It is now clear that Heidegger took seriously the criticism that *Being and Time*\(^1\) did not adequately address the human body. He addresses this criticism in the *Zollikon Seminars*\(^2\) and provides a brief outline of an existential theory of the body, one that bears a striking similarity to Merleau-Ponty’s, as both Richard Askay and Kevin Aho have recently claimed.\(^3\) Another thing that is clear is that Merleau-Ponty was among the most Heideggerian of the French philosophers of his generation, since he adopts Heidegger’s *ekstasis* characterization of human existence, i.e., the subject’s active transcendence toward the world, and speaks of perception as occurring through the anonymous structures of the body and not as a personal choice.\(^4\) It is also true, as some have claimed, that *The Visible and Invisible*\(^5\) is Merleau-Ponty’s most Heideggerian text,\(^6\) since, in his own words, he attempts to move even further from the “subjectivism” of *Phenomenology of Perception*—by developing an ontology of the Flesh, by developing a theory of perception that is nature perceiving itself through one of its own, through the human body. In a Heideggerian spirit, Merleau-Ponty claims that the individual’s experience rests upon the body that opens to a world that includes it and other human bodies. The individual’s Flesh blends with the greater Flesh of the world.

Yet, even though recent commentators have claimed that there is a similarity between Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body, they have also claimed that Heidegger’s being-in-the-world supersedes the body and remains more primary. Heidegger’s position remains more worldly and less attached to the subjectivism that necessarily remains a part of an individual’s bodily orientation toward the world, and, apparently, the subjectivism that remains a part of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the body. (Askay 32) Kevin Aho presents Heidegger’s analysis of the body in the *Zollikon Seminars* as similar to Merleau-Ponty’s in that each seeks to overcome the body understood merely as an object or merely as a vehicle for a Cartesian subject. For both the body must be understood as lived-through. (Aho 15)
However, Aho proceeds to claim that the *Zollikon Seminars* remain at the level of the “ontic-existetiell,” describing the concrete activities and perceptions of a ‘factual’ individual.” This of course means that the comparable analysis provided by Merleau-Ponty, especially in *Phenomenology of Perception*, also remains at the level of the ontic, at the level of the individual’s body. (Aho 16; see Askay 32-33) Aho also points out that *Being and Time*, on the other hand, is more primarily concerned with the ontological “structures that determine the being of beings…These structures constitute the Da, the disclosure site in which any entity whatsoever can show up as such and such. That is why Heidegger claims that it is a mistake to interpret *Dasein* as…being in a determinate place, ‘here and not there.’” (Aho 16) One thing, then, that distinguished Heidegger from Merleau-Ponty is that the latter adheres to the “here-there” structure of a particular embodied being opening upon the world, while Heidegger, at least in *Being and Time*, focuses on the “there” in a way that supposedly transcends the “here” of the situated, embodied subject. As Richard Askay expresses it, referencing and quoting Heidegger, “bodily being is possible because our being-in-the-world always already consists ‘of a relatedness in which we perceive-apprehend that which addresses us out of the openness of our world.’” (Askay 32: see ZS-G 293, ZS-E 232) “Bodily-being,” he continues, “is ‘founded upon’ *Dasein’s* responsiveness to the clearing.” (Askay 32: see ZS-G 232, ZS-E 186) Moreover, he states that “*Dasein’s* existence is the precondition for the possibility of bodily being.” (Askay 32; see ZS-G 113, ZS-E 86-87) Askay thus concludes that “Heidegger…would no doubt have accepted Merleau-Ponty’s premise that the lived body and existence ‘presupposes each other’, and yet deny his conclusion that neither ‘can be regarded as the original of the human being.’” (Askay 33) For Heidegger it is clearly *Dasein’s* being-in-the-world that is “original.”

Following Askay on this point, Aho believes that it is Heidegger’s distinction between the ontic and ontological that distinguishes his work from Merleau-Ponty’s, for Heidegger’s *Dasein* opens to “there,” to the ontological clearing that reveals the Being of beings, while Merleau-Ponty’s “here-there” opening upon being remains at the ontic level of being. Aho thus details the difference between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty with respect to four main points.
1.) Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the body remains at the level of the ontic, of an embodied being aiming at specific tasks, while Heidegger’s *Dasein* “radically departs” from this sort of being-toward-the-world, radically departs from the objects within it, radically departs from an embodied, perspectival point of view upon the world. “For Heidegger, *Dasein* is not a subject that is perceptually bound to worldly objects. *Dasein* is the world, the ‘Anyone’, the public web of meaningful relations…and the institutions on the basis of which things show up as such in embodied comportment. *Dasein*, as the shared referential context, is already there, prior to the bodily perception. It is the condition for the possibility of any meaningful perception whatsoever.” (Aho 16)

2.) Merleau-Ponty does discuss the “condition of possibility” for human experience and even introduces concepts like “field” and “horizon” that bear some resemblance to Heidegger’s notion of the clearing that individuals exist within, but, Aho claims, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy still remains subjectivist. (Aho 17) Aho proceeds to quote the following passage from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, in an apparent effort to underscore the subjectivism of Merleau-Ponty’s position and to set it in contrast to Heidegger’s more worldly position.

“Perception is not a science of the world; it not even an act, a deliberate taking of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thought and all my explicit perception…[the] Sinngebung, or active meaning-giving operation which may be said to define consciousness, so…the world is nothing but ‘world-as-meaning.’” (PhP xi, Aho 17)

The italics at the end of this quote are Aho’s and he proceeds to state that “Merleau-Ponty never explains ‘world-as-meaning’” and that “one is left to wonder if meaning is, as it is for Husserl, ultimately discovered and constituted ‘in me’, in ‘incarnate’ consciousness.” (Aho 17, who refers to PhP, 162, xiii) Setting Heidegger’s *Dasein* in contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s embodied “subjectivism,” Aho proceeds to claim that “for Heidegger, the source of meaning is always already out ‘there’ in the shared public background that human beings grow into. Heidegger’s account of the background of intelligibility as the origin or source of meaning is what Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology passes by…” “According to Heidegger, human beings ‘stand outside’ themselves by taking over meaningful public patterns of
comportment that are prescribed by ‘Anyone.’ There is no ‘I’, no body-subject when describing the
clearing of intelligibility. In my everyday activities, I am already being-with-other; I am ‘Anyone.’” “The
anonymous ‘Anyone’ has not only decided in advance what roles, occupations and norms I can take over;
the ‘Anyone’ has also determined the meaning of my own embodied perceptions.” (Aho 17-18)

3.) Merleau-Ponty does not deal with the relationship between embodied perception and culture and
even privileges perception by suspending the influence of culture on the perceptual process. While
“Heidegger, on the other hand, points out that perception is always saturated with cultural and historical
meaning.” (Aho 18)

4.) Merleau-Ponty focuses on the temporal present as his “starting point” and maintains that time is
something we are born into. For Heidegger, on the other hand, “Dasein is temporality, and it is
temporality that provides the scaffolding or frame of reference that makes it possible for things to emerge
on the scene as the kinds of things that they are. Because Merleau-Ponty seeks to revive the living, pre-
thematic bond between body-subject and worldly object he overlooks the ontological fact that our present
perceptions are rendered meaningful not by ‘incarnate’ consciousness but by the prior horizon of
temporality.” (Aho 19)

First, addressing the second point above, the interpretation of the “world as meaning” quote of
Merleau-Ponty’s is misleading. As Aho does seem to be aware, Merleau-Ponty is here discussing
Husserl’s early conception of the phenomenological reduction. Merleau-Ponty’s point, as he goes on to
state, is that it is idealistic because it treats the world as a meaning for a transcendental consciousness.
Yet, not mentioned by Aho, Merleau-Ponty finds a tension in Husserl’s thought, since Husserl recognizes
the problem of other people, and this in turn implies that consciousness has an outside that is perceived by
others. Husserl’s supposedly transcendental consciousness, then, actually reveals its existence in a
situation. Reflection, in this case, does not retreat to a transcendental consciousness that constitutes the
world as a meaning, but is aware of a prior, pre-reflective opening upon the world. The purpose of the
phenomenological reduction, then, is merely to temporarily put the world’s existence “out of play,” and to
do so only to seek a better understanding of it. (PhP xiv) As Merleau-Ponty expresses it here, “radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation. Far from being…a procedure of idealistic philosophy, phenomenological reduction belongs to existential philosophy: Heidegger’s ‘being-in-the-world’ appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction.” (PhP xiv) Thus, even though being-in and toward-the-world comes first and is primary, it still needs a reflective awareness to fully bring it to light. Without the aware perceiver, without the awareness that creates the opening, and the suspending of the pre-suppositions that it brings with it, the clearing would not appear, or would not appear as clearly---since we would simply be lost in everydayness. Merleau-Ponty takes up Heidegger’s ekstasis, the notion that (embodied) consciousness is always already in the world, but since there is never an experience of the world in-itself, without embodied awareness, this embodied awareness must be taken into account. In addition, he takes the same stand in his later work *The Visible and the Invisible* when he answers the following question: How is it that I am in contact with the things of the world, where they rest, and yet also experience them at the end of my gaze? He answers that it is because the human body is a two dimensional being; it is a being that can touch from the inside because it is aware of being touched by the world from the outside. The lived-through human body is in contact with the world because they are both bodily beings, yet the human body is separate from the world because of its reflexivity, because it can become aware of itself in the act of experience, because it becomes more fully aware of itself as it is touched or seen from the outside. (VI 131ff)

