)

Finally, a number of more specific questions and comments raised and offered by Crowell can now be addressed, albeit briefly in summary form.

1) He asks, is the phenomenological reduction to lived-through experience self-justifying? If it isn’t, what is it that demands the phenomenological reduction? (Crowell 46).

We have seen numerous times, when discussing the phenomenological methods of Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, that one experience is questioned by another that is more accurate. This is given in experience itself. Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty the reduction is not complete; it does not and will not provide absolute certainty, some indubitable starting point for human knowledge. Merleau-Ponty agrees with Eugen Fink’s formulation of the reduction: when Fink “spoke of ‘wonder’ in the face of the world. Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis; it 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 our notice” (PhP xiii). We should first live the world, or first experience the world via lived-through perception, then pause and reflect, in order to become more fully aware of what we are experiencing. The perceptions, and perceptual “interpretations,” that provide the greatest clarity and the greatest ease of adaptation to the world and each other are the perceptions that we should accept. Since no perception is complete, since all perceptions are perspectival, no perception is absolutely certain. Some perceptions are clarifying and adaptive, yet all perceptions may be corrected or adjusted by future perceptual and adaptive experience. Some are better than others, but, again, none is certain—with the only perceptual certainty being the open ended horizon of the world within which all perceptions occur, even those that are wrong. Thus, the phenomenological reduction is self-justifying, even if not certain, because the questioning of experience—and the more accurate and adaptive answers that are implied by this questioning, which is more thoroughly
observed in the reduction—comes from experience itself.

2) Crowell asks, “if its commitment to intuitive givenness bestows no epistemological privilege, in what sense is phenomenology more justified than any other philosophy? Does the phenomenological reduction really constitute a necessary starting point?” (Crowell 46). First, we must acknowledge perceptual intuition. We can’t eliminate it. It doesn’t provide an absolute foundation, but if we eliminate it, we have nothing, since more abstract conceptual intuition, if we appeal to it, is intimately tied to it and is a sublimation of it. Second, even though we must start with it, we must continually check it against other experiences and the experiences lived-through by others, and, again, this process will never be complete. Thus, yes, perceptual intuitions, cross-checked by me and others, do provide an epistemological, philosophical starting point, one that should continually be cross-checked but that can’t be eliminated without eliminating human experience. Moreover, it can’t be eliminated without eliminating the possibility of human knowledge, since nothing else can replace it from the outside, since these attempts end up being either arbitrary, or circular, or an infinite regress.

3) Crowell proceeds to offer the following criticism of the phenomenological reduction by pointing out that “a crucial element of justification does indeed seem to be missing.” Thus, he continues, “the ground of the demand that I take responsibility for truth by subordinating myself to the reduction must be sought elsewhere” (Crowell 47). Yet, we may ask (as we have already done above), from where else? If the questioning of experience doesn’t come from experience itself, from the intuitiveness of perceptual experience, where else would it come from? One traditional answer has been from conceptual intuition and logic, but this answer is no longer widely accepted. Moreover, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty (as well as John Dewey and others) have plausibly argued that logical systems are abstractions from our lived-through perceptual encounter with the world. Conceptual systems are not outside of experience but drawn from it. Yes, they fold back on the perceptual to help organize it, but they are also measured by it—since they are originally drawn from it. Following Levinas, Crowell will offer another answer: in the ethical recognition of the other. Yet, we must reply, the recognition of the other occurs only by way of perception, i.e., sentiment for the other only occurs by way of sentiment. Crowell does admit that the engaged, practical rationality of the sort of revised phenomenology that he has considered above (that Waldenfels provides, for example) does seem to “maintain an attitude of critical questioning toward all putatively ultimate grounds while nevertheless availing himself of the intellectual resources of phenomenology” (Crowell 48). Yet he immediately questions whether this solution is satisfactory. He does agree with the “new” phenomenological approach which claims that “personhood . . . does rest upon prepersonal structures of the embodied ego” and that “the person is defined in terms of a response to a demand of practical reason.” Moreover, he continues, if this is so, if we are defined in terms of our response to the demands of others, “then the demand itself must reach the pre-personal ego—and this is just the Gestalt switch required by Levinas” (Crowell 49). Furthermore, he adds, “the problem of grounding ‘leads to the Other’ in the sense that the origin of intersubjective personhood lies in the ethical experience of a demand that ‘calls my freedom into question.’ I demand justification of myself as a person only because it has already been demanded of me, as ego or ‘freedom,’ by the Other” (Crowell 49). And finally, he argues here that “Levinas suggests that the origin of intersubjectivity be traced to an ethical modality of experience, viz., conscience, ‘the shame that freedom feels for itself.’ Because ‘philosophy consists in knowing critically . . . it begins with conscience’” (Crowell 49). We must reply that, yes, Merleau-Ponty, like the “new” phenomenologists characterized by Crowell, does recognize that the other is given in embodied, pre-reflective experi-
ence. Yet, the other cannot be an absolute other—as the other is for Levinas. Or rather, to say this more accurately, for Merleau-Ponty the recognition of the other requires both sameness and difference, not just difference. We need to connect self and other, sense and sentiment, perception and ethics, not separate them, as Levinas and Crowell attempt to do.

