This chapter attempts to explore Merleau-Ponty’s complex relationship to Husserl’s philosophy. It has been said that he is one of Husserl’s greatest disciples and yet, also, one of his severest critics. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is similar to Husserl’s in many ways; he does embrace certain aspects of Husserl’s philosophy; and yet he remains critical of significant aspects of Husserl’s thought as well. The present chapter will explore some of these similarities and differences by focusing especially on themes that appear in the later works of both authors. Part I of this chapter will consider the later Merleau-Ponty’s comments on the developments in the later philosophical thought of Husserl. More specifically, Merleau-Ponty’s late essay on the later Husserl, “The Philosopher and His Shadow” (1959), will be considered in detail and will present an exposition with the following sections: Part I. A. 1.) Reduction, 2.) Third dimension, 3.) The Other, 4.) Objectivity, and 5.) Pre-conceptual. Part I. B.) will consider Merleau-Ponty’s critical response to each of the previous 1-5 subsections just listed. Part II. A.) will present an exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s 1959-1960 lecture course “Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,” including both his brief summary of the course and his full-length lecture notes. Part II. B.) will present Merleau-Ponty’s critical consideration of Husserl’s ideas as Merleau-Ponty presents them in this lecture course and in his “On the Phenomenology of Language.” And finally, a consideration of how Merleau-Ponty’s The Prose of the World relates to the later works of Husserl will be explored.57

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

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

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

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

Part I Merleau-Ponty’s late completed essay on Husserl
A.) “The Philosopher and His Shadow”

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

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

2.) Third Dimension between pure things and pure consciousness: It seems clear, Merleau-Ponty states, that Husserl’s later thought begins to move away from the West’s widely adhered to subject/object bifurcation and from his own attempt to transition from the objective to the subjective (Shadow 162). In his later works, Husserl begins to “look deeper down for the fundamental” (Shadow 163). The problem with the search for the pure thing, within the context of the subject/object bifurcation, the pure thing that Husserl sought in his earlier works, is that it presupposes a purely intellectual attitude---which, in turn, tends to ignore the source of its ideal essences. Husserl came to realize that we know far more from our lived through perceptual contact with the world then we do from our purely intellectual grasps of it, and, furthermore, he came to realize that these two means of “knowing” are quite different. The natural, pre-reflective, lived
through perceptual relationship to the world, which is prior to the conceptual, displays a “primordial faith and a fundamental and original opinion (Urglaube, Urdoxa), which are thus not even in principle translatable in terms of clear and distinct knowledge, and which . . . gives us not a representation of the world but the world itself” (Shadow 163; Ideen II, Husserliana, Bd. IV, 22). In addition, this givenness offers a “clarity and obviousness” that is prior to and different from our conceptual attempts to articulate it.

And finally, Husserl seemed to realize that any attempt to go beyond this givenness must do so by utilizing what is given in the first place (Shadow 163-4). The goal of phenomenology and the phenomenological reflection, then, should be to reveal this pre-reflective, pre-cognitive, pre-theoretical experience that is the basis of the theoretical, and that the theoretical goes beyond only by carrying it forward. Phenomenology, then, should not seek to construct the world cognitively but should reveal the pre-reflective, lived through perceptual encounter with the world, which, moreover, is the basis for the abstract idealizations of the supposedly pure object and pure mind (Shadow 165).64

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It is as if my body learns what my consciousness cannot, for this body takes the actions of the other into account, realizes a sort of coupling with them, or an ‘intentional transgression’, without which I would never gain the notion of the other as other. Thus the body is not only an object to which my consciousness finds itself externally linked. For me it is the only way of knowing that there are other animated bodies, which also means that its own link with my consciousness is more internal and essential.”72
We see here not only the body’s lived through connection to other experiencing bodies but we also see that one’s own connection to one’s own body must be understood as lived through, and not simply as an external relationship, and, Merleau-Ponty goes on to say, “the same is true of language.” Since language is a sublimation of our bodily gestures, which are a sublimation of our active perceptual encounter with the world, the lived through expression of language has an internal connection to the body. Language will be more thoroughly addressed below, yet for now we should remain focused on the recognition of the other.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

First, we should cite, once again, in part, what Merleau-Ponty favorably says of the later Husserl above. “The senseless effort to submit everything to the properties of ‘consciousness’ [and abstract thought] was necessary…to reveal all that was left over---those beings beneath idealizations and objectifications which…nourish them” (Shadow 180, my bracket addition). It is clear that this return to the body’s pre-cognitive, per-conceptual, lived through perceptual encounter with the world is one of the fundamental
themes of “The Philosopher and His Shadow” and part of what Merleau-Ponty finds in the later Husserl. It is also clear, for those who have a familiarity with Merleau-Ponty’s body of work, that the focus on the body’s pre-cognitive, lived through perceptual encounter with the world is one of the primary themes of the entire body of his work. This, in fact, is his primary criticism of both empiricism and rationalism, that is to say, they both intellectually construct the world rather than living in it. Secondly, in his “Eye and Mind,” an essay composed and published at the same time as he was composing The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty states the following about science. “Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. Operating within its own realm, it makes its constructs of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals” (E&M 159). We must return to this face to face encounter with the real, he says, and we do so by prioritizing the body’s perceptual openness out to and upon a world that is always already there. Everything else is a framing and expression of this primordial encounter (E&M 160). Thirdly, in The Visible and Invisible he argues that cognitive essences cannot be regarded as either prior to or separate from our perceptual encounter with the world. “We never have before us . . . essences without place and without date. Not that they exist elsewhere, beyond our grasp, but because we are experiences, that is, thoughts that feel behind themselves the weight of the space, the time, the very Being they think . . .” (VI 115). Existence, then, is not the variation of an essential form. We must look at this the other way around: abstract essences are a variation existence. Moreover, in The Visible and Invisible he states even more broadly that our abstract ideas must find their origin in our lived through perceptual openness out upon the world. “Every ideation, because it is an ideation, is formed in a space of existence, under the guarantee of my duration, which must turn back into itself in order to find there the same idea I thought an instant ago and must pass into the others in order to rejoin it also in them. Every ideation is borne by this tree of my duration and their durations . . . ; behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of all the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other.” (VI 111)