Merleau-Ponty thus here, in his analysis of Husserl and his brief mention of Heidegger in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and in his later *The Visible and Invisible*, indicates his own “double aspect” approach to human existence. He indicates that the origin of the meaning of the world is our pre-reflective, bodily perceptual openness upon the world, upon a world that runs beyond the subject’s acts of perception and refers back to them. For Merleau-Ponty consciousness is always already embodied and always already in a world that nevertheless runs beyond the embodied subject and includes it. Embodied
perception is needed to create an openness to a world, but this world always already refers back to this openness, i.e., the opening, which we must take into account, is primarily a relationship to the world. Thus the tension that Merleau-Ponty refers to in Husserl’s thought, and the “confusion” that Aho refers to in Merleau-Ponty’s, is perhaps due to the profound difficulty of understanding the proper relationship between embodied consciousness and world, between subject and object, between mind and body, between ontological and ontic, etc. Moreover, as M.C. Dillon has stated, to date it is Merleau-Ponty that has most profoundly worked out the relationship between mind and body, that has integrated them more than anyone else, and that has for the first time recognized both without falling back into dualism.11 I believe, with Askay and Aho, that Heidegger does provide a different answer than Merleau-Ponty to the question of understanding the proper relationship between embodied consciousness and the world. I disagree that Heidegger’s answer is superior to Merleau-Ponty’s—-that is more accurate or explanatory.

To support this claim, a few points should be introduced. First, Heidegger’s being-in-the-world is already present in Husserl’s focus on noematic analysis, on the object of experience, rather than the noesis, the act of experience. For Husserl, then, at least in certain periods of his development, phenomenology was worldly and the synthesis of the object occurred in the object. Merleau-Ponty agrees, and he approaches this through his understanding of time. True, as Aho claims, Merleau-Ponty claims that we live in the present, but only in the broad sense, not in the sense of a discrete moment, separate from the past or the future. We live in a present that gradually shades towards the past and a future that are a part of it. The present moment, then, is really experienced as a field. Yet, even with this, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to ask: don’t we still need to speak of a synthesis of the different moments of experience? The holding together of the moments of time is referred to here as a transition-synthesis, since the transition of the present into the past and toward the future is something that occurs, as a dimension of reality, and is not accomplished by the subject as an intellectual act of synthesis. True, we still need a subject to be aware of the passing of time, for otherwise its passing would go un-noticed. The subject must therefore be co-present with the passing of time. However, time remains, even with the passing of time, because each
present presents itself as part of a dimension, as opening out onto a past and a future, and as thus running beyond the subject’s experience as a dimension of reality. With this Merleau-Ponty hopes to shed light on this synthesis of experience by clarifying what Husserl had already referred to as a *passive synthesis*. This process of synthesis cannot be a passiveness that we construct, nor can it be a construction that is passively submitted to—for both of these expressions are contradictions. Offering a more consistent description Merleau-Ponty proceeds to assert that “what is called passivity is not the acceptance by us of an alien reality, or a causal action exerted upon us from outside: it is being encompassed, being in a situation—prior to which we do not exist—which we are perpetually resuming and which is constitutive of us.” (PhP 427) Let us proceed to unravel what he means by this statement.

Utilizing phenomenology’s so called *Fundierung* relationship, Merleau-Ponty here argues that time is a dimension of the world that we are born into and that encompasses us but that we also take up, something that we cross back into, something that we use and even help bring more fully to light, for we are *aware* of this dimension of reality and its gradual passing of the present into the past and toward the future.12 We help bring this structure more fully to light, yet we do not create it. “At the heart of the subject himself we discovered, then, the presence of the world, so that the subject was no longer to be understood as a synthetic activity, but as *ek-stase*, and that every active process of signification or *Sinngebung* appeared as derivative and secondary in relation to that pregnancy of meaning within signs which serve to define the world.” (PhP 429) There is thus a perceptual meaning that is prior to reflection that the intellectual acts of construction help bring to light but that they also rest upon. And even more, within perception itself the world’s existence is given as a *meaning*, since the aware embodied perceiver is needed for the meaning to appear, yet it is the *world itself* that is experienced as presenting this meaning. As Merleau-Ponty argues in great detail, the world, its objects, and their interaction with the human body must be regarded as part of the necessary conditions that make meaningful human experience possible. Yet these conditions are not sufficient to fully account for the meaning that appears, since the *awareness* of the perceiver must also be taken into account. Merleau-Ponty would certainly admit that the famous
gestalt figure that can appear as a vase or as two faces really exists in the world, in this case as black lines on a white piece of paper before the perceiver. The paper, these lines, the light that strikes them and that is reflected upon the human eye are required for human perceptual meaning to appear. Yet they are not sufficient, since the lines are taken up and grasped as either a vase or a face. The world’s objects (in this case lines that are structured in a certain way) are primarily responsible for the meaning that they present. Yet for the meaning to be fully present, to be fully brought to light, as meaning, requires the presence of the aware embodied subject. Again, the aware embodied subject meets the conditions of the world, takes them up, and folds back upon them (Fundierung) in an effort to grasp and help organize the structures of the world in a meaningful way. The aware subject is needed to bring the world’s meaning fully to light, but the world, its objects, and their structure remain the primary source of this meaning.

For Merleau-Ponty, when considering the synthesis of our perceptual experience of the world, we find that there is no pre-given rationality, in the world, in a realm of ideas, or in a transcendental consciousness. Rather, rationality is at first and primarily the agreement of perceptual profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those of others as we actively open upon the world together. Moreover, since the individual’s perceptual perspectives open upon aspects of really existing objects, upon a temporality that is a pre-existent dimension of reality, the agreement of profiles is not conceptual. It is not the agreement established by conceptual analysis alone, since the meaning is concrete, perceptual, and worldly. Yet these meanings do blend, for the profiles and aspects of the thing are related meaningfully to one another. Thus, what we find here is a perceptual logos or structure: the things themselves reveal themselves as meaningful through the profiles and perspectives of human perception. Human perceptual consciousness doesn’t create these meanings and their connections but helps bring them more fully to light and helps bring them more fully to light as meaning. The unity or synthesis of the subject’s perspectival experiences is possible because of the cohesion of temporality as a dimension of the world, yet it is the subject’s embodied awareness that helps bring this unity more fully to light. Thus, since my personal life is carried along by a natural time, by a time that I do not constitute, and
since I am aware that my personal life is carried into the world by the anonymous functions of my body, I am aware that my personal experience rests upon perceptual fields that are pulled together naturally and anonymously and not by abstract intellectual judgments or by me as personal acts of choice. Embodied awareness may well be needed to bring the world’s meaning more fully to light, but it is the world and its pre-existent dimensions, including time and space, that are the primordial source of meaning.

Contrary to what Aho seems to believe, then, Merleau-Ponty adopts much of Heidegger’s *ekstasis* characterization of time (which, again, is found first in Husserl’s writings), that the present opens out to a non-discrete past and future. (See PhP 417ff) Yet, Merleau-Ponty says, not that *Dasein* is temporality, as Heidegger claims, with the idea of somehow leaving the *awareness* of temporality behind, but that temporality is the model of subjectivity. Just as the present moment of time is an *ekstasis*, is a projecting out of itself toward the other (the past and future) with which it remains in contact, so the subject in its very nature leaps out of itself toward the other, towards the past and future, toward the world, and toward other people, while, nevertheless remaining in contact with itself. In addition, Merleau-Ponty finds an inconsistency in Heidegger’s thought. If time is characterized as *ekstasis*, as a transcendence of itself toward the other, as the present, which is closest to us, which is the center of awareness, which projects outside itself toward the past and future, then Heidegger’s focus on the future is inconsistent within the context of this framework. The projection toward the future, and even death, as the opening of the range of human possibilities, is not a more authentic expression of *Dasein*, of *Dasein’s* ontological openness, of *Dasein’s* being-there, since our authentic decisions about our future, and the possibilities that it holds, must occur in the present. (See PhP 427) We live primarily in the present. We do not primarily live in the future, or, if we do (speaking loosely, since this is impossible given the nature of time, and thus simply speaking about thinking too much about our future as we live in the present moment), then we will be alienated from the present. Obviously our future goals can help transform our present and even our view of our past. Yet this future, after all, is a projection that takes place in the present. Moreover, the present as it is characterized by both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, is not the present that is so maligned by
Derrida; it is not the expression of an ontology of discrete moments or things. Presence for both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger is a field, with the present fanning out to and remaining in contact with both the past and future.

