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FIGURING FLESH IN CREATION

ANDREAS NORDLANDER

FIGURING FLESH IN CREATION

Merleau-Ponty in Conversation with Philosophical Theology



LUND UNIVERSITY
Ph.D. Dissertation, 2011

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Is this the highest point of reason, to realize that the soil beneath our feet is shifting, to pompously name 'interrogation' what is only a persistent state of stupor, to call 'research' or 'quest' what is only trudging in a circle, to call 'Being' that which never fully *is*?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*

And to all that stood around the portals of my flesh I said, 'Tell me of my God. You are not he, but tell me something of him.' Then they lifted up their mighty voices and cried, 'He made us.' My questioning was my attentive spirit, and their reply, their beauty. Then toward myself I turned, and asked myself, 'Who are you?'

Augustine, *Confessions*

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ABBREVIATIONS

In referring to works by Merleau-Ponty and Husserl in the footnotes, where appropriate, I first give the page number of the original, followed by that of the translation.

Works by Merleau-Ponty

CRO	<i>The Child's Relations with Others</i>
EP	<i>Éloge de la philosophie/In Praise of Philosophy</i>
HAL	<i>Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology</i>
IP	<i>Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954-1955)</i>
N	<i>La nature: Notes, Cours de la Collège de France/Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France</i>
OE	<i>L'oeil et l'esprit/Eye and Mind</i>
Parcours	<i>Parcours 1935-1951</i>
Parcours 2	<i>Parcours deux 1951-1961</i>
PhP	<i>Phénoménologie de la perception/Phenomenology of Perception</i>
PriP	<i>The Primacy of Perception</i>
S	<i>Signes/Signs</i>
SC	<i>La structure de la comportement/The Structure of Behaviour</i>
SNS	<i>Sens et non-sens/Sense and Non-Sense</i>
VI	<i>Le visible et l'invisible/The Visible and the Invisible</i>

Works by Husserl

Ideen I	<i>Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch/Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book</i>
Ideen II	<i>Ideen zu Einer Reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch/Ideas Pertaining to a Pure</i>

	<i>Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book</i>
Krisis	<i>Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie/The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology</i>
Umsturz	<i>Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature: The Originary Ark, the Earth, Does Not Move</i>
Ursprung	<i>The Origin of Geometry</i>

Works by Augustine

Conf.	<i>Confessiones/Confessions of St. Augustine</i>
De civ. Dei	<i>De civitate Dei/The City of God</i>
De Gen. ad litt.	<i>De Genesi ad litteram/The Literal Meaning of Genesis</i>
De Gen. lib. imp.	<i>De Genesi ad litteram liber unus imperfectus/Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis</i>
De Gen. c. Man.	<i>De Genesi Contra Manichaeos/On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees</i>
De doct.	<i>De doctrina christiana/Teaching Christianity</i>
De vera rel.	<i>De vera religione/True Religion</i>
De trin.	<i>De Trinitate/The Trinity</i>
Enchiridion	<i>Enchiridion de fide et spe et caritate/The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity</i>

Works by Thomas Aquinas

ST	<i>Summa Theologiae/Summa Theologica</i>
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INTRODUCTION

Il y a un thème unique de la philosophie: le *nexus*, le *vinculum* ‘Nature’ – ‘Homme’ – ‘Dieu.’¹

Stating the Problem

It is ironic that while contemporary theology is struggling to rethink parts of its dualistic legacy, contemporary philosophy is becoming increasingly aware of the need to rethink its own materialistic assumptions. Might the time be ripe for an encounter between them that reflects the still undecided question of what a human being is? The ultimate purpose of this book is to stage just such an encounter, in this case between the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the philosophical theology of Augustine of Hippo. More precisely, the central question with which I shall be concerned in the following chapters is this: *What kind of ontology is needed to preserve the integrity of human beings as part of the natural world, as well as the integrity of the natural world in the presence of human existence?* Let me unpack somewhat the meaning of such a question.

In this context, to ask for an *ontology* is to ask for a philosophical interpretation of reality, that is, what reality is and how it is most fundamentally structured. As I shall use the term, ontology is necessarily hermeneutical in the sense that it is an interpretation of reality based on what the philosopher has access to, which is to say everyday experience, the deep structure of experience as revealed by phenomenological practise, the results of the empirical sciences and the deliverances of philosophical reasoning and rationality. It is also hermeneutical in that it is aware of place, that is to say it is aware of working from within a particular perspective, against pre-given horizons, and within already established contexts of meaning; it does not, therefore, pretend to be the neutral voice of reason with which all rational

¹ ‘There is a unique theme of philosophy: the nexus, the vinculum “Nature” – “Man” – “God.”’ N., 265/204.

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individuals must agree. What I shall offer here, I offer in this spirit: an interpretation of reality from where I stand, though always trying to live up to the highest standards of critical rigour, academic honesty and philosophical reasoning. Whether, as I believe, something is thereby captured, a step has been taken in the right direction, or reality is beginning to make more sense – this is up to the reader to decide.

It should also be noted that philosophical ontology is an interpretation of reality that strives for a certain inclusiveness, in the sense that it seeks a comprehensive account of the different dimensions of reality, rather than this or that particular region. For instance, it can neither content itself with an interpretation of reality that requires it to bracket the entire sphere of human consciousness, nor with an interpretation that makes an illusion of the concrete world of everyday experience. Rather, it strives for an interpretation that can accommodate and make sense of all these diverse phenomena in its one purview. The central question above should be understood along these lines, as asking for an ontology that encompasses the two main ‘dimensions’ of reality that modern philosophy has driven a wedge between, that is consciousness and things, or in the terms I shall more often use, between human beings and the natural world.² My use of ontology is thus similar to that of Nicholas Rescher, who understands it to provide ‘a thought-framework for understanding the world about us and our place within it.’³

Two more minor points about ontology: First, I make no distinction between philosophical ontology and metaphysics, when metaphysics is understood in this most general sense of an interpretation of being. This I believe is consonant with Merleau-Ponty’s practise, though not with that of Heidegger and subsequent Heideggerians.⁴ Second, it does not follow that if ontology seeks to account for the whole of reality, the philosopher engaging in it believes he or she can somehow stand outside of the reality described. As Merleau-Ponty understands it, all ontology must be practised from within, so

² See Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), chap. 3, for a discussion of the fundamental distinction of modern philosophy between nature and mind.

³ Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 1.

⁴ Cf. Marjorie Grene, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal of Ontology,’ *The Review of Metaphysics* 29, no. 4 (1976), 605.

to speak, and this brings with it problems of its own, some of which I shall consider later.⁵

What would a *theological* ontology amount to? Much the same, in fact. That is to say, an interpretation of reality and our place within it, using the same sort of tools as philosophical ontology. However, theology inhabits a different space insofar as its interpretation is based also, and above all, on what it takes to be divine revelation, and the traditions in which this revelation has been handed down. This means that theology speaks from a perspective which is not available outside of its own tradition, that is, from a unique perspective and from out of its own proper concerns. Thus, when I speak of Augustine's creational ontology it should be understood in this sense – ontology done from a perspective constitutive of the Christian tradition.⁶ And it is against this general understanding that we always find Augustine proposing things he takes to be in accord with scripture, reason and experience, 'affirming whatever can be taught on the clear evidence of facts and by the light of reason, or on the unambiguous authority of the scripture.'⁷ In this way, then, ontology has been briefly characterized for the purposes of the following investigation.

This brings us to *integrity*. What could it mean to ask for an ontology – an interpretation of reality – that is able to preserve the integrity of both human beings and the natural world? I draw the first meaning of this term from Aristotelian philosophical method, and from the way it is reiterated in twentieth-century phenomenological philosophy.⁸ For Aristotle, philosophy is in the business of making sense of various kinds of phenomena, and in Book VII of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, just before he embarks on the famous discussion

⁵ A classic treatment is found in John Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1973).

⁶ Cf. James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 206 n. 59: 'By a "creational ontology" I mean an ontology (i.e. philosophy of the nature of reality) that begins with the commitment that the reality or world with which we are grappling is to be understood fundamentally as creation and hence as gift of the creator.'

⁷ De Gen. ad litt. VII.1.1.

⁸ What follows is neither the only method present in Aristotle's corpus, nor an undisputed interpretation of this passage, but it is one that has been brought forward and forcefully argued by Martha Nussbaum, among others. See esp. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 8. The received view of Aristotelian method tends instead to privilege his approach in the *Analytics*. This is an historical aside that matters little for the purposes of elucidating what I take to be the meaning of integrity.

of *akrasia* – weakness of the will – Aristotle offers some remarks about his philosophical method:

Here, as in all other cases, we must set down the appearances [*phainomena*] and, first working through the puzzles [*diaporēsantas*], in this way go on to show, if possible, the truth of all the beliefs we hold [*ta endoxa*] about these experiences; and, if this is not possible, the truth of the greatest number and the most authoritative. For if the difficulties are resolved and the beliefs are left in place, we will have done enough showing.⁹

For Aristotle, then, philosophy is committed to the *phainomena*. The original meaning of this Greek term, which is a neuter plural of the present participle *phainesthai*, is that which shows itself, that which appears. It is thus the givenness of the world – its manifestation, in phenomenological terminology – that must first be duly attended to. For phenomenology, but arguably also for Aristotle, phenomena serve to ground us in our linguistic, cultural and conceptual community; they safeguard the *context* or cultural *horizon* in which things (and ultimately a world) are given to us. It is this givenness that must first be set down.

After the philosopher thus ‘sets down’ the phenomena, he must set himself to ‘working through the puzzles.’ In other words, the phenomenal world presents us with much ambiguity, conflict and incoherence, and as human beings we want to sort these out, to achieve coherence and sense. We theorize, we argue, we philosophize, and we try to bring out a higher order. Some phenomena will have to be questioned and their validity rejected; others will be seen to be indispensable.

Having set down the phenomena, and having philosophically worked through their puzzles towards a meaningful coherence, the philosopher has one last but vital step to take: He must return with his theories and thoughts to the phenomena themselves and see if the theories still manage to preserve them, at least most of them and the most basic, as true. If they do not so preserve them the philosopher has gone wrong somewhere in his interpretation, for it was the very world of phenomena he set out to understand in the first place. In other words, philosophical theory must be true to the way the world gives itself to us.

Such an approach to philosophy accords well with a phenomenological ethos, whether in Husserl’s original call to ‘return to the things themselves’ [*zurück zu den Sachen selbst*], that is, to things as they are primordially given in

⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 1145b I-8.

experience; or in Heidegger's elaboration in terms of letting things be what they truly are, bringing them out of concealment and so forth; or finally in Merleau-Ponty's insistence that the painstaking work of 'true philosophy' consists in 'relearning to look at the world [*rapprendre à voir le monde*],' that is to say, to see it as it is really and truly disclosed in experience.¹⁰ It is this concern for phenomena, this demand that the world as experienced be respected, that I mean to convey with the notion of integrity, which is etymologically connected – through the Latin *integritas* – with something being whole rather than fractured and torn apart. Its origin lies in the negation *in* and the verb *tangere*, to touch – that which has integrity in this specific sense, then, has not been touched, has not been meddled with or corrupted, it has been allowed to be whole, to remain what it most properly is, and so forth. Integrity has all these shades of meaning.

The first sense of integrity, then, is Aristotelian-phenomenological in origin and is intended to suggest a philosophy, the basic motivation of which is to respect what it tries to give an account of; to understand it, yes – but also, if possible, to do so without losing the phenomenon in the process.¹¹ This hopefully begins to clarify what the central question above asks for: an interpretation of reality, a philosophical ontology, of such a calibre as to be able to preserve the integrity of both human beings and the natural world, rather than playing one out against the other.

But there is also a second meaning intended in the notion of integrity, one that once more is exclusively inherent in the theological perspective, and in particular the perspective of the theology of creation, with which I shall be mostly concerned in the coming chapters.¹² From the affirmation of Christian

¹⁰ See e.g. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 49-63; PhP., 21/xxiii. Again, this is not the whole of phenomenological method, but a core aspect of it, and one that serves to illustrate what I shall let 'integrity' signify for the purposes of the following investigation.

¹¹ As an illustration, a similar gesture within analytic philosophy of mind can be found in David Chalmers' *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xii-xiii, 164, in which the author distinguishes between positions that take mind seriously and those which do not (such as eliminativism), and which he therefore sees no real point in arguing with. Argumentation is really worthwhile only with those who agree on the phenomenon – mind – but have different understandings of how to account for it. Says Chalmers: 'The easiest way of developing a "theory" of consciousness is to deny its existence, or to redefine the phenomenon in need of explanation as something it is not' (*ibid.*, xii).

¹² Both my use of the term and my general understanding of it has been inspired by James K.A. Smith's lucid discussion of this theme in his *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 204-223, in particular.

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theology that the world is the creation of a good God it is possible to arrive at either of two opposite positions, neither of which is theologically adequate. On the one hand, it might be concluded that the world exists only as an idea in the mind of God, that the world has no reality or solidity of its own, but is continually suspended on God's will, and that the operation of the world, the workings of nature, subjectivity and freedom are determined behind the scenes by the creator. This, in its extreme form, would be the alternative of occasionalism. On the other hand, the opposite might be concluded, namely that since the world has been once established by God it has a kind of absolute self-sufficiency and autonomy in its existence and operations, and has, strictly speaking, little need for God any more. This would be the deistic alternative. As Smith puts it, speaking of creation's integrity is an attempt to negotiate 'a third way between autonomy and occasionalism.'¹³

In short, when theology insists on the integrity of creation, this must be seen as an attempt to speak coherently and faithfully of the world as created and continually sustained by its creator, but also – and even because of this – as having a reality and independence proper to its absolute goodness as created, and as having within itself real productive power, authentic subjects and a measure of freedom.

As will be seen in the chapters that follow, the question of integrity, both in its philosophical and in its theological senses, is central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, in his own developing position as well as in his critique of theology. The initial clarifications just made will be fully developed in the text, but let this suffice as a first specification of what I shall let integrity signify for the purposes of the argument to be made.

With 'ontology' and 'integrity' having been defined, let us return to the question with which we began: *What kind of ontology is needed to preserve the integrity of human beings as part of the natural world, as well as the integrity of the natural world in the presence of human existence?* In other words, what kind of interpretation of reality is able to account for human beings as a part of the natural world, without thereby, wittingly or not, rejecting the human phenomenon? And how can we account for the integrity of human beings without making them into something *opposed* to nature? These questions should be read as an invitation to try to think human beings in such a way as to steer clear both of reductionism and of dualism, as these are normally understood. And related to this, how must nature be understood if indeed it

¹³ Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 207.

INTRODUCTION

accommodates such things as human beings in all their glory? What sort of power must be inherent in it for human beings to emerge from it? What is the relation between human beings and the being of the natural world? This is how I intend the governing question of this whole project to be taken.

Now, as it stands there are strictly speaking no limits to this question; it involves any number of issues and a host of related disciplines. It is in need of a more precise circumscription and a definite context and it is with this in mind that I propose to stage an encounter between the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and the philosophical theology of Augustine. That is to say, the question as specified above shall be treated from the philosophical perspective of Merleau-Ponty and from the theological perspective of Augustine, choices which will soon be justified. However, it is important to state clearly that my own interest and motivation for relating these two rather diverse currents of thought is to be found in the task of constructive and creative philosophical theology. In other words, as a philosophical theologian, situating myself within the Augustinian tradition broadly conceived, I think of this as a consultation with a particularly strong and influential contemporary philosophy for the purposes of appropriating insights for philosophical theology as it seeks its own account of the integrity of human beings and the natural world. Risking a somewhat silly impiety, I am tempted to suggest that this way of approaching Merleau-Ponty is similar to the way in which Thomas Aquinas, according to Josef Pieper, approached Aristotle: 'Aristotle is for St. Thomas (in the measure in which he follows him) nothing more or less than a clear mirror of the natural reality of creation, a great and rich mind in which the *ordo* of the natural universe was inscribed.'¹⁴ In a word, the perspective adopted here is that of philosophical theology, rather than phenomenology or philosophical ontology *per se*.

Framing my project in this way immediately invites another *caveat*: While I do conceive of the encounter between Merleau-Pontian philosophy and philosophical theology as a give-and-take, the point is not a merger of perspectives. In particular, I shall not offer an argument for the existence of a God who created the world *ex nihilo*, or try to make the case that phenomenology followed through to its most radical consequences leads to religion. I simply see neither the possibility, nor the point of attempting such an argument. Nor do I seek to persuade theologians that they must accept this or that philosophical system to be coherent or contemporary. Theology, I believe, owes no such allegiance to any philosophical system, but remains free

¹⁴ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1957), 32.

to articulate its own concerns from its own points of view, even though it is also trivially true that some philosophies are more congenial to this end than others. In short, engaging the Merleau-Pontian and Augustinian legacies is not about finding out how much common ground we can agree on, or about merely pointing out some interesting parallels between strands of thought that otherwise appear to be far apart; rather, it is ultimately an approach to philosophical theology, seeking to articulate a vision of the world and judiciously using all relevant material for that purpose. And I contend that Merleau-Ponty is highly relevant for the articulation of a contemporary philosophical theology.¹⁵

The Players and the Game

Why Merleau-Ponty and why the Augustinian legacy? Though many persons, schools and disciplines will figure in the ensuing investigation, the main conversation partners are phenomenology and philosophical theology as they have been practised in the Merleau-Pontian and Augustinian styles. These choices must of course be justified.

I have chosen to approach this issue through the philosophy of ‘the greatest French phenomenologist,’ Merleau-Ponty, for several reasons.¹⁶ The first is that in deliberately seeking to develop Husserlian phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty found it necessary to articulate an explicit ontology, which, moreover, he says ‘must be presented without any compromise ... with theology.’¹⁷ His philosophical development makes it very clear how phenomenology leads to

¹⁵ A precursor to my project, in this respect, is John Milbank, who in a two-part article entitled ‘The Soul of Reciprocity,’ *Modern Theology* 17, no. 3 (July 2001), and 17, no. 4 (October 2001), argues that Merleau-Ponty is a chief resource for the articulation of a Christian account of the soul, which I shall say more about in chap. 6. Needless to say, the present project elaborates a much fuller account of the encounter between Christian theology and Merleau-Pontian philosophy. Interestingly, it seems that theologians associated with Radical Orthodoxy, though often highly critical of trends in Continental philosophy, generally have a soft spot for Merleau-Ponty. In addition to Milbank, see e.g. Phillip Blond, ‘Perception: From Modern Painting to the Vision in Christ,’ in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), and ‘The Primacy of Theology and the Question of Perception,’ in Paul Heelas, *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 107, 114.

¹⁶ This was Paul Ricoeur’s judgement. See Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens, OH: Ohio University press, 1981), 267.

¹⁷ VI., 322/274.

ontology and he is also very clear about what is problematic with the doctrine of creation. Since, as I shall argue, the doctrine of creation implies its own ontological framework – a creational ontology – the possibility of an interesting conversation offers itself, though one not devoid of the sort of tensions one hopes may be productive.

Another reason is that Merleau-Ponty's version of phenomenology is the one that has inspired a recent wave of interdisciplinary engagement from the cognitive and life sciences, that is, from people in diverse fields seeking a better understanding of the integrity of human beings within the natural world. This is not least because Merleau-Ponty, more than other phenomenologists, constantly consulted with the sciences of his own time. This makes it easier to bring out the unabated potential of the Merleau-Pontian program, by establishing some of the continuities with contemporary theories in the field. Since, as stated, my overall purpose is to discuss the integrity of human beings and the natural world, Merleau-Ponty is the obvious reference point in the phenomenological tradition; for as we shall see the relation between human beings and the natural world is a theme towards which Merleau-Ponty himself quite consciously oriented his philosophy.

In relation to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl is not as explicitly ontological, nor does he enter into debate with theology to the extent that Merleau-Ponty does, who even said that 'the confrontation with Christianity is one of the trial cases where philosophy best reveals its essence.'¹⁸ As for Sartre, it seems there would be less hope of a *fruitful* dialogue with theology and perhaps more denunciation than interaction. It also seems to me that Sartre's philosophy, though laced with his individual brilliance, is nonetheless clearly inferior to that of Merleau-Ponty and it has not been taken up in the contemporary debate about these issues to nearly the same extent as that of Merleau-Ponty. Finally, the philosophy of Heidegger and its relation to theology is already well rehearsed, even as his relation to theology is perhaps more complex still than that of Merleau-Ponty. In addition, Heidegger has already been more or less co-opted for a different project of relating theology and phenomenology, of which I shall say more presently. And most importantly, Heidegger does not command the attention of those seeking to further the interdisciplinary understanding of human beings in the natural world as Merleau-Ponty does, and one reason for that must be Heidegger's different approach – it is difficult to see Heidegger engaging in the painstaking philosophical analysis of the

¹⁸ S., 176 (my translation).

contemporary sciences of biology and psychology in the way that is characteristic of Merleau-Ponty. Among the founding figures of phenomenology, therefore, Merleau-Ponty strongly recommends himself for the kind of project I am seeking to undertake.

However, the most important reason for choosing to interact with Merleau-Ponty is that his thought, or at least the direction he is suggesting and developing, strikes me as one of the most promising attempts to give a philosophical account of the enigmatic relation between human beings and the natural world that seeks to preserve their mutual integrity and that traces a possible path between the less attractive ontologies of dualism and reductive materialism, none of which, as Aristotle might have said, manages to preserve the phenomena in their attempts at explaining them. In short, I consult Merleau-Ponty primarily on the strengths of his philosophical vision.

When it comes to philosophical theology, I have chosen an Augustinian trajectory for several reasons as well. It began when I found some philosophically interesting and often unappreciated themes in Augustine's *Literal Meaning of Genesis* that immediately struck me as close to certain themes in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh. Looking at the matter more closely, I realized that it would be possible to critically relate these themes in a reciprocally elucidating way, and in an effort to further philosophical theology in the Augustinian tradition – without necessarily subscribing to all the theses Augustine proposes in what could be called his creational ontology, nor indeed to everything suggested by Merleau-Ponty in his elaborate ontology.

Augustine returned to and wrote about the theme of creation throughout his career, producing no less than five treatises on the topic as well as returning to it in numerous sermons and letters. His major work in this area, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, has been compared in scope and subtlety to his other masterpiece, *The Trinity*.¹⁹ However, in comparison to his other works it has been little studied, such that Michael Gorman as late as 1974 could refer to it as 'the unknown Augustine' and write that this is a work that is 'practically unknown.'²⁰ Though the text has since been published in English, it remains one of the least studied of Augustine's major works.²¹ By taking it up in the

¹⁹ Michael Murrey Gorman, *The Unknown Augustine: A Study of the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, Doctoral thesis at The University of Toronto, 1974, 59.

²⁰ Gorman, *Unknown Augustine*, 1.

²¹ The entire work was first translated into English by John Hammond Taylor, S.J., and published by the Newman Press, New York, in 1982, as part of the *Ancient Christian Writers* series. I use instead the excellent recent translation of Edmund Hill, O.P., published in *On*

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context of a contemporary constructive philosophical theology one may perhaps hope that its potential would become increasingly recognized.²²

Another reason for choosing Augustine as the main theological dialogue partner is that he is without doubt at the very centre of the Western theological tradition, equally important for Roman Catholics and Protestants, and as I intend to do theology with as few prefixes as possible, this is a major desideratum. That is to say, I should like the result to be genuinely ecumenical, drawn from the heartland of the Christian tradition and available for all who identify themselves with this historical core, regardless of whether they are Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists or something else.²³ There is, I hope, nothing naïve in this attempted inclusivism. I am not saying that these traditions are similar in all important respects, but I will claim that as regards the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and the understanding of God as transcending the world in virtue of having thus created it, there are no essential differences. Nor do I pretend that the ecumenicity I claim for the doctrine of creation is at all uncontroversial in the context of contemporary academic theology; indeed, some segments of theological scholarship would prefer to reject the doctrine and revise the idea of God that it entails. As I shall argue, however, I believe the reasons for this rejection are inadequate. While this is not the place to engage in polemics about theological methodology, perhaps a brief word about my own position as self-consciously writing from within a specific tradition is in order.

As I understand it, Christian theology is not primarily an interpretation of the human condition as anyone happens to perceive it, but an interpretation of what the Christian tradition takes to be revelation and the human condition in light of this. It is *responsive*, therefore, to an address with historical specificity. As such, theology is primarily hermeneutical in the sense that it concerns itself with biblical interpretation and in the sense that the biblical texts concern

Genesis (New York: New City Press, 2002), as part of their series *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*.

²² When I had already completed the bulk of this manuscript I was made aware that Alister E. McGrath, in his 2009 Gifford Lectures, uses Augustine's *Literal Meaning of Genesis* as a theological lens for refocusing the science and theology debate. Although the context is quite different, I find it encouraging that Augustine's theology of creation is being rediscovered in a variety of contexts. See Alister E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

²³ Though there is no scope within the confines of this project to include major voices from the Eastern Orthodox traditions of Christian theology, that is certainly also on the horizon, and I do believe that the approach I take would be consonant with that tradition and could equally well have been drawn from such sources as Gregory of Nyssa or John Chrysostom.

themselves with the interpretation of God's primary revelation in the life and death of Jesus Christ, and of human life in relation to it, as Karl Barth so well understood.²⁴ But it is also the case, as the Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart says, that such a hermeneutic positively demands – and has always demanded – an effort at sheer metaphysical speculation.²⁵ This is especially true in the province of theology that is nowadays often called philosophical theology, which is roughly equivalent to some aspects of the German notion of *Fundamentaltheologie*, and which concerns itself precisely with fundamental philosophical issues, such as those of ontology and anthropology, in light of the more dogmatically driven hermeneutic. From this point of view, to do constructive philosophical theology would necessarily be to situate oneself within a tradition, but within a tradition that is *living* – which is to say, one that embodies an ongoing critical argument.²⁶ Constructive philosophical theology would therefore not merely be a dull and identical repetition of tradition, but something more like a creative performance of the ancient score. It is in this sense that I shall seek to align the 'conversation in philosophical theology' in my final chapter with the central concerns of Augustine, while at the same time arguing for a somewhat different rendition of these concerns in light of debates internal to and external to that tradition, and using insights from Merleau-Pontian philosophy in particular.

A word on my use of Thomas Aquinas is also in order. When I bring in Aquinas – and this is mostly in the final section of chapter 5 – I do so in order to clarify or bolster ideas already found in Augustine. This holds in particular for the discussion of secondary causes, a notion which is clearly present in Augustine, but which is far less developed than it is in Aquinas, for whom this constitutes an important topic.²⁷ In looking to Aquinas on this issue, I hope also to illustrate the idea of living tradition in theology, since it seems clear to

²⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957-1975), 457-537.

²⁵ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 32.

²⁶ This is of course the essence of Alasdair MacIntyre's celebrated definition of tradition – it must contain within itself a critical tension, both in relation to external criticism and internally as to the meaning of its fundamental agreements, if it is to remain a living tradition, that is, if it is to survive. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12; and *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984.), 220-225.

²⁷ I might mention here that, as the discussion in chapter 5 will show, Aquinas is self-consciously continuing the Augustinian tradition with respect to secondary causes, even as (according to Barth), Lutheran and Reformed theology looked to Aquinas when developing their renditions of the divine *concursum*. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 98.

me, on the one hand, that Aquinas is in this respect an Augustinian, and on the other hand, that he places the emphasis differently than does Augustine, as a result of his own concerns, his place in the tradition and his distinct philosophical engagements.

It is possible that some might see my presentation of Augustine as too Thomistic, or my understanding of Aquinas as too Augustinian. This is perhaps unavoidable in a text which uses both doctors to largely the same purpose. But in response to such worries, I should like to point out two things. First, I do not claim to present the entirety either of Augustine's or of Aquinas' theologies, and consequently make no sweeping claims about their similarity. Indeed, one need only recall the heated debates between 'Augustinians' and 'Aristotelians' at the University of Paris to see that there were points of contention. Second, while I am aware that there are strands of Aquinas scholarship that still consider him to be all that Neo-Thomism wanted and needed him to be in their polemic against modern rationalism, I fall back on a substantive wave of recent scholarship that does in fact seem to reduce the divide between Augustine and Aquinas, without thereby obliterating their differences.²⁸ This is due in no small part to the recognition of the importance of the concept of participation – Platonic in origin – in Aquinas' thought as it follows from his philosophy of creation, a concept that also figures centrally in Augustine.²⁹ Since I shall be concerned precisely with the doctrine of creation, and hence to some extent with the ontology of participation, there would be little point in dwelling extensively on the difference in accent between their accounts. My strategy will therefore be the following: When germane to the discussion in the text, I shall content myself with indicating that I am aware of divergent strands of interpretation and proceed to read Augustine and Aquinas along the same trajectory of thought, as defined by the historical core of the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

²⁸ See Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas' Way of Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); Rudi A. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001); Mary T. Clark, ed., *An Aquinas Reader* (New York: Forham University Press, 2000); W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being, God, Person* (Notre Dame, IL: Notre Dame University Press, 1994).

²⁹ See David V. Meconi, S.J., 'St. Augustine's Early Theory of Participation,' *Augustinian Studies* 27 (1996): 81-98.

Playing Fields Nearby

It will be useful to situate my project in relation to two other debates with which it is related: the *first* is the debate between theology and phenomenology constitutive of the so called theological turn of phenomenology, and the *second* is the rather influential line of contemporary philosophical and theological thinking, according to which divine transcendence can only be affirmed at the expense of immanent values.

As to the first of these nearby playing fields, the project thus far described seeks to stage a different sort of encounter between phenomenological philosophy and theology than what has become the standard approach, in the last twenty years or so, among philosophical theologians who are oriented towards Continental philosophy. For the fact of the matter is that the intellectual fecundity of relating phenomenology and theology has given rise to a steadily building wave of scholarship that explores this interface. However, the debate has so far been confined to a rather narrowly circumscribed set of questions, and one of my purposes in the chapters that follow is to open up a new direction for the interaction between phenomenology and theology.

In many ways, the renewed interaction between phenomenology and theology took off with Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being*, published in 1981, and with Dominic Janicaud's severe critique of what he called 'the theological turn' [*le tournant théologique*] of French philosophy in authors such as Marion, but also in Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henri and, to a lesser extent, Paul Ricoeur (It is true, however, that this 'turn' also harkens back to Heidegger's attempts at a 'phenomenology of the inapparent' proposed in the Zähringen seminars in 1973.)³⁰ I cannot here present this complex debate in full, nor do I need to, since I do not intend to enter into it in any direct way. However, in broad outline the debate concerns the methods and limits of phenomenology in a rather peculiar sense. Janicaud accuses the theological phenomenologists of taking phenomenological method 'hostage' for their own theological purposes.³¹ As he sees it, phenomenology is committed to

³⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981); Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). See also Janicaud's *Phenomenology Wide Open: After the French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); and an illuminating article by Jean-Luc Marion, "'*Mihi magna quaestio factus sum*": le privilège d'inconnaissance,' reprinted in *Grands Articles* 4 (Juillet-Septembre, 2006): 46-61. For a presentation and discussion of the debate and its historical roots, one may consult Jayne Svennungson, *Guds återkomst: En studie av gudsbegreppet inom postmodern filosofi* (Munkedal: Glänta Produktion, 2004).

³¹ Janicaud et al., *Theological Turn*, 43.

describing what appears, without straying from the phenomenal sphere, according to Husserl's well-known 'principle of principles.'³² What the theologians do, according to Janicaud, is to try to open phenomenology to that which exceeds the sphere of immanence, thus negating its strict methodology. It is interesting that he locates the beginning of this decline with the 1961 publication of Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, while curiously, he sees Merleau-Ponty, who died that same year, as the last stalwart defender of phenomenology *stricto sensu*. As Janicaud describes it, there are now two rather distinct phenomenological camps: One respects the phenomenological method by restricting its investigation to what is experientially given; the other violates this method by paradoxically trying to thematize what lies beyond phenomenality. If Merleau-Ponty is the hero of the first approach, Levinas is the villain of the second: 'Merleau-Ponty's way presupposes nothing other than an untiring desire for elucidation of that which most hides itself away in experience. ... On the contrary, [Levinas'] directly dispossessing aplomb of alterity supposes a nonphenomenological, metaphysical desire.'³³

Against this background of the original debate a number of philosophers and theologians have continued to probe the relation between phenomenology and theology. I believe it is possible to detect at least two major strands of interaction, which, though closely related, may nevertheless be distinguished. The first deals with the challenge that alterity or otherness – and in the extreme case the otherness *par excellence*, that of God – lays at the door of phenomenology. How can phenomenology accommodate radical otherness? Can God become a phenomenon (that is, be experienced)? If so, must the concept of the phenomenon be modified? What kinds of experiences would be analogous to religious experience in requiring the same sort of phenomenality? How is all this related to ethical concern for the other? These are the governing questions of the first approach.³⁴

³² Ibid., 87-103; cf. *Ideen I*, § 24.

³³ Janicaud et al. *Theological Turn*, 24-28.

³⁴ The following examples well illustrate this approach: Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996); Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, 1-52; Jean-Luc Marion, *De Surcroît: Études sur les phénomènes saturés* (Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 2001), 125-153; Claudia Welz, 'God – A Phenomenon?,' *Studia Theologica: Nordic Journal of Theology* 62, no. 1 (2008): 2-24; Jean-Yves Lacoste, 'Perception, Transcendence and the Experience of God,' in Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler, eds., *Transcendence and Phenomenology* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

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In the second approach, phenomenology is used as a resource for thinking through theological language and conceptuality; in particular, Marion's analysis of iconicity, and iconic concepts, have proved fertile: Does predicative language always involve an element of violence? Do we need predicative language when talking about God? Is there a non-predicative language of prayer? Is it even theologically desirable to try to overcome predication? Is there a particular 'logic of incarnation' that rivals the logic of the icon, without being reducible to the idol? Such are the governing questions of this type of interaction between phenomenology and theology.³⁵

What I have described above could be called the standard approach to the interaction between theology and phenomenology. I do not wish to deny that this approach is important; indeed, I think there is much to be learnt from it. However, I contend that a different interaction is needed in addition, one that more explicitly concerns the ontological stakes in the game.

Consequently, in contrast to the standard approach I shall not be concerned with religious experience, the phenomenality of God or iconic and incarnational language, but with the world and its denizens. The encounter I propose to stage between phenomenology and theology is unabashedly metaphysical in the sense specified above, as giving an interpretation of the structure of reality rather than merely a description of phenomena and their constitution; while it must start from these latter, and seek to preserve the phenomena, it significantly goes beyond them. As I understand it, neither phenomenology nor theology is metaphysically innocent, but wittingly or not committed to metaphysical frameworks. *Pace* Janicaud, the virtue of Merleau-Ponty is that the trajectory of his thought so clearly illustrates the passage from phenomenology proper, as the patient description of the givenness of things, to an explicit ontology, as that which is needed to make sense of the phenomena. And as for the theology of creation, it will become clear that it constitutes a metaphysics of its own, or at least provides a framework within which a properly theological ontology could be developed. This is what provides the opportunity of a different direction in the conversation between

³⁵ The following would be representative examples of this approach: Marion, *God Without Being*, 1-52; Marion, *De Surcroît*, 155-195; Jacques Derrida, 'Comment ne pas parler?,' in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987); Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le nom* (Paris: Galilée, 1993); Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002); James K.A. Smith, *Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002); Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

phenomenology and theology. An absolutely fundamental question can now be addressed: What kind of world do phenomenology and theology respectively envisage? And then: Are they compatible? Can they learn from each other? In particular, are there important insights in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology that philosophical theology would do well to appropriate? Such are the questions I shall pursue in the following chapters, and I believe they contribute to a new direction for the interaction between phenomenology and theology that stands to benefit both. In this sense, apart from the central question articulated at the beginning of this introduction, one purpose of this project is to experiment with letting phenomenology and theology interact around the ontological question of reality, instead of around the question of phenomenality as such. Moreover, this redirection nicely fits with my intention to let theology interact with the sort of phenomenology that in turn interacts with the contemporary sciences of life and mind. In a nutshell, following Merleau-Ponty's own development, we move from phenomenology proper to an ontological interpretation of the world and of human beings within it, an interpretation that finds significant resonance in contemporary biology and cognitive science – and it is primarily with this interpretation that philosophical theology will enter into conversation.

To further clarify this, let me return to Janicaud's critique of the theological turn of contemporary phenomenology. As will become evident throughout this book, I believe that Janicaud's characterization of Merleau-Ponty does not do full justice to his philosophical development, and especially not to his later development of a philosophy and ontology of nature. The point I wish to make here is this: It seems to me that the two camps of the original debate at least share a more fundamental agreement. Both camps tend to forswear ontological or metaphysical questions about reality in favour of a philosophy of access, or what Quentin Meillassoux calls 'correlationism' – that is, a philosophy of reality *for us*, a philosophy essentially confined to the methodological strictures of Kant's Copernican revolution.³⁶ Marion is a good example, for even though he develops the notion of saturated phenomena, in which more is given to intuition than can be adequately grasped, they are treated precisely as phenomena; Marion does not want to speak of a sub- or a supra-phenomenal reality, neither in his analyses of saturated phenomena nor of ordinary phenomena. In this way, Marion does in fact respect Husserl's

³⁶ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), 5-6.

‘principle of all principles.’³⁷ And of course, these are exactly the limits Janicaud so insistently argues that phenomenology should keep within. Regardless of the value of Janicaud’s critique, it seems to me that none of his interlocutors genuinely challenges this tacit agreement of the debate: that phenomenologists must abstain from any metaphysical interpretation of the ordinary reality in which we live. Ironically, however, the philosopher that Janicaud hails as the last pure phenomenologist – Merleau-Ponty – is the one that does in fact challenge this understanding, or so I shall argue. To repeat: an important virtue of Merleau-Ponty as a conversation partner for philosophical theology is that he exemplifies what I think is a very natural passage from phenomenology to ontology. And this is, once more, what distinguishes the interaction I propose between phenomenology and theology from the first nearby playing field described above.

There is another nearby playing field that it will be helpful to briefly characterize, since it figures as a theological motive for undertaking this project in the first place, though it does not receive extensive discussion in the text: An antithetical conception of the relation between divine transcendence and the world’s immanence has become widespread in theology and philosophy. I would like to tentatively call this antithesis the *Feuerbachian Assumption*, not necessarily because Ludwig Feuerbach was the first to state it, but because his statement of it is so clear, so passionately argued and so undeniably influential for subsequent thinkers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and beyond.³⁸ The reasoning, in a nutshell, is as follows: The theological affirmation that God transcends the world in virtue of having created it *ex nihilo* implies a denigration of the immanent sphere of the world so created, that is to say a rejection of the value of human life here and now in favour of the there and then of the transcendent divine, of finitude and temporality in favour of the infinite and eternal. Another way to put it would be to say that the Feuerbachian Assumption is that one cannot affirm the transcendence of God in relation to the world without thereby denying the integrity of the world itself. As such it is highly pertinent to this project, since I shall seek an

³⁷ Cf. the trenchant critique of Graham Harman in his *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2005), 15.

³⁸ For Feuerbach’s own take on this, see e.g. *Thoughts on Death and Immortality from the Papers of a Thinker, along with an Appendix of Theological-Satirical Epigrams*, Edited by One of His Friends (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980); and *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), esp. 101-119, 297-298.

ontology that preserves the mutual integrity of humanity and the world precisely within the context of a theology of creation.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of Christian theology basically operates on what I call the Feuerbachian Assumption, which is something I will discuss extensively in chapters 4 and 5. However, at this point I would like to register that the case of Merleau-Ponty is in this respect one among any number of candidates, and the critique I shall undertake in chapter 5 would, I believe, apply *mutatis mutandis* to many other cases of theological and philosophical reasoning based on a similar assumption. Thus, for instance, Sartre seems to subscribe to the same logic; he is anxious to preserve the utter creativity of the for-itself against the passivity he thinks follows from the notion of divine creation: 'Since people supposed that God had given being to the world, being always appeared tainted by a certain passivity. ... [Being] can only affirm itself as *distinct from and opposed to* its creator; otherwise it dissolves in him.'³⁹ And the same assumption of the antithesis between divine transcendence and the integrity of mundane immanence is evident in a number of recent theological attempts to revise the doctrine of God through a rejection of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. For instance, Catherine Keller, one of the most articulate critics of the traditional doctrine of creation, says that 'when theology insists on creation/genesis from a mere void, it can render the embodiment in which we live every moment of our actual lives close to nothingness. Materiality becomes empty of value, little more than surface of carnal temptations and meaty decay to be passed through with as little contamination as possible.'⁴⁰ Or again, 'according to the logic of *ex nihilo*, one is either good or evil, corporeal or incorporeal, eternal or temporal, almighty or powerless, propertied or inferior. One need not argue that this grid of dualisms necessarily accompanies the *ex nihilo* argument – only that historically it has done so.'⁴¹

Keller here draws attention to an important point in the recent history of the reading of creation *ex nihilo*, namely that the presumed dualism between God and the world functions as a motivator and justifier of all other unwanted dualisms. Rowan Williams, who goes so far as to call this 'something of a new "received" view,' characterizes the reasoning as follows:

³⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge, 2003), 20 (my emphasis); cf. 256.

⁴⁰ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 52.

⁴¹ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 49.

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It is just such a gap [that between God and the world], we're told, that sanctions or grounds all sorts of other dualisms – not only spirit and body, but man and woman, and humanity and nature; if we start with a basic disjunction between an active and a passive partner, and allot a massive metaphysical privilege to the former, we end up associating technocratic humanity, masculinity, and distancing or dominating rationality with God. The result is the mess in which this planet now lives.⁴²

Williams highlights something that is of decisive importance for the project to be undertaken in the following chapters, since its ultimate purpose, as stated at the beginning, is to search for an ontology which is able to preserve the integrity of human beings and the natural world, and if a major theological premise of such a project – creation *ex nihilo* – does indeed have the consequences suggested by Keller and described by Williams, there can be no hope of finding such an ontology while also affirming the doctrine. This is an intuition that has struck deep roots even in the ecological movement, starting with Lynn White's classic 'Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' in 1967.⁴³ White claims that 'Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity ... not only established the dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.'⁴⁴ Crude as this judgement may be, it expresses a sentiment that is echoed in a wide variety of writings. For instance, one of the most celebrated ecological writers of our time, David Abram, delineates – and admittedly, with more nuance than White – Judeo-Christianity and Platonism as the two sources of the denigration of nature and the loss of our intimate bond with the earth, writing that they have led to 'a style of awareness that disparages sensorial reality, denigrating the visible and tangible order of things on behalf of some absolute source assumed to exist entirely beyond, or outside of, the bodily world.'⁴⁵

Needless to say, these are but a few examples of a widespread trend in the interpretation of the doctrine of creation, and anyone familiar with the field

⁴² Rowan Williams, 'Good for Nothing: Augustine on Creation,' *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), 9-10.

⁴³ Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,' *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203-1207.

⁴⁴ White, 'Historical Roots,' 1205.

⁴⁵ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 94. Interestingly, Abram falls back on a theoretical framework adopted from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and I shall refer to Abram's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty at several places in the following chapters.

will immediately come to think of other similar proposals.⁴⁶ I characterize this approach as a nearby playing field (or indeed, playing fields), because I will not directly engage the vast literature of this discussion of how to interpret the doctrine of creation and its consequences. Rather, I will engage Merleau-Ponty's understanding of Christian theology against the background of this wider context, arguing for an alternative reading of the logic of creation *ex nihilo*. But the importance of chapters 4 and 5 emerges more fully against the background here sketched, since it reveals that the assumptions of Merleau-Ponty's critique are not idiosyncrasies, but still widely held among philosophers and theologians. Hence, while this conversation takes place between Merleau-Pontian philosophy and Augustinian theology, I take it that it will have implications for this wider debate about the meaning of the doctrine of creation today. To make that case, however, would be the task of a different project, which is why I here limit myself to these remarks, only so as to be able to better situate the present project.

Overview

Under the general problem sketched above, there are three main tasks to be achieved in the following chapters: The *first* is to present Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a response to the general question, and to demonstrate the coherence of his development towards ontology. This is what I do in Part One. The *second* task is to articulate and clarify Merleau-Ponty's critique of Christian theology, which, as I read it, is concerned precisely with the integrity of human beings in the natural world; and then to develop a theological response to this criticism from out of the resources of the broadly Augustinian tradition. This is the concern of chapters 4 and 5. Finally, the *third* task is to stage a constructive conversation between Merleau-Pontian philosophy and Augustinian theology, centred around the themes considered in Part One: the ontological framework; the emergence of human being within nature; and the co-creative nature of human meaning-making. This is the task of chapter 6, where Merleau-Ponty is

⁴⁶ To mention just a few more, one might consider the work of Anne Primavesi and Sallie McFague as examples of ecologically minded theologians who are critical of creation *ex nihilo*. See e.g. Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism and Christianity* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1991), and her *Sacred Gaia: Holistic Theology and Earth System Science* (London: Routledge, 2000); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987). From a philosophical perspective one might also consider John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

primarily seen as a resource for contemporary philosophical theology as it engages with these issues.

In Part One, then, I present a reading of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy by means of the twin concepts of *rootedness* and *verticality*. Rootedness is a theme that runs through all of Merleau-Ponty's works, and its basic meaning is that what we think of as higher phenomena are always prefigured on lower levels and continue to be borne by them. Thus, in *The Structure of Behaviour*, human consciousness is described as rooted in vital structures, while vital structures are in turn rooted in physical structures. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the personal thinking subject is described as rooted in the pre-personal corporeal subject of perception. And in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the phenomenal world itself is described as emerging out of and thus rooted in the flesh. To seek in this way the roots of phenomena could be described as Merleau-Ponty's fundamental philosophical impulse. As he says, 'I have tried first of all to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world.'⁴⁷

Verticality is a comparatively muted theme, though I believe it is always in the background. Verticality suggests an upward movement, progression or teleology, themes that are central to Merleau-Ponty's thought. Towards the end of his life, he began to speak of 'the vertical world [*le monde vertical*]',⁴⁸ and of a 'rediscovery of the vertical Being [*l'Être vertical*].'⁴⁹ He even indicated that this rediscovery held the solution to the mind-body problem. Verticality is akin to transcendence, but without suggesting a contrast with immanence; it indicates a being that has the potentiality of transcending itself, which is to say of transcending what it is now in favour of what it shall become. As such, there is a close connection between verticality, as Merleau-Ponty uses it, and the now popular notion of emergence, to which I shall come back.

Rootedness and verticality are thus complementary; they are really two ways of approaching the same phenomenon. As my interest here is in philosophical anthropology, and in particular the relation between humanity and nature, I shall use these terms to speak about human beings as both entirely rooted in the natural world and as it were vertically transcending their material infrastructures.

One significant philosophical thesis that Part One as a whole seeks to demonstrate is that paying attention to the way in which Merleau-Ponty

⁴⁷ PriP., 3. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Merleau-Ponty Vivant,' in Jon Stewart, ed., *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ VI., 277/228.

⁴⁹ VI., 282/233.

investigates biology in *The Structure* and the lived body in the *Phenomenology*, and in particular the inadequacies of the interpretations offered there, will let us see how transcendental philosophy metamorphoses into a new form of realism as it meets the phenomenon of life. In other words, that transcendental phenomenology, as it meets life, necessarily moves towards an ontological consummation.

It is possible to take Part One as an overall introduction to Merleau-Ponty's thought, through a series of critical readings. However, this method of presenting Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, through some chosen themes that particularly interact with Christian theology, is not to be seen as a mere repetition of other scholarly work. Rather, it is hoped that this approach will be able to disclose new dimensions of his philosophy, in accord with what Merleau-Ponty himself said of Husserl, that any rich philosophy contains more than the philosopher is himself aware of, and thus numerous possibilities of creative appropriation. Dimensions of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy will be seen more clearly in dialogue with the theological understanding of divine transcendence, creation and so on. This is especially true if Merleau-Ponty is right in that it is in confrontation with Christianity that philosophy best reveals its essence.⁵⁰

The *first chapter* deals with incarnate existence, that is, with the human subject and with Merleau-Ponty's discovery of the role of embodiment and of the body itself as the primordial subject. The first part of the chapter is concerned with how the body escapes the dualism of subject and object and appears as a transcendental condition incarnate. Here, I present a number of the central concepts needed to understand Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. In the second part of the chapter, I set out Merleau-Ponty's anti-reductionist interpretation of the phenomenon of life, and the continuity between life and mind, as these are found in *The Structure of Behaviour*, and seek to relate them to contemporary developments in biology and the philosophy of mind. The general thrust of the chapter as a whole is thus to follow Merleau-Ponty in search of the deep roots of subjectivity, from consciousness, through the body and finally down into life itself, showing how Merleau-Ponty is in search of a philosophy able to navigate between dualism on the one hand, and materialistic reductionism on the other.

In the *second chapter*, I look at the other pole of the intentional relation – the world perceived. I address the question of perceptual meaning and how it is

⁵⁰ Cf. S., 176/140.

fundamentally interrelated with metaphysics. Since perception is the openness of a subject towards the world, to think philosophically about perception always implicates you in ontology, always presupposes an understanding of what the world is and who the perceiver is. The philosophy of perception is the gateway to ontology, and this is the way it functions in Merleau-Ponty's thinking. Here I present and discuss the central Merleau-Pontian ideas of perceptual dialogue, and the teleology of meaning-formation as well as its contingency. After a brief discussion of the transition from perceptual meaning to linguistic meaning, I raise the critical issue of the integrity of the world on the Merleau-Pontian account; I argue that an unresolved tension cuts across the *Phenomenology* and briefly suggest the implicit ontology that could be developed from Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of perceptual dialogue. Finally, just as chapter 1 constitutes an *approfondissement* of subjectivity, so chapter 2 constitutes an *approfondissement* of the world perceived, pushing towards an explicit ontology.

The *third chapter* is concerned with Merleau-Ponty's development of ever more explicitly ontological themes, culminating in his unfinished *Visible and the Invisible*. I begin with an overview of Merleau-Ponty's criticism of his own earlier philosophy and a formulation of my own critique along similar lines. I then follow Merleau-Ponty's philosophical maturation as he deals successively with the notions of world, nature, and, finally, being; devoting myself in particular to the development of the ontology of flesh, I attempt to expound its meaning and assess its significance and the way in which it may overcome the tensions laid bare in the previous two chapters. As I see it, the ontology of flesh opens for a much deeper appreciation of the integrity of human beings in the natural world. It is this rendition of Merleau-Pontian themes, then, that should guide the positive interaction with philosophical theology, but it cannot be properly understood or assessed save through familiarity with his earlier work. What I describe as the ontological consummation of phenomenology is intended to convey that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as I read it, only fully makes sense when placed in the ontological framework of the ontology of flesh. Indeed, the deepening of the subjective pole in chapter 1 and of the world-pole in chapter 2, is in chapter 3 seen to lead to the same being – the being of flesh.

In *Part Two* I present my own critical interventions, from the point of view of philosophical theology, in a more explicit way. Here I seek to relate the philosophy that has emerged from the investigations of Part One to the Christian doctrine of creation and the theological and philosophical

consequences following from it. This takes the form of a critical presentation of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Christian theology, an alternative reading of the logic of creation, and finally an intertwined reading of ontology, anthropology and meaning-making in Augustine and Merleau-Ponty.

In *chapter 4*, I give a full presentation of Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Christian theology, starting from his very first publication and following the development through subsequent interaction all the way to the decisive course notes on nature and *The Visible and the Invisible*. A number of themes developed in Part One are here taken up in relation to theology, in particular the questions of incarnation, contingency and integrity. In my reading of Merleau-Ponty's polemic, I make the case that his antipathy towards certain aspects of Christian theology, while having practical as well as methodological dimensions, is nonetheless fundamentally fuelled by his understanding of the doctrine of creation and of the orthodox doctrine of God, and the presumed consequences of such beliefs. This becomes increasingly clear as one follows the maturation of Merleau-Ponty's thought and it is made abundantly clear in his course notes on nature. This chapter is intended as an exposition of Merleau-Ponty's explicit interaction with theology and as a clarification of the governing logic of this interaction, its assumptions and hermeneutical decisions. It is not, however, intended as a straightforward historical analysis, taking into account all the possible influences of Merleau-Ponty's polemic, its precise historical and cultural context, its similarities with and differences from other philosophical critiques of theology and so on. My ultimate interest is in the value of the analysis itself and in the way in which a philosophical theology should respond.

Chapter 5 contains my response to the charges made by Merleau-Ponty about the consequences that follow upon the doctrine of creation. The purpose here is to provide an alternative reading of creation, largely based on the Augustinian and to some extent Thomistic traditions of theology, where the logic of creation comes across as something entirely different. I begin by presenting the emergence, development and reception of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in the early church, drawing out some philosophical features that are of specific importance for the discussion. I then proceed to present and discuss, in turn, the three points addressed in chapter 4 – incarnation, contingency and integrity – using Augustine as the chief exponent of the doctrine of creation, but at times extending and buttressing his main points as they were developed by Aquinas. The outcome of this chapter is that there are resources at the heart of the Western Christian tradition for addressing precisely the concerns raised by Merleau-Ponty. There is thus no reason for

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philosophical theology to back down from its traditionally central convictions about God and the world in order to engage the contemporary debate about the integrity of human beings and the natural world. On the contrary, this should be precisely the perspective defended by theology from out of its own agenda.

Chapter 6, finally, takes this one step further, as I begin to look at the potentially positive interaction between these traditions. This is the most freely creative chapter and it takes the form of an intertwined reading of Augustine and Merleau-Ponty, or, more precisely, a reading of Augustine's creational hermeneutic alongside Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh. After briefly reviewing Augustine's interpretation of the creation stories in Genesis, I focus on some of the particularly interesting consequences he draws from the text, showing how Augustine was led to formulate a surprisingly dynamic ontology, in which the world is understood as a structure containing potentialities to unfold over time. I proceed to look at the vexed issue of anthropology and the relation between body and soul as understood by Augustine and by Merleau-Ponty. And finally, I consider a topic dear to phenomenology that theology has largely ignored – the transcendental or co-creative function of human subjects, that is to say, the way in which human subjects participate in the meaning of the world.

I

ROOTEDNESS AND VERTICALITY:

A READING OF MERLEAU-PONTY

CHAPTER 1

EXISTENCE INCARNATE

SUBJECTIVITY AS ROOTEDNESS AND VERTICALITY

The organic body signifies the latent crisis of every known ontology.¹

Il faudrait définir à nouveau la philosophie transcendentale de manière à y intégrer jusqu'au phénomène du réel.²

Le corps est pour l'âme son espace natal.³

1. Introduction

Merleau-Ponty laboured to develop a framework for thinking about the integrity of subjectivity in the natural world in a way that steers clear of the modern alternatives of dualism and reductive materialism. In this chapter, I present that framework, beginning with what could be seen as Merleau-Ponty's great discovery – what he called the lived body [*corps vécu*], the body itself [*corps propre*] or the corporeal subject [*sujet corporel*]. Seeking to anchor Merleau-Ponty's breakthrough in the problems and possibilities of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy, I show that the human subject is primordially embodied and as such fits neither in the category of subject nor of object as these have been traditionally conceived. Rather, when faithfully

¹ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 19.

² 'It would be necessary to define transcendental philosophy anew in such a way as to integrate with it the very phenomenon of the real.' SC., 241/224.

³ 'The body is the birth place of the soul.' OE., 54/176 (my translation).

attended to, the corporeal subject at the root of what we are seems to demand a reinterpretation of ontology, as Hans Jonas suggests in the first of the above epigraphs. The body itself, by refusing to be an object simpliciter, calls dualism into question, but it is not yet clear what must come in its place.

In discussing this thematic, I initially revisit two themes from the *Phenomenology of Perception*: (1) the curious phenomenon of double sensation, and (2) the body schema. The first is not very prominent in the *Phenomenology*, but it is useful for articulating clearly the way in which the body as experienced escapes dualism; it is also a theme that grows in importance for Merleau-Ponty and comes to constitute something of a cornerstone for his ontological project, as we shall see in chapter 3. The second theme, on the other hand, is central to the argument of the *Phenomenology*, for it concerns the way in which the corporeal subject discloses a meaningful world of perception. The upshot of this is that there is no sense in saying that the subject discloses the world from a distance, since the body first learns to perceive the world in constant interaction with it – by being in the world. This leads to a re-articulation of transcendental philosophy from the point of view of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty is clearly a transcendental philosopher in the historical trajectory going from Kant and the Romantics through Husserl and phenomenology, which means that he is interested in the way in which pre-given subjective structures inform experience and shape the way that the world is given.⁴ Yet with the discovery of the corporeal subject he breaks with this tradition in two important respects: First, by showing that the constituting structures are not primarily in the mind, as categories or concepts, but in the body as an acquired schema for sensorimotor interaction; and second, by consequently insisting that constitution must be reciprocal *between* the subject and the world, rather than unidirectional *from* some otherworldly subject. Significantly, the lived body is always already found in the world as part of the world and this means that the sharp distinction between the subjective and the objective orders once again begins to fade out.

The case against dualism, however, is only half the story (and half of the present chapter). For Merleau-Ponty's rejection of modern dualism is in no way a concession to its twin – materialism in its reductionist mode. In the third section, I therefore return to Merleau-Ponty's earliest book, *The Structure of Behaviour*, to seek the rootedness of subjectivity in structures even deeper

⁴ For an elucidating discussion of the continuities and ruptures between the transcendental tradition and Merleau-Ponty's project, see Martin Dillon, 'Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty,' *Kant-Studien: Philosophische Zeitschrift der Kant-Gesellschaft*, vol. 78 (1987): 403-423.

than that of the lived body, namely in the vital structures of life itself. In dialogue with contemporary theoretical biology and the philosophy of mind, as well as with the organismic philosophy of Hans Jonas, I investigate Merleau-Ponty's claim that the orders of matter, life and mind evince formal structures and that these are irreducible to their material substrates. This involves five sub-sections. In the *first*, I present and discuss the notion of form upon which Merleau-Ponty builds his framework. In the *second*, I approach vital forms – biological cells, as a minimal case – through an interaction with autopoietic theory, arguing that they demand to be seen as emerging individuals with their own internal norms – indeed, as in some sense primordial subjects. In the *third* sub-section, I clarify an important consequence of this with the additional help of Jonas' organismic philosophy, which is that vital forms establish a relation of meaning with their environments, such that these primordial subjects are also in some sense intentional. This is exemplified through the minimal case of cellular metabolism. A further consequence is that with vital forms there emerges something like a teleology immanent to the organism, a goal for which the organism can be said to act. It is this feature that allows Merleau-Ponty to discriminate between different levels of behaviour among living forms, where simpler, or 'lower,' forms of life are tied to rigid goals and structures of behaviour, whereas more complex, or 'higher,' forms of life evince an increasing level of freedom in the setting of goals. This amounts to an interpretation of life as increasingly meaningful, such that it would be possible to speak of a teleology of meaning emerging in nature. This leads on to the *fourth* sub-section, where the distinctively human form is briefly characterized as disclosing a meaning toward rationality and truth. Here I try to situate Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the distinctively human mind, which I develop along emergentist lines, in contrast to contemporary reductive materialism concerning the mental.

The *fifth* sub-section, finally, stands apart from the others in that I here consider the overall philosophical framework of Merleau-Ponty's investigations of vital and human forms, which veers toward idealism. This is significant, since it suggests an unresolved tension in Merleau-Ponty's main project of reconciling consciousness and nature in such a way as to steer clear of the antinomy of realism and idealism – or indeed, of reductive materialism and dualism. Thus, while *The Structure* certainly provides an interesting set of concepts and a first stab at understanding the relations between human being and nature, it is ultimately unsuccessful on its own terms, as it posits

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consciousness both as emerging and as primordially constituting, which is, as it seems to me, an impossible equation.

The upshot is this: While Merleau-Ponty does indeed redefine transcendental philosophy by rooting it in the lived body and in the vital structures of behaviour, he does not go far enough. The *Phenomenology* is in this respect an advance on *The Structure*, because it countenances no viewpoint whatsoever outside of the dialectic between the body and the world. However, as we shall see in chapter 2, the *Phenomenology* retains a problematic vestige of dualism nonetheless. Selectively read, however, and without caring too much about the finally unresolved ontology involved in Merleau-Ponty's propositions, there is in both of these works a vision of human being as deeply rooted in nature, sustained throughout by its sensuous carnality, even as it rises vertically toward an unknowable and open future. In sum, Merleau-Ponty thus furnishes us with elements of a philosophical anthropology which is bent on understanding the phenomenon that we are, while also preserving the phenomenon's peculiar integrity.

This is what, finally, makes all of this interesting for philosophical theology, insofar as theology cares deeply for the integrity of human being, as discussed in the introduction. The full elaboration of this will have to wait until the last chapter, but a brief reminder here may serve us well. It is clear that theological anthropology has often been heavily invested in philosophies of human being that now appear increasingly obsolete. Anthropological dualism, in particular, now seems as problematic to many of us as it did to Merleau-Ponty. On the other hand, it is also clear that reductionist approaches to human being can offer theology little assistance. Therefore, if it is indeed the case that just as theology is questioning its often problematic allegiance to dualism, philosophy is waking up from its slumber in the arms of reductionism, then one must agree with theologian David Kelsey that we now have every reason to re-examine the adequacy of received formulations in theological anthropology.⁵ In this adventurous endeavour, it is my contention that Merleau-Pontian philosophy may serve as one important dialogue partner in a way that will make more sense as we go along, and emerge most fully in the last chapter.

⁵ David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 10.

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2. Origin: Corporeal Rootedness

From the very first, Merleau-Ponty's thinking was geared towards the problem of the antinomy of consciousness and nature, the idea that there are two ways and two ways only of existing – as subject or as object. 'Our goal is to understand the relations of consciousness and nature' [*Notre but est de comprendre les rapports de la conscience et de la nature*], he states already at the beginning of his first work, *The Structure of Behaviour*.⁶ This is a quintessentially modern problematic, since the two main and rival schools of philosophy in the modern period, realism and idealism, can be distinguished by their different priorities vis-à-vis this basic ontological distinction. Realism prioritizes *nature*, understood as an object, and conceives of the subject, or consciousness, as the passive receptor of impressions caused by objective things in nature. In the final analysis, the subject itself must be seen as caused by the objective world – 'a bundle of perceptions'⁷ – in a manner which is in principle specifiable by empirical science from a third-person perspective. Idealism, on the other hand, prioritizes *consciousness*, understood as a transcendental subjectivity responsible for forming the structures of the perceived world from an amorphous and therefore imperceptible 'raw material.' While not reducing consciousness to an effect of objective causality in the world, idealism still often holds that it is in principle possible for transcendental or psychological investigation to reveal the invariant structures of the mind, thus yielding its own account of the objective world, albeit as a construction. As a result, objective thought is in no way dethroned, regardless of the ontological camp to which one swears allegiance; the world is objectively there, whether in-itself or for-us.⁸

If objective thought presupposes a dualistic logic of consciousness and nature, Merleau-Ponty believes he has discovered 'a third genus of being' [*un troisième genre d'être*],⁹ making it possible to overcome the traditional dualistic stalemate. This is not to be taken literally, as if we now had three distinct ontological categories instead of two; rather, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the old and worn demarcation lines have been blurred, since there is evidently at

⁶ SC., 1/3.

