We should revisit Merleau-Ponty’s late essay “From Mauss to Levi-Strauss,”140 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.”

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 transcendental 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 “différance” is the productive play of signs, the productive play of linguistic meaning. Différance means to both defer and to differ. “The circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself” (“Différance” 9) and does 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 trace 1 refers to, presence, then is the trace 1 of the trace 2, the trace 1 of the erasure of the trace 2.” 150

Trace 1 above represents language and refers to trace 2, 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.” (“Différance,” 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 sublimes, 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-stace*, 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. 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. 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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.