Merleau-Ponty thus does not deny, and even embraces, Dasein’s thrown-ness into the world, Dasein’s being out “there.” Yet this openness upon the world necessarily involves a presence (in the wide sense of a field just mentioned above, with the present remaining centered and closest to us as it fans out and remains in contact with both the past and future) and, subsequently, necessarily involves a time/space moment and place through which the opening occurs. We must understand the experience of presence, then, as a now and a here opening upon other nows and other heres, and even upon the world and other people. This argument is deepened with Merleau-Ponty’s claim that consciousness is an embodied openness upon the world. First, the opening must be understood as an opening upon the world, with its time/space dimension, upon a horizon or clearing, yet, secondly, this clearing could not appear without the opening, and, thirdly, this opening must occur through the human body, since a disembodied opening is inconceivable. In addition, if the opening does occurs through the body, and it must, then it must be situated. It must be understood as an opening occurring in a particular time and place. It opens upon the world from a point of view of a here and now, yet, since it is an opening, this here and now necessarily includes a reference to a horizon of other heres and nows, which in turn refer back to the spatial/temporal present. Human beings always open upon the time/space dimension through their situated bodies and thus always from a particular perspective. Yet this perspective, by its very nature, by its very foreground-background, object-horizon structure, opens out to other possible perspectives, to a field or to a horizon of possible heres and nows, and is thus both general and tied to a particular situation. This also means that for embodied human beings that there is no God’s eye view of a clearing, that there is no non-situated view of space or time. To have a there and a then necessarily presupposes that we begin with a here and a now.
Merleau-Ponty thus largely agrees with Heidegger’s characterization of Dasein as ekstasis, as being “there,” as being in the world. Yet Merleau-Ponty does not fully abandon (or, if you wish, downplay so completely) the opening upon being to focus on the clearing alone, that is, on the there without reference to the position from which the opening occurs, a here. Since we must understand the embodied subject’s opening upon being, we may legitimately ask of Heidegger’s approach, of the Dasein that focuses on the there, on the clearing that it opens, how the opening disappears, since the clearing would not appear without a situated opening. Now, clearly, Heidegger recognizes that Dasein, the being that recognizes its own being, is the being that opens upon and recognizes the Being of beings. But, we must then ask, how is it that the clearing which appears through Dasein as its opening suddenly, somehow, is no longer needed or referred to, at least as situated within Being. Or, if we interpret this in a different way, how do we have a clearing that Dasein exists within (the Being of beings and the “they” of our social/historical inheritance, mentioned by Aho) influence the opening or reflect back to it if it is no longer there, if it is no longer situated? Even a mirror, after all, which simply reflects other objects, has a location and thus a certain relationship to the objects that it reflects, relative to their position with respect to each other and the mirror. How does the “there” influence a “here” that isn’t there? Dasein must be an aware, situated opening that cannot be completely superseded without the loss of a meaningful experience of the clearing, without the loss of an oriented and thus meaningful experience of the clearing.

Furthermore, when discussing mind/body parallelism, even in his early The Structure of Behavior,14 Merleau-Ponty does argue for the primacy of an “ontological” perception, including the “ontological” perception of one’s own body, over a reductionistic materialism/tabula rasa empiricism, over the body treated merely as an object. (SB 92-93, 192) He continues with this emphasis in Phenomenology of Perception.

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

Thus even though Merleau-Ponty recognizes the primacy of an ontological perception, he also here recognizes the codependence between the body as an ontological, phenomenological perceiver and the natural, material human body, on the body as acquired and stabilized existence. Yet *Phenomenology of Perception* expresses this even more precisely in a earlier passage, briefly mentioned above by Askay but now cited more completely.

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

To help us understand this passage more thoroughly, it is useful to frame this issue of the relationship between the human body as stabilized existence and what Merleau-Ponty refers to a human existence as a relationship between fact and theory. Recalling Merleau-Ponty’s use of the *Fundierung* relationship, we must understand that within the context of his philosophy that there are no bare facts. Facts must be interpreted, by a theory, by a belief system of some sort, or even within the context of an oriented body. Yet this doesn’t mean that the theory, the belief system, or the bodily orientation *totally construct the facts*. Within the context of his philosophy, specific and stable perceptual patterns suggest certain patterns of understanding, of belief, or of orientation, and may even suggest a variety of them. Merleau-Ponty certainly recognizes the ambiguity of perceptual experience and the fact that it may be open to a variety of interpretations. And even though he recognizes that there is no definitive interpretation, he still maintains that some interpretations are better than others, since some are more clarifying, and they are so because there is something there in the perceptual world that motivates and measures them. Thus, even though interpretation is needed to more fully articulate the perceptual world, to more fully bring the perceptual world to light, this light first emanates from the perceived and the interpretation is primarily a reflection
of this light back upon it (Fundierung). Now, we can utilize the same Fundierung relationship in our attempt to understand the relationship between the human body and human existence. As Merleau-Ponty sees it, the body is not a collection of bare facts, but an ensemble of stable structures that suggest or motivate certain interpretations, or frameworks, or certain ways of understanding. True, this human understanding is needed to fold back upon these structures to help frame them more precisely, but there is something there to frame, the stable structure of the perceived. To use Heidegger’s language of the ontic and ontological, for Merleau-Ponty the ontic must be framed within the context of the ontological, yet there is something there to be framed, some ensemble of structures that suggest certain interpretations and not others. In the French author, then, we see more of a back and forth movement between the ontic and the ontological; we see more of an attempt to recognize a mutual influence between them; we see more of an attempt to integrate them. As the late The Visible and the Invisible expresses it, the only way to perceive the world, the only way to open the clearing in the world, is through one of its own, the embodied human being. Yet this body is special because it is the being that is aware of its own Being and the Being of the world. The body is touched and impacted upon, yet it is the human body that is aware that it is being touched and influenced. It is the being that can take up the forces that impact upon it and treat them as a meaning. We must therefore attempt to understand the human being by approaching the human body from its two sides, we must therefore look to the science of the body (i.e., the patterns we discover using perceptions that check one another) and integrate these patterns into our ontological understanding of human beings (human beings are not mere things, but an embodied openness upon them and the world). It is the ontological understanding of human existence that guides Merleau-Ponty’s studies, but it is the structure of the body (its emergent properties) that allows human ontological meaning to appear. Thus, again, to truly understand the human being, we must approach the study of human being from both sides, from the side of the ontic and the ontological.

One of Merleau-Ponty’s claims against Sartre, then, can perhaps be used against Heidegger as well: consciousness is not a hole in being but a hollow. If the opening upon being were nothing, then there
would be no here from which the opening occured. If *Dasein* opens to a “there,” and if *Dasein* is not nothing, this opening must be situated somewhere, must be a “here.” Moreover, since there is no non-situated view of Being for embodied human beings, as we have just seen, there is no God’s eye view of Being for human beings; there is no view of space, for example, that looks at it from nowhere, that is without perspective, without intervening distance, without orientation. The human, situated opening upon Being must be accounted for with respect to the appearance of the clearing, since it exists in Being and helps create the orientation and dimensionality of the clearing. It is through one of its own, the human body, that Being/Nature experiences itself. We must therefore take into account the being of this being. This is what Merleau-Ponty attempts to do, in part by taking the scientific study of the body into account. Granted, he always attempts to reframe the sciences in broader ontological terms, but he still values the ontic studies of science, and he attempts to make full use of them. Indeed, it would be foolish to do otherwise, given what science (including medicine) has accomplished, and given the rigorous nature of its collaborative testing. Merleau-Ponty’s attitude toward science and the history of science and technology is thus far more sympathetic than Heidegger’s.