⁷ As memorably expressed by David Hume. Behaviourism was the logical outworking of this perspective, according to which there was no such thing as a *psyche* for psychology to investigate, only behaviour. Reductive materialism in philosophy of mind is the contemporary heir.

⁸ See Madison, *Phenomenology*, 19-22.

⁹ PhP., 407/408.

least one being that fits neither category.¹⁰ This is none other than the body as lived [*corps vécu*].

Merleau-Ponty realizes that the body may be the key to affirm the real insights of both realism and idealism, without succumbing to their mistakes, and that the body may allow us to understand and preserve the phenomenon of human being, leaving both dualism and reductionism behind. In short, the body may be that unified whole wherein nature and consciousness need no longer stand opposed. As he says in another connection, what we need is

a means of linking the 'psychic' and the 'physiological,' the 'for-itself' and the 'in-itself,' to each other to form an articulate whole, and to contrive some meeting point for them: if the third person processes and the personal acts could be integrated into a common middle term.¹¹

In order truly to unite consciousness and nature, the body would have to inhere in nature and be subject to its conditions, but it would also have to be a being for which a world could be present in a way similar to consciousness. Hence, it would be rooted in the natural world, but it would also transcend its rootedness. That the body is such a being and that it fulfils this twin function could be said to be the burden of the first part of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, entitled simply 'The Body' [*Le corps*]. In this rightly famous set of investigations, Merleau-Ponty considers a number of phenomena – notably phantom limb syndrome, pathological and normal spatiality and motility, the sexual or affective component of intentionality and the bodily origins of language.¹² Since I shall not be able to discuss all of these topics, I have chosen two themes that will play a particularly important role for the purposes of my argument: the phenomenon of *double sensations* [*sensations doubles*] will throw light on Merleau-Ponty's attempt to overcome dualism, and the concept of the *body schema* [*schéma corporel*] will advance my discussion of the transcendental, world-disclosing function of the body.

¹⁰ On this theme, cf. Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* (London: Routledge, 2008), 135-136.

¹¹ 'Le moyen d'articuler l'un sur l'autre, le "psychique" et le "physiologique," le "pour soi" et le "en soi," et de ménager entre eux une rencontre, si les processus en troisième personne et les actes personnels pouvaient être intégrés dans un milieu qui leur soit commun.' PhP., 106/89. The immediate context of this remark is a discussion of phantom limb syndrome.

¹² In addition to the introduction, these chapters are, for instance, the only parts of the *Phenomenology of Perception* that have been translated into Swedish. *Kroppens fenomenologi*, trans. William Fovet (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2000).

Before going into that, however, we need a better general understanding of what the concept of the lived body refers to. We may note, to start with, that the expression lived body – *corps vécu* – harkens back to Husserl’s distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, where the former signifies the objective body, as observed from a third-person perspective, and the latter signifies the body as experienced and experiencing, that is, from a first-person perspective. For Husserl realized that there is something it is like to be a body (or to have a body), ways in which our embodiment has an irreducible subjective dimension, and he also realized that in virtue of the bodies we have, the world is disclosed to us in particular ways. Most importantly, Husserl realized the role of bodily movement in the constitution of the world.¹³

When Merleau-Ponty takes over the notion of the lived body, then, it designates a material body which is clearly a part of nature, but precisely in its function as agent in the world – that is, as intentionality, as subjectivity – which is why he also calls it the corporeal subject [*sujet corporel*]. This is not the body as an object, then, whether living or dead, which is available to be studied by anatomists, physiologists and psychologists, but the irreducibly first-person body, the material subject that I am and for whom a world shows up. In appropriating this Husserlian notion, Merleau-Ponty is beginning to trace the rootedness of the subject.

To begin to describe the lived body’s mode of being Merleau-Ponty borrows the Heideggerian notion of *being in the world* [*être au monde*] or simply *existence* [*existence*], and states that ‘the body is the vehicle of being in the world.’¹⁴ We should understand Merleau-Ponty to signify with these terms a particular form of intentionality, which delivers the world by being *open* or *involved* rather than, as usually defined, as *directed* towards this or that. As Merleau-Ponty understands it, this is the intentionality of the body, ‘beneath

¹³ See e.g. *Ideen II*, §§ 18, 35-42. For a lucid discussion of this theme in Husserl, see Dan Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 98-109.

¹⁴ PhP., 111/94. While clearly striving in the same general direction, Merleau-Ponty’s use of being-in-the-world differs from Heidegger’s in interesting ways; it is more fundamental. Heidegger’s descriptions of the projects of Dasein, which in so many ways give us the non-thematized phenomenal world, are on a level which already presupposes a primordial intelligibility, that of movement and sensation, in which the lived body is involved and which gives us the primordially meaningful world. To raise a hammer one must already be spatially situated and aware of one’s possibilities of motility. On this, see Alphonse de Waelhens, ‘A Philosophy of the Ambiguous,’ in SC., v-vi/xviii-xix.

the intentionality of representations ... a deeper intentionality, which others have called existence.¹⁵

Being in the world, then, is a function of the lived body, its primary way of existing, and its crucial characteristic is that it is meaningfully related to its surrounding in a pre-objective or pre-cognitive way, through practical projects rather than cognitive activity of a representative kind. It is not the case that the body without the cogito, or without the higher mental functions of the mind, is devoid of the sort of intentionality that results in a meaningful relation with the world. Rather, the body has its own ways of disclosing the world through its 'motor intentionality' [*intentionnalité motrice*],¹⁶ or what can generally be called its *sensorimotor* capacities. In the same way that Dasein, for Heidegger, is primordially involved in the world so as to make it meaningful without the assistance of thematic thought or cognitive representation, the lived body, for Merleau-Ponty, is meaningfully related to the world through the body's own intentionality long before and also always behind reflective thought.

The phenomenological task that Merleau-Ponty sets himself is to return to this experience of our pre-reflective, embodied being in the world and to describe it faithfully, so as to let the phenomenon of the body and the structures of pre-reflective intentionality shine forth. It is in this way, above all, that he seeks to follow the phenomenological mandate of returning to the things themselves [*retour aux choses mêmes*]. Why does he undertake the task? He believes, to repeat, that such a return holds the key to resolving the antinomy of consciousness and nature, which was always his fundamental concern.¹⁷ But Merleau-Ponty does more than undertake a phenomenological analysis. In fact, his rather idiosyncratic style involves a mixture of phenomenological descriptions, arguments, observations and psychological and psycho-pathological case studies. In particular, Merleau-Ponty's strategy is that of immanent critique, that is, of looking at particular cases and the ways in which the traditional empiricist and intellectualist accounts, often translated into physiology and psychology respectively, handle them. His claim is that neither alternative is capable of providing an adequate understanding of the relevant phenomena, wherefore a new theoretical platform must be sought. This battery of approaches is ultimately aimed at showing that the phenomenon of the lived body fits neither in the category of a mere object, nor in that of a subject simpliciter, thus preparing the way for new categories to

¹⁵ PhP., 153 n. 5/140 n. 54.

¹⁶ PhP., 141/127.

¹⁷ Cf. SC., 240-241/224.

emerge.¹⁸ Let us consider now one particularly interesting case that is central to Merleau-Ponty's rejection of dualism.

Against Dualism: Double Sensation

Husserl 'discovered' and thematized the curious phenomenon of double sensation in the course of his ongoing struggle to understand how it is that material objects given through different appearances are nonetheless experienced as unities. In the process of fully elucidating the layers of this constitutional operation, the body came to play a central role, since 'in all experience of spatio-thingly Objects, the Body [*Leib*] is involved as the perceptual organ of the experiencing subject.'¹⁹ The body is necessarily involved in the constitution of material objects. The body, however, is of course itself a material object, and so Husserl asks how this body is constituted in the first place: How is that material body constituted, without which no other material bodies can be constituted? A full constitutional analysis obviously requires an answer to this fundamental question, especially since perception of material objects is the founding mode of intentionality for Husserl, as it will also be for Merleau-Ponty.²⁰ To this end Husserl recognizes a twofold givenness of the body: it is given both as an exterior, an object that can be sensed, and as an interiority, a subject that senses. The question now is how these two ways of experiencing the body are related. Husserl claims that the objective and subjective aspects of the body are related through the body's ability of having what he calls double sensations [*Doppelempfindungen*], which are experiences of simultaneously sensing and being sensed.²¹ He describes, for instance, a basic reflexivity of tactile perception: when touching a table I experience *its* qualities, but I can also, by a change of attention, experience *myself* sensing, that is, the effect the table has on my hand. He also describes the phenomenon of touching one hand with the other, and being able to switch the roles of the hands between touching and being touched.

¹⁸ Indeed, as Renaud Barbaras has pointed out, a weakness in *Phenomenology of Perception* is that Merleau-Ponty remains within the bounds of polemic to such a degree that he never really succeeds in establishing the alternative position he envisages, beyond the more schematic descriptions. In this sense, the work remains preparatory. Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁹ *Ideen II*, § 36.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. *Ideen I*, § 39; PhP., 159/146. See also Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, 106.

²¹ *Ideen II*, §§ 36-37.

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The phenomenon of double sensation was to occupy an increasingly central position in Merleau-Ponty's thinking. He probably first encountered it when visiting the newly established Husserl archive in Leuven, where he had occasion to read Husserl's unpublished manuscripts.²² Among them was the already quoted *Ideas II*, the reading of which Merleau-Ponty would later describe in conversation as '*une expérience presque voluptueuse*.'²³ And indeed, this particular Husserlian text can be read as a sort of charter for Merleau-Ponty's own project, and in particular vis-à-vis the phenomenon of double sensation. For Merleau-Ponty would have been immediately struck by the fact that this is a version of the question about the relation between consciousness and nature. The two fundamental ontological categories are here both seen to inhere in the body. Could it be that the body shows us a way of uniting subject and object, consciousness and nature?

Starting from the insight that the body is the subject that has a world, as a necessary – 'metaphysical' – condition of appearance, Merleau-Ponty devotes the second chapter of the first part of the *Phenomenology* to the question of the special givenness of the body and its consequences.

I am accessible to factual situations only if my nature is such that there are factual situations for me. In other words, I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk around them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe.²⁴

In fact, Merleau-Ponty claims that the body in its act of perceiving can never perceive itself in the act, as it were. Of course, I can touch my right hand with my left as the right hand touches an object. But, Merleau-Ponty insists, the right hand will in this case be touched as an object and not in its original subjective function.²⁵ In the first case, the hand as an object is merely 'a system of bones, muscles and flesh brought down at a point in space'; in the second, the subjective hand 'shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external

²² PhP., 121 n. 1/105 n. 1.

²³ As recalled in the translators' introduction of *Ideas II*, xvi. Merleau-Ponty in fact held *Ideas II* to mark a decisive turning point in Husserl's own development: 'From *Ideas II* on Husserl's reflections escape this tête-à-tête between pure subject and pure things. They look *deeper down* for the fundamental.' S., 206/163.

²⁴ 'Les situations de fait ne peuvent m'atteindre que si d'abord je suis d'une telle nature qu'il y ait pour moi des situations de fait. En d'autres termes, j'observe les objets extérieur avec mon corps, je les manie, je les inspecte, j'en fait le tour, mais quant à mon corps je ne l'observe pas lui-même.' PhP., 120/104.

²⁵ PhP., 121/105.

object in its place.’ The reason that the body cannot perceive itself perceiving is that the body is the necessary condition for the appearance of objects and can itself therefore not be numbered among objects appearing, unless it could step out of itself and behold itself from a distance – a manifest impossibility. This does not mean that the body is absent, of course, but only that it is not present just like any other object in the world, it has a peculiar status that has been overlooked by traditional objectivist thought, which is committed to putting the body squarely on the side of nature as opposed to consciousness. Merleau-Ponty is making a phenomenological point: Look! The body is not given as other natural objects; it is their necessary condition of appearance.

How, then, is the body given? For one thing, it is permanently with us, it is the fixed point in relation to which all other things show up and disappear. But this permanent presence is already fractured, as the phenomenon of double sensation indicates. This is in fact a rather important point within Merleau-Ponty’s immediate context, since Jean-Paul Sartre had argued, in *Being and Nothingness*, published only two years before Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology*, that while there is indeed a subjective body and an objective body, their distinction is absolute, each existing in its own absolute ontological sphere.²⁶ What Merleau-Ponty draws from the phenomenon of double sensation is rather the body’s irreducible ambiguity, as being able to function both as subject and as object. It is important to note, also, that even though, as Husserl had argued, a mental change of perspective can alter the roles of touching and touched, they are never experienced strictly simultaneously, they never coincide. Merleau-Ponty interprets this as a fundamental fracture in the living unity of the body – a notion he will later develop under the ontological theme of *écart*, meaning rupture, fissure, gap, separation and the like.

Now there are different variations of the phenomenon in question, leading to different insights, and it might be clarifying to distinguish them. First there is the *basic corporeal reflexivity* that names the experience of a difference between the perceiving body (subject) and the thing perceived (object): In ordinary perceptual encounter, touching a material thing such as a book, the perceiving hand effaces itself, so to speak, in favour of the book felt. The same goes for visual perception, it loses itself in the visual spectacle, forgetful of its

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge, 2003), 327-382. For a critical discussion, see Martin Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 139-150.

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own role. Ordinary perception goes straight to the thing perceived.²⁷ What phenomenology aims to do is of course to lead such experiences back [*re-ducere*] to a subjective achievement – what Husserl called *Leistung* – as their necessary condition. This switch of attention helped phenomenologists to see the reflexivity of all perception, the fact that when I touch the book, I am in a sense simultaneously touched by it. Even though we are not focally aware of it, the tactile givenness of an object is also the co-givenness of the perceiving body to itself. In other words, the perceptual presence of an object always also implies the tacit presence of a subject. ‘Perception and experience of one’s own body [*du corps propre*] are mutually implied.’²⁸ According to this interpretation, perception already establishes a distinction between the body and all other objects, however tacitly, since this particular object, in contrast to all others, is co-given as sensing, which is to say as subjective. This means that the subject discovers itself through its involvement in the world. But it discovers itself precisely as a corporeal subject.

As Merleau-Ponty investigated perceptual encounter, he came to realize this necessary mutual specification of body and world, as indicated in the quote above. Martin Dillon explains:

It is only because [the body] is a worldly object that it can perceive worldly objects: pure consciousness cannot *touch* anything. The body can touch things, but it can touch things only to the extent that it is touched *by* things: to touch something is necessarily to feel the touch of the thing on oneself.²⁹

The upshot of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological investigation of perception, then, is that it requires the subject to be a body in the world of bodies, but one that is tacitly given differently than all other bodies, namely as a sensing body. ‘My existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.’³⁰ The world and subjectivity, says Merleau-Ponty, belong together, and it is initially a subjectivity, a reflexivity, that is corporeal. In other words, the subject incarnate must be a being in the world. But if the original subject is corporeal,

²⁷ As we will see when discussing the body schema, this forgetfulness or effacement is necessary to the proper function of the sensorimotor capacities of the body.

²⁸ PhP., 163-164 n. 1/150 n. 66. Cf. ‘I am conscious of my body *via* the world [*à travers le monde*].’ PhP., 111/94.

²⁹ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 105.

³⁰ PhP., 470/475.

this also indicates that it is always already fractured, which is to say that it is never fully present to itself. This is to be understood in contrast to the broadly Cartesian idea that the mind, as immaterial, can be entirely self-transparent, that we can get to the bottom of all our thoughts and thus establish for our knowledge a sure foundation.³¹

The corporeal subject that is discovered in perception, in contrast to the Cartesian cogito, never coincides with itself. While corporeal reflexivity indicates the body's difference from other objects in the world as the object that senses, the closely related phenomenon of *double sensation proper* indicates the body's self-difference, its internal fracture, or non-coincidence.

Consider the case of the left and the right hands touching each other. In contrast to touching an object other than itself, there is here the possibility of a complete alternation, a reversal of roles. The subject, so to speak, that is my right hand, touches the object, so to speak, that is my left hand. However, I may at the next moment reverse these roles at will, such that the left hand becomes the subject and the right the object. And of course, all of this takes place in the unified subject-object that is my body. Here is Merleau-Ponty's description from a late work on Husserl's phenomenology:

When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a 'physical thing.' But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right, *es wird Leib, es empfindet*. The physical thing becomes animate. ... Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes 'a sort of reflection.'³²

In this way, double sensation teaches me that the objectively touched body and the subjectively touching body are just different manifestations of the same body, since they are reversible. In the self-experience of the body the subject-object dichotomy is thereby challenged. Says Merleau-Ponty: 'The experience of one's own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other.'³³ Consider also his description in the *Phenomenology*:

³¹ Cf. PhP., 240/230.

³² 'Quand ma main droite touche ma main gauche, je le sens comme une "chose physique," mais au même moment, si je veux, un événement extraordinaire se produit: voici que ma main gauche aussi se met à sentir ma main droite, *es wird Leib, es empfindet*. La chose physique s'anime. ... Donc, je me touche touchante, mon corps accompli "une sorte de réflexion."' S., 210/166, quoting the italicized words from *Ideen II*, § 36.

³³ PhP., 241/231.

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[It is] an *ambiguous set-up* in which both hands can alternate the roles of ‘touching’ and being ‘touched’ ... in this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. *The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process*; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates ‘a kind of reflection’ which is sufficient to distinguish it from objects, of which I can say that they ‘touch’ my body, but only when it is inert, and therefore without ever *catching it unawares* in its explanatory function.³⁴

Let me unpack this rather dense quotation. The ambiguity of double sensation follows from the fact of non-coincidence: the subjective body never coincides with the objective body; the alternation of roles never comes to a halt in an experience of full self-possession. The clean cut between the subject and the object must be rejected in the case of the body, which apparently plays both roles, but this does not lead to ontological monism, as usually conceived, which is something we shall see further on. Nonetheless, double sensation does imply a qualification of the above-mentioned claim that as long as the body senses, it effaces itself and we cannot therefore catch hold of it in this function. Merleau-Ponty here says that while we cannot fully thematize the body as subjectivity, we can, as it were, ‘catch it unawares’ – surprise it – in its subjective role.

What this means, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that I can identify the hand now touched as the hand that was touching a moment ago, and vice versa. While there is no coincidence – it is never the case that I simultaneously experience my right hand as touching and touched – there is at least a sort of echo in the body touched of the body touching. Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl and says that through double sensation the body ‘initiates a kind of reflection’; that is, it takes itself as a theme, or at the very least, there is in this bodily phenomenon a muddled and obscure differentiation whereby the unified body, which is originally simply our access to the world, takes itself as a theme in a sort of embodied proto-reflection.

This, then, is the decisive difference between basic corporeal reflexivity and double sensation proper: while I may feel the inanimate object touching me, as it were, I never ‘catch it unawares in its explanatory function.’ The inanimate

³⁴ ‘[Il s’agit] d’une organisation *ambiguë* où les deux mains peuvent alterner dans la fonction de “touchante” et de “touchée.” ... Dans ce paquet d’os et de muscles qu’est ma main droite pour ma main gauche, je devine un instant l’enveloppe ou l’incarnation de cette autre main droite, agile et vivante, que je lance vers les objets pour les explorer. *Le corps se surprend lui-même de l’extérieur en train d’exercer une fonction de connaissance*, il essaye de se toucher touchant, il ébauche “une sorte de réflexion” et cela suffirait pour le distinguer des objets, don’t je peux bien dire qu’ils “touchent” mon corps, mais seulement quand il est inerte, et donc sans jamais qu’ils le *surprennent* dans sa fonction exploratrice.’ PhP., 122/106-107 (my emphasis).

object is never perceived as a subject, but only as that detour by which I discover my own subjectivity. On the other hand, in the reciprocal alternation of roles it is as if the right hand almost catches the left in an act of subjectivity. This is what Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, calls ‘a kind of reflexion.’

Now, I must confess that I have not presented double sensations because I find it to be such a convincing case, either in terms of description or as far as argument goes. Nor does it at all occupy a central place in the *Phenomenology*. However, the fact of the matter is that this phenomenon more than any other inspires Merleau-Ponty’s development of the later ontology. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone observes, it ‘constitutes what one might consider the foundation of his ontology proper.’³⁵ In chapter 3, we shall see how Merleau-Ponty returns to the example of double sensations in *The Visible and the Invisible*, this time privileging the even more complex case of the right hand touching the left hand *as it palpates the things in the world*. If for this reason alone, double sensation would make for a good starting point. But it is also the case that the discussion of double sensations brings out many of the salient features of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the lived body, regardless of its value as phenomenological description.

How should we at this stage evaluate Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of these phenomena? Can double sensation establish the lived body as existing between the purely subjective and objective orders? Or must we agree with Marjorie Grene, who, while profoundly sympathetic to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, nonetheless had to exclaim, ‘But what about that hand trick? Alas, I cannot make it work.’³⁶ As for me, I treat this particular example more like an illuminating indication than as an establishing description; it serves almost like a metaphor. For when I attempt the experiment myself, I only half-recognize Merleau-Ponty’s description. When I clasp my hands together and try to alternate their roles, what I get is a profound ambiguity – my body is clearly not simply one among other objects, it is precisely a subjectivity incarnate in my hands. However, what I cannot conjure up is a clear sense of alternation, where the body is now subject, now object. And to be honest, I cannot say that I quite catch myself unawares as a subject, or that my left hand (for instance) suddenly becomes sentient. I have no sense that it was non-sentient in the first place; ordinarily, my body is never an object that *turns* subjective.

³⁵ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999), 318.

³⁶ Grene, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal of Ontology,’ 619.

There is, however, an experience that perhaps better illustrates what Merleau-Ponty is after. When I wake up after having fallen asleep on my arm, for instance, the arm has sometimes gone numb and I experience it most of all like an inanimate object in the world.³⁷ At any rate, I do not experience it as part of my own subjective body, even though I know that it is. It can in fact be quite a disconcerting experience of self-alienation. However, as I pinch my arm and try to move it, it slowly awakens, becomes sentient and finally takes its rightful place as a part of the subjective body that I am. Here, it seems to me, I have a better chance of waiting upon my objective body as it rouses itself to sentience and subjectivity.

As I see it, we can thus partly affirm the phenomenological descriptions of double sensation, and in particular their suggestion that embodied existence is inherently ambiguous and does in fact seem to slip between the categories of subject and object, or cast doubt upon their adequacy. What is more, we can fully affirm the theoretical point that the lived body is indeed a corporeal subject, that is, that subjectivity is not to be seen as an inaccessible interiority, but as exteriorly present in the lived body as it interacts with the world. We can also affirm with Merleau-Ponty that bodily being in the world is the condition of possibility for sense perception, since, as Husserl said, the body is the perceptual organ: without these hands, this skin, these eyes and so on, there would be no world for me. For disembodied spirits do not perceive – at least, not in any sense we would normally attribute to the word.

It might seem strange to have devoted this section on overcoming dualism to the rather obscure phenomenon of double sensation, especially if its force can only be partly recognized. But in addition to its importance for Merleau-Ponty's later development, let me also add the following remarks: It is not my intention here to establish the falsity of anthropological dualism – as a theory it has few contemporary defenders, at least in its radical modern form (but it is also true that there is no knock-down argument against it). Be that as it may, here I shall simply assume that modern dualism is unwanted, which is why the discussion of Merleau-Ponty's critique of it can be quite limited. I am chiefly interested in what comes in its place, and this is where Merleau-Ponty has a contribution to make; it is with regard to this issue that the phenomenon of double sensation contains fruitful suggestions.

The lived body, then, according to Merleau-Ponty, discovers itself in the world, as ambiguously part of the world as well as the subject who has a world.

³⁷ Cf. Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 157.

Now, if the lived body is the subject who has a world, the body will be more than a passive channel through which the world reaches the mind; rather, the structure of the body will be seen to structure the world perceived. Here, in fact, we find another reason for throwing doubt on the dualist hypothesis: As we shall now see, the body usurps the basic function dualism traditionally assigns to mind; in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy the body itself becomes a meaning-giving transcendental subject.

The Transcendental Body: Corporeal Schema

The most important thing about the concept of being in the world, or existence, is that it suggests a relation between the subject and the world that is already meaningful before the onset of categorical, conceptual or linguistic meaning. Indeed, one of Merleau-Ponty's important claims is that all the higher mental functions that philosophers normally associate with the word 'meaning' are in fact rooted in this primordial relation, and ultimately that the personal and reflective self or cogito is in fact rooted in the anonymous, pre-personal operations of the body. 'My personal existence must be the resumption of a prepersonal tradition. There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here ... my body.'³⁸ One of his main challenges – one that he only partly meets – is therefore to explain how the personal subject is thus rooted in the body and in the world, and how this vertical development takes place. In short, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy revolves around these interrelated themes of rootedness and verticality.

Let us approach this topic through the following basic question: How do we find the world meaningful? As we shall see, Merleau-Ponty tries to show that it is the corporeal subject that has the ability to enter into a relation with the perceived world in such a way as to disclose it – to constitute it – as meaningful. Indeed, the reflective subject, he says, always arrives at the scene after the fact, in the already constituted world.³⁹ To understand this primordial bond of meaning between the body and the world – this 'natal pact'⁴⁰ – the concept of the *body schema* is important. I shall therefore first describe what is meant by this notion and then proceed to elaborate on its philosophical consequences.

³⁸ PhP., 302/296.

³⁹ Cf. the discussion of spatial meaning at PhP., 300/293.

⁴⁰ PriP., 6.

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Merleau-Ponty introduces the body schema [*schéma corporel*] in a discussion of the constitution of spatiality and the psychopathologies of spatiality, but it has a more general application. After a long discussion of the famous patient Schneider, he concludes that ‘motility [is] a basic intentionality. Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of “I think that” but of “I can.”’⁴¹ At issue here is the practical know-how of the body itself – its ‘praktognosia’⁴² – whose sensorimotor skill works in sync with the disclosure of the world. Merleau-Ponty here suggests both a reconceived notion of how we interact with the world and of motion itself.

Consciousness is being-toward-the-thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, when it has incorporated it into its ‘world,’ and to move one’s body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it *independently of any representation*. Motility, then, is not, as it were, the handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point of space of which we have formed a representation beforehand.⁴³

Merleau-Ponty here suggests the unity of the sensorimotor system, that perception is deeply intertwined with motion, and that this motion involves a crucial element of learning. The intertwining of perception and movement is, upon reflection, obvious: to touch an object, I reach out towards it; to see something, I turn my head; I smell fragrances by making air move through my nasal chambers, and so on. Moreover, as a perceiver I am myself constantly in motion. ‘It is a marvel too little noticed,’ writes Merleau-Ponty, ‘that every movement of my eyes – even more, every displacement of my body – has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them.’⁴⁴ Even in apparently absolute bodily immobility, the operation of the eyes crucially involves saccadic movements. However, by what magic is the body so skilled at coordinating movement and sensation so as to unfold a meaning in the world around it? When facing material things, how does it know how to ‘respond to their call’? The corporeal schema names an important answer.

⁴¹ PhP., 171/158-159.

⁴² PhP., 175/162.

⁴³ ‘La conscience est l’être à la chose par l’intermédiaire du corps. Un mouvement est appris lorsque le corps l’a compris, c’est-à-dire lorsqu’il l’a incorporé à son “monde,” et mouvoir son corps c’est viser à travers lui les choses, c’est le laisser répondre à leur sollicitation qui s’exerce sur lui *sans aucun représentation*. La motoricité n’est donc pas comme une servante de la conscience, qui transporte le corps au point de l’espace que nous nous sommes d’abord représenté.’ PhP., 173-174/159-161 (my emphasis).

⁴⁴ VI., 175/134.

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As Shaun Gallagher has demonstrated, there is a contemporary conceptual confusion between body *image* and body *schema* with roots in early psychology.⁴⁵ As a remedy to such confusions, Gallagher proposes the following clarifications:

A *body image* consists of a system of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to one's own body. In contrast, a *body schema* is a system of sensorimotor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring.⁴⁶

The importance of *body image* has come into focus in mainstream debates about advertising, self-esteem and eating disorders, as well as being important to theories in feminism and gender studies.⁴⁷ This phrase describes the (sometimes conscious) perceptions we have of our own bodies, the way we think about our own bodies and the way we feel about our own bodies ('body percept, body concept, body affect'⁴⁸). Characteristically, body image involves taking one's body (or parts of one's body) as one's intentional object in some way or other, and is markedly shaped both by personal and cultural factors. Needless to say, body image is in many ways crucial to human existence: it influences how we view ourselves and how we see and judge others; it feeds into the proprioceptive system and can be important in learning complex motor skills such as boxing, dancing or playing the guitar, which all depend (at various stages) on a conscious perception of where parts of the body are precisely located; it is instrumental in many pathological conditions, such as unilateral neglect, which can be seen as a failure of body image as part of the body is perceptually neglected, but also quite generally in sickness and fatigue where the body can appear as the 'object' responsible. Interestingly, the consciously thematized body image tends to be seen as clearly distinct from the world, and even parts of the same body tend to be seen as discrete. Upon burning my palm on the stove, I feel the pain and inspect the palm in a way

⁴⁵ Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19-23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁷ A superb and influential account of how culturally coloured body images interact with corporeal schemas to produce a specifically 'feminine' way of being in the world is given in Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality,' *Human Studies* 3 (1980).

⁴⁸ Gallagher, *How the Body*, 37.

that, as it were, distinguishes it from the rest of my body and makes of it an 'object' that I attend to.⁴⁹

Body schema, on the other hand, largely functions on a pre-conscious level (even though some marginal awareness of body schema is probably available),⁵⁰ and can best be thought of as the 'habits' of the body in movement and sensation, which in turn suggests the provenance of the body schema, which we shall return to.⁵¹ The body schema specifies the way in which the body continuously negotiates its interaction with its surroundings through the contraction and release of muscles, the coordination of the movement of limbs, the posture of the body and its balance. Consider walking down the street. Normally, we do not have to think about putting one foot in front of the other, of swinging the arms in such a way as to optimally aid momentum and balance, of bending forward ever so slightly to counter a gust of wind, of tilting the head so as to better pick up what the person walking beside us is saying, and so on. There must be a system, early psychologists surmised, that keeps all of this running as smoothly as it does – and this is the body schema. In virtue of the body schema, the body is (so to speak) a performance artist, and under normal circumstances it performs very well indeed. Interestingly, the body in performance tends to efface itself; we are not normally conscious of it and the body really does not need the help of intentional consciousness – such as a body image – to function optimally.⁵² This is one conclusion Merleau-Ponty draws from the famous case of Schneider: he has lost that primordial sense of the body's possibilities of action and must therefore negotiate his actions through thinking and explicit positioning.⁵³ Conscious attention to bodily performance in a complex task, then, may often be a hindrance rather than a help: If I try to be consciously aware of the position of my fingers when playing a piece on the piano it will ruin the performance. Further, in contrast to the body image, the body schema does not operate with distinct boundaries between the body and its environment, but freely incorporates the

⁴⁹ Cf. the similar point made by Drew Leder: 'In pain, the body or a certain part of the body emerges as an *alien presence*.' *The Absent Body* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 76 (and chap. 3 in general).

⁵⁰ Gallagher, *How the Body*, 27-28; Gallagher and Zahavi, *Phenomenological Mind*, 146.

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty speaks of the 'habit body' [*corps habituel*]. PhP., 111/95.

⁵² The effacement of the body as it functions properly is the main theme of the contemporary 'Merleau-Pontian' philosopher Drew Leder in his already cited book, *The Absent Body*. Cf. also Gallagher and Zahavi, *Phenomenological Mind*, 146.

⁵³ PhP., 138-142/125-128.

environment in its own motor capabilities, such as vehicles, clothes, tools and so on.⁵⁴

What is the origin of a body schema? Is it not, after all, just a type of reflex behaviour? An automatism? It is true that the body schema works in a quasi-automatic way – that is, without conscious monitoring. However, the bodily activity here described is not exclusively triggered by stimuli, nor does it resemble the relative rigidity of reflex responses. Instead, if anything ‘triggers’ a specific course of motor intentionality, it is the conscious intention of the subject. Moreover, the body schema is endlessly adaptable to new situations and does not follow any fixed stimulus-response loop. This is why Merleau-Ponty says that it is ‘neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action.’ What is it then? ‘It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort [*par une désignation objective*].’⁵⁵ In other words, it seems to be a subjectivity that operates in a quasi-automatic way, and this is of course what ties it to the prepersonal corporeal subject. For Merleau-Ponty, who was always interacting with the sciences of his day, this held promise: Here is a concept worked out in the field of psychology that may help us understand the lived body, that is, how the body as subject can be the first to constitute a meaningful world. If our interest is in the transcendental function of the body, so to speak, the body schema plays a key role.⁵⁶

Consider: If my intention is to pick up the cup of freshly made espresso on the table before me, it is the body schema that coordinates the way in which I stretch out my arm and the way in which my fingers find their way around the cup and effectively grasp it; the body schema – not some stimulus-response activation, nor my conscious attention – guides my hand with the cup to my lips on just the right trajectory, and makes the rim of the cup smoothly and perfectly find my lower lip.⁵⁷ Now, while these movements are clearly something I *do*, my attention may well be elsewhere – perhaps on the book I am reading or the conversation I am involved in. And if asked what I am ‘doing,’ I would not likely answer that I am stretching out my arm, grasping

⁵⁴ Cf. PhP., 177-178/165.

⁵⁵ PhP., 178/166. Merleau-Ponty is specifically discussing typing here.

⁵⁶ Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus point out that Merleau-Ponty’s originality within the phenomenological tradition is that he was the first to take up the idea that perceptual habits, by which experience is constituted, are formed by the *corporeal* subject. See ‘Translators’ Introduction’ to SNS., xii.

⁵⁷ Cf. Gallagher, *How the Body*, 26.

the cup with my fingertips, guiding it along a very specific diagonal to my mouth, and so on, but rather that I am ‘taking a sip of my espresso.’ However, everything that I do, so to speak, on the margins of consciousness like this, is done for the sake of my intentional goal.⁵⁸ In this way, bodily skills – the praktognosia – subtend my conscious projects throughout my waking hours.

While neither fully conscious action nor mere reflex behaviour, it is clear that the skills associated with the corporeal schema are learnt skills, and this will turn out to be important if motor intentionality is going to help Merleau-Ponty overcome the dualism of consciousness and nature. For it is a fact that the skills associated with the body schema are learnt in interaction with the world. A newborn baby has a very limited repertoire for interacting meaningfully with its new surroundings, but in time it is going to learn to move its limbs in response to external objects, to grasp, to turn, to crawl and walk, and it is going to learn the ways in which such activity discloses the world.⁵⁹ Eventually, a basic schema for sensorimotor action is going to be in place, like a repertoire of skills sunk so far into the body that they seldom need to be consciously thematized. The body subject recedes; as Drew Leder observes: ‘the successful acquisition of a new ability coincides with a phenomenological effacement of all this.’⁶⁰ Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, this very effacement of sensorimotor functions – the emergence of a ‘relatively autonomous current of existence,’ as he puts it – is what frees up the subject for higher cognitive functions.⁶¹ Our energies must no longer be absorbed in navigating the cluttered space from *a* to *b*.

⁵⁸ Cf. Gallagher, *How the Body*, 32-33.

⁵⁹ Our understanding of the extent to which the body schema and the lived body are rooted in the world has recently been deepened and clarified both by empirical studies and by philosophical reflection upon them. In contrast to the ‘traditional view,’ held also by Merleau-Ponty, that the body schema is acquired in infancy and early childhood as the child interacts with its surroundings (cf. CRO., 120-125), these new results suggest that the body schema is an innate capacity, but not necessarily in the sense of being hardwired from the start. Rather, it seems that we must allow prenatal sensation and movement a role in the formation of the rudimentary stages of a body schema, which would be able to explain phenomena such as neonate imitation. This is not a rejection, then, of the phenomenological and psychological understanding of the body schema in favour of some sort of objectivist innatism, reducing the lived body once again to the sum of external parts causally related, but rather issues in a renewed appreciation of the very deep roots of the lived body as an agent of action and perception. For references to and a discussion of this research, see Gallagher, *How the Body*, 65-85; cf. also PhP., 101/84.

⁶⁰ Leder, *Absent Body*, 31.

⁶¹ PhP., 116-117/100-101.

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That, however, is only half the story, for the repertoire of skills changes throughout a lifetime. We are always *incorporating* new corporeal habits, thus moulding our body schema such that it will disclose new aspects of the world, not least through the use of tools and technology.⁶² In the extreme case of going blind, for example, I must learn to incorporate a tool – my walking stick – in such a way that it will become a prolongation of my sense of touch.⁶³ Or consider the more mundane case of learning to drive; incorporating the vehicle into my bodily motor skills will not only be necessary for safe driving, but is likely to alter my sense of spatiality and distance. Even learning a new language could be seen as the incorporation of a bodily skill. For if I ever reach the level of proficiency, speaking the language will not be a matter of applying textbook rules, it will be something like a skill of the tongue and mouth.⁶⁴ In short, the body schema is not static but dynamic.

Let me stress the perhaps obvious point that bodily skills are not imposed upon the world, but are learnt only in utter reciprocity with the body's immediate surroundings, which indicates the constitutive reciprocity that marks this account as very different from traditional transcendental accounts, which tend to take constitution in a unidirectional sense. In the words of Drew Leder, 'incorporation is the result of a rich dialectic wherein the world transforms my body, even as my body transforms its world.'⁶⁵ It is when a baby responds to the solicitation of objects, as it tries to reach out and grasp this or that a hundred times and more, that the precision of the body schema develops and matures. Similarly, it is the soundful response of the guitar as I practise hour by hour, trying to place my left-hand fingers correctly on the fingerboard and coordinate all that with the strokes and picks of my right-hand fingers, that I incorporate the bodily know-how of playing, until one day I may close my eyes and let the music surge from a deeper source.

Once learnt, then, skills become part of what we are, part of the lived body in the world; they become latent possibilities of interacting with the world. This is what Merleau-Ponty talks about as the 'I can' of the body, as opposed to the traditional 'I think' of the mind. He is not saying that higher cognitive operations are not structuring the world we perceive; he is saying that they can do so only as they build on the non-thematized acquisitions of motor

⁶² Drew Leder suggests *incorporation* as a technical term for this process, in his *Absent Body*, 30-35.

⁶³ Cf. PhP., 178/165.

⁶⁴ PhP., 464/468-469.

⁶⁵ Leder, *Absent Body*, 34.

intentionality. The ‘I think’ presupposes the ‘I can.’ In his famous discussion of phantom limb syndrome, he makes use of this analysis.⁶⁶

Following the development of modern cognitive psychology and physiology, Merleau-Ponty uses the pathology of the phantom limb to understand the workings of the corporeal subject. If the body schema, the skill by which the corporeal subject first negotiates the world, is mistakenly identified with the body image, as a conscious perception of one’s body at any given time, it can offer little assistance in understanding phantom limbs. For the ‘phantom’ is a phenomenon that remains even when a patient is able to perceive, on the level of body image, that one of their limbs has been removed. However, if the body schema is taken in the dynamic sense outlined above, some progress can be made. It will now be possible to understand the phantom limb as a product of the body schema. As a series of bodily habits for movement and perception, the body schema congeals into a set of relatively stable sensorimotor circuits which maintain themselves below the level of thematizing consciousness. After amputation, the patient’s body does not lose this sense of ‘I can,’ the projects it can undertake in the world or its diverse potentialities.⁶⁷ The body remains in the world as a habitual sensorimotor agent. Conscious awareness of amputation does not alter this, which is why a patient can be perfectly knowledgeable of their lack of a leg (for instance) on the reflective level, and still rise to walk as if they had the full use of their body – which sadly, they do not. In this case, body schema trumps body image, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘the habitual body [*corps habituel*] can act as guarantee for the body at this moment [*corps actuel*].’⁶⁸

Now, what Merleau-Ponty describes, borrowing terms from psychology and physiology, could equally be described using a more straightforward phenomenological vocabulary. And of course, a general phenomenological understanding, which he mostly culled from Husserl’s unpublished manuscripts, everywhere permeates Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the lived body. Realizing this will lead us to confront the body in its transcendental function and to the question of meaning.

The Husserlian notion of *operative intentionality* [*fungierende Intentionalität*] – as a pre-conceptual and pre-cognitive, but still meaningful directedness toward things and the world – comes very close to that which is specified by the body schema, especially when operative intentionality is

⁶⁶ PhP., 104-118/88-102.

⁶⁷ PhP., 110-111/94.

⁶⁸ PhP., 111/95.

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conceived of as always embodied.⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty picked this up and put it to effective use in his own phenomenology.⁷⁰ In Husserlian terminology, the *intentionality of act* specifies consciousness as a directed relation, which discloses meaningful objects to the subject. In contrast, operative intentionality, being the deeper structure, specifies the way in which the body itself relates to its surroundings through sensorimotor activity so as to disclose a meaningful world. Now, Merleau-Ponty's favoured expression – the lived body – obviously suggests the body precisely as an operative intentionality, as the agent which is primarily responsible for organizing itself in relation to its milieu and thus for instigating a primary sphere of meaning. Iris Marion Young states it clearly:

The body is the first locus of intentionality, as pure presence to the world and openness to its possibilities. The most primordial intentional act is the motion of the body orienting itself with respect to and moving within its surroundings. There is a world for the subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions.⁷¹

It is acquired sensorimotor habits and skills, then – the body schema – that make up operative intentionality and that suggest how the body has in fact become something of a transcendental condition incarnate, one which is responsible for constituting the primary meaning of the world perceived.

As I have already touched upon, this is an embodied meaning devoid of linguistic or conceptual mediation. It is a meaning for the body and not for the reflective cogito. However, in a philosophical culture which has learned to associate meaning above all with concepts, and which after the so-called linguistic turn would be suspicious of any claim to a meaning that would escape linguistic representation, it is perhaps wise to say something about what this primordial 'motor meaning' amounts to in Merleau-Ponty. What does he mean when he says that 'my body has, or *understands* [*comprend*] its world, without having to reach it through "representations," without subordinating itself to a "symbolic" or "objectifying function"?'⁷² What kind of understanding is he talking about? Well, whatever their positive signification, it is clear that these remarks amount to a wholesale rejection of the dominant

⁶⁹ Cf. PhP., 18/xx; Anthony Steinbock, 'Saturated Intentionality,' in Donn Welton, ed., *The Body: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 183-186.

⁷⁰ PhP., 153 n. 5/140 n. 54; 480/486.

⁷¹ Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl,' 145.

⁷² PhP., 175/162 (translation modified).

intellectualist tradition, wherein ‘all meaning [*signification*] was *ipso facto* conceived of as an act of thought, as the work of a pure *I*.’⁷³ The non-symbolic, positive meaning referred to here is perhaps best illustrated with the examples we have already come across. It is, for instance, a tacit understanding of where I am in relation to other objects and what I would have to do to reach them or to avoid colliding with them – a basic sense of spatiality. Consider a skilled driver. She does not have to think about or mentally represent the outer limits of the car in order to navigate a narrow passage, for the car has become incorporated, as it were, into her own corporeal schema.⁷⁴ It is the same with other, more complex motor skills, such as dancing, typing or playing an instrument, in which, clearly, mentally ‘representing’ what we are doing will be far from needed – and indeed, will generally prove a hindrance. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty will insist that symbolic forms of meaning, such as gestures, language and ideality, have their *sine qua non* in these primordial layers of embodied meaning; one’s body is the soil in which they are rooted. This issue of *meaning* is absolutely central to the argument of the present book, and we shall return to it in the coming chapters. For now, we note that Merleau-Ponty considers the investigation of the transcendental body to usher in a new conception of meaning: ‘What we have discovered through the study of motility, is a new meaning of the word “meaning” [*sens*].’⁷⁵

Philosophically countercultural as they may be, there is nothing extravagant in these claims, since anyone who wants to account for linguistic meaning without, on the one hand, positing an ontologically separate sphere of immutable concepts, or on the other, surrendering it up to the wholly arbitrary, would presumably have to seek the roots of linguistic meaning in more basic meaning-structures.⁷⁶ So it is not surprising that these primordial forms of meaningfulness have increasingly been taken up by subsequent contemporary theorists, in particular in the attempt to understand the emergence of more symbolic forms of meaning, such as linguistic meaning. Among them, Gallagher and Zahavi speak of ‘circumstances that are bodily meaningful’ or ‘situations of meaning,’ such as finding something to be out of

⁷³ PhP., 182/170.

⁷⁴ PhP., 178/165

⁷⁵ PhP., 182/170. Merleau-Ponty will often, though not consistently, use the term *signification* for linguistic meaning and *sens* for the broader notion.

⁷⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson present this case from the point of view of cognitive science, and with inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, in their *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 16-44.

my reach, being physically unable to escape a threatening situation, and so on.⁷⁷ Mark Johnson speaks in general of ‘the meaning of the body,’ which he describes as ‘more than words and deeper than concepts.’⁷⁸ Jordan Zlatev, a cognitive semiotician, develops ‘a general theory of meaning’ that goes from the level of embodied life through different stages up to the level of linguistic meaning, where each new level builds upon the preceding ones.⁷⁹ In the final section of this chapter I shall return to the question of what constitutes the minimal requirements for something to count as meaningful in order to trace the full depth of Merleau-Ponty’s suggestions.

For myself as a personal thinking subject to be embodied, then, is to always find the world already basically constituted for me by the ‘anonymous’ or ‘original’ subject that is my body. Yet this is no transcendental ego that stands opposed to the world, unidirectionally bestowing its sense, but a corporeal subject who is itself constituted by the world – there is a reciprocal constitution going on. Thus reflective thought finds that the body ‘has always already sided with the world.’⁸⁰ Indeed, ‘our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and *with it forms a system*.’⁸¹ It is maximally important to grasp this subtle point, if Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is not to be entirely misrepresented. Yes, the body itself takes on the role of transcendental subject, but the *a priori* structures by which it shapes the world are not, as with Kant, simply given once for all; they constantly change in response to the world *of which the body is a part*. Merleau-Ponty speaks here of the need to re-conceive the *a priori*, and of the ‘historical *a priori*’ [*l’a priori historique*].⁸² The dual nature of the body that we thematized above in ‘double sensation’ here returns – and with it, the enigma of human existence. The lived body is clearly a part of the world, a material object among others; yet it is also the agent of that world, a transcendental condition incarnate. A consequence of this is that having a body is equivalent to having a world, since the lived body is in the

⁷⁷ Gallagher and Zahavi, *Phenomenological Mind*, 137-138.

⁷⁸ Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁷⁹ Jordan Zlatev, ‘The Semiotic Hierarchy: Life, Consciousness, Sign and Language,’ *Cognitive Semiotics* 4 (2009): 169-200.

⁸⁰ PhP., 261/251.

⁸¹ PhP., 245/235 (my emphasis).

⁸² PhP., 117/101. On the transcendental status of the body, see Dillon, ‘Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty’; for Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Kant, consult PhP., 265-267/256-257; cf. also Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 78-83.

world and makes sense only in relation to a world, while the world, in its primordial sense, is the world as it appears to the body itself through its many projects, that is, through the body schema. Dillon states this succinctly: 'To be incarnate is to be in the world and of the world ... motor intelligence and corporeal intentionality are designed to show that the flesh is intrinsically purposive and that its purposes are grounded in its worldly needs.'⁸³

We shall return to this important point in the chapter 3, on Merleau-Ponty's late ontology, since this is the very tension that prompts him in the direction of ontology. How can we both be part of the world and constitute it? How can we be nature as well as consciousness? Suffice it to say at this point that part of Merleau-Ponty's genius lies in his understanding of constitution as reciprocal at the level of the body itself. It is true that the body constitutes the world according to its sedimented structures, but it is equally true that those structures were themselves acquired in the body's encounter with the world. It is because the body schema is learnt in constant interaction with the surrounding world that the corporeal subject cannot be seen as a creator or constructor of the world in any more absolute sense; the subject is already too involved in the world for it to be possible to imagine it as the source of the world and its meaning. Naturally, this radically qualifies the transcendental tradition in which Merleau-Ponty stands, the full consequences of which he did not himself at first recognize.

Just like the subject-object body of double sensation, the third genus of being, the transcendental body can thus not be made to neatly fit the traditional ontological categories. It is on the one hand clearly a material object, and as such is subject to the ordinary conditions of material objects; but on the other hand it is the primary subject of the *meaning* of material objects – that is, of the perceived world – and interacts with them in manner more like conscious *activity* than like a merely external causality. Now, if, with Merleau-Ponty, we take the descriptions of double sensation and the transcendental function of the body – phenomenologically carried out and with the assistance of physiology and psychology – to be accurate in the main, we have good reasons for refusing the clean-cut separations between subject and object, soul and body, consciousness and nature. There must be a better way of articulating these experienced divergences, so as not to create between them an ontological abyss. Perhaps, also, we have begun to see that we are ourselves intimately

⁸³ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 139.

acquainted with a phenomenon that respects no such abyss – indeed, that we *are* this phenomenon, the lived body.

However, there is something unsatisfactory in the story so far, something that cries out for further development. It results from taking the lived body as one's first term, as Merleau-Ponty does in the *Phenomenology*. Where, we may want to ask, is the body itself rooted? And how is it that it has this almost magical power of being sentient, of being subjective matter? Even if we accept the phenomenon of the body as such, it should be placed in a more comprehensive theory or general metaphysics. Else the danger is that the phenomenon of the body will remain an anomaly in the received view of objective thought. For if the lived body is itself an argument against dualism, it is indeed equally an argument against reductionism. Without determining how Merleau-Ponty's philosophical vision is antithetical to reductionism, we would be in possession of only half the story. In the next section, I therefore begin to seek the roots of the lived body and its subjectivity in more fundamental forms of life – indeed, in life itself – to bring out this latter point.

3. Rooted in Life: Autopoietic Verticality

We have seen how Merleau-Ponty tries to overcome anthropological dualism by rooting the personal subject in the pre-personal lived body, but stopping here would give the wrong impression of his philosophy. We must also look at how rootedness is not equivalent to reduction, and at how the verticality he envisioned is not to be seen as the effect of linear causation, but rather as a type of emergence. It is important to realize that just as Merleau-Ponty argues against dualism, so he argues against reductionism. As Remy Kwant reminds us: 'Not a single aspect of man's spiritual being is denied by Merleau-Ponty.'⁸⁴ I propose, therefore, in this section to return to Merleau-Ponty's first book, *The Structure of Behaviour*, to see how he initially attempted to understand the three orders of matter, life and mind as intimately connected and yet as irreducible to each other. Throughout, I shall interweave Merleau-Ponty's interpretation with similar developments in contemporary theoretical and philosophical biology, cognitive science and the philosophy of mind to

⁸⁴ Remy C. Kwant, *From Phenomenology to Metaphysics: An Inquiry into the Last Period of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophical Life* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1966), 44; cf. 223.

corroborate and extend Merleau-Ponty's anti-dualist and non-reductive account such that it can stand as a live contemporary option. However, my purpose here is not to establish the position considered, which would be impossible within the confines of this section. Rather, my purpose is to present the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical vision and the way in which it interacts with more recent theoretical developments. In the end we shall have to ask whether this account manages to salvage the integrity of human being as part of the natural world, and whether it passes the Aristotelian test of returning to the phenomena with understanding, while also preserving them as true.

Form: Against Reductionism

The basic anti-reductionist claim made by Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure* is that the notion of *form* [*forme*], which is equivalent to *structure*, *phenomenon* or *Gestalt*, is found in what he calls the material, vital and human orders alike [*l'ordre physique, l'ordre vital, l'ordre humain*], and as such can be used to interconnect what has often been seen as absolutely distinct. 'Equally applicable to the three fields which have just been defined,' the notion of form would 'integrate them as three types of structures by surpassing the antinomies of materialism and mentalism [*spiritualisme*].'⁸⁵ This integration, however, does not mean that they should be reduced to the same level. Because 'matter, life and mind [*matière, vie et esprit*] must participate [*participer*] unequally in the nature of form; they must represent different degrees of integration and, finally, must constitute a hierarchy in which individuality is progressively achieved [*constituer enfin une hiérarchie où l'individualité se réalise toujours davantage*].'⁸⁶ This appears to be something like a pluralistic ontology, a point made by Marjorie Grene, who writes that Merleau-Ponty is 'insisting ... on a plurality of real centers of being.'⁸⁷ By a pluralistic ontology, I mean an ontology that recognizes distinct levels of reality, each of which has its own laws or principles of operation, and each of which is irreducible to 'subvenient' levels, though it depends on them. As such, a pluralistic ontology dovetails with a commitment to so-called *strong emergence*, which is often distinguished from weak emergence, or indeed from reductionism, by its advocacy of the real

⁸⁵ SC., 141/131.

⁸⁶ SC., 143/133.

⁸⁷ Grene, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal of Ontology,' 607.

causal power of the emergent levels, through what is often called *downward causation*.⁸⁸ Pluralism in ontology, however, should not be construed as an inflated dualism – one that is oblivious to Ockham’s scientific principle of parsimony. Rather, ontological pluralism could paradoxically be construed as a monism, in the sense that it postulates only one basic stuff out of which, through the temporal processes of emergence, novel ‘real centres of being’ come to exist.⁸⁹

This perspective is evident when Merleau-Ponty in the same section says that these ‘different sorts of forms [should be] invested with equal rights [*de droits égaux*].’ That is, no one form must be seen as entirely determined by an other, such that it is reduced to a mere epiphenomenon. On the other hand, equal rights do not preclude hierarchy; Merleau-Ponty clearly envisages an ontology of hierarchical structures on different levels building upon each other in a dialectical or circular relation which is soon to be specified.⁹⁰ Let me also hasten to say that even though I speak of an ontology here, Merleau-Ponty does not use the term (though I think he well could have). What is important, however, is that he does not think of these structures as different *substances*, so it is not in that sense a pluralist ontology. He indicates instead that a genuine philosophy of form ‘would be substituted for the philosophy of substances.’⁹¹

Nonetheless, the structures of matter, life and mind must be seen as irreducible. This can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, form as such cannot be reduced to its parts, and on the other hand, higher forms cannot be reduced to lower forms, which was the critique Merleau-Ponty levelled at the Gestaltists. While they well understood that form is an irreducible feature of reality, they still believed that life and mind could be reduced to material form: ‘The integration of matter, life and mind is obtained by their reduction [*leurs réduction*] to the common denominator of physical forms.’⁹²

⁸⁸ For a discussion of pluralistic ontology and its relation to emergence theory, see Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 49-62.

⁸⁹ As to terminology, monism might be preferable to materialism in this context, since the latter, at least in modern philosophy, tacitly implies an antithetical relation to mind, something many emergence theorists would be keen to avoid. Nonetheless, standard emergence theory typically envisages the basic stuff as material. Cf. Clayton, *Mind and Emergence*, 60. The actual characterization of the basic stuff is something that will come to have importance later on in the discussion.

⁹⁰ Grene, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal,’ 609.

⁹¹ SC., 142-143/132.

⁹² SC., 146/135; cf. 147/136-137.

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To grasp the import of this we must have a better understanding of what, more specifically, Merleau-Ponty takes the meaning of the concept of form to be. It is a holistic concept that he borrows from Gestalt psychology (although, as we shall see, he interprets the ontological status of forms differently), and it signifies a configuration, whole or unity that is not reducible to its parts; and this implies a sharp critique of the ontological atomism of much modern science and philosophy, according to which there are no irreducible forms as such, only aggregates of parts that can be analysed, in principle, into their constitutive elements – a position that has been called ‘particle metaphysics.’⁹³ But form, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, is more than a whole which is irreducible to its parts; it is also a coherent unity whose properties are interrelated such that each element depends on all the others. These two aspects are present when Merleau-Ponty gives the following definition:

Form, in the sense in which we have defined it, possesses original properties with regard to those of the parts which can be detached from it. Each moment in it is determined by the grouping of the other moments, and their respective value depends on a state of total equilibrium the formula of which is an intrinsic character of form.⁹⁴

There are thus two characterizations of form to keep in mind: a negative characterization, according to which the formal structure is *not reducible* to the parts participating in it; and also a positive characterization, which states the way that a formal structure operates, namely through a *reciprocity of influence* between its parts so as to maintain the equilibrium of the totality. The latter is what Merleau-Ponty also calls ‘circular causality’ [*causalité circulaire*], since there is an *effective* circularity between the whole configuration and its constituent parts. In other words, it is not simply a version of the colloquial ‘a whole is more than the sum of its parts,’ since it crucially involves the specific relational structures of the parts with each other.⁹⁵ At another place he writes of the first characteristic:

⁹³ Richard Campbell and Mark Bickhard, ‘Physical Emergence and Downward Causation’ (unpublished, 2002), 22. See also Nancy Murphy, ‘Reductionism: How Did We Fall Into It and Can We Emerge From It?’, in Nancy Murphy and William Stoeger, S.J., eds., *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20-22.

⁹⁴ ‘La forme, au sens où nous l’avons définie, possède des propriétés originales à l’égard de celles des parties qu’on en peut détacher. Chaque moment y est déterminé par l’ensemble des autres et leur valeur respective dépend d’un état d’équilibre total dont la formule est un caractère intrinsèque de la forme.’ SC., 101/91.

⁹⁵ Terrence Deacon understands the difference between aggregates and forms – or what he calls systems – to lie precisely in the relational aspect of the latter. Writes Nancy Murphy apropos of

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For the ‘forms,’ and in particular physical systems, are defined as total processes whose properties are not the sum of those which the isolated parts would possess. More precisely they are defined as total processes.

And of the second characteristic, that of reciprocal influence:

We will say that there is form whenever properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves.⁹⁶

Consider finally another definition he gives, this time of physical formal structures:

The notion of form ... [was defined as] an ensemble of forces in a state of equilibrium or of constant change such that no law is formulable for each part taken separately and such that each vector is determined in size and direction by all the others. Thus, each local change in a form will be translated by a redistribution of forces which assures the constancy of their relation; it is their internal circulation which *is* the system as a physical reality. And it is no more composed of parts which can be distinguished in it than a melody (always transposable) is made of the particular notes which are its momentary expression. Possessing internal unity inscribed in a segment of space and resisting deformation from external influences by its *circular causality*, the physical form is an individual.⁹⁷

Deacon’s description: ‘The important difference between an aggregate and a system is that in a system it is [the] *relational* properties of the constituents (as opposed to primary intrinsic properties) that constitute the higher order.’ Murphy, ‘Reductionism,’ 37.

⁹⁶ ‘Car les “formes” et en particulier les système physique se définissent comme des processus totaux dont les propriétés ne sont pas la somme de celles que posséderaient les parties isolées – plus précisément comme des processus totaux. ... On dira qu’il y a “forme” partout où les propriétés d’un système se modifient pour tout changement apporté à une seule de ses parties et se conservent au contraire lorsqu’elles changent toutes en conservant entre elles le même rapport.’ SC., 49-50/47.

⁹⁷ ‘La notion de forme ... [se définissait comme] un ensemble de forces en état d’équilibre ou de changement constant, tel qu’aucune loi ne soit formulable pour chaque partie prise à part et que chaque vecteur soit déterminé en grandeur et par direction par tous les autres. Chaque changement local se traduira donc dans une forme par une redistribution des force qui assure la constance de leur rapport, c’est cette circulation intérieure qui *est* le système comme réalité physique, et il n’est pas plus composé des parties qu’on peut y distinguer que la mélodie, toujours transposable, n’est fait des notes particulières qui en sont l’expression momentanée. Unité intérieure inscrite dans un segment d’espace, et résistent, par sa causalité *circulaire*, à la déformation des influences externes, la forme physique est un individu.’ SC., 147-148/137 (second emphasis mine).

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Two things are particularly important here. First, clearly it is the formal organization – that is, the *relation* between the parts – that is the central thing, and not the parts themselves. Form is defined precisely as a relative stability of this relation; over and above the various changes in its substrate, this equilibrium must always be maintained if the form is to remain *as such*. Second, Merleau-Ponty sees that individuation must occur at the formal level, such that we can speak of the form as an individual unity. This is because of the complete relationality and reciprocity of the parts participating in the form, which is what the notion of circular causality signifies.⁹⁸ These aspects will become clearer presently, as we take a more detailed look at forms that are in fact living.

That formal organization, as defined above, is present already at the material level was something Merleau-Ponty learnt from Gestalt theorist Wolfgang Kohler. Examples of such forms in the literature are often soap bubbles, snow flakes, candle flames and Bénard cells, but Merleau-Ponty seems more interested in conceiving of physical reality as a whole in formal terms.⁹⁹ For if you let the notion of form expand to cover such things as the earth's atmosphere, or indeed, the whole universe with its laws, it seems increasingly plausible that everything exercises influence on everything else. Interesting as this is, I shall nonetheless be concerned here with the vital structures, which make such a striking case for the recognition of irreducible formal structures and which is the crucial step toward a recognizably human person. For while physical forms may be characterized as individual unities over and above their constituent parts, what we need is something that begins to look like a subject, a structure that can be recognized as the root of human subjectivity.

⁹⁸ Merleau-Ponty takes this to be a challenge to all theories, following from the rise of classical physics, that locate ultimate reality in the particle or minimal element and takes this to be the fundamental 'individual.' What formal organization suggests is that the 'molar individual' [*individu molaire*] is equally real and not reducible to its parts. Cf. SC., 148/138; N., 209/156. I think it must be right to seek here one of the important roots of the concept of the 'molar' so prominent in later Continental thought, such as that of Gilles Deleuze.

⁹⁹ With regard to formal wholes within physics, the issue, as I understand it, is not whether there are such things, since everybody would seem to agree on that; the vexed question is rather whether or not they are causally reducible, in principle, to their constituent parts. That is to say, whether physical wholes are in effect only *aggregates*. For reference to this debate, see Clayton, *Mind and Emergence*, 66-78.

Forms of Life

The root of human subjectivity is, according to Merleau-Ponty, to be found in the formal structure of living organisms. Given that life has emerged from matter, and that we are looking for the deepest roots of mind, or the personal subject, it makes sense to look for these roots in lower life forms. Especially if we already know that the lived body functions in its own manner as a constituting subject, even in the absence of conscious thought, it seems natural that other animal bodies would function in the same way – that is, if we have given up on the Cartesian and objectivist notion that the body is but an infinitely complex machine. If we have shed objectivism, we should be prepared to look for corporeal subjectivity further down the strata of life. This was already a present theme within phenomenology; Husserl, for instance, writes about the experience of jellyfish.¹⁰⁰ Among phenomenological philosophers, however, it is Hans Jonas who has provided the most ingenious attempt in this direction, insisting on the deep continuity between mind and even the minimal life form of the organic cell. As he puts it in the introduction to his major book, *The Phenomenon of Life*, ‘the organic even in its lowest forms prefigures mind, and ... mind even on its highest reaches remains part of the organic.’¹⁰¹ The same line has also increasingly been pursued in theoretical biology, especially in the theory of *autopoiesis*. In what follows I shall rely on these developments in order to elucidate Merleau-Ponty’s position.

