Merleau-Ponty’s Concept of Reason
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I. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The Western world view is currently being challenged with a seriousness that has perhaps no parallel in Western history. This challenge can be observed in the attempts to establish a multicultural perspective in the United States, in attempts to arrive at a more international perspective in the geopolitical sphere, and in the rigorous attempts to deconstruct the Western logic of presence with the postmodern logic of difference.

Some of this challenge can undoubtedly be regarded as positive, for it in part represents a move toward the recognition of each culture by all the others rather than the domination by one of all the rest. However, is there not also something positive in what is being rejected? Is there not something worth saving in the rational methods that gave the world Western science and Western methods of rational confirmation? Merleau-Ponty's work, with its striking balance, does save from the Western Weltanschauung much of what is positive while undermining much of what is negative in it. Even though his work does much to establish a language and a logic of difference, he does not completely abandon the Western logic of presence. He comes between the classical Western position and those that would totally deconstruct it.

In this paper, I will sketch out three concepts of reason, the traditional reason or logic of presence, Merleau-Ponty's logic of presence within difference, and the deconstructionist's logic of difference. Since traditional logic's reliance on judicative claims and the principles of identity and noncontradiction is so crucial to the Western concept of rationality, and since the other positions respond to it and are in part defined by it, I will begin the paper with a brief summary of the traditional position. Since the logic of difference is in some ways closely related to Merleau-Ponty's position, I will discuss this position along with Merleau-Ponty's, when the similarity or difference makes it apparent to do so. And finally, since I
believe that Merleau-Ponty's position is the one that is the most plausible, I will attempt to treat it fully. My secondary purpose here is to compare and contrast these positions to each other. I will not attempt to construct detailed arguments using Merleau-Ponty's view against the other two. My main goal is to bring to greater awareness the richness, plausibility and balance of Merleau-Ponty's undeservedly overlooked position. I will, however, where it is appropriate, point out the direction of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of these alternative positions.

II. THE LOGOCENTRISM OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The brief comments about Western philosophy that compose the following section make no claim to originality or profundity of insight. However, since Western philosophy's logocentrism is so central to the Western tradition, and since it is the position both Merleau-Ponty and the deconstructionists respond to, a brief summary of its main themes is called for. This brief exposition will, I hope, bring greater clarity to the discussion that will follow.

The classical Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is often referred to as classical realism, a position defined as follows: a structured reality exists independent of the human mind that the human mind is capable of grasping; humans have the capacity to use rational methods to grasp this reality; this reality, in fact, is structured like reason. This sort of realism is very clear in Plato's philosophy, where an intelligible reality made of eternal forms or essences (abstract class concepts) can be grasped by the human intellect in isolation from the world of particular sense objects, objects which nevertheless mirror or imperfectly copy the rational ideals. Here reality (at first the intelligible world of forms and subsequently the sensible world of particular objects) is clearly structured by or like reason, thus creating rational forms that are external and that pre-exist human thought.

Aristotle's work is strikingly more empirical and material than the work of his great rationalist/idealist teacher Plato. Yet similar realist principles can be found in his work as well, for even though Aristotle criticizes Plato by saying that he does not see how the form (essence) of a thing can exist
apart from the thing itself, he (Aristotle) simply implants these rational forms into the material, sensible things. The material things contain a rational essence or core. For Aristotle this rational core is fixed. It does not evolve into other forms, and even though it exists in material objects and is known empirically, it is regarded by Aristotle as eternal and therefore as pre-existent to human thought. Once again reality is structure by a pre-existent reason.³

As is well known, this logocentrism can also be found in Descartes' philosophy. Descartes' famous analysis of a piece of wax claims that it is reason (not the senses) that grasps that the essential property of natural objects is extension in space. He subsequently argues that as a geometer in possession of the abstract principles of logic and mathematics he has all that he needs to reason about nature and all of nature's objects. For Descartes, these principles and ideas are innately given, and they are thought to match the pre-established rational structures of reality. Once again, all of reality is structured by/like reason, in this case geometrical and deductive reason.⁴

Prior to Hume, when philosophers claimed that reality was structured by reason, more often than not they meant structured by the principles of deductive logic, thus often confusing the boundaries between deduction and induction. Hume's work goes a long way in clarifying the distinction between these respective methodologies, for, as is now well know, he very clearly draws the distinction between what he calls "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact." "Relations of ideas" are established by an internal relation of meaning, while, to the contrary, "matters of fact" are established by empirical data. Prior to Hume, as is evident in Descartes' philosophy, the tendency was to confuse the boundaries between these two types of judgment. Nature was seen to be structured by reason in the strong sense, that is, by geometrical and deductive reason. Yet even after Hume, when the claim that reality is structured by/like deductive reason is given up, the principles of traditional logic and reason are still taken to underlie all judgments about the real world.⁵

This will become clearer once we see just what these principles are and discuss how these principles were intended to function. Traditional philosophy's answer to the question "what is reason?" is
often that reason is logic, and that logic is the science of correct thinking, the science of moving from one judgment or set of judgments to another judgment correctly. Humans think correctly, this view claims, when they follow rules of inference, that is, when they correctly move from one statement to the next following rules of inference. These rules of inference are taken to be based on the logical principles of identity and noncontradiction, defined respectively as "what is is," that "a thing or concept is identical with itself," that "A is A" and as "the same thing or concept cannot both be and not be something at the same time and in the same respect," "the same thing cannot be both A and not A at the same time and in the same respect". Whether the rules of inference are immediate, such as the well-known "square of opposition," or whether the rules are mediate, such as in the classical syllogism that connects two terms by identifying them with a mediating third term, all principles of traditional inference rely and rest on the principles of identity and noncontradiction. All correct thinking, all inference was to be based on these principles, principles that were, for the most part, taken to be self-evident and, as has been discussed above, as representing the very structure of reality.