To further demonstrate this, we see in *Phenomenology of Perception* that the author develops and utilizes his own unique phenomenological approach by bringing it into full contact with the sciences. Speaking generally, Merleau-Ponty’s method, in some ways similar to the method of the empirical sciences, will begin with lived-through perceptual experience, reflect on this experience, check it against other perceptual experiences and the perceptual experiences lived-through by others. Then, by dialoging with others, or other theoretical positions, he will attempt to establish the description (interpretation, explanation, theory) that most clarifies these experiences. More specifically, he does this by addressing a number of specific topics, in order to see which description (interpretation, theory) best describes them. He considers the human body, the phantom limb, sexuality, time, space, freedom, language, etc. Here he frequently begins with what the best and most recent scientific studies report about these specific topics, while then proceeding to consider which theory best describes/explains them. Does
materialism/empiricism, for example, best explain the human body and the phantom limb, or does idealism/rationalism best explain them? Or perhaps both fail, or at least appear inadequate, when a third alternative, an existential/phenomenological approach, is offered.

If we proceed to observe how Merleau-Ponty considers the topic of space as an illustration of his method, we see that he turns, without hesitation, to the most recent scientific studies. In an attempt to answer the fundamental question of how space takes on an orientation for us, including the basic orientation of “up” and “down,” he turns to the following scientific experiment. A subject views a room through a mirror that casts the room at a 45 degree angle. Within a few minutes the room rights itself and appears vertical to the subject. It seems here that the spatial level prior to the experiment determines that the angle of the experiment is oblique, yet, Merleau-Ponty cautions, this is not to admit a realist determination of space, since, even though each spatial level is fixed by the preceding level, the determination of the first level is yet to be established. “What counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal ‘place’ defined by its task and situation.” (PhP 249-50) The spatial level, then, is determined primarily by the body’s practical engagement with the world, mostly by its articulation with the actual world, but even with its potential involvement in the virtual world, as the mirror experiment shows, for the subject adopts the virtual space of the tilted room. (PhP 250) This bodily orientation is situated in the anonymous functions of the body, Merleau-Ponty says, and they continually draw my individual life into a more general one. My life, my personal orientation, therefore rests upon a more primary orientation to the world. The perceived world and my spatial orientation within it are always given to me as already there, as already framed in and through my body, and subsequently, cannot be detached from it.

Now, to state this more generally, and using the language of both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, since the spatial horizon occurs through the situated embodied subject, since the clearing occurs through Dasein, we must have at least some understanding of the embodied subject, of Dasein’s ontic nature.
Merleau-Ponty embraces the embodied subject and we have seen that Heidegger does as well. Yet Heidegger approaches the ontic ontologically, leaving the ontic almost no role, whereas Merleau-Ponty moves back and forth between the ontic and ontological, and uses them to inform one another. To understand Being of beings, Heidegger says, we must understand \textit{Dasein}, but to understand \textit{Dasein} we must understand Being, but, he continues, this is not a circular argument. Being has always been presupposed in our philosophical studies (albeit not as a concept in the context of an explicitly formulated theory). What we should do, then, is just look at our experience of the world—which presupposes Being. Yet this looking at Being should involve a back and forth movement between a type of being (\textit{Dasein’s looking}) and Being. (BT 27-28) True, Heidegger says, the sciences study objects, yet the structure of these objects is indicated by pre-scientific experience. Thus we must first determine the meaning of Being and the conditions of possibility for the regional ontologies of the sciences before the sciences can legitimately proceed. \textit{Dasein} ontically is the being who is aware of its Being and the Being of entities, yet it is the through the ontological that ontic must be approached. (BT 28-35) As we have already seen, like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty wants to reframe the ontic in the context of the ontological; he wants to reframe the discrete entities of science in the context of a pre-reflective perception that opens upon a stable but also open horizon. Yet unlike Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty will draw on the studies of the ontic. True, he will point out that the results of scientific studies frequently do not match the ontic presuppositions of materialism, especially its belief in discrete units in external relations, but it is the results of these studies that he will make full use of, now more broadly framed. Merleau-Ponty’s studies hinge back and forth between the ontic and the ontological. The collection of data informs his descriptive theory, yet his descriptive theory helps frame and interpret the data.

Merleau-Ponty explicitly addresses Heidegger’s treatment of the relationship between the ontic and ontological, between facts and essences, between data and theory, between science and philosophy, in his series of lectures that came to be published under the title of “Phenomenology and the Science of Man.” He does this briefly, and by comparing Heidegger to Husserl, who he investigates in more detail. For
Husserl, Merleau-Ponty states, positivism, particularly in the social sciences, contributed to the “crisis” of 20th Century thought. Positivist versions of psychology and sociology, referred to as psychologism and sociologism respectively, tend to regard human thought as a mere product of external events. Husserl points out, and Merleau-Ponty agrees, that this sort of position must end in skepticism, since the knowledge of psychologism, etc., is merely a result of external events and is therefore not knowledge at all. Knowledge presupposes that we take hold of events in order understand their meaning. Yet Husserl is also dissatisfied with various forms of idealism, since he believes that the attempt to understand human knowledge cannot be accomplished by simply applying abstract concepts to factual events. Understanding, and the general concepts associated with it, must be generated from the facts themselves. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “the insight into essences rests on the fact that in our experience we can distinguish the fact that we are living through something from what it is we are living through in this fact.” (PSM 54) We must begin with concrete experience, take it up and reflect upon it in search of the stable meaning that it offers, including and especially its more general meaning. (See PSM 43-55)

The tendency of positivist/empiricist psychology of the 20th Century was to study human experience, or even human consciousness, like all other empirical objects were studied, by using the inductive method to arrive at abstract principles by means of the process of generalization from sense particulars. But the problem with induction, Husserl points out and Merleau-Ponty reminds us, is that it perceives particulars and thus has difficulty accounting for what it is that generates general understanding. Husserl’s answer to this dilemma was eidetic phenomenology. Psychology and the other social sciences study facts and their correlation, while the role of eidetic phenomenology would be to provide the intuition of general meanings and essences. (PSM 58-59) Yet, Husserl again insists, eidetic phenomenology, as an aware conscious activity in search of general meanings and essences, must always take place in contact with the facts. In order to grasp a general meaning, in order to have insight into essences, it is first necessary to have a perceptual experience. As Merleau-Ponty put it, “the relation between perception and Wesenshau is one of founding [Fundierung]; perception serves as a ground, or
pedestal, on which an insight into essence is formed.” (PSM 68, Merleau-Ponty’s bracket)

Phenomenology, then, must begin with something that reflection recognizes as a prior experience, and it must seek to clarify the meaning of this experience. What we see in Husserl, Merleau-Ponty thus reports, is “the idea of a double envelopment.” (PSM 68) As we have seen above, and as we will see repeated here, perception provides the basis of the reflection, and thus envelops it, yet reflection is needed to fold back upon the perceived in order to more fully grasp it, and thus envelops the perception. (PSM 68) Perception provides an example, which, with the aid of Husserl’s eidetic method, is then taken over by the reflection, varied in the imagination, and finally grasped in its essential structure.

Now, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, it is by better understanding the relationship between induction as the perception of a set of particulars and the grasping of a general essence that we will better understand the relationship between empirical psychology and phenomenology, between the ontic and the ontological, between science and philosophy. (PSM 68) For J. S. Mill induction involved the perception particulars, the recognition of their common characteristics, and the abstraction of these common or essential characteristics from their accidental or unessential properties. (PSM 68) Husserl disagrees. When he discusses the inductive method, using Galileo as an example, he thinks that Galileo more or less freely hits upon the idea of an object in free fall. This idea or essence of gravity, for which there is no exact observation, is then used to explain imperfect cases, such as an object’s fall down an incline plane, with friction, etc., added to explain variation. Or, as Merleau-Ponty presents Husserl’s interpretation, “through certain impure and imperfect phenomena, such as the fall of a body on an incline plane, I read off the free fall of the body, which is theoretically conceived, or forged, by the intellect. That which gives it is probable value to the induction and which finally shows that it is truly founded on things is not the number of facts invoked to justify it. No! It is rather the intrinsic clarity which these ideas shed on the phenomena we seek to understand.” (PSM 69) Husserl, then, certainly doesn’t deny induction’s contact with the facts, but 1.) claims that the perceiver must recognize the meaning in the facts, otherwise no generalization or abstraction could occur, and 2.) claims that the arrived at generalizations are confirmed
not simply by the number of facts that can be derived from them but by the clarity their interpretations provide. Here, again, we see the Fundierung relationship at work, for perception provides and suggests certain patterns or meaningful organizations, and yet interpretation/theory/language are needed to more fully bring these patterns to light. The generalizations help to more fully articulate the less precise and more ambiguous meanings embedded in the facts.