The most radical questioning of life must turn to the original and the minimal vital structure known, and enquire into its characteristics – this structure is the cell. The single cell is the basic life form on earth. We are all made up of cells; indeed, each of our lives originated in one single cell, itself the result of the union of egg and sperm. Likewise, life on earth must have

¹⁰⁰ As referenced in Ted Toadvine, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 79. I cannot resist to mention here the intriguing question of what it may be like to be a bat, ubiquitous in analytic philosophy of mind since Thomas Nagel’s influential article ‘What Is It Like to Be a Bat?’, *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (October, 1974): 435-450, a question that presupposes that there is in fact something like a bat-subjectivity, a way in which a bat discloses the world.

¹⁰¹ Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, 1. Cf. Merleau-Ponty’s second course on nature, in N., 234/178. In the phenomenological tradition, Hans Jonas is the obvious point of reference for a phenomenology of life. Before him, however, Hedwig Konrad-Martius championed the philosophical investigation of biological phenomena, and today the same approach has been taken up by the French phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras. See especially Barbaras’ *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2008).

originated from a first cell or proto-cell some four billion years ago.¹⁰² But what is it *about* the cell that makes it a living organism and not inanimate matter? In short, what is life?

In the early 1970s Chilean neurobiologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela developed the *theory of autopoiesis*, addressing the issue of what makes the cell a living being by looking at its organization: ‘All living systems must share a common organization which we implicitly recognize by calling them “living.”’¹⁰³ Autopoiesis (meaning self-production) they argued, means that the cell is basically a self-producing unity, bringing itself forth as an organizational structure and sustaining itself as an autonomous unity embedded in an environment. Such an autopoietic cell is of necessity a spatio-temporal unity with a semi-permeable membrane separating its interior parts from its external milieu such that it stands out as an individual organism. Furthermore, it has the capacity, through the metabolism of nutrients from its environment, to generate the components it needs to sustain itself as a unity. The organization of the autopoietic cell, Maturana and Varela argue, is thus a circular process of self-generation: the membrane is needed to sustain the metabolic processes within the cell and the metabolic processes themselves continually create the membrane. Thus even though its components are exchanged, *the structure of the cell subsists* as long as it is alive, and then it decomposes and is diffused into its environment. Evan Thompson describes the process thus:

A cell stands out of a molecular soup by creating the boundaries of what set it apart from what it is not. Metabolic processes within the cell determine these boundaries, but the metabolic processes themselves are made possible by those very boundaries. In this way the cell emerges as a figure out of a chemical background. Should the process of self-production be interrupted, the cellular components no longer form a spatially individuated whole and they gradually diffuse back into the molecular soup.¹⁰⁴

Thompson further specifies the three minimal criteria that would have to be met for something to qualify as autopoietic: (1) It must have a semi-permeable *boundary* creating an inside and an outside of the system; (2) the components making up the boundary must themselves be produced by a *network of reactions*

¹⁰² Harold Morowitz, *Beginnings of Cellular Life: Metabolism Recapitulates Biogenesis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 12-14.

¹⁰³ F. Varela, H. Maturana and R. Uribe, ‘Autopoiesis: The Organization of the Living, its Characterization and a Model,’ *BioSystems* 5 (1974): 187.

¹⁰⁴ Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 99.

inside the boundary; and (3), factors (1) and (2) must be *interdependent*, such that the boundary components are produced by the internal network reactions and the network is regenerated due to the boundary itself.¹⁰⁵ In short, an autopoietic system, such as a cell, is basically characterized by this kind of self-production.

That autopoietic theory defines life in terms of its organization rather than in terms of its various components or parts means that the notion of form, as Merleau-Ponty understood it, becomes central. It is the formal structure or organization that realizes life, rather than the parts making up this form, since these parts are exchangeable and are in fact continuously exchanged through the process of metabolism, whereas the form remains for as long as the autopoietic cell is living.¹⁰⁶ This is obviously not to reject the importance of the actual parts – or in Varela’s and Maturana’s terms, the structures – making up the cell, but rather to insist that in the absence of formal organization, these concrete parts are not sufficient to define life: membrane, mitochondria, ribosome, nucleus, DNA and so forth do not make up a living cell unless they maintain a specific set of relations, an organization *wherein* life is realized.¹⁰⁷ Analogously, my computer is made up of a set of components – case, screen, keys, microchips, transistors and whatnot – but unless they are organized in a specific way, they do not make a computer. What the theory of autopoiesis describes, then, in the case of living beings, is an organic form that subsists in virtue of its internal relations. It is this feature that closely connects the theory to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of vital forms, something that autopoietic theoretical biology has increasingly come to recognize.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰⁶ The exception is DNA, which belongs to the cell from its beginning to its end. On the non-participation of DNA in metabolism in relation to formal organization, see Simon Conway Morris, *Life’s Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 323-324; Marjorie Grene, ‘Biology and the Levels of Reality,’ in *The Understanding of Nature: Essays in the Philosophy of Biology* (Dordrecht/Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1974), 49; Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, 97-98. The theory presented here stands in obvious contrast to the mechanistic view of ‘genocentrism,’ as presented, for instance, in Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁰⁷ Note that what Merleau-Ponty calls *structure*, Varela and Maturana call *organization* – in both cases, this is to describe the relations that obtain between the parts making up a living whole, rather than these parts as such. I shall usually speak with Merleau-Ponty of structure in the sense of formal organization.

¹⁰⁸ Even Thompson’s work, *Mind in Life*, is a case in point.

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In his treatment of vital forms, of which the cell would be the paradigmatic case, Merleau-Ponty realizes that they require an analysis that rises above the level of physical particles as such to the level of the formal.

A total molecular analysis would dissolve the structure of the functions of the organism into the undivided mass of banal physical and chemical reactions. Life is not therefore the sum of these reactions. ... 'The meaning of the organism is its being' and the organism which biological analysis is concerned with is an ideal unity.¹⁰⁹

If we want to study and understand biological phenomena, then, we cannot restrict ourselves to studying their parts and the way in which they react, but we must instead focus attention on the organism as a biological form. Only thus can we begin to understand that 'the true organism, the one which science considers, is the concrete totality of the perceived organism, that which supports all the correlations which analysis discovers in it but which is not decomposable into them.'¹¹⁰ The noted philosopher of biology, Marjorie Grene, makes a similar point when she observes that 'biology needs to rely not only on material and efficient causes but on formal causes as well, and on formal causes most fundamentally.'¹¹¹ A formal unity is the minimal vital organization in which life is realized. (Notice how Merleau-Ponty, in the above quotes, speaks of the vital form as an *ideal* unity, and a *perceived* organism. This indicates his ambiguity concerning the ontological status of these forms, something to which we shall come back.)

How are vital formal structures different from physical formal structures? There are a number of differences, the first of which would be that living forms are precisely autopoietic. That is to say, they create the elements of which they are made, according to a logic of circularity. The all-important phenomenon here is that of *metabolism*, a function which is shared by all living beings, and by which they, quite literally, continually produce themselves. As we shall soon see, however, this brings with it other differences from merely physical structures – namely, a new sense of individuality, as well as a new sense of world, a world constituted as meaningful for the organism. In the words of

¹⁰⁹ 'Une analyse moléculaire totale dissoudrait la structure des fonctions et de l'organisme dans la masse indivise des réactions physique et chimique banales. La vie n'est donc pas la somme de ses réactions. ... "Le sens de l'organisme est son être" et l'organisme dont s'occupe l'analyse biologique est une unité idéale.' SC., 164-165/152; and cf. 164/151.

¹¹⁰ SC., 169/156.

¹¹¹ Grene, 'Biology and the Levels of Reality,' 37.

Francisco Varela, autopoiesis entails identity and sense-making.¹¹² Hence, we must look at three novel aspects of vital formal structures that serve to distinguish them from physical formal structures: autopoietic circularity, individuality and a meaningful world-relation, the latter two containing important suggestions about the emergence of subjectivity.

First, then, the notion of circular causality involved in autopoiesis should be clarified and related to Merleau-Ponty's similar notion. Autopoietic theory discerns a basic circular causality which is characteristic of life even in its minimal form. The formal realization of life, understood as autopoietic, is as we have seen self-producing, which is to say that it cannot be explained by recourse to standard linear causality or mechanistic thought. Rather, as Maturana and Varela suggest, the autopoietic cell 'pulls itself up by its own bootstraps and becomes distinct from its environment through its own dynamics.'¹¹³ This, then, is what Varela refers to as the identity of the autopoietic cell, consequent upon the autonomy that results from organizational or operational closure. What is here described is the emergence of a new level of reality with an independence strong enough for it to exercise whole-to-part, or global-to-local, causal influence on its constituents – in a word, downward causation. The phenomenon is perhaps best understood through an illustration.

In the below schematic representation of the autopoietic cell it is shown how it possesses what Varela calls 'organizational closure,' which means, as we have seen, that molecular components produce the material boundary of the system, and that this material boundary is itself the condition for the production of these molecular components through metabolic reactions within the system.¹¹⁴ This establishes a circularity of mutual dependence without which the system would not be able to exist – in short, a formal structure as Merleau-Ponty defines it. As Thompson points out, it is this circular formal organization that constitutes the system as autonomous in relation to its environment.¹¹⁵

¹¹² As presented in Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 146.

¹¹³ Maturana and Varela, *Tree of Knowledge*, 46-47.

¹¹⁴ 'Organizational closure refers to the self-referential (circular and recursive) network of relations that defines the system as a unity.' Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 45.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-46.

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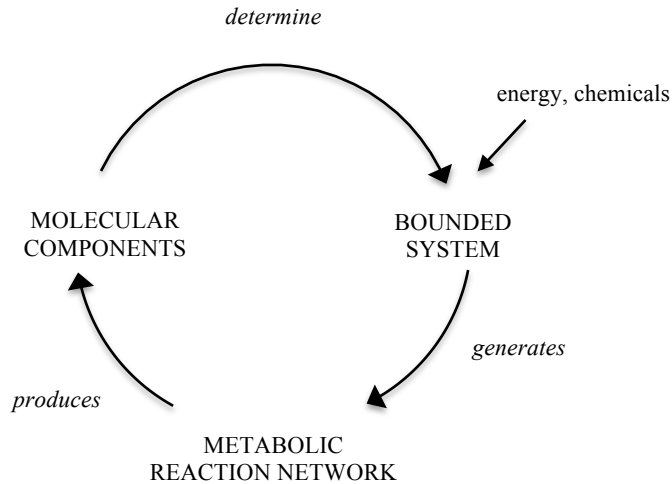


Figure 1. Basic autopoietic network
(Redrawn from Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 45, by permission of the author.)

In this way, then, the cell's identity as a formal unity is constituted; it emerges as a whole that cannot be reduced *to* its parts and a whole that realizes the relational interdependence *of* its parts in the way described above. It perfectly fits Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the notion of a formal structure. However, as a living structure, the cell also achieves a different kind of individuality or identity than that of inanimate material structures. This is because its autopoietic activity nonetheless needs a suitable environment in which to find the nutrients required for metabolism. For organizational closure does not mean that the system is materially closed to the outside; rather, it is a thermodynamically open system, continuously exchanging matter and energy with its surroundings. The autopoietic cell uses the molecules entering through its porous membrane to itself produce the new components it needs. In short, it is the cell itself that produces all it needs to realize its own form,¹¹⁶ but the

¹¹⁶ This characteristic is what defines systems as *autopoietic*, that is self-producing, rather than *allopoietic*, which refers to 'mechanistic systems in which the product of their operation is different from themselves,' such as, for instance, the ribosome, which is produced by processes external to its own operations. They are also to be distinguished from *heteropoietic* systems,

material it needs is found outside of the cell – that is, outside of this form. This kind of organizational closure therefore also requires ‘embodiment’ in the sense that there must be a boundary between what goes on inside the system and what is available outside it.¹¹⁷ This means that, according to autopoietic theory, biological life is always embodied; it is necessarily realized as a spatio-temporal, material structure or configuration. Without being such a distinct unity, the cell would dissipate into its environment and there would be no life. In order to live, the cell must maintain a difference between itself and all that is other. The cell’s membrane is what constitutes it as a discrete body. This, however, would seem to be an individuality that is different from the one realized by the formal organization of a physical structure. Merleau-Ponty tries to account for the difference between vital and material structures by saying that, in contrast to the physical structure, the vital structure establishes its own norm by which it relates to its environment.¹¹⁸ What can this mean?

Metabolism and Meaning

Having considered autopoietic circularity and the individuality or formal unity it achieves, we must now consider the other distinguishing aspect of vital formal structures. In addition to autopoietic theory, I will at this point bring in the organismic philosophy of Hans Jonas to further amplify Merleau-Ponty’s basic insights. From the start, autopoietic theory described the relation between the cell and its environment in terms of *cognition*, since the relation must be understood as meaningful from the point of view of the autopoietic cell.¹¹⁹ For it is not as if the cell merely reacts to objective stimuli in its environment; it rather invests stimuli with a certain value according to its own norms and preferences. For example, motile bacteria, which are prokaryotic cells (that is, cells without a nucleus, thought to have preceded eukaryotic cells with nuclei),

which are defined as allopoietic systems resulting from human design, such as cars and computers. Varela, Maturana and Uribe, ‘Autopoiesis,’ 188; Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 98.

¹¹⁷ I will confine myself to the minimal case of autopoiesis in the living cell. There is, however, a debate within autopoietic theory about how to define the ‘boundary’ of autopoietic systems at higher levels of organization: How should the boundary of multicellular organisms be understood, let alone that of societies of such organisms? For a discussion of this, see Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 105-107, 118-122; and Maturana and Varela, *Tree of Knowledge*, 73-89.

¹¹⁸ SC., 161/148.

¹¹⁹ Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 42. (Boston/Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980).

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can sense the presence of sucrose in their environment and begin to move in the direction of a higher concentration of sucrose; they also actively swim away from a chemical repellent. Advocates of autopoietic theory claim that this must be seen as a coupling of the organism with its environment so as to make it meaningful, which is precisely what cognition, understood in the most general way, amounts to.¹²⁰ Describing the pioneering work of Maturana and Varela, Michel Bitbol and Pier Luigi Luisi summarize their approach:

In their analysis, [Maturana and Varela] pointed out an indissoluble link between being a living system and *interacting with the environment*. One particular aspect of this interaction is that all living systems owe their living status to the selection of certain chemicals from the environment. These chemicals are called ‘nutrients’ to denote a specific relation between them and the metabolic network that incorporates them. This process of biochemical recognition occurs via a specific *sensorium*, which in turn has been developed throughout a history of coupling interactions between autopoietic units and changing environments. The authors used the term ‘cognition’ for this process of biological selectivity – and they came to establish a basic equivalence between life and cognition.¹²¹

There is a striking similarity between the way in which the lived body, as we have seen, acquires its transcendental function, as it were, through interactions with its surroundings and the development of a body schema and of corporeal habits that disclose the world, and the way in which autopoietic theory suggests that life, in the minimal form of a cell, has developed the ability to disclose its environment as meaningful or not. In fact, in *The Structure*, Merleau-Ponty describes essentially this same phenomenon transposed to the level of sensorimotor agents. As Thompson points out, the structural coupling between organism and environment that Merleau-Ponty recognizes between autonomous sensorimotor agents and their *Umwelt*, where the organism is an autonomous sensorimotor system that meets the world on its own terms, recapitulates the logic of autopoietic cells on a higher level, the level of the lived body – perception and movement are here equivalent to the metabolic cycle.¹²² And when Merleau-Ponty talks about ‘circular causality,’ he understands this primarily as a type of relation between the organism and its

¹²⁰ Cf. Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 39-46; Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 74, 154, 157-158; Weber and Varela, ‘Life After Kant,’ 110.

¹²¹ Michel Bitbol and Pier Luigi Luisi, ‘Autopoiesis With or Without Cognition: Defining Life at Its Edge,’ *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*, no. 1 (2004): 100.

¹²² Cf. Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 47; Madison, *Phenomenology*, 8-9.

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milieu.¹²³ Arguing against the traditional objectivist approach to neurophysiology and psychology, he rejects the idea that an organism's behaviour is simply the effect of external stimuli acting as objective causes. Rather, he claims, the organism must be seen as actively engaging its milieu in a meaningful way, which is to say that the structure of behaviour – or meaningful action – is the result both of the organism and of its milieu, of their interaction.

The form of the excitant is created by the organism itself, by its proper manner of offering itself to actions from the outside. ... It is the organism itself – according to the proper nature of its receptors, the thresholds of its nerve centers and the movements of the organs – which chooses the stimuli of the physical world to which it will be sensitive. 'The environment (*Umwelt*) emerges from the world through the actualization or the being of the organism.'¹²⁴

There is thus a reciprocity or circularity of influence, such that it cannot be held that one acts and the other reacts.¹²⁵ (This is what contemporary theorists

¹²³ SC., 13/15.

¹²⁴ 'Ainsi la forme de l'excitant est créée par l'organisme lui-même, par sa manière propre de s'offrir aux actions du dehors. ... C'est lui, selon la nature propre de ses récepteurs, selon les seuils de ses centres nerveux, selon les mouvements des organes, qui choisit dans le monde physique les stimuli auxquels il sera sensible. "Le milieu (*Umwelt*) se découpe dans le monde selon l'être de l'organisme.'" SC., 11-12/13, quoting Kurt Goldstein's *Die Aufbau der Organismus*, a work that greatly influenced Merleau-Ponty.

¹²⁵ Contemporary neurophysiology appears to confirm something like this in its descriptions of the activity of the central nervous system. For instance, the neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeaux cites the discovery of the projective function of the brain as one of the most important scientific advances: 'Instead of conceiving of the brain as functioning according to the standard behaviourist "input-output" model (later associated with the computer) the central nervous system was now seen by contrast as a "projective system" that continually projects its hypotheses onto the external world, putting them to the test of experience.' Jean-Pierre Changeaux and Paul Ricoeur, *What Makes Us Think: A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue About Ethics, Human Nature and the Brain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 42. Similarly, the neurobiologist Walter Freeman says of olfactory perception, that 'although this collective neural activity reflects the odorant, the activity itself is not determined solely by the stimulus. Bulbar functioning is self-organized, very much controlled by internal factors.' And further: 'Perception requires ... that the bulb participates in assigning meaning to stimuli.' And as a final conclusion: 'In short, the act of perception is not the copying of an incoming stimulus. It is a step in a trajectory by which brains grow, reorganize themselves and reach into their environment to change it to their advantage.' Walter Freeman, 'The Physiology of Perception,' *Scientific American* (February 1991).

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have come to call *enaction*.)¹²⁶ From this point of view the meaningful *Umwelt* of the organism is to be understood as emerging from the reciprocally determining influence of the environment and the organism, according to a logic that must be described as dialectical or circular.

All this is to say that vital forms differ from inanimate physical forms in that they, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, are related to their surroundings not by *laws* external to the form, but by *norms* internal to it.

Thus each organism, in the presence of a given milieu, has its optimal conditions of activity and its proper manner of realizing equilibrium; and the internal determinants of this equilibrium are not given by a plurality of vectors, but by a general attitude to the world. This is the reason why inorganic structures can be expressed by a law while organic structures are understood only by a norm. ... This signifies that the organism itself measures the action of things upon it and itself delimits its milieu by a circular process which is without analogy in the physical world.¹²⁷

This point can also be stated thus: *A living form has its own project*, but an inanimate form does not. What project is this? Minimally, it is to live; this is the project shared by all living things. But in addition, and as a consequence, each vital form has its own preferred ways of reaching equilibrium with its environment. Merleau-Ponty classes these under two general categories of behaviour: *syncretic* and *amovable*.¹²⁸ Syncretic structures of behaviour are instinctual and entirely given over to the context of their natural conditions; this is characteristic of invertebrates. Amovable structures of behaviour, in contrast, are characterized by an intelligent response to signals in the context that are not determined by instinct, whereby things take on a meaning in relation to the varied projects of the organism; this is characteristic of vertebrates. Thus, to use Merleau-Ponty's examples, an ant treats an unusual situation only as an allusion to a vital situation prescribed by its instinctual *a priori*. In contrast, a chimpanzee will encounter two bamboo sticks, fit them

¹²⁶ Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch made the term popular through their influential *Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991.)

¹²⁷ 'Chaque organisme a donc, en présence d'un milieu donné, ses conditions optima d'activité, sa manière propre de réaliser l'équilibre, et ses déterminantes intérieures de cet équilibre ne sont pas donnés par une pluralité de vecteurs, mais par une attitude générale envers le monde. De là vient que les structures inorganiques se laissent exprimer par une loi, au lieu que les structures organiques ne se comprennent que par une norme. ... Cela signifie qu'il mesure lui-même l'action des choses sur lui et délimite lui-même son milieu par un processus circulaire qui est sans analogue dans le monde physique.' SC., 161/148; cf. 174/161.

¹²⁸ SC., 114-130/104-120.

together and use the tool constructed to reach a banana that would otherwise have remained out of reach. The animal encounters an object, the meaning of which is not entirely given by a history that has resulted in an instinctual coupling, but is given in relation to the organism's chosen goal.

Regardless of whether the forms of behaviour are syncretic or amovable, however, the main point is that the relation between vital forms and their milieu is one of meaning; it strictly does not matter to what extent this meaning is variable from situation to situation. Indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty, it is this new relation between the vital form and its surrounding world in terms of significance or meaning that establishes the vital form as a new kind of individual, as something that begins to look more like a subject. A relation is established between the poles of organism and world, where the organism begins to come forward as an individual subject intentionally related to a world that is invested with meaning, even though these terms are here stretched to their utmost if applied to a vital structure as basic as a cell.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, as Merleau-Ponty says, 'by accepting the fact that the organism itself modifies its milieu according to the internal norms of its activity, we have made it an individual in a sense that is not even that of modern physics.'¹³⁰

In an important essay on the meaning of metabolism, Hans Jonas was perhaps the first to develop the suggestive idea that metabolism functions in this way as a sort of proto-intentionality, establishing both the cell as an identity-pole and the world as that towards which the cellular organism is propelled, and from which it must draw its sustenance, thus establishing the intimate and organic relation between subjectivity and world. In consonance with autopoietic theory, Jonas claims that metabolism entails both self-identity and sense making, which is to say the constitution of a minimally meaningful world. To start with, the actual exchange of matter that constitutes metabolism is the basis for cellular individuation, since, as we have seen, it makes possible the membrane, which establishes the organism as a formal unity through which matter comes and goes. Once this formal unity is in place it constitutes the self-identity of the cell, which will remain as long as the cell lives and regardless of the material substrate constituting it at any given time. This, Jonas argues, is a 'self' at least in the sense of being an operational unity distinct from its

¹²⁹ Says Thompson about the use of the term cognition in this context: 'This usage of "cognition" is admittedly a broad one ... [but it is] not merely a way of speaking because it rests on an explicit hypothesis about the natural roots of intentionality.' Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 159.

¹³⁰ SC., 167/154.

surroundings and with its own project or concern. Jonas summarizes these features of cellular self-identity thus: “This ontological individual, its very existence at any moment, its duration and its identity in duration is, then, its own function, its own concern, its own continuous achievement.”¹³¹

Dialectically related to the self-identity of the cell, however, is the otherness of the world. The cell, as we have seen, establishes itself as a unity through its metabolic interaction with its environment, with the consequence of continually maintaining its own identity as over and against the world from which it tears itself. But metabolism also means that the cellular unity must be *turned towards* the world, since ‘in order to change matter, the living form must have matter at its disposal, and it finds it outside itself, in the foreign “world.”’¹³² This, as Jonas understands it, is both its possibility and its necessity: its possibility of relative independence from matter through metabolism, but also its necessity of constantly changing matter through the same processes. It is thus the concern of life to maintain itself that propels it outward towards what is other, towards the world. In phenomenological parlance this amounts to a form of self-transcendence, or *ek-stasis* – a going beyond oneself, beyond one’s self-enclosure, in openness to a world. It is, in short, part of what I have called *verticality*. Following Jonas’ lead, we may say that the impulse of verticality is a function of so basic a phenomenon as metabolism, without which there would be no life. Hence, life and verticality must always be concurrent. The absence of verticality is death.

The world-turning implied by metabolism is therefore also a meaning-disclosing action; the organism turns outward, driven by its own concern to go on living, in an effort to make sense of its environment. Proto-intentionality must be understood not just as a turning towards that which is other than self, but a turning that invests the world with meaning. The organism meets the world on its own terms and according to its own needs; only that which matters to the organic cell, that with which it is concerned in order to maintain itself, is disclosed to the organism – in this case, nutrients. This dimension, then, is what theorists of autopoiesis describe as ‘cognition’ in the most generic sense of establishing a meaningful relation between a subject and its world.

Jonas draws another consequence from his reflections on the philosophical implications of metabolism; he introduces into the discussion the issue of *teleology* as applied to living phenomena, in addition to that of form. Already

¹³¹ Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, 80.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 84.

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Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement*, had insisted that living organisms cannot be understood by recourse to mechanistic causality, but require a teleological perspective, which is to say they require to be seen as acting for the sake of something. He had, however, kept himself within his own transcendental framework and maintained only that *we*, human beings, must comprehend living organisms under the regulative concept of teleology, or not at all; this was not yet an ontological statement.¹³³ Jonas goes a step further when he claims that *the teleology of living organisms is an ontological feature rooted in the twofold effects of metabolism itself: self-identity and sense-making*. For with these properties, Jonas argues, the double horizon of space and time opens up for the organism: its concern for continued life propels it forward in time and it organizes its activity with this fundamental goal on its temporal horizon; and the same concern propels it outward in space towards that which is other than its embodied self in an attempt to find those elements which alone are meaningful in relation to its continued survival. Hence, the teleology of life refers to the self-identity of the living cell and follows from its disclosure of a meaningful *Umwelt*. Through such teleological direction, what Jonas calls biological time and space are constituted:

The internal direction toward the next impending phase of a being that has to continue *itself* constitutes biological time; the external direction toward the co-present not-itself which holds the stuff relevant to its continuation constitutes biological space. As the here expands into the there, so the now expands into the future.¹³⁴

What is described here is an *internal* or *immanent* teleology; it is not the sort of directedness that would result from being bound to a preordained goal given by someone else to the organism. Rather, goals are set by the organism itself. As Grene puts it: 'Organic phenomena are directive, not directed.'¹³⁵ This becomes especially important in view of the discussion in the second part of this book, when I relate this proposal to a theological vision, since theology has sometimes asserted the teleology of the world as a function of divine will and design in such a way that the immanent purposes of the individual creature would seem to be annulled.¹³⁶ We return to these issues in Part Two.

¹³³ See Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 129-140; Francisco Varela and Andreas Weber, 'Life After Kant,' *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1 (2002).

¹³⁴ Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, 86.

¹³⁵ Marjorie Grene, 'Biology and Teleology,' in *Understanding of Nature*, 174.

¹³⁶ Cf. Varela and Weber, 'Life After Kant', 98.

Contemporary biology must of course admit the appearance of teleology, purpose or design in nature, which is after all one of its most conspicuous features,¹³⁷ but it is often at pains to demonstrate that this is precisely a mere appearance: ‘The overwhelming preference is to explain biological facts as the statistical results of natural selection which *post factum* gives the semblance of goal-directedness.’¹³⁸ To admit actual design would presumably lead to the idea of a Designer – straight into the arms of natural theology and William Paley’s God. The infected debate between ultra-Darwinists and advocates of Intelligent Design hinges on this premise, shared by the tradition of British natural theology and Darwinism alike, that teleology is an externally imposed condition or else non-existent.¹³⁹ A different and more profound alternative has, however, existed as a live alternative in Continental Europe at least since the time of Kant, via the Romantics and *Naturphilosophie*, up through German philosophy and biology in the twentieth century.¹⁴⁰ This is the tradition that Merleau-Ponty takes up in his lectures on nature in the late 1950s, as we shall see in chapter 3. According to this tradition, it is not a question of invoking a transcendent Designer in order to explain and understand biological life, but rather of admitting an internal teleology at the heart of life itself. It is this tradition, shedding its origin in Kantian philosophy in favour of empirically based theorizing, that challenges the received view, even in the Anglo-American world, with notions of autopoiesis, self-organization, circular causality, emergence and the like. Clearly, this is not a minor ripple on the surface of an ocean of ontological consensus, but an issue that cuts to the marrow of how we conceive of reality – scientifically as well as philosophically – and in the end determines how we will come to view ourselves as human beings. At this point, I can merely register the paramount significance of these issues.

On the question of teleology, Merleau-Ponty would have largely agreed with Jonas that biological phenomena must be understood as displaying teleological behaviour, that is, behaviour directed to a goal, and also that these goals are immanent to the organism. Indeed, what he calls the norm, or the immanent law of the organism, could also be called its goal: that for which it

¹³⁷ Cf. Grene, ‘Biology and Teleology,’ 174; Donald T. Cambell, “Downward Causation” in Hierarchically Organized Biological Systems,’ in Francisco Ayala and Theodosius Dobzhansky, eds., *Studies in the Philosophy of Biology: Reduction and Related Problems* (London: Macmillan Press, 1974), 179.

¹³⁸ Varela and Weber, ‘Life After Kant’, 98.

¹³⁹ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 208-218.

¹⁴⁰ Varela and Weber, ‘Life After Kant,’ 102, 111.

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acts. Not, to be sure, in the sense that simple organisms ‘choose’ their own goals, for there is as we have seen something like a biological a priori of instinct, but that they have evolved in such a way as to interact with the world according to their own needs and purposes. Thus he says: ‘One finds immanent to the phenomenal organism, certain nuclei of signification [*noyaux de signification*], certain animal essences [*essences animales*] – the act of walking toward a goal, of taking, of eating bait, of jumping over or going around an obstacle.’¹⁴¹ It is the very characterization of living organisms as vital forms, then, that brings about the indispensability of a teleological point of view, since the living is distinct from the physical by having its own project, its own concern. As Merleau-Ponty says in a discussion of physiology:

The notion of form does nothing other than express the descriptive properties of certain natural wholes. It is true that it renders possible the use of a finalistic vocabulary. But this possibility itself is rooted in the nature of the nerve phenomena; it expresses the type of unity which they achieve.¹⁴²

All of these converging lines of thought from the early Merleau-Ponty, from autopoietic theory and from Hans Jonas’ philosophy of metabolism, it seems to me, amount to a powerful suggestion: It must be wrong to think of the distance between inanimate nature and human consciousness as an empty chasm; rather, it is populated by innumerable life forms from the most primitive to the most advanced. In between, there are ascending levels of individuality, as organisms tear themselves from their instinctive a priori to set themselves more of the goals for which they act. And this means that there are ascending levels of sense-making, from the minimal world of bare sentience to the expanding worlds of animal and human culture.

This is not just Darwinian evolution in philosophical garb, though it must be admitted that the perspective sketched here is congenial to an evolutionary perspective. However, it must be remembered that even Aristotle, in his *De Anima*, realized that the vegetative, the animal and the human soul should be treated together and that all exhibit ‘soul.’ More importantly, there is no sense of reductive Darwinism here, as if everything without exception could be

¹⁴¹ SC., 170/157.

¹⁴² ‘La notion de forme ne fait qu’exprimer les propriétés descriptives de certains ensembles naturels. Il est vrai qu’elle rend possible l’emploi d’un vocabulaire finaliste. Mais cette possibilité même est fondée dans la nature des phénomènes nerveux, elle exprime le type d’unité qu’ils réalisent.’ SC., 54/51. Cf. the similar point made by Terrence W. Deacon in ‘Three Levels of Emergent Phenomena,’ in Murphy and Stoeger, eds., *Evolution and Emergence*, 107.

explained as a function of survival value and every layer of cultural evolution could be reduced to natural selection. No, because ‘the appearance of reason and mind [*de la raison et de l’esprit*] does not leave intact a sphere of self-enclosed instincts in man. ... Man can never be an animal: his life is always more or less integrated than that of an animal.’¹⁴³ On the suggestion sketched here, the opposite is therefore true: it is precisely by its establishment of *new* norms of behaviour that the development of the vital order would be understood. Thus, cultural evolution gears seamlessly into natural evolution; indeed, it is impossible to say where nature ends and culture starts. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, in human existence everything is natural and everything is cultural.¹⁴⁴

Moreover, the three levels of matter, life and mind remain constantly intertwined. It is not as if we cease to be physical matter or merely shed our animality, but rather that we take them up and integrate them into the human order in a way that fundamentally changes them even as they remain. Thus the human subject, however it is best to be characterized, can be said to be ‘perched on a pyramid of past life [*une pyramide de passé*],’¹⁴⁵ and must be seen as given to itself from an immemorial past. As Merleau-Ponty understands it, the human order does not shed its origins, for like the top of a pyramid it is continuously subtended by the lower rungs of the edifice. ‘For life, as for the mind, there is no past which is absolutely past; “the moments which the mind seems to have behind it are also borne in its present depths.” Higher behaviour retains the subordinated dialectics in the present depths of its existence.’¹⁴⁶

Merleau-Ponty and the Emergence of the Human Order

We come now to what Merleau-Ponty calls the human order and to what it is that constitutes the distinctively human structure of behaviour over and above the vital structure as such. The philosopher Remy Kwant claimed in 1963 that ‘it would be irresponsible for any contemporary to write a philosophical anthropology without making a thorough study of Merleau-Ponty.’¹⁴⁷ This,

¹⁴³ SC., 196/181. Cf. IP., 18.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. PhP., 230/220.

¹⁴⁵ PhP., 453/457, quoting Proust.

¹⁴⁶ SC., 224/207, quoting Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*. Cf. ‘The advent of higher orders, to the extent that they are accomplished, eliminate the autonomy of the lower orders and give a new signification to the steps which constitute them.’ SC., 195/180.

¹⁴⁷ Remy C. Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1963), 243.

according to Kwant, is because his philosophy shows better than any other the rootedness of the human person in the body and of the body in nature or Being. However, Kwant also realizes that Merleau-Ponty has not adequately considered the movement of verticality and what belongs to the life of the spirit or consciousness proper, something that is confirmed by the secondary literature since his time, which has remained much more concerned with the rootedness and much less with the transcendence or verticality. Merleau-Ponty's own philosophical instinct was largely archaeological; he was, as Sartre remarked, always in search of the lost origin.¹⁴⁸ Now, the issue of our continuity with the rest of nature is an obviously important topic for any philosophical anthropology, particularly in this day and age, but a question must also be raised as to whether Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has resources for thinking the uniquely human, the personal, that with which we are ultimately concerned. The opinion I will defend here is that his philosophy does indeed contain very fruitful starting points, but that they remain rather programmatic and will need to be appropriated and extended by other thinkers, though to some extent this has already happened.¹⁴⁹

A balanced philosophical anthropology, one that is able to take into account the full spectrum of human experience, must therefore not play rootedness and verticality against each other, but most hold them together in the unity of being. Such a philosophy, I contend, would recognize and emphasize the carnal and sensuous inherence of human being in the natural world, in vital and material structures – the whole human being, including what we refer to as the higher human capacities of language, thought and the orientation towards truth, or in short, of mind. But it would also recognize and celebrate the verticality made possible by such a rootedness and the uniqueness it implies. Finally, such a philosophy would recognize the reciprocity and intertwining of rootedness and verticality in the phenomenon of the human, so as to conceive of mind as constantly nourished by the sensuous carnal life of the body in the world.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Merleau-Ponty Vivant,' 566-567; and Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 214: 'It remains strange, however, that Merleau-Ponty always points toward the dark origin of our creative expressions ... one would expect that Merleau-Ponty would also point to the other direction.'

¹⁴⁹ In the following works, for instance: Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life*; Renaud Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie*; and Etienne Bimbinet, *Nature et humanité: Le problème anthropologique dans l'oeuvre de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2004).

It will be useful to situate Merleau-Ponty's early understanding of the specifically human order in the context of the contemporary debate. It is probably fair to say that the phenomena of life and mind have been the central antinomies of modern thought. When Husserl toward the end of his life set himself the task of diagnosing the malaise of Western culture, he located the problem in the post-Galilean tradition of science and philosophy, since it took the useful scientific method of analysis into smallest parts and converted it into a general ontology, thus cutting reality down to scientifically manageable size.¹⁵⁰ In the process, however, it made consciousness, or the human person, into an anomaly. For either human being would now have to be seen as a mere aggregate of tiny bits of extended matter, or it would have to be seen in opposition to these tiny bits, as an immaterial substance with no part in material nature – *anti-physis*.¹⁵¹ Now, the metaphysical assumption of atomism, which Nancy Murphy calls 'one of the central metaphysical assumptions of the modern era,' is still alive and well, at least among philosophers.¹⁵² That is to say, there is a widespread tendency to move from an appreciation of scientific method – to try to explain macro-properties or events through the causal influence of their constitutive micro-properties or events – to a metaphysical

¹⁵⁰ *Krisis*, §§ 8-27. In this context it is interesting to observe that if Galileo's rejection of Aristotelian hylomorphism, with its emphasis on the notion of form [*morphe*], in favour of the atomistic account is challenged by contemporary theory, this equally signifies a renewed appreciation of Aristotle, albeit with appropriate reservations. For instance, in his debate with neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux, Paul Ricoeur notes the central problematic of the category of causality in passing from the neuronal to the mental and suggests, as an antidote to the uncritical use of a monolithic concept of efficient causality, a qualified re-appropriation of the Aristotelian notion of *substrate*; that is, of speaking of a necessary but not in itself sufficient element of material causality in the way we try to make sense of the relation between neurophysiology and conscious experience. Ricoeur and Changeux, *What Makes us Think?*, 46-47. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum and Hilary Putnam argue, in their interpretation of Aristotle's *De Anima*, that his hylomorphism is best understood as a sort of non-reductive functionalism regarding the mind. They argue that when Aristotle says that the psyche, the soul or the mind, is the form of the body, he means that the mental is an organizational function realized by the material substratum of the body. Martha Nussbaum and Hilary Putnam, 'Changing Aristotle's Mind,' in Martha Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, eds., *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). This ties in very nicely with Ricoeur's injunction that we should really only talk of the neuronal substratum as the material cause. Again, Evan Thompson notes that downward causation understood as a structuring cause, whereby the whole constrains and structures the behaviour of the parts, could be seen as a recuperation of Aristotle's notion of formal causation. Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 427.

¹⁵¹ Modern materialism, as Hans Jonas demonstrates, is therefore but the flipside of modern dualism; they feed of each other. See Jonas' *Phenomenon of Life*, 7-26.

¹⁵² Murphy, 'Reductionism,' 19.

commitment about what exists. Indeed, the position known as physicalism is often understood to stand for the theory according to which reality is nothing but minimal physical elements (whatever they turn out to be). In the words of the noted physicalist philosopher Jaegwon Kim: ‘Ontological physicalism [is] the thesis that bits of matter and their aggregates exhaust the content of the world.’¹⁵³ We can usefully understand this particle metaphysics to involve two distinct but related claims: *ontological reductionism* (of wholes to material particles) and *causal reductionism* (that the apparent causal efficacy of complex bodies are pre-empted by the causal dynamics at the lowest level).¹⁵⁴ It is important to realize that this, in minimal form, amounts to a philosophy of nature, or an ontology, and it is the paradigmatic form of modern naturalism.

For a number of contemporary philosophers working in the philosophy of mind (which we can perhaps think of as a subdivision of the broader concerns of a fully fledged philosophical anthropology), this is the understanding of nature that frames the enterprise. From that perspective, to naturalize consciousness would of course be to reduce it to ‘bits of matter and their aggregates.’ A crucial consequence of this has to do with causality: Since it is thought to be efficacious only on the lowest level of particles, wholes as such can have no causal efficacy of their own, and this is particularly true of the whole that constitutes a human being. Thus our everyday belief that we do things for reasons – that I rise from my chair and go into the kitchen in order to have a cup of tea, say – must strictly speaking be mistaken, however practically useful they are.

To get an idea of how reductive physicalism works out, let me briefly present it in the influential formulation given to it by Jaegwon Kim. Kim is motivated by a concern to save the causal involvement of the mind in the material world and argues that this can be done only if mind can be reduced to its underlying material infrastructure. If not, he contends, the mind can only be a causally impotent epiphenomenon. Epiphenomenalism, according to Kim, is in fact a consequence of *non-reductive* versions of physicalism, since they claim that the mind is irreducible to physics while also holding to what is known as the ‘causal closure’ of the physical domain.¹⁵⁵ Causal closure is the

¹⁵³ Jaegwon Kim, *Physicalism or Something Near Enough* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3; cf. 7, 149-150.

¹⁵⁴ Cf., Nancy Murphy, ‘Introduction and Overview,’ in Nancy Murphy, George F.R. Ellis and Timothy O’Connor, eds., *Downward Causation and the Neurobiology of Free Will* (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2009), 4.

¹⁵⁵ Kim, *Physicalism*, 152.

idea that ‘if a physical event has a cause at t , then it has a physical cause at t .’¹⁵⁶ There is, in other words, no reason or possibility of looking outside of the physical domain to causally explain a physical event. In particular, causal closure implies that the mental *qua* mental may never be invoked as cause of a physical event. But if this is so, Kim argues, mental causation cannot be had on a non-reductionist account of the mind. Non-reductive versions of physicalism are, Kim argues, incoherent. In order to save mental causation, therefore, mind does need to be causally reducible to the physical, such that causal closure is not violated.

Ironically, then, it appears Kim is also trying to save the phenomena. With that in mind he proposes an in principle functional reduction of cognitive mental states to their material substrates, while also recognizing that such a reduction is not possible for mental states with qualia, which he therefore considers to be merely epiphenomenal.¹⁵⁷ In this way he claims we can ‘save’ mental causation through reduction: ‘Unless we bring the supposed mental causes fully into the physical world, there is no hope of vindicating their status as causes ... the reality of mental causation requires reduction of mentality to physical processes, or of minds to brains.’¹⁵⁸ The figure below neatly illustrates Kim’s basic suggestion.

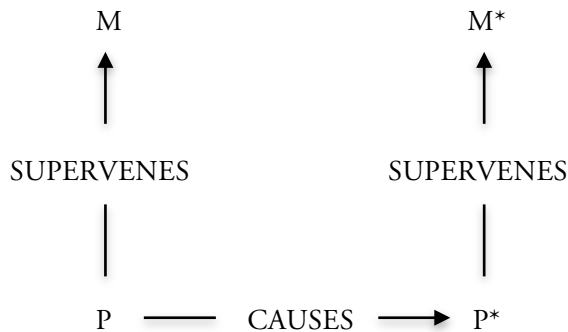


Figure 2. Reduction of mental causation to physical causation
(from Kim, *Physicalism*, 45)

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 7-69. It should be noted that this concession implies that Kim’s proposal is not an all-out reductive physicalism, since he admits that certain aspects of consciousness are irreducible, vis-à-vis its phenomenal properties.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 156.

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This model could be used to understand how our experience of mental causation can gain a foothold in the physical world. The mental property (M) here supervenes on the strictly physical property (P), and it is P that *causes* another physical property (P*), upon which a second mental property (M*) in turn supervenes.¹⁵⁹ Notice that in this scenario there is only one causal relation; the mental *qua mental* does not cause, but it is causally relevant *qua* reduced to its supervenience base. In other words, if mental states are unilaterally determined by brain-states, the mental is appropriately connected to causal power through this very relation. There is thus no need, according to Kim, to labour with the highly problematic notions of mental-to-mental causation or mental-to-physical causation. Rather, the causal efficacy of the material properties pre-empts the presumed causality of all other levels and is, in any case, all we need.

This is, in a nutshell, Kim's reductive proposal. The problem with such an account, at least for a philosopher committed to the Aristotelian-phenomenological maxim of saving the phenomena, is of course that the mind we are left with looks very unlike the mind we thought we had, since human being (minus epiphenomenal qualia) is here entirely drafted into the order of microphysics and its causal dynamics, our mental lives being no less causally determined than the stone that falls to the ground because of gravity, or alternatively, being entirely random. Presumably, though Kim does not discuss this in his program on physicalism and mind, the self must be equally reduced (alternatively epiphenomenal) – strictly speaking, *I* can have nothing to do with what *I* do. If ever there was a pyrrhic victory, surely this is it. (Kim even appears to be aware of this, as he speaks about the high price that physicalism exacts: it cannot be had on the cheap.¹⁶⁰)

Now, my purpose here is not to argue against reductive physicalism as such; I have brought it up merely to demonstrate the sort of naturalism that is obviously antithetical to Merleau-Pontian philosophy, and for that matter to

¹⁵⁹ Here it is a question of so called 'strong supervenience,' that is, the theory according to which the (subvenient) neural substrate unilaterally *determines* the supervenient mental phenomena, such that the real explanation of the mental is to be had only on the subvenient level. 'Weak supervenience,' in contrast, is sometimes used to refer to the non-reductive position, according to which mental phenomena *are* dependent on the (subvenient) neural substrate without being unilaterally caused by it or explainable solely on its terms. Weak supervenience therefore fits nicely with strong emergence. For a lucid presentation of these terms, see Clayton, *Mind and Emergence*, 124-128.

¹⁶⁰ See Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World: An Essay on the Mind-Body Problem and Mental Causation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 129.

phenomenology as such, and to draw attention to the crucial metaphysical premise of the whole conundrum, namely an adherence to the idea that causality is a one-way, linear, determination holding between the smallest discrete items in the universe, which are seen to constitute reality.¹⁶¹ Reduction on this view is essentially analysis of wholes into their parts and a specification of the causal relation holding between these.

But this is a crucial metaphysical assumption that goes far beyond anything science presents us with; it is a philosophical framework, not empirical science.¹⁶² But why, then, should we accept it? If it tallies so poorly with the phenomena, and if we lack convincing reasons to accept the metaphysical framework as such, it would seem that we are rather warranted in being suspicious of the framework and in searching for a better one. Let us recall Merleau-Ponty's alternative of a pluralistic ontology, with his notion of formal structures, which we have also seen exemplified in autopoietic theory. A consequence of rejecting 'particle metaphysics,' that is, of admitting with Merleau-Ponty the irreducible category of form, would seem to be that it opens the possibility of understanding human being in a way that is non-dualistic, yet also non-reductive. If so, it may be possible to give a scientifically and philosophically acceptable account of human being that does in fact pass Aristotle's test, that is, that gives us a way of understanding while also preserving the validity of the phenomenon we attempt to understand – in this case, the phenomenon that we are. Admitting that there are such formal structures – and indeed, that life is itself such a structure – amounts to a wholesale rejection of the particle metaphysics that reductive physicalism presupposes. But it is not, let us be clear, a rejection of naturalism as such. Nor is it an invocation of dualism. Nor is it necessarily even a rejection of the thesis of the causal closure of the physical domain, granted the coherence of such an idea.¹⁶³ What it is, however, is a different philosophy of nature, a different metaphysics. This suggests that perhaps we do not have to land in Kim's impossible dilemma of choosing between reduction and epiphenomenalism.

What would such a Merleau-Pontian naturalistic account in fact look like? Let me merely note here some recent developments in this field and connect it with Merleau-Pontian themes to suggest that this philosophy, which could be

¹⁶¹ On the related issue of Merleau-Ponty's critique of Laplacian physicalist determinism, see Fred Evans, 'Chaosmos and Merleau-Ponty's View of Nature,' in *Chiasmi International. Merleau-Ponty: De la nature à l'ontologie* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2000), 64-65.

¹⁶² Cf. Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 439-441.

¹⁶³ See Murphy, 'Reductionism,' 27; and Deacon, 'Three Levels,' 94, 109.

seen as an alternative naturalism, is a live contemporary alternative, before finishing by returning to Merleau-Ponty's own treatment of the characteristics of the human order.

The crucial issues revolve around the notion with which we began, that of *emergence*, that is to say the emergence of new formal structures irreducible to their parts. A new way of thinking about emergence appeared above all within the field of biology in the 1970s and, though there is no settled consensus in this field, this has resulted in important conceptual clarifications of how an emerging structure, such as consciousness, could gear into the physical in a non-discontinuous way and without losing its causal power. Important in this respect was a paper by Donald Campbell in 1974, entitled "Downward Causation" in Hierarchically Ordered Biological Systems.¹⁶⁴ Campbell argues that higher biological systems have downward causal power over lower levels of organization through a process of *selection*: among the various possibilities of the lower levels, the higher living system selects or actualizes one. This could also be described as the higher level of biological organization *constraining* the lower levels.

To many, the virtue of this general way of thinking consists in that, in contrast to some earlier formulations of emergence, it does not seem to imply any novel immaterial – or otherwise 'spooky' – entities. Campbell's example is in fact the jaw structure of ants, which he argues must be understood as the product of the natural selection of the higher level of the ants' ecological niche, effectively constraining the possibilities of developing jaw structures. There is no mystery here, only a recognition of the irreducible contribution of the higher ecological system to the development of one of its constituent parts. In Campbell's words: 'Where natural selection operates through life and death at a higher level of organization, the laws of the higher-level selective system determine in part the distribution of lower-level events and substances.'¹⁶⁵

Campbell's general approach has subsequently been further developed and applied to other areas by, among others, Alicia Juarrero, Robert van Gulick, Terrence Deacon and Evan Thompson.¹⁶⁶ Thompson is particularly interesting since his project is partly inspired by Merleau-Ponty's early work. While many

¹⁶⁴ In Ayala and Dobzhansky, eds., *Studies in the Philosophy of Biology*.

¹⁶⁵ Campbell, 'Downward Causation,' 180.

¹⁶⁶ Alicia Juarrero, *Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behaviours as a Complex System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Robert van Gulick, 'Who's in Charge Here? And Who's Doing All the Work?,' in J. Heil and A. Mele, eds., *Mental Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Deacon, 'Three Levels'; Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 417-441.

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recent philosophers of mind have treated conscious experience as the last great mystery, the exception to the all-embracing rule of hard science, Thompson claims that consciousness and life follow the same general pattern of emergence, which is that of a whole organizing itself over and above its constituent parts and beginning to exert influence on the lower levels by constraint or selection. The phenomenon, or form, thus comes to have a certain autonomy in relation to the substratum and cannot be seen as an effect unidirectionally caused by its substratum. This holds for the autopoietic cell as well as for the nervous system: both exhibit features that go beyond their constituent physical particles. Indeed, even at the level of the neurological substratum of consciousness there is no linear causal chain from objective stimuli to neurological events.¹⁶⁷ And the same, Thompson claims, holds for consciousness itself: it must be seen as emerging from the physical substratum as a formal structure, thus achieving a certain autonomy as well as downward causal influence through selection and constraint, as represented in the below figure.

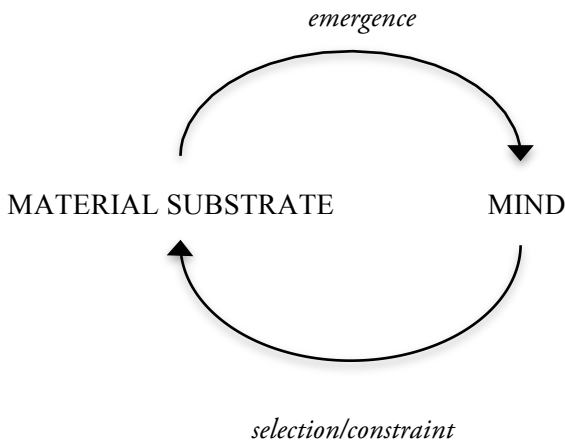


Figure 3. Emergent circular causality

¹⁶⁷ See note 125, above.

Needless to say, this is but a model illustrating the way mental life could gear into the physical in a non-discontinuous way, and it is a model that for explanatory purposes reduces an interaction of unfathomable complexity to the bare minimum of a flat circularity. But is it useful as a contrast to Kim's similarly stripped model of physicalist reduction, and it serves to show that there are alternative naturalisms that would seek to give an account of human being along the same lines as that of other phenomena in the world, without thereby reducing the mind to something unrecognizable, and that also manage to preserve the causal power of the mind in a physical world – in short, models that fare much better in terms of the Aristotelian-phenomenological requirement of preserving the validity of the phenomena.

A key idea for Thompson is the idea of *co-emergence*.¹⁶⁸ This expression is meant to capture phenomena such as that of the autopoietic cell, in which part and whole mutually specify each other and cannot be understood apart from this relation. Analogously, however, it also comes to stand for the simultaneous emergence of the interior and the exterior of an autonomous system, such as a biological cell, and for the similar emergence of an individual unity and its *Umwelt*, as we have already seen. Such cases evince an irreducible relationalism, in the sense that the relation is primary vis-à-vis the relata.¹⁶⁹ Take the case of an autopoietic cell, which is an organizationally closed system or unit, as we have seen. With its emergence an interiority comes into existence, as well as an exteriority necessarily related to it: what goes on inside the membrane is related to what goes on outside of it, though they are distinct. As Thompson understands it – and here he is in consonance with Hans Jonas – this interiority is the root from which a more full-fledged first-person point of view evolves, culminating in the rich interior worlds of human subjects. This is the basic premise of his approach to human consciousness: 'the organizational properties distinctive of mind are an enriched version of those fundamental to life.'¹⁷⁰ And not only do the organizational properties show this continuity between life and mind, but the phenomenological properties do as well. In other words, even subjective experience is prefigured in the minimal case of the cell.¹⁷¹ Yet this cannot be consciousness as we know it, subjective experience with qualia; rather, as Thompson understands it, somewhere along the

¹⁶⁸ Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 60-65.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 428.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

evolutionary line a nervous system of sufficient complexity develops, one which is able to sustain consciousness in the full sense of the word.

With the notion of form, as presented by Merleau-Ponty and by autopoietic theory, we are already beyond causal reductionism and must admit a global-to-local or downward causal influence of the whole on its parts. What Merleau-Ponty describes with his three orders is clearly a kind of emergence theory, as Marjorie Grene recognizes: ‘Each level, then, at the same time that it “emerges” as a genuine novelty, is intertwined with both the others, to which, in its emergence, it gives a new expression and a novel meaning.’¹⁷² Merleau-Ponty sees reality as full of emergent features that have their own ontological integrity, and consciousness is their culmination. The later course-notes on nature serve to corroborate this reading, and they do so on a more explicitly ontological register. In a most revealing passage of his second course on nature, Merleau-Ponty questions the assumption of particle metaphysics and suggests that reality be characterized by meaningful forms or totalities rather than particles: ‘The notion of the real is not necessarily linked to that of molecular being. Why would there not be molar being? The model of Being would be elsewhere than in the particle; it might be, for example, in a being of the order of Logos, and not of the “pure thing.”’¹⁷³ Indeed, the very structure of the courses he offered on the concept of nature again demonstrates that the three levels of matter, life and mind are to be seen as emergent phenomena, and Merleau-Ponty himself says as much:

Regarding the human, the concern is to take him at his point of emergence in Nature. Just as there is an *Ineinander* of life and physicochemistry, i.e. the realization of life as a fold or a singularity of physicochemistry – or structure, so too is the human to be taken in the *Ineinander* with animality and Nature.¹⁷⁴

Clearly, Merleau-Ponty is taking emergence to involve a number of circularities, indicated here by Husserl’s word *Ineinander*: between physicochemistry and life, between nature and animality, between animality and humanity. That this emergence is dependent on its substructures, although not linearly caused or necessitated by them, is by now evident. Let me

¹⁷² Grene, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal,’ 611.

¹⁷³ N., 209/157; cf. 267-268/206-207.

¹⁷⁴ ‘A propos de l’homme, il s’agit de le prendre à son point d’émergence dans la Nature. De même qu’il y a *Ineinander* de la vie physico-chimie, réalisation de la vie comme pli ou singularité de la physico-chimie – ou structure – de même l’homme est à prendre dans l’*Ineinander* avec animalité et Nature.’ N., 269/208; cf. 279-281/217-218.

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nonetheless quote Merleau-Ponty's explicit statement of this as regards the emergence of human consciousness:

A new consciousness surges forth (as does life from physicochemistry) by the arrangement of a hollow, by the irruption of a new field that comes from the interworld and *is not the effect of antecedents, not necessitated by them, even if it depends on them*. Thus the eye, with its nervous apparatus, takes to seeing.¹⁷⁵

This crucial characteristic of being rooted and dependent, but still not necessitated is also brought out in this general description of the relation from *The Structure*:

We could not simply superimpose these three orders; not being a new substance, each of them had to be reconceived as a retaking and a 'new' structuration of the preceding one. From this comes the double aspect of the analysis which *both liberated* the higher from the lower *and founded* the former on the latter.¹⁷⁶

Hence, consciousness is entirely rooted in the body. 'The body is the acquired dialectical soil upon which a higher "formation" is accomplished [*sur lequel opère une mise en forme supérieur*], and the soul is the meaning [*l'âme est le sens*] which is then established.'¹⁷⁷ This understanding remains in the later works, even if the conceptual framework, as we shall see, changes. Thus Merleau-Ponty says in *Eye and Mind* that 'the body is the birth place of the soul.'¹⁷⁸ And in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible* he states that 'the soul is planted in the body as the stake in the ground ... the body is the distension [*gonflement*] of the soul.'¹⁷⁹

However, it is very hard when discussing Merleau-Ponty to reach the higher levels of human consciousness; he tends to stay at the level of perceptual consciousness. And indeed, when he comes to an explicit discussion of the human order in *The Structure*, he considers perceptual consciousness above all.

¹⁷⁵ 'Une conscience nouvelle surgit (comme la vie surgit dans la physico-chimie) par aménagement d'un creux, par irruption d'un nouveau champ qui vient de l'entremonde et *n'est pas effet des antécédents, n'est pas nécessité par eux, même s'il en dépend*. Donc l'oeil avec son appareil nerveux se met à voir.' N., 271/210 (my emphasis).

¹⁷⁶ 'Nous ne pouvions pas superposer simplement ces trois ordres, et chacun d'eux, n'étant pas une nouvelle substance, devrait être conçu comme une reprise et une "nouvelle structuration" du précédent. De là le double aspect de l'analyse qui, *en même temps, libérait* le supérieur de l'inférieur et le "*fondait*" sur lui.' SC., 199/184 (my emphasis).

¹⁷⁷ SC., 227/210.

¹⁷⁸ OE., 54/176 (my translation).

¹⁷⁹ VI., 282-282/233.

This, however, evinces some interesting aspects, the first of which is that the human norm for interacting with the environment is characterized by an entirely novel freedom, a freedom that opens up vistas of interiority unknown to animals. For while vital structures of behaviour are characterized by sense-making according to an internal norm that can be either syncretic or amovable, Merleau-Ponty characterizes human conduct as oriented around symbolic meaning with which human beings invest the world, thus giving rise to the virtual, the possible, or the perspectival – this is the emergence of a ‘third dialectic’ between the organism and its environment.¹⁸⁰ For while an animal may recognize something *as* this or that in relation to its present goal, it never views an object under several different possible perspectives, conclusions that Merleau-Ponty to a large extent draws from the psychological work of Wolfgang Koehler, especially from Koehler’s *Mentality of Apes*. Thus the behaviour of a chimpanzee is to treat the function of a box as either a seat or as an instrument – that is, as two distinct objects. Or again, a monkey picks a tree branch and uses it as a tool to reach a goal; but having become a tool, the stick then ceases to be a branch.¹⁸¹ A human, on the other hand, sees the one object under different aspects and sees in these aspects different possibilities. A tree branch used as a tool, as Merleau-Ponty says, remains in this case a tree-branch-that-has-become-a-stick. Hence, the human structures of behaviour are driven by the multiplicity of possibilities afforded by the surrounding world and objects.

It is this possibility of varied expressions of the same theme, this ‘multiplicity of perspective,’ which is lacking in animal behaviour. It is this which introduces a cognitive conduct and a free conduct. In making possible all substitutions of points of view, it liberates the ‘stimuli’ from the here-and-now relations in which my own point of view involves them and from the functional values which the needs of the species, defined once and for all, assign to them. ... With symbolic forms, a conduct appears, which expresses the stimuli for itself, which is open to truth and to the proper value of things, which tends to the adequation of the signifying and the signified, of the intention and that which it intends. Here behaviour no longer *has* only one signification, it *is* itself signification.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ SC., 175/162. For a discussion of contemporary ethological studies suggesting a similar conception of what makes human conduct unique, see Peter Gärdenfors, *How Homo Became Sapiens: On the Evolution of Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 73-79.

¹⁸¹ SC., 190/175.

¹⁸² ‘C’est cette possibilité d’expressions variées d’un même thème, cette “multiplicité perspective” qui manquant au comportement animal. C’est elle qui introduit une conduite cognitive et une conduite libre. En rendant possibles toutes les substitutions de points de vue, elle délivre les “stimuli” des relations actuelles où les engage mon point de vue propre, des valeurs

In this highly condensed analysis Merleau-Ponty associates a certain freedom to adopt different perspectives on one and the same thing with rationality and with truth. This is presumably because with the plurality of perspectives there occurs a world given in such and such a manner, that is, a world that is not exhausted in any specific relation I establish with it, a world that transcends me and that I can consequently come to understand better. The human structure of behaviour with its perspectivism thus inaugurates a new teleology – of rationality, of truth and of a meaning that would transcend the here and now toward the objective and the ideal.

Moreover, human language-use transforms the perceptual relation between the organism and the environment, especially since this environment is now overlaid with human culture and tools. As Merleau-Ponty understands it, language ‘play[s] the guiding role ... in the constitution of the perceived world.’¹⁸³ It is language that reinforces the aforementioned teleology of consciousness: ‘The act of speaking expresses the fact that man ceases to adhere immediately to the milieu, that he elevates it to the status of spectacle and takes possession of it mentally by means of knowledge properly so called.’¹⁸⁴ Thus, human behaviour is characterized by a ‘categorical attitude’ [*l’attitude catégoriale*]¹⁸⁵ that makes truth possible. However, it is important to remember – and this is a contended point that we shall have to investigate further – that this categorical function of human consciousness remains rooted in the perceptual relation: ‘The knowledge of a universe will always be prefigured in lived perception [*préfigurée dans la perception vécue*].’¹⁸⁶

fonctionnelles que leur assignent les besoins de l’espèce définis une fois pour toutes. ... Avec les formes symboliques, apparaît une conduite qui exprime le stimulus pour lui-même, qui s’ouvre à la vérité et à la valeur propre des choses, qui tend à l’adéquation du signifiant et du signifié, de l’intention et de ce qu’elle vise. Ici le comportement n’a plus seulement une signification, il est lui-même signification.’ SC., 133/122.

¹⁸³ SC., 183-184/169. One important issue is understanding how it can do so, and the key, if I understand *The Structure* correctly here, is to understand that the child is born into a nascent meaning, wherein perception and language are intertwined via the human other. The human child first encounters the physiognomy of a mother who speaks, and there is a nascent meaning in this. Not, to be sure, an intellectual meaning by concepts or representations, or even formal structures of consciousness, but an affective meaning coupled with phonation. Thus the child learns *that* human language means, before learning *what* it means. ‘Nascent perception is an emotional contact of the infant with the emotional centers of interest in its milieu much more than a cognitive and disinterested operation.’ SC., 191/176-177.

¹⁸⁴ SC., 188/174.

¹⁸⁵ SC., 190/176.

¹⁸⁶ SC., 191/176.