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

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

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

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to point out that in Husserl’s later texts that ideality and historicity have a common source, something between a timeless realm of ideas and the flow of specific, everyday events, (as we have seen above, and Merleau-Ponty restates here) a third dimension that is the source of ideality, a dimension whose stages contain more than what is expressed explicitly in precisely defined concepts (TFL 115). In fact, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, each stage of experience carries not explicit concepts but certain implications, carried forward from the past. As these implications are developed in the present, they open new possibilities for the future. As Merleau-Ponty puts it with respect to an author’s creation (yet the context here makes clear that he also has in mind the broader movement of history), “each stage opens up a field and prepares themes which their author can only see as an outline of what is to come (Urstiftung), but which, when handed down (tradiert) to succeeding generations along with the earliest advances, become useful through a sort of second creation (Nachstiftung)” (TFL 115). This sublimation of past and the generation of future thought from it cannot be understood as proceeding from a timeless realm of ideality, for it is difficult to see how this ideality would enter the mind of the individual and drive the development of thought from the implied to the explicit. On the other hand, if we more properly begin with the origin of thought in our own experience, which exists within and fuses with the worldly dimension of temporality, then we can grasp this historicity of human thought, how it moves through time. Yet, in order to do this, because of the intersubjective nature of thought, we still have to understand how the thought that appears to one individual can exist for other minds. Here Merleau-Ponty answers, following his exposition of Husserl’s text, that it is the human act of speech that makes this possible (TFL 117). Yet how is this possible, or, rather, how is this accomplished? Again, following Husserl’s thought here, in order to answer this question, we should once again turn first to the historicity of personal thought. “Before anything else within my sphere of consciousness there is a sort of message from myself to myself . . . I think in this near past, or rather yesterday’s thought passes into today’s thought: there is an encroachment of the passive upon the active which is reciprocal” (TFL 118). Thus, we begin to be able to form ideas and ideal thoughts, we begin to be able to move out of our own immediate experience in the present, because the ideas of yesterday pass into the thoughts of today and do so by means of the reciprocal encroachment of the passive and the active. I passively receive memories of the past as I actively take them up and move them toward the future. Moreover, it is speech that gives these integrated past/present/future meanings a stable body, and even more, for speech is the means by which thoughts are able to move from

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one individual speaker to another. “Speech passes from the sphere of one consciousness to another by the
same phenomenon of encroachment or propagation. As a speaking and active subject, I encroach upon the
other who is listening, as the understanding and passive subject I allow the other to encroach upon me.
Within myself and in the exercise of language I experience activity in every case as the other side of
passivity. And it is thus that ideality ‘makes its entrance’ (Eintritt)” (TFL 118-119).

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

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

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

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

Course Notes for Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology

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

Here again, Husserl appears to associate the possibility of the identification of meanings over time with our practical engagement in the world. Merleau-Ponty presents this point in a somewhat cryptic lecture note as follows. “\textit{Deckung} [coincidence]: the identification of one \textit{Erzeugung} [production] and of its wake. Neither simple passivity nor simple activity therefore, neither association nor survey, but coupling---cf. evocation of the passive as sensible, \textit{Empfindlich} [sensible] through the ‘I can’ of the body . . .” (Limits 45, my bracket additions).\textsuperscript{84} In other words, it is within one’s practical activity that the passive and active fold into each other, and that the past is sensed and merges with the present. The lecture note continues its characterization of Husserl’s thought: geometry itself “consists in ‘spiritual’ being . . . engendered by human activity, belonging to our human space. I know this because it is a trace: Friday’s footprint” (Limits 28). In other words, since it is impossible for us to be historically present at the actual empirical origins of geometry, we are left with what might be considered to be its origins, i.e., some practical human activity that presumes a certain \textit{human sense} (just as Robinson Crusoe realizes that he is not alone on the island by seeing human footprints in the sand, the footprint of a man subsequently called Friday\textsuperscript{85}). Some \textit{human sense} must accompany the original trace of human activity that we can still presently observe. In the case of geometry, the first written formulas reveal a certain human presence and sense (human beings who were able to create \textit{meaningful} geometrical formulas), just as the human footprints left in the sand on what appeared to be an abandoned beach reveal a human presence and, presumably, some purposeful human activity.

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

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

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

Merleau-Ponty continues his exposition of Husserl.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“On the Phenomenology of Language”

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

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

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

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

**Temporality**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Prose of the World**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Political similarities and differences**

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

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

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

“Thinking ‘operationally’ has become a sort of absolute artificialism, such as we see in the ideology of cybernetics, where human creations are derived from a natural information process, itself conceived on the model of human machines. If this kind of thinking were to extend its reign to man and history; if, pretending to ignore what we know of them through our own situations, it were to set out to construct man and history on the basis of a few indices . . . then, since man really becomes the manipulandum he takes himself to be, we enter into a cultural regimen where there is neither truth nor falsity concerning man and history, into a sleep, or a nightmare, from which there is no awakening.” (EM 160)

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

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