Now, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to remark that Husserl’s intuition of essences is similar to Husserl’s conception of induction in that both begin with experience of the facts, yet the intuition of essences is accomplished with the aid of a “free variation” accomplished by the imagination, while induction is accomplished “by considering the different cases that are actually realized.” (PSM 70) What Merleau-Ponty finds in Husserl’s early work, and its tendency toward eidetic phenomenology and the intuition of ideal essences, is a tendency toward a pure consciousness that is revealed via reflection. This must mean for the early Husserl, when considering consciousness related to the human body, that consciousness must be apprehended “not as it is in itself but only as it is causally linked to a certain object which I call ‘the body.’” (PSM 83) This must mean, the early Husserl surmised, that when dealing with other people, we must apperceive a pure consciousness behind the body as it is joined to the world and exposed to the perceptions of other people. (PSM 83) The later Husserl, however, at least according to Merleau-Ponty, begins to recognize the original contributions of the body. “It is as if my body learns what my consciousness cannot, for this body takes the actions of the other into account, realizes a sort of coupling with them, or an ‘intentional transgression’ without which I would never gain the notion of the other as other.” (PSM 83) The link of the body to consciousness is thus not merely external, with consciousness behind or above the body looking back at it or down upon it from nowhere. Consciousness and the body are intimately and internally connected. Consciousness is bound up with the body and its orientation toward the world. Husserl’s thought, Merleau-Ponty claims, developed with his attempt to better understand the relationship between essences and facts, between the ontological and the ontic, between the philosophical and the empirical. “Reflection is historicity—on the one hand the possession of myself”
and on the other my insertion into history.” (PSM 92) Again, reflection envelops the perceptual particularity and yet perceptual particularity envelops reflection. With Husserl, then, Merleau-Ponty sees (and utilizes) the double envelopment of essence and facts, of the ontological and ontic, of philosophy and science. He proceeds to comment that Heidegger refuses to accept this relationship.

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

Thus, Merleau-Ponty concludes,

“Heidegger remained fixed in [his] thesis of the pure and simple opposition between philosophy and the sciences of man or, as Heidegger puts it, between the ontological and the ontic. For Husserl…the opposition was only a point of departure, which later became a problem and finally a hidden connection between the two kinds of research. Husserl, who defined philosophy as the suspension of our apprehension of the world, recognized the actual being of the philosopher in the world much more clearly than Heidegger, who devoted himself to the study of being in the world.” (PSM 94, my bracket)

Although it is beyond doubt that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is deeply influenced by both Husserl and Heidegger, it is clearly the later Husserl that he follows with regard to the connection between the empirical and philosophical, between the ontic and ontological. Merleau-Ponty’s early The Structure of Behavior, his middle Phenomenology of Perception, and his late Nature and The Visible and the Invisible provide a detailed description/explanation of this relationship with an insight and balance that has seldom, if ever, been achieved anywhere else. Contrary to what Aho seems to imply, Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that we address the ontic and integrate it with the ontological, is not a weakness in his thought but one of its greatest contributions.

Since we have already alluded to his early and middle works, and briefly mentioned the late The Visible and the Invisible, a brief consideration of his discussion of the relationship between the empirical and philosophical in his late Nature, and its relationship to The Visible and the Invisible, is worth our attention. In Nature Merleau-Ponty offers a description of what he will refer to as the “invisible” in his
later *The Visible and the Invisible*. The later text describes the invisible, at least in part, as the perceptual horizon that always remains open and that helps present an articulated perceptual foreground. The elements or implied lines of the horizon act like rays of force that help articulate the foreground but they themselves remain inarticulate. There is thus an *invisible of the visible*, an absence that helps articulate the present. Here, in the lecture notes that came to be published as *Nature*, Merleau-Ponty discusses the invisible as the biological emergence of global behavior.

“…the organism is not a sum of instantaneous and punctual microscopic events; it is an enveloping phenomenon, with the macroscopic style of an ensemble in movement. In between the microscopic facts, global reality is delineated like a watermark, never graspable for objectivizing-particular thinking, never eliminable from or reducible to the microscopic: we had only a bit of a protoplasmic jelly, and we then have an embryo, by a transformation which, always too early or too late, we were never witness to in our investment in a biological field.” (Na 207)

In a similar vein, Merleau-Ponty mentions that an organism’s regeneration or self-repair is physicochemical but also something more, since the regeneration of an organism from one of its parts aims to restore a functional whole that is greater than the mere sum of its parts. “[E]verything that happens in embryonic regulation is physicochemical, but it is not physicochemistry requiring an organism of a typical form when the plan of the whole is restored from a part (regeneration of flatworms).” (Na 207) Thus, just as Merleau-Ponty sees in the visual field the invisible attached to the visible in a way that is not fully articulate, he likewise sees life attached to the physicochemical in a way that is not fully articulate, for life is the gestalt whole that maintains a global significance that is not reducible to its physiological elements, even though global function would not be possible without them. Moreover, the global functioning of the organism can guide its physicochemical repairs, yet the global functioning would have no existence without the physicochemical substrate. We can make reference to Heidegger’s ontic/ontological distinction here as well, as Merleau-Ponty does, for it helps us understand the difference between the physicochemical and the global functioning of life. The physicochemical is the ontic, the articulated foreground, while life is the ontological, the horizontal whole intimately attached to it. Merleau-Ponty reminds us here that this lived-through whole remains to be discussed with respect to
evolution, for the global functioning of the organism must be understood as emergent, as attached to the physicochemical, yet without being reduced to it. It must be understood as something between mechanism and finalism. In a section informatively entitled “Place of the Human Body in Our Study of Nature” (Na 208), Merleau-Ponty explicitly states that his study of nature was intended to lead to the study of animality, which in turn was intended to lead to the study of the human body and human life. The human being is a natural being and as such emerges from nature. The human being cannot be understood as possessing an animal body plus reason, or as a purely mechanical body coupled with a pure consciousness, but rather as manifesting another kind of body, as “another corporeity.” We should understand the human being and its emergence from the animal body just as we have understood the emergence of life from the physicochemical, for in each case we witness a global functioning that is attached but not reducible to other elements. Just as the physicochemical and life cross or flow into one another (Ineinander), just as we cannot understand the phenomenon of life without reference to the physicochemical, and just as we cannot understand the physicochemical in living beings without reference to the global functions of life, so we must understand the human body and human life as crossing into one another. We observe in the human body the emergence of a new type of corporeal functioning, a new way of being embodied. In addition, Merleau-Ponty concludes, the study of the human body and subsequently of human perception should help confirm his preceding studies of nature, and since nature is necessarily perceived through the human body, we will be approaching the same phenomenon from two different directions.

As we have seen Merleau-Ponty claim above, we cannot speak of experience without an experiencer. We cannot speak of an opening upon a clearing without the opening, without the subject, and that this subject is not just what is reflected back to it by the clearing. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s subject, as we have just witnessed, is more thoroughly embodied than Heidegger’s, and is thus more thoroughly connected to the world than Heidegger’s ontological, disembodied clearing. Furthermore, Dasein is able to open to a clearing because of the biological structure of the human body, and this is
what Merleau-Ponty attempts to understand in his studies that came to be labeled and published as *Nature*. Merleau-Ponty traces the historical use of the concept of nature, in part, to be able to more adequately understand the concept of human nature and the emergence of the human ability to open upon nature. Moreover, we have witnessed that he insists that we should approach the issue of the emergence of human existence from both directions, from the point of view of nature/biology and from the point of view of the aware embodied subject that opens upon and organizes the natural/biological and human world. The body can touch (be aware) because it is touched from the outside. The individual’s experience opens to a public world. In addition, according to Merleau-Ponty’s own stated research agenda, his early and middle works dealt with perception, while his later works took up intersubjectivity and language, and not with the idea of leaving perception behind, but in an attempt to integrate perception with language. Yet even in the earlier and middle works, he doesn’t characterize perception as private or completely personal (as subjectivist), since the individual’s perceptions rest upon the anonymous function of the body. The individual’s perception subsequently gives the impression of occurring by means of the body and thus as public, and not therefore as subject to personal choice. Embodied perception by its very nature opens to a public world of other people, including to a public language, which in turn reflects back on this perception. The middle *Phenomenology of Perception* explicitly claims that the meaning of a word is attached to the body’s perceptual encounter with the world and to how the word is used (like a tool) in various social contexts, (See PhP, 179, 403) and explicitly characterizes the relationship between perception and language as a Fundierung relationship, with perception motivating expressions that crosses back into it to help express it more completely. Even more so in his later studies, he makes the case that we must understand how perception and the social/linguistic crisscross or chiasm into one another--still, though, with perception as the more primary term. (VI 149-155) Personal perception must be understood as opening to a public natural and social world that crosses back into perception and helps interpret it and articulate it more precisely. Yet the public field of nature and society would not appear without the opening of embodied individual existence, and, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s
philosophy, it is the body’s encounter with the world that is remains the more primary source of meaning. The cultural/linguistic meanings that the adult opens upon, that fold back upon perception in order to help articulate it more precisely, must, nevertheless, have a source. They must be regarded as the sublimation of our similarly embodied perceptual encounter with the world, he claims. Merleau-Ponty thus has not by-passed the social and linguistic, as Aho claims, but in fact argues that we exist within them. Merleau-Ponty’s claim, though, is that they are not without origin, and, at some point, must be grasped as a sublimation of the body’s perceptual encounter with a really existing world. From the point of view of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, then, it is Heidegger that has by-passed the primary source of meaning in the concrete, situated, perceiving body.