An additional point needs to be made here, for not only does traditional logic deal with the correct movement from one judgment to another, it necessarily deals with the expression of a single judgment. Logic must deal with individual judgments because they are the basic units of an argument, the series of judgments connected by rules of inference, and, furthermore, logic must deal with terms because these are the basic units of a judgment. Terms are traditionally taken to refer to concepts that in turn refer to either individual things (or persons) or to an essence (to a kind of thing) and serve as either subject or predicate in a given judgment. For example, in the statement "Socrates is mortal," "Socrates" refers to an individual and "mortal" refers to a kind of thing, the kind of thing that dies. Thus, logic must express terms and judgments because these are the basic units of an argument. Once again, logic (judgments and their terms) relies on the principle of identity and noncontradiction. This is evident with the naming of an individual, for when naming Socrates, he must remain self-identical. Socrates is and remains Socrates and not something or someone else, and this must be so for him to be named. This is also evident with terms
that signify an essence (a class concept or kind of thing), for a dog is a dog and not a cat and must remain
so. Thus, the traditional concept of reason and logic relies on the principle of identity and
noncontradiction at every turn. Not only does it use the principles to make correct arguments, to move
from one judgment to another, but it uses them to make single judgments and even to articulate single
terms. Traditional reason and logic are therefore thoroughly judicative and categorical.

Furthermore, since terms are basic to both deductive and inductive propositions, the judicative
principles of identity and noncontradiction are basic to induction as well as deduction. Inductive
inference, as it is understood in traditional Western philosophy, moves from claims (or judgments) about
particulars to general claims (judgments about an entire class). After repeated observation of like sense
particulars, a generalization is made of all particulars of this kind. For example, "all the particular swans I
have observed thus far are white" is generalized to "all swans are white." The principles of identity and
noncontradiction are operative in the recognition of a concrete particular, in the recognition of the
similarity of one particular with another, and of the generalization to all particulars of its kind. For
example, recognizing this particular swan as remaining the same over time relies on the principle of
identity, as does the recognition of its similarity with other swans, for certain characteristics are being
identified, as does the generalization of certain characteristics to all swans, for again certain
characteristics of all swans are being identified. The traditional concept of reason, then, relies on
principles of identity and noncontradiction from top to bottom; they are used to establish terms and
judgments of both inductive and deductive arguments, as well as to establish rules of inference for both
induction and deduction. For traditional philosophy all of reality must be understood to be structured
rationally, either in the inductive or deductive sense. In addition, the principles of rationality were often
taken to be self-evident and universal as well as pre-existent either in a realm of ideas or in nature itself.

Moreover, this traditional idea that reality is structured by/like reason is not just an
epistemological or metaphysical claim, for one also finds reason behind the scenes in political and social
treatises as well. Locke, for example, says that the laws of nature and of human nature follow the laws of
reason, which state, he claims, that all being equal, no man ought harm another in his life, liberty and property. Locke's claim that all human beings are equal is obviously a politically progressive one, especially when considered against the background of the hierarchy of natures of the medieval period, a hierarchy that was of course supported by supposedly indubitable principles of reason. Yet many have argued that the rationality and "rational man" of the Enlightenment (and the corresponding ascendency of capitalism) were just as exclusionary in practice, for anyone who did not accept the "rationality" of capitalist property rights could easily be regarded as unreasonable or irrational. This has led some to claim that it is those who are in the social positions of power and privilege that determine what it is to be "rational." Yet these determinations are regarded by those harboring them as expressing the pre-established principles of nationality. Once again, here in the political arena, certain principles of reason are taken to represent the structures of reality. Political and social consequences clearly follow from the traditional position that all of nature, including human nature, is structured by a pre-existent reason.

III. MERLEAU-PONTY'S CONCEPT OF REASON

Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the traditional approach --- the approach that says all of nature and human nature are structured by/like reason --- is that it is too abstract, that the principle of identity as it is expressed in traditional logic is an abstraction from experience that is then unconsciously projected back into nature, that it takes a result for its absolute starting point, that, in a word, it takes the abstract principles of reason as pre-existent. Merleau-Ponty will argue that there is something beneath the judicative experience that reflective judgments are an abstraction from, a lived experience that is more ambiguous and open, an experience that is a gestalt of dialectical relationships. He is critical of identity in the sense of an abstract principle prior to experience that provides that experience with its immutable conditions of possibility, and he is critical of presence in the sense of a separate individual defined completely and in complete isolation from all else. He does not, however, totally abandon the concept of identity or presence. Identity and presence must be placed back into the context of lived experience, an
experience which is a spatial and temporal gestalt field, an experience in which all the background elements come to participate in the appearance of the foreground, the present. For Merleau-Ponty there is identity (the presence of a perceptual form or style) only within the context of difference, only within spatial and temporal gestalt fields. (VI113ff, 131-132)\textsuperscript{16}