Moreover, we must respond to the claim regarding the origin of intersubjectivity in the ethical recognition of the other with the counter claim no; it begins with the whole person’s attempt to adapt to the world and others. As we have witnessed above, thought (epistemology) develops as a relationship with oneself, the world, and others, and these three relationships develop simultaneously. As Crowell and Levinas express it here, ethics trumps epistemology, the ethical recognition of the other occurs prior to epistemology and helps bring it about. Contrarily, we have seen that for Merleau-Ponty knowing the world and adapting to it with others occurs contemporaneously, that is to say, here the epistemological and recognition of the other are co-present, since I try to grasp the world with others and this implies that I recognize them. But this recognition isn’t the offering of the “gift” of my world to them (See Crowell 50). I recognize others as we open upon the world together. I don’t recognize the other, and then constitute an intersubjective world. This doesn’t describe the world and our experience of it as we ordinarily live it together. Rather, I recognize the other as being in a world that we appear in together. Yes, I can individuate from this shared world, and I will never literally live the individual thoughts of another. Yet our experiences can overlap, since our perceptions open upon a common world. Thus, when I “reason” with the other there is something common to discuss, to reason about, our commonly given perceptual world.

Finally, we must again consider Piaget and Kohlberg and the child’s cognitive and moral development. In doing so, we see that the sense of self, other, and morality develop together and they tend to develop over time. The child gradually learns how to negotiate the world and others, with a sense of morality, at first associated with blind obedience to authority up to the grasping of a universal principle of justice. We see, then, if we take Piaget and Kohlberg seriously, that the sense of morality develops along with the child’s cognitive ability, thus confirming Merleau-Ponty’s point above about aspects of human experience developing together. Thus, within the context of what Crowell and others are referring to here as practical reason, our moral sense is not separate from what we should broadly characterize as our intersubjective epistemological awareness and development. Finally, Crowell concludes that “transcendental philosophy is a philosophy of evidence not because there are epistemological ultimates, but because it arises from an [ethical] obligation to constitute a world that can be shared with others” and, moreover, that “transcendental philosophy is possible precisely because it is necessary” (Crowell 50). We have witnessed above that Merleau-Ponty has argued otherwise: the relationships between oneself, the other, and the world tend to develop together, and the necessary must follow the actual and is a sublimation of it. The recognition of the other is contingent part of experience. My attempt to justify my experience to the other is based upon the contingent fact that we must act in the world together. For me to be able to communicate with the other, we must have a common world upon which our experience opens we open. This common world, not some transcendental condition, is the basis of a shared language. The “transcendental” for Merleau-Ponty must be based upon and drawn from our actual experience.
NOTES


4. Harrison Hall has written an insightful essay about how Merleau-Ponty recasts the distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori: “The A Priori and the Empirical in Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception,” Philosophy Today 23 (1979): 304–09, and it is worth drawing the reader’s attention to it here. See also the profound piece by M. C. Dillon, “Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty,” Kant-Studien 78 (1978): 403–23. Mention should also be made of Saul Kripke’s Naming and Necessity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), compiled from lectures delivered in 1972, which makes claims, in some cases, similar to those made here by Merleau-Ponty. See especially pages 34–39, 63, 122–23, 158–60. It is worth noting that Kripke is frequently, and deservedly, lauded as a profound and original thinker, in part because of his own reformulation of the a priori and the a posteriori distinction, yet Merleau-Ponty made similar points almost thirty years earlier.

5. Charles Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” in After Philosophy: End or Transformation?, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 464–88, see especially 472ff. For Kant’s refutation of idealism see Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1929), 244ff. For comments regarding Kant’s refutation of idealism see Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, xvii. For comments regarding the inconsistency in Kant’s thought, see Phenomenology of Perception, 220–21, where Merleau-Ponty states the following. “Kant has already shown that the a priori is not knowable in advance of experience, that is, outside of facticity. . . . Insofar as the a priori in his philosophy retains the character of what must necessarily be, as opposed to what in fact exists and is determinate in human terms, this is only to the extent the he has not followed out his program, which was to define our cognitive powers in terms of our factual conditions, and which necessarily compelled him to set every conceivable being against the background of the world.”


20. See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 249, where the author uses the French term *mesurant* (translated as “measurant” in English) but in a different context.

21. See Karl-Otto Apel “The Problem of Philosophical Foundations in Light of a Transcendental Pragmatics of Language”: “when I perform the act of doubting my existence—an act that is explicitly expressed in the sentence ‘I doubt herewith, now, that I exist’—I refute the sense of that very sentence for myself and virtually, for every dialogue partner. In other words, the propositional component contradicts the performativity component of the speech act expressed by that self-referential sentence” (278).

22. We should note here that Merleau-Ponty does not deny the use of algorithms and other abstract, shorthand means of going directly to a conclusion, that is, to do so without the need of traversing all the formula’s intervening steps, and without the need of tracing these steps back to their perceptual origins. Yet, he says, at some point these formulas must relate back to the world as we live it perceptually, otherwise they remain empty abstractions. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O’Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 106. Originally published as *La Prose du Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

23. We now know, since Gödel, that logical systems cannot be self-justifying.