To return to Aho’s four points of difference between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty with which we began above, we are now in a position to clarify these differences and make a summary case for Merleau-Ponty. 1.) We have seen that Merleau-Ponty makes more room for the ontic in his philosophy and integrates it with the ontological far more than Heidegger does in his. The fact that he does so is not a weakness of his philosophy but a strength, since our openness upon the world, our ontological orientation, if you wish, is connected to the concrete specificity of our life. The concrete and general are integrated in our lives. Merleau-Ponty thus integrates them in his philosophy. He does not leave the concrete behind for the sake of mystical generality. 2.) Merleau-Ponty is not a subjectivist but, rather, has perhaps gone further than anyone else in the effort to integrate mind and body, subjectivity and objectivity. He recognizes both, yet without falling into the trap of dualism that has so fettered and limited Western thought for the past 2000 years. He recognizes both the subjective and objective, refused to reduce one to the other, and integrates them in the lived-through body. The fact that this theoretical approach can solve problems that remain intractable for both empiricism and rationalism is made evident in *Phenomenology of Perception’s* largely successful treatment of the body, the relationship between the mind and body, the phantom limb, sexuality, space, time, the other, human freedom, language, etc. Merleau-Ponty thus offers a theory that integrates the subjective and objective in a way that provides more explanatory power than
theories that don’t, including Heidegger’s. 3.) Merleau-Ponty does not neglect the relationship between perception and language, between self and other, between the individual and social, but again has perhaps gone further than any other thinker in the attempt to integrate them, to understand how they cross or chiasm into one another. True, Merleau-Ponty does privilege perception when considering the relationship between perception and language, but, again, this is not a weakness in his thought but a strength—and it is a strength because it integrates language with the embodied, practical, perceptual activity of individuals within groups. Language is thus not just about itself. It is about something and refers to something outside of it; it is about life as it is lived by embodied individuals as they open upon a shared perceptual world. And even though language helps mold and express our shared perceptual world, language still sublimates it, rests upon it, and is confirmed or denied by it. Language, then, like all social institutions, must be seen as crossing into the perceptual lives of the individuals who use and maintain it, otherwise it wouldn’t exist. Thus the neglect here is not Merleau-Ponty’s downplaying of the social but the downplaying by Heidegger and others of the individuals who must interface with social institutions, including language, to keep them alive. 4.) While recognizing the necessity to account for the awareness of the passing of time, Merleau-Ponty does not equate time with subjectivity, but recognizes that subjectivity, like time, must be characterized as ekstasis, as a leaping out of itself toward the other. Just as the present leaps toward a past and a future while remaining in contact with itself, so also the experiencing embodied subject is thrown toward the world and other people while remaining in contact with itself. Merleau-Ponty fully recognizes that the subject is primarily a relationship to the world and others, but he also realizes that both sides of this relationship must be recognized and maintained, otherwise, again, the relationship would collapse. Now, the difference here between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger is perhaps more a matter of emphasis than categorical, since Heidegger’s emphasis on the “there,” on the horizon that is opened by Dasein but that is experienced as existing prior to Dasein, nevertheless recognizes that it would not appear without Dasein, without human awareness. A certain kind of being, a being that is aware of its Being, is required for Being to appear. Yet, as we have seen, for
Heidegger, it is *Dasein* that is diminished in favor of the *clearing* that is opened by *Dasein*. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, argues that human nature, including and especially the human body, should be revealed through a phenomenological or even an “ontological” perception. Yet Merleau-Ponty’s places a far more balanced emphasis the ontological and ontic, on the “there” and the “here” then Heidegger does. The ontological and the ontic mutually influence and define one another, and there is no “there” without a “here.” As already mentioned, this recognition of both “there” and “here,” of both the general and the specific, and the recognition that they are intimately tied to one another, more accurately describes human experience. It accounts for their integration in human experience, and doesn’t leave our concrete involvement in the world behind for the mystical call of being. Overall, then, it can at least be plausibly argued that the differences between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger do not display Merleau-Ponty’s neglect of insights achieved by Heidegger but, rather, display sound reasons why Merleau-Ponty offers the position that he does. These differences between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, and what may well appear to be the advantage of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, will show up again in their respective political views, to which we should now turn.

**Politics**

We have already witnessed that Merleau-Ponty follows and develops the late Husserl’s claim that meaning (even the general meaning of an essence—which is expressed in language) is first born and generated through our concrete experiential contact with objects. Applying this insight to language itself, if we seek to properly understand language, we should not begin with some ideal essence, some necessary condition, that all languages must share, but with our contact with our own language. This contact thus becomes our way into other languages, our way of imperfectly modeling the contact of others with theirs, since our bodily openness upon the world is similar but not identical. If there is a universal meaning, then, in all likelihood it will be lateral. It will capture overlapping similarities but not a rational essence that is identical for all. Likewise, when attempting to understand human society, we must not begin with some abstract essence of all human societies, but with our experiential contact with our own. We must compare
and contrast our own experiences of the social with similar experiences lived-through by others. Now, we may certainly admit that abstract and statistical analyses may well be helpful in our attempts to understand human societies, as, for example, knowing how many societies treat cousins as close kin may help us understand the structure of human families. Nor can we deny the influence of natural and social structures on the subject and how the subject comes to perceive of him or herself. The social roles that I enact or perform, and how I am treated within them, certainly contribute to how I come to perceive who and what I am. Yet, still, these structures fold in upon the aware individual subjects who must live them and take them up. Moreover, without these aware individuals we would not have access to either the natural world or social institutions, and these social institutions would either collapse, since there would be no aware individuals to maintain the social relationships that constitute them, or show no non-accidental improvement, since the individuals within them would simply be the product of them and subsequently display no conscious effort to improve them. It is with these brief summary comments that we may now briefly consider the individual’s relationship to the political community, for both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger.

*Dasein*, Heidegger says, is thrown into a social/historical setting, into a time and place in history, into a way of existing and interacting with others, and into a certain “average” way of interpreting these ways of existing/co-existing. The “average” (not individualized) way of interpreting the social/historical conditions of this time and place are the starting point for our projection into the future. Yet this projection can be done inauthentically or authentically. The inauthentic is characterized by getting lost in the average and ambiguous interpretation of the “they,” while the authentic involves a clear and unambiguous understanding of one’s “ownmost distinctive possibility.” Moreover, this projection into the future, within the context of one’s social/historical conditions, is most authentic when it honestly confronts one’s ultimate future, death. As Heidegger puts it, “only by the anticipation of death is every accidental and ‘provisional’ possibility driven out.” (BT 435) Thus, contrary to Aho’s interpretation, Heidegger speaks of an authentic being toward the future that begins with an “average” interpretation of
one’s society and its past but that also attempts to individualize our place in this heritage as we project
ourselves toward the future. Yet, consistent with Aho’s interpretation, we must recognize that Heidegger
does downplay the significance of the individual subject. Heidegger’s individual subject is an abstraction,
since, as Aho pointed out above, the subject initially is the product or reflection of the “they,” or of some
“average” situation, and finally is an abstract possibility of a future—death. 21 Moreover, while it is
certainly true that modernist political philosophers exaggerated the importance of the individual,
postmodernists, with Heidegger, and even more so, shift the exaggeration to the social, and this may well
have unwelcome results, since with the elimination of the subject, or, rather, with a subject that is so
completely diminished, we may well eliminate or diminish both personal freedom and individual moral
responsibility. We must attempt to understand how the individual and social influence and cross into one
another, not embrace the significance of one while diminishing the role of the other. Merleau-Ponty spent
much of his professional life trying to understand this relationship, which we witnessed above, and
especially witness in his philosophy of language. Even though this philosophy of language was touched
upon above, this theory is far too complex to offer in detail here. Perhaps, though, the following brief
quote will help provide an additional insight into the balance of his position.