A brief discussion of the general outlines of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and his philosophy of language is now called for, for it is only in this way that one can understand his philosophy of reason. In all of Merleau-Ponty's major works, he seeks to come between the philosophical alternatives of empiricism and materialism on the one hand and rationalism and idealism on the other. He is able to integrate many elements from these alternative approaches, yet he remains critical of both. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's works are replete with a variety of arguments against both empiricism and rationalism. Needless to say, for anyone familiar with his works, the richness and variety of Merleau-Ponty's arguments cannot be repeated or even adequately summarized here in a brief journal article. All I can do here, as I have attempted to do above, is point in the direction of one of the main arguments that has relevance for the present discussion. Merleau-Ponty claims that both the empiricist and rationalist attempt to abstractly reconstruct experience rather than returning to it in order to begin by living in it. (See PhP viii-x, 26ff, 30-31, 54) Instead of beginning with an already defined world in-itself or with a reflective intellectual consciousness for-itself, Merleau-Ponty begins with and always returns to the lived body in contact with the world. He is \textit{the} philosopher of the body, and he immediately places the body in the world, yet the body is not an object just like any other, for it is the object that allows the world to experience itself. Through the human body the world folds over on itself and becomes aware of itself. The human body is in a chiasmatic relationship with the world. I am able to feel and touch the world with my hand, and I feel and touch the world inside my hand. Yet, in order to feel, my hand must be capable of being touched from the outside. There is a partial blending and crisscrossing of my touching with the touched, to a point where I am not sure where my experience ends and the world begins. My bodily
experience is caught in a world that runs beyond it and includes it. Out of this lived through blend comes an experience in general, an experience of which I am a part (VI 135ff).

Since for Merleau-Ponty consciousness is the body's awareness of the world, the world turning over on itself through the human body,\textsuperscript{17} there is for human beings no "God's eye view" of the universe and its objects. (VI 113) The world is always experienced from a place within it. Where the active body and the world meet, there meanings are formed, meanings to which both the world and the active body contribute. The human body opens to a prepersonal perceptual field or, more accurately, to a field of fields, the visual, tactile fields, etc., synergically blending to form one field or horizon. All perceptual experience and the simplest element of perceptual experience is a gestalt, a figure on a background. (PhP 3-4) This gestalt is not a sum of isolated parts in blind external relation to each other but a whole in which the parts participate, in which the parts define each other in reciprocal relationships. For Merleau-Ponty the very act of perception is "a going beyond" the facts (\textit{Signs}, 67-68),\textsuperscript{18} for the parts (facts) of the visual field are related internally by meaning. This gestalt meaning or form is not therefore simply copied from a set of related facts in themselves. Certainly, it cannot be denied that the facts or parts of the visual field are related to each other externally, yet the aware, synergic body pulls together the elements that are dispersed in space and makes them present to one another, relates them meaningfully under an idea, the perceptual form.\textsuperscript{19} This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he says that perception is "a going beyond" the facts. Lived through perception already involves engaged bodily movement and is already meaningful.

For Merleau-Ponty an active bodily perception is always a transcendence, a going beyond in the sense that it opens a meaning: it relates the elements of the field meaningfully, gives the facts a sense. Perception, for Merleau-Ponty, thus entails movement of the body, an orientation, and it is already an expression --- a creation of meaning. (\textit{Signs}, 67-68, 81) Human bodily gesture, which is the beginning of human communication, is then, for Merleau-Ponty, the prolongation of already oriented perception. Gesture is at first a lived through expression of an oriented, engaged perceptual encounter with the world.
The human body has the power to appropriate and to prolong oriented perception as gestures, to use bodily gestures to express a meaning. (PhP, Part One, Chapter 6, especially 187-189, and 193-194)

When my awareness of others and the other's awareness of me becomes explicit for me, when my gestures explicitly aim at others (instead of moving spontaneously toward or away from the environment), this is the insertion of abstract ideas into a world of mute perception, for my experience now becomes an explicit example of a universal visibility. Gesture becomes speech: it seeks now to communicate with others. Gesture now sublimes the perceptual idea (the sensual gestalt form or style) into a universal idea, into an idea that is shared by others. My perceptual idea becomes an example of what others can and do experience. This is possible because our bodily gestures can slip from one human body to another, because our bodies open onto a visual field that includes both of us, because our own individuated experience is cut out of this visibility in general, out of this anonymous Visibility. (VI 139, 143-145; PhP 184-185)

My perceptual idea becomes an example of what others can also experience in the following way. Through continued perceptual disclosure I can check my perceptual idea against the world upon which it opens, the world that it doubles by the body's folding back on itself. I can throw my experience in and out of focus in order to arrive at an identifying pattern or style (what others have called an essence). I can compare it with other experiences of a similar style and form families of more general styles. In doing this I am not practicing Husserl's Wesenschau (intuition of essences) because there is no eidetic variation in an imagination apart from the perceived. Nor am I doing simple induction as a "pure inventory of constants in themselves." (VI 116; Primacy of Perception, 67ff) Experiences clarify one another, check one another. Profiles flow into one another (Ineinander) to form a style, a pattern or a relatively stable gestalt and even a family of styles that do not simply account for the greatest number of facts but clarifies them, that grasps and helps formulate their sense. (VI 116) And finally, I can describe my experience to others. We can check (confirm or deny) each other's experience because our gestures overlap and because our gestures open to a shared perceptual world. It is through this entire process that my perceptual idea or
gestalt becomes explicitly articulate, becomes freed from my own immediate experience, and becomes an example of a universal idea. (VI 116-117)