Here is one point of thinking of the distinctively human in terms of the emergence of a new structuration, rather than thinking of mind as the addition of a new substance: Mind can better be seen to be carried forward by the structures out of which it has emerged and which it takes up in its higher integration. Human consciousness is never free of the vital structures, but neither is it dominated by them – mind is a creative appropriation. Hence, even language and truth are rooted in perceptual consciousness, which is in turn already a new integration of animal perception towards perspectivism and the possible. ‘One does not act with the mind [*l’esprit*] alone. Either mind is nothing, or it constitutes a real and not an ideal transformation of man. Because it is not a new sort of being but a new form of unity [*pas une nouvelle sorte d’être, mais une nouvelle forme d’unité*], it cannot stand by itself.’¹⁸⁷

As I see it – and this is my conclusion – Merleau-Ponty’s general way of thinking about the emergence of the human order gives us some very useful tools that we need to begin to understand how a human being can have its formal integrity and be distinguished from the orders of matter and animality, even though it remains both material and animal. We have reached another level of formal integration. Causality is implicated in this, since if mind is not another substance, but another structuration, it poses no special problem to think of the mind as having causal effects on the lower formal structures, which would have to be seen as downward or global-to-local causation, perhaps after the model of selection and constraint sketched above. Granted that it makes sense to speak of the causal closure of the physical domain, there also seems to be no *prima facie* reason that this kind of influence would be in violation of it.

However, in my judgement this also makes it problematic. For it is clear that Merleau-Ponty has not addressed the issue of how animal and human forms have conscious experience, in the sense of something-it-is-like to go through this or that experience, or qualia in the terms of the contemporary debate. In the way that Merleau-Ponty presents his case, with the ascending orders of matter, life and mind, we are invited, it seems, to the thought that matter is the fundamental substrate and even though it may be formally structured, nothing indicates that it is conscious – panpsychism is not on Merleau-Ponty’s agenda. If so, however, this still seems to beg the question of how a merely material substrate gives rise to experience with qualia. In fact, the same issue still faces contemporary Merleau-Pontian ‘research programs,’ such as that of Evan Thompson. One can agree with Thompson that the vistas of

¹⁸⁷ SC., 196/181.

interiority characteristic of human subjectivity are prefigured along the continuum of less complex vital forms, and are perhaps even ultimately rooted in the 'biologic' of life itself; moreover, one can grant that phenomenal consciousness as such arises somewhere along the way of life's evolution, and should be seen as a layer of emergent processes. However, Thompson contents himself with presenting a framework that seems to lessen the gap between matter and mind; he does not in the end propose to explain how material processes – of however complex a nature, with whatever dynamic non-linearity, and regardless of the amplification logic of its recursive feedback loops – can give rise to subjective experience with phenomenality in the first place. In short, Thompson's impressive work demonstrates why traditional approaches will not work, and he offers a more promising framework inspired by Merleau-Ponty, but the ultimate mystery of consciousness nonetheless remains intact.

Let me be clear, I believe the theory of emergence does take us in the right direction, but the problem is that the cases of emergence we can study from a third-person point of view are quite far removed from the postulation of the emergence of a first-person point of view from third-person processes. Terrence Deacon rightly notes that the concept of emergence when applied to the mental 'mostly serves as a philosophically motivated promissory note.'¹⁸⁸ Even if the concept of emergence as such is gaining in respectability and sophistication, so far all we can do is still to posit that in some way conscious experience emerges from complex formal structures in the brain. And that, I believe, is about it. The immediate upshot of this is that the central characteristic of human beings remains something of a mystery.

What I have sketched above, however, is not Merleau-Ponty's final position. For when he comes to define what he means by the concept of flesh in the later ontology, he insists that it is *neither matter nor mind*, but their common root or element. This seems to be a denial of the standard emergentist thesis of wondrous mind from mere matter, at least under the aegis of non-reductive materialism; rather they are intertwined from the beginning in the potentiality of the flesh. Yet here it is my turn to leave this as a promissory note, to be taken up again in chapter 3.

¹⁸⁸ See Deacon, 'Three Levels,' 93.

The Final Tension between Consciousness and Nature

There is a final issue in *The Structure* that merits full attention, especially in view of the wider argument I wish to make to the effect that phenomenology leads to an ontological consummation. So far, we have looked at the particular structures of matter, life and mind as described by Merleau-Ponty, but we have not considered the framework within which he understands these issues, which remains bound to idealist conceptions. The whole thing revolves around the question of the ontological status of form. It is quite possible to read Merleau-Ponty as providing a straightforward ontological description of the formal structures of reality. In fact, however, this is not his own position, but rather the one he faults the Gestalt theorists for holding. Rather, these forms are phenomenal and appear only to intending consciousness.

Put in other terms, Merleau-Ponty suggests that life and mind can be understood only as phenomena. This, however, is a highly problematic assertion, as Merleau-Ponty himself recognizes, since the consciousness that intends these phenomena is itself, of course, mind – which is to say, a phenomenon. This realization inaugurates Merleau-Ponty's lifelong philosophical quest for the status of the being of the phenomenon. As Renaud Barbaras observes: 'The investigation concerning life enables Merleau-Ponty to pose the problem of the phenomenon.'¹⁸⁹ What is the problem? The problem is that the ontological status of the phenomenon ever since Kant had been conceived of as a being for consciousness, which is to say, as appearance. Hence the dilemma: If the phenomenon of life suggests that reality is not exhausted by a 'molecular analysis' of physics and chemistry, Merleau-Ponty understands that it would be equally odd to define the phenomenon of life as constituted by consciousness, if for no other reason than that we as conscious perceivers are also living, and since Merleau-Ponty understands consciousness to be a phenomenon as well, one that emerges from life, this would mean that consciousness could only be understood through life and life through consciousness.¹⁹⁰ This amounts to a fundamental tension in *The Structure*, which proceeds by analyzing consciousness as rooted in life and matter, even as it claims that these phenomena can only be understood through consciousness.

¹⁸⁹ Renaud Barbaras, 'A Phenomenology of Life,' in Taylor Carman and Mark B. Hansen, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 211. Barbaras continues: 'I believe it was this point, questioning the ontological status of life, that led him to give up the concepts of *Phenomenology of Perception* and turn to an ontological approach.'

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Toadvine, *Philosophy of Nature*, 24.

‘We considered consciousness as a region of being and as a particular type of behaviour,’ that is, as emerging from the dialectics of matter and life. And yet: ‘Upon analysis one finds it presupposed everywhere. ... What then is the relation between consciousness as universal milieu [transcendental consciousness] and consciousness enrooted in the subordinate dialectics?’¹⁹¹

To resolve this issue, a new understanding of form would have to be sought. ‘We would like to return to the notion of form, to seek out in what sense forms can be said to exist “in” the physical world and “in” the living body, and to ask from itself the solution to the antinomy of which it is the occasion, the synthesis of matter [*la nature*] and idea.’¹⁹² What Merleau-Ponty proposes here is a sort of middle road between realism and idealism: He agrees with the Gestaltists that formal structures are not projected onto a world devoid of them; they are not, so to speak, real only in our minds: they are not imposed on reality. But he does insist that they are present in the world only as intended by consciousness and not in-themselves. Forms, then, are neither in the world as in realism nor in the mind as in idealism – but rather, ‘the notion of form is ambiguous [*ambiguë*].’¹⁹³ However, rather than resolving the antinomy, Merleau-Ponty only manages to posit the problem, and it must be admitted that the overall sense of *The Structure* ends up veering strongly towards idealism.

Once this is admitted, we see it everywhere. Thus Merleau-Ponty says that ‘form is not a physical reality, but *an object of perception*.’¹⁹⁴ And, ‘the true organism, the one which science considers, is the concrete totality of *the perceived organism*.’¹⁹⁵ And again, ‘the organism ... is a unity of signification, *a phenomenon in the Kantian* [sic] *sense*. It is given in perception.’¹⁹⁶ Further, ‘what we have designated under the name of life was already the consciousness of life.’¹⁹⁷ And finally, ‘it should not be concluded from this that forms *already* exist in a physical universe.’¹⁹⁸ This tendency is partly due to the fact that Merleau-Ponty polemicizes primarily against realism in *The Structure*, and is thus prone to exaggeration in the other direction. But that can be only half the truth, for a similar tendency is evident in the *Phenomenology*, even though

¹⁹¹ SC., 199/184.

¹⁹² SC., 147/137.

¹⁹³ SC., 138/127.

¹⁹⁴ SC., 155/143 (my emphasis).

¹⁹⁵ SC., 169/156 (my emphasis).

¹⁹⁶ SC., 172/159 (my emphasis).

¹⁹⁷ SC., 175/161-162.

¹⁹⁸ SC., 156/144.

idealist philosophy is there Merleau-Ponty's main target.¹⁹⁹ Regardless, Renaud Barbaras' judgement is apposite: 'In fact, when he wrote *The Structure of Behaviour*, his concept of phenomenon was more Kantian than phenomenological, that is to say, referring to transcendental consciousness in contrast to the thing in itself. Indeed, in the last chapter ... he draws a Kantian conclusion.'²⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty simply has no notion of form that is not that of form for perceptual consciousness. In the end, this makes it impossible to resolve the antinomy between consciousness and nature.

From an epistemological perspective there is no real problem here; clearly knowledge presupposes consciousness such that the knowledge of mind presupposes mind itself. However, as an ontological thesis it runs into trouble as it suggests the ontological primacy of mind over the formal structures of matter and life, or at least its co-primacy. This is something most would be unwilling to admit. Mind is first in the order of knowing, but not in the order of being.²⁰¹ Interestingly, Hans Jonas, from a different phenomenological perspective, reads the ontological status of form very differently, simply as descriptive of reality. This is why he says that our knowledge of biological structures constitutes a formidable challenge to rethink ontology precisely as ontology.²⁰² This seems to me to be a better approach, one that Merleau-Ponty was increasingly willing to take up, as we shall see.

What would be needed to overcome this infelicitous ambiguity, then, is a new notion of being – one that is able to sustain the emergence of meaningful structures above the level of physical structures. That is to say, an auto-affective being that manifests itself from within – an intra-ontology – rather than for an

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Toadvine's treatment of this tendency in the *Phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, 69-75. Cf. also the exchange between Madison and Geraets, in Madison, *Phenomenology*, 267-290.

²⁰⁰ Barbaras, 'Phenomenology of Life,' 220.

²⁰¹ Let me remind my theologically minded readers that we are here discussing the emergence of human consciousness and knowledge and not the doctrine of God. Obviously, one may espouse an emergentist theory of human consciousness without subscribing to a theological doctrine about the emergence of divinity. For a discussion of this historically important relationship, see Clayton, *Mind and Emergence*, 165-169, 179-187.

²⁰² Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, e.g. 81. It is my impression that Evan Thompson, whose book *Life in Mind* without doubt constitutes the most ambitious and impressive contemporary attempt to study the mind from a generally Merleau-Pontian theoretical platform, makes it too easy for himself when he discusses this topic as if it were merely a question of adopting different points of view on the same thing, whether transcendental or naturalistic. If that were so, why would the upshot of *The Structure* as a whole be the need to understand perceptual consciousness, as Merleau-Ponty suggests? At least for Merleau-Ponty, there is a significant tension here. See Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 81-87.

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external consciousness. Only thus can the integrity of the world and all the phenomenal structures that it contains – life and mind – be preserved. It is a conception like this that we shall see developed in the ontology of Merleau-Ponty's later years. The problem is not simply the inflated role of transcendental consciousness, even though it is that too. It is also the more subtle notion that meaningful structures *primordially* emerge in a sort of dialogue between consciousness and the world, which means that the structures of the world, such as vital structures, are dependent for their being on the co-constitution of consciousness. We shall investigate this problem and its ontological consequences further in the next chapter, before moving towards Merleau-Ponty's explicit ontology, which answers this situation by positing the primacy of self-expressive, self-phenomenalizing being.

CHAPTER 2

THE SACRAMENT OF THE SENSIBLE

MEANING AND METAPHYSICS

La sensation est à la lettre une communion.¹

La contingence de tout ce qui existe et de tout ce qui vaut n'est pas une petite vérité à laquelle il faudrait tant bien que mal faire place dans quelque repli d'un système, c'est la condition d'une vue métaphysique du monde.²

La question est, en dernière analyse, de comprendre quel est, en nous et dans le monde, le rapport du *sens* et du *non-sens*.³

1. Introduction

Is the world meaningful? Or should the question be: How is the world meaningful? In their simplicity these are surely two of the most profound of philosophical questions, with far-reaching consequences for how we understand the world and our place within it. For meaning does indeed name a deep-seated, visceral human desire. However, in what sense the world can be said to be meaningful, and how meaning comes about, are disputed metaphysical questions.

¹ 'Sensation is literally a communion.' PhP., 257/246 (my translation).

² 'The contingency of all that exists and all that has value is not a little truth for which we have somehow or other to make room in some nook or cranny of the system: it is the condition of a metaphysical view of the world.' SNS., 117/96.

³ 'The whole question is ultimately one of understanding what, in ourselves and in the world, is the relation between *meaning* and *absence of meaning*.' PhP., 491/497-498.

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It could be argued that post-Kantian or modern thought in general has tended to dislocate meaning from the world, to locate it instead in subjective structures, whether in terms of cognitive structures forming an in-itself structure-less substratum, or, alternatively, after the linguistic turn, in the structures of language moulding experience. In general, meaningful structures have been seen as projected onto a world which is itself devoid of such structures. On such a scheme, the world is at best a limit concept, an infinitely malleable plenum subtending our constructions, but inaccessible in itself.

In this chapter, I investigate Merleau-Ponty's alternative account of meaning, perceptual meaning in particular, and how it is related to his metaphysics. In chapter 1 we probed the rootedness of the subject and followed it all the way down to the formal structures of life, which we saw were already intimately and meaningfully related to their environment. Here I propose in a similar manner to push the perceived world to its limits in order to gauge its ontological status in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and hence, finally, to gauge the integrity of the world perceived.

To this end, I will begin with a consideration of Merleau-Ponty's participatory understanding of perception as an intimate dialogue between the corporeal subject and the world, from which emerges a primary layer of meaning. This perceptual meaning, however, is not a once-and-for-all acquisition, but is characterized by a teleological unfolding in response to the sensorimotor activity of the body subject. This process is motivated by a felt deviation from the norm of what Merleau-Ponty calls 'optimal grip.'

I then proceed – against this general background of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, and in dialogue with Husserl's similar description of the perceptual process – to address the ontology presupposed by this phenomenology, and to discuss Merleau-Ponty's attempt to overcome objectivist presuppositions. The upshot of this discussion is that Merleau-Ponty requires us to search for an ontology that better accounts for the dynamics of perceptual meaning.

In the next sub-section, I begin to elaborate on the central themes of teleology and contingency, and in particular on how the teleology of meaning-formation is nonetheless a contingent affair, based on no antecedent principle. Here I distinguish between two related senses of contingency which are operative in Merleau-Ponty's thought – relative and absolute contingency. The contingency of all meaning names an important *Leitmotif* of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole, and in this section I try to bring out the nuances in this

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important notion that will continue to occupy us in the following two chapters.

There follows a discussion of the crucial transition from perceptual to linguistic meaning, according to the logic of *Fundierung*, as Merleau-Ponty develops it in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. This will make it clear that there is a place in Merleau-Ponty's theory of meaning for the transcendental role of language, but not as an arbitrary screen between the subject and a world-in-itself. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty linguistic meaning is rooted in the perceptual dialogue, but sedimented linguistic structures also return to perception to invest it with a new layer of meaning, thus operating as a transcendental condition of perceptual experience. This section is primarily meant as an illustration of the contingent teleology of meaning as it plays itself out in the domain of linguistic meaning, which is of course of central importance.

Having presented the basic features of Merleau-Ponty's understanding, I turn in the next section to a critical reading of parts of the *Phenomenology*, and in particular to a critique of the notion that perceptual dialogue inaugurates a first layer of meaning upon which all other meaning-formations build. I make the case that a basic tension cuts across these descriptions and interpretations, such that the key idea of perceptual dialogue requires more than his explicit theorizing admits – namely, that the perceptual dialogue cannot finally be seen as the *primordial* source of meaning. This amounts to a polemic against Merleau-Ponty's notion that the world lacks an intrinsic structure apart from human existence, using resources from his own phenomenology to make the case.

Why should we care about Merleau-Ponty's account of meaning? And more specifically, why should theology care? The point is that, when placed in an adequate ontological framework, this is an account that lets us affirm that the world is indeed meaningful, it is not just projection or nominalist construction – the world really is ordered, albeit in a surprising and dynamic way. On the other hand it keeps a significant role for transcendental subjectivity, language and cultural meaning-making – our part of the dialogue matters, the world is not *simply* there, it is brought forth, or enacted. Indeed, being-in-the-world is also a participation in its meaning. This is a very subtle approach to the question of meaning that makes use of the best insights of the central philosophical traditions while not, I believe, succumbing to their flaws. Thus the burden of this chapter is to affirm, with a certain Merleau-Ponty, the intrinsic structure of the world and the meaningfulness of human lives within it.

2. The Participatory Nature of Perception

To fully appreciate Merleau-Ponty's philosophy it is necessary to let oneself be taken aback by the sheer mysteriousness of perception, the fact that a world shows up for me, that I am conscious of a world. Here, if anywhere, Aristotle's dictum that philosophy 'begins in wonder' is surely correct. Perception is our everywhere assumed primordial access to the world, subtending common sense, science and philosophy alike. But precisely because of this ubiquitous subtending presence it is easily lost from view, concealed by the natural attitude of the everyday, for which everything is just normal and nothing is cause for astonishment. It is the particular virtue of phenomenology to try to awaken a sense of 'wonder in the face of the world' [*étonnement devant le monde*].⁴ What is this bond that unites a human being to other human beings and to the world?

The path of Western philosophy in the modern period twists back and forth between two fundamental metaphysical and epistemological poles that stress the subjective and the objective dimension of experience respectively. We know them as rationalism and empiricism, or idealism and realism, or constructivism and objectivism. Nothing less than the fundamental relation between human beings and the world is at stake here: Is the structure of the world in fact contained within our minds – immanent in them – such that we are the ones constructing a meaningful world, forming it and making it what it is? Or does the world stand over and against us, replete with independent structures, categories and properties which transcend our minds, such that the world is what it is regardless of the presence of human consciousness?

Merleau-Ponty realizes that there is a reason why highly sophisticated thinkers have held both positions, and the reason is that they both articulate a certain truth about human being in the world.⁵ Intellectualism, his preferred word for the subjectivist strand, tells the truth about the fact that the world is *for us* – we know of no world that is not given to a subject so as to be immanent to this subjectivity. There is simply no experience to be had of anything – not even using advanced scientific technologies and methods – that is not the experience *of* a subject. Experience necessarily has a dative. To this basic insight can be added the observation that different conceptual paradigms are used by different peoples in different times and places, and they produce

⁴ Eugen Fink, quoted in PhP., 14/xv.

⁵ Cf. PhP., 49/29, 62/42.

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different ways of relating to the world – ranging from slight variations (e.g. colour perception) to incompatible differences (e.g. vitality versus inertia in matter). This suggests a strong creative role for humans in the constitution of the world. However, intellectualism misses one crucial point that realism grasps: the world gives itself as real rather than constructed. In other words, while the world must be *for* us, we experience it as in some sense *in itself*. This is the ‘paradox of immanence and transcendence’: the world can only be had within the immanence of subjectivity, but there it gives itself in full transcendence. Martin Dillon rightly notes that it ‘is this paradox that defines the nexus of ontological dualism that Merleau-Ponty spent his philosophical life trying to overcome.’⁶ Merleau-Ponty acknowledges both the irreducibility of immanent consciousness and the transcendence of the world; his philosophical project could be described as an attempt to understand the way in which these two poles must somehow be held together.⁷ Rather than rejecting or embracing one, he tries to redeem the truths of both intellectualism and realism in a sort of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, as we shall see.

However, are the intellectualist and realist positions really that different? In fact, they have a central presupposition in common – the importance of representations in theories of perception. With the development of modern philosophy and science there arose a curious but powerful and incredibly influential theoretical picture of how human beings are perceptually related to the world, a picture rich with ontological and anthropological assumptions. This novelty in the world of ideas was expressed by Descartes with admirable clarity: ‘I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except *by means of* the ideas I have within me.’⁸ The very structure of perception that is being stated here, though the terms and details vary greatly, is one shared by intellectualist and realist philosophies alike, as well as by vast strands of contemporary philosophy of mind, cognitive psychology and neuroscience, which in this sense remain functionally Cartesian. This basic structure is as follows: an objective world is available for the subjective mind only through a mediation, a representation of some kind of the object to the subject. For philosophies of a realist bent, a mental representation is what allows us to recover in perception what is objectively in external reality; and for philosophies of an intellectualist

⁶ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 35-36.

⁷ Cf. *PriP.*, 12-13.

⁸ Descartes in a letter to Gibieuf, quoted by Charles Taylor, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture,’ in Carman and Hansen, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, 26 (my emphasis).

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persuasion, mental representations are projected outward to form an external reality.⁹ The extent to which we find either of these positions obvious is the extent to which we are, as Charles Taylor says, subject to ‘the thralldom of the mediational picture.’¹⁰ Different as they may seem, it is nonetheless the case that both positions tend to provide themselves with an objective world, whether passively recovered or actively constructed. This, at any rate, was Merleau-Ponty’s conviction, as we have already seen, which is why his twin polemics against intellectualism and empiricism often come together under the title of ‘objective thought,’ or objectivism, in short. ‘[The] intellectualist antithesis is on the same level as empiricism itself. Both take the objective world [*le monde objectif*] as the object of their analysis.’¹¹ And again, in a critique of Gestalt psychology, itself seen as a critique of empiricism in the intellectualist tradition, Merleau-Ponty writes that it still has not been able to rid itself of a general prejudice: ‘the prejudice of determinate being [*l’être déterminé*] or of the [objective] world.’¹²

What this brings out is that theories of perception are never metaphysically innocent, but are constructed within a framework of fundamental metaphysical or ontological assumptions, which is to say from within a pre-understanding of what reality is like. In particular, the assumption of an objective world has subtended representationalist theories of perception. It is only against the ontological background of objectivism that the mind can be conceived of as ‘the mirror of nature,’ as Richard Rorty has famously put it.¹³ The same is true, of course, with regard to Merleau-Ponty; his phenomenology of perception is, as I have already indicated, primarily driven by a set of ontological questions, in particular the search for a better understanding of the relations between consciousness and nature. It is to this end that he sets out to rediscover perception, with the help of phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of sense experience [*le sentir*] and of the perceived world it discloses [*le monde perçu*] is everywhere informed by his understanding of the lived body. Having rejected the primacy of the thinking subject in favour of the corporeal subject, representationalism in favour of embodied meaning and the ontological dualism of subject and object,

⁹ Cf. Varela, Thompson and Rosch, *Embodied Mind*, 172.

¹⁰ Taylor, ‘Merleau-Ponty,’ p. 49.

¹¹ PhP., 50/30; cf. 64/45, 73/54.

¹² PhP., 77/59.

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

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perception must itself be approached from a very different angle. If the lived body has already escaped the polarization of subject and object, and obscured their neat division, then ‘obscurity spreads to the perceived world in its entirety,’ as Merleau-Ponty puts it.¹⁴ His point is that if perception is still to be discovered, or rediscovered in all its depth, as the close and organic bond between the sentient and the sensible, then with that discovery we may rediscover the sensible world itself.¹⁵ In short, perception opens towards ontology – hence the subtitle of this chapter: *meaning and metaphysics* are indeed intertwined.

Perception as Dialogue

In their introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s *Sense and Non-Sense*, Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus observe that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of perceptual meaning was drawn from two principal sources.¹⁶ From Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology he learnt that the intelligibility, rationality, order or meaning of the perceived world is not given beforehand, in-itself as it were, but must be made by the subject, which is to say, in phenomenological parlance, that it must be constituted. From the Gestaltists, however, he learnt that we are not thereby the absolute source of meaning, that, in fact, we discover meanings by responding to the solicitations present in our experience of the world.¹⁷ We have no ready-made meanings to give that we have not already found in our experience. Merleau-Ponty thus understands intentionality first and foremost as an openness to the situation in which we find ourselves and where we organize experience in response to its solicitations. As we have seen, he borrows from Heidegger’s terminology and calls this process being-in-the-world, or simply existence. This, then, is the attempt to walk a middle path between objectivist realism and subjectivist intellectualism.

In contrast to traditional philosophies of perception that stress either the passive receptivity of the subject or the active construction of the subject, therefore, Merleau-Ponty characterizes perception reciprocally, as a *dialogue* in

¹⁴ PhP., 241/232.

¹⁵ Toadvine, *Philosophy of Nature*, 50.

¹⁶ Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, ‘Translators’ Introduction’ to SNS., x-xi.

¹⁷ In fairness to Husserl it should be stated that Merleau-Ponty could have learnt this from Husserl himself – and most probably did – who after all talked about meaning-making as ‘a constitutive duet.’ For a discussion of this theme, see Anthony Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 8-9.

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which the subject and the world both participate, a dialogue that transpires on an embodied level. This understanding is evident already in *The Structure*, where he describes the interaction between organism and environment as a questioning, a problem solving or a dialectical relation. ‘The relations of the organic individual and its milieu are truly dialectical relations.’¹⁸ What emerges in the relation between ‘perceptual consciousness’ and the world is a form or a Gestalt, a figure that stands out as meaningful against a background or horizon. The interesting thing about Merleau-Ponty’s use of the notion of perceptual Gestalt, for our purposes, is that he understands it to suggest a reality that escapes the polarity between consciousness and nature, as discussed in the previous chapter. What Gestalt psychological research on perception had above all discredited was the empiricist notion that the first layer of perception involves minimal elements that are in themselves meaningless, sense data that somehow or other have to be put together to form a meaningful perceptual experience.¹⁹ Rather, the Gestaltists demonstrated something like a Kantian holism of perceptual meaning: the perceptual field always organizes itself into meaningful structures, even as minimal as that of a dot against a uniform background. However, in contrast to neo-Kantian construals, they described this perceptual meaning as ‘autochthonous,’ a concept that also plays an important role for Merleau-Ponty.²⁰ If perceptual meaning is autochthonous, which is to say self-organizing, then there is no ground for saying that we *impose* meaningful structures on a substratum devoid of sense; the distinction between the matter and form of perception must be rejected, and with it idealism.

Most of the Gestaltists, however, construed this in a realist sense, believing that the Gestalt was a feature of objective reality – in isomorphism with consciousness (and indeed, with neurological structures), but an independent reality nonetheless.²¹ As we have already seen, Merleau-Ponty rejects both the

¹⁸ SC., 161/148; cf. 40/39; 67/63; 106/96; 166/153;

¹⁹ Gestalt psychology emerged as an approach to experimental psychology in Germany in the early twentieth century and had its most flourishing period between 1915 and 1935. After the Second World War their influence was curtailed and behaviourism continued to hold sway until the so called cognitive revolution of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since the rise of cognitive psychology, with the rejection of behaviourism and the possibility of once more speaking about consciousness, belief, perception and so on, Gestalt psychology is receiving the renewed interest it deserves. For a useful introduction, see David Murray, *Gestalt Psychology and the Cognitive Revolution* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995).

²⁰ Cf. SC., 189/175, where Merleau-Ponty speaks of the ‘intrinsic meaning [*sens intrinsèque*] of the perceived.’

²¹ Cf. SC., 142-147/132-137.

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intellectualist and the realist interpretations of the ontological status of the perceptual Gestalt. ‘The notion of form has value precisely ... because it rejects psychological empiricism without going to the intellectualist antithesis.’²² But as we have also seen, he still veers in the direction of idealism,²³ even as he thinks realism is a position motivated by experience:

As philosophy, realism is an error because it transposes into dogmatic thesis an experience which it deforms or renders impossible by that very fact. But it is a motivated error; it rests on an authentic phenomenon which philosophy has the function of making explicit. The proper structure of perceptual experience, the reference of partial ‘profiles’ to the total signification which they ‘present,’ would be this phenomenon.²⁴

Henceforth, then, the problem set by Merleau-Ponty is to understand the being of the phenomenon. For if form, Gestalt, or simply perceptual meaning is not to be located in transcendental consciousness, nor in some independent objective reality, where is it to be located? What is its ontological status? Merleau-Ponty clearly sees that the question of ‘what sort of being [*quelle sorte d’être*] can belong to form’ is the crucial one.²⁵ The suggestion made in *The Structure* is that phenomena are found at the very intersection of consciousness and nature.

In Merleau-Ponty’s sequel, the *Phenomenology*, it is his task to make good on this suggestion. Hence the notion of a dialogue between the perceptual subject and the world is even more pronounced and developed at length. In fact, Merleau-Ponty never tires of inventing metaphors for the intimate relation between the lived body and the world perceived. It is described, for instance, as the relation between the sleeper and his slumber [*du dormeur et de son sommeil*];²⁶ as sacramental communion [*une communion*];²⁷ as communication [*communication*],²⁸ symbiosis [*symbiose*],²⁹ and coition

²² SC., 100/91.

²³ See e.g. SC., 97/88, 141/132; 235-236/219.

²⁴ ‘Le réalisme est une erreur comme philosophie parce qu’il transpose en thèse dogmatique une expérience qu’il déforme ou rend impossible par là même. Mais c’est une erreur motivée, il s’appuie sur un problème authentique, que la philosophie a pour fonction d’explicitier. La structure propre de l’expérience perceptive, la référence des “profils” partiels à la signification totale qu’ils “présentent” serait ce phénomène.’ SC., 231/216.

²⁵ SC., 147/136.

²⁶ PhP., 256/245.

²⁷ PhP., 257/246; 258/248.

²⁸ PhP., 302/296; 373/370.

²⁹ PhP., 373/370.

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[*accouplement*];³⁰ and as primordial contract [*contrat primordial*].³¹ In the ensuing discussion, I shall most often refer to this intimate relation with the simpler image of perception as dialogue [*dialogue*].³² In what follows I shall present some of the salient features of this dialogue from which meaning emerges.

The first thing that strikes the reader of Merleau-Ponty's descriptions is the way he stresses the very intimate relation between the subject – now understood to be the lived body – and the world: 'Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.'³³ The lived body, as a dialectic between the body as subject and the body as object (between *Leib* and *Körper*), is here inscribed into the more encompassing dialectic of the lived body and the world – a circularity nested within a circularity, as it were.

David Abram draws attention to the 'dynamic blend of receptivity and creativity' implied in these descriptions.³⁴ For Merleau-Ponty it is never the case that perceptual meaning is passively received by the subject, nor that it is only the result of active creation. A dialogue requires me to hear what the other is saying, but also that I make sense of it and respond to it. Abram suggests that the concept of *participation*, as it was developed by the early French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, captures the relation Merleau-Ponty describes: 'By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered, is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives.'³⁵

To flesh out the dialogical conception of perception, consider the following example: Say you walk into somebody's living room. As you enter a *visual field* appears, the space of objects that you have access to from the location you are occupying. Let us say, further, that your gaze immediately falls on a grand piano in one corner of the room. However, a rather sharp light falls from a lamp on the polished surface of the grand piano in such a way that from your

³⁰ PhP., 376/373.

³¹ PhP., 261/251.

³² PhP., 375-376/372-373.

³³ PhP., 245/235.

³⁴ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 50.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57. See also Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's classic *How Natives Think* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), chap. 2 in particular.

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position you cannot quite make out the colour – it could be a standard ebony or a very dark mahogany. Then comes the moment I want to draw attention to: it is very likely that you will now change position and move from where you are standing to a place in the room that will give you a better view, a position from which you will be able to see what colour the grand piano actually is. And indeed – it is a dark mahogany. There are no conscious operations going on here, normally, and we can even assume that you are involved in a discussion with your host about the choice of wine. All the same, ‘you’ have performed an action that has given you a much better grasp of the focal object you have momentarily picked out from the perceptual field. Merleau-Ponty would claim that this sort of thing is ubiquitous and defining of perception itself, which is why we must pay heed to it.

What is described here is a kind of perceptual *teleology*, where the goal is a situation in which the perceived object is maximally revealed to the perceiver, something that Merleau-Ponty calls optimal or ‘best grip’ [*meilleure prise*],³⁶ or ‘privileged perception’ [*perception privilégiée*].³⁷

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency. We therefore tend toward the maximum of visibility, and seek a better focus as with a microscope.³⁸

That perception involves this kind of movement towards optimal relation had already been empirically demonstrated in the laboratory by the Gestalt psychologists, who referred to the phenomenon as ‘the law of good Gestalt’ (Koffka), or ‘the law of Prägnanz’ (Wertheimer). Aron Gurwitsch described it like this: ‘The perceived object tends to become the best possible and strongest Gestalt. This strength and this “goodness” of Gestalt mean, phenomenally, a maximum of stability, clarity and good arrangement.’³⁹ This theme of

³⁶ See the discussion of depth in PhP., 303-317/297-311.

³⁷ PhP., 355/352. He also calls it ‘maximum of visibility’ [355/352], ‘maximum of clarity’ [373/371], ‘optimum balance’ [374/371] and the like. Hubert Dreyfus provides a nice presentation of this line of thought in his ‘Intelligence Without Representation,’ accessible at <http://www.class.uh.edu/cogsci/dreyfus.html> (2011-05-17).

³⁸ ‘Pour chaque objet comme pour chaque tableau dans une galerie de peinture, il y a une distance optimale d’où il demande à être vu, une orientation sous laquelle il donne davantage de lui-même: en deçà et au-delà nous n’avons qu’une perception confuse par excès ou par défaut, nous tendons vers le maximum de visibilité et nous cherchons comme au microscope une meilleure mise au point.’ PhP., 355/352.

³⁹ Quoted in Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 67.

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perceptual teleology towards ‘good Gestalt’ was picked up by Merleau-Ponty and wedded to his notion of the lived body and its motor intentionality, making it possible for him to give an account of what is involved in our case of the colour of a grand piano. The teleology involved in perception is a relational feature – neither a characteristic of the objective world, nor a representation in the mind of the subject. It can only be understood as arising from the coupling of the body subject and the perceived world. The body offers itself to the impingement of the object through its senses, its position and its movement, and the object offers its sensibility so as to sufficiently gear into the body subject. However, the body subject senses that it can have more than what is presently given, a better grip of the object, and it acts to bring this about.

With this background we can understand something more of what it means to say that the body is present within the world, as opposed to standing over and against the world. In the latter case, the body is merely receiving the world without actively taking part in it; in the former case, the body is active in the world in such a way as to change, by its movement, the way the world appears. Had it not been for the systematic neglect of this salient point it would almost have been too obvious to point out: I move my body, and when I do the perceptual field alters and I have a new perspective on the focal object. This is not at all trivial, for it is the function through which a good Gestalt emerges.

The question of the origin of the perceptual teleology now arises. What gets it going in the first place? Merleau-Ponty's way of understanding perceptual teleology, the emergence of good Gestalt, is in terms of the know-how of the body in responding to a felt tension, expressing itself in movement. This is the place, therefore, to reintroduce the body schema, for as Merleau-Ponty says, ‘the theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception.’⁴⁰ Now, we have considered the body schema at length in the previous chapter and it is perhaps obvious how it relates to perceptual teleology, but let me nonetheless spell it out. As we have seen, the body schema is operative intentionality in action, it is what subtends our conscious intentionality and allows us to get around in the world smoothly. However, with a slightly narrower focus we can see that body schema is what subtends perception as such, on the assumption that perception is something like a bodily skill closely related to movement. Taylor Carman puts it succinctly:

How, more specifically, does the body function as the subject of perceptual experience?
By means of the *body schema*, the set of abiding non-cognitive dispositions and capacities

⁴⁰ PhP., 249/239.

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that orient, guide and inform our bodily sensitivities and motor actions. To say that perception is grounded in the body is to say that the *phenomenal field* is constituted by the *body schema*.⁴¹

As the example of the grand piano brings out, perception is about knowing what to do, or rather, about the bodily skill needed to facilitate a better grip on the perceived world. As we considered at length in the previous chapter, such skill is of course learnt only through interacting with the perceived world in just the same way that we learn any other complex motor skills through practise. In the terms of the dialogue of perceptual meaning, the body can only learn the language by being in the world, by being exposed to its silent speech. Or as Merleau-Ponty says, ‘the subject of sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of a quality [i.e. intellectualism], nor an inert setting which is affected and changed by it [i.e. realism], it is a power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment [*une puissance qui connaît à un certain milieu d’existence*], or is synchronized with it.’⁴²

Now, perceptual teleology seems to presuppose that when I perceptually intend a given object, when an intention is formed between me and the object, my body experiences this in relation to a certain *norm of givenness*, that it spontaneously strives to obtain the sufficient equilibrium from which it feels itself to deviate, so as to achieve the optimally revealing relation.

The distance from me to the object is ... a tension which fluctuates around a norm. An oblique position of the object in relation to me is not measured by the angle which it forms with the plane of my face, but *felt as a lack of balance*, as an unequal distribution of its influences upon me. ... There is one culminating point of my perception ... towards which the whole perceptual process tends.⁴³

In the case above, the original perception of the grand piano was experienced as a deviation from the norm, a disequilibrium that needed adjustment. In the original experience there was a bodily understanding that such an object would reveal itself more fully from a slightly different perspective. This norm can be described in different ways – as a balance between the inner and outer horizons

⁴¹ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 2008), 132-133.

⁴² PhP., 256/245.

⁴³ ‘La distance de moi à l’objet ... [est] une tension qui oscille autour d’une norme; l’orientation oblique de l’objet par rapport à moi n’est pas mesurée par l’angle qu’il forme avec le plan de mon visage, mais éprouvée comme un déséquilibre, comme une inégale répartition de ses influences sur moi. ... Il y a un point de maturité de ma perception ... vers lequel tend tout le processus perceptif.’ PhP., 356/352 (my emphasis).

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of the object,⁴⁴ as a balance between seeing the whole object and seeing as much detail as possible,⁴⁵ as a balance of richness and clarity,⁴⁶ in short, by a felicitous arrangement of the perceptual field in relation to the goal of the subject – but the crucial thing for our purposes is that a normativity subtends the perceptual dialogue and motivates an ever richer unfolding of perceptual meaning.

This, then, is what it means to describe the body subject as a sensorimotor agent in possession of a body schema: that sensation and movement are coupled in the most intimate way, and that this sort of activity, whereby sensation motivates movement and movement motivates sensation, is directed towards the disclosure of the world in an ever richer way, that it is drawn to something like an ideal stasis that will facilitate the most intimate communion.

A more recent example from cognitive science may help us appreciate the strong link between action and perception – that perception is actually something we do, a performance or skill. In the words of philosopher and cognitive scientist Alva Noë: ‘[Perceptual] consciousness is more like dancing than it is like digestion.’⁴⁷ Noë recalls the case of Paul Bach-y-Rita, an engineer and physiologist, who in the late 1960s began to construct a device through which blind people would be able to see. This is how Noë describes the device:

He [Bach-y-Rita] wired a camera to an array of vibrators that he placed on the thigh or abdomen of subjects. The wiring was such that visual information presented to the camera produced a range of tactile stimuli on the subject’s skin. What he found was that when the camera was mounted on the head or shoulder of the person, visual information presented to the camera that in turn produced tactile sensations on the body enabled the person to make judgement about the size, shape, and number of object placed on the other side of the room. By deploying the substitution system, the blind person was able to reach out and pick up objects, and even swat at a ball successfully with a Ping-Pong paddle. This is astounding. In effect, blind subjects using a tactile-visual substitution system can see! Somehow, for a person who has a few hours to get used to the apparatus, a series of tactile stimulations on the leg or stomach add up to a way of seeing.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ PhP., 350/346.

⁴⁵ PhP., 356/352.

⁴⁶ PhP., 374/371.

⁴⁷ Noë, *Out of Our Heads*, xii. In an earlier book, Noë put it in the following way: ‘Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. Think of a blind person tapping his or her way around a cluttered space, perceiving that space by touch, not all at once, but through time, by skilful probing and movement. This is, or at least ought to be, our paradigm of what perceiving is. The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction.’ *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 1.

⁴⁸ Noë, *Out of Our Heads*, 57.

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A number of critical questions could be, and have been, raised in response to Bach-y-Rita's very interesting results. In particular one may wonder exactly what sort of conscious perceptual experience the sensory substitution system actually gives rise to, and whether it in fact merits the name of visual perception. What seems to be beyond doubt, however, is that the system does give rise to a perceptual experience in which the subject relates to the surrounding world in a way that is more like visual perception than any other perceptual modus, particularly more like vision than like touch. None of this is essential for my purposes here though, since the only point I wish to make is the following: For the sensory substitution device to function so as to provide blind persons with a sort of rudimentary experience of visual perception (or whatever we may want to call it), it is necessary that the person actively moves about, experimenting with the way in which different actions give rise to different patterns of tactile stimulation. Only then, after such a sensorimotor coupling has been established, does the experience change from one of tactile stimulation on the skin, to being about the surrounding world.⁴⁹

What above all seems to matter for perceptual meaning, as evidenced by Bach-y-Rita's sensory substitution system, is not just having a set of well-defined stimuli containing information and a specific neurological receiving apparatus to decipher it, but rather the way in which embodied subjects *enact* the world of perception; that is, the way in which action and perception are necessarily coupled and unfold as an harmonious whole. Indeed, both the neurological underpinning and the conscious structures of experience seem to be plastic and malleable enough to allow for precisely this sort of dynamic emergence, rather than being statically fixed and innate as species-specific structures.⁵⁰ Perception, then, is not reducible to retinal stimulation and neurological mechanisms. Noë summarizes:

Seeing is not something that happens in us. It is not something that happens to us or in our brains. It is something we do. It is an activity of exploring the world making use of

⁴⁹ Cf. Varela, Thompson and Rosch, *Embodied Mind*, 175.

⁵⁰ Bach-y-Rita's device clearly operates on the level of consciousness; since the effect was the result of only a few hours of practise, there is simply no time for any kind of neurological restructuring (assuming that to even be possible in adult subjects). For an example of the same on the level of neurophysiology, however, see Noë's discussion of Mriganka Sur's fascinating experiments with the 'rewiring' of ferrets. *Out of Our Heads*, 53-54.

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our practical familiarity with the ways in which our own movement drives and modulates our sensory encounter with the world. Seeing is a kind of skilful activity.⁵¹

However, if we find the case of sensory substitution too far removed from ordinary perception to be of help in elucidating its workings, one of Merleau-Ponty's own preferred examples is ubiquitous in ordinary experience, for he likes to discuss a minimal case of body-world coupling, where the body negotiates a felt tension and acts in the direction of equilibrium – the case of ordinary binocular vision. That we have binocular vision, even though we visually receive two monocular and slightly different images, is often taken to point to the fact that the brain needs to step in and synthesize the two images into a unified whole. Alternatively, and this was prevalent in Merleau-Ponty's neo-Kantian and intellectualist context, one may point to the need for cognitive operations to bring unity to the disparate information perceptually given by subsuming it under the idea of the perceived object.

From his perspective of embodied perception, Merleau-Ponty proposes an alternative reading of the phenomenon of binocular vision. He claims we must operate with a notion of *perceptual synthesis* rather than either intellectual synthesis or neurological mechanism, carried out by the whole embodied organism over time.⁵² With the notion of perceptual synthesis Merleau-Ponty thus tries once again to trace the by now familiar path between subjectivist construction and objectivist mechanism and to speak about what perception must be if the subject of perception is an embodied subject, and indeed, a third genus of being. For he agrees, as we have seen, with transcendental philosophy that the subject is active in perception, but denies the primacy of the reflective subject in favour of the 'anonymous subject' of the lived body, and he denies also the unidirectional account of constitution in favour of reciprocity. What is perceptual synthesis like? How are we to describe it? Merleau-Ponty thinks that binocular vision, the synthesis of two monocular images, serves as the canonical example of perceptual synthesis, a sort of minimal case displaying the 'logic' of perceptual synthesis in general, that is, the way in which embodied perception works.

Describing the experience of binocular vision, Merleau-Ponty begins by noting that monocular diplopia is experienced as an imbalance: 'For my gaze to alight on near objects and to focus my eyes on them, *it must experience double vision as an unbalance* [*déséquilibre*] or as an imperfect vision, and tend towards

⁵¹ Ibid., 60.

⁵² PhP., 277-280/268-271.

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the single object as towards the release of tension and the completion of vision.⁵³ Here, in the case of binocular vision, we have in concentrated form all the elements of our above description of seeing the colour of the grand piano. There is the solicitation of an ambiguous object that draws the gaze, but the experience deviates from the norm of a clear vision of the object, and so the body adjusts so as to bring out an optimal relation to the object perceived, in this case by focusing the eye. *This is a minimal case of motor intentionality*, which negotiates a felt imbalance and so gives an embodied teleology to the perceptual process.

This process cannot, according to Merleau-Ponty, be understood as an objective mechanism resulting from the neurological makeup of the perceiver, since monocular diplopia as well as unified binocular vision both remain possibilities from a strictly neurological perspective. The unification must rather be motivated by the pre-reflective intentionality of the corporeal subject. This is obviously not to deny the all-important neurological underpinnings of normal binocular vision, but merely to assert that a neurological explanation is not in itself sufficient. Consider: If I focus on the apple tree in the far corner of the garden while holding a pencil before my eyes, the pencil will occupy two places in my visual field and will have a fleeting ephemeral appearance in comparison to the apple tree. The images of the pencil and of the apple tree both occupy places on my two retinas, they are both neurologically realized, and it is hard to make sense of the idea that the neurological state realizing the diplopic vision of the pencil could act as sufficient *cause* of its unification into one as I change my focus. The diplopic vision, after all, can remain as long as I so desire. Is it not rather the case that the brain subserves my own corporeal intentional action? Says Merleau-Ponty: 'If double vision as well as the single object can be included in normal vision, this is not attributable to the anatomical layout of the visual apparatus, but to its functioning and to the use which the psycho-somatic subject makes of it.'⁵⁴

In the same way, an intellectualist analysis of binocular vision fails to account for the experience. Chiefly because the application of an idea or a concept is either/or, such that as soon as I become aware of the two images of the same object in my visual field, they would be unified with the speed of thought. In reality, however, there is an experienceable duration from beginning to focus in to the completed unification into one single perceived

⁵³ PhP., 278/269-270 (my emphasis).

⁵⁴ PhP., 277/268.

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object. An intellectual analysis would not allow for this; we clearly have to do here with a bodily process, a perceptual synthesis. ‘Herein lies the distinction between the perceptual synthesis and the intellectual. On passing from double to normal vision, I am not simply aware of seeing with my two eyes *the same* object, I am aware of progressing toward the object *itself* [*l’objet lui-même*] and finally enjoying its concrete presence [*présence charnelle*].⁵⁵

This minimal case of embodied perception – binocular vision – thus resists objectivist as well as subjectivist analysis and lends itself instead to an analysis in terms of the reciprocity between the perceived object and the lived body, their mutually specifying activity, and the teleology of perception that results from the sensorimotor activity of the subject. Perceptual experience in general is characterized by a reciprocal and unfolding constitution, a sort of directed synchronization over time between the subject and the object, by their co-existence and their participation one in the other.

These simple examples – the case of the grand piano, Bach-y-Rita’s sensory substitution device, and binocular vision – show the perceptual dialogue between corporeal subject and world to be ever shifting, ever in the process of becoming, and yet not arbitrarily so, since it is also teleologically oriented towards an optimal grip, a richer disclosure of meaning. We must therefore recognize in perception not just an internal replica of an external world of fully formed objects which are laid out in objective space and of constant qualities simply present for us to receive, but a world of nascent objects and potential qualities, of forms coming together and of structures *in via*. In such a shape-shifting world, there is clearly a part to play for the sensible object as well as for the sentient subject:

Sensation is not an invasion of the sensor by the sensible. It is my gaze which subtends colour, and the movement of my hand which subtends the object’s form, or rather my gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ PhP., 279/271.

⁵⁶ ‘La sensation n’est pas une invasion du sensible dans le sentant. C’est mon regard qui sous-tend la couleur, c’est le mouvement de ma main qui sous-tend la forme de l’objet ou plutôt mon regard s’accouple avec la couleur, ma main avec le dur et le mou, et dans cette échange entre le sujet de la sensation et le sensible on ne peut pas dire que l’un agisse et que l’autre pâtisse, que l’un donne sens à l’autre.’ PhP., 258-259/248.

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To sum up what we have seen so far: Merleau-Ponty understands perceptual meaning to emerge from the dialogue between the lived body as sensorimotor subject and the perceived object in its givenness, wherein the subject seeks to orient itself in the best possible way to the object as a response to a felt deviation from the norm of optimal relation, thus giving rise to the teleological movement of the perceptual process.

Escaping Objectivism

Much of the above can be found in Husserl's phenomenology of perception as well. But there are also subtle differences and it will be instructive to look at them here, since they concern precisely the relation between perceptual meaning and metaphysics – that is, they concern the ontology presumed in the description of perception. According to Husserl's analysis, every time we perceive any three-dimensional object we have access to certain of its sides – profiles, *Abschattungen* – and necessarily miss other sides. Perceiving a house from its front side, I am constitutively barred from perceiving its back side at the same time. Such are the conditions of being a physical body perceiving a material thing. Husserl provided the canonical description of this phenomenon in the first book of his *Ideas*, where he states that 'to be in infinitum imperfect in this matter is part of the unannullable essence of the correlation between "physical thing" and perception of a physical thing.'⁵⁷ And again, 'We perceive the physical thing in virtue of its being "adumbrated" ... A mental process is not adumbrated.'⁵⁸

This incompleteness of perceptual experience motivates perceptual teleology. Husserl emphasizes the way in which given profiles harmoniously link up with other possible profiles so as to motivate the unity of perceptual experience in its temporal flow:

To their essence [perceptions of spatial physical things] belongs the ideal possibility of their changing into determinately ordered continuous multiplicities of perception which can always be continued, thus which are never completed. It is then inherent in the essential structure of those multiplicities that they bring about the unity of a *harmoniously presentive* consciousness and, more particularly, of the *one* perceptual

⁵⁷ *Ideen I*, 91-91/94 (§44) (emphasis omitted).

⁵⁸ *Ideen I*, 88/90 (§42) (emphasis omitted).

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physical thing appearing ever more perfectly, from ever new sides, with an ever greater wealth of determinations.⁵⁹

Each perception actually given thus refers to an infinite series of possible perceptions, where what is given is slightly altered, but still refers to the same unity of sense – the thing perceived, the identity in the manifold. In such a way, Husserl claims, the perceptual object unfolds and gives more and more of itself.

To a large extent Merleau-Ponty shares this analysis of the necessary incompleteness of perpetual experience.⁶⁰ But whereas Husserl, at least in *Ideen I*, seems to think of the co-given profiles as potentially given, that is, as the profiles one would have were one to change position or perspective, Merleau-Ponty indicates that there is also an absence co-given with the profile which is in principle unavailable, as has already been intimated – a depth that is inexhaustible. So, while it is true, as Robert Sokolowski has pointed out, that Husserl's thematization of the absences co-given with the presence of the perceived was novel and highly original to phenomenology, the question is how we are to understand this 'negativity' as constitutive of the positively given.⁶¹ Throughout *Ideen I*, Husserl talks about the co-presented simply as the *potentially presented*, or about the non-actual as the *potentially actual*. Thus, while 'the misty and never fully determinable horizon is necessarily there,' it is there as that which can be made determinate; it is only that if it becomes determinate, something else will have become indeterminate background.⁶² 'The continuously unbroken chain of cogitations is continually surrounded by a medium of non-actionality [*einem Medium der Inaktualität*] which is always ready to change into the mode of actionality [*in der Modus der Aktualität überzugehen*], just as, conversely actionality is always ready to change into non-actionality.'⁶³ Or again: 'Those moments of the physical thing which are also seized upon, but not in the proper sense of the word, gradually become actually

⁵⁹ 'Zu ihrem Wesen gehört die ideale Möglichkeit, in bestimmt geordnete kontinuierliche Wahrnehmungsmannigfaltigkeiten überzugehen, die immer wieder fortsetzbar, also nie abgeschlossen sind. Im Wesensbau dieser Mannigfaltigkeiten liegt es dann, dass sie Einheit eines einstimmig gebenden Bewusstseins herstellen, und zwar von dem einen, immer vollkommener, von immer neuen Seiten, nach immer reicheren Bestimmungen erscheinenden Wahrnehmungsdinge.' *Ideen I*, 89/92-93 (§42).

⁶⁰ See e.g. PhP., 245-247/235-237.

⁶¹ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22, 33.

⁶² *Ideen I*, 57/52 (§27).

⁶³ *Ideen I*, 73/72-73. (§35).

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presented, i.e., actually given [*kommen ... zu wirklicher Darstellung, also wirklicher Gegebenheit*]; the indeterminacies become more precisely determined [*bestimmen sich näher*] and are themselves eventually converted into clearly given determinations [*in klare Gegebenheiten zu verwandeln*].⁶⁴

While Merleau-Ponty agrees that perception involves this sort of motivated flow between the presented and the co-presented, the now-present and the now-absent, he also understands perceptual experience to include a more radical absence, one that categorically refuses to be made present, thus making perception incomplete in an absolute sense. It is not just that given my present location there are parts of the perceived object I cannot see unless I put myself in another position, but rather that the perceived object contains a depth that is in principle invisible, and will never be given: ‘When I see an object, I always feel there is a portion of being beyond what I see at this moment ... a depth of the object *that no progressive sensory deduction will ever exhaust* [*une profondeur de l’objet qu’aucun prélèvement sensorial n’épuisera*].’⁶⁵

What Merleau-Ponty is trying to think – and this is one of his most original contributions – is ‘the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon.’⁶⁶ Describing the co-given horizons of the perceived, he states that ‘there occurs here an *indeterminate vision, a vision of something or other*.’⁶⁷ However, the standard English translation does not quite bring out the meaning of the original French. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a ‘*vision de je ne sais quoi*,’ which literally means ‘a vision of I do not know what.’⁶⁸ It is thus not about seeing some *thing* or other – that is, an object in itself determinate – which I have yet to determine, but of actually seeing something indeterminate. The distinction is in fact rather important, for it already indicates Merleau-Ponty’s alternative ontology; in the same context in the *Phenomenology*, he argues at length that traditional theories of perception have been misled into denying the positive presence of the indeterminate because they have modelled themselves on an objectivist ontology, insisting therefore that the perceived object is made up of objective and determinate qualities that correspond to the object itself as ultimately determined by physics:

⁶⁴ *Ideen I*, 91/94 (§44). Examples could be multiplied; see e.g. 101/107 (§47).

⁶⁵ PhP., 261/251 (my emphasis).

⁶⁶ PhP., 28/7.

⁶⁷ PhP., 28/6 (emphasis in the original).

⁶⁸ Cf. Sean Dorrance Kelly, ‘Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty’ in Carman and Hansen, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, 81.

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The objective world being given, it is assumed that it passes on to the sense-organs messages which must be registered, then deciphered in such a way as to reproduce in us the original text. Hence we have in principle a point-by-point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception. But this 'constancy hypothesis' conflicts with the data of consciousness.⁶⁹

The data in question, I believe, is precisely the *vision de je ne sais quoi*, the indeterminate, the ambiguous that plays such a major part in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. This, therefore, is what a return to the things themselves – to the originally manifested – must respect and not cover over with theories and systems. For Merleau-Ponty this must mean, in other words, that the return to the perceived world turns out to be a return to a world whose meaning is ambiguous – neither wholly present, nor wholly absent, but something in between. Meaning is there as a sort of pregnancy, but what will be brought forth is necessarily enacted by the corporeal subject in dialogue with the ambiguous world. As such, as we shall soon see, perceptual meaning – and all meaning-formation that builds upon it – is also contingent.

What is at stake, therefore, is our understanding of the object perceived. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty can agree that the object seen is necessarily seen from one perspective, and against a horizon; and they can agree that any such given perspective is related to a host of other co-given perspectives, so as to make up a web of potential perspectives. However, Husserl at times seems to think that the object is exhausted in the combination of all such potential perspectives – the object seen from everywhere.⁷⁰ Though impossible to realize for a finite human being, the object remains an ideal possibility. It is with this that Merleau-Ponty disagrees: even if I could so combine all potential perspectives, 'I have still only the harmonious and indefinite set of views of the object, but not the object in its plenitude.'⁷¹ In other words, even in an ideally achieved synthesis of possible perspectives something would be missed – the depth and density of the object. Thus, as Remy Kwant says, 'Merleau-Ponty

⁶⁹ 'Le monde objectif étant donné, on admet qu'il confie aux organes de sens des messages qui doivent donc être portés, puis déchiffrés, de manière à reproduire en nous le texte original. De là en principe une correspondance ponctuelle et une connexion constant entre le stimulus et la perception élémentaire. Mais cette "hypothèse de constance" entre en conflit avec les données de la conscience.' PhP., 30/8. Cf. 34/12-14.

⁷⁰ Kelly, 'Seeing Things,' 94. Cf. Anthony Steinbock, who writes that Husserl was at times tempted to look at the world as an object constituted, to model it after an ideal object, 'a *cogitatum* writ large.' Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 98. See e.g. Husserl, *Krisis* § 49, 51.

⁷¹ PhP., 98/80.

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rejects the very ideal aimed at by Husserl.⁷² Merleau-Ponty is himself well aware of the difference between his approach and that of traditional transcendental philosophies, even that of a certain Husserl.⁷³ He is also aware of how our putatively neutral descriptions are never metaphysically innocent, and that we have often presupposed an objectivist metaphysics as the logical framework all our descriptions.⁷⁴

Objectivism, the idea that the world and its objects could in principle be exhausted by a complete knowledge – that is, that every little truth could be unified into a comprehensive Truth that leaves nothing indeterminate – was something Merleau-Ponty constantly resisted. Though the following text from the *Phenomenology* does not deal explicitly with Husserl or *Ideas I*, let me nonetheless quote it at length, since it so clearly brings out the metaphysical assumptions at stake here.

Science and philosophy have for centuries been sustained by unquestioning faith in perception. Perception opens a window onto things. This means that it is directed, quasi-teleologically, towards a *truth in itself* in which the reason underlying all appearances is to be found. The tacit thesis of perception is that at every instance perception can be co-ordinated with that of the previous instant and that of the following, and my perspective with that of other consciousnesses – that all contradictions can be removed, that monadic and intersubjective experience is one unbroken text – that what is now indeterminate for me could become determinate for a more complete knowledge, which is as it were realized in advanced in the thing, or rather which is the thing itself.⁷⁵

Merleau-Ponty pits himself against the metaphysicians of objectivism that would identify the *telos* of perceptual teleology with the thing in itself, and that would identify the actual world of perception with an inadequate grasp of the

⁷² Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 166-167; cf. 118-121.

⁷³ Cf. PhP., 87-90/69-73. Writes Merleau-Ponty: 'It is striking how transcendental philosophies of the classical type never question the possibility of effecting the complete disclosure which they always assume *done somewhere*. It is enough for them that it should be necessary, and in this way they judge what is by what ought to be, by what the idea of knowledge requires.' PhP., 88/71.

⁷⁴ Cf. PhP., 86/68.

⁷⁵ 'La science et la philosophie ont été portées pendant des siècles par la foi originaire de la perception. La perception s'ouvre sur les choses. Cela veut dire qu'elle s'oriente comme vers sa fin vers une *vérité en soi* où se trouve la raison de toutes les apparences. La thèse muette de la perception, c'est que l'expérience à chaque instant peut être coordonnée avec celle de l'instant précédent et avec celle de l'instant suivant, ma perspective avec celles des autres consciences – que toutes les contradictions peuvent être levées, que l'expérience monadique et l'intersubjectivité est un seul texte sans lacune – que ce qui, maintenant, pour moi, est indéterminé deviendrait déterminé pour une conscience plus complète qui est comme réalise d'avance dans la chose ou plutôt qui est la chose même.' PhP., 80/62.

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real thing behind appearances, even as an ideal. This qualifies Merleau-Ponty's remark above to the effect that the perceptual norm is the thing itself. We now realize that this can be so only if the thing toward which we are drawn is not the ideal object behind appearances. The radicality of Merleau-Ponty's approach consists in no small measure in his willingness to align his metaphysics with what he believes he has disclosed about perceptual meaning, as rooted both in the corporeal subject and in the world, in their dialogue.⁷⁶ And if perception is and always remains open-ended, if perceptual synthesis is never completed, if the perceiver and the perceived – their profound intimacy notwithstanding – never coincide, then perhaps it is reality itself that needs to be reconceived. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, 'true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world.'⁷⁷ If under the sway of objectivist thinking, we believed that perception was an inadequate grasp of the object in itself, fully actualized and present behind appearances, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception seeks to show that what we call the object, or objective reality, emerges from the body-world dialogue, in the corporeal subject's striving for an optimal hold on the shape-shifting world. We are invited to understand the thing perceived not as a fully formed and present being, but as itself constituted of presence and absence; not as the being of a substance resting in itself, but as the being of a phenomenon.⁷⁸ What must be understood, says Merleau-Ponty, is therefore not how perception grasps a fully formed external object; we must rather 'discover the origin of the object at the very centre of our experience; we must describe *the emergence of being [l'apparition de l'être]* and we must understand how, paradoxically, there is *for us* an *in-itself* [*pour nous de l'en soi*].'⁷⁹ It is my belief, however, that the meaning of these remarks can only be grasped against the background of Merleau-Ponty's later ontology. In the immediate context in which we here encounter them they raise rather

⁷⁶ Cf. Henry Pieterma, *Phenomenological Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128, 167; Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 149.

⁷⁷ PhP., 21/xxiii. And in a later lecture course on the phenomenon of passivity, he states this approach quite clearly: '[We shall be] passing through these phenomena [here: sleep and the unconscious] *in order to redefine being.*' IP., 125 (my emphasis). In other words, for Merleau-Ponty, the patient interrogation of phenomena is in the service of an ontological interpretation of reality.

⁷⁸ Cf. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, chap. 4, on the thesis of the ontological primacy of phenomena. Dillon writes: 'I think that the ontological thesis of the primacy of phenomena is the central thesis of both the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible.*' Ibid., 85.

⁷⁹ PhP., 100/82-83 (first emphasis added).

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perplexing questions: How would Merleau-Ponty have us understand the reality towards which he is gesturing?

3. The Contingent Teleology of Meaning

That the meaning of perception develops teleologically, as it were, towards a norm of optimal grip is at first sight rather odd, suggesting as it does the inadequacy of received theories of perception: the world, it seems, is neither spread out before us to be veridically mirrored in the mind-brain, nor indeed are we in possession of a set of innate conceptual structures that once and for all organize the perceptual field into a meaningful whole. A much more dynamic theory is called for, one that allows both the possibility of a minimal hold on the world the moment 'my transcendental field was thrown open, when I was born as vision and knowledge, when I was thrown into the world,'⁸⁰ and also one that allows me to progress towards an ever more intimate and rich relation to the world. In fact, two very important themes for understanding Merleau-Ponty's thinking intersect here: the *teleology*, as it were, of all meaning-formation, and the insistence that this must be understood as a *contingent* development.