“The social fact, which is no longer a massive reality but an efficacious system of symbols or a network
of symbolic values, is going to be inserted into the depths of the individual. But the regulation which
circumvents the individual does not eliminate him. It is no longer necessary to choose between the
individual and the collective.” (Signs 115)

We have witnessed Merleau-Ponty’s balanced treatment of various issues above, and we will see
momentarily that the balanced attention that he here pays to both the individual and social, and his
insistence that we must understand them as crossing into one another, with the aid of language, will be
repeated when he turns his attention to the relationship between the individual and the political state. Let
us turn first to a brief consideration of Heidegger’s politics.

As Michael Gillespie reminds us, Heidegger did not fully articulate a political philosophy, yet,
Gillespie maintains, it is possible, based on his general philosophy and his political actions, to reasonably
state his political views. Gillespie provides this statement in his excellent essay entitled “Martin Heidegger.” I will here summarize some of the main points of the essay.

Heidegger finds his political inspiration in his criticism of the West’s forgetfulness of Being. The Greeks boldly confronted the question of Being; they pondered the openness, chaos and mystery of Being, but also sought answers. The ontological question thus led to ontic answers. The West has subsequently forgotten Being and focuses too exclusively on beings, on things as discretely defined—including the human being. We must remember Being, Heidegger maintains, and we must remember Dasein’s Being, that it is the being that is aware of its Being and the Being of things, that it (Dasein) is not a thing but has a future and a future of possibilities. Now politically speaking, Heidegger apparently hoped that university system, with its sensitivity to the true nature of Dasein and Being, would be able to influence the government and its policies, which in turn would guide the population to the fulfillment of its full potential.

Heidegger also believed that the West’s classical conception of Being, framed mostly by Plato as an eternal foundation set against an ever changing world of flux, had largely been abandoned. However, Heidegger continued, since this abandonment primarily aimed at the abandonment of eternal foundations, we are left with the relativism of the flux, with relativism with respect to both truth and values, and we are left with individuals seeking to control and manipulate nature using technology for their own security and gain. Since this tends to give rise to conflict, government intervenes to maintain stability, but does so using the same instruments, the same instrumental thinking and manipulation. In response to this condition Heidegger asserts that it is the destiny of Dasein to call ourselves to Being, to confront its uncertainty and mystery, to confront the open ended possibilities of our future, and, through the awareness of our own death, to realize that we will never be a thing but will always be a future with open possibilities. It is through our mindful reverence for Being, and the call to this Being through the university, and apparently via the political apparatus, outlined in that paragraph immediately above, that Heidegger apparently hoped to bring about widespread social change.
Gillespie offers “both sides” of view with respect to Heidegger’s involvement with Nazi party, reporting that he supposedly took the role of rector at Freiburg University in order to protect the university and to provide the political arena with enlightened guidance, yet also reports “that Heidegger never publicly repudiated his Nazi utterances.” (MH 896) Gillespie proceeds to more critically state that Heidegger’s focus on Being “cannot guarantee…that the mysterious ‘essence’ of existence will strike man again,” in Heidegger’s Germany, as it did pre-Socratic Athens, “thus engendering wonder and authentic thought.” (MH 904, 902) And Gillespie concludes his essay with his most critical claim.

“Aristotle remarks that the man who lives outside the city is either a beast or a god. Heidegger may well teach us that those who pass beyond the city in their search for a new god often find themselves worshiping at the feet of beasts, that those who derive reason from revelation all too easily become entailed in the highest and most monstrous unreason. His thought and his example thus seem to lead us in opposite directions and open up anew the question of the relationship of the philosopher and the city.” (MH 905)

It must be noted that in the years following the publication of Gillespie’s essay, and consistent with his concluding comment, that a number of publications have documented, now beyond doubt, the extent of Heidegger’s unhesitant, willing, and even enthusiastic involvement with the Nazi party.23 Thomas Sheehan’s notable essay “Heidegger and the Nazis” presents and summarizes the documented information from two such publications.24 Here is a sampling of just some of what has been established. While serving as rector of Freiburg University (1933-1934) Heidegger stated the following to the university’s students: “Let not theories and ‘ideas’ be the rules of your being. The Fuhrer himself and he alone is German reality and its law, today and for the future.” (H&N 38) He wrote the following to a colleague: “The individual is nothing, wherever he stands, counts for nothing. The fate of our people in their State is everything.” (H&N 38) He was fond of quoting the following passage from Homer (Iliad 11, 204): “The rule of the many is not good; let there be one ruler, one king.” And, he wrote to a friend (in 1974!) that “Our Europe is being ruined from below with ‘democracy’…” (H&N 38) In his role as rector of the university he worked to diminish academic freedom and required that academic departments submit to rule of the rector, following Hitler’s Fuhrerprinzip, with its top down ideology and means of control.
(H&N 38) As “Fuhrer-rector Heidegger issued a decree applying the Nazi ‘cleansing’ laws to the student body,” thereby excluding “Jewish and Marxist” students from financial aid. (H&N 39) He held in contempt those who adhered to the “liberal-democratic” ideals associated with Max Weber’s work. (H&N 39) He viewed history through the framework of his metaphysics of Being, through a Being that would reveal/conceal itself to each epoch, and especially to the German people of the 20th Century. He regarded this revelation as the fate of the German people, and thus was a strong proponent of German nationalism, led, specifically, by a charismatic leader who could guide Germany through the industrial/technological age while maintaining traditional agrarian values. (H&N 44) After World War II, when Heidegger was called to justify his actions, he once again appealed to the fate of the mystical revelation of Being, now as a point of “apology,” since everything, the Depression, the economy, the war, etc. was a matter of fate and thus beyond human control and personal responsibility. (H&G 45) These facts, regarding Heidegger’s embrace of Nazism, and only some have been presented here, are now beyond dispute. Yet we must certainly ask, as many have, and as Sheehan reminds us, to what extent does Heidegger’s politics reflect his philosophy and vice versa? The answers to this question vary, with some claiming a direct connection and some claiming none at all. The present essay sides with the former, and for the following reasons: Heidegger’s discussion of “the historical process of the Volk” (H&N 47), that we may now interpret as the notion of Being revealing itself to the German people, is certainly consistent with German nationalism. Heidegger’s disdain for scientific knowledge and technology and his penchant for a more mystical revelation of Being lend themselves to the belittling of the scientific process, a de-valuing of technology, and even their suppression and (we now know) their authoritarian control from the point of view of the revelation of Being to a select few. Moreover, Heidegger’s focus on the ontological and his neglect of the ontic lend themselves to a neglect of the individual who is concretely involved in specific situations. His devout focus on and attention to an abstract Being, and his devout focus on future possibilities and ultimately on death, reveal an alienation from specific work and socio-economic
environments and from the embodied individual’s concrete sensuous, erotic, vital involvement in life and in the present.\textsuperscript{25}

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy suffers none of these short-comings and is consistent with a democratic politics, which he fully develops and articulates. His philosophy is certainly less mystical than Heidegger’s, and, as we have seen, less negative about the ontic, including the legacy of science and technology. He doesn’t deny either the ontic or ontological, or support one at the expense of the other, but seeks to integrate them. He is consequently less nihilistic about finding the ground for both knowledge and values in the history of Western science and democracy. Merleau-Ponty obviously does not accept Plato’s eternal foundation for beings in the eternal essences of Being. Yet he also does not accept the nihilism of relativism, of a position that in abandoning eternal foundations finds no means at all to establish common truths and values. Reminiscent of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty seeks as way between the intuitive certainty of eternal essences and seeming arbitrariness of personal/cultural relativism, yet without Heidegger’s penchant for mysticism, distain for the ontic, and emphasis on the future and death.