My perceptual idea is made more abstract and is finally "detached" from my own experience by this gesturing toward others. Gestures now open to and refer to a field of meanings. These meanings do not emigrate outside of all bodies, says Merleau-Ponty, for they are attached to the less heavy body of speech. (VI 153) Meanings or thoughts are in a chiasmatic relationship with their gestures, just as the body is in a chiasmatic relationship with the world. Just as the perceptual world folds back on the body to help pull its perceptual functions together (as for example the touched folds back on the touching), the field of meanings folds back on its own means of expression, the linguistic gesture or the act of speech, in order to help pull it together. For Merleau-Ponty there is no thought without speech (PhP 177ff), yet thought helps unify the act of speech. (VI 154)

Just as the body is dimensional, a splitting apart of the body as perceiver and perceived, just as experience is therefore a hinging back and forth between the body as touching and touched, a touching/touched that is spanned or unified by the body and the world, so also the visible is dimensional, a gestalt field, a field of differential elements that articulate a cohesive visible; so also gesturing is dimensional, for it sublimates the perceptual and produces a field of different sounds that articulate a rhythm or sense, a field of meanings; and so also these meanings themselves are differential, for the meaning of abstract thought is not independent of the differential rhythms of its linguistic expression. (VI 149-155)

What, then, does this brief summary of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and philosophy of language tell us about his notion of reason and logic? As was briefly observed above, Merleau-Ponty criticizes traditional empiricism and rationalism for starting with the abstract principles and judgments and for unconsciously projecting them back into the world, for taking these principles as pre-existent and seeing all things as displaying their rational structure. Traditional philosophy categorizes nature, makes its objects into separately fixed things with completely defined essences, makes them a reflection of an
abstract and pre-existent analytic reason. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty starts with a lived through bodily perception that is (1) concrete, ambiguous and open, and (2) differential, that is, a gestalt in which the parts participate in reciprocal relations to create a meaning. Merleau-Ponty then moves to abstract thought as expressed in language, a thought and language which follow the perceptual and are its sublimation. Consequently, (1) thought and language are open, "a going beyond," just as perception is, and (2) thought and language are differential, a gestalt, a background of differential sounds or meanings that also contain a foreground, a presence, a signification, a reference to a meaning or a thing.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, abstract thought and language, including the abstract principles of traditional logic, must have their source in lived experience. For Merleau-Ponty the principle of identity, if it is to have a viable meaning, must have its source in lived perception, in lived perception's blending of profiles, in the agreement of one moment of experience with the next. I am able to connect or identify abstract thoughts from one moment to the next because my lived bodily experience "interconnects with itself and connects with that of others by opening upon one sole world . . ." If there were no connection (unity or partial identity) between the moments of bodily experience that imperceptibly slip into one another, there would be no experience, not even difference. For difference is comparison and without one moment to compare to the next, if moments just drop off from each other, there could be no comparison or deferring and there would be no experience at all. Or, at the very least, one would simply have instantaneous flashes of experience with no connection to each other. In a word, one would have no experience. Yet there is experience. There is a unity of experience over time. For Merleau-Ponty this unity of experience over time is not just an abstract creation of language nor an abstract condition for the possibility of experience. Rather, the unity of experience over time as an abstract concept finds its origin in the unity of lived bodily duration. This unity is not therefore accomplished by a transcendental ego nor a reflective, judicative consciousness. It is accomplished by the prereflective body, the body as lived through, the body as a synergic whole that aims at or opens onto one sole world. (VI 141-142)
The lived duration of the body is thus the source of unity in experience. But, again, it must be remembered this is not the unifying of a transcendental subject nor even of an embodied subject standing over against the world. Lived bodily experience aims at the world and blends with it. Lived experience is between subjectivism and objectivism. It is a lived through blend of the body subject with the world. Consequently, when one thinks, along with Merleau-Ponty, that lived bodily duration is the source of unity in experience, one must understand the body as a pre-personal être à, as ek-stase, as being-at the world with which it blends. (PhP 70, 429; VI 136, 141-142) Lived bodily duration unifies experience because it is the experience of one sole body blending with one sole world. The unity of the body and the unity of the world blend together to form the unity of lived experience. Yet the body is also the source of difference (1) because the body is dimensional, a perceiver that never completely coincides with itself as perceived (VI 147-148), and (2) because the body is being-at, an aiming beyond itself, is itself the "original elsewhere." (VI 254) The lived through body is somehow the source of both unity and cohesion on the one hand and dehiscence and difference on the other. In the lived through body there is unity and presence within difference. (VI 142)