If the teleology of perceptual meaning is a function of the body being drawn to a norm of optimality, this invites the question: What is that norm from which the body subject feels itself to deviate, and with which it seeks a more intimate relation with perceived things? This is a most important question, since it is this norm of perceptual givenness that ushers in and subtends the sensorimotor intentionality that leads to perceptual teleology. I indicated above how Merleau-Ponty considers the norm to be a felicitous arrangement of the perceptual field in relation to the perceiver's goal. Now, in its most basic sense, perceptual meaning, such as that arising from ordinary binocular vision, can normally involve no explicit or conscious goal-setting, but must refer to a goal pre-given with the specific style of the organism's interaction with the world. This is to say that the history of structural coupling between the perceiver and the world must have established a sedimented normativity which implicitly guides all subsequent interaction. I believe this is what Merleau-Ponty intends when he says that 'my life is made up of rhythms that have not their *reason* in what I have chosen to be, but their *condition* in the

⁸⁰ PhP., 418/419.

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humdrum setting that is mine.⁸¹ Or again, when he speaks of a sensorimotor circuit as ‘within our comprehensive being in the world, a relatively autonomous current of existence’ enabling typical responses to be ‘outlined once and for all in their generality.’⁸²

This picture makes sense as long as it is kept in mind that it presupposes that there was once a founding – a *Stiftung* – where the perceiver managed to respond ‘correctly’ to the solicitations of the environment, that is, where a successful enaction of perceptual meaning actually took place. And if we want to know why the perceptual dialogue was successful in the first place, it seems to me that we must say it was because the subject was able to gear into its environment in a way that allowed it to bring out something that was *there*, to disclose an element of *meaning* in the world. In short, it presupposes that we understand the surrounding world of the subject as at least potentially meaningful, such that the dialogue can get going and develop in evermore intricate patterns.

Now, the quote above identified the perceptual *telos* with the concrete thing: ‘I am aware of progressing toward the object *itself*.’ In other words, Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest that in some sense it is the object itself that constitutes the norm for perceptual teleology, or that the norm arises as the subject encounters the objective thing; he suggests that it is the fullness of its presence that draws and motivates the perceiver to seek a better grip. But before throwing ourselves over such a statement with deconstructive fervour, it must be acknowledged that what this presence is supposed to be is still unaccounted for, and we are sufficiently attuned to Merleau-Ponty’s thought to realize that this is not the Kantian thing-in-itself, forever hiding behind appearances. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that if the norm of givenness is the fullness of the object’s presence, then the present actual givenness of the object evinces a certain absence of the desired fullness. Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty as for Jacques Derrida there is no eschaton of consummated presence.⁸³ Perceptual experience is always the co-experience of a lack, an absence, a

⁸¹ PhP., 113/96.

⁸² PhP., 116/100.

⁸³ On the relation between Merleau-Ponty and deconstructive thought, see Christopher Watkin, *Phenomenology or Deconstruction? The Question of Ontology in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 13-17, 28-35; cf. also Leonard Lawlor, ‘*Verflechtung*: The Triple Significance of Merleau-Ponty’s Course Notes on Husserl’s “The Origin of Geometry,”’ in Leonard Lawlor and Bettina Bergo, *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology. Including Texts by Edmund Husserl* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), xxi-xxxii.

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negativity in the midst of manifestation. Put differently, at the heart of the world in its givenness, there is an element of transcendence, of otherness, and the body senses this as a tension spurring it on towards increased fulfilment. For if I were in full possession of the perceived, having perhaps subsumed it without residue under a concept – an *eidōs* – there would be nothing motivating me to keep interrogating it. As Merleau-Ponty says, ‘intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or ... we should not be searching.’⁸⁴

The point I wish to make for the moment, however, is that describing perceptual meaning as oriented to a norm does entail that there are better and worse ways of bringing out perceptual meaning, and that this presupposes that the world is, as Merleau-Ponty repeatedly says, pregnant with meaning [*prégnante d'un sens; cette prégnance de la signification*]; that it is, so to speak, just waiting to give birth.⁸⁵ And there are better and worse ways of being a midwife. The interpretation I am suggesting, and will come back to towards the end of this chapter, is this: It makes little sense to speak of a normatively guided teleology of disclosure in the relation between the perceiver and the world perceived, unless this world has its own structures with which to interact. Indeed, these structures – this child to be delivered – is the meaningful world of perception. This, however, is a characterization of the meaning of the world that is by no means consistent in the *Phenomenology*, not least because it is especially hard to reconcile with another of Merleau-Ponty's governing ideas, that of the contingency of meaning. Commenting on this, Gary Brent Madison goes so far as to suggest that ‘the two notions of teleology and accident would seem rather to be mutually exclusive.’⁸⁶ This, however, would depend on how we understand the contingency in question.

The recognition of contingency, says Merleau-Ponty, is the absolute requirement of ‘a metaphysical view of the world.’⁸⁷ Now, it will be useful to distinguish two basic notions of contingency that are operative in Merleau-Ponty's thought; I shall call them *relative contingency* and *absolute contingency*. These are, as we shall see, closely related, and Merleau-Ponty does not always distinguish clearly between them. Nonetheless, the *Phenomenology* contains a passage where the difference is clearly indicated:

⁸⁴ PhP., 52/33.

⁸⁵ Cf. PhP., 45/25, 346/350, 492/498; PriP., 12.

⁸⁶ Madison, *Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 68.

⁸⁷ SNS., 117/96.

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When we make being necessary ... it is impossible to ask why there is something rather than nothing, and why this world rather than a different one, since the *shape* of this world and the very *existence* of a world are merely consequences of necessary being.⁸⁸

Relative contingency corresponds to the *shape* of this world, why it is like this and not in another way; in short, relative contingency deals with *how* the world is. Absolute contingency, in contrast, corresponds to the very *existence* of the world, why there is something at all; in short, absolute contingency deals with *that* the world is in the first place. As we shall come to see, their necessary interrelatedness is an important theme for Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty usually writes about relative contingency, as it refers to the outcome of the perceptual dialogue, the basic layer of perceptual meaning. This meaning arises within experience as a result of the perceptual dialogue and teleologically develops, as I have described above, but there is nothing before this dialogue that guarantees that meaning develops in this way or that, unfolding an ever richer world; rather, perceptual meaning is the result of the particular ways in which the corporeal subject responds to solicitations – it is not the result of metaphysical principles, causality or divine decree – and the relative stability of the perceptual world – the aforementioned equilibrium – is never absolutely secured. Merleau-Ponty's point is not that we could be entirely deceived; far from it, for there is always some meaning in experience. Even perceptual illusion must give way and be corrected *within experience*, not from some putative position external to it.⁸⁹ Thus, there is always meaning, but the point is that it is never exhausted and secured, always contingent and *in via*. 'The existence of the percept is never necessary, since perception entails a process of making explicit [that is, perceptual teleology] which could be pursued to infinity.'⁹⁰ There is a radical perspectivism in this that results from understanding the subject as corporeal and always in-the-world; we can never presume to have more than a perspective on things. True, some perspectives are better than others, given certain goals and there is such a thing as an experience of optimal grip, but there is no God's-eye-view from which we could objectively judge the best perspective and we must admit that another perspective could always be found that would give us a different meaning.

⁸⁸ 'Quand on fait l'être nécessaire ... il est impossible de se demander pourquoi il y a quelque chose plutôt que rien et ce monde-ci plutôt qu'un autre, puisque la *figure* de ce monde et l'*existence* même d'un monde ne sont que des suites de l'être nécessaire.' PhP., 457-458/462 (my emphasis).

⁸⁹ Cf. PhP., 391-402/389-402.

⁹⁰ PhP., 401/401.

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Thus, the basic form of perceptual meaning takes on the character of contingency – it could always be different – even though, paradoxically, it evinces a sense of teleological development and even optimality. This is a contingency of meaning that is not absolute, then, for meaning-formation is not arbitrary; it builds on previous acquisitions and already sedimented structures. The teleology of meaning is therefore contingent upon – relative to – its historical *a priori*, as it were, but it is not determined by it; rather, it is conditioned by it in such a way that there are a number of possibilities for meaning to develop from what has gone before – the roots do not unilaterally determine the vertical growth of meaning. It is in this sense that the teleology of meaning-formation is relatively contingent. Says Merleau-Ponty:

Self-evidence may be called into question ... because I [in the experience of self-evidence] take for granted a certain acquisition of experience ... which remains contingent and given to itself. ... It is therefore of the essence of certainty to be established only within reservations; there is an *opinion* ... which is primary in the double sense of 'original' and 'fundamental.' This is what calls up before us *something in general* ... There is significance, something and not nothing.⁹¹

In contrast to this relative contingency of meaning-making, absolute contingency is usually in the background. It refers to the utterly gratuitous fact that there is a world and that there is human existence in the first place. When Merleau-Ponty speaks about contingency in this way he conveys that the world is not necessary but accidental; it is not grounded in any necessary being or anything that would negate what he takes to be a basic presupposition of authentic philosophy – that the world is an inexplicable *factum brutum*, and all the more astonishing for it.

Absolute contingency, then, refers not only to the existence of the world, but to the existence of human beings, and consequently, also, to the existence of meaning. As Remy Kwant observes, 'Merleau-Ponty's entire synthesis is, so to speak, suspended in mid-air; everything in it depends on a single fact. The entire rise of meaning, the whole of history, all meaning exists thanks to the presence of man and this meaning is a contingent fact.'⁹² Note that it is not *how* meaning develops once there is human existence that is absolutely

⁹¹ 'L'évidence même peut être révoquée en doute ... parce que j'assume comme allant de soi un certain acquis d'expérience ... qui reste contingente et donné à elle-même. ... Il est donc essentiel à la certitude de s'établir sous bénéfice d'inventaire et il y a *opinion* ... originaire dans le double sens d'"originelle" et de "fondamental". C'est elle qui fait surgir devant nous *quelque chose en général* ... Il y a du sens, quelque chose et non pas rien.' PhP., 457/461.

⁹² Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 233.

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contingent in this way, but *that* there is a meaning in the first place. Since meaning primordially emerges in the perceptual dialogue between human existence and the world, and since these are absolutely contingent, contingency spreads to meaning itself: it must be seen to be without foundation. Madison concurs: 'The presence of the world, the subject-world structure, being in the world, is a brute fact, a real and irreducible a priori as regards reason, for its stems neither from the world nor from the subject.'⁹³ Nor, we might add, does it stem from 'some deeper laid necessity,' such as God or some other metaphysical principle.⁹⁴ Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, at least in the period we are considering, that there is a meaningful world is an absolutely contingent fact.

Now, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, and here he is echoing Husserl, perceptual meaning is the indispensable foundation upon which all other meaning-structures are built. Therefore, the contingency of perceptual meaning, in the double sense of the term, is transferred to all meaning-formation whatsoever. The consequences of this are far reaching. Commenting on the relative contingency of meaning-formation, Dreyfus and Dreyfus put it like this: 'Once we recognize the irreducible contingency of perceptual experience and the fact that the moral, cultural and political phenomena are founded on perception, we are no longer able to claim any guaranty for the ultimate achievement of order.'⁹⁵

It is above all the collection of articles entitled *Sense and Non-Sense* that brings this out. These articles were produced in the years following the *Phenomenology*, and can be described as Merleau-Ponty's attempt to test his basic theoretical notions on a number of cultural and political phenomena. In particular, the idea that what he calls reason – which here is more or less synonymous with meaning, sense or significance – and its teleological development are, paradoxically, both evident and contingent. As he says, 'we must form a new idea of reason [*raison*].'⁹⁶ In what sense should it be new? In the sense that we must affirm both that there is meaning and that it unfolds, as it were, teleologically, and also, and no less importantly, that such meaning and development are never definitive and immune to revision, since they are not rooted in anything absolute – neither in a putatively objective reality, nor in

⁹³ Madison, *Phenomenology*, 67.

⁹⁴ PhP., 459/463.

⁹⁵ Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 'Translators' Introduction' to SNS., xviii.

⁹⁶ SNS., 7/3.

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transcendental consciousness, nor indeed, in God.⁹⁷ As Dreyfus and Dreyfus, once again, formulate it: ‘*All* experience would be construed on the model of perceptual experience, which is never totally without meaning and whose meaning is never definitive. Man would move between chaos and the absolute.’⁹⁸ In short, we would move between sense and non-sense, as Merleau-Ponty says, and this would be both a task and a threat.

In an article in *Sense and Non-Sense*, ‘The Metaphysical in Man,’ Merleau-Ponty declares the importance of contingency in no uncertain terms: ‘The contingency of all that exists and all that has value is not a little truth for which we have somehow or other to make room in some nook or cranny of the system: it is the condition of a metaphysical view of the world.’⁹⁹ Metaphysics for Merleau-Ponty is not in the business of securing the putatively basic categories of reality, or of deducing necessary concepts, but of the opposite. It is concerned only with the meaning of ordinary experience and the ‘miracle’ of its appearance; it seeks nothing ‘outside of ongoing experience.’

While I will discuss contingency and its consequences at length in the chapter devoted to Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of theology, it is important at this stage to grasp something of its wider significance, and especially its existential thrust. In essence, Merleau-Ponty’s position implies that we are, as he says, ‘condemned to meaning’ [*condamnés au sens*],¹⁰⁰ but not in the sense that a benign teleology towards an ever more meaningful world is guaranteed. On the contrary, insofar as *we make meaning* – human, fragile meaning – nothing is written beforehand. By the early 1950s, Merleau-Ponty spoke about the precariousness of the human situation and explicitly tied it to the experience of twentieth-century European life. Throughout his writings Merleau-Ponty celebrates the human ability to weave the tapestry of meaning in ever more intricate patterns, yet he is also aware of the danger that ‘humanity, like a sentence which does not succeed in drawing to a close, will suffer shipwreck on its way.’¹⁰¹ This is the other side of rejecting every transcendent guarantee of a meaningful world – be it God or objectivist science: If meaning rests with humanity, a great task is on the horizon, yet it is one that may well end in disaster.

⁹⁷ Cf. PriP., 50-52.

⁹⁸ Dreyfus and Dreyfus, ‘Translators’ Introduction’ to SNS., xiii.

⁹⁹ SNS., 117/96.

¹⁰⁰ PhP., 20/xxii.

¹⁰¹ S., 303/239.

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When it comes to the contingent teleology involved in developing meaning-structures on different levels Merleau-Ponty discusses this throughout his corpus, indicating its fundamental importance. Thus, he discusses at different places how meaning develops in art and literature, in philosophy and science, in language and perception, in politics and history, and so on. And these levels are interconnected, with perceptual meaning being the basic acquisition upon which the others build. Thus Merleau-Ponty can say that ‘it is the expressive operation of the body, *begun by the smallest perception*, which is amplified into painting and art. ... Let us say more generally that the continued attempt at expression finds one single history, as the hold our body has upon every possible object finds one single space.’¹⁰² For ‘painting awakens and carries to its highest pitch a delirium which is vision itself.’¹⁰³ And further, that ‘we would undoubtedly recover the concept of history in the true sense of the term if we were to get used to modelling it after the example of the arts and language.’¹⁰⁴ Again, literary language performs a similar function to that of the body schema: ‘The writer transports us without transitions and preparations from the world of established meanings [*du monde déjà dit*] to something else. ... The meaning of a novel too is perceptible first as a *coherent deformation* imposed on the visible.’¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the meaning of the world can be described as the meaning of a novel: ‘The fact is that it contains, better than ideas, *matrices* of ideas – the fact that it provides us with symbols whose meaning [*sens*] we never stop developing.’¹⁰⁶ Science is implicated as well when Merleau-Ponty says that

the figurations of literature and philosophy are no more settled than those of painting and are no more capable of being accumulated into a stable treasure; that even science learns to recognize a zone of the “fundamental,” peopled with dense, open, rent beings of which an exhaustive treatment is out of the question.¹⁰⁷

In sum, the whole edifice of meaning in language, art, philosophy, science and so forth, emerges from and builds upon the perceptual dialogue between the

¹⁰² S., 87/70 (my emphasis).

¹⁰³ OE., 26/166.

¹⁰⁴ S., 91/73.

¹⁰⁵ S., 97/78.

¹⁰⁶ S., 96-97/77.

¹⁰⁷ ‘... pas plus que celles de la peinture les figures de la littérature et de la philosophie ne sont vraiment acquises, ne se cumulent en un stable trésor, que même la science apprend à reconnaître une zone de “fondamental” peuplée d’êtres épais, ouverts, déchirés, dont il n’est pas question de traiter exhaustivement.’ OE., 91/189.

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body and the world; all meaning thus participates in the sensuous, and no matter how abstractly developed, it remains rooted in the primary carnal dimension of human existence.¹⁰⁸ Such meaning-formation answers to what I have called verticality: the givenness of the subject and its inherence in a contingent situation that has been taken up and creatively developed in layer upon layer of sedimented meaning-structures and that can always be further developed. For it follows from Merleau-Ponty's position – and this is a crucial point to keep in mind – that there can be no end to the teleology of meaning. There is strictly speaking no final *telos*, just as there is no completed perceptual synthesis or combination of all possible perspectives, but only the incessant drive towards a richer disclosure.

Thus the task of making meaning is never finished, any more than a painting manages to fully express its painter's interaction with the world. As Merleau-Ponty says, 'the idea of a universal painting, of a totalization of painting, of a fully and definitively achieved painting is an idea bereft of sense. For painters the world will always be yet to be painted, even if it lasts millions of years ... it will end without having been conquered in painting.'¹⁰⁹ We can see that this must be so if we remember that perception is not a passive mirroring of what is objectively 'out there' but an enaction that already carries the style of the body itself. 'Perception already stylizes. [*La perception déjà stylise.*]¹¹⁰ In short, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, meaning is never made *ex nihilo* since it builds upon layers of sedimented structures, such as body schema, conceptuality and cultural traditions; nevertheless, it must always be freshly taken up and there is always potentially more to be seen, to be painted, to be said or understood – a different meaning to disclose, and one that might destabilize our older acquisitions.

Note, however, that if all meaning is founded on primordial perceptual meaning, then everything hangs upon the perceptual dialogue, and absent this

¹⁰⁸ Says Taylor Carman: 'Merleau-Ponty's philosophical purpose is thus basically the same in his phenomenology of perception and in his reflections on language, art, and history, namely, to show that all forms of meaning are rooted in the bodily intelligibility of perception.' *Merleau-Ponty*, 23.

¹⁰⁹ OE., 90/189.

¹¹⁰ S., 67/54. Merleau-Ponty's notion of style, closely related to that of expression, is fundamentally a way of describing the way we, each of us, access the world and express the perceptual relation according to our own idiom. Thus Merleau-Ponty approvingly quotes André Malraux, saying that style is the 'means of re-creating the world according to the values of the man who discovers it' [S., 67/53]. This is not constructivism; the perceiver actually expresses *the world* according to her style of engagement, but this style encompasses any number of factors on the scale from the species-specific to different languages to the highly personal.

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dialogue, Merleau-Ponty indicates that the world must be seen as devoid of sensible and intelligible structure. These structures are enacted between the subject and the world, and are not to be thought of in the absence of this relation, as if existing in the world itself. As Remy Kwant says, ‘there is no meaning except for a subject.’¹¹¹ To repeat, this is not in itself a turn to subjectivism, for it would be equally true to say that there is no meaning in the absence of a world. It does mean, however, that meaningful structures are irreducibly bound up with being-in-the-world or existence. ‘There is no world without an Existence that sustains its structure.’¹¹² This also places a great deal of weight on the assumption – the fact, rather – that human existence and the world are indeed *for each other* in the most intimate way, such that meaning actually unfolds – on this ‘natal pact between our body and the world,’ as Merleau-Ponty puts it.¹¹³ It is because of the absolute contingency of human existence and of its intimate relation with the equally contingent world, and because of the sub-sequent relative contingency of the development of meaning, that these things are so astounding. Precisely because meaning and reason seem to be suspended in the void, they cannot fail to attract the wonder of the philosophers. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty describes the philosopher’s task as one of ‘wonder in the face of the world,’ and attention to the way meaning contingently develops in the encounter between human existence and the world.¹¹⁴ We shall have reason to come back to this point when tracing the development of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of contingency in the later ontology.

Now, there are clearly internal tensions in this account and in preparation for the more constructively critical approach of the next section I should like to highlight two of them. *First*, the difficult notion of perceptual normativity suggests that there is a kind of structure to the world, however that is conceived, with which the perceiver can interact in better or worse ways, given a goal of some sort. Yet Merleau-Ponty also suggests, out of his desire to undercut objectivism no doubt, that the world has no structure in the absence of a relation to human existence. This is an ontological tension: How should the world be characterized? *Second*, in discussing the relative contingency of meaning-formation, Merleau-Ponty argues that it is rooted in historically sedimented structures, which nonetheless do not determine future development, which is in this sense contingent. These historical structures

¹¹¹ Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 64.

¹¹² PhP., 495/502.

¹¹³ PriP., 6.

¹¹⁴ PhP., 14/xv.

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have, in turn, emerged from a primordial acquisition of meaning – an *Ur-Stiftung* – that Merleau-Ponty in this context understands as a perceptual experience, wherein the perceiver was able to bring out the structure with which the world was pregnant. But this primordial emergence of meaning in the perceptual dialogue can neither have been necessary nor arbitrary; rather, it must have been contingent relative to some form of structure – the structure of the perceiver and of the world, and in this sense both freely creative *and* constrained. Again, however, this seems to imply that we must be willing to speak of the world as minimally structured *sans* human existence. Thus, the ontological question once more forces itself upon us.

Expressing the World Perceived: The Logic of Fundierung

We have seen how important it is for Merleau-Ponty to be able to speak of a meaning that emerges because it is rooted in previous meaning-structures, yet not in such a way that what has gone before determines everything that comes after; rather, what has gone before makes possible the further development. The meaning-formation that we have just considered, whether in art, literature, politics or science, everywhere assumes that an edifice of meaningful structures is built up and that new structures may, in turn, be built upon it. In this section I will try to make these ideas clearer by presenting in somewhat more detail the specific logic of this approach, this layered structure of meaning that Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl's later writings – the logic of *Fundierung*.

Among the different meaning-structures that could illustrate *Fundierung*, I choose that of linguistic meaning, as rooted in perceptual meaning – a topic that is positively crying out for thematization at this stage. For in the teleology of meaning – or of reason or consciousness – the transition from perception to language is obviously the crucial step, which Merleau-Ponty recognizes. Language is the most important of meaning-structures, one which turns back on the perceptual relation itself and invests it with new layers of meaning. I indicated the importance of this theme in the previous chapter when discussing the distinctively human capacity of symbolic perception – that is, of perspectival seeing – and how this inaugurates a teleology of reason and truth. But this is unthinkable in the absence of language, and we found Merleau-Ponty saying that language fundamentally changes the dynamics of perception: ‘The act of speaking expresses the fact that man ceases to adhere immediately to the milieu, that he elevates it to the status of spectacle and takes possession

of it mentally by means of knowledge properly so called.¹¹⁵ We must now probe somewhat deeper into the relation between the inauguration of meaning in the perceptual dialogue and the creative development of this in linguistic expression and ideality.

In approaching these issues Merleau-Ponty follows a logic that he borrows from Husserl and his notions of *Fundierung* (or *Stiftung*) and sedimentation.¹¹⁶ *Fundierung* names a kind of circular or reciprocal relation that can play itself out on many levels.¹¹⁷ In general, it designates a whole meaning-structure in which present meaning builds on previously acquired meanings, which in turn build on an originally instituted meaning-formation (*Urstiftung*).¹¹⁸ Such a structure is characterized by a kind of teleology towards increasing complexity, when more complicated structures grow from the originally instituted meaning – as in geometry, to take Husserl’s example, where incredibly complex structures nonetheless build upon a relatively small set of founding insights. Meaning-structure is also characterized, however, by the return of founded terms upon founding terms so as to imbue them with an altered signification. *Fundierung* therefore names not just a linear edifice, but instead a circularity of mutual implication.¹¹⁹ In another context, Merleau-Ponty describes it as follows: ‘Husserl has used the fine word *Stiftung* – foundation or establishment – to designate first of all the unlimited fecundity of each present.’¹²⁰ In other words, the already acquired repository of meaning is at any given moment pregnant with endless possibilities of new formations of meaning, even as they are never guaranteed by or simply caused by the past.

¹¹⁵ SC., 188/174; cf. 183/169, 181-182/167.

¹¹⁶ Cf. S., 172-177/217-223; PhP., 226-231/216-221, 448-455/451-459.

¹¹⁷ Husserl puts the logic of *Fundierung* to fruitful use not least in his later work on the constitutive role of tradition, as for instance in his *Origin of Geometry*, where he undertakes an ‘inquiry back into the most original sense in which geometry once arose, was present as the tradition of millenia, is still present for us, and is still being worked on in a lively forward development.’ 354.

¹¹⁸ See e.g. *Origin*, 362-363. There is a peculiar sort of foundationalism in the logic of *Fundierung*, but as Merleau-Ponty uses it this is not an epistemological foundationalism, which would require what Merleau-Ponty denies – a secured access to the foundation. In contrast to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty is more interested in the layered structure of *meaning* than in epistemology as such.

¹¹⁹ It is to indicate this circular non-identical repetition within the relation that I here keep the German *Fundierung* as a technical term, rather than translating it as *foundation*, which has a straightforward, linear connotation. In a lecture course from the mid-1950s, later to be considered, Merleau-Ponty begins to use the term *institution* [*institution*] to convey the rich sense of *Fundierung*.

¹²⁰ S., 73/59.

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The relation between perceptual and linguistic meaning, so important for Merleau-Ponty's thought, is a case of this. Already in the *Phenomenology* he treats language as a founded phenomenon – it is founded in the perceptual dialogue between the body and the world, and it functions according to the logic of *Fundierung*. In this, his beginning 'philosophy of language,' Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between two kinds of linguistic operations.¹²¹ There is first what he calls 'speaking speech' [*parole parlante*] (and also 'originating,'¹²² 'transcendental' or 'authentic'¹²³ speech), which is language as creative and expressive of novel meaning, as epitomized in the work of the poet who is seeking for the right combination of words to express a vague and undetermined emotion that will not come fully into being until it finds expression. But there is also 'spoken speech' [*parole parlée*] (or 'secondary'¹²⁴ and 'constituted'¹²⁵ speech), which refers to language as a cultural acquisition, an available fund of linguistic meaning that is perhaps best exemplified by the unthinking chatter of everyday life, where almost everything already has a name.¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty holds that the already constituted cultural acquisition of spoken speech is in fact the sedimentation of originally creative expressions of speaking speech. Yet it is also true that, once founded, sedimented linguistic structures give birth to fresh and creative linguistic expressions that may in turn become sedimented, and so the circular – or better: spiralling – process continues.

Given the basic pair of speaking and spoken speech, it is possible to move in two directions of inquiry: on the one hand Merleau-Ponty is interested in tracing the relation of *Fundierung* upward, as it were; this is the *vertical* movement from the circularity of creative expression and linguistic sedimentation to the emergence of thought and ideality. On the other hand, he searches in the other direction for the founding source of creative language itself, and thus for the very *rootedness* of thinking in general, as well as of his own activity as a thinking philosopher.

¹²¹ PhP., 238/229.

¹²² PhP., 449/453.

¹²³ PhP., 217 n. 2/207 n. 4.

¹²⁴ PhP., 217 n. 2/207 n. 4; 449/453.

¹²⁵ PhP., 224/214.

¹²⁶ The distinction between *parole parlante* and *parole parlée* obviously resembles that of Saussure between *parole* and *langue*. Merleau-Ponty was familiar with Saussure, though only indirectly; apparently he first read the *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1945 and interacted with it subsequently. Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic speech is also echoed here.

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Where, then, shall we look for the root of creative expression? Merleau-Ponty answers this question, at least in the *Phenomenology*, by pointing to the now familiar source of all meaning-structures – the body’s perceptual dialogue with the world.¹²⁷ This is, as Madison acutely observes, ‘less an intention of reducing ... speech to perception than a desire to show how bodily existence contains in itself the seeds of an active transcendence which makes its first appearance in it, but which, afterwards, grows and transcends itself in other forms.’¹²⁸ Herein lies also the crux of the project of the *Phenomenology*, later characterized by Merleau-Ponty as a ‘bad ambiguity.’¹²⁹ For even if the body-world dialogue is saturated by a sort of silent, word-less meaning, according to Merleau-Ponty’s incisive analysis, it must be asked what is in it to propel it towards linguistic expression and, from there on, to thought and ideality? Indeed, what is it that draws *mind* out of embodied perception?

This would be the logical place to introduce what Merleau-Ponty calls the *tacit cogito*, which he later on will denounce as a false solution to the problem.¹³⁰ While I will not go very far with the tacit cogito here, let me briefly present the basic idea. Merleau-Ponty introduces this tacit cogito in the third part of the *Phenomenology*, and many readers have been surprised at the move, since the previous parts of the book so clearly seem to suggest that the cogito, or thinking subject, emerges from the embodied subject. Take the case of double sensations, for instance, where Merleau-Ponty suggests that the corporeal subject instigates a sort of embodied proto-reflection by alternating between its subjective and objective modes of being, as we saw in the previous chapter. This is clearly not an explanation, but it is a gesture towards the rootedness of reflective thought in the function of the body itself. This is especially so if the argument of *The Structure* is taken into account, where an emergentist theory of the human order was clearly presented. It is all the more surprising, therefore, when Merleau-Ponty, in some extremely convoluted pages, begins to speak of a level of the cogito that seems to be prior to perception and speech, rather than founded on them: ‘a generalized “I think” in face of a confused world “to be thought about.”’¹³¹ Based on what we have seen so far, we would expect the confused world to be faced with a corporeal ‘I can,’ not with an ‘I think.’ What is thought doing at the origin of meaning?

¹²⁷ E.g. PhP., 235/225.

¹²⁸ Madison, *Phenomenology*, 117-118.

¹²⁹ PriP., 11.

¹³⁰ PhP., 463-470/467-475; cf. 351/347.

¹³¹ PhP., 465/470.

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I believe that what most bothers Merleau-Ponty is the following question: ‘How can that which does not think take to doing so?’¹³² Or as previously phrased: What draws mind out of embodied perception? But it seems very odd to respond by introducing a mind, paradoxically silent and unaware of itself, at the very beginning. Unless, I would say, this is just a manner of speaking about a potentiality inherent in the corporeal subject, as some statements seem to suggest: ‘The tacit *cogito* is a *cogito* only when it has found expression for itself [*lorsqu’il s’est exprimé lui-même*].’¹³³ If so, the tacit *cogito* is really no *cogito* at all, and should not be much of a worry. However, in retrospect Merleau-Ponty does seem to worry, or at least to criticize the notion itself, suggesting that he used it because he was still captive to the dichotomies of the modern philosophical vocabulary and its avenues of thought. I return to this self-criticism briefly in the next chapter.

It is not easy to evaluate the degree of tension in or even incoherence of Merleau-Ponty’s account here. On the one hand, it is possible to read the pages on the tacit *cogito* as really being about corporeal reflexivity of the kind associated with double sensation, only infelicitously named *cogito* and confusingly spoken of as a consciousness unaware of itself. In this way the tension in the account of the tacit *cogito* can be minimalized; Merleau-Ponty can be seen as trying to elucidate the reflexivity of the corporeal subject with an inadequate, inherited vocabulary (mostly from Sartre). This is the interpretation of Martin Dillon, and it has, as I have said, some support in Merleau-Ponty’s later self-criticism.¹³⁴ But it is, on the other hand, also possible to see here a more ‘significant tension within Merleau-Ponty’s account of our emergence within nature,’ as does Ted Toadvine.¹³⁵ *Pace* Dillon, he points out that Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology* never connects the tacit *cogito* with the corporeal reflexivity which is present in the first part of that work. Toadvine therefore reads the tacit *cogito*, not as a continuation of perception or as a further sublimation of corporeal reflection, but rather as a retreat from the body’s involvement in the world, creating a space for ‘auto-affection, self-givenness, by which consciousness steps back from nature in order to gain reflective knowledge of it.’¹³⁶ This line of thought would be something quite

¹³² PhP., 466/470.

¹³³ PhP., 466/470.

¹³⁴ Cf. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 103-107.

¹³⁵ Toadvine, *Philosophy of Nature*, 73-74.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

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different from seeing reflection as a continuation of perception; rather, it would constitute a break.

There is no need for me to try to settle this issue here. What is beyond doubt, though, is that the *Phenomenology* embodies a tension with regard to the relation between the pre-personal corporeal subject and the reflective cogito, or between perception and thought. And if indeed, as seems plausible, the tacit cogito at least names something more than merely corporeal reflexivity, that is, if it suggests a certain reluctance on Merleau-Ponty's part to give up the idea of consciousness as primordially present, then it must be seen as a compromise that will not solve the problem. In fact, it seems to me that the tacit cogito corresponds with the perceiver of *The Structure*, who was somehow exempt from the orders of emergence. I shall, however, not try to substantiate this hunch, but merely state it as a suggestion.

We can leave the problem of the tacit cogito to one side, at least for the moment, since I shall be following that definitive strand of the *Phenomenology* (and also of *The Structure*) which understands all the higher functions of the mind as derived without residue from the carnal realm of bodies and things – that is, from the perceptual dialogue. As Merleau-Ponty clearly states: ‘The “mental” or cultural life borrows its structures from natural life and ... the thinking subject must have its basis in the subject incarnate.’¹³⁷ And now we return to that movement of transcendence from the inchoate meaning inherent in the perceptual dialogue, to the first vocal gesture (‘A contraction of the throat, a sibilant emission of air between the tongue and teeth, a certain way of bringing the body into play suddenly allows itself to be invested with a *figurative significance* which is conveyed outside us’),¹³⁸ to the whole gamut of expressive (i.e. speaking) speech, and finally to the cultural constitution of an intersubjectively shared (i.e. spoken) speech.

Now, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, it is this instituted language, the already acquired repository, that serves as an immediate foundation for (inner) thought and for ideality as a sort of quasi-independent realm of entities. This is what we are born into, an already existing meaning-structure that we take up in learning to use language: ‘As for the meaning of the word [*sens du mot*], I learn it as I learn to use a tool, by seeing it used in the context of a certain situation.’¹³⁹ Merleau-Ponty describes the cultural repository of sedimented

¹³⁷ PhP., 235/225.

¹³⁸ PhP., 235/225.

¹³⁹ PhP., 464-465/469. There are here some obvious affinities with the later Wittgenstein; however, *Philosophical Investigations* was first published in 1953, whereas the *Phenomenology* was

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language as a ‘Logos of the cultural world’ [*Logos du monde culturel*].¹⁴⁰ Now, as an institution, an intersubjective and diachronic cultural acquisition, sedimented language must be rooted somewhere – it did not simply pop into being from nothing, nor did it always lie waiting in the storehouse of eternity – and the only genuine alternative, according to Merleau-Ponty, is to see it as rooted in originating expressive acts, themselves rooted in the perceptual dialogue. Once more, the tacit assumption here is that there is something in the body-world dialogue – something creative – that seeks linguistic expression, something already oriented towards the teleology of meaning and the vertical.

However, once instituted as a cultural acquisition, linguistic meaning returns to structure and organizes the perceptual world, thus fulfilling its transcendental function by conditioning what appears to perception. This is the important point that illustrates the temporal and circular logic of *Fundierung* and sedimentation, as the figure below makes clear.

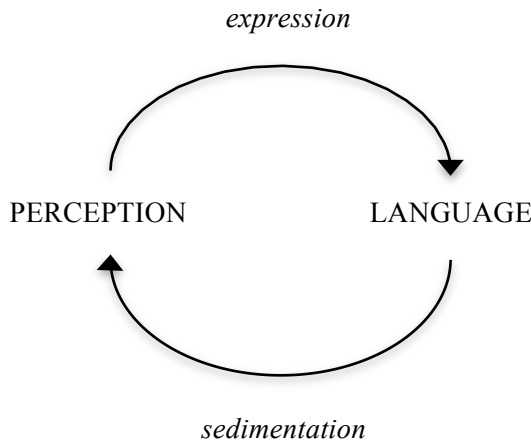


Figure 4. (Adapted from Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 194.)

published in 1945. Merleau-Ponty had read the *Tractatus*, but evidently never read Wittgenstein's later work. On the relations between Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, see Philip Dwyer, *Sense and Subjectivity: A Study of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

¹⁴⁰ S., 121/97.

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What we have here is an asymmetrical reciprocity between the *founding* term and the *founded* term that sets up a network of increasing complexity. As Dillon points out, it is not just that the founded term is derived from the founding term, since it is through the founded term, the linguistic sign, that the founding term, the silent perceptual meaning, comes to expression and is recognized.¹⁴¹ Indeed, the silent meaning of perception needs language to come to expression, and the perceived is what it is for us because it has come to expression, folding into itself layers of sedimented acquisitions, which are nonetheless never beyond further development. David Abram beautifully describes the whole process:

While individual speech acts are surely guided by the structural lattice of the language, the lattice is nothing other than the sedimented results of all previous acts of speech, and will itself be altered by the very expressive activity it now guides. Language is not a fixed or ideal form, but an evolving medium we collectively inhabit, a vast topological matrix in which the speaking bodies are generative sites, vortices where the matrix itself is continually being spun out of the silence of sensorial experience.¹⁴²

With the interplay of *Fundierung* and sedimentation it is possible to account for the partial truths of realism and constructivism alike vis-à-vis language. The latter is right to insist that sedimented language and conceptual categories structure the world we experience, but the realist intuition is correct in that such structures must be rooted in reality: they do not make up an arbitrary screen which is independent of the perceived world. Language does indeed have a transcendental function in structuring experience, but this is a power it has borrowed from experience in the first place, even though it has developed the expressive potentiality of experience in a life of its own, the life of language and ideality. There is, therefore, no strict symmetry between terms in a relation of *Fundierung*; the asymmetry in question is evident in that in the final analysis every deliberate *Sinnggebung* (the constitutive, transcendental role of language) is rooted in a prior perceptual meaning (the body-world dialogue), through the phenomenon of expression. Says Merleau-Ponty: 'There is an autochthonous significance [*sens*] of the world which is constituted in the dealings which our

¹⁴¹ Cf. 'The founding term, the originator ... is primary ... yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.' PhP., 454/458.

¹⁴² Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 84.

incarnate existence has with it, and which provides *the ground* [*le sol*] of every deliberate *Sinnggebung*.¹⁴³

One more important aspect of this relation needs to be stressed so as not to misrepresent Merleau-Ponty's use of the model of *Fundierung*: It is never the case that linguistic expression coincides with the pre-linguistic pregnancy of meaning of the perceptual dialogue, and hence that sedimented language could be seen as mapping onto a reality external to it without residue. Indeed, this is implied in the use of the notion of *expression*, rather than, say, reflection. Language, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, does not mirror the world perceived; it expresses this world on its own terms, bringing out a latent meaning that may be faithful, but never complete. In the same way that perceptual synthesis, as we have seen, can never be completed, since the thing transcends my hold on it, so the linguistic expression can only partially bring out of what the perceptual dialogue contains.¹⁴⁴

Let this brief overview suffice to give an idea of how Merleau-Ponty, in the *Phenomenology*, envisages the transition from perceptual to linguistic and ideal meaning. I shall not argue here that this is the correct view; the origin of language is after all a most contested topic. And in any case, I have not presented the material to make such a case convincing. What is important, however, is the general idea of an evolution of meaning through the emergence of language in the perceptual dialogue, a meaning that turns back and adds its transcendental force to the subsequent dialogue. It is this idea that is needed to fully grasp the thrust of the previous sub-section on the contingency of human meaning-making. The logic of *Fundierung*, as illustrated through the case of the transition from perceptual to linguistic meaning, lets us understand something of how meaning can be contingent in the sense of non-determined, while it is at the same time motivated by previous acquisitions. Meaning on such an account is necessarily temporal and diachronic, always on its way.

4. Integrity: The Limits of Merleau-Ponty's Dialogical Conception

If the readings so far given are essentially faithful to the thrust of Merleau-Ponty's thinking, the resultant position comes forth as somewhat ambiguous, to say the least. We have seen how he argues that perception is best understood

¹⁴³ PhP., 512/504 (my emphasis); cf. 492/498.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Watkin, *Phenomenology or Deconstruction?*, 51, 57.

on the model of a dialogue in which perceiver and perceived world both participate. This leads him to strongly reject objectivism, both as it figures in theories of perception and as a general understanding of reality, a metaphysics. Now, if objectivism is rejected in favour of the dialogical conception (whose concomitant metaphysics the *Phenomenology* does not explicitly consider), then we would expect a similar rejection of subjectivism, both in perceptual theory and in metaphysics. But, as I have indicated, this is a rejection Merleau-Ponty only equivocally affirms. In the end, his position vis-à-vis the role of the subject is extremely hard to characterize. As I see it, the logic of his argument in favour of dialogue should usher in a clean break with subjectivism as well, but it does not quite do so. In this section, I shall discuss this tension in Merleau-Ponty's work and suggest a way forward.

The core issue, as I see it, has to do with whether Merleau-Ponty's dialogical conception, as presented in the *Phenomenology*, can do justice to the alterity, aseity, or otherness of the object and finally of the other human being and the world itself. Hence, it is ultimately a question of integrity, as defined in the introduction. Whereas in the preceding chapter we were primarily concerned with the integrity of human being as an emergent structure within nature, the focus is now on the integrity of the world in relation to human perception. Both are needed to begin to respond to the governing question articulated in the introduction: *What kind of ontology is needed to preserve the integrity of human beings as part of the natural world, as well as the integrity of the natural world in the presence of human existence?*

Phenomenology is sometimes accused of or perceived as being a sort of idealism or constructivism that leads the world back to a more or less Cartesian transcendental ego.¹⁴⁵ This is not without some warrant. There are phases and figures of phenomenology that fall under this judgement; after all, it is a style of philosophy that starts from the modern turn to the subject and remains interested in and often committed to the transcendental function of humanity, one way or the other.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Husserl's early slogan was 'Back to the things themselves!' [*Zurück zu den Sachen Selbst!*], and early phenomenology was conceived of as a rejection of arid abstractions and a return to concrete lived reality. Indeed if, as Dermot Moran says, 'phenomenology's conception of objectivity-for-subjectivity is arguably its major contribution to

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Sokolowski, *Introduction*, 55-56.

¹⁴⁶ Henry Pietersma correctly notes the transcendental structure not only of Husserl's phenomenology, but also that of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenological Epistemology*, 12, 18. Cf. also Dillon, 'Apriority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty.'

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contemporary philosophy,¹⁴⁷ and if, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the subjectivity in question is corporeal and hence necessarily in the world, then it cannot be right to equate phenomenology with idealism.

Incidentally, this is the context for appreciating Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the phenomenological reduction, which he said 'never ceased to be an enigmatic possibility for Husserl.'¹⁴⁸ For Merleau-Ponty the reduction does not lead to transcendental consciousness but to the givenness of the subject to itself; it leads back to a concrete situation in which the world is always already given, or in other words, it leads to being-in-the-world.¹⁴⁹ What phenomenology can thematize is this original inherence of the subject in the world, but it cannot move beyond this relation to a unidirectional source of constitution. As Merleau-Ponty suggestively phrases it: 'The central phenomenon, at the root of both my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others, consists in my being given to myself. *I am given*, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world – *I am given to myself* [*je suis donné à moi-même*].'¹⁵⁰ Given, that is, from a mysterious depth of being that no reduction can neutralize.¹⁵¹ In other words, even if we could find a passage to the cogito, it still carries this otherness along with it, a knowledge of being rooted elsewhere. This is what connects the reduction to the theme of anonymity. From the point of view of the self-reflective cogito, philosophical reflection leads to the conclusion that the self is not its own foundation; rather, it is given to itself from beyond itself, from an impersonal and anonymous existence, indeed, from a depth it cannot sound.¹⁵² Hence, 'the

¹⁴⁷ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 15.

¹⁴⁸ S., 203/161.

¹⁴⁹ PhP., 14-15/xiv-xv. Cf. Madison's judgement: 'The phenomenological reduction, such as practised by Merleau-Ponty, leads us to the reflecting subject, but unlike the Husserlian epoché it brings us face to face, not with a subject which is the constituting source of all that is, but with a subject which discovers itself to be *derived*.' Madison, *Phenomenology*, 44. For further remarks on the differences between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on this score, see Taylor, *Merleau-Ponty*, 39-42.

¹⁵⁰ PhP., 417-418/419 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵¹ Cf. Sallis, *Phenomenology and the Return to Beginnings*.

¹⁵² At this point I should like merely to indicate that a similar understanding of subjectivity has been elaborated long before in the Augustinian notion of the subject, who finds itself to have been created and so to exist only as gift. It is therefore ironic that Merleau-Ponty briefly polemicalizes against Augustine immediately before considering this theme, clearly seeing no difference here between Augustine and 'analytical reflection.' [PhP., 10-11/xi-xii.] Might it not rather be that the notions of createdness and giftedness fall back on the same phenomenon at the heart of the self-reflective cogito?

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most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.¹⁵³

While not furnishing us with an absolute origin, then, the reduction does have the power to let us catch sight of our own rootedness and also of our verticality – that is, of how meaning emerges in the world. The transcendental function of the body schema is a case in point. I draw attention to this since it is important to remember that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is not in any way hostile to the cogito or to personal subjectivity as such, but he merely insists that they are made possible by being rooted in a pre-reflective and pre-personal realm.¹⁵⁴

If it is not an idealism, then, in which the subject constructs the meaning of the world without remainder; yet also not, as we have seen, an objectivist realism that posits a completely actualized world external to the subject, to which reflection should then be adequate – where does Merleau-Ponty's philosophy fit in? And is there not a sense in which Merleau-Ponty, in emphasizing the ways in which the body and the world articulate each other dialogically, has collapsed the reality of the thing into the body? This would be a transformation of idealism in the direction of embodiment, but a type of constructivism nonetheless, in which the thing is defined by its constitutive relation to the lived body. Is the thing, or indeed the human other that is always on the horizon, nothing but a correlative to the self, conceived of as embodied?¹⁵⁵

We must furthermore ask if the descriptions Merleau-Ponty provides of the emergence of meaning are compatible with his own explicit theorizing. Does it make sense to say that meaning-structures emerge from an intimate body-world relationship and still claim that the sensible world is 'pregnant with an irreducible meaning'?¹⁵⁶ For in that case, what is the world in the absence of human subjectivity if not potentially meaningful? As I see it, then, there are

¹⁵³ PhP., 14/xv.

¹⁵⁴ One of the earliest critiques of Merleau-Ponty's project was that it courted the irrational and pre-reflective to such an extent that philosophical rationality was evacuated in favour of scepticism and relativism. This represents a profound misunderstanding. For a reference of this debate, see PriP., especially 23-25, 27-31. Cf. PhP., 325/320.

¹⁵⁵ This is related to a similar critique voiced against Merleau-Ponty in the subsequent Continental tradition of philosophy, though often in relation to the ontology of flesh. Merleau-Ponty is taken to task for his alleged overemphasis on the proximity of self and other and of self and object, such that all differences in the end would reduce to sameness and identity, or at least to meta-identity. See e.g. Ann Murphy, 'All Things Considered: Sensibility and Ethics in the later Merleau-Ponty and Derrida', *Continental Philosophy Review* 42 (2010).

¹⁵⁶ PhP., 45/25.

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two dimensions that call for attention here: First, there is the question of the integrity of things in the world; second, there is the question of the internal logic of Merleau-Ponty's proposal, that is, of its coherence.

With these questions we remain at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concern. But in view of the preceding discussion of the sensorimotor activity of the corporeal subject, it now needs to be stressed that Merleau-Ponty's descriptions are also consistently infused with a sense of the activity and agency of the world and of objects in perception. If we do not take this into account, we will present a flawed picture of his phenomenology of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, the logic of perceptual dialogue is such that the world first of all calls out to the body subject. He describes the activity of the world as 'nothing but a vague beckoning [*une sollicitation vague*]',¹⁵⁷ setting 'a kind of muddled problem [*une sorte de problème confus*] for my body to solve';¹⁵⁸ and a 'first attack [*première attaque*] upon my senses.'¹⁵⁹ Such metaphoric language can perhaps be somewhat clarified if we turn to Husserl's account of passivity in perception and his distinction between receptivity and affectivity.¹⁶⁰ Husserl claimed that there are different levels of passivity, resulting from the way that the presence of sensible objects force themselves upon us in perception. Receptivity is when I respond to what is passively affecting me, but it presupposes, according to Husserl, a primary layer of having been affected by something that solicited my receptivity in the first place. For something to be perceived it must already have had an affective force on the perceiver, manifesting itself in the capturing of the perceiver's attention. This primary layer of affectivity, subtending receptivity, is, I believe, what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he speaks of the beckoning of the sensible object. Anthony Steinbock concurs, writing a propos of the affective force of the object as understood by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, that 'sense is not simply the result of the intentional directedness of the subject, but coevally the affective force on the part of the object or object phase that solicits the subject.'¹⁶¹

When Merleau-Ponty lays stress on the activity of the sensorimotor subject, as when he says that 'our senses question things [*nos sens interrogent les*

¹⁵⁷ PhP., 259/248.

¹⁵⁸ PhP., 259/249.

¹⁵⁹ PhP., 286/278, 287/279.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. *Krisis*, §28; Gallagher and Zahavi, *Phenomenological Mind*, 100; Anthony Steinbock, 'Saturated Intentionality,' 191-194; Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 29-30.

¹⁶¹ Steinbock, 'Saturated Intentionality,' 192.

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choses],¹⁶² it must be understood against this background of worldly activity. Perception involves both the activity, as it were, of sensible objects impinging on our senses, and the activity of the sentient subject structuring these solicitations into meaningful and ever richer perceptions (or, as Merleau-Ponty says, ‘perception already stylizes.’). Indeed, this is what it means to speak of perception as participatory; the reciprocity between the sensible and the sentient is here complete:

Thus a sensible datum which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which will provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of showing up as blue; I must find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. And yet I do so only when I am invited by it; my attitude is never sufficient to really make me see blue or really touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place.¹⁶³

This description of sensation makes clear that it is not a question of passively undergoing or of actively constructing a sensation, but of a reciprocal influence between the one sensing and the thing sensed, bearing in mind that the one sensing is not the subject as ordinarily understood, but the pre-reflective corporeal subject. Nor, of course, is the thing conceived of as a fully present thing-in-itself. Let us consider further the world-pole of the perceptual dialogue, bearing in mind our concern with the integrity of things as well as with the logic of Merleau-Ponty’s proposal. What is the thing perceived?

Merleau-Ponty treats explicitly of the thing perceived in several very rich pages of the *Phenomenology*, in which he is clearly seeking to articulate the insights that will continue to occupy him in his later explicit ontology.¹⁶⁴ The most basic and intriguing question of this section is, again, this: How can the thing be both available to me (*for-me*) and at the same time be beyond me (*in-itself*)? Thus the question concerns how there can be ‘a genuine *thing-in-itself-for-us*’ [*un véritable en-soi-pour-nous*].¹⁶⁵ We recognize this as ‘the problem of

¹⁶² PhP., 375/372.

¹⁶³ ‘Ainsi un sensible qui va être senti pose à mon corps une sorte de problème confus. Il faut que je trouve l’attitude qui *va* lui donner le moyen de se déterminer, et de devenir du bleu, il faut que je trouve la réponse à une question mal formulée. Et cependant je ne le fais qu’à sa sollicitation, mon attitude ne suffit jamais à me faire voir vraiment du bleu ou toucher vraiment une surface dure. Le sensible me rend ce que je lui ai prêté, mais c’est de lui que je le tenais.’ PhP., 259/248-249.

¹⁶⁴ PhP., 373-383/370-381.

¹⁶⁵ PhP., 375/378.

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perception' with which Merleau-Ponty ended his first book, *The Structure*, and we will see it return in his last work, *The Visible and the Invisible*.¹⁶⁶

In these pages of the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty speaks of *the thing as expressive*, and this contains an important suggestion. We have already encountered the description of the perceived thing as an obscurely posed question to which we seek the answer, and perception as a response seeking to make explicit what has already affected us implicitly. 'The thing ... [is] what is discovered or taken up by our gaze and our movement, a question to which these things provide a fully appropriate reply.'¹⁶⁷ If this phenomenological description of perception as dialogical is to have an ontological counterpart, its ontological interpretation must be that the thing encountered is there, that it exists, and that it is structured in a potentially (though incompletely and indeterminately) meaningful way. Another way of putting this would be to say that the real thing is capable of manifesting itself in various ways, of variously expressing itself, but that it does not do so on its own. Instead it solicits the completion of the perceiver, who draws out and constitutes its concrete 'physiognomy' in any given situation. 'Every perception is a communication or communion, the taking up or *completion by us* [*l'achèvement par nous*] of some extraneous intention.'¹⁶⁸ This completion, however, always carries the style of the one who completes; it brings out the perceived on its own terms, as it were. If given an ontological interpretation, this would mean that the thing must no longer be thought of as fully actual in itself, but as always containing a crucial element of potentiality – there is something it can become, if taken up in this or that way by a perceiving subject. In this way the expressivity of the thing is bound up with that of the body itself.

To understand Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the thing as expressive in this way, it is instructive to note that the second part of the *Phenomenology*, dealing with the thing and the perceived world in general, comes after the part dealing with the human body. In fact, the expressivity laid bare with regard to the lived body is claimed to be a phenomenon of the world as such: 'Prompted by the experience of our own body, [we] will discover in all other "objects" the miracle of expression.'¹⁶⁹ As already suggested, the investigation of our embodiment turns out to have been a propaedeutic to the investigation of the perceived world; Merleau-Ponty models his understanding of the thing on the

¹⁶⁶ SC., 240-241/224; VI., 170-171/130-131.

¹⁶⁷ PhP., 373/370.

¹⁶⁸ PhP., 376/373 (my emphasis).

¹⁶⁹ PhP., 239/230.

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human body: ‘The sensory “properties” of a thing together constitute one and the same thing, just as my gaze, my touch and all my other senses are together the powers of one and the same body integrated into one and the same action.’¹⁷⁰ In other words, just as the thing gives itself, or expresses itself, in many different ways and through many different properties, while these properties still clearly belong together in the unity of the thing; so the perceiving body with its different sense modalities is able to pick up on a thing’s different manifestations as expressive of the unity of that thing and, in it, to find its own intersensory unity. The body and the thing reflect one another’s expressivity and potentiality, and bring each other forth as two systems of difference-in-unity:¹⁷¹ ‘The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects.’¹⁷² This is how I believe the notion of the expressivity of things is to be understood. In this way Merleau-Ponty attempts to safeguard the integrity of the subject and of the thing perceived; they gear into each other, reciprocate each other, in such a way as to be equal partners in the enaction of meaning – meaning is not reducible to one part’s passive reception of the activity of the other part.

This way of talking suggests that the thing can truly be given *in the flesh* (*en chair et en os* – or *leibhaftig*, as Husserl says),¹⁷³ yet without ever being exhaustively given, and this is an important recognition. For Merleau-Ponty is aware that the descriptions he has given could be taken reductively – that is, that the thing perceived could be reduced to the body’s hold on it in the perceptual dialogue. But he insists that the transcendence of the thing is itself given in experience:

The fact remains that the thing presents itself to the person who perceives it as a thing in itself, and thus poses the problem of a genuine *in-itself-for-us*. ... This will become clear if we suspend our ordinary preoccupations and pay a metaphysical and disinterested attention to it. It [the thing] is then hostile and alien, *no longer an interlocutor*, but a

¹⁷⁰ PhP., 373/370.

¹⁷¹ The attentive reader may find in this account the echoes of Aristotle’s theory of sense experience, wherein the receptivity of the perceiver is precisely the perceiver’s ability to actualize the form of the thing perceived. In the next chapter, I use Aristotle to throw some light on Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, in which potentiality has such a prominent place.

¹⁷² PhP., 493/499-500.

¹⁷³ PhP., 375/373.

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resolutely silent Other, a Self which evades us no less than does intimacy with an outside consciousness.¹⁷⁴

This is a remarkable passage, because it suggests that even though things are given as correlates of my body, they are simultaneously given as transcending my hold on them, indeed, as resisting my advances – ‘no longer an interlocutor.’ And again he says, ‘things are rooted in a background of nature, which is *alien to man*’ [*les choses sont enracinées dans un fond de nature inhumaine*].¹⁷⁵ It seems to me that these remarks qualify the dialogical conception and indicate a recognition of its limits. What Merleau-Ponty means to convey with the enigmatic expression ‘the-thing-in-itself-for-us’ is simply that viewed from a phenomenological perspective the thing gives itself, on the one hand, as for-me, as intimately and constitutively intertwined with my perceiving body, and on the other hand, that there it gives itself as transcendent, as a being with an unfathomable depth and reality. Both of these dimensions need to be acknowledged and accounted for as irreducible dimensions of experience in any ontological interpretation of reality. How can we make sense, ontologically, of such a Janus-faced being as the thing? This is what now becomes the paramount question. ‘How are we to understand both that the thing is the correlative of my knowing body, and that it rejects that body?’¹⁷⁶ Everything now hangs upon how this question is answered.

It must be admitted that this issue is never resolved in the *Phenomenology*, as Merleau-Ponty himself later acknowledged. I would argue that the crux, or at least one significant crux, has to do with taking the dialogical relation of the body and the world as the *primordial* foundation of meaning, or the *sine qua non* of structure as such. Merleau-Ponty clearly *attempts* to safeguard the integrity and aseity of the thing in the *Phenomenology*, but can he pull it off? Here, we are in the vicinity of the logic of perceptual dialogue itself; how should it be construed so as not to beg the question about what it is that the corporeal subject finds in the perceived world – the insipient meaning, the inchoate structures, all of that which is needed to truly make sense of the

¹⁷⁴ ‘Mais encore est-il que la chose se présente à celui-là même qui la perçoit comme chose en soi et qu’elle pose le problème d’un véritable en-soi-pour-nous. ... Nous le verrons si nous mettons en suspens nos occupations et portons sur elle une attention métaphysique et désintéressée. Elle est alors hostile et étrangère, *elle n’est plus pour nous un interlocuteur*, mais un Autre résolument silencieux, un Soi qui nous échappe autant que l’intimité d’une conscience étrangère.’ PhP., 378/375-376 (second emphasis mine).

¹⁷⁵ PhP., 380/378 (my emphasis). Cf. Toadvine, *Philosophy of Nature*, 124.

¹⁷⁶ PhP., 381-382/379.

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notion of perceptual dialogue? Put differently, if there is perceptual dialogue, surely meaning cannot begin there, as if without any other roots; rather, even perceptual meaning must be rooted in structures that precede it, such that perceptual dialogue has something to take up. The question of the integrity of the thing perceived, if indeed it takes on its meaning in the perceptual dialogue, is of course related to this.

The fact that Merleau-Ponty explicitly tries to uphold the aseity of real things in his description of the reciprocity of perceptual dialogue, and the way in which this includes the experience of the thing as transcendent and other to the subject, serves as a pointer to the importance of integrity in his thought. However, as it stands I am still concerned that by having their expressive powers essentially intertwined with the expressive powers of the body, things owe too much to subjectivity, albeit an embodied one. In both *The Structure* and the *Phenomenology* one gets the impression that the meaningful configurations of the world, its structures, need the transcendental function of consciousness or the body itself for their very being. As Ted Toadvine observes apropos of the earlier work, ‘we would search this text in vain for a characterization of the ontological status of the gestalt that does not define it in relation to an “outside spectator” ... How, then, might the being of the sensible be described in its own right?’¹⁷⁷ And the *Phenomenology* is in fact equally devoid of any characterization of the ontological integrity of things in the absence of their relation to human subjectivity. Are we perhaps asking too much of Merleau-Ponty in pushing the ontological consequences of his descriptions? Has he not, after all, written a phenomenology? There is certainly some validity to this: Merleau-Ponty’s approach is indeed to situate himself within the perspective of perception itself.¹⁷⁸ But it is worth reflecting on the fact that Merleau-Ponty himself came to the conclusion that an ontological explication of the *Phenomenology* was needed to overcome its infelicitous tensions and ambiguities, as we will see in the next chapter.

On the one hand, we are dealing here with the concern about the integrity of the world on the dialogical conception of perceptual meaning, which is more than getting our theories straight – it carries deep ethical connotations. But there is also the related issue of the logic or coherence involved. It seems to me that a dialogue requires some structure of its parts prior to the dialogical interaction, and that this is what Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions presuppose: A

¹⁷⁷ Toadvine, *Philosophy of Nature*, 49.

¹⁷⁸ *PriP.*, 4-5.

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question, even if obscurely put and in need of the subject's clarification, must have *some* form or other, however minimal, else it would not be describable as an obscure *question*. In putting it thus, I do not mean to suggest that the perceiver and its world are ever absolutely separable, or that phenomenological description must theorize what properly belongs to each part. Rather, I suggest that if we press the logic of the description, if we demand an ontological interpretation, it must be possible somehow to speak about the logic involved in a coherent way. Without implying that we can have phenomenological access to a separated subject or world, our ontology must nonetheless be able to reflect on what we have no direct phenomenological access to. In other words, in some sense both the possibility and the limit of bringing out perceptual meaning must already be present (logically) prior to the dialogue. As Remy Kwant, who recognizes that the notion of perceptual dialogue suggests that we not only give meaning, but also accept the meaning of things, says: 'Does this not imply that things are already a kind of potential meaning? For otherwise, how could they lend themselves to a dialogue with our existence?'¹⁷⁹ However, Merleau-Ponty sometimes speaks as if the whole primordial structure arises in the dialogue and is dependent on nothing but the previous coupling of subject and world, resulting in sedimented structures of interaction. This implies – radically – that the thing perceived has no structure of its own, limiting the ways in which perceptual dialogue may unfold. But as I have already pointed out, this would make it very hard to make sense of perceptual normativity, as well as relative contingency. For the former requires something like a structure to interact better-or-worse with in relation to a goal, and the latter implies something like constraining factors of creative development, factors which (according to the logic of *Fundierung*) must be rooted even beyond cultural sedimentation. In a word, is it in fact the case that the world is devoid of basic structures prior to perceptual dialogue? Or better, *how is the expressivity of the world bound up with the powers of the perceiving subject?*

Let me be clear about what I am suggesting: I am not insinuating that Merleau-Ponty should have been a metaphysical realist – which is to say an objectivist, after all – nor that his position demands that we take the world to contain an a-temporal intelligibility that we simply access from without, without disturbing it, as it were. Rather, what I am suggesting is that perceptual dialogue ought to imply the intrinsic expressivity of the world, and that the subject would then be the one who takes up and creatively interprets

¹⁷⁹ Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 126.

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this proto-meaning after its own fashion. These suggestions are in fact drawn from Merleau-Ponty's later work, with which I shall be concerned in the next chapter, but they seem to be already demanded from the *Phenomenology's* governing motif of perceptual dialogue. This work is, however, fraught with tension in this regard, as Merleau-Ponty still labours under the idea that human existence (a term that is nowhere to be found in the later work, but everywhere in the *Phenomenology*) stands at the very origin of structure, meaning and rationality.

In order to bring out this tension in the *Phenomenology* between what I take to be the entirely plausible idea of a world pregnant with potentially meaningful structures, and the problematic idea that these structures somehow owe their very being to human existence, let me quote in full a very significant section from the *Phenomenology's* chapter on temporality, interjecting several comments. Says Merleau-Ponty:

It is characteristic of idealism to grant that all significance is centrifugal, being an *act* of significance or *Sinn-gebung*, and that there are no natural signs. To understand is ultimately always to construct, to constitute, to bring about here and now the synthesis of the object.