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty begins with our embodied openness upon the world within the present—within the present in the wide sense that we have witnessed above. Embodied perceptual experience opens to a world that presents stable foregrounds within the context of open natural and social horizons. Our choice, then, does not have to be between eternal essences and a flow of chaotic events, since experience presents stable truths that are nevertheless open to further development. To use Heidegger’s language, for Merleau-Ponty the ontic occurs in the context of the ontological, the foreground occurs in the context of open natural and social horizons (including language and theory) that nevertheless help articulate the foreground. Yet these interpretations are primarily suggested by the perceived. As we have already witnessed, for Merleau-Ponty it is by moving back and forth between fact and essence, between fact and theory, between thing and context, between the individual and the social, that we arrive at stable truths and values. Merleau-Ponty thus more thoroughly connects beings and Being, an Aristotelian logic.
with a dialectical one, and he more thoroughly connects science with philosophy, more thoroughly connects the history of science and the ontic with the ontological.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, knowledge, technology, and values have a ground in the body’s situated perceptual openness upon the world, with its things and events in natural and social context. True, we can forget Being, the openness of our natural and social horizons, and become focused on ontic things or merely objective bodies, manipulated by the instrumental thinking of the marketplace. What we should do, he says, is remember the Being of human beings, and place science, technology and instrumental thinking in the service of it, see that they emanate from it and act to fulfill the whole human being. The ontic must be placed in the context of Dasein’s ontological openness upon being, yet the ontological is always connected to the ontic, always takes off from a particular time and place. Presence always occurs in the context of absence; the ontic always occurs in the context of the ontological. Yet absence always occurs in contact with a present; the ontological also always occurs in contact with the ontic. Here again the Fundierung relationship helps us grasp Merleau-Ponty’s thought, for it is concrete experiences within specific natural/social contexts that suggest or motivate (not cause) certain interpretations that fold back on these experiences to help express them more precisely. Knowledge and values are not caused by experience but are certainly suggested by it. With respect to politics and ethics, Merleau-Ponty certainly would not accept Natural Law Theory, with its claim that Nature provides certain values and rights, but neither would he accept a complete relativism that claims that values are only specific to certain individuals or groups—or more, that they are mere conventions, based on more or less arbitrary choices. We have seen that for Merleau-Ponty human consciousness is embodied and that the individual is embedded in various natural/social contexts that profoundly influence the experiencing subject. Yet because of the human ability to turn back on these circumstances with at least a degree of awareness, human beings have the freedom to interpret them in a number of ways. It is better to say then that nature and human nature do not determine a certain set of human values, but that they provide a range of motives for human values, such as, and speaking generally, seek pleasure and avoid pain, cultivate health and
avoid disease, etc. And it is better to say that specific social situations, like one’s job or class, do not specifically determine one’s values but provide conditions that motivate a certain range of values and responses. Now, certainly, when attempting to arrive at a more refined expression of these values and the political rights that may be attached to them, a great deal can be left open for interpretation and discussion. Yet, still, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, embodied human beings live their world, take up the natural and social conditions within which they find themselves, and fold back upon them in a variety of ways. When attempts to interpret, structure, and deal with these conditions are arrived at by listening to all voices, are arrived at through non-coercive dialogue and all inclusive democratic debate, then this society will be just. Now obviously this is a moral claim—and it is not one that is strictly determined by our human nature, although perhaps suggested by it, since it appears more than arbitrary, and it is certainly a claim that appears consistent with the democratic values that we are still straining towards in the West, and that other traditions are straining towards as well. To what extent it is confirmed or denied, and how it is refined and ultimately comes to be expressed, is, of course, open social discussion and debate.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, we are not isolated or purely individual minds that rationally grasp the universal mathematical/logical principles of all of reality and the universal moral principles for all of humanity, as the Modernist tradition maintains. We are embodied beings who are primarily an openness upon a public world. We each have a personal perspective because we are individuated in our bodies, since no other human being has exactly our own individual history or our own collection of individual experiences. Yet this personal life and personalized body rest upon the anonymous structures of the human body, on structures that are shared by others. My personal life therefore opens upon, crosses with, and individuates from a public world. As we witnessed above, this means that, politically speaking, Merleau-Ponty attempts to hold the individual and community in balance. On the one hand, he seeks to uphold knowledge and values based on democracy and open democratic debate, and he stresses the individual rights of freedom of conscience and speech. On the other hand, since he fully realizes that
these values have been more fully developed in certain societies, and within certain historical traditions more than others, he stresses the need to support the social and political institutions that support and help maintain these values.²⁹

Also, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s political philosophy, and to more specifically address Heidegger, the university, the government, or the party officials may well seek to guide the general population, but, he says, they must take their original orientation from the people, must aim at increasing democratic participation, and must have their pronouncements democratically confirmed by the people. If their pronouncements do not connect with the people, if they do not match their experience and solve problems in a way that is democratically acceptable to them, then they have failed. If they have not met with the democratic consent of the people, then they are not legitimate.³⁰ For Merleau-Ponty there must be a democratic, dialectical exchange between a society’s political officials and its citizens, while this is clearly not the case for Heidegger. In addition, while we have seen above that Heidegger does recognize the importance of the individual’s experience when discussing authentic experience, we have also seen, emphasized by Aho, that he also seeks to de-emphasize the importance of the individual subject and even treats the subject as an abstract being toward death. Yet, we must ask, can we do this without also undermining the principles of a democracy, without, for example, undermining the freedom of individual conscience, the freedom of speech, and the principle of one person one vote, and without eliminating the individual’s positive drive toward life as it is lived in the present? Merleau-Ponty offers a sustained discussion of these issues, always with an eye toward maintaining and enhancing the democratic process.³¹ We have not seen in Heidegger any sustained political discussion of this sort and, in fact, that his political actions display an enthusiastic support for the authoritarian state of fascism. In addition, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, scholars, politicians, and the society’s citizens may well need to democratically remind each other that the ontic/technological should be placed in the broader context of an ontological human life, but we need not stress one so completely that we ignore the other. Human experience has an open/ontological aspect to it as well as a stable/ontic aspect. We must integrate
them, not focus exclusively upon one or the other. And we should do the same in the political arena. A society should be democratically governed with both the individual (the ontic) and the community (the ontological) in mind. Moreover, if the embodied situated individual (the ontic) and the social horizon (the ontological) are theoretically integrated, as we have seen Merleau-Ponty attempt to do, then truth and values are not left without a ground, as they may well be in a Heideggerian thought that focuses almost exclusively on the ontological and even the mystical call of Being.

1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Referred to as BT. Heidegger’s primary concern throughout *Being and Time*, of course, is with metaphysics and the meaning of Being. (BT 24) And, he says, “the being of entities is not itself an entity.” The thing’s existence or Being is not just the thing. Being, rather, must be understood in its own way. (BT 26) Being must be understood ontologically and not ontically. With regard to meaning of these last two special terms, translators Macquarrie and Robinson note the following. “While the terms ‘ontisch’ (‘ontical’) and ‘ontologisch’ (‘ontological’) are not explicitly defined [by Heidegger], their meanings will emerge rather clearly [in *Being and Time*]. Ontological inquiry is concerned primarily with Being; ontical inquiry is concerned primarily with entities and the facts about them.” (BT 31) Moreover, according to Heidegger, science studies entities (the ontic) and does so according to “our per-scientific ways of experiencing and interpreting” specific domains of Being. (BT 29) He maintains, rather, that we should first determine the meaning of Being as a condition of possibility for the regional ontologies of the respective sciences. (BT 31) We must first grasp the ontological before we can determine the ontic. Furthermore, it is Dasein that is ontically the kind of being that is aware of its own Being and the Being of beings or entities. (BT 32) Thus, the Being of beings or entities must first be approached through Dasein, and this must be done in order to provide the conditions for the study of specific areas of Being by the specific sciences, such as physics, biology, anthropology, etc. These themes, and Merleau-Ponty’s response to them, will appear below.


Aho, “Missing Dialogue,” quotes the following from Heidegger’s Zollikon Seminars. “Da-sein is understood differently in Being and Time. The Da in Being and Time does not mean a statement of place for a being, but rather it could designate the openness where beings can be present for the human being, and the human being also for himself. The Da of [Dasein’s] being distinguishes the humanness of the human being.” ZS-E 120

Askay cites the original German publication of Zollikon Seminars, represented here by ZS-G. The English translation, which was not available when Askay composed his essay, and which Askay himself later provided, contains page references to the German pagination. The English translation will be represented in text as ZS-E.

Heidegger, Being and Time, for the definition of ontic and ontological see endnote 1.) above.

Aho, “Missing Dialogue,” quotes the following passage from Heidegger to confirm these claims: “Proximally, it is not ‘I’, in the sense of my own self, that ‘am’, but rather the Others, whose way is that of the ‘they’. In terms of the ‘they’ and as the ‘they’, I am ‘given’ proximally to ‘myself’ [mir ‘selbst ’]. Proximally Dasein is ‘they’, and for the most part it remains so…With this interpretation of being-with and being-one’s self in the ‘they’, the question of the ‘who’ of everydayness of being-with-one-another is answered. (BT 129, italics added by Aho.)


Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception. “The relation of reason to fact, or eternity to time, like that of the reflective to the unreflective, of thought to language or of thought to perception is a two-way relationship that phenomenology has called Fundierung: the founding term, or originator—time, the unreflective, the fact, language, perception—is primary in the sense that the originated is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from absorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.” (PhP 394)


See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language, trans. Hugh Silverman (Northwestern University Press, 1979), 8, where the author states that phenomenology describes but in doing so must interpret the world in the way that is most clarifying.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Phenomenology and the Science of Man,” in The Primacy of Perception, 4. Referred to in the text as PSM.


19 See note 12.) above.


31 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*. 