This introduces an issue that I must deal with briefly in order to properly understand Merleau-Ponty's concept of reason, that is, the issue of the metaphysics of presence. The metaphysics of presence (along with the principle of identity) is found consistently in Western philosophies and is defined as the position that relies on the coincidence of consciousness to being and that privileges the present moment over the past and future. Nancy Holland reports to us that Derrida hesitantly admitted to a class of graduate students that Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* falls into the philosophy of consciousness and presence, yet, he left open the question of whether this is true of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Derrida's claim could be challenged even with regard to *Phenomenology of Perception*, but the charge of being a philosophy of consciousness and presence definitely cannot be claimed with respect to *The Visible and the Invisible*. For Merleau-Ponty, in both of these texts, presence is not a coincidence of consciousness and being nor of one moment of experience with itself. Consciousness (especially in VI)
is bodily awareness of the world in which the body is immersed and engulfed. Humans experience the world through the body's thickness, through its situatedness, and thus from a point of view. There is no all-sided view, no complete view of or fusion with the object. Yet just because there is no complete fusion or coincidence does not mean there is no experience at all of the visible (VI 122-123), as Derrida seems to claim.27

The visibly present for Merleau-Ponty is the simultaneity of the spatial and temporal.28 Since the simplest element of experience is a figure on a spatial background, the background elements must be seen as coming together to form the foreground. This foreground, this presence, is provisional and fluid, for the body and the world constantly shift with respect to their spatial relationship to each other. For Merleau-Ponty the temporal is likewise a gestalt, for even though the present movement is emphasized, it always flows into and occurs with a gradually receding past and gradually approaching future. The present is emphasized because that is where (when) there is a coincidence of consciousness with being. (PhP 422) What Merleau-Ponty means here is that consciousness is at a greater distance from its past and its future than it is from its present. He does not mean that consciousness is in full possession of itself in the present, for the present moment continuously shades into the past and moves toward the future, forming a unity of time from within. (PhP 422) The present moment, then, is also a gestalt, for the temporal background of the past and future are internally connected to the present moment and come together to help form it. Thus the present moment is privileged because it is more coincident with the present than with its past or future, yet this coincidence is never complete. Holland does recognize this qualified coincidence or presence in Merleau-Ponty's work but also goes on to emphasize "the internal divisions of the present moment, its non-presence" in order to point out a similarity to Derrida's logic or language of difference.29 While I whole-heartedly agree that these similarities exist (and Holland does an excellent job of showing just how they do), I would just as emphatically argue that vast differences separate Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. First of all, Derrida abandons the presence of perceptual consciousness for what appears to be an autonomous language of difference.30 Merleau-Ponty, to the contrary, embraces a
qualified or gestalt perceptual present, a presence within difference, a presence that then sublimates these structures into a differential language. Derrida thus jettisons the idea of a perceptional foundation for experience and language, while Merleau-Ponty makes a qualified perception the founding term for an abstract thought and language. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty accepts a qualified philosophy of presence. While it is true that he does accept the differential element of experience, the gestalt structure of experience, he nevertheless argues that these gestalt elements come together and provisionally hold together to form a present. This is something that Derrida would not accept. Yet it is obviously also different from traditional philosophy's concept of the pure presence of consciousness to being. For Merleau-Ponty, presence is not complete coincidence. Presence is the provisional stopping up of experience (VI 113), the provisional coming together of the spatial and temporal gestalt, a partial agreement or identity of the moments of experience through time.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, there is a unity to experience, and this unity is produced by the lived cohesion of the body, as was explained, and by the cohesion of the world, by the fact that the body opens onto one world, onto a world that remains there (and remains one) no matter how many of its particulars are nullified. There is a partial identity of one moment of lived through experience with the next and so on. There is an identity, a presence, yet it is connected to a field of differences. Thus at the level of abstract thought one can move from thought to thought by the traditional principle of identity but one must remember its source in lived experience, an experience that is open and differential, that provides presence and identity only within difference. For Merleau-Ponty the essences or abstract forms, including the abstract forms of thought (such as the principle of identity), must be a sublimation of lived perceptual form. The forms of thought, the forms in which we think, are abstractions from a blending of perspectives and from a unity of bodily experience through time.

We think with an open principle of identity that has its source in the blending of perspectives, in the unity of experience over time, which in turn has its source in the unity of the phenomenal body and the world. One must not separate forms of thought or essences from bodily perceptual experience in order
to give them an independent status either in the world itself as a pre-existing reason or in a realm of logical abstraction - which the world is then taken to reflect. We have seen that for Merleau-Ponty form (or essence) is originally perceptual form, form that coagulates at the heart of the perceptual field. There is no essence or form apart from the facts or the perceptual field. Form is the differential elements of the perceptual field related to one another reciprocally. Form is the "invisible" or implied lines of force that come together between the elements of the visual field and that help articulate the visible foreground.

We have also seen that for Merleau-Ponty the abstract form that finds its expression in language is a sublimation of the perceptual form, a sublimation that goes beyond the perceptual, that develops its own sense but without ever completely abandoning the flesh of the world, of the body and of speech.