Here Merleau-Ponty describes the intellectualist understanding of meaning that he has polemicized against throughout the *Phenomenology*, the conclusion of which we can fully agree with: The world has a sense beyond subjective *projection*. He then continues to give his own proposal in a nutshell:

Our analysis of one's own body and of perception has revealed to us a relation to the object, i.e. a significance deeper than this. ... I come to it [the thing] bringing my sensory fields and my perceptual field with me, and in the last resort I bring a schema of all possible being, a universal setting in relation to the world ... and every active process of signification or *Sinn-gebung* appeared as derivative and secondary in relation to that pregnancy of meaning within signs which could serve to define the world. We found beneath the intentionality of acts, or thetic intentionality, another kind which is the condition of the former's possibility: namely an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgement, a 'Logos of the aesthetic world' [Husserl].

This, then, is Merleau-Ponty's characterization of the perceptual dialogue between the corporeal subject and the world. He now proceeds to clarify the relation between this primordial perceptual meaning, described as a Gestalt, and the sort of linguistic meaning that belongs to a thinking subject or cogito, here called signification:

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From this point onward the distinction made by us elsewhere between structure and signification began to be clarified: what constitutes the difference between the Gestalt of the circle and the signification 'circle,' is that the latter is recognized by an understanding which engenders it as the place of points equidistant from the centre, the former by a subject familiar with his world [the corporeal subject] and able to seize it as a modulation of that world, as a circular physiognomy.

What interests me here is the founding term, the meaningful *structure*, that Merleau-Ponty says the world is pregnant with and that the corporeal subject 'recognizes' as one recognizes a physiognomy, thus leading us to believe that the world is indeed replete with meaningful structures that the corporeal subject finds – not as one finds a ready-made artefact that one can take a snapshot of, to be sure, but rather as one finds an old letter with a semi-legible text that one can decipher because one knows the language. But as Merleau-Ponty proceeds with this description of what his position on meaning finally amounts to, we get something rather different:

There is no world without an Existence that sustains its structure. ... Nothing will ever bring home to my comprehension what a nebula that no one sees could possibly be.

Here, then, we seem to have returned to a quasi-Kantian position once more – but this is not quite right either, for Merleau-Ponty continues:

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.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ 'Le propre de l'idéalisme est d'admettre que toute signification est centrifuge, est un acte de signification ou de Sinn-gebung, et qu'il n'y a pas de signe naturel. Comprendre, c'est toujours en dernière analyse construire, constituer, opérer actuellement la synthèse de l'objet. L'analyse du corps propre et de la perception nous à révélé un rapport de l'objet, une signification plus profonde que celle-là. ... Je viens au-devant d'elle [la chose] avec mes champs sensoriels, mon champ perceptif, et finalement avec une typique de tout l'être possible, un montage universel à l'égard du monde ... toute opération active de signification ou de Sinn-gebung apparaissait comme dérivé et secondaire par rapport à cette prégnance de la signification dans les signes qui pourrait définir le monde. Nous retrouvons sous l'intentionnalité de l'acte ou thétique, et comme sa condition de possibilité, une intentionnalité opérante, déjà à l'oeuvre avant toute thèse ou tout jugement, un "Logos du monde esthétique". ... La distinction que nous avons faite ailleurs entre structure et signification s'éclairait désormais: ce qui fait la différence entre la Gestalt du cercle et la signification cercle, c'est que la seconde est reconnue par un entendement qui l'engendre comme lieu des points équidistants d'un centre, la première par un sujet familier avec son monde, et capable de la saisir comme une modulation de ce monde, comme physiognomie circulaire. ... Il n'y a pas de monde sans une Existence qui en porte la structure. ... Rien ne me fera jamais comprendre ce que pourrait être une nébuleuse qui ne serait vue par

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This is a tortuous passage that we could only wish were more lucid, since it seems to be something of a recapitulation of Merleau-Ponty's project in the *Phenomenology*. (It is, in fact, followed only by a short chapter on freedom that seems to be tacked onto the book without clearly belonging to its argument.) For instance, how can Merleau-Ponty say that I bring 'a schema of all possible being' when I encounter the perceived thing? Surely, I bring my corporeal schema – but that is hardly a schema for all possible being; it is a schema for a limited range of possible beings. The only real candidate for having 'a schema of all possible being' would be the mind (as Aristotle said, everything is a possible object of thought¹⁸¹), but Merleau-Ponty clearly seems to be talking about the pre-reflective perceptual dialogue here. My point is that if perceptual dialogue is truly embodied, it must be much more restricted than Merleau-Ponty suggests here. (Unless, of course, he takes the world to be nothing more than what the body may dialogically bring out, but this would cut against the grain of his remarks on aseity and transcendence, and would yield a severely curtailed ontology.) Then there is the tension between, on the one hand, 'recognizing' a structure (a circle), which suggests finding something familiar, and on the other hand, of 'sustaining' that structure, which rather suggests the dependence of sensible structure on human subjectivity. This vacillation between the quasi-realist and quasi-Kantian is perhaps nothing but a limitation of language, but it might also indicate a deeper problem with the whole framework in which perceptual dialogue is situated by Merleau-Ponty.

To see the problem more clearly let us pause over the fact that Merleau-Ponty, at the end of the *Phenomenology*, continues to speak of the subject, now understood as the natural corporeal subject, as 'sustaining the structure of the world.' It seems to me that if the corporeal subject is truly an integral part of nature – emerging from the womb of nature, as it were – then we can no longer speak of the correlation in those terms, since that would be to betray that we still think according to the logic of a dualism between consciousness and nature. In other words, to save the insight that the lived body is a natural subject it must be conceded that structures emerge out of nature itself and that subjectivity is therefore not its necessary correlate. Indeed, if we are to retain the language of correlation on this level then we should say that nature is self-

personne. ... Et, d'autre part, que veut-on dire quand on dit qu'il n'y a pas de monde sans un être au monde? Non pas que le monde est constitué par la conscience, mais au contraire que la conscience se trouve déjà à l'oeuvre dans le monde.' PhP., 491-496/498-502.

¹⁸¹ Aristotle, *De Anima* III.4, 429a18.

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correlating; or, to press our metaphors, that dialogue is possible only because there has first been monologue, the monologue of nature ordering itself into a plurality of 'real centres of being.'

The final part of this extended quote, I must confess, does not really resolve my worries. For it is clear that from a phenomenological perspective consciousness 'finds itself already at work in the world,' but that does not relieve us from trying to answer the ontological question of the world *in which* we find ourselves. In short, we can admit that consciousness does not constitute the world, and that consciousness always finds itself engaged in the world, and still wonder about the being of the world.

In the next chapter, I will look more closely at Merleau-Ponty's developing understanding of what is involved in the question of the world – which is a key to this whole problematic, since Merleau-Ponty tends to glide between several different senses of 'world' – and thus move towards his later ontological interrogation. Here, however, I should like to press a little further what it is that appears problematic in parts of the *Phenomenology*. The problem, I suggest, lies at the centre – namely, in the role of the dialogical conception of perception. Not in affirming that the body and the world interact in this way, which they surely do, but in assuming that this is the deepest root of all structure, *the very foundation of meaning*; that is, the problem lies in the ontology presupposed (but not thematized as such). Remy Kwant has suggested that the central and most original part of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, before the later ontology, is his rejection of the notion that reality is intrinsically intelligible: 'This position is perhaps the most revolutionary thesis proposed by Merleau-Ponty. It is the core of his philosophy. ... With this question we are in the midst of metaphysics.'¹⁸²

It appears, then, that there is at least a strand in Merleau-Ponty's major work that tacitly suggests an ontology according to which the world is devoid of structures in the absence of perceptual dialogue, which is to say, in the absence of human existence. But is this possible to square with Merleau-Ponty's own descriptions? If the world is a 'vague beckoning,' if it 'sets a muddled problem for my body to solve,' if it is 'a question which is obscurely expressed,' if 'I am invited' by the sensible, then surely this suggests – as Merleau-Ponty himself says – a world pregnant with meaning, which must mean a world that is potentially meaningful. Indeed, if the sensible is genuinely a sacrament – as he also says – then it must be because its water is able to

¹⁸² Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 120; see 120-127 for the argument.

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become wine, which is to say that the potentiality of wine is in the water.¹⁸³ In short, far from being without its own structures, the sensible must be granted at least a minimal and incipient structuration. Or this is, at least, what parts of the *Phenomenology* suggest, even as other parts deny it.

According to the reading I have just given, suggesting that the *Phenomenology* is fractured by a central tension vis-à-vis the question of structure and meaning, Merleau-Ponty seeks to affirm two positions that have often been taken as irreconcilable: He wants to affirm both the transcendental insight that the corporeal subject brings out the world perceived – its meaning – in the perceptual dialogue, *and* the position – which I would describe as a realist sensibility – that there is a structured and potentially meaningful world beyond the subject. But what sort of realism would affirm a transcendental constitution that is nothing more than a partial enaction of a never-completed world? ‘Our world ... is an “unfinished task.”’¹⁸⁴ As we shall see in the next chapter, the thrust of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking gradually comes to allow for a re-conceptualization of the transcendental function, as itself a part of nature, or flesh.¹⁸⁵ Toadvine aptly concludes that his later ontological reflection ‘offers us a means to understand our own thinking as a continuation of nature’s efforts at self-expression.’¹⁸⁶ The transcendental henceforth does not lead back to idealism of any kind, nor indeed to the perceptual dialogue alone, but to the encompassing being of nature, which obviously includes human being. There is thus a deeper constitutive force at work beneath even the perceptual dialogue; this is the constitutive force of nature as *naturans* or of flesh as segregating, turning back upon itself, instituting a fold in being which is the actualization of a meaningful structure.

¹⁸³ PhP., 256/246.

¹⁸⁴ PriP., 6, quoting Malebranche.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Elizabeth A. Behnke, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s’ Ontological Reading of Constitution in *Phénoménologie de la perception*,’ in Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree, eds., *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2002), 43, 45.

¹⁸⁶ Toadvine, *Philosophy of Nature*, 20.

CHAPTER 3

BEING OF FLESH

THE ONTOLOGICAL CONSUMMATION OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Ce qui résiste en nous à la phénoménologie – l'être naturel, le principe 'barbare' dont parlait Schelling, - ne peut pas demeurer hors de la phénoménologie et doit avoir sa place en elle.¹

Mettre à nu toutes les *racines*.²

Le problème ontologique, c'est le problème dominant, auquel tous les autres problèmes sont subordonnés.³

1. Introduction

Merleau-Ponty continues to run up against ontology, as we have now clearly seen. In chapter 1, we saw how his reflections on subjectivity, his tracing of the rootedness of the human subject in the lived body, and the vertical rising of life and mind forced him to ask the question of the being of these phenomena, while having recourse only to the idea that they emerge in relation to consciousness, he finally failed to solve the problem and raised for us the issue of the integrity of life and mind on such a construal. In chapter 2, we followed his understanding of meaning – perceptual meaning in particular – and concluded in a similar fashion that his dialogical conception is threatened by

¹ 'What resists phenomenology within us – natural being, the "barbarous" source Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it.' S., 178/225.

² 'Bare all the *roots*.' VI., 169/220.

³ 'The ontological problem is the dominant problem, to which all other problems are subordinated.' N., 180/134.

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internal tensions, and by the suspicion that it fails to coherently account for the integrity of the non-human world. This pointed in the direction of a different ontological construal that Merleau-Ponty only indicates in the earlier work. It is thus by pushing the analysis of the subject and the analysis of the world, the twin poles of the intentional relation, to their limits that Merleau-Ponty is moved in the direction of ontology proper – that is to say, to an interpretation of being.⁴

In this chapter, I present Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh and his way towards it, as evidenced in lectures and notes during the latter half of the 1950s, where a difference in emphasis begins to make itself heard. As I read it, the development of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy illustrates how a radical phenomenological investigation leads to ontology proper – hence, to the ontological consummation of phenomenology.

In the following section I draw together the main themes of the previous chapters – those of the subject, the world and the emergence of meaning – by looking once more at Merleau-Ponty's governing philosophical thematic, that of the relations between consciousness and nature and the aporias it gives rise to. I consider some of Merleau-Ponty's later criticism of his own approach, particularly in the *Phenomenology*, and present my own critical concerns about his philosophy and indicate the road ahead.

The philosophical maturation that occurred between Merleau-Ponty's earlier and later work was prompted by his reflections on the encompassing context of all perceptual meaning – namely, the context of the *world* and of *nature* – a thematic briefly touched upon already in the *Phenomenology*. A consideration of Merleau-Ponty's ontology would be incomplete without taking into account his developing understanding of the concept of 'world.' This is the topic of the third section. Here, I include a substantive presentation of Husserl's developing notion of lifeworld, as Merleau-Ponty's ontological reflections so clearly evidence an ongoing conversation with the Husserlian *corpus*, both published and unpublished. An understanding of the relation between the two philosophers aids in the understanding of Merleau-Ponty's ontology.

Husserl's notions of world as horizon and earth-ground are seen to prefigure some of the central themes of Merleau-Ponty's lectures on the concept of nature, given as three series at the Collège de France from 1956 to

⁴ In his later writings Merleau-Ponty tends to capitalize 'Being,' though not consistently. I shall use the lower case and write 'being,' except when directly quoting him.

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1960, which I present in section 4. In particular, the understanding of nature as a productive origin or source of meaning will be important, signalling a difference from the *Phenomenology*, which tended to see the perceptual dialogue as source of the fundamental structures of the world, towards understanding being as the potentiality of all meaning.

In the fifth section, I finally present and discuss the intricate ontology of *The Visible and the Invisible*, the so-called ontology of flesh, in its own right. Initially, I focus on the implications of this new ontology for the question of contingency, such as we pursued it in the preceding chapter, for a case can be made that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of being entails a reconceived notion of the contingency of meaning-formation. This will become important in chapter 4, when I consider Merleau-Ponty's critique of theology. Then I proceed to elaborate on the main themes of the ontology of flesh, explaining the import of such basic terms as flesh, reversibility, *en-être*, unity, and *écart*, before presenting a possible clarification in terms of potentiality and actuality. In the last sub-section, I discuss the notions of *chiasm* and *intertwining* and how they may help to deepen our understanding of the integrity of human beings and the natural world.

2. The Philosophers' Shadows

In the late essay 'The Philosopher and His Shadow,' Merleau-Ponty returns to Husserl and to what he takes to be the most profound themes of his phenomenology.⁵ He declares that we must attempt to think 'the unthought' [*l'impensé*] of the philosopher, that which is 'articulated between the things said.'⁶ As we approach Merleau-Ponty's explicitly ontological thought, which was never fully articulated and which was cut short by his untimely death by cardiac arrest in 1961 at the age of fifty-three, we face a situation in which a similar methodological procedure must be adopted. Enough of his unpublished manuscripts and notes, as well as a couple of published essays, exist in order for us to get a good grasp of the direction of his later thinking and plausibly guess where he would have ended up, even if much remains forever suspended. However, a better approach might be to read him as he himself read Husserl: faithfully, creatively and with a sense that the most important aspects of

⁵ S., 201-228/159-181.

⁶ S., 202/160.

anyone's philosophy resist the light of the philosopher himself and are rather to be found in the shadows, being brought to light only by a subsequent generation of thinkers.

'The Philosopher and His Shadow' belongs to these late essays where we get a sense not only of how Merleau-Ponty saw his own work as a continuation and development of Husserl's basic insights, but also of the content of this development.⁷ Husserl understood, according to Merleau-Ponty, at least since the time of *Ideas II*, that phenomenology moves at once in two directions, thus leading to an insurmountable tension. On the one hand it leads towards nature, which is the common origin of all; and on the other hand, towards conscious persons with their powers of constitution.⁸ We have here not just a specific problem encountered along the way, as it were, but a 'fundamental difficulty' [*une difficulté de principe*], which Merleau-Ponty understands as the very source of philosophical wonder and reflection.⁹ It is this tension, both problematic and fecund, that I have tried to illustrate in the previous two chapters and with the concepts of rootedness and verticality. Now if these are genuine phenomena, as Merleau-Ponty thinks they are, then philosophy must attempt to respect their integrity – that is, attempt to salvage the reality of both of these dimensions: the constitutional power of subjectivity, according to its own sedimented structures, as well as its origin in nature. Only this could mark out a way to navigate between objectivism and subjectivism.

But this also marks the passage from phenomenology proper to ontology. For in a strictly methodological sense, phenomenology investigates what gives itself in experience, the constituted and the acts and operations of constitution, yet is ill-equipped to handle ontological questions of the world and human persons, once it has denied the ultimacy of the all-constituting transcendental consciousness – for which the world itself would be but a sense constituted – and has begun to realize that consciousness is itself rooted in an immemorial past. This is not to say, of course, that phenomenological analysis lacks an ontological bearing, as I hope is already clear from the foregoing. The central question, then, is about the relation between consciousness and that which is constituted on the one hand, and on the other, about that 'barbarous source' which remains hidden and resists the phenomenological light. Phenomenology leads us to a place where it must be joined by ontological interpretation, to a

⁷ Cf., VI., 217/165.

⁸ Cf. the similar characterization in the 1956-1957 course on nature at the College de France: 'Husserl's thought is divided between two tendencies.' N., 102-104/70-72.

⁹ S., 224-225/177-179.

set of questions that can only be answered within a properly ontological register. Perhaps this is the ultimate shadowland of philosophy, where one must feel one's way in the half-light, and try to faithfully articulate the dimly seen, using a language through which it can only be partially expressed. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty's final project was to attempt a philosophical discourse that would be able to unite what phenomenology teaches us about human persons and what must be the ontological structure of which they are a part and which is the factual condition of their existence: 'The ultimate task of phenomenology as philosophy of consciousness is to understand its relationship to non-phenomenology.'¹⁰ This is a remarkable sentence. Rather than allow us to bracket the being of the world – a technique which has, for many, unfortunately become synonymous with phenomenology itself – Merleau-Ponty in fact claims that phenomenology has inexorably led us to ontology. For we had to push the powers of constituting consciousness to its limits in order to become aware of the deep soil in which consciousness itself is rooted and which therefore cannot be made its object.¹¹ 'Constitution becomes increasingly ... the means of unveiling a back side of things that we have not constituted ... these beings beneath our idealizations and objectifications which secretly nourish them.'¹²

In relation to Husserlian phenomenology, this is not a Merleau-Pontian *eisegesis*; in his last published work, the *Crisis*, Husserl is himself able to articulate this essential difficulty very clearly in a few crucial paragraphs. Let us briefly look at how he puts the issue there.

How can a component part of the world, its human subjectivity, constitute the whole world, namely, constitute it as its intentional formation, one which has always already become what it is and continues to develop, formed by the universal interconnection of intentionally accomplishing subjectivity, while the latter, the subjects accomplishing in cooperation, are themselves only a partial formation within the total accomplishment? ... The subjective part of the world swallows up, so to speak, the whole world and thus itself too. What an absurdity!¹³

¹⁰ S., 225/178.

¹¹ As Remy Kwant puts it: 'His last work demonstrates the metaphysical impact of the phenomenological tradition.' *From Phenomenology*, 228.

¹² S., 227/180.

¹³ 'Wie soll ein Teilbestand der Welt, ihre menschliche Subjektivität, die ganze Welt konstituieren, nämlich konstituieren als ihr intentionales Gebilde? – Welt, ein immer Schon gewordenes und fortwährendes Gebilde des universalen Konnexes der intentionalen leistenden Subjektivität – wobei sie, die im miteinander leistenden Subjekte, selbst nur teilgebilde der totalen Leistung sein sollen? ... Der subjektbestand der Welt verschlingt sozusagen die gesamte Welt und damit sich selbst. Welch ein Widersinn.' *Crisis*, 183/179-180 (§ 53).

From a phenomenological perspective, we have here, as I said, a paradox of the highest order: On the one hand, the sense of the world is constituted by subjectivity, but on the other, subjectivity is itself only a part of this world-sense. The paradox, as Husserl puts it, is ‘that of humanity as world-constituting subjectivity and yet as incorporated in the world itself [*Welt-konstituierenden und doch der Welt selbst eingeordneten Subjektivität*].’¹⁴ Granting that consciousness constitutes the world (in all the rich and complex detail brought out by phenomenology), but also that consciousness is a part of this same world, we are caught up in a circle and the question is whether transcendental philosophy will be able to handle this circularity.¹⁵

This is also the problematic that occupies Merleau-Ponty from the beginning, and that continues to do so throughout his career. Recall his opening lines in *The Structure*: ‘Our goal is to understand the relations of consciousness and nature [*comprendre les rapports de la conscience et de la nature*].’¹⁶ But what, in chapter 1, I called the final tension between consciousness and nature is in fact never resolved in *The Structure*, as Merleau-Ponty in the end posits a transcendental consciousness in relation to nature. Consciousness and nature, and their interrelation, is also what is at stake throughout the *Phenomenology* with its many descriptions. In the celebrated case of phantom limbs, for instance, it is a matter of understanding ‘how the psychic determining factors [i.e. consciousness] and the physiological conditions [i.e. nature] gear into each other.’¹⁷ Again, the key to the *Phenomenology* – the lived body – is described as a ‘third genus of being’ [*un troisième genre d’être*], participating in objective nature and in subjective consciousness, but reducible to neither.¹⁸ Clearly then, this is Merleau-Ponty’s governing philosophical thematic.

Looking back on his earlier work, however, Merleau-Ponty realizes that he has not yet been able to push through to a consistent understanding of what is at stake in this problematic, not least because he has been caught in the bifurcating vocabulary of the modern philosophical tradition. He has indeed

¹⁴ *Krisis*, 185/182 (§ 54).

¹⁵ I leave out at this point Husserl’s attempted solution in this section of the *Crisis*, by way of a second *epoché* to an absolute ego; such a solution is resolutely rejected by Merleau-Ponty, and with good reason. Here I have wanted to show only that Husserl was well aware of the problem.

¹⁶ *SC.*, 3/1.

¹⁷ *PhP.*, 105/89.

¹⁸ *PhP.*, 407/408.

been able to articulate the problem – a fact that alone gives continuity to his philosophical work – but thinks he has lacked the resources for a genuine breakthrough. There may be many reasons for this, so let us review some of Merleau-Ponty's self-criticisms.

In a note written in January 1959, he accuses himself of never consistently rising above Cartesian dualism in the *Phenomenology*.¹⁹ Above all, he criticizes his notion of a silent cogito [*cogito tacite*] in the third part of that work, since it presupposes a sort of unmediated self-presence, and underestimates the role of language for any return to oneself – which is to say, for any reduction in the phenomenological sense. Again, in a later note, he writes that ‘my chapter on the Cogito was not connected with the chapter on speech: on the contrary I posed a problem.’²⁰ The problem is to understand the passage from perceptual meaning to the meaning of language, and to show their interconnection. This was insufficient in the *Phenomenology*. Merleau-Ponty now suggests that since consciousness as we experience it has come into being through speech it is incorrect to call the silent body subject a ‘cogito,’ that is, to understand it along the lines of consciousness. Consciousness is no longer to be seen as originally belonging to human life. Rather than a silent cogito, perhaps we could say that the pre-reflective human being is a potential cogito, a potentiality to be actualized by speaking.²¹ This reading ties in nicely with the suggestions made about the tacit cogito in the previous chapter.

The inability to transcend the Cartesian dualism of subject and object returns in a critical note of July 1959: ‘The problems posed in *Ph.P.* are insoluble because I start there from the “consciousness”-“object” distinction [*j’y pars de la distinction “conscience”-“objet”*].’²² Merleau-Ponty here refers to the discussion of pathologies in the *Phenomenology*, suggesting that he too soon accepted the idea that a certain brain lesion, say, was an event of the objective order, and that, consequently, the task was to show how this event could be interrelated with the subjective order of experience. Setting up the problem in this way, he now claims, will only lead back to objectivism – the ensuing subjective problems will always be seen as *caused* by an event in the objective

¹⁹ VI., 222-223/171.

²⁰ VI., 227-228/175-176. Remy Kwant rightly observes that Merleau-Ponty finds resources for correcting his earlier view of the cogito in the *Phenomenology* itself, namely in the chapter on speech. This indicates again the continuity of his philosophical endeavour. Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 38.

²¹ In fact, Merleau-Ponty suggested as much already in the *Phenomenology*: ‘The tacit cogito is a cogito only when it has found expression for itself.’ PhP., 466/470.

²² VI., 250/200.

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order. It is this set-up that must be rejected. Rather, said brain lesion must be seen as ‘an event of the order of brute or wild being’ [*un événement de l’ordre de l’être brut ou sauvage*]. The objective order is already an interpretation of brute being, which is ‘ontologically primary.’ To philosophically reflect on pathological cases in order to demonstrate how subjective and objective, consciousness and nature gear into each other is wrongheaded at the start; rather, philosophy must try to elucidate the ontologically primary source from which both the subjective and the objective orders arise. It is therefore not a question of showing how two (consciousness and nature) unite into one (the body), but of how one (being) separates into two (perceiver and perceived).

Apparently, Merleau-Ponty thinks he has penetrated into a deeper understanding of the unity of being, and that while he was certainly on track in his earlier works, an inherited vocabulary kept him from consistently expressing this unity, which is why he now recommends that philosophy cease to use ‘all the positivist bric-a-brac of concepts, judgements, relations’ [*tout le bric-à-brac positiviste des “concepts,” des “jugements,” des “relations”*].²³ For such terms have a built-in dualism between the subjective and the objective. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to reject ‘experience’ and ‘perception.’²⁴ These notions seduce us into thinking that they refer to realities existing as separate and in themselves. However, he also says that

the whole architecture of the notions of the psycho-logy (perception, idea-affection, pleasure, desire, love, Eros), all that, all this bric-a-brac, is suddenly clarified when one ceases to think all these terms as *positive* ... in order to think of them ... as *differentiations* of one sole and *massive* adhesion to Being which is the flesh.²⁵

Perhaps, then, it is not so much about changing our vocabulary as about being aware of the implications of these central philosophical terms and beginning to think them differently. Even so, as we shall shortly see, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is rich in creative terminology, and this must be seen in light of these concerns.

Such, in brief, is Merleau-Ponty’s self-criticism; it reveals a desire to do ontology afresh, free of the straightjacket of modern conceptuality. However, it

²³ VI., 284/235.

²⁴ VI., 207/157-158.

²⁵ ‘Toute l’architecture des notions de la psycho-logie (perception, idée, – affection, plaisir, désir, amour, Eros) tout cela tout ce bric-à-brac s’éclaire soudain quand on cesse de penser tous ces termes comme des positives ... pour les penser ... comme des *différenciations* d’une seul et *massive* adhésion à l’Être qui est la chair.’ VI., 318/270.

must be admitted this criticism sounds strange to us once we have worked through his earlier writings. Is this not precisely what he has always done? Is he here not too hard on himself? Are not the lived body and the perceived world attempts to address the interrelation of the subjective and the objective, of consciousness and object? At the very least, it must be said that the impetus towards unity is there from the start, even though it is indeed often conceived as a unity of separate orders of being – consciousness and nature. In addition, as Rudolf Bernet has pointed out, the passage explicitly about the world in the *Phenomenology* is already very close to articulating a unitary ontology. Bernet writes: ‘The last word of *Phenomenology of Perception* is not yet the common “flesh” of bodies and things, but the function of flesh is nonetheless anticipated in what this text says about the *world*.’²⁶ Thus the transition from reflection on ‘the world’ to reflection on ‘the flesh,’ which I trace in this chapter, is a very natural one indeed.

What, then, shall we conclude? It seems to me that Remy Kwant is right in principle to suggest that we read Merleau-Ponty’s self-criticism as a critique of inconsistency: ‘He has been inconsistent because, in the exposition of particular points, he has forgotten his fundamental point of view; he has been seduced into placing himself again in the perspective of the cogito.’²⁷ Renaud Barbaras concurs and observes that, hampered by a dualistic vocabulary, Merleau-Ponty was not able to thematically analyze and explain what he nonetheless clearly saw and described: the unity of sense experience.²⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology can thus be seen as an attempt to fully and consistently articulate an ontology that was only partially and inconsistently revealed in the earlier works, to try to bring into the light what was formerly in the shadows. Merleau-Ponty himself writes that his projected new work, or the first volume of it, ‘takes up again, deepens and rectifies [*approfondit et rectifie*] my first two books,’ and that it is ‘entirely carried out within the perspective of ontology.’²⁹

What Merleau-Ponty says in *The Visible and the Invisible*, to preview something to come, is this: Rather than meaning arising as the relation of two orders, we must say that being (or nature) is self-expressive in ascending orders,

²⁶ Rudolf Bernet, ‘The Subject in Nature: Reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*,’ in Patrick Burke and Jan van der Veken, eds., *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 66.

²⁷ Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 39.

²⁸ Renaud Barbaras, *Le tournant de l’expérience: recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998), 23-24.

²⁹ VI., 220/168.

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and that humankind is a particularly rich expression of being, through which being comes to self-reflection. This means that the transcendental function, if that is still an appropriate term, has descended from consciousness, through the body, all the way into being itself – being as expressive of meaning, as auto-affective of its own proto-intelligible structures. As Merleau-Ponty says of the flesh, '[it is] what makes the fact be a fact. And at the same time, what makes the facts have meaning [*du sens*].'³⁰

That formulations such as these are demanded becomes clear once it is fully recognized that human beings, as original sites of meaning-making, are themselves the products of nature or being. It must therefore be said that whatever human beings contribute to the perceptual dialogue was itself begun by nature. What this means is that the seed of a solution to the problem can be found already in *The Structure*. As Paul Ricoeur points out, there are some themes in Merleau-Ponty's earliest work which seem to be forgotten later on, that is, at the time of the *Phenomenology*.³¹ These are precisely the rootedness of the (entire) human order in the vital and material orders, as we saw in chapter 1. Now, one would imagine that this line of thought would serve as the impetus to think the original unity of all these orders, and that once free of its idealist concerns it would land Merleau-Ponty in the conception of a more unitary source of meaning, from which human beings with all their creative powers would be seen to emerge. But as Merleau-Ponty, in the *Phenomenology*, rather takes his starting point in the experience of the lived body and even in the silent cogito, a subtle dualism is still installed between embodied constitution and the world as constituted.

It is all the more interesting, therefore, to realize that what preoccupied Merleau-Ponty during the latter half of the 1950s, when the ontology was beginning to take shape, was the phenomenon of life and its emergence in nature, as evidenced in the recently published *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. It is clear from the working notes left by Merleau-Ponty at his death that the phenomenon of life and its continuity with mind would have been a major part of *The Visible and the Invisible* had he lived to write it.³² Indeed, I believe one would not be far off the mark in taking the projected

³⁰ VI., 182/140.

³¹ Quoted in Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 126.

³² The manuscripts and working notes everywhere attest to the major presence of nature in his new projected work. See Claude Lefort's introduction to VI., 10-11/xxxv-xxxvi. Cf. Also an early working note of January 1959, as well as the last working note of March 1961, VI., 219-220/168-169, 322/274.

ontology as a new *Naturphilosophie*, and in what follows I shall treat Merleau-Ponty's notions of being and nature as more or less synonymous.³³ The radicalization by way of autopoietic theory and organismic philosophy we considered in chapter 1 thereby receives its justification and ties in very nicely with Merleau-Ponty's continuing and deepening interest in nature, and we shall be better able to understand the direction of his thought by also considering in this chapter his course notes on nature.³⁴

In the light of this, I now propose to grasp Merleau-Ponty's movement towards ontology beginning, in the next section, with the phenomenological treatment of the world in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, since this is really the first stop on the itinerary that takes us towards nature and being. This will be followed by a consideration of the seminal lecture courses on 'nature,' which is in many ways synonymous with 'world' as well as with 'being,' and which is crucial to Merleau-Ponty's development.³⁵ What this provides us with is really an *approfondissement* of the understanding of the natural world that I called for and briefly suggested in chapter 2, and that must be seen as the counterpart of the *approfondissement* of the subject that we considered in chapter 1. We shall then be in a position to see how Merleau-Ponty's radicalized investigation of the twin themes of world and subject leads to an ontological consummation of phenomenology, first in the concept of nature as productive source, and then in the explicit ontology and Merleau-Ponty's creative proposal of being as a play of difference within unity, taking the shape of an intertwining.

3. Of Worlds: Phenomenon, Horizon, Earth-Ground

Phenomenology and the World

The problem of 'the world' follows the development of the phenomenological movement like a shadow. In seeking a deeper ground for the objective world in the world as experienced, while not wanting to fall into subjectivism, phenomenology is led to focus on the 'the how' of the phenomenon's givenness. The question always lurking in the neighbourhood of such investigations, however, is that of the ontological status of the phenomenon, and ultimately of the world itself. Such is the pervasive presence of this issue

³³ Cf. Evans, 'Chaosmos and Merleau-Ponty's View of Nature,' 70.

³⁴ On this connection, see especially N., 194/145.

³⁵ Cf. VI., 179/137; HAL., xvii.

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that Husserl's close collaborator and assistant, Eugen Fink, in a much-cited article in *Kantstudien* in 1934, can write that 'the last (or first) question of phenomenology is that of the origin of the world.'³⁶ But 'world' is said in many ways, as we shall see, and the trajectory of thought in both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty leads to an ever deeper understanding of what is involved in this question of the world.

The short section explicitly addressing the problem of the 'world' in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* is, to my mind, one of his most important texts. It offers us the possibility of trying to 'think the unthought' of the philosopher, in the same way that he wanted to do so with Husserl. For this is surely one of the most obscure aspects of his thinking, but also the one that will finally unfold in his notions of nature and of being as flesh. The problem of the world parallels that of the thing, vis-à-vis its integrity. But with the world the problem is magnified and receives its proper contours, for while the thing shows up within a larger matrix, a figure against a number of horizons, 'the natural world is the horizon of all horizons, the style of all possible styles [*le monde naturel est l'horizon de tous les horizons, le style de tous les styles*], which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life.'³⁷

Nonetheless, there are also, as we have seen, statements in the *Phenomenology* that would seem to make not only the thing but the world a correlate of the lived body in a reciprocal dialogue. As Gary Brent Madison has pointed out, this double talk reveals 'the "*bête noir*" of phenomenology. It is the question of the ontological status of the world, of the being of the world.'³⁸ Granted the embodied nature of intentionality, which in itself is a major paradigm shift, must we still say that like the thing, the world is a correlate to embodied subjectivity? Is this not still to subjectivize the world, even if the subject is the body itself? And if these are inadequate formulations – and I think we must admit that they are – how should one formulate what the world is in such a way as to safeguard its integrity and not make it into something like an object constituted? Commentators on Merleau-Ponty's work have not always noted the transposition of the problem of integrity that occurs with the move from the thing in its immediate surrounding to the world as the encompassing structure – the structure in which, like the thing, the lived body itself is but a part – even though this transposition is signalled by Merleau-

³⁶ As quoted by Paul Ricoeur in Madison, *Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, xix.

³⁷ PhP., 386-387/385.

³⁸ Madison, *Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 32.

Ponty in the *Phenomenology*.³⁹ These are related problems, but they are not equivalent. For while it is possible to imagine that the *perceived* world and the corporeal subject emerge in the perceptual dialogue, it is not possible to imagine that the world in the more encompassing sense is enacted in perceptual dialogue with subjectivity. For as Merleau-Ponty also says, ‘the world is the inexhaustible reservoir [*réservoir inépuisable*] from which things are drawn.’⁴⁰ For a philosophy committed to the transcendental status of subjectivity, this is truly the *bête noire*. Let us look more closely at these tensions in Husserl and in Merleau-Ponty.

Part of the confusion of the *Phenomenology* results from Merleau-Ponty’s neglecting to define the different senses of ‘world’ in play; or perhaps, rather, from his own unthematized use of the word. Let me try, therefore, to clarify. It is initially possible to distinguish three senses of ‘world’ in the *Phenomenology*. There is first the *perceived world* (lived world, phenomenal world), which holds a certain primacy as it is the world in which we immediately live and which exists in relation to the lived body. This is always where we begin. There is also the *objective world* [*le monde objectif*], which, paradoxically, is less real; derived from the lived world by the sciences, this is the world as portrayed in scientific theory.⁴¹ As such it is abstract and ideal, and it is placed at some distance from the perceived world. Though this objective world may express truths about the perceived world, it must not be made the measure of reality, but must rather always return to the perceived world for its meaning and validation. And finally, there is what could be called the *subjective world*, which is the private world of dreams, illusions, hallucinations and schizophrenic disorders.⁴² This too is a modification of the perceived world – all illusion takes its material from the real world – but it is conjured up by the individual and is in fact under constant threat of being banished by the relative solidity of the perceived world, which is intersubjective.⁴³

The virtue of this heuristic is that it makes it clear that the perceived world is not a subjective (private, introspective, individualistic) world, but it is the world as the subject encounters it in the perceptual relation, and always with other subjects. It does not, however, bring out another aspect of the world that I think is unmistakably there in the *Phenomenology*; for as Madison observes,

³⁹ PhP., 383/381.

⁴⁰ PhP., 402/401.

⁴¹ PhP., 83-84/66.

⁴² PhP., 391-402/389-402.

⁴³ Cf. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 88.

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there are instances in the text where Merleau-Ponty intimates a sort of *pre-world*, from which the perceived world itself arises:

Where does the phenomenal world itself come from? To say that the world exists only for the (bodily) subject and the subject exists only for the world seems to be a conception that in the last analysis does not account for the ontological status – the being – of either the world or the subject. In fact, Merleau-Ponty lets it be understood that the phenomenological world emerges from a sort of *pre-world* existing prior to the dialectal-intentional structure bodily subject – perceived world.⁴⁴

For instance, Merleau-Ponty says that the world is ‘one being, and one only, a vast individual from which my experiences are taken, and which persists on the horizon of my life as the distant roar of a great city provides the background to everything we do in it.’⁴⁵ As with his image of the ‘inexhaustible reservoir,’ here the world is not so much conceived of as the counterpoint of the body-subject in reciprocal dialogue, but rather as beneath or beyond both the subject and the perceived world. It is similar when he speaks of the world as a being that, though it has ‘an envelope of objective and determinate attributes, it has also fissures and gaps into which subjectivities slip and lodge themselves [*des fissures, des lacunes par où les subjectivités se logent en lui*], or rather which are those subjectivities themselves.’⁴⁶ Here again we see how subjectivity is located within the world, rather than as its counterpart. Note that these expressions are not equivalent to speaking of ‘being-in-the-world,’ which is a way of saying that the subject is situated in an immediate environment rather than affirming an ontological thesis of the being of the world. What we have here is instead a suggestion of an ‘*omnitudo realitatis*,’⁴⁷ in which both subjectivity and the perceived world are ultimately found. There is also the quote with which I began: the world as horizon of horizons, guaranteeing the unity of my experience. This clearly suggests an encompassing whole. Granted, apart from a few elliptical expressions, these ideas are written between the lines of the *Phenomenology* and we see them, perhaps, only because we are aware of the subsequent development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought as it unfolds and becomes ever more explicitly ontological – for indeed, most of the time Merleau-Ponty speaks here of the world either pejoratively, as the presumed world of objectivism, or as the perceived world, the immediate surrounding or

⁴⁴ Madison, *Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 35; cf. 169.

⁴⁵ PhP., 384/382.

⁴⁶ PhP., 390/389.

⁴⁷ PhP., 385/383.

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Umwelt. I mention these instances in the *Phenomenology* merely to indicate that the impulse towards ontology – towards thinking a more comprehensive matrix – is there from very early on, and signals the tension I have discussed.

As to the question itself, where do we stand? To stress, as Merleau-Ponty does, the interactive relations between the lived body and the perceived world, seems to me to be a decisive step beyond the alternatives of objectivist realism and subjectivist idealism, precisely because it allows us to speak of the world as genuinely real, given for us as well as inexhaustible by us; in short, to speak of the world as manifesting itself and of the subject as the embodied dative of manifestation. But much hangs upon the ontological framework, implicit or explicit, in which the perceptual dialogue is placed. Madison, in an effort to bring out the discontinuity of the earlier and the later Merleau-Ponty, suggests that the perceived world is automatically subjectivized in the perceptual dialogue. I believe this is going too far. I concur instead with Kwant, Dillon, Toadvine and others who see a fundamental continuity in Merleau-Ponty's project, albeit one that moves towards a much more explicit taking up of ontological themes.⁴⁸ Above all, there is clearly a need to say more than that the lived body and the perceived world are dialectically related and emerge together; the question naturally arises how we are to characterize the whole that these two poles jointly make up, and this is essential if the problems pursued in the last chapter are to be avoided. However, in this situation the danger would be that we too quickly help ourselves to a notion of being or world that ends up once again in objectivism, conceiving of the world as the biggest object out there and ourselves as – *per impossibile* – looking at it from the outside. This would, in a sense, no less be the danger of phenomenology in its idealist mode, where absolute consciousness gets to constitute the whole, than it would of objectivist realism, where subjectivity must ultimately be co-opted into objective causal processes. To articulate a notion of world that escapes these pitfalls calls for a reconceived language.

⁴⁸ The interpretative issue of the continuity versus rupture between the earlier and the later Merleau-Ponty is a point of serious contention in Merleau-Ponty scholarship. Gary Madison champions an interpretation where the rupture is stressed, focusing on the novelty of the late ontology in relation to the earlier phenomenology. Remy Kwant, Theodore Garaets and Martin Dillon have all in different ways argued for the deep continuity of the Merleau-Pontian *oeuvre*. This does not preclude the obvious fact that the *Phenomenology*, according to Merleau-Ponty, was in need of an ontological elaboration. See e.g., Madison, *Phenomenology*, 166-203, 267-290; Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 11-13, 230; Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 148-150, 153-154, 174; Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 120.

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The objective and subjective worlds, then, are anchored in the perceived world, which itself suggests an origin in some sort of ‘pre-world.’ To make some sense of this it is instructive to compare Merleau-Ponty’s development of these notions with that of Husserl, for in this case he seems to follow Husserl very closely indeed.⁴⁹ Anyone familiar with Husserl’s later writings notices the parallelism between Merleau-Ponty’s *lived world* and Husserl’s *lifeworld* [*Lebenswelt*], which is ‘the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception, that is ever experienced or experienceable’ [*die einzig wirkliche, die wirklich wahrnehmungsmässig gegebene, die je erfahrene und erfahrbare*].⁵⁰ However, some commentators have insisted that these two notions should not be conflated, arguing that Husserl’s lifeworld is finally only there for a constituting subjectivity, thus reducing his position once again to a transcendental idealism, whereas Merleau-Ponty’s lived world is an explicit attempt to undercut such idealism as well as its rival sibling, realism.⁵¹ There is reason, however, to be suspicious of this overly polarized account of the relation between these philosophers; at the very least, it seems that a much more interesting story could be told. For one thing, such an account presupposes that Husserl’s notion of the lifeworld was fixed and ready, while in reality it involved a number of metamorphoses from its original mention in *Ideas II* to the unpublished *Nachlass*, something that Merleau-Ponty was well aware of.⁵² What is striking is the way in which Husserl’s development parallels Merleau-Ponty’s increasing awareness of the problem of the world in his own philosophy, a development that presumably occurred as Merleau-Ponty had opportunity to read and digest more and more of Husserl’s late unpublished documents.⁵³ Far from being antithetical, therefore, their approaches are closely kindred both in terms of substance and historical circumstance, and a consideration of Husserl will help us to better grasp the difficulty involved in trying to think the world and to understand more deeply Merleau-Ponty’s position and its internal motivation.

⁴⁹ ‘Il ne serait pas faux de définir la pensée de Merleau-Ponty comme une tentative de saisir le sens spécifique du monde, élément de notre vie spontanée et, par là, de mener à bien le projet husserlien, thématiqué dans la *Krisis*, de retour au “monde de la vie.” Renaud Barbaras, *Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: Ellipses, 1997), 59.

⁵⁰ *Krisis*, 49/48-49 (§ 9).

⁵¹ Dillon makes this point in *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 87.

⁵² PhP., 423 n. 1/425 n. 8; N., 102-113/70-79.

⁵³ Cf. Ted Toadvine, ‘Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview,’ in Toadvine and Embree, eds., *Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl*, esp. 263-286.

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To briefly bring this out I shall consult the heuristic developed by Anthony Steinbock to account for the different senses of the concept of 'lifeworld' in Husserl. Steinbock distinguishes four provisional concepts and two transcendental concepts, following logically upon each other.⁵⁴ Among the four provisional concepts, the second is particularly close to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived world. Here Husserl understands the lifeworld as the foundation of sense [*Sinnesfundament*] of the sciences, which is to say that the sciences, dealing in ideal notions and symbols, must ultimately refer back to the lifeworld if they are to have any meaning for us. Merleau-Ponty says the same about the relation of the sciences to the perceived world, 'which alone endows scientific operations with meaning [*sens*] and to which these latter always refer back.'⁵⁵

It is the fourth provisional concept that raises the issue of idealism, for here Husserl tries to counter the relativism entailed by the fact that different cultures could have different lifeworlds by introducing a unifying idea of the lifeworld as an essential structure of perception, a sort of universal a priori accessible to phenomenological reflection.⁵⁶ Thus he ends up treating the lifeworld as being on a par with a constituted object: 'I have freed myself through the epoché; I stand *above* the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a *phenomenon* [*Ich stehe über der Welt, die nun für mich in einem ganz eigenartigen Sinne zum Phänomen geworden ist*].'⁵⁷ With respect to *this* lifeworld-concept, Dillon's critique is justified. It is also criticized by Merleau-Ponty, who understands it as an inconsistency in Husserl's development of the lifeworld-problematic.⁵⁸

Sometimes when Husserl treats of the lifeworld, then, he seems to end up with the world seen as a totality by constituting consciousness, 'a *cogitatum* writ large,' as Steinbock says.⁵⁹ But there is a more profound concept, one used

⁵⁴ The provisional concepts are: (1) intuitable with a higher degree of evidence than ordinary science; (2) the foundation of sense, founding the meaning structures of science; (3) culturally subjective and thus unique to different socio-historical groups; and (4) an essential structure, serving as the universal a priori overcoming relativism. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 88-96.

⁵⁵ PhP., 86/68.

⁵⁶ *Krisis*, 142-145/139-141 (§ 36).

⁵⁷ *Krisis*, 155/152 (§ 41) (emphases in original).

⁵⁸ PhP., 423 n. 1/419 n. 8. Cf. Barbaras, 'Phenomenology of Life,' 208.

⁵⁹ Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 98. An important phenomenological reason for this is that Husserl realizes that just as an object has an 'objective sense,' to which the many diverse profiles and aspects are constitutively related, in the same way the many different objects must be coherently related to each other through their relations to an overarching 'sense' of the world.

both by Husserl himself and by Merleau-Ponty, and that is to treat the world as a *horizon*, indeed, as the ‘horizon of all horizons.’⁶⁰ This brings us to the two ‘transcendental concepts’ of lifeworld that Steinbock considers to be the culmination of Husserl’s writings: the lifeworld as *horizon* and the lifeworld as *earth-ground*. Methodologically, this implies asking not for the phenomenal givenness of the world, in the manner of an object, but for the pre-givenness of the world, in the manner of a necessary context for the givenness of any object: ‘The world is pre-given to us ... as horizon [*als Horizont vorgegeben*].’⁶¹

World as Horizon and Earth-Ground

The essential thing about horizons, as phenomenology uses the concept, is that horizons are not given as objects are given, but are rather co-given or implied – horizons are constitutive of all givenness, but are themselves not given.⁶² In other words, a horizon is that which must surround the thematized object in order for it to be given, but which cannot itself be thematized *as horizon*. We can thematize the horizon, for then it will no longer be a horizon – it will be an object appearing against another horizon. It belongs to the horizon as horizon to be always receding in favour of a new spectacle.

If the lifeworld is to be understood after the manner of a horizon, and if this is to be an advance over the previous understanding of the lifeworld in the *Crisis* – where it is sometimes reduced to an object, a phenomenon, a totality for a constituting consciousness that stands over and above it – then it must no longer be understood as straightforwardly given in experience, but as the ultimate co-given context. In other words, what the concept of the lifeworld must be able to elucidate is the way in which the world is always already

He thus treats the world in its entirety as an objective sense modelled on the perceived object to articulate the coherence of the whole. Cf. *ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁰ PhP., 386-387/385.

⁶¹ *Krisis*, 145/142 (§ 37).

⁶² Husserl’s analyses progressively laid bare several horizons at play in experience, primarily in standard perception: The *internal* and *external* horizons are spatial in nature. The first refers to the sides or dimensions of an object that are not seen from my present perspective – the hidden sides, such as the back of a house. The latter refers precisely to the context of the surrounding milieu, which like the internal horizons of the object changes in relation to the moving body that perceives. But there are also the *temporal* horizons, the harmonious successions of protension, impression and retention that any object perceived unfolds within. There would also be *historical* and *cultural* horizons at play in standard perception, something that Husserl came to emphasize more towards the end of his life. For concise presentations, see *Ideen I*, 56-58/51-53 (§ 27), 184-185/195-196 (§ 82); *Krisis*, 159-167/157-164 (§§ 45-47).

invisibly operative.⁶³ Indeed, the world must itself be seen as a transcendental condition, as that which gives meaning. As such, it comes forward as something like an interpretation of sub-phenomenal being, based upon phenomenal experience.

However, it proved very difficult for Husserl to consistently hold to the transcendental role of horizons, and as Steinbock observes, he was prone to substantialize the horizon and treat it merely as a potential given or as a theme not yet made thematic by consciousness.⁶⁴ This ties in with what we considered, in the last chapter, as a difference between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty vis-à-vis the absences of perceptual experience and what they indicate. A Husserlian tendency, here confirmed by Steinbock's analysis, was to view the absent merely as the potentially present, while Merleau-Ponty, albeit perhaps not consistently, suggested a perceptual depth going beyond the potentially given. When Husserl slips into his substantializing attitude, the world is grasped as a totality and precisely *not* as a horizon, since the latter is essentially characterized by its open and indefinite structure. To misconstrue the world-horizon in this way adds nothing to the fourth provisional concept mentioned above and does not escape the idealizing tendency that we have identified as a tension in Merleau-Ponty's account as well. Rather, it seems to smuggle back in a dualism between consciousness and world.

As it turns out, it is very difficult to philosophically approach the utmost context of our lives without objectifying it, without placing oneself 'outside' of it – though of course, one can never be 'outside' of one's horizon. We are here in the vicinity of a fundamental paradox that must be treated as such; our language and our ordinary ways of thought are frustrated. But it seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's intimation of a sort of pre-world does pay homage to the Husserlian attempt to genuinely think the world as a horizon encompassing subject and object alike, without, as it were, thereby making a totality – as his use of Husserl's expression 'horizon of horizons' indicates. Such a world would not merely be pre-given in relation to reflective consciousness, but pre-given also in relation to the lived body; it would indicate the subject's absolute givenness from a source it has in no way constituted. I am speaking here not just of the existential givenness of the cogito, discovering itself always too late, always already involved in a situation, but of the outright ontological givenness

⁶³ Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 103.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 105-106. Cf. 108: 'After having suggested the novelty of the lifeworld as world-horizon, Husserl's error, as suggested, was to attempt to grasp pre-givenness in its wholeness, transforming it thematically into an object-like structure.'

of being born, of natality.⁶⁵ In short, it seems to me that in trying to radically think the world as horizon of horizons, as ultimate context, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty broach an ontological discourse: a discourse about being or the all-encompassing.

It must also be added that while a horizon is not itself given, there is a specific style of manifestation to what it gives, such that anticipation builds upon previous experience and a stability arises in the harmonious unfolding of sense directed by the horizon. In the same way that this is true of spatial, temporal and historical horizons, so it is true of the world-horizon: The world has its specific ways of manifestation; it is encountered as having a particular style, in which we live and in which sense or meaning unfolds harmoniously. Merleau-Ponty tacitly grasps the significance of this when he claims that ‘the natural world is ... the style of all possible styles.’⁶⁶ This is distinct from the way in which ‘objective thought’ envisages the unity and harmonious unfolding of the world as the result of a dependable constant causal relation between things-in-themselves – with the world as the sum of things-in-themselves – and conscious minds. To speak about the world as the ultimate horizon is an attempt to speak otherwise about what is nonetheless the unity of experience.

Such is the first of Husserl’s transcendental concepts of the lifeworld, clearly indicated in the *Crisis* and taken up in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology*, though he does not consistently develop it. The second transcendental concept elaborated by Husserl, that of the world as earth-ground [*Boden*], is present in the *Crisis* only as negatively determined – which is to say, as that which transcendental consciousness stands *over* – but it comes to occupy a positive place in Husserl’s posthumously published working manuscripts.⁶⁷ The notion of earth-ground represents a deepening of Husserl’s understanding of the constitutional, meaning-giving role of the world and it is remarkably

⁶⁵ Cf. PhP., 260/250; 417-418/419; 468/473.

⁶⁶ PhP., 386-387/385.

⁶⁷ Especially in *Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature: The Originary Arc, the Earth, Does Not Move* (hereafter *Umsturz*), and in *The World of the Living Present and the Constitution of the Surrounding World That Is Outside the Flesh* (hereafter *World of the Living Present*). Both have been republished as appended to Merleau-Ponty’s lecture course *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. *Umsturz* was written in 1934 and *World of the Living Present* is an undated manuscript that appeared in press for the first time in 1946. (Alfred Schütz, who first presented it, believed it to be composed in 1931.) The former, on which I shall here concentrate, is often referred to as *Umsturz* because it was found in an envelope on which Husserl had written *Umsturz der kopernikanischen Lehre* [*Overthrow of the Copernican Theory*].

consonant with Merleau-Ponty's development, for the earth-ground is a concept continuous with that of the lived body, as Merleau-Ponty recognized: 'There is a kinship between the being of the earth and that of my living body (*Leib*).'⁶⁸

With the notion of the world as earth-ground [*Boden*] we are getting very close to rootedness, one of the principle guiding motifs of the metaphysics I have been driving towards, for the earth-ground, or the soil, is that into which meaning sinks its roots, the element from which it springs, the nourishment that sustains it.⁶⁹ Husserl elaborates on the world as earth-ground in an investigation of what is the ultimate source of constituted sense, particularly of spatiality. As source it cannot be an intentional correlate, but must itself be constitutive of experience in the first place – not given, but pre-given, always already operative. In fact, in the manuscript known as *Umsturz* we find Husserl going to great lengths to demonstrate that the earth-ground could never be a perfectly given totality, and that all notions of the world as an object for reflection in fact presuppose a more primordial earth-ground, in which it must be rooted: 'The earth is a whole whose parts ... are bodies, but which insofar as it is a "whole" is not a body.'⁷⁰ In the same way that Husserl tried to think the world-horizon as a unity without making of it an object for consciousness, he is here more explicitly laying out his understanding of the world as a unity without objectifying it, true to the way it is pre-given rather than given, always already there. To this end he considers a number of outlandish possibilities, or thought-experiments, the most extravagant of which is the following: It is possible that I would have grown up exclusively on a space-travelling 'flying ark' (that is, a space ship), in which case the flying ark itself would in effect be my earth-ground – that is, be ultimately sense-constituting for me. If my parents started off from planet Earth, then that would in the same way be their earth-ground – that relative to which sense would be constituted for them. We would in effect have different earth-grounds. 'The ship would itself be my "earth," my homeland. But my parents are not then primordially at home on the ship; they still have the old home, another primordial homeland

⁶⁸ HAL., 9.

⁶⁹ As Steinbock explains, Husserl's use of the German word *Boden* instead of *Grund* indicates that it is not here a question of ground in the sense of a rational foundation given to consciousness, or simply a causal antecedent state, but rather of ground in the sense of pre-given source of rationality, as the soil in which rational accomplishments sink their historical roots. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 110.

⁷⁰ *Umsturz*, 122.

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[*Urheimat*].⁷¹ But this seems an odd conclusion; if the earth-ground is to be a transcendental clarification of the world as ultimate, then how can there be several of them? Husserl clarifies: There is of course only one unique earth-ground, and while it remains true that each ego has its primordial home – in my case, the flying ark – these earth-grounds are themselves historically rooted, such that ‘all relative histories have to that extent a single primordial history of which they are episodes.’⁷² In other words, a foundational earth-ground is constitutive of subsequent derived earth-grounds, and that in a generative way; it is mediated through the generations of birth and death, through historicity.

This whole historicity belongs inseparably to the Ego ... One might therefore think that the earth can no more lose its sense as ‘primordial homeland,’ as the ark of the world, than my flesh can lose its wholly unique ontic sense as primordial flesh from which every flesh derives a part of its ontic sense ... There is only one humanity and one earth – all the fragments which are or have been separated from it belong to it.⁷³

Even having been born and raised on a space ship, therefore, the earth would be my primordially constitutive ground. For I would still be human – an earthling – and I would carry the historically sedimented structures of humanity in my very flesh: in the beating of my heart and the breathing of my lungs, in the posture and movement of my body, in my speaking and thinking.⁷⁴ To borrow from *The Origin of Geometry*, I would presumably still learn geometry on the space ship. Considerations such as these move Husserl to conclude that the earth-ground is a *Stammboden*, a root-ground.⁷⁵ It is not that I always have conscious access to the meaning-grounds of my life, but rather, human meaning is deeply *rooted* in the earth.

Through reflections such as these Husserl attempts to describe the transcendental function of the world without reducing it to an object constituted, and to think our ultimate context in such a way as to respect our derivation or givenness from a source we can never fully comprehend. The issue of givenness from an inaccessible source was, as we have seen, an important theme for Merleau-Ponty as well. Here, however, by emphasizing the generativity involved – birth and death – it seems to me that Husserl indicates what could be construed as an ontological understanding of the earth-

⁷¹ *Umsturz*, 126.

⁷² *Umsturz*, 126-127.

⁷³ *Umsturz*, 130.

⁷⁴ Cf. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 119.

⁷⁵ *Ursprung*, quoted by Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 120.

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ground as something that would have to be prior to the lived body itself and its pre-reflective hold on the world. This is the deeper question of origin Husserl had begun to philosophically tease out and to which Merleau-Ponty was ever more drawn, as we shall see presently.

In this way, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty move regressively from the reflective cogito as constituting to the pre-reflective lived body as constituting, and from there to the world as ultimately constitutive, elaborated in terms of the earth-ground. In all likelihood, the deeper notion of the world could not have been reached had they not passed by way of the lived body; it is not for naught that Merleau-Ponty will call his ontology, in which many of these themes return, an ontology of *flesh*. The description of the function of the earth-ground is an extension and deepening of the analysis of the function of the lived body.⁷⁶ However, while the analysis of the lived body can take us from the explicit dualism of the reflective cogito and its world, but not from the subtler dualism of the lived body itself and the perceived world; so the earth-ground indicates a more profound unity, constitutive of subjectivity and objectivity in all its forms. 'It is the earth-ground that is constitutive of sense for both subject and object.'⁷⁷ The earth-ground supports the perceiver and the perceived object alike, while it cannot itself become a perceived object. That this is the direction taken by the later Merleau-Ponty is corroborated by Madison: 'The Earth, it seems, is that pre-world on which is based the phenomenological world, the object of our existential projects; that is, it is the invisible soil or ground which upholds the subject-world relation and which makes it possible.'⁷⁸

It has now become evident that the notion of the lifeworld is not cut-and-dried in Husserl's writings, but evinces internal tensions and above all some very profound suggestions for phenomenology's overcoming of dualism along the lines of horizon and earth-ground. David Abram's remarks are apposite as an overall judgement of Husserl's treatment of the lifeworld:

Husserl's writings seem to suggest that the life-world has various layers, that underneath the layer of diverse cultural life-worlds there reposes a deeper, more unitary life-world, always already there beneath all our cultural acquisitions, a vast and continually overlooked dimension of experience that nevertheless supports and sustains all our

⁷⁶ Ibid., 113-116.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁷⁸ Madison, *Phenomenology*, 171-172. Cf. Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 62-65.

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diverse and discontinuous worldviews. ... The earth is thus the secret depth of the lifeworld.⁷⁹

The lifeworld problematic thus calls some aspects of phenomenology into question even as it opens out towards ontology. Steinbock even says that the lifeworld as constitutive earth-ground implies 'refining, if not revising the constitutive role of subjectivity.'⁸⁰ This would be necessary, presumably, because the world (as horizon or earth-ground) must be seen as the primordial source from which subjectivity in its various forms itself derives. As we shall see, this is precisely the direction of Merleau-Ponty's explicit ontology. In sum, perhaps we could say that a constitutive function has descended from consciousness, through the body, all the way down into the world.⁸¹ When phenomenology, going back through the layers of constitution towards the original, comes up against notions like this it cannot remain phenomenology *stricto sensu*, but must broach an ontological discourse. While this is foreshadowed in the *Phenomenology's* treatment of the world, or pre-world, it clearly becomes Merleau-Ponty's main project during the late 1950s, coming to explication first in the courses he gave on nature, which seem to lay the groundwork for a reconceived *Naturphilosophie*, and then in his projected *Visible and the Invisible*.

4. The 'Barbarous Source': Nature as Productive Origin

What must nature be like if there are irreducible and ontologically real Gestalt structures? What must nature be like for there to be continuity rather than rupture between the natural world, life, the sensing body and reflective human consciousness? The budding philosophy of nature coming through in Merleau-Ponty's lectures at the Collège de France from 1956 to 1960 takes up these issues in a new way and represents the beginning of a more integrated philosophy. Let me indicate the most important advances; this can be rather quick, since there is some overlap between these points and what we have seen

⁷⁹ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 41-42, 43.

⁸⁰ Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 120 (quotation marks omitted).

⁸¹ Cf. Steinbock, 'Saturated Intentionality,' 186.

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develop vis-à-vis the world as horizon and earth-ground, as well as the subjectivity intrinsic to life.⁸²

In his courses on the concept of nature, Merleau-Ponty extends and deepens one path suggested by the *Phenomenology*, attempting to think the profound continuity between nature and the human person. Here, however, he is perfectly clear that such a deepening involves pursuing this theme in an explicitly ontological register:

Nature as a leaf or layer of total Being – the ontology of Nature as the way toward ontology – the way we prefer because the evolution of the concept of Nature is a more convincing propaedeutic [since it] more clearly shows *the necessity of the ontological mutation*. ... We will show how the concept of Nature is always the expression of an ontology – and its privileged expression.⁸³

If indeed, as I have suggested throughout, phenomenology harbours within itself the necessity of such a passage to ontology, it will be crucial for us to understand why this is so. We can understand this passage in terms of what phenomenology, within its own methodological strictures, uncovers in two directions: Starting from intentionality, or givenness, it encounters the thing perceived and finally the encompassing world; but no less inevitably, it encounters the subject, first as reflective, then as operative and anonymous. In other words, pushed to its limits, phenomenological analysis discloses that which exceeds its own grasp in two directions – the subjective and the objective – and which therefore demands another approach, the ontological. We have already seen the lineaments of such an analysis at the beginning of this chapter, with reference to Merleau-Ponty's late essay 'The Philosopher and His Shadow.' These conclusions do not entail a rejection of phenomenology as such or its painstaking results, which retain their value insofar as vast strands of human experience and meaning-formation *are* susceptible to analysis along the lines suggested by phenomenology. What it does mean is that phenomenology

⁸² Indeed, when Merleau-Ponty gave his third lecture course on nature, he was delivering the parallel course entitled *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. These courses are alike parallel, in turn, to the composition of many of his working notes for *The Visible and the Invisible*.