The tendency in traditional Western philosophy has been to give abstract ideas an independent status. That is to say, there has been a tendency to conceive definitions, axioms, principles, etc., as independent essences or ideals that already contain their own ideas and possible relations of ideas. In Merleau-Ponty's view, as was just observed, one should not consider ideas as having independent existence, for abstract ideas are a sublimation of a perceptual gestalt. In addition, the reflection and the intellectual abstraction that produces these ideas, if it is authentic, sees itself as coming second, as based on a prior perceptual experience. Nor should one think that the possible relations of ideas are already contained in their definitions, for this would be true only if one were to draw a circle, for example, in the sand as a physical object. But the definition of a circle as an idea does not already contain all its possible relations. (Prose 122-129) Abstract knowledge like that found in mathematics and logic "advances like a crab," Merleau-Ponty says, looking back at "its point of departure." (Prose128) Abstract knowledge is a reconstruction of the original definition that includes the original in it. Yet with abstract knowledge like mathematical algorithms "... we are dealing with a transcendence [from a definition toward an open possibility of meaning] and not a static identity [of a conclusion with its hypothesis], and here as in language [and in perception], truth is not an adequation but anticipation, repetition and slippage of meaning." (Prose 129) For Merleau-Ponty abstract thinking thus involves or uses the principle of identity:
the conclusion is constructed with the hypothesis in mind, a construction that brings with it (and thus *identifies* with) the meaning of the hypothesis. Yet since there is something new, there is slippage beyond the original meaning. It is not *just* repetition. (*Prose* 122-129)

Thus for Merleau-Ponty there is a movement of thought, of sense, that relies in part on the principle of identity, on a unity (sameness) of meaning. I construct a conclusion by looking back at the hypothesis. I construct it with a similar (if not quite identical) meaning. Yet this construction is not pregiven in a world of ideas. Other constructions were and remain possible, for there are no fixed meanings in the hypothesis. Its terms are defined within the context of difference. The hypothesis and its terms have a meaning only within an open horizon of meanings. There is no fixed identity. There is no fixed identity of a term, of one term with another, of a hypothesis, or of the hypothesis with its conclusion. Meanings (either perceptual or conceptual) are open; they are formed in a field and get their meaning by their gestalt relationship to that field. Meanings, terms, statements, and the objects to which they refer have a provisional identity, an identity within difference, within a horizon of rebounding, vibrating meanings. Meanings therefore have an *open* identity. Thought (even abstract mathematical thought) has its openness as well as its identity. Humans think according to the principle of identity, for profiles blend with one another and we reconstruct a conclusion with a hypothesis in mind, with the same or a similar meaning in mind, but our thought is also open, for there is *new* meaning, slippage, a going beyond.

Even though Merleau-Ponty attempts to undermine a logic of presence and identity, a logic that makes everything including human beings into a thing fixed by abstract, pre-existent categories, he does not just develop a negative logic difference, as the deconstructionists do. Deconstruction develops a logic which claims that language is simply a system of differences with no positive terms, that terms always defer to other terms, that signifiers refer only to other signifiers and so on.33 Here "presence," "identity," and "perceptual thing" are creations of a deferring logic or language. For Merleau-Ponty, as was observed above, the human body opens to a perceptual world that already includes it and others like it. Where my
lived bodily experiences come together, and where they come together with the experience of others, there meanings are formed. These perceptual ideas can then be sublimated by means of the linguistic gesture, the act of speech, into more abstract ideas. Language (as well as the abstract principles of logic expressed in it) is thus not cut off from the perceptual. Nor does language create it or completely form it. Perception, Merleau-Ponty claims, acts as a pedestal upon which language rests and that language folds back upon to help express. (PhP 127) Perception and language thus form a relationship of non-reciprocal reversibility. Traditional logic, with its principles of identity and noncontradiction, has its roots in prereflective bodily contact with the world, in the agreement of perceptual profiles and the moments of experience, in the cohesion of the body and the world. The principles of traditional logic therefore are not arbitrary or merely created by language. For Merleau-Ponty they are considerably more open than they are for traditional logic, for identity or presence is now formed within a gestalt field of differences. When we think, we connect similar meanings to each other, yet thoughts and words continually refer to new meanings.

Merleau-Ponty's position is thus superior to the traditional view which is too abstract and dogmatic, to a position that unknowingly projects its abstractions back into nature and takes them as expressing the truth, to a position that in many cases has had dire consequences for non-Western cultures and peoples. Merleau-Ponty's position is also superior to the postmodern or post-traditional view which cuts language and logic off from perception, to a position that has no source for the meanings of language other than language itself, to a position that consequently ends up being a sort of linguistic idealism.

For Merleau-Ponty the principles of thought and logic are not absolute, for the identification of the profiles of my experience and of my experience with others must be continually accomplished. There is no pre-existent reason in nature or in a realm of ideas, and identification or presence has meaning only within an open field of spatial and temporal difference. Merleau-Ponty's logic is a logic that is open and open to the perspectives of others (and to other non-Western cultures), yet it is not an arbitrary
creation, for it rests on the cohesion of the body, of the cohesion of all human bodies with each other, and of the cohesion of the world to which all these bodies open in a similar fashion.

ENDNOTES


6. See Andrew Bachhuber, *Introduction to Logic* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), 74ff. I am citing Bachhuber's work because it is so clear and because it is clearly representative of traditional Western logocentrism.