⁸³ 'La Nature comme feuillet ou couche de l'être total – l'ontologie de la Nature comme voie vers l'ontologie, - voie que l'on préfère ici parce que l'évolution du concept de la Nature est une propédeutique plus convaincante, montre plus clairement *la nécessité de mutation ontologique*. ... Montrons comment la concept de la Nature est toujours expression d'une ontologie – et expression privilégiée.' N., 265/204 (my emphasis). In this work Merleau-Ponty consistently capitalizes 'Nature.' I shall however keep to convention and write 'nature,' except when directly quoting him.

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cannot be seen as co-extensive with philosophical thinking itself, but only as a part of the philosophical task. Let us now briefly look closer at this twofold limit.

The experience that we are confronted with things in a world whose depths we cannot sound, corresponding to the experience of subjectivity as rooted in an irretrievable past, is articulated in the chapter on the thing and the natural world in the *Phenomenology*. This we have already considered at length, so it suffices to point out that this is the experience that animates Merleau-Ponty's later reflections on nature, to the extent that, commenting approvingly on Whitehead, he can say: 'Nature is thus what remains intact after perceptual unveiling [*dévoilement perceptif*], what is indifferent to the look that I pose upon it. There is a transcendence of Being.'⁸⁴ Yet there is more to it, for this being, which is nature, is now conceived of as a productive source: 'The concept of Nature does not evoke only the residue of what had not been constructed [*construit*] by me, but also a productivity that is not ours [*une productivité qui n'est pas nôtre*].'⁸⁵ This productivity is what signifies the decisive break with modern ontology, which Merleau-Ponty traces back to Descartes, but also to the 'Judeo-Christian ontology.'⁸⁶ These, he argues, reduce nature to *naturata*, and forget its role as *naturans*. Indeed, on the first page of the course notes he connects the concept of nature (from the Latin *nascor*) with life, birth and self-productivity: 'Nature ... is the autoproductio of meaning [*l'autoproduction d'un sens*].'⁸⁷ This theme of the productive or creative power of nature is crucial to the argument I propose in the following chapters.

But this new emphasis is also decisive for the tension we have detected in *The Structure* as well as in the *Phenomenology*. In the former work, we were left without a positive characterization of the being of the Gestalt and with the unhappy suspicion that Gestalt emerges only through a relation with a perceiver. In the latter work, we found a vacillation between understanding things (and ultimately the world) as necessarily related to the lived body, on the one hand, and on the other hand as pre-given in relation even to the lived body. It seems to me that the concept of nature as self-productivity is able to overcome these tensions and progress towards a more integrated philosophy. To be sure, Merleau-Ponty continues to speak of the relation between the lived

⁸⁴ N., 169/118.

⁸⁵ N., 165/125 (my emphasis).

⁸⁶ N., 169-185/125-138. I shall have more to say in chapter 4 on Merleau-Ponty's perceived connection between modern ontology and Judeo-Christian ontology.

⁸⁷ N., 19/3.

body and the perceived world as a dialogue, where each contributes to the emergence of sense in a sort of question-and-reply dialectic, but he is much more emphatic in articulating nature's *own* meaning-production prior to the constitutive role of human subjectivity, and this is the important point. Thus, for instance, he describes Leibniz's philosophy of nature like this: 'What lives in Nature is not mind or spirit [*l'esprit*], but rather the beginning of *meaning in the process of ordering itself*, but which has not fully emerged [*ce commencement de sens en train de s'arranger et qui n'est pas tout à fait dégagé*]. ... The subject has to intervene in order to bring meaning out fully [*Il faut que le sujet intervienne pour dégager le sens*].'⁸⁸ Meaning gets going without the subject, but in such a way that it is never fully positive; the formation of meaning is an open-ended process, which is why subjects can and must take it up to unfold its potentiality. Again, he says that 'Husserl rehabilitated the idea of Nature by his idea of jointure to a common truth that subjects would continue but of which *they would not be the initiators* [*que les sujets continueraient, mais dont ils ne seraient pas les initiateurs*].'⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty takes this all the way back to Pre-Socratic ideas of nature: 'Heraclitus says that Nature is a child at play; *it gives meaning* [*elle donne sens*], but in the manner of a child who is playing, and this meaning is never total [*ce sens n'est jamais total*].'⁹⁰ These remarks suggest that the central concept of intentionality, as a dialectical or dialogical relation between subject and object, must be entirely reworked and even rejected as foundational, in favour of *expressivity* as an auto-affective process of nature.

Here, then, is the answer to the question we posed in the last chapter and articulated again at the beginning of this one, to the effect that there must be some sort of primordial structure in nature if the subject is to be able to enter into a meaningful dialogue with it – indeed, if the subject is itself just such a structural Gestalt. Merleau-Ponty's dialogical account of perceptual meaning, with the subject as a sort of answer to the obscure question put by the thing, everywhere seemed to assume such a primordial structure at work, but he failed to adequately thematize this dimension in his earlier work.⁹¹ In the lectures on nature, however, Merleau-Ponty discovers a meaning that must be seen to arise in the depths of being or nature, rather than being 'an art hidden in the depths of the human soul.'⁹² Thus, I would argue that the primordially of nature's

⁸⁸ N., 68/43 (my emphasis).

⁸⁹ N., 111/78 (my emphasis)

⁹⁰ N., 119/84 (my emphasis).

⁹¹ Cf. Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 126, 232-236.

⁹² See PhP., 492/498.

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own meaning-making follows from the internal exigency of the perspective opened up by Merleau-Ponty – that is to say, from his account of perceptual dialogue, and from the considerations presented above to the effect that perceptual meaning must be seen as a taking up and a creative appropriation of a meaning that is already underway, and hence as a continuation of nature's self-expression, from which we are given, rather than as the brute upsurge of dialogical meaning *ex nihilo*. It seems to me that the development of nature as productive source answers to this exigency precisely and effectively. Nature is never the subject's wholly other, nor is subjectivity ever *anti-physis*; rather, they are continuous, as Merleau-Ponty had already suggested – half-heartedly, it is true – in *The Structure*.

Now, this deepened understanding of nature as productive and as initiator of meaning is, obviously, connected to the Merleau-Pontian understanding of the subject followed through to its ultimate consequences, another theme that is prominent in the lecture courses on nature. For here Merleau-Ponty returns in a more sustained and detailed way to the 'vital structures' that occupied his thought in his first work. In the second lecture course, he devotes himself to the problem of life, to animality, to Coghill's study of the behaviour of the Axolotl lizard and Gesell's study of embryology, to the concept of emergence and the theories of Darwin and von Uexküll, to cellular biology and much more. My point is that Merleau-Ponty is out once more to establish the roots of subjectivity in a deeper way. In a phrase strikingly similar to Hans Jonas' credo, he states: 'In the simplest physiology, we will find behaviours very similar to so-called higher behaviours [*comportements supérieurs*]. Reciprocally, we will have to conceive higher phenomena according to the mode of existence of lower behaviours [*comportements inférieurs*].'⁹³

We already considered the potential for developing this perspective in chapter 1, where the anonymous subjectivity of the body was extended to minimal life by way of contemporary autopoietic theory, and given philosophical interpretation by Jonas' more developed organismic philosophy (though to the best of my knowledge, Jonas never mentions Merleau-Ponty as a precursor in his *magnum opus*, *The Philosophy of Life*), so we need not dwell on it here. Let it suffice to make the obvious point that such an approach to subjectivity, which can broadly speaking be called emergentist, chimes very well with the understanding of nature as productive source. We are led to a conception, according to which the auto-affective stirrings of nature eventually

⁹³ N., 234/178; cf. PhP., 494/501.

lead to life, and with this monumental event to the transcendental function proper, since life itself has an *Umwelt*. As life develops we get the human organism, which like no other organism, turns back on nature and invests it with layer upon layer of embodied, linguistic, cultural and scientific meaning, according to the logic of *Fundierung*, and for which being itself becomes a question.

Must we not say, then, that regardless of whether phenomenology sets out to radically investigate the perceived world – finding there, not the world as a totality of fully constituted objects, but an unfathomably deep origin that gives without ever itself being given; or whether it sets out to radically investigate the subject – finding there, not a transcendently pure consciousness, but a subject nourished by an obscure and immemorial root system: that *it ultimately approaches the same being?* This would be the ‘being’ from which the subject and the world are both drawn, or the ‘nature’ that is found both within and without. This was Merleau-Ponty’s conviction, and it spurred him on to develop a full-fledged ontology: ‘Our experience of Nature in us and outside of us [can] contribute to delineating another ontology, and it is in terms of this that we consult it.’⁹⁴ With this we are brought to Merleau-Ponty’s explicit and interrupted attempt to develop an ontology proper: an interpretation of being.

5. Being of Flesh: Rethinking Ontology

What is possible to say about the structures of being? How can we articulate the vicissitudes of its vertical unfolding? Merleau-Ponty’s incipient ontology, such as we find it in the final chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, entitled ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm’ [L’entrelacs – le chiasme], is an attempt to speak about vertical being and its ways, to describe in rich and creative language the processes of verticality in a number of significant cases: the body, perception, intersubjectivity, thought and language. My purpose in this section is not to elaborate on any of these themes for its own sake, interesting as that would be, but rather to lay bare the essential structure of being that Merleau-

⁹⁴ N., 266/205. Merleau-Ponty saw part of this already in the *Phenomenology*, where he writes: ‘I am thrown into nature, and nature appears not only as outside me ... but it is also discernible at the centre of subjectivity.’ PhP., 403/403. However, here he sees no need for this to lead to an explicitly ontological elaboration, and does not follow it to the conception of the unity of being that we meet in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Ponty divines in these cases – the structure of vertical intertwining – and to draw together the themes of the preceding chapters in a more integrated philosophy of rootedness and verticality.

The Roots of 'This Inspired Exegesis': Contingency?

Merleau-Ponty introduces his chiasm-chapter by returning to an unassailable phenomenon: the harmony between the perceiving subject and the thing perceived. It is, he says, as though a 'pre-established harmony' [*harmonie préétablie*] exists between them, as though the look 'knew them [visible things] before knowing them.'⁹⁵ We have considered the teleological unfolding of perception in the previous chapter: my body knows how to comport itself in such a way as to disclose the sensible world with tremendous detail. Another way of putting this would be to say that the dialogue between the corporeal subject and the world, as a rule, is always meaningful (or potentially meaningful). In beginning the exposition of his new ontology, Merleau-Ponty thus returns to a question that has been with him since his first book and that we have considered at length in chapter 2: How is it that the world is meaningful?

Merleau-Ponty has in fact so far given us two different answers to this question. In his first works, perceptual dialogue names the answer: Meaning primordially emerges in this dialogue and there are no prior structures of any sort to constrain it; the perceptual dialogue is absolutely contingent, an ultimate *factum brutum*. As he says in the *Phenomenology*: 'beyond these [dialogical correlations] there is nothing to understand.'⁹⁶ In the later courses, however, a new emphasis begins to make itself heard: The world is meaningful because it *is* 'meaning in the process of ordering itself,' which is to say that a certain structure intrinsically belongs to the world, although not in a fully actualized or once-and-for-all kind of way. Merleau-Ponty stresses process, becoming and human participation.

In the opening of the chiasm-chapter Merleau-Ponty seems to be asking how it can be that the subject is able to pick up this incipient meaning in the process of becoming and creatively run with it. How can the subject and the world be for each other? How can it be that the scribbles of nature are legible for the subject? And indeed, that the subject is not only able to understand the

⁹⁵ VI., 173/133.

⁹⁶ PhP., 424/425.

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text of the world, but to continuing writing it – which is to say, to unfold and extend the latent meaning of the sensible?

In his earlier philosophy Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly raise this issue; he rather assumes that the subject and the world are able to *be for each other*, such that meaning can unfold harmoniously. To be sure, Merleau-Ponty also writes about disharmony – there is illusion and there is chaos on any number of levels – but it must be said that Merleau-Ponty's perspective is nonetheless infused by a sense of fundamental harmony, so much so that he has been criticized for ignoring the elements of chaos in the world and of displaying a fundamental 'horror of contingency.'⁹⁷ Now, this may be overstating the case, but it cannot be ignored that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical perspective, sometimes in spite of his own explicit statements, takes a certain *harmonia mundi* for granted; that is to say that a certain presupposition is involved in describing the intimate relation of subject and world that results in ever unfolding structures of meaning, building upon each other in sedimented layers. The presupposition is that harmony wins out over chaos.

When beginning to lay out his new ontology, Merleau-Ponty returns to this phenomenon and questions its possibility: 'What is this prepossession of the visible, this art of interrogating it according to its own wishes, *this inspired exegesis* [*cette exégèse inspirée*]?'⁹⁸ This is a very surprising question from the point of view of the *Phenomenology*, since in that work the condition of possibility for meaning was the dialogue between the body subject and the perceived world, and to ask for the condition of possibility for the dialogue *itself* would cut against the grain of the whole argument. Indeed, beyond the dialogue there is only absolute contingency, and to seek a deeper ground would amount to negating this fundamental tenet of Merleau-Ponty's early thought. Hence, when he later asks for an ontological explication of 'this inspired exegesis,' this signals a change also with respect to the question of contingency, as a number of commentators have realized. Thus Kwant says, 'the dialectic relationship between man and world is, according to Merleau-Ponty, no longer the final source of all meaning, and contingency is no longer Merleau-Ponty's final philosophical perspective.'⁹⁹ Madison similarly concludes, regarding the *Phenomenology*: 'The notion of the radical and unsurpassable contingency of

⁹⁷ See Evans, 'Chaosmos and Merleau-Ponty's View of Nature.'

⁹⁸ VI., 173/133 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁹ Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 12 n. 5.

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everything is a rather unsatisfying response.¹⁰⁰ And in a related vein, in what is a very shrewd judgement:

The attempt to make of the subject a relation to the world and of the world a relation to the subject runs the risk of ending up in a confused philosophical relativism which can account neither for the origin nor the being of this dialectical relation itself. In the last analysis, the theory of intentionality illuminates everything except the very being of the intentional relation.¹⁰¹

The very possibility of the intentional relation is thus what is at stake in the later ontology, its ontological roots: How can the world and the subject be *for each other*? In brief, the difference between the two perspectives is that between an existential philosophy oriented around human being-in-the-world and a philosophy that pushes through this existentialism to an ontological consummation – or again, the difference between a philosophy content to accept the evident possibility of a meaningful relation between the subject and the world and a philosophy bent on searching for the origin of this possibility itself. A phenomenology of origins, such as that of the *Phenomenology*, that reaches no further than embodied being in the world does not reach far enough.

What then is Merleau-Ponty's answer? It will be the task of the coming two sub-sections to answer that question, but his answer *in nuce* is that the intentional relation is possible because subject and object are rooted in a differentiation within the same being, which is the flesh. This answer is crystallized in Merleau-Ponty's expression: *J'en suis* – I belong to it. This expression and its variations return often in *The Visible and the Invisible* and stand for Merleau-Ponty's fundamental insight, the original unity of being, to which subjectivity and objectivity alike belong, 'as the two halves of an orange.'¹⁰² But before further investigating this conception of being, I want to briefly address the question of contingency from this new perspective: If indeed contingency has ceased to be Merleau-Ponty's final word on origins, then how does contingency figure within the new perspective?

Though *The Visible and the Invisible* is an unfinished and enigmatic text, to say the least, it seems to me that it does address itself to the question of contingency in a way that answers to the exigency of thinking a deeper origin – that is to say, of thinking the subjective and the objective within being. I would

¹⁰⁰ Madison, *Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 166.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 170.

¹⁰² VI., 174/133.

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like to put it this way: The relative contingency of meaning-formation is no longer seen to ultimately rest on the absolute contingency of human existence facing a world. To be sure, there is still a relatively contingent formation of meaning, but it no longer arises out of the perceptual dialogue alone. And this is because being is not devoid of structures, as we shall see. Thus, when human being emerges out of nature, it is precisely as a formation *by* nature, as the result of an ‘autoproduction of meaning.’ Thus, human existence is no longer an absolute origin, nor is it absolutely contingent; it is rooted in structures that preceded it: ‘For this crystallization [of the thing and the world] which is partly given to us ready-made is in other respects never terminated [*qui, pour une part, nous est donné toute faite, elle n’est par ailleurs jamais terminée*], and thereby we can see how the world comes about [*comment le monde se fait*]. It takes form under the dominion of certain structural laws [*certaines lois structurales*].’¹⁰³

From this perspective it makes sense that Merleau-Ponty, in describing the body’s belongingness to the orders of subjectivity and objectivity alike, would say that ‘it cannot be by incomprehensible accident [*hasard incompréhensible*] that the body has this double reference.’¹⁰⁴ Why is it not an accident? Because it is grounded in the structure of the flesh. And a few pages later he still speaks about the amazing harmony between the sentient and the sensible, saying that they ‘form a close-bound system that I count on ... from which I cannot detach myself.’ But how can I count on it? It is because ‘the flesh ... is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself.’¹⁰⁵ Clearly, contingency is here downplayed in favour of a structural matrix of which the perceiver is but a part and which can be counted on precisely because it is *not* absolutely contingent. For Merleau-Ponty, it seems, the unity of being guarantees the harmony of perceiver and perceived. A similar point is echoed in *Eye and Mind*, when Merleau-Ponty writes about the remarkable unity of the body, into which the touching and the touched blend, making it a subjective body, ‘lighting the fire that will not stop burning until some accident of the body will undo *what no accident would have sufficed to do* [*ce que nul accident n’aurait suffit à faire*].’¹⁰⁶

The structures of the flesh are therefore neither absolutely contingent, nor chaotic; they are open and becoming, which is what ‘*vertical* being’ signals, yet they are intrinsic to the flesh: they do not themselves emerge from something

¹⁰³ VI., 134/100.

¹⁰⁴ VI., 178-179/137.

¹⁰⁵ VI., 190/146.

¹⁰⁶ OE., 21/163-164 (my emphasis).

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entirely structure-less, nor are they the result of some sort of correlation or intentional relation. Rather, they are the condition of the correlation. It is, I believe, in this sense that contingency should be taken within the new perspective. It is well to note that this does not in any way trivialize the dialogical relation between the body and the world so painstakingly investigated in the *Phenomenology*; it means only that Merleau-Ponty presses on towards a deeper *logos* of the sensible world and hence a deeper philosophical understanding. The perceptual dialogue is put within an ontological framework in which it makes more sense. While meaning unfolds in the perceptual dialogue; the *origin* of meaning is no longer to be sought in the correlation between subject and world. We must now try to disengage the salient dimensions of Merleau-Ponty's new understanding of being in a text that is as suggestive as it is frustrating.

Flesh: The Carnal 'Prototype of Being'

As the review of Merleau-Ponty's self-criticism at the beginning of this chapter indicated, he comes to believe that he has pushed through to a deeper understanding of the primordial unity of being, and as one reads the chiasm-chapter this is amply confirmed. Indeed, the all-encompassing unity of being is *the main idea* of Merleau-Ponty's ontology; intentionality is itself derived from this unity, as are subject and object.¹⁰⁷ 'Merleau-Ponty thus realizes that the subject-world-relation is a derived relation, that the subject's *being* in the world and the world's *existence* for the subject are upheld by something which encompasses them.'¹⁰⁸ Here, then, in the all-encompassing unity of being, lies the primordial origin of meaning; this is where Merleau-Ponty searches for the provenance of 'this inspired exegesis,' as we have seen. If we were to run with the metaphor of inspiration, we could say that unitary being is what breathes meaning into the body-world dialogue. However, unitary being is itself characterized as *flesh* [*chair*], and this concept holds the key to understanding

¹⁰⁷ '[The flesh is] the formative medium [*milieu formateur*] of the object and the subject.' VI., 191/147. Merleau-Ponty intimates a similar conception already in his lectures on passivity at the Collège de France in 1954-1955: 'Something fundamental is to be rediscovered in what follows: in-itself implies for-itself, not only the for-itself of the spectator, but a kind of intimacy of self to itself, a kind of real unity of what exists.' IP., 125 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁸ Madison, *Phenomenology*, 170. Cf. Merleau-Ponty's similar insight with regard to temporality already in PhP., 494/500.

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what Merleau-Ponty means by the unity of being, for we are presented with an unusual thought and cannot pretend to know straightaway what it means.

Merleau-Ponty begins his positive explication of the new ontology, as I said, by returning to perceptual experience. A paradox belongs to the ordinary experience of perception – to perceptual faith. For on the one hand, ‘the visible about us seems to rest in itself,’ yet on the other hand, visible things are taken up by our gaze, which ‘envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh’ [*les enveloppe, les habille de sa chair*].¹⁰⁹ We have here the by now familiar antinomy between empiricism/realism and intellectualism/constructivism, whose respective truths it is a matter of preserving in a coherent theory. As Merleau-Ponty earlier put it: we must understand how there can be an ‘in-itself-for-us’ [*un en-soi pour nous*].¹¹⁰ He now rephrases it: ‘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?’¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty’s proposed solution consists in disclosing a primordial unity of being that is nonetheless not a self-coincidence, which is to say that it is a unity that contains a certain distance within itself – a being of rupture, so to speak. His preferred term for this rupture is *écart*. That being must be such is grounded in the requirement of appearance, since if being were a self-coinciding unity it could not appear even to itself; if, that is, appearance requires the opening of a certain distance between that which appears and the one for whom it appears, according to phenomenological analysis.¹¹² Now Merleau-Ponty holds, plausibly, that we have no direct access to being itself, but only to beings within the world; something he calls ‘indirect ontology’ is therefore called for.¹¹³ For being is not an object that we can investigate like any other object in the world, as we have seen in our discussion of the world as horizon and earth-ground; it is a hidden reality, analogous to the way in which the real grounds for psychic disorders, according to psychoanalysis, are hidden from the subject and must be indirectly brought out by the interpretations of the analyst. It is in this sense that one should understand Merleau-Ponty’s cryptic remark that he would

¹⁰⁹ VI., 170-171/130-131.

¹¹⁰ PhP., 375/378.

¹¹¹ VI., 171/131.

¹¹² ‘It is ... as though there were between it [the visible] and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible.’ VI., 171/130-131.

¹¹³ Cf. VI., 231/179.

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perform ‘an *ontological* psychoanalysis.’¹¹⁴ It means only that we must approach being through an interpretation of what we encounter in beings, and it is clear that the being with which we are most intimately familiar is our own being. In laying out his new ontology, therefore, Merleau-Ponty once again considers the perceiving body subject.

The reason why the perceiver and the perceived stand in such a harmony as to open up a world of meaningful perception, says Merleau-Ponty, is that they are present in the same world – indeed, that they are both *part* of it. To appreciate the import of this, let me quote Merleau-Ponty in full on the experience of touching, which is primary among the senses.

Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some *relationship by principle, some kinship*, according to which they are ... the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon *a tangible being of which it is also a part*.¹¹⁵

This is an explication of the essential unity, expressed by the French locution *en-être*, in the tactile realm. The touching hand is *of the tangible*, which refers us, of course, to the analysis of double sensation and the body as a third genus of being that we considered in chapter 1. Here Merleau-Ponty takes it up again to extract its deeper implications. If my left hand touches a thing, it can be understood as a subject touching an object, but if my right hand at the same time touches my left hand touching, then the left hand ‘passes over to the rank of the touched [*passé au rang des touchés*], descends into the things [*descend dans les choses*], such that the touch is formed in the midst of the world and as it were in the things.’¹¹⁶ It is no longer possible to understand the subjectivity of my touching left hand in opposition to the world it touches, since it is disclosed as a ‘subjectivity’ inherent in the tactile things themselves, fully part of the world, part of ‘the flesh of the world’ [*la chair du monde*].¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ VI., 317/270; cf. 315/267.

¹¹⁵ ‘Il faut qu’entre l’exploration et ce qu’elle m’enseignera, entre mes mouvements et ce que je touche, existe *quelque rapport de principe, quelque parenté*, selon laquelle ils [sont] ... l’initiation et l’ouverture à un monde tactile. Ceci ne peut arriver que si, en même temps que senti du dedans, ma main est aussi accessible du dehors, tangible elle-même, par exemple, pour mon autre main, si elle prend place parmi les choses qu’elle touche, et en un sens l’une d’elles, ouvre enfin sur *un être tangible dont elle fait aussi partie*.’ VI., 174/133 (my emphases).

¹¹⁶ VI., 174/134.

¹¹⁷ VI., 298/250; cf. 192/148, 179/137.

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From this it is clear that Merleau-Ponty keeps the main points of his earlier analyses of double sensation; that is, that the touching and the touched cannot be sundered into separate orders, even as, on the other hand, they never collapse into identity.¹¹⁸ What is new is that he now searches for the *origin* of this strange phenomenon – the being onto which touching opens, but of which it is also itself a part, that *radical* kinship which is indicated in the quote above by the words ‘a relationship by principle.’ It seems that we should take the word ‘principle’ in its original sense as *principium*, that is, as origin or beginning. The quoted passage, thus, clearly shows that Merleau-Ponty is not content to describe the phenomenon; he rather wants to search for the origin of the phenomenon in a unitary source. This originary source is what Merleau-Ponty will call the *flesh*.

However, before further considering the flesh, let us follow the description of the phenomenon and clear away some misconceptions. We must first take note of two additional characteristics. First, there is a *reversibility* in the midst of tactile experience: the touching hand passes over to the rank of the touched hand *and back again*. Second, this is so because the touching hand belongs to the tangible world, which is just to state the obvious, that to touch an object I must myself be touchable – no disembodied spirit or immaterial mind ever touched a tangible body, since only a body can touch a body. To touch, I must be a tangible body in the tangible world, and this is why, when touching a thing, I am simultaneously touched by it. The tactile relation is reversible.

The same, Merleau-Ponty claims, holds for vision, even though it might be somewhat harder to detect as vision leads us to believe we stand apart from what we see; it is also less obvious that perception is embodied and thus easier to connect vision with the notion of an immaterial mind.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, as we have clearly seen in chapter 2, visual perception is embodied: it crucially depends on the structural coupling between the moving body and the unfolding spectacle, according to the perceptual teleology that arises as a relation between the lived body and the perceived world. ‘It is a marvel too little noticed,’ says Merleau-Ponty, ‘that every movement of my eyes – even more, every displacement of my body – has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them.’¹²⁰ In short, as the touching hand must itself be tangible and belong to the tangible world, the visually

¹¹⁸ Cf. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 158.

¹¹⁹ This is clearly a radicalization of Husserl, who explicitly denied visual reversibility and reserved it for the tactile realm alone. Cf. *Ideen II*, § 37; and Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 127-132.

¹²⁰ VI., 175/134.

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perceiving body must itself be visible and belong to the visible world, and of course, the tangible and the visible worlds open to the same sensible world.

Must we say, then, that in the same way that in touching a thing I am myself touched, so in seeing a thing I am myself also seen? This would be counterintuitive, since in contrast to the hand touched as a thing in the world, the thing seen is not itself sentient. I see the tree, but I do not believe the tree sees me. Has Merleau-Ponty involved himself in an incoherent position? Or – perhaps worse – is he suggesting the thesis of panpsychism? This suspicion is boosted when one comes upon the passage in Merleau-Ponty's last published work, *Eye and Mind*, where, quoting the experience of the painter Paul Klee, he writes: 'In a forest I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me.' And then he continues in his own voice: 'There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being [*inspiration et expiration de l'être, respiration dans l'être*], action and passion so slightly discernable that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.'¹²¹ However, such poetic licence should not be taken literally, as Merleau-Ponty himself unequivocally attests in one of his working notes: 'The flesh of the world is not self-sensing (*se sentir*) as is my flesh – it is sensible and not sentient – I call it flesh, nonetheless, ... in order to say that it is a *pregnancy* of possibles [*elle est prégnance de possibles*] ... This is not hylozoism.'¹²² To see that there is no incoherence in this proposal we must more closely consider the underlying phenomenon of reversibility. What sense can be made of the claim that the sentient and the sensible are reversible?

We may begin by noting that reversibility need not be a symmetrical notion, such that if I see the trees, the trees see me *in the same sense*. In fact, the phenomenon of touch already brings this out, for while the reversibility between my two hands is indeed symmetrical – my right hand touches my left hand in the same way that my left hand touches my right hand, without ever coinciding – the reversibility between my hand touching and the inanimate thing touched is precisely asymmetrical, which is to say that it is reversible in the sense that as I touch it, it touches me, but while I feel the touch of the thing, the thing does not feel my touch. To say that the thing touches me or sees me is not to ascribe sentience to inanimate objects, but is rather a way of saying that the inanimate thing is constitutive of the appearance of a certain

¹²¹ OE., 31-32/167 (translation modified).

¹²² VI., 298/250.

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visibility, namely my own visibility, my carnal presence in the world.¹²³ As Dillon suggests, this sort of asymmetrical reversibility functions as a kind of mirror, in front of which I can say that it sees me, or that I see myself in the mirror.¹²⁴ Merleau-Ponty could therefore have said that it is *as if* the trees see me, but he did not for reasons that will soon become clearer.

The phenomenon of reversibility, then, is not symmetrical. There is an alternation, or reversibility, between *a* and *b*, but not in the sense that *b* becomes for *a* exactly what *a* was for *b*. We have thus cleared away the suspicion of panpsychism or hylozoism. What the phenomenon of reversibility reveals, both in the tactile and in the visual realm, is that perception requires that the perceiver and the perceived be embodied in the same world; in *that* sense they share the same ‘flesh,’ though only part of that ‘flesh’ is sentient. This brings us now to the central notion by which Merleau-Ponty comes to characterize being, namely, ‘the flesh’ [*la chair*]. It is the body as reversible, as sentient as well as sensible, that leads us into being as flesh.

The experience of perception teaches us that the body is part of the world and that the world is part of the body, that they are reversible – which is to say that they are a unity in the same sense that the sentience of each of my two hands is united in my one body, or in the sense that my different senses are united in the synaesthetic unity of my whole body. However, this is a very peculiar unity, since it is always ruptured, always internally fractured by the *écart*. There is never coincidence between the sentience of my left hand and my right, nor do my senses ever efface their difference. ‘It is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact [*toujours imminente et jamais réalisée en fait*] ... I never reach coincidence [*je ne parviens jamais à la coïncidence*].’¹²⁵ In the same way, though the world is one flesh in which the perceiving body and perceived things co-inhere, the divergence of sentient and sensible is never effaced. This is finally what allows us to understand where the ‘inspired exegesis’ is rooted, or how it can be that the thing perceived does not lose its aseity even as I take it up in perception. It is because, as Merleau-Ponty says, ‘this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with

¹²³ That Merleau-Ponty takes note of the asymmetry between touching and seeing is evident in a passage such as this: ‘There is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching; there is a circle of the visible and the seeing, the seeing is not without visible presence.’ VI., 185/143. Clearly, for Merleau-Ponty, the reversibility of vision constitutes the seer as visible.

¹²⁴ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 161-162; cf. VI., 189-190/146, 303/255: ‘The flesh is a mirror phenomenon [*phénomène de miroir*].’

¹²⁵ VI., 191/147.

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it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh [*l'épaisseur de la chair*] between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is their means of communication.¹²⁶ This thickness of flesh, the fact that the visible and the seer are bodies in the same world, could not be constitutive of the visible and the seer if it did not have a distance within itself, making proximity possible. For that which is self-identical admits of no appearance; this would be the problem of traditional monism. And at the other extreme, that which shares no essential being can have no genuine communion; this would be the problem of traditional dualisms, which, as we have seen, reduce communion to mediation across the unbridgeable chasm of ontological difference. According to Merleau-Ponty's ontological interpretation, perception is thus possible because the sentient and the sensible are of the same being – the same flesh – and that this being evinces an *écart* whereby the flesh of the sensible can be *for* the flesh of the sentient. It should now make sense to us that Merleau-Ponty calls the body an 'exemplary sensible' [*sensible exemplaire*].¹²⁷ For the body exemplifies for us in a unique way what it is to be a *unity-in-difference* – 'that identity without superposition, that difference without contradiction, that divergence between the within and the without that constitutes its natal secret.'¹²⁸ In a word, the analysis of the lived body begun in the *Phenomenology* is in *The Visible and the Invisible* raised to an ontological level in such a way that being is itself characterized after the model of the body: 'Carnal being [*l'être charnel*] ... is a prototype of Being [*prototype de l'être*], of which our body is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible.'¹²⁹ Merleau-Ponty starts with the human body, but it is not anthropology he sets out to do; it is very clearly an ontology: 'It is indeed a paradox of Being, not a paradox of man, that we are dealing with here.'¹³⁰

Let me forestall a possible objection at this juncture: Is this leap from the paradox of embodied existence to the very characterization of being not a little fanciful? What justifies such an analogy between the body and being?¹³¹ I believe Merleau-Ponty would answer that it is not a question of an *analogy* between the body and the world, for the experience of the paradox of

¹²⁶ VI., 176/135.

¹²⁷ VI., 176/135 (my translation).

¹²⁸ VI., 177/135-136.

¹²⁹ VI., 177/136.

¹³⁰ VI., 178/136.

¹³¹ Cf. Françoise Dastur, 'World, Flesh, Vision,' in Evans and Lawlor, eds., *Chiasms*, 34-35.

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embodied being is already an experience of the paradox of being, only not directly. For the reversibility of the body as sentient-sensible is possible only because being is reversible – that is, only because I can be a visible body that perceives. As Dastur observes: ‘The body as sensible sentient only concentrates the mystery of visibility in general and does not explain it.’¹³² As Merleau-Ponty sees it, in other words, the body’s *écart* and reversibility is possible only because being is rupture and reversibility, for the body is part of the flesh of the world and would not show us these characteristics if it were not already inscribed in the general structure of being.

This is the place to make explicit a consequence of the above that has so far remained implicit in the presentation. If the flesh is a single reality, a single whole, then the subject is obviously included in the flesh in the same way that the tactile sense is included in my body as a whole. And if this is so, and the subject perceives a thing in virtue of the distance opening up within the flesh, segregating itself into the flesh of the sensible and the flesh of the sentient (*écart*), then might we not as well say that *perception is the flesh perceiving itself through us*, after the model of my right hand touching my left, and that perception is to be seen, therefore, as the auto-affection of being? After all, ‘where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh [*le monde est chair*]?’¹³³ This is how we must understand Merleau-Ponty’s remark, that ‘to touch is to touch oneself [*toucher, c’est se toucher*].’¹³⁴ Perception in such a scenario would really be being coming to self-awareness, a part of being – a remarkable part, capable of sentience – would turn back on the whole of being and thus make being appear to itself. This seems to me to be the meaning of a rich, but dense passage in Merleau-Ponty’s text, where he writes:

There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, 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.¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid., 34.

¹³³ VI., 180/138.

¹³⁴ VI., 305/255.

¹³⁵ ‘Il y a vision, toucher, quand un certain visible, un certain tangible, se retourne sur tout le visible, tout le tangible dont il fait partie, ou quand soudain il s’en trouve entouré, ou quand, entre lui et eux, et par leur commerce, se forme une Visibilité, un Tangible en soi.’ VI., 139/180-181 (emphasis omitted).

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This perspective helps us to understand why Merleau-Ponty did *not* say that it is *as if* the trees see me, but rather that it is hard to distinguish what sees and what is seen. For even though he would not want to ascribe sentience to inanimate things, he is driving at an ontological interpretation of perception, according to which seeing is a function of being itself rather than the property of a subject in opposition to the world. This is why, from the perspective of the unity of being, it is correct to say that being senses itself, and this might be the evocation Merleau-Ponty wants to retain in a language that must ultimately be seen as metaphorical. For it must immediately be added that the appearance of being to itself is the result of the turning back *of a part of being* on the whole of being, and it is the part turning back that is sentient and for whom being appears; in this context Merleau-Ponty is clearly talking about human being, but we might also want to speak generically about the living, since with life comes sentience.

It follows that from my own perspective as a corporeal subject, this must also be said about perception: Whatever visible thing I perceive is always a perception of myself, since both I and the visible thing is part of the same being of flesh. Merleau-Ponty indicates this when he says that ‘there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision.’¹³⁶ To see is in one sense always to behold oneself. In addition, to perceive is always to find oneself in the midst of the sensible, as a part of the sensible, and inhabited by the sensible which is my body. Thus the reciprocity of the seer and the seen receives its most potent formulation – a reciprocity that, as we shall see presently, is described as an intertwining, a chiasm.

What is the being of flesh, which is capable of all this? What is its status? How does it fit into the history of human thought? Merleau-Ponty himself claims that ‘there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it. ... The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance [*La chair n’est pas matière, n’est pas esprit, n’est pas substance*].’¹³⁷ To begin to get an idea of what we shall understand by the term flesh, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless harkens back to Pre-Socratic philosophy and resurrects the old world *element* [élément]. As Madison explains, the Pre-Socratic elements – water, air, earth and fire – were for the first Greek philosophers ‘not things themselves, but *rizomata*, the roots of all things.’¹³⁸ As such, the elements are not themselves visible, but are nonetheless part of everything visible. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty characterizes the flesh as ‘a

¹³⁶ VI., 181/139.

¹³⁷ VI., 181-182/139.

¹³⁸ Madison, *Phenomenology*, 176.

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general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea [*à mi-chemin de l'individu spatio-temporel et de l'idée*], a sort of incarnate principle [*principe incarné*] that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.¹³⁹ Not an individual thing, then, that could be made to appear and be thematized by a phenomenology; nor the mere idea of unity or of being, but a sort of carnal web in which all visible things are caught up. In Abram's words:

The Flesh is the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity. It is the reciprocal presence of the sentient in the sensible and of the sensible in the sentient, a mystery of which we have always, at least tacitly, been aware.¹⁴⁰

Such are, in general, the sketches of the flesh we are given; there can be no doubt that this is a thought in the process of taking hold of itself rather than a finished theory. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that we have here only 'a preliminary outline,' whose purpose is just to let us 'catch sight of this strange domain.'¹⁴¹ Nonetheless, we are faced with a situation in which we must try to make sense of perception – of ourselves and the world we are a part of – and if the alternatives of objectivism and constructivism are rejected, as they must be if we are to preserve the integrity of these phenomena, we have no choice but to engage in an ontological reflection on perception. It might be, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, that these are 'the extravagant consequences to which we are led when we take seriously, when we question, vision.'¹⁴²

Nonetheless, it must be admitted that *The Visible and the Invisible* is a highly frustrating text on account of its unfinished and sketchy nature, as well as the novelty of its conceptual apparatus. It seems to me, however, that we can make this ontology of the flesh clearer by considering it in relation to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of nature and of the earth-ground, especially since *The Visible and the Invisible* was to include a reconceived philosophy of nature. In particular, I wish to pick up on those passages in which Merleau-Ponty speaks of nature as a being of potentiality, making it possible for us to say that when being, or nature, phenomenalizes itself through turning back on itself – as he puts it – this is to be understood as the actualization of a potentiality which is inherent in being, and consequently, that life and human life are actualizations of the potentiality of nature. I submit the following, then, as an interpretation

¹³⁹ VI., 181-182/139.

¹⁴⁰ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 66.

¹⁴¹ VI., 182-183/140.

¹⁴² VI., 182/140.

of this enigmatic text cast in the language of potentiality and actuality, which is present in Merleau-Ponty's later works, but remains somewhat unthought or relatively in the background.

In his first course on nature Merleau-Ponty characterizes the role of the earth in the later Husserl in words that, as we have seen, were very much his own. It is, he says, 'a type of being that contains all the ulterior possibilities and serves as a cradle for them' [*un type d'être qui contient toutes les possibilités ultérieures, et leur sert de berceau*].¹⁴³ Or again, it is a 'carrier of all the possible' [*porteuse de tout le possible*].¹⁴⁴ Since Merleau-Ponty at this time is trying to think nature as a source of productivity, rather than as a correlate of human subjectivity, we can assume that he would have included human subjectivity in these possibilities themselves. According to this line of thought, therefore, the flesh names the latent potentiality of being, and in particular the potentiality it has in virtue of its non-coincidence, its interior fracture, its *écart*, allowing for appearance – for the sensible that appears, and for the sentient for whom it appears. The potentiality of nature, or being, is indeed the possibility of sentient life, and in the final analysis, of human existence.

With this, Merleau-Ponty is inscribed in a rather unexpected philosophical lineage – that of Aristotle, for whom the concepts of actuality and potentiality are of course central.¹⁴⁵ This philosophical pedigree has gone largely unnoticed in the secondary literature, with most commentators preferring to see affinities with Pre-Socratic thought.¹⁴⁶ Following Jan Patočka, however, Renaud Barbaras has effectively made the Aristotelian connection. The gist of Barbaras' argument is that Merleau-Ponty inscribes himself in the Aristotelian tradition by understanding being as potentiality rather than as pure actuality, but also that he fails to fully realize this basic insight in his early work. According to Barbaras, 'the difficulty of a philosophy of sense experience is to find a way of thinking a unity in which the duality of the subject and the world is not lost.'¹⁴⁷ In other words, sense experience testifies to an original unity between what is nonetheless subject and object; yet as soon as we theorize this relation,

¹⁴³ N., 110/77.

¹⁴⁴ N., 111/77.

¹⁴⁵ The *locus classicus* is Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book Theta.

¹⁴⁶ E.g. Madison, *Phenomenology*, 243-246; Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 241-244. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself virtually ignores Aristotle and, at a conference in Geneva, even confesses his relative unfamiliarity with Aristotelian philosophy. At a later point in the discussion he says, 'If Aristotle thinks what you say he does, I have no reason to disclaim this illustrious patronage.' *Parcours 2*, 329-330; see also Barbaras, *Tournant*, 14.

¹⁴⁷ Barbaras, *Tournant*, 14 (all translations mine).

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Barbaras contends, we end up making ontologically distinct what was originally unified. In effect, what Barbaras says, with Merleau-Ponty, is that sense experience reveals an ontological unity-in-difference that is very hard to think and to formulate. With his actuality-potentiality scheme, however, Aristotle actually managed to pull this off, which is why his is ‘the conceptual framework within which every thinking that seeks to respect sense experience must move.’¹⁴⁸

The Aristotelian description of sense experience, observes Barbaras, answers precisely to what phenomenology has seen, not least in regard to the subtleties of passivity and activity, both of which must belong to perception. To perceive something is to have been passively affected by the sensible; yet it is also an activity in so far as sentience must realize the sensible to which the experience draws. In being sensitive to a prior act, sentience must also act to receive. The similarities to Merleau-Ponty’s account are no doubt obvious. The mere fact that throughout his oeuvre he positions himself between objectivism and subjectivism – that is, between those who overemphasize the sheer passivity of perception and those who overemphasize the activity of the subject – is enough to establish his proximity to Aristotle’s theory of sense experience. With that tradition he will emphasize that in the act of perception, in the intentional relation, subjectivity and objectivity are intertwined. Indeed, this is the point of defining intentionality as openness to the world, as that clearing which lets the world appear. Joining the vocabulary of Aristotelian and phenomenological philosophy, we might want to say that the potentiality of intentionality is precisely the power to let phenomena appear, and nothing more.

As Barbaras understands it, the problem of the *Phenomenology* is that while Merleau-Ponty succeeds in faithfully describing this original unity in which subject and object are rooted, he lacks the conceptual resources to theorize what he describes. What he needed to integrate description and theory was a new understanding of being. No longer should sense experience be conceived of as arising from even embodied being-in-the-world, but as arising within being itself; no longer should subjectivity in any form be what makes being appear, but being should be what makes the subject appear. Such an ontology, Barbaras notes, is what constitutes the rapprochement between Merleau-Ponty and Aristotle, since the latter, ‘ignoring the bifurcation of nature and consciousness, of the in-itself and the phenomenon, recognizes thereby a

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 24.

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precession of vision, in the form of potentiality, in the visible.¹⁴⁹ This, of course, defines the flesh.

On this account, being is not fully positive actuality: it contains within itself potentialities, a certain negativity that is not the opposite of being; it has its invisibilities. When Merleau-Ponty accedes to this understanding of being, his analysis of sense perception comes to its proper framework. Such an ontology is radically non-Parmenidean: being is not absolute self-identity, upon whose surface difference glides in the form of deceiving appearances, for being is rather non-coincidence with itself, and difference is therefore in its very fibre. There can be genuine appearance, then, because being has the potentiality of sentience and the potentiality of the sensible. This is an Aristotelian gesture. Barbaras explains:

It is clear that the potentiality that Aristotle, in turn, put as the principle of his philosophy of the sensible should be reintroduced in the midst of sensible Being. The rigorous apprehension of the sensible in itself has as a consequence the abandonment of the actualism that still characterized the *Phenomenology of Perception* ... To say that, in effect, the visible is defined by a fundamental invisibility, which is not the other side of another visibility, is to recognize at the heart of the visible a dimension of negativity, a sort of indetermination, of withdrawal or of unfulfilment, which are the other names of potentiality.¹⁵⁰

Barbaras' delineation of Merleau-Ponty's Aristotelianism is helpful as long as we do not forget the difference between the two thinkers. This concerns above all Aristotle's fundamental metaphysical framework, that of substance, which Merleau-Ponty does not accept.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹⁵¹ Jan Patočka observes that Merleau-Ponty radicalizes the Aristotelian theory of potentiality by wresting it free from adherence to substance metaphysics. See Barbaras, *Tournant*, 29. This is not the place to delve into all the intricacies of Aristotelian metaphysics; suffice it to say that, whereas for Aristotle, potentiality is always the potentiality of an actuality, for Merleau-Ponty, potentiality is primordial. Hence, while Aristotle can argue for the necessity of a first 'pure actuality,' Merleau-Ponty could only argue for a first potentiality. Cf. 'It is not true that everything is actual; *there is an actuality of the possible as possible*, that is, the notion of an outline, the being of becoming actual that is certain possibilities.' N., 306/241 (my emphasis). One wonders, however, whether Merleau-Ponty, as well as Barbaras and Patočka, are really reacting to Aristotle's notion of substance, or perform a charitable reading of it, rather than reacting negatively to a notion of substance charged by modern or Lockean attributes. Arguably, there are openings in Aristotle for a more holistic and relational understanding of substances, something which, as we shall see in chapter 5, comes to the fore in Aquinas' retrieval of Aristotle. For a reading along these lines, see e.g. Norris Clarke, S.J., 'To Be is To Be Substance-in-Relation,' in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being, God, Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame

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The being of flesh, then, can be seen as above all an open potentiality – first of all the potentiality inherent in the *écart* and intertwining of unitary being that makes possible the sentient and the sensible, which is to say, perception, and thenceforth the multitude of chiasms culminating in a being who thinks and questions being. This is why Merleau-Ponty says that ‘the *visible* has to be described as something that is *realized through man* [*se réalise à travers l’homme*] ... Logos also as what is *realized in man*.¹⁵² Both perception and the higher functions of mind must be seen as potentialities of being, realized through life and through the human. Again, he describes human thought as the ‘realization of an invisible that is exactly the reverse of the visible, *the power of the visible* [*la puissance du visible*].¹⁵³ And using one of his most cherished organic metaphors, he says: ‘The visible is pregnant with the invisible’ [*le visible est prégnant de l’invisible*].¹⁵⁴ It must be admitted that this understanding of flesh as a being of potentiality – or as Merleau-Ponty says, of a certain negativity within being – gives a central place to sentient organisms and above all to the human as the one who more than any other being actualizes being’s inherent possibilities. And yet it is clearly not a humanism in the sense that the human creates a meaning that it projects upon being as upon a screen, nor does it retain the subtle anthropomorphism of perceptual dialogue. Rather, the sense of the world surges forth from being itself and in its currents the human is taken up and so becomes the privileged bearer of being’s self-expression. As such, Merleau-Ponty is clearly articulating an ontology proper – which is again to say, an interpretation of being.

Intertwining and Chiasmic Structures

If the flesh is that unity-in-difference, and that *écart* or segregation of the sentient and the sensible, as the phenomenon of our own body uniquely indicates, we have still to inquire into how Merleau-Ponty intended to put such concepts to work in his philosophy, and how they may assist us in preserving the integrity of human being as part of the natural world, as well as the natural world in the presence of human existence.

Press, 1994); and also Jacob Sherman, ‘A Genealogy of Participation,’ in Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, eds., *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 90-92.

¹⁵² VI., 322/274 (latter two emphases mine).

¹⁵³ VI., 188, editor’s note/145 n. 5 (my emphasis).

¹⁵⁴ VI., 265/216; cf. 193/148-149, 258-259/208-209, 298/250.

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Despite the interpretive difficulties that result from the unfinished state of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, what *can* be said about how Merleau-Ponty puts the notion of flesh to work philosophically? What we need to grasp is that while the flesh specifies that being is a unity that segregates and splits open, it also implies being's ever imminent return to itself. The *écart*, far from issuing in the self-estrangement of being, is what allows a specific set of reversible relations internal to the flesh to occur – especially perception, but also intersubjectivity, language and thought – all of which depend on the setting up of a difference that does not cause a rupture so deep that it makes communion impossible. Both distance and proximity, difference and unity are required for such operations. It is to indicate the nature of these reversible *relations* that Merleau-Ponty uses the terms *chiasm* [*chiasme*] and *intertwining* [*entrelacs*]. They refer to the ways in which being self-relates, doubles over, folds in and sets up intervals of an ever increasing complexity of structure.

As to the terms themselves, the most basic meaning of 'chiasm' is that of a cross-like structure, such as the letter *x*. In literature *chiasmus* (French: *chiasme*) refers to a specific construction with the form *a, b, b, a*; as in 'love without end, and without measure grace.'¹⁵⁵ In anatomy, the word *chiasm* or *chiasma* (French: *chiasma*) refers to the crossing over of the optical nerves in the brain (and therefore has a connection with Merleau-Ponty's interest in the 'synaesthesia' of binocular vision). All these expressions go back to the Greek noun *khiasmos* and the verb *chiazein*, meaning cross-wise arrangement and to mark with a *chi*. Merleau-Ponty initially used both terms, but later opted for *chiasme* with its rhetorical connotations.¹⁵⁶ The term 'intertwining,' which Merleau-Ponty picked up from Husserl, who often used the German *Verflechtung*, has rather an aesthetic connotation, as it refers to specific decorative patterns, such as medallions made up of strings of flowers, ribbons or other elements criss-crossing and interweaving to make up the pattern in question.¹⁵⁷ Though the two terms are used as equivalents, I find it interesting that Merleau-Ponty chooses a word with such obvious reference to beauty.

¹⁵⁵ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 83 (Book 3: 142).

¹⁵⁶ See Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor, eds., *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 17-18 n. 2. I follow established practice and render Merleau-Ponty's French *chiasme* with the English *chiasm* (with *chiasms*, *chiasmic*), even though *chiasmus* would have been more correct.

¹⁵⁷ Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 45-46. See also *Le nouveau Petit Robert de la langue française 2007*, under the entries *entrelacement*, *entrelacer*, *entrelacs*.

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Dillon's characterization of the meaning of these terms is particularly helpful, as it highlights the singularity of the element making up the pattern.

The figure called forth by these terms is that of the crossing and turning back on itself of *the single thread* that emanates from the spider's body when she spins her web. This web-matrix, the whole cloth, the flesh, of the world *is* an interweaving, an *elementary* knotting, which is always prior to its unravelling in language and thought.¹⁵⁸

With these terms, then, Merleau-Ponty seems to want to indicate something of the complexity of what he is describing and to indicate that analytical description often disentangles what can only be understood as entangled, what apart from its inweaving in the larger whole cloth loses its genuine being and results therefore in misunderstanding. 'The idea of chiasm ... that every analysis that *disentangles* renders unintelligible.'¹⁵⁹ Perception, once again, is the best example. Consider our earlier case of perceiving a grand piano upon entering a room. Analyzed from the point of view of a previous decision to treat the thing as an objective stimulus causally impinging on the senses of the passively receiving subject, the dynamic phenomenon of perception is lost; and the same is true from the point of view of absolute consciousness, for which the object is constituted by the subject without remainder. But when the unity of the phenomenon of perception is considered, we can begin to glimpse the interactive coupling between the perceived and the perceiver, and to realize that perception, far from being a static snapshot of the crime scene, is a dynamic and teleological unfolding of sense, a back-and-forth between perceiver and perceived. This dynamic body-world dialogue can now be reinterpreted, within the framework of the ontology of flesh, as a chiasmic structure, wherein she who sees is herself thereby placed as visible in the same world as what she sees, setting up an embodied relation between perceiver and perceived, which, because it is a relation between bodies caught in the same context, can unfold an ever richer perceptual sense. The mechanistic body of 'causal thought' can make no sense of this, and neither can the immaterial spirit of subjective construction – yet this is the phenomenon of perception, and this is what needs to be understood.

There is thus a specific 'logic' to the chiasmic structure and the way in which it relates sensibility and sense, or as Merleau-Ponty sometimes puts it, relates the visible and the invisible. Chiasmic structures, however, are by no

¹⁵⁸ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 155 (first emphasis mine).

¹⁵⁹ VI., 316/268.

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means restricted to the emergence of basic perceptual meaning; Merleau-Ponty holds that these structures replay themselves at increasing levels of complexity throughout being. It is true that perception for him remained a sort of archetypal encounter, foundational in relation to what emerges from it, but here it is important to remember that the emergence of 'higher' chiasmic structures are themselves chiasmically related to their 'ground.'¹⁶⁰ It is therefore clear to me that we are still dealing with a thinking that could be called *emergentist*, insofar as emergence specifies a relation of dependence that is not therefore a causal necessitation.¹⁶¹ As such it harkens back to the notion of circular causality developed by Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure* and which here returns as a general framework of thinking. In his working notes this is sometimes called 'vertical being,' whereby Merleau-Ponty indicates that we must admit a plurality of real beings which are causally irreducible to a minimal substratum, yet chiasmically related. As he says,

What is at issue is to operate the reduction, that is, for me, to disclose little by little – and more and more – the 'wild' or 'vertical' world. Show the intentional reference of Physics to Physis, of Physis to life, of life to the 'psycho-physical' – a reference by which one nowise passes from the 'exterior' to the 'interior,' since the reference is not a reduction and since each degree 'surpassed' remains in fact presupposed ... Circularity: everything that is said at each 'level' anticipates and will be taken up again ... it is the reduction itself, the discovery of vertical being. ... There will therefore be a whole series of layers of wild being.¹⁶²

If it is possible to describe 'a whole series of layers' within being-as-unity-in-difference, then in the perspective of the ontology of flesh these layers must themselves be chiasmic structures, ways being has of weaving the most intricate tapestry of meaning. The text of his chiasm-chapter suggests the fundamental direction Merleau-Ponty sees in this development. For while his focus is on the chiasmic reversibility of perception in the seeing and visible body, Merleau-Ponty also begins to describe chiasmic structures at higher levels, which he

¹⁶⁰ Cf., VI., 208/158, 223-224/172, 229-230/177-178.

¹⁶¹ Dillon rightly speaks about 'the emergent nature of the logos that is embodied in the "profound idea of self-mediation."' *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 222 (quoting VI.).

¹⁶² 'Il s'agit d'opérer la réduction, c'est à dire, pour moi, de dévoiler peu à peu – et de plus en plus, – le monde "sauvage" ou "vertical." Montrer référence intentionnelle de la Physique à la Physis, de la Physis à la vie, de la vie au "psycho-physique" – référence par laquelle on ne passe nullement de "l'extérieur" à "l'intérieure," puisque la référence n'est pas réduction et que chaque degré "dépassé" reste en réalité presupposé. ... Circularité: tout ce qui est dit à chaque "niveau" anticipe et sera repris ... elle est la réduction même, la redécouverte de l'être vertical. ... Il y aura donc toute une série de couches de l'être sauvage.' VI., 228-230/177-178.

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evidently intended to be major parts of the projected work.¹⁶³ These are the intertwining of self and other in intersubjectivity as well as the chiasm of body and language and of language and thought. The latter is particularly interesting, since Merleau-Ponty criticized himself for not having worked out the crucial passage from the silent meaning of the body subject to the higher forms of linguistic meaning and ideality in his earlier work. However, it is also clear from his working notes that Merleau-Ponty had no settled schema of chiasmic structures; they open rather to the idea of what I, following Marjorie Grene, have called a pluralistic ontology.¹⁶⁴ Other chiasmic structures mentioned by Merleau-Ponty include those between animal and human, between biology and psychology, and between perception and various cultural achievements such as art, science and philosophy.¹⁶⁵

Chiasmic structures are thus non-reductive and this is what generally distinguishes Merleau-Ponty's approach from another trajectory of modern thinkers who also stressed the continuity of being and the way in which the higher human functions are rooted in lower levels. This trajectory may be represented by Marx, Darwin and Freud.¹⁶⁶ In contrast, Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, follows the logic of *Fundierung* and sedimentation, and as his article 'The Philosopher and His Shadow' indicates, this was a model that remained attractive to him at the time he was beginning to articulate the ontology of flesh.¹⁶⁷ It is possible to understand the chiasmic structure as a refinement of the logic of *Fundierung*, one that to a higher degree emphasizes the ontological unity of the terms.

In what sense does this ontology of flesh advance what we have seen in the previous chapters vis-à-vis preserving the integrity of human beings and the natural world? Here I would like to highlight two things. First, there is an admittedly unstated shift between the versions of emergentism that are operative in *The Structure* and in *The Visible and the Invisible*. The former work conforms well to the most common form of contemporary emergentism, usually associated today with forms of non-reductive physicalism; that is, the argument seems to assume, crudely put, that one can start from 'mere' matter,

¹⁶³ As Barbaras points out, it makes sense to see the chiasm-chapter as a sort of abridged version of what the work as a whole would have been, rather than as a chapter in itself. *Being of the Phenomenon*, 147.

¹⁶⁴ See page 58-59 above; and Grene, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal,' 607.

¹⁶⁵ VI., 223-224/172; cf. also OE.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 196.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. S., 172-177/217-223. See also Evans and Lawlor, *Chiasms*, 15.

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have a series of complexifying circularities, and end up with mind. This process could perhaps be understood according to a logic of *Fundierung*.¹⁶⁸ However, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty insists that ‘the flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.’¹⁶⁹ The flesh is rather that which subtends mind and matter alike, as their common ‘element.’¹⁷⁰ It would appear, then, that Merleau-Ponty thinks the flesh contains in itself the potentiality of both matter and mind, and as such his ontology is clearly not a version of physicalism, even of the non-reductive form. For some this will be an intolerable mysticism, threatening to undo the cherished project of the naturalization of consciousness; but not a few, even within the analytic tradition of philosophy, have seen the need for something along these lines: matter and consciousness might somehow or other be co-original.¹⁷¹ This does not at all mean that the notion of emergence is made redundant. Merleau-Ponty is not defending the idea of a ready-made soul which is inserted into the body; he continues to hold to the emergence of the human order from the vital and material orders, but the ontological framework is now different.¹⁷²

Now, it seems to me that both accounts of the emergence of consciousness attempt to preserve the integrity of human being as a part of the natural world, and if either is correct this will have succeeded. Thus, it comes down to a question of which theory is correct – which better corresponds to the evidence, which is able to explain more, and so on. This is so far an unsettled issue, and

¹⁶⁸ Merleau-Ponty suggests as much in his lectures on nature. See e.g. N., 263-278/203-215.

¹⁶⁹ VI., 181/139.

¹⁷⁰ An even better analogue is perhaps Aristotle’s *hyle*, the *materia informis* of the Latin tradition, as that is precisely what subtends all formations, such that it cannot be encountered in the nude, as it were. It is important to remember that even what we call matter – atoms, quarks, strings or what have you – would on this scheme not count as *hyle*, since it is already somehow or other formed. This is a suggestion I take up in chapter 6.

¹⁷¹ The most important recent defense of such a position within analytic philosophy of mind is that of David Chalmers in his *Conscious Mind*; however, even someone like Jaegwon Kim, often taken to be a stalwart reductionist, admits, as we saw in chapter 1, that qualia are irreducible. What are they, then? we might want to ask. What is their ontological status? In contrast to these thinkers, however, Merleau-Ponty has not an epiphenomenalist bone in his body. Cf. also Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 119, 241 n. 37; as well as Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 319-332, on the increasingly fuzzy concept of the physical.

¹⁷² Remy Kwant is one who notes the monist and materialist assumptions of the earlier work; my reflections have been prompted by that recognition. See his *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 230-233. In making this point I have neglected the problem of the perceiver in *The Structure*, which I believe is not necessarily pertinent to the choice between an ontology of matter or of flesh.

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though I indicated some of the limitations of the standard emergentist approach in chapter 1, I confess that I remain undecided. I would only insist that the issue not be shut down on ideological grounds, but kept open as it concerns the very being of the phenomenon of human existence. As far as Merleau-Ponty is concerned, his later position is what I would like to call a *carnal emergentism*, to distinguish it from the standard non-reductive physicalism. The carnality of emergence reminds us that, according to Merleau-Ponty's understanding, 'the flesh' is not matter, is not mind, but is their common root.

When it comes to the integrity of the natural world, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty has advanced his position by making much more explicit what was only implicit in the *Phenomenology*, if that – namely that being, or nature, is a productive power in its own right, a continuous movement of intertwining, in which human being is a particularly rich pattern. The structure and meaning of the world thus escapes from its presumed correlation with human subjectivity. Being, or the world, is here not merely characterized as transcending its correlation with the perceiving body, rather the body itself is taken up in the auto-productive fecundity of nature ('being,' 'nature' and 'world' being essentially synonymous). However, what about the integrity of human being on this scheme? Is the integrity of human being not threatened by its being merely a part in the cosmic logic of the flesh? Is human integrity diminished in proportion to the augmentation of the integrity of nature? No – or only if an oppositional logic of correlation is presupposed. But it would be odd to claim that the worth of humankind was somehow diminished if all meaningful structures did not depend on it for its existence. Moreover, if one were to construct a full-fledged philosophical anthropology from Merleau-Ponty's incipient ontology of flesh, human beings would not appear as just one chiasmic structure among others; they would appear as beings of tremendous complexity and beauty that remain rooted in nature, even as they rise vertically towards an unknowable and open future. In sum, in this perspective human beings are deeply continuous with the natural world, yet also irreducible to their underlying infrastructures; human beings are embodied through and through, their mental or spiritual life remains rooted in and nourished by their carnal bodies, which are fully part of the sensuous world; human beings are also exceptional within the fabric of being, as they are the ones that can come to know themselves truly and as a part of being, that can finally come to express and question the enigma that they are.