7. See Bachhuber, 122-132, 138.

8. Bachhuber: "The laws and rules of logic are not arbitrary enactments...We submit to these laws and rules only because we see that they must be as they are - that is, the evidence compels us to submit." 5. "Simply because we are rational beings, we spontaneously know the more general laws of correct thinking and are necessarily subject to them." 6.

9. Bachhuber: "Notice that this principle [of identity] is true of things as they are in themselves and independently of their being thought of." 123.


17. Merleau-Ponty's view is not a subjectivism, as is sometimes charged, for intentionality is not the reflective yet centrifugal intentionality of a single, intellectual consciousness. Intentionality is an intentionality that occurs within being, an operative bodily intentionality that is caught in being and influenced by it and that is being itself. Consciousness is being experiencing itself through the human body. Consciousness is the inside of the prepersonal human body as it aims at the world outside.


19. Merleau-Ponty says: "Taken as a being of nature, existing in space, the form would always be dispersed in several places and distributed in local events, even if these events mutually determine each other; to say that it does not suffer this diversion amounts to saying that it is not spread out in space, that it does not exist in the same manner as a thing, that it is an idea under which what happens in several places is brought together and assumed. This unity is the unity of perceived objects." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. A. Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983), 143-144.


21. "Probably the chief gain from phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world or of rationality. Rationality is precisely measured by the experiences in which it is disclosed. To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges. But it should not be set in a realm apart, transposed into absolute Spirit, or into a world in the realist sense. The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own. For the first time the philosopher's thinking is sufficiently conscious not to anticipate itself and endow its own results with reified form in the world. The philosopher tries to conceive the world, others and himself and their interrelations. But the mediating Ego, the 'impartial spectator' ... do not rediscover an already given
rationality, they 'establish themselves', and establish it, by an act of initiative which has no guarantee
in being, its justification resting entirely on the effective power which it confers on us of taking our
own history upon ourselves." (PhP xix-xx)

22. "We do not have the right to say that the essences we find give the primitive meaning of Being, that
they are the possible in itself, the whole possible, and to repute as impossible all that does not obey
their laws, nor to treat Being and the world as their consequence: they are only its manner or its style,
they are the Sosein and not the Sein. And if we are justified in saying that every thought respects
them as well as does our own, if they have universal value, this is so inasmuch as another thought
founded on other principles must, if it is to make itself known to us, to enter into communication
with us, adapt itself to the conditions of our own thought, of our experience, take its place in our
world, and inasmuch as, finally, all the thinkers and all the essences possible open upon one sole
experience and upon the same world. We are no doubt using essences in order to establish and state
this; the necessity of this conclusion is a necessity of essence. But it only crosses over the limits of
one thought and imposes itself upon all, it indeed only survives my own intuition of the moment and
is valid for me as a durable truth because my own experience interconnects within itself and connects
with that of the others by opening upon one sole world, by inscribing itself in one sole Being." (VI
100-110)

23. "Every ideation, because it is an ideation, is formed in a space of existence, under the guarantee of my
duration, which must turn back into itself in order to find there again the same idea I thought an
instant ago and must pass into the others in order to rejoin it also in them. Every ideation is borne by
this tree of my duration and other durations, this unknown sap nourishes the transparence of the idea;
behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of all the real and possible durations, the cohesion
of one sole Being from one end to the other. Under the solidity of the essence and of the idea there is
the fabric of experience, this flesh of time..." (VI 111).

24. M.C. Dillon's excellent discussion of Merleau-Ponty's concept of time was helpful to me in
formulating this point. See M. C. Dillon, "Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernity" in Merleau-Ponty

25. Nancy Holland, "Merleau-Ponty on Presence: A Derridian Reading" in Research in Phenomenology

26. Holland, 111.

27. Jacques Derrida: "And contrary to what phenomenology - which is always phenomenology of
perception - has tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into
believing, the thing always escapes. Contrary to the assurance that Husserl gives us a little further on,
'the look' cannot 'abide'." Speech and Phenomena, trans. D. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern
University Press, 1973), 103.

Jacques Derrida: "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." See "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" in The
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28. For this point, I am indebted to an open discussion at the 1991 Merleau-Ponty Conference held at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

29. Holland, 117.

30. Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, 139ff and 152ff.

31. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that even Kant's attempt to provide the abstract, logical conditions of the real world is based on the refrain, "If this world is to exist for us." Thus the conditions arrived at in thought are based on an experience of the world prior to them. (VI 109).


33. Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, 140.


35. M.C. Dillon, "Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernity", in Merleau-Ponty Vivant, xxi.

ADDENDUM

Excerpt from Douglas Low “Merleau-Ponty Criticism of Analytic Philosophy” April 2018

https://www.douglaslow.net/Merleau-Pontys_Criticism_of_Analytic_Philosophy.pdf

Merleau-Ponty claims that in order to properly understand logic that we must see it as an abstract tool that must be placed back into the context of open and even ambiguous lived through experience as a whole. All ideas appear in a context, including the historical and cultural environment within which the ideas were developed. Commenting favorably on Piaget’s stand against logicism, on his objection that logicism “reduces unique thought to a series of elemental operations,” Merleau-Ponty states that, first of all, “we must find again the fact of thought, living and acting, the unique motor of our thought’s operations. Two tasks remain: we must add to logic a logic of totalities [of gestalt wholes with
interconnected and mutually implicating parts] and redefine logic in a manner that is no longer a sort of reality model but a living portrait of factual thought.” Merleau-Ponty continues:

“The second way to resolve the problem is to envision what the effective function of thought is. We come to see that the definition does not exhaust all the elements of the real . . . Living and interesting thought is not within definitions; we must try to construct concepts (put the two terms in relation) by relation to life [and not just by contingent external association or simply by the internal meaning of concepts, established by definitional fiat]. The problem does not pose itself in relation to the principle of noncontradiction. The effective functioning of our thought permits this principle to realize itself in a much more nuanced and complex manner. It is for us to observe a cohesion in lived phenomena more than to engage in a rigorous confrontation of logical terms. We seem to now be at the antipodes of logicism.” [Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Child Psychology and Pedagogy: the Sorbonne lectures 1949-1952, trans. Talia Walsh (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), see pages 203 and 204, my bracket additions.]

Merleau-Ponty’s comments here regarding Piaget’s and logic are reminiscent of his earlier Phenomenology of Perception. In the Preface he states the following. “Probably the chief gain from phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world or of rationality.” We have seen above that meaning is formed as the lived through human body comes together with the forceful perceptual patterns of the world, as the subjective and objective come together and meet . . . There is a perceptual presence but this presence occurs in the context of an open spatial and temporal perceptual field. Perceptual presence (a foreground) occurs in the context an absence, in the context of an implied and open horizon. Thus, phenomenological rationality is the overlapping or blending of perceptual perspectives that involve both the subject and the world and that leaves open future possibilities, possibilities that are perceptual, not logical. The perceptual blending of perspectives follows the principles of lived through gestalt perception, not the principles of abstract logic, or, for that matter, the principles of the mere association of isolated empirical events. Merleau-Ponty proceeds. “Rationality is precisely proportioned to the experiences in which it is disclosed. To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges. But it should not be set in a realm apart, transposed into absolute Spirit, or into a world in the realist sense.” Rationality is established in and through experience. It is not already established, certainly not in some sort of ideal
realm, or in the mind, or, for that matter, in nature in itself---certainly not as the abstract principles of
Aristotelian or symbolic logic, which are human creations, abstractions from our lived through perceptual
encounter with the world. Again, Merleau-Ponty proceeds. “The phenomenological world is not pure
being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also
where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from
subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in
those of the present, or other people’s in my own.” Phenomenological rationality is formed where my
perceptual perspectives meet and blend, with each other and with those lived through by others, as we
actively encounter the world together. Thus, a rational truth involves three primary relationships, the
relationship between the embodied subject and the world, the relationship between embodied subjects as
we actively engage with the world together, and the relationship between present experiences with those
previously lived through in the past. If this is true, and if we are aware of this truth, then “for the first
time, Merleau-Ponty says, “the philosopher’s thinking is sufficiently conscious not to anticipate itself and
endow its own results with reified form in the world.” Again, rationality is not already established (or
objectively established) but remains to be established in our lived through experience, but this does not
mean that we cannot use already established rational principles as tools. Yet these tools must always
return to our lived through experience for their renewal, confirmation and adjustment. (PhP xix-xx, see
also PW 106; see also PhP 384ff and VI 149ff)

**Excerpt** from Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Context: Philosophy and Politics in the

The main contribution of phenomenological philosophy, Merleau-Ponty reports, is to bring together
the subject and the object in lived-through perceptual experience. We should not begin with the world as
it is in-itself or with consciousness as it is for-itself, but with our experience of the world as it runs
beyond us. We should not begin with a Reason that is already formed and complete in Nature or in Mind,
for rationality must now be understood as an agreement of perspectives, of mine within me as I open actively upon the world, and of mine with those of other people as we open actively open upon the world together. This notion of rationality is open and incomplete and does not mistake itself for reality in-itself, for it a realizes that as a human product that it will continue to unfold. And it also realizes that it is not arbitrary, since the world does reveal itself through stable pattern. All of this, of course, means that there is no absolute I that is outside of nature, history and the relations to others. The experiencing I is temporal and historical, is situated and incomplete, is constructed at the same time that it constructs. The preceding sections lead Merleau-Ponty to conclude the following about the role of philosophy. “Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.” Yet how are we to understand this? How does philosophy bring truth into being? It does not deduce it from an already established Rationality that exists outside or above Nature, nor does it demonstrate it inductively by beginning with already established facts. “The answer is that the only pre-existent Logos is the world itself . . . We witness every minute the miracle of related experiences, and yet nobody knows better than we do how this miracle is worked, for we are ourselves this network of relationships.” Or, to state this in a language already expressed above, rationality is the agreement of profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those experienced by others as we actively open upon the world together. Rationality is this concrete agreement of profiles, which is neither purely logical (since the relationships are concrete and specific) nor simple empirical (since the relationships involve internal meaning). Moreover, . . . the truths of rationality are expressed by more fully articulating the ambiguous and open-ended patterns of the perceived world. (PhP xx) “True philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world,” and it consists in trying to express or articulate the world as accurately as possible. Many different theories and explanations are always possible but some will tend to express the perceived world more accurately than others, for there is something there to express, an actually existent and patterned world, even if this world is open and ambiguous. (PhP xx) It is this sort of clarifying the world with others that we call rationality.