II

ORIGINAL GRACE:
CREATIONAL ONTOLOGY AND THE FLESH

THE WONDER OF THE WORLD

MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE PROBLEM OF CREATION

Je ne passe pas mon temps à dire que je suis athée, parce que ce n'est pas une occupation et que ce serait transformer en négation un effort de conscience philosophique tout positif. Mais si, en fin de compte, on me le demande, je réponds oui.¹

La position de Dieu ne contribue en rien à l'élucidation de notre vie. Nous avons l'expérience non pas d'un vrai éternel et d'une participation à l'Un, mais ... d'une participation au monde.²

La religion est valable en ceci qu'elle réserve la place de l'étrange et qu'elle sait que notre sort est énigmatique. Toutes les solutions qu'elle donne de l'énigme sont incompatibles avec notre condition monstrueuse.³

1. Introduction

The landscape of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thought is punctuated by a subterranean current of theological interest and influence that erupts in occasional remarks and discussions, but never gives rise to a fully articulated philosophy of religion. Indeed, his first published work was a review article

¹ *Parcours* 2, 369. 'I do not spend my time saying that I am an atheist because it is not an occupation and because that would be to transform an entirely positive attempt at philosophical consciousness into a negation. But if, finally, one asks me, I answer yes.'

² PhP., 455/459. 'The positing of God contributes nothing to the elucidation of our lives. We experience, not a genuine eternity and a participation in the One ... we experience a participation in the world' (emphasis omitted).

³ 'Religion is valuable in that it saves a place for what is strange and knows our lot is enigmatic. All the solutions it gives to the enigma are incompatible with our monstrous condition.' S., 257/203.

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entitled ‘Christianisme et ressentiment,’ published in 1935 on the occasion of the French translation of Max Scheler’s *L’Homme du ressentiment*.⁴ And again, his last working note – dated March 1961, for the manuscript posthumously published as *The Visible and the Invisible* – registers his resolve to present the new ontology without any compromise with theology.⁵ As my ultimate purpose in Part Two is to stage an encounter between Merleau-Pontian philosophy and philosophical theology, it is important to try to initially establish where Merleau-Ponty stood with regard to Christian theology, not least since his commentators diverge on this score.⁶ In this chapter, I shall therefore present Merleau-Ponty’s central engagements with theology, spanning the whole of his philosophical career. While I will not attempt to cover every aspect of what he says on the subject, I believe the material presented here more than suffices to establish his position.

While Merleau-Ponty criticizes a certain type of theology, which he calls ‘explanatory theology’ [*théologie explicative*], from several points of view, I argue that they all spring from a deep-seated ontological conviction, from which two corollaries can be seen to follow – one practical and one methodological. His ontological conviction is that the sort of divine transcendence that follows from the Christian doctrine of creation is always antithetical to the immanent integrity of the world and human existence incarnate within it; in short, that an affirmation of God implies a negation of the world. It will be my main task in this chapter to demonstrate how this plays itself out in a number of central texts and with an eye to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development. What could be called the practical corollary to this ontological conviction is that the affirmation of a transcendent God precludes a wholehearted (political) engagement with the affairs of this world; while the methodological corollary, in turn, is that any theology that invokes such a notion of divine transcendence amounts to an unwarranted rationalism that puts a stop to all genuine philosophical wonder and reflection by evacuating contingency from the world. Notwithstanding the depth and sensitivity of some of Merleau-Ponty’s remarks on religion and theology, I believe that this central ontological conviction, with its practical and methodological

⁴ Reprinted in *Parcours*, 9-33.

⁵ VI., 274/322.

⁶ See e.g. Janicaud et al., *Theological Turn*; Milbank, ‘Soul of Reciprocity’; Blond, ‘From Painting’; Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 242; Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, ‘L’incarnation change tout: Merleau-Ponty critique de la “théologie explicative.”’

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corollaries, misrepresents the original subtlety and attraction of the logic of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and inadequately accounts for the consequences of that doctrine as they were expounded by the major pre-modern theologians of the West. Taking this into account will be my task in the next chapter, where I present an alternative reading of the doctrine of creation; the present chapter is confined to a presentation of Merleau-Ponty's own critique of theology.

I present this material under three headings that chronologically follow the development of Merleau-Ponty's stance vis-à-vis theology; they also highlight the different dimensions of his critique, where what I understand to be the central ontological conviction is at first rather understated, but then gains in importance and becomes quite pronounced in the later works. In the *first* section, I look at some early material written in the years surrounding the publication of the *Phenomenology* (which book, it should be noted, has almost nothing to say about religion or theology). The article 'Faith and Good Faith,' in particular, demonstrates the fundamental contrast Merleau-Ponty sees between the immanence of the world and the presumed transcendence of the creator God. In the *second* section, I consider material written in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Merleau-Ponty was enjoying wide popularity and respect as a philosophical and political thinker. In these articles and essays, the question of contingency takes centre stage, as well as the closely related issue of the purpose of philosophy and the enigmatic task of the philosopher. This is also the period when Merleau-Ponty's critique of theology and professed atheism are most pronounced, and when Christianity is held to be incompatible with his own understanding of philosophy, the reasons for which are highly instructive for understanding his philosophy as such. And finally, in the *third* section, I look at the later works, in particular the courses on nature and *The Visible and the Invisible*, where this explicitly becomes a question of incongruent ontological positions. In a nutshell, Merleau-Ponty argues that the integrity of the world, of human subjectivity and of the contingent unfolding of meaning is denied by the ontology of modern science, which, as he sees it, derives from the 'postulates of Judeo-Christian thought' [*postulats de la pensée Judéo-Chrétienne*],⁷ and in particular from the notion of a world 'suspended on a creative act.' In this section, I also try to gauge the difference that Merleau-Ponty's altered conception of contingency – mentioned in the preceding chapter – makes for his critique of theology. This is an issue that returns in the

⁷ N., 176/131.

next chapter, and is important when the tables are turned and Merleau-Ponty's notion of contingency is evaluated from the point of view of philosophical theology.

2. Early Formulations: Incarnation *Versus* Transcendence

From his earliest work, Merleau-Ponty was aware of what he saw as a philosophically problematic tension between the transcendence of God as creator and the integrity and goodness of the world. However, in the 1935 review article 'Christianisme et ressentiment,' he squarely sides with Scheler in thinking that while Nietzsche clearly demonstrated the role of resentment in the 'genealogy of morality,' and while Christianity lives in constant threat of being subconsciously motivated by resentment, Nietzsche was nevertheless wrong to think such an attitude is intrinsic to Christianity itself.⁸ Rather, argue Scheler and Merleau-Ponty, Christianity affirms life and the living, and in any case, *pace* Nietzsche, phenomenology itself has showed that human life cannot be understood reductively, such that it could be brought back to this or that fundamental drive, but must rather be characterized by the constant interplay of different levels – of immanence and transcendence, of nature and consciousness.⁹ Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty contends that Christianity in its historical and institutional form (which for Merleau-Ponty is largely co-extensive with Roman Catholicism) is not able to negotiate this tension very well, interposing instead 'between us and the fishermen from lake Tiberias' the 'hypocrisy of resentment.'¹⁰ There is here a distinction at work between fact and idea: on the level of ideas, Christianity affirms the world; but as a matter of fact, it fails to live at the level of its own understanding. At the end of this essay, therefore, Merleau-Ponty wonders whether there is not after all an important question to be asked, within Christianity, about 'the concrete relations between the "spiritual person" and consciousness of the sensible world [*les rapports concrets de la "personne spirituelle" et de la conscience sensible*].'¹¹ Merleau-Ponty's attitude, which seems very personally felt, is thus that Christianity on the level of theory does indeed affirm the immanence of life,

⁸ *Parcours*, 29.

⁹ *Parcours*, 14, 24.

¹⁰ *Parcours*, 30 (all translations my own).

¹¹ *Parcours*, 31.

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but on the level of practise fails to resolve the tension between heavenly and earthly values, between ‘metaphysical salvation’ and concrete action. Paraphrasing, perhaps we could state his problem like this: Granted that Christianity affirms both the transcendent realm and the immanent world, how are they then supposed to be connected in the life of the Christian?

In 1946, Merleau-Ponty published an article entitled ‘Faith and Good Faith’ in *Les temps modernes*, the magazine he had founded together with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and others the year before.¹² Here it is clear that the problematic of the earlier piece has remained live for him, that it has intensified and taken a more explicitly political turn. While in ‘Christianisme et ressentiment’ he had argued that Christianity had got it right on the level of theory, he now rather claims that early Christianity had made some doctrinal choices that it should not have – namely, the decision to affirm *both* the transcendence of God the creator and the immanence of God incarnate. He now locates the problem in Christian doctrine itself. Let us consider his argumentation.

The context for this article was a debate between the Communist intellectual Pierre Hervé and Father Jean Daniélou on whether the Roman Catholic Church could be progressive or is rather inherently conservative.¹³ Daniélou had argued that the Church could indeed join forces with progressive and revolutionary social currents; Hervé, one the other hand, had responded by saying that while individual Christians may work in favour of liberation, the Church as an institution with its own internal logic will always be a reactionary force in society. At this point Merleau-Ponty intervenes, arguing that Hervé is in fact right: the Church is always conservative; but as it stands this critique is incomplete, since it is not grounded in the internal logic of Christianity as a system of ideas. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty accuses Hervé of the same kind of incompleteness that he himself demonstrated in ‘Christianisme et ressentiment,’ locating the problem in historical circumstance rather than in the logic of the ideas believed, as if the external behaviour of the faithful and their social and ecclesial structures could be divorced from their internal life: ‘There must be an ambiguity in Catholicism as a spiritual way of life to correspond to its ambiguity as a social phenomenon’ [*À l'équivoque du*

¹² Reprinted in SNS., 209-220/172-181. Translations from ‘Foi et bonne foi’ are my own, and differ somewhat from those of Dreyfus and Dreyfus, but I give the pagination of their edition in the footnotes.

¹³ Remy Kwant gives some background information about the debate in *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 139-140.

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catholicisme comme phénomène social doit correspondre une équivoque du catholicisme comme vie spirituelle].¹⁴

Merleau-Ponty proposes a twofold typology of Christian doctrine: ‘Catholicism believes at the same time in an interior God and in an exterior God, such is the religious formulation of its contradictions.’¹⁵ Christianity tries to follow two incompatible paths at the same time: On the first, God is seen as transcending the world and is thus not to be found *in* the world as such, but only by turning inward, and hence, away from the world. Merleau-Ponty associates this path – the inward turn away from the concrete world – with Augustine, and quoting Hegel, calls it ‘the reign of the Father’ [*le règne du Père*]. This path leads to quietism, for according to this logic perfection already resides in a God who has no need of human effort, and since the good is already realized *elsewhere*, one’s interest must be invested there; down here ‘there is, literally, nothing to be done.’¹⁶ In chapter 5, I will confront this interpretation with a reading of the relevant sections of Augustine’s *Confessions*, to try to gauge the tenability of Merleau-Ponty’s indictment of Augustinian Christianity: Is it in fact the case that Augustinian interiority implies a denigration of the ‘exterior’ world?

On the second path of Christian doctrine, as Merleau-Ponty reads it, ‘the incarnation changes everything. After the incarnation, God has been in the exterior [world]’ [*L’incarnation change tout. Après l’Incarnation, Dieu a été dans l’extérieur*].¹⁷ After this monumental event, the path to God passes through the world, which must therefore be interpreted anew, with a never-ending energy; *this world* now becomes interesting again, since it is the place of God’s presence. A religious transformation occurs with the event of the incarnation, says Merleau-Ponty; it is as if the transcendent creator God ‘were no longer self-sufficient, as if something moved in him, as if the world and humanity, instead of being a useless fall from the original perfection, became necessary moments in an even greater perfection.’¹⁸ Hegel, I think, would have been very pleased with such an analysis. Suddenly, something is at stake in this world; quietism is rendered incoherent: there is now something to be done. I shall again have reason to challenge the assumptions of this reading of divine presence, as exclusively tied to the incarnation, in the following chapter.

¹⁴ SNS., 211/173.

¹⁵ SNS., 211/173.

¹⁶ SNS., 212/174.

¹⁷ SNS., 212/174.

¹⁸ SNS., 213/175.

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The insurmountable paradox of Christianity arises precisely because it refuses to choose one path over the other and tries instead to retain them both – God the creator and God incarnate. Merleau-Ponty associates different approaches and attitudes with each of these paths: ‘speculative theology and Thomism’ *versus* ‘faith,’ ‘experience’ and Pascalian reasons of the heart. The problem, as he sees it, is that ‘the incarnation is not followed through to all its consequences.’¹⁹ What would those consequences be? They would be to finally reject the reign of the Father, to realize that God is now on earth – *not in heaven*. As Albert Rabil has observed, Merleau-Ponty is here in fact proposing what would, historically speaking, be a sort of Sabellian doctrine of God: the one God is now no longer manifested as the Father, nor indeed as the Son, but as the Spirit: ‘Pentecost signifies that the religion of the Father and the religion of the Son, ought to be accomplished [*doivent s’accomplir*] in the religion of the Spirit, that God is no longer in heaven, that he is in society and in the communication between men, everywhere where men gather in his name.’²⁰ This would have been an option for the early Christians, but instead Catholicism developed its doctrine of the Trinity and put a stop to the transformation of religious consciousness, whereby Christianity could have lived the union of Spirit and the history that began with the incarnation. As it now stands with Christianity, as soon as it invokes God incarnate in the world – in history, in human lives – the ‘infinite Gaze’ [*ce Regard infini*] of the Father is there behind the scenes, ‘before which we are without secrets, but also without freedom, without desire, without future, reduced to the condition of *things seen* [*nous sommes sans secret, mais aussi sans liberté, sans désir, sans avenir, réduit à la condition de choses visibles*].’²¹ In the final analysis, declares Merleau-Ponty, Christianity always judges the path of God incarnate through the path of the transcendent creator God. What is interesting in Merleau-Ponty’s analysis – and problematic from a theological point of view – is the absolute contrast he sees between the transcendence of God and the integrity and value of the immanent world. For Merleau-Ponty, the existence of God would seem to reduce us – human subjects – to ‘things seen,’ that is to say, to unilaterally constituted *objects*.

This analysis of doctrine is also the key to the ambivalence of Christian action in the world, which was the original problem attended to in the debate

¹⁹ SNS., 214/176.

²⁰ SNS., 215/177. See Albert Rabil Jr., *Merleau-Ponty: Existentialist of the Social World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 221.

²¹ SNS., 215/177.

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between Hervé and Daniélou. Had Christianity followed through on the incarnation, says Merleau-Ponty, it could have been entirely committed to the human struggle for liberty; but since it retains the reign of the Father, there is always a reserve, a more fundamental investment elsewhere that precludes wholehearted engagement in political action. ‘When it follows the incarnation, it can be revolutionary. But the religion of the Father is conservative.’²² Thus the Church establishes itself ‘on the margin of society’ [*en marge de l’État*], rather than in its midst. While it may from time to time align itself with revolutionary causes – when it is itself threatened – the Church remains haunted by its knowledge that ‘you cannot serve two masters.’ This is the reason, says Merleau-Ponty, why Christian faith will never be able to achieve ‘this premier honesty [*sincérité*], which consist of chasing from oneself the equivocal [*chasser de soi l’équivoque*].’²³ In this way, the political ambiguity, equivocation and half-heartedness of Christianity is given a theoretical foundation in doctrine.

Such is Merleau-Ponty’s early understanding of the consequences of affirming a transcendent creator God: a believer in this God cannot in open-eyed honesty engage in the political struggle of this world. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty came to believe that the world itself and its denizens are negated in the affirmation of a transcendent God – that is to say, that something that is essential to worldly existence and human integrity is rejected by Christianity. While his 1935 review affirmed that Christian doctrine allowed for a genuine appreciation of this world, even though it often failed to live it, this 1946 article claims that it is precisely Christian doctrine, as it has developed, that effectively bars the Christian from a full affirmation of this world.²⁴

However, we cannot leave ‘Faith and Good Faith’ without mentioning its last couple of pages, where Merleau-Ponty all of a sudden – and to great effect – turns his analysis towards the Communist Party itself. For is it not the case, he asks, that all human engagement in the world – whether in religion, in politics, in love or in friendship – demands action that can never be fully justified from a theoretical point of view? There is an element of the ambiguous and equivocal in all human activity; but if this is so, ‘how then is it possible to reproach the Catholic for living in the equivocal?’²⁵ It is hard to know what to make of this last section. The indictment of Catholic doctrine

²² SNS., 215/177.

²³ SNS., 217/178.

²⁴ Cf. Rabil, *Merleau-Ponty: Existentialist*, 221.

²⁵ SNS., 217/179.

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and practise seems so clear in the earlier part, and yet here Merleau-Ponty seems to say that we are all in the same boat, that there is no absolute choice between faith and honesty, but rather always an intermingling of both. As we shall soon see, this is a theme that returns with full force as Merleau-Ponty thinks more about what it means to exist in the world, and to exist as a philosopher.

3. Being a Philosopher: The Fragility of Wonder

In 1951 Merleau-Ponty travelled to Geneva to give a public lecture, entitled 'Man and Adversity,' at the *Rencontres Internationales*, interacting with, among others, Jean Daniélou on the question of theology. His actual presentation was later published in the collection *Signs*, and the discussion sessions surrounding it have more recently been published in *Parcours deux*.²⁶ Here we find Merleau-Ponty at the height of his social engagement, when he had established himself as a very respected public voice in France. In comparison with 'Christianisme et ressentiment' and 'Faith and Good Faith,' it is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty here explicitly confronts Christian doctrine with his own philosophical position as it had emerged over the years since the publication of his most famous work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, in 1945. He goes so far as to assert that philosophy, as he understands it, is incompatible with Christianity, or at least with the sort of theology he now calls explanatory [*théologie explicative*] and identifies with the Catholic mainstream.²⁷ 'I think that those who are deeply interested in phenomenology or existentialism, while being Catholics, are inconsistent [*c'est par une inconséquence*].'²⁸ And he goes on to state that if pressed he would indeed say that he is an atheist, and for philosophical reasons.²⁹ These reasons, as we shall see, are tied to the interrelation of *wonder* and *contingency*: As Merleau-Ponty understands it, philosophy is motivated by 'wonder in the face of the world.'³⁰ More particularly, philosophy wonders at the emergence of a meaningful world that

²⁶ S., 284-308/224-243; *Parcours 2*, 321-376.

²⁷ S., 307/242.

²⁸ *Parcours 2*, 364.

²⁹ See the epigraph to this chapter.

³⁰ Cf. PhP., 14/xv.

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it knows is absolutely contingent, and thus, as it were, suspended in the void of the meaningless.

In his Geneva lecture, Merleau-Ponty attempts to describe the crucial characteristics of life in the twentieth century, and states that the times are marked by a profound sense of ambiguity that runs through the sciences and the arts, manifesting itself in how we think about the relation between the body and the mind, consciousness and language, politics and history. Clear alternatives and categories that used to be neatly divided are now blurred and lost in infinite complexity. Attempting to give these phenomena a philosophical interpretation, Merleau-Ponty believes they are all related to the phenomenon of contingency [*contingence*].³¹ His early philosophy has, as we have seen, very much been a sustained effort to witness to this contingency of human existence and to profess this as the *sine qua non* of meaning formation as well as the motor of philosophical reflection.

The theme of contingency and its implications lie at the very heart of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical reflection – or rather, contingency coupled with an affirmation of the teleological development of meaning: The world is contingent but not meaningless, since a meaning emerges in history and in the ever renewed encounter between the subjective body and the world (or as the later ontology would have it, in the chiasmic return of the flesh upon itself), yet this meaning is never fully present, never absolute, never secured. This is the great and wondrous mystery of human existence – that there is meaning in spite of, and even because of, contingency. Indeed, the human being is the one who encounters contingent situations in the flux of time, picks them up and makes something out of them, thereby creating a whole new layer of meaning – contingent, yes, but none the less real.³² This is why phenomenology becomes Merleau-Ponty's chosen method. As he says in the preface to the *Phenomenology*:

[Phenomenological] reflection does not withdraw from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical.³³

³¹ S., 303/239.

³² S., 304-305/239-240.

³³ 'La réflexion ne se retire pas du monde vers l'unité de la conscience comme fondement du monde, elle prend recul pour voir jaillir les transcendances, elle distend les fils intentionnelles qui

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As Merleau-Ponty understands it, the philosopher must above all not fear contingency, seeking to evade it by rooting it in some necessary principle. For it is from contingency that humanity is born and from the freedom with which the human encounters the world, meaning and history emerge. The task of the philosopher, therefore, is to understand how we become subjects and how the world comes to be for us, to grasp the moment of the birth of meaning, how it is rooted and how it develops.

Against this background we can understand the conflict with theology that Merleau-Ponty addresses at the end of his Geneva lecture: The idea of divine creation and rationalistic humanism (which Merleau-Ponty calls ‘a secularized theology’) share one thing in common – they both seek to evade the idea of a contingent world; for both, human being is the necessary outcome of a teleological process, whether by divine decree or metaphysical mechanism.³⁴ Explanatory theology is precisely this: believing oneself to have a secured access to an explanation of the fundamental mystery of humankind; but this explanation leads to a concealment of the authentic phenomenon of humanity in all its ‘vertiginous’ contingency, freedom and fragility. Instead, the dice are loaded: everything is decided beforehand, meaning itself eternally reposes in God. Human meaning-making, as Merleau-Ponty has describes it in the *Phenomenology* and in subsequent articles, is thereby denied. Could there be a more profound conflict of perspectives?

In view of his very clear statements at the Geneva conference in 1951 it seems to me impossible to claim, as some have, that Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of Christianity was a personal matter that had little or nothing to do with his own philosophical position, in stark contrast to someone like Sartre, whose atheism was clearly consequent upon his philosophy.³⁵ It is probably true that Merleau-Ponty’s early rejection of Christianity, as he had practised it in childhood and adolescence, was premised more on personal disappointment

nous relieut au monde pour les faire paraître, elle seule est conscience du monde parce que elle le révèle comme étrange et paradoxal.’ PhP., 14/xv.

³⁴ S., 305/240-241.

³⁵ Dermot Moran, for instance – who moreover cites the Geneva lecture, though not the ensuing discussion sessions – claims that Merleau-Ponty ‘remained agnostic in religious terms,’ a statement which, as we have seen, cannot be justified. *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 430. Similarly, Richard Kearney describes Merleau-Ponty’s viewpoint as ‘ostensibly agnostic,’ and recognizes in Merleau-Ponty ‘an atheistic alternative to the endless doctrinal disputes between theism and atheism.’ *Anatheism*, 91, 93. Cf. also Atherton C. Lowry, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Absence of God,’ *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 52 (1978).

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with the conduct of the Church and the clergy than on philosophical doctrine; but it is also true that as he developed his own philosophical understanding, he explicitly contrasted it with Christian faith. Hence it must be said that, at this point at least, his rejection of Christianity is indeed philosophically motivated. Whether it is well motivated is a different issue, one I shall take up in the next chapter.

The Geneva lecture lets us glimpse a methodological decision as to what philosophy should be on the part of Merleau-Ponty that we need to probe somewhat deeper, not least since it remains basic to his understanding of the philosophical task to the end of his life. Philosophy is above all a radical questioning that keeps itself open; it tries to understand more, but it also understands that, just as there is no final perceptual synthesis, so there can be no closure to philosophical understanding, since there are no metaphysical principles from which a complete understanding could be deduced. Rather, philosophy as a continuation of perceptual meaning-making is creative; it does not just describe, it enacts, it brings forth meaning. But the principal enigma is that it can do so. As Merleau-Ponty will later say, ‘philosophy is the set of questions wherein he who questions is himself implicated by the question’ [*la philosophie est l’ensemble des questions où celui qui questionne est lui-même mise en cause par la question*].³⁶ In contrast to the positive or objective sciences, for which the unknown is synonymous with the not-yet-known, the philosophical limit is a limit in principle. For the positive sciences allow themselves to forget the subjective as they go to the object, whereas philosophy is precisely the interrogation of the ways in which subjectivity is related to the world, ways that are not pre-determined, but in the final analysis always contingent. For the subjectivity that we are, and that gives a certain basic meaning to the world as we know it, is rooted in a place we always arrive at too late, and in a history which, since it is contingent, cannot be subsumed under a set of laws so as to become a positive science. Everything touched by human hand or seen by human eye is drawn into the mystery that humankind is. This is why Merleau-Ponty can say in the *Phenomenology* that the lived body ‘is not merely one object among the rest which has the peculiarity of resisting reflection and remaining, so to speak, stuck to the subject. Obscurity spreads to the perceived world in its entirety [*l’obscurité gagne le monde perçu tout entier*].’³⁷

³⁶ VI., 46-47/27.

³⁷ PhP., 241/234.

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The problem with Christianity, then, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, is that it refuses this contingency, which is also the sign under which we may be free. If God had created the world there would be no more room for contingency and hence no more room for human existence – we would no longer recognize ourselves. For Merleau-Ponty, the predicament of theology is in this sense the same as that of modern rationalism:

When the great rationalist philosophies joined battle with revealed religion, what they put in competition with divine creation was some metaphysical mechanism which evades the idea of a fortuitous world just as much as it had. Today a humanism does not oppose religion with an explanation of the world. It begins by becoming aware of contingency. ... It is the methodological refusal of explanations, because they destroy the mixture we are made of and make us incomprehensible to ourselves.³⁸

I believe that two related but nonetheless separate issues are entangled in Merleau-Ponty's discussions of contingency and Christianity and that it would be clarifying to disentangle them. There is the *ontological problem*: divine creation leads to a mistaken ontology in that it does not admit of contingency and, hence, of human freedom and creativity. There is also the *methodological problem*: divine creation absolves us from radically pursuing philosophy, as there are no more radical philosophical questions to be asked – which is to say, no more questions pertaining to the origin and development of human meaning-formation. This is what we have already seen, and it becomes more explicit and is further developed in several other published works. Let me illustrate this with two examples – the 1947 essay 'The Metaphysical in Man' and the 1953 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, 'In Praise of Philosophy' – and then finally consider Merleau-Ponty's reading of Descartes in his last published work, *Eye and Mind*, where his understanding of philosophy is set against the onto-theological move of modern philosophy. These articles veer more towards the methodological issue of what philosophy requires, but as will become apparent, the ontological issues are just below the surface.

In 'The Metaphysical in Man,' Merleau-Ponty describes what he calls 'metaphysical consciousness' [*conscience métaphysique*] and outlines a

³⁸ 'Quand les grand philosophies rationalistes sont entrées en conflit avec la religion révélée, c'est qu'elle mettaient en concurrence avec la création divine quelque mécanisme métaphysique qui n'éluait pas moins l'idée d'un monde fortuit. Un humanisme aujourd'hui n'oppose pas à la religion une explication du monde: il commence par la prise de conscience de la contingence ... il est le refus méthodique des explications, parce qu'elles détruisent le mélange don't nous sommes faits, et nous rendent incompréhensibles a nous-mêmes.' S., 305-306/241.

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metaphysics – we could understand it as a sort of phenomenological metaphysics – that takes subjectivity seriously. Rather than seeking otherworldly anchorage points, this new metaphysics is to be anchored in the concrete life of the everyday: ‘Metaphysical consciousness has no other object than everyday experience [*l’expérience quotidienne*]: this world, the others, the human history, the truth, the culture.’³⁹ Since, as we have seen, human existence resists the modern notion of a *mathesis universalis*, what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘metaphysical consciousness’ must resist all completed systems, and, consequently, all absolute knowledge. In a pointed phrase, Merleau-Ponty claims that ‘metaphysical consciousness ... dies upon contact with the absolute.’⁴⁰ For if there is absolute knowledge, there can be no contingency, and contingency is the enigma that feeds philosophy itself and without which it cannot live.

Religion, however, posits an absolute God, an anchorage beyond the contingency of this world; a religiously motivated metaphysics is therefore no longer *in humankind*. Merleau-Ponty also makes the related point that the partial understanding of humankind and its world that we do have is undervalued if it is compared to the impossible ideal of an absolute divine thinker, for whom nothing is in principle mysterious or contingent. The danger is that we may come to reject the fractured knowledge that is available for a pipedream of epistemic perfection.⁴¹ Again, however, Merleau-Ponty concludes by making the point that there is a current of Christian thought that would not fall victim to this analysis – the thought of God become man and of the death of God, a God that assumes the human condition. But as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty finds no way of reconciling these ideas with the notion of the transcendence of God the creator. This, then, amounts to a methodologically motivated rejection of God and the absolutist metaphysics

³⁹ SNS., 115/94 (my translation). For a discussion about the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics, see Dan Zahavi, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics,’ in Dan Zahavi, Sara Heinämaa and Hans Ruin, eds., *Metaphysics, Facticity, Interpretation: Phenomenology in the Nordic Countries* (Dordrecht-Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003).

⁴⁰ SNS., 117/95.

⁴¹ Cf. SNS., 116/95; PhP., 458/462; Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 165: ‘We make the real values relative, or even condemn them in the name of false ideal values. This happens when we consider the absolute essence as the ideal of human knowledge. ... God has been conceived as the Absolute Look surveying everything. Such a God emerges out of man’s feelings of failure. God becomes the successful man. God is conceived as the actualization of an impossible human ideal. ... It is extremely dangerous because it makes us blind to the light which we do have because of our involvement in Being.’

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Merleau-Ponty thinks theology entails if it affirms a transcendent creator of the world, since philosophy proper cannot live and breathe in such a framework.

In his inaugural speech, as the youngest ever to hold the chair of philosophy at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty picks up these themes again in a sustained discussion of what philosophy should be. Here he paints Henri Bergson and Socrates as philosophical heroes and polemicizes against Henri de Lubac and Jacques Maritain.⁴² Bergson's theological notions are associated with the path of God incarnate, as Merleau-Ponty understands it:

There is in the Bergsonian theology, as perhaps in every theology since Christianity, a sort of 'movement,' such that one never knows whether it is God who maintains humans in their human being or if it is the opposite, because to know his existence it is necessary to pass through ours, which is no longer a detour.⁴³

As Merleau-Ponty notes, Bergson worked his way towards Catholic beliefs, yet out of solidarity with those who were soon to be persecuted, his fellow Jews, did not submit to baptism, choosing instead to officially remain Jewish. Merleau-Ponty takes this to mean that Bergson refused to sacrifice his stand in the contingency of human history and his stand with humanity for an institution, the Church, as guardian of eternal truth; the path of incarnation triumphed over the path of transcendence in that Bergson refused the logic that sacrifices the here and now for the elsewhere. Again, religion cannot be about withdrawing into the truth and away from humankind and history. But in relation to the transcendent creator God, 'our existence was a mistake and the world a decadence, from which we could only be healed by returning from it.'⁴⁴ To the contrary, the incarnation points us to an engagement with the progression of human history, which Bergson so beautifully illustrated by his own example.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that religion may be true, but if so it is true as a philosophical interpretation of life, not according to its own self-understanding. This was Socrates' approach to Athenian religion, for which he paid with his life.⁴⁵ This is a rather important point in view of the fact that

⁴² Conspicuously avoiding any mention of his illustrious predecessor at the chair of philosophy at the Collège de France, Etienne Gilson.

⁴³ 'Il y a dans la théologie bergsonienne, comme peut-être dans toute théologie depuis le christianisme, une sorte de "bougé" qui fait qu'on ne sait jamais si c'est Dieu qui soutient les hommes dans leur être humain ou si c'est l'inverse, puisque, pour reconnaître son existence, il faut passer par la nôtre, et que ce n'est plus là un détour.' EP, 33-34/26 (my translation).

⁴⁴ EP, 34/26 (my translation).

⁴⁵ EP, 43/35.

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Merleau-Ponty is sometimes seen as a sort of quasi-religious philosopher, due to his interest in the idea of incarnation. But in speaking about Socrates here, Merleau-Ponty is laying out his program as a professor at the Collège de France, and this program guides his more positive interactions with theology. For as he understands it, Christianity is indeed the soil from which certain truly important ideas could spring up in Western philosophy, and these ideas are the ones that most interest Merleau-Ponty himself. As he says in the preface to a work in the history of philosophy that he edited, *Les philosophes célèbres*, ‘how can you take away from Christianity the ideas of *history, subjectivity, incarnation, positive finitude*, and attribute them instead to a “universal” reason, without any place of birth?’⁴⁶ But if the idea of incarnation is truly important and full of consequences, it must not be understood as the Church itself understands it, and certainly not according to Chalcedonian doctrine; rather, this is the symbol under which a number of central human phenomena let themselves be recognized and interpreted by the philosopher. When Merleau-Ponty appropriates the notion of incarnation, therefore, he lets it stand for many things: embodiment in general, the rootedness of the ideal in the carnal, the affirmation of the here and now, and so on. And while we may perhaps speak of a kind of mysticism of the flesh in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, it is not a mysticism whereby the immanence of creation is joined to divine transcendence. Indeed, this may well be the import of his last cryptic working note, where he states that his new work ‘must be presented without any compromise [*sans aucun compromis*] ... with theology.’⁴⁷

The final point I want make in relation to ‘Éloge de la philosophie’ concerns the polemic with de Lubac and Maritain towards the end of the lecture. The principal problem for Merleau-Ponty, here as before, concerns the nature of philosophy as antithetical to the absolute in any and every form. He accuses de Lubac and Maritain of assuming that any philosophy that does not seek and affirm the absolute must end up in the utterly dissolute, as if there could be no philosophy that refused the absolute but which nonetheless witnessed to a genuine birth and development of human meaning. We can easily understand what it is that offends Merleau-Ponty in such an approach to philosophy, since his own philosophy attempts to install itself precisely in the ambiguous, ever-changing progression of human meaning and history, to witness its birth and development, with all the more astonishment as it

⁴⁶ S., 179/142 (my emphasis and translation).

⁴⁷ VI., 322/274 (emphasis omitted).

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recognizes its contingency. Thus, theology's absolute meaning which reposes in God and 'promethean humanism's' absolute denial of the world's meaning are each other's mirror images: explanatory theology faces here its inversion.⁴⁸ Genuine philosophy, on the other hand, admits that there is meaning in the world – indeed, it stands back to witness its brute upsurge – but also that this meaning is not a preordained progression, but rather, as biologist Francisco Varela said about enactive cognition, 'a path laid down in walking.'⁴⁹

The [true] philosopher does not say that a final overcoming of human contradiction is possible and that the completed human awaits us in the future: like everyone else, he does not know anything about that. He says – and that is a very different thing – that the world begins, that we cannot judge its future from what has been its past, that the idea of a destiny in things is not an idea but a vertigo, that our relations with nature are not fixed once and for all, that *no one can know what freedom may do*.⁵⁰

Can theology admit its worldliness and stand back as a witness to the upsurge and development of this fragile and contingent formation of meaning? Merleau-Ponty believes that it cannot, at least not as understood by de Lubac and Maritain. 'For theology observes the contingency of human being only to derive from it a necessary Being, that is, to get rid of it; it uses philosophical wonder only to motivate an affirmation that terminates it' [*Car la théologie ne constate pas la contingence de l'être humain que pour la dériver d'un être nécessaire, c'est-à-dire pour s'en défaire, elle n'use de l'étonnement philosophique que pour motiver une affirmation qui le termine*].⁵¹ What Merleau-Ponty seems to be saying is that only a thinking that affirms the contingency, not only of humankind, of meaning and the progression of history, but of being itself can remain in the philosophical attitude. De Lubac, in his 1944 book *Drame de l'humanité athée*, had claimed that the ultimate metaphysical question of why there is something rather than nothing is indeed the problem that 'has let God be born in human consciousness.'⁵² But in the face of its explicit intentions, de Lubac accuses modern atheism of being *insufficiently* sensitive to the problem

⁴⁸ Cf. EP, 50-51/41-43.

⁴⁹ Quoted from Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 13.

⁵⁰ 'Le philosophe ne dit pas qu'un dépassement final des contradictions humaines soit possible et que l'homme totale nous attende dans l'avenir : comme tout le monde, il n'en sait rien. Il dit, - et c'est tout autre chose, - que le monde commence, que nous n'avons pas à juger de son avenir par ce qu'a été son passé, que l'idée d'un destin dans les choses n'est pas une idée, mais un vertige, que nos rapports avec la nature ne sont pas fixés une fois pour toutes, que *personne ne peut savoir que la liberté peut faire*.' EP, 52/43 (my translation and emphasis).

⁵¹ EP, 53/44 (my translation).

⁵² Quoted by Merleau-Ponty in EP, 53/45 (my translation).

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of contingency – indeed, of eliminating it. Merleau-Ponty retorts that he is not the one eliminating contingency, but rather that he radicalizes it. The philosopher ‘makes it [i.e. the problem of contingency] radical, he raises it above “solutions” that choke it.’⁵³ In other words, the philosopher recognizes contingency as a fundamental and principal enigma, for which no solution could or should be sought.⁵⁴ In the next chapter I will enquire, from a theological perspective, into what this could mean: What kind of theology is such that it ‘chokes’ the experience of contingency? At any rate, we still seem to be dealing with the methodological motivation for rejecting divine creation, since this doctrine leads us to reject contingency and without contingency there is no philosophy, at least not of the authentic kind, as Merleau-Ponty understands it.

To make more sense of this rather important line of argument, let us consider once more the distinction, first made in chapter 2, between absolute and relative contingency – the former referring to the very existence of the world, of human being and of the possibility of meaning; the latter signifying the fact that the forward development of meaning is not determined and fixed, even though it is motivated by previously sedimented structures. In his discussions of the task of philosophy, and the wonder it requires, Merleau-Ponty seems mostly to be concerned with relative contingency, as in the quote above: ‘no one can know what freedom may do.’ In other words, nature is not to be understood as a deterministic stretch of cause and effect – ‘our relations with nature are not fixed once and for all’ – but as an open structure, in which human beings participate.

The importance of this theme can be traced all the way back to *The Structure*, where it was developed under the names of circular causality and emergence. The texts we are now looking at, focally concerned with the philosophical sense of contingency, show that Merleau-Ponty can quite easily transpose his highly theoretical reflections on nature and science into an existential key. Throughout Merleau-Ponty’s life this theme remains; he always insists that the causal matrix should not be so defined as to exclude in principle the phenomenon of human being, and he feels strongly that this requires the contingency of meaning-formation.

However, what seems to be at stake in de Lubac’s charge and Merleau-Ponty’s riposte is the different (though of course related) question of absolute

⁵³ EP, 53/45 (my translation).

⁵⁴ See Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 135-136, for some critical remarks on Merleau-Ponty’s response to de Lubac’s charge.

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contingency, what Merleau-Ponty in another place calls ‘ontological contingency’ [*contingence ontologique*]; that is, the very question of why the world is in the first place.⁵⁵ The confusion of this exchange of ideas, it seems to me, is caused in no small part by the fact that Merleau-Ponty is less than clear about what absolute contingency has to do with the relative contingency of meaning-making. This is a question that has been calling for clarification in all our previous discussions of the topic of contingency, and it is one that I shall return to again, but some initial clarification must be made at this stage. To re-articulate the question: Why does Merleau-Ponty, at least in his earlier writings, need to affirm the brute facticity of the world, human existence and meaning so strongly? Why is it important to affirm that these things are rooted in nothing but absolute contingency? The answer turns out to be intimately bound to theology. Simply put, Merleau-Ponty believes that an affirmation of divine creation as a response to the enigma of ontological contingency implies a denial of intra-mundane relative contingency; he believes, that is, that God equals determinism and therefore the loss of the human phenomenon, its freedom, and its creative meaning-making potential. He indicates as much when, in his response to de Lubac, he says that ‘it is the same thing to establish [*constater*] [the strange becoming of the sense of the world] against every naturalistic explanation as it is to liberate [it] from every sovereign necessity [i.e. God].’⁵⁶ Apparently divine creation and scientific determinism are functionally equivalent: they both lead to the loss of relative contingency, and consequently to the loss of philosophy and of humanity itself. Hence, in the same way that Merleau-Ponty criticizes materialistic reductionism in *The Structure*, so he criticizes Christian theology and the doctrine of creation – and for largely the same reason.

The methodological problem of contingency, as described above, is in this sense clearly dependent on an ontological understanding. Perhaps we could say that reduced to its bare essentials, there are two reasons for philosophical wonder and questioning: that there is a world *and* that it is such as it is for us – *that* it is and *how* it is. If, for the sake of argument, we concede to Merleau-Ponty that divine creation puts a stop to the first kind of wonder, we would still have the possibility of the second kind of wonder – which is in fact the one that most occupies him (phenomenology as learning to see the unfolding sense of the world). Unless, of course, a necessary connection is perceived between

⁵⁵ PhP., 459/462-463.

⁵⁶ EP, 54/46 (my translation).

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the first kind of wonder and the second, if that is, it is assumed that eliminating the first kind of wonder automatically eliminates the second. But why would it do that? As far as I can see the inference only works if it is assumed that divine creation implies a world stripped of its own integrity, reduced to a passive effect of the divine creative intention. This is, of course, Merleau-Ponty's assumption – for which, I might add, he does not argue. When in his debate with de Lubac he says that theology 'uses philosophical wonder only to motivate an affirmation that terminates it,' we ought therefore to understand him as saying that theology, by affirming a divine creation of the world, immediately terminates the first kind of wonder and then also the second, through the ontological connection holding between them. At one fell swoop theology manages to get rid of absolute and relative contingency alike, and with them all reasons for wonder and philosophy. In short, the *how* of the world follows necessarily from the *that* of the world.

In the following chapter, I shall have occasion to challenge Merleau-Ponty's understanding of theology on two fronts, and more importantly, to probe the theological resources for thinking differently about these issues. We shall have to ask, first, in what sense does it terminate philosophical wonder to say that God creates the world *ex nihilo*? And second, is there really an obvious connection between absolute and relative contingency?

I would be amiss, however, if I left 'In Praise of Philosophy' without mentioning the passage in which Merleau-Ponty indicates where we are in fact in contact with 'the essence of Christianity' [*l'essence du christianisme*]. This is in Maritain's notion of an atheism which is integral to Christianity: a constant vigilance against the sort of god who turns out to be an idol, who would be a mere guarantor of the world order, of good as well as evil. The essence of Christianity, says Maritain, is the overthrow of all such false gods. The God of Christianity is the God who redeems the world in all its misery, not the 'absurd Emperor of the world' [*l'absurde Empereur du monde*].⁵⁷ But why not then, asks Merleau-Ponty, pursue this line of critique internal to Christianity to its final consequences – the rejection of God as necessary being, as cause of the contingent world? For if not, is he not the absurd Emperor, after all? We are back at the tension between God the creator and God incarnate that we initially saw in 'Faith and Good Faith.' For Merleau-Ponty, only God incarnate, interpreted as a symbol of the human condition, is compatible with authentic philosophy.

⁵⁷ EP, 55-56/46.

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A good example, finally, of how Merleau-Ponty thinks that the notion of a transcendent God puts a stop to philosophical wonder and reflection is found in his last published work, *Eye and Mind*, where he treats of Descartes' *Dioptrics*, saying that for Descartes God is drafted into philosophy to effectively stop its interrogation at the very brink of pushing through to a deeper understanding of the world.⁵⁸ Descartes is struggling in the *Dioptrics* with the question of the enigmatic relationship between the body and the soul, something that was, of course, very much Merleau-Ponty's central theme as well.⁵⁹ As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty thinks that philosophy itself is principally nourished by the enigma of corporeal existence and how it can give rise to human thought and all the higher cognitive faculties. In other words, just like the enigma of the link between the subject and the world, the enigma of the contingent relation between body and soul acts as a motor of philosophical reflection: How can there be a living, conscious human being that is nonetheless composed of matter? What Descartes does, face to face with this enigma, is simply invoke divine decision: God decrees the union of soul and body and that sensible reality should be understandable for human minds, end of story. As Kwant puts it: 'Descartes appeals to metaphysics in order to dispense us from metaphysical reflection on the obscure realm of corporeal existence.'⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty thinks this is a copout; once more, philosophy cannot exist where God is brought in to neutralize the ground of its radical interrogation. 'Here is the Cartesian secret of equilibrium: a metaphysics which gives us decisive reasons to be no longer involved with metaphysics.'⁶¹

4. Ontology and the Integrity of Nature

With the exception of the *Eye and Mind*, we have so far considered works that predate the more explicit ontological flourishing of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. I should finally like to consider how some of Merleau-Ponty's later work, in particular the decisive lecture courses on nature at the Collège de

⁵⁸ OE, 36-60/169-178.

⁵⁹ Recall the introduction to *The Structure*: 'Notre but est de comprendre le rapport de la conscience et de la nature.' SC., 1/3.

⁶⁰ Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 210. Cf. Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty's Last Vision: A Proposal for the Completion of The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 62.

⁶¹ OE., 56/177.

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France (1956-1957; 1957-1958) bear upon his interpretation of Christian theology.⁶² This is quite important, since these texts are rarely considered in this context even though they arguably contain Merleau-Ponty's most explicit formulation of why he rejects the idea of a transcendent creator. Moreover, as these texts are produced towards the end of his life they do as a matter of fact provide us with Merleau-Ponty's final position vis-à-vis theology. It is interesting to note that while some have seen a (re)turn to religion in the later Merleau-Ponty, both these lectures on nature and the unfinished *Visible and the Invisible* suggest that as regards his rejection of divine creation and its notion of transcendence, there has been no significant change.⁶³

What these texts above all bring out is once again that we are dealing with a clash at the level of ontology, from which follow practical and methodological consequences. Hence, they confirm what I have identified as the deepest motivation for Merleau-Ponty's critique of Christian theology: He sees the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as leading to an understanding of being (or nature) that is incompatible with his phenomenology and ontology alike, in that it leads to the loss of the integrity of nature. I have already used the term *integrity* in my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's critique of theology, because I think it well captures his concern for the freedom of human beings as makers of meaning in a contingent world. However, the theme of integrity becomes more pronounced in his philosophy of nature and being, where one principal concern, as we have seen, is to preserve the living fecundity of nature as a source of structure and meaning.

At the same time, however, there is a difference in Merleau-Ponty's ontology vis-à-vis contingency, as we considered in the last chapter, and this has potential ramifications for the relation between Merleau-Pontian philosophy and the theology of creation. This is a thematic I shall broach here, but that continues into the next chapter.

As we saw in chapter 3, Merleau-Ponty, in his first lecture course on nature, describes nature differently from what has been the modern standard: it is 'the autoproduction of meaning.' Nature is here conceived of as a 'soil' or 'earth-

⁶² The course notes were published in English as *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France* by Northwestern University Press in 2003 and are still in the process of being absorbed by the scholarly community. The French edition was only published in 1995, under the title *La nature: Notes, course du Collège de France*.

⁶³ Sartre seems to be the most important source for thinking that he opened himself to religion towards the end of his life. Cf. his 'Merleau-Ponty Vivant,' 616-617. See also de Saint Aubert, 'L'incarnation change tout,' and its references to some of Merleau-Ponty's still unpublished manuscripts held by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

ground' that of itself gives birth to meaning. Human being is an integral part of this nature with its nascent meaning, rather than its origin; it is part of the flesh turning back upon itself and realizing ever more of its inherent possibilities. This means that when human being (as well as life itself) creates meaningful structures and layers of her own, this can at the level of ontology be inscribed into nature's general movement of self-expression. Merleau-Ponty is here trying to think the radical continuity of nature and human consciousness, allowing at the same time that the human is the one who transcends nature. Needless to say, this is a far cry from the modern construal of nature or being and this is the crux, for Merleau-Ponty tends to read theology through the lens of modern philosophy and as deeply involved in modernity's philosophical and scientific project.

Merleau-Ponty's later turn to nature and to ontology also led him to modify his earlier radical thesis of contingency – where he had suggested that structure *tout court* was absolutely contingent upon the subject-world interaction – in the more sensible direction of a relative contingency that, so to speak, is nonetheless rooted within an already given structure, however inchoate, which is the flesh. Madison writes apropos of this turn to the flesh that it 'finally succeeds in providing the means of satisfying these two requirements: necessity and contingency.'⁶⁴ This would explain why Merleau-Ponty now says that 'the flesh (of the world or my own) is not contingency, chaos.'⁶⁵ It is true, of course, that on both accounts human meaning arises contingently in the encounter between subject and object, or in the self-encounter of the flesh. But in the later, more unified ontology the flesh is already a matrix not devoid of structures in a process of becoming and this, as I have argued, is a better way of preserving the integrity of nature and of accounting for the emergence of subjectivity. I take this to be the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's statement that the world is a 'carrier of all the possible,' even though nothing predetermines which possibilities are going to be realized over the course of time, which is indeed contingent. In light of this, I believe the earlier discussion of contingency and the theology of creation needs to be revised.

To begin with, Merleau-Ponty's later re-situation of contingency unsettles the relation between absolute and relative contingency. On one level, Merleau-Ponty is retaining his earlier emphasis on the open and free development of the

⁶⁴ Madison, *Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 254.

⁶⁵ VI., 190/146.

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world with its meaning-structures, and with an edge against determinism in all forms. In other words, he continues to stress the relative contingency of meaning and the role of freedom and creativity. But something has also changed. In his earlier work the organic link (not unity) between the subject and the world appears as an absolutely contingent *factum brutum*, and to search for an answer to *how* they can thus be meaningful for each other would constitute an unphilosophical search for some absolute anchorage, the very rejection of metaphysics, as we have seen Merleau-Ponty define it. In the later work that very question is, as we saw in chapter 3, not only pursued, it is answered – and his answer is the flesh. This is why, when speaking of the body as belonging both to the objective and the subjective orders, Merleau-Ponty can say that ‘it cannot be *by an incomprehensible accident* that the body has this double reference.’⁶⁶ But if the upsurge of meaning cannot be by an incomprehensible accident, then how can it be? Not, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, because God has ordained it, which would be the Cartesian way out. Rather, it is because the flesh has its peculiar unity that it can ground the upsurge of meaning beyond the ‘incomprehensible accident.’ It would seem that in his later work Merleau-Ponty envisages the formation of meaning as a free progression which is open towards a future, not determined by its past, but which is nonetheless not absolutely contingent and therefore arbitrary since it is grounded in the flesh, which in some sense contains the meaning-potential to be realized (or not, as the case may be). In a word, what was previously absolutely contingent is now seen to be rooted in being. ‘We can see how the world comes about. It takes form under the dominion of certain structural laws.’⁶⁷ The contingency of human existence is no longer posited as an absolute origin, since human existence itself is rooted in the flesh of being, so much so that an impatient Sartre can state that ‘at times, it would seem that being invents man in order to make itself manifest through him.’⁶⁸

Witnessing this development one of Merleau-Ponty’s early commentators, Remy Kwant, concluded: ‘With contingency failing as the final truth of philosophy, the foundation of Merleau-Ponty’s atheism disappears.’⁶⁹ It seems

⁶⁶ VI., 179/137 (my emphasis).

⁶⁷ VI., 134/100.

⁶⁸ Sartre, ‘Merleau-Ponty Vivant,’ 616.

⁶⁹ Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 242. The reasoning behind this conclusion seems to be as follows: The earlier Merleau-Ponty must reject divine creation since he affirms that meaning is grounded in the perceptual dialogue, which is itself absolutely contingent, and God would be a ground beyond the contingent. In his ontology, however, contingency is no longer the final word, since the perceptual dialogue is grounded in the peculiar unity of being; hence there is no

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to me, however, that this is only half right. With the notion of flesh Merleau-Ponty has indeed found a way of admitting a sort of absolute – the being of flesh – which nevertheless does not automatically destroy the contingency interior to it and which therefore manages to preserve the integrity of nature and humanity. The flesh is a structured lattice that admits of freedom and contingency. On the other hand, it is still not clear how this relates to the question of divine creation. At first sight, it may seem that the new understanding is only an opening towards theology if the flesh is itself taken to be God, according to something like a pantheistic logic, but there is very little, if any, support for this reading in Merleau-Ponty's texts.

However, a question can be raised as to what accounts for the flesh. Indeed, the very existence of the flesh remains an issue. It is either itself contingent – that is to say absolutely contingent, in which case absolute contingency has only been pushed one step back in relation to Merleau-Ponty's previous position, and the question of a divine origin remains open – or it is necessarily existing and therefore without beginning. From the scant material we have, nothing can be said with certainty about Merleau-Ponty's position with regard to this issue. However, in criticizing the contrastive view of being and nothingness (targeting mainly Sartre) and presenting his own understanding of being as neither fully positive nor negative, but rather potential, Merleau-Ponty does seem to reject ontological contingency as a problem:

The famous ontological problem, the 'why there is something rather than nothing' disappears along with the alternative: there is not something *rather than nothing*, the nothingness could not *take the place* of something or of being: nothingness inexists (in the negative sense) and being is, and the exact adjusting of the one upon the other no longer leaves room for a question.⁷⁰

Merleau-Ponty suggests that the polarity or contrast between absolute being and nothingness is mistaken, and that being must rather be conceived of as a mixture of being and nothingness, which is to say, as a mixture of the actual and the potential with room for becoming. Being cannot fail to be, nor can it

longer any need to reject a ground beyond the contingent. As I argue above, however, this logic does not capture the ambivalence of flesh and the different ways in which it could be understood in relation to God.

⁷⁰ 'Le célèbre problème ontologique, le "pourquoi y a-t-il quelque chose plutôt que rien, le rien" disparaît avec l'alternative: il n'y a pas quelque chose *plutôt que rien*, le rien ne saurait *prendre la place* du quelque chose ou de l'être: le néant inexist (au sens négatif) et l'être est, et l'exact ajustement de l'un sur l'autre ne laisse plus place à une question.' VI., 91/64.

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fully be: 'what is called negation and what is called position appear as accomplices.'⁷¹ This, then, is the flesh.

Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty obliquely suggests a connection with the tradition of conceiving of being as created *ex nihilo* – a tradition he describes as 'a totalizing thought, a high-altitude thought' [*une pensée totalisante, une pensée de survol*].⁷² Contrasting this with his own thought, he says: 'One does not arouse being from nothingness, *ex nihilo*; one starts with *an ontological relief* [*relief ontologique*] where one can never say that the ground be nothing. What is primary is not the full and positive being upon a ground of nothingness [*l'être plein et positif sur le fond de néant*].'⁷³ The ontological relief, once more, is the flesh, a being that escapes from the polarity of plenitude and nothingness. What is echoed in these remarks by Merleau-Ponty is a particular understanding of the tradition of creation *ex nihilo* (even as it metamorphoses into radical idealism), one that takes it to posit a world of absolute fullness of being and therefore as devoid of relative contingency and potentiality for creative development. Merleau-Ponty says that the world cannot emerge from absolute nothingness; there is always an ontological relief. And if so, there is no ontological contingency – in the absolute sense, the world could not *not* have been.

These readings of what are admittedly rather obscure texts, texts focally concerned with dialectical philosophy rather than with the question of absolute contingency *per se*, are nonetheless corroborated in a late working note that I have already cited, even if it is equally obscure. 'For me it is no longer a question of origins, nor limits, nor of a series of events going to a first cause, but one sole explosion of Being which is forever. ... Posit the existential eternity – the eternal body' [*il n'y a plus pour moi de question des origines, ni de limites, ni de séries d'événement allant vers cause première, mais un seul éclatement d'Être qui est à jamais. ... Poser l'éternité existentielle – le corps éternel*].⁷⁴ If my interpretation of these passages is correct, does this not mean that Merleau-Ponty has obliquely answered the question of absolute contingency after all? And how could it be otherwise? If the flesh is truly to be an 'ultimate notion' [*une notion dernière*] or 'ultimate truth' [*vérité ultime*], how could the major question of its origin be left hanging?⁷⁵ That would be to invite back in the

⁷¹ VI., 91/64.

⁷² VI., 119/88.

⁷³ VI., 119/88 (my emphasis).

⁷⁴ VI., 313/265.

⁷⁵ VI., 183/140; 201/155

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question of a necessary ground, to leave the door open for the absolute. Rather, Merleau-Ponty must say that the flesh has always been, thus finally deflating the question of absolute contingency. Henceforth, existence – that something is – is not to be treated as a problem; what matters is the process of development, which is forever. It is, as Merleau-Ponty says, ‘no longer a question of origins,’ for the flesh has always been. To understand why this is so we must once more look at his understanding of the doctrine of creation and its consequences, which is what I believe pushes Merleau-Ponty in the direction suggested above.

This leads back to the course notes on nature, where we get a glimpse of how Merleau-Ponty continues to hold to the incompatibility of nature’s integrity and divine creation. Contrasting it with the concept of nature he wants to defend, Merleau-Ponty argues, or rather suggests, that the Judeo-Christian tradition has led to the modern conception of nature or the world as a lifeless product that lacks all productivity and creativity of its own – *naturata* rather than *naturans*. All that could have been interior to nature (its inherent possibilities) takes refuge in God, and nature becomes thoroughly externalized and related by linear causality, that is, becomes regulated by law – a gigantic object fully constituted by God.⁷⁶ The world thus becomes intrinsically meaningless; meaning is to be sought elsewhere: ‘Nature loses its interior; it is the exterior realization of a rationality that is in God.’⁷⁷ In this conception lies the idea that the world is a fully actualized being; no trace of an open potential is left, and hence, no relative contingency. Granted, these are Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the Cartesian understanding of nature, rather than a position he describes in order to polemicize against it; he is engaged in a historical study of the concept of nature. It seems clear, however, that he believes such a conception of nature is a natural outworking of the assumptions of Christian theology, and equally clear that he describes the essence of the position to which he intends to oppose his own understanding: ‘It is Descartes who will first posit the new idea of Nature, by drawing the consequences from the idea of God.’⁷⁸ Consider the following long quotation:

Now if we allow that the existence of the World is contingent and suspended on a creative act, then once its existence is posited, the essence of this World would derive necessarily and intelligibly from the infinity of God. There is complete adequation of the

⁷⁶ N., 26/9.

⁷⁷ N., 27-28/10.

⁷⁸ N., 26/9.

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World and of the possible; hence it follows that there is no longer a need for the idea of finality – that is, for the idea of a force battling against *a certain contingency in things* in order to bring them back into order, which supposes either the idea of disordered matter that will be informed by finality, or the idea of a causal order not constituting a rigorous determination of order and needing to be completed (Leibniz). Nature as a system of laws renders the presence of forces interior to it superfluous; the interiority is wholly within God.⁷⁹

The richness of this text is due to the fact that Merleau-Ponty here indicates all of his important reservations about the idea of the world ‘suspended on a creative act.’ The *first* consequence following from creation is that it leads to determinism (or as he says elsewhere, ‘divine mechanism’) and necessity. The *second* is that it leads to an ontology of consistent actuality, since there are no possibilities to be realized in a world structured by the necessity of divine law; the only potential is precisely the actual world. The *third* consequence is that there can be no progress or teleology internal to nature itself, no struggle to achieve a greater harmony in the presence of ‘a certain contingency.’

The phrasing itself seems to be significant here; he is not talking about an all-out absolute contingency, but about *a certain* contingency present within a larger structure. Yet Merleau-Ponty apparently holds that even such a circumscribed contingency is negated if the world is ‘suspended on a creative act.’ This is because if the existence of the world is contingent upon divine choice, that choice predetermines such a world and evacuates contingency altogether. And this in turn means that any struggle towards a *telos* internal to nature – the struggle of human existence towards meaning – would be a sham, a harmless playing out of a pre-written script. Notice how Merleau-Ponty here indicates the role of subjectivity in the constitution of meaning when he says that what would be needed is a world ‘not constituting a rigorous determination,’ but which would instead need ‘to be completed.’ Here we hit the core of Merleau-Ponty’s later thought: There is indeed a structured world from which we emerge, but it contains infinite potentialities, which to be realized are in need of subjectivity and the human constitution of meaning,

⁷⁹ ‘Or, quand on admet que l’existence du Monde est contingente, suspendu à un acte créateur, alors, une fois posée l’existence d’un Monde, l’essence de ce Monde dérive, de façon nécessaire et intelligible, de l’infinie de Dieu. Il y a adéquation complète de ce Monde et du possible; d’où il s’ensuit qu’il n’est plus besoin de l’idée de finalité, c’est-à-dire de l’idée d’une force luttant contre *une certaine contingence des choses*, pour les ramener à l’ordre, ce qui suppose soit l’idée d’une matière désordonnée qui sera informé par la finalité, soit l’idée d’un ordre causal ne constituant pas une détermination rigoureuse de l’ordre et ayant besoin d’être complété (Leibniz). La Nature comme système de lois rend la présence de force qui lui soient intérieures superflue; l’intériorité est toute en Dieu.’ N., 27-28/10 (my emphasis).

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which were in turn there as a potentiality from the start. What Merleau-Ponty needs is thus a world with a measure of relative contingency and this, he thinks, is not possible within the confines of the Christian doctrine of creation.

Merleau-Ponty also continues to assimilate the theologically motivated ontology with the modern scientific worldview, which he takes to be deterministic. Criticizing modern conceptions of nature, he says that

the very concept of Nature, such as it is often allowed by scientists, belongs to a conception that is entirely theological in its infrastructure. ... The world is positive, full. At bottom, this conception is a theological affirmation, the affirmation of a view of totality capable of subtending all evolution of the world.⁸⁰

Thus 'Judeo-Christian ontology' and modern scientific ontology share the common assumption that the world, or nature, is devoid of potentiality, and therefore there can be no progression or unfolding with which subjectivity could assist, insofar as subjectivity is seen as that which realizes some of the manifold potentialities inherent in the world.⁸¹ To say, as does Merleau-Ponty, that 'no one can know what freedom may do' becomes an anomaly.

Merleau-Ponty's problem with divine creation now stands out in full clarity, and we can understand why he would be motivated to say that the flesh is without beginning. From the very start of his philosophical career he criticized 'objectivism' and the concomitant understanding of perception as a mirroring representation of a world that is out there in full actuality. He argues instead – and this is a constant theme in his *oeuvre* – that perception, as intentionality, is a disclosure of the world according to the structures sedimented in the perceiving body and even an enactment of being's inherent potentiality. The perceived world and the sensorimotor body are engaged in a structural coupling that brings forth subject and world alike. It follows that the world we meet is there as a potentiality to be activated by the lived body, it is 'a question which is obscurely expressed,' to which 'I [the lived body] must find a reply.'⁸² Or in the terms of the ontology of flesh, the meaningful world of perception and language arises as chiasmic self-relatedness, when the flesh, ripe

⁸⁰ 'Le concept même de Nature, tel qu'il est souvent admis par les savants, appartient à une conception entièrement théologique dans son infrastructure. ... Le monde est positif, plein. Au fond, cette conception est une affirmation théologique, c'est la affirmation d'une vue de la totalité capable de sous-tendre toute l'évolution de monde.' N., 123-124/88-89.

⁸¹ There can still be a sort of progression, but if so this progression must follow from antecedent conditions by causal necessity, or at least as specified by law.

⁸² PhP., 259/249.

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with its own developmental potentiality, bursts open. As I have used the term, this is a conception of nature that lets it keep its integrity, but it is also a conception of human being as an integral part of nature while not reducible to some deterministic natural mechanism. Insofar as divine creation and its mirror image, scientific determinism, do not allow for this kind of integrity, according to Merleau-Ponty, they must be rejected.

Such is Merleau-Ponty's understanding of Christian theology, as evidenced by material from his entire philosophical career. While there is certainly more to be said and other texts to mine for understanding, I believe we are now in possession of the most important themes in his critique of the theological notion of divine creation and transcendence, and of his attempt to defend philosophy as an interminable quest motivated by the wonder of the world.

To sum up, we can usefully focus on the three interrelated concepts of incarnation, contingency and integrity. *Incarnation* has emerged as central to Merleau-Ponty's thinking, where it names his desire to safeguard the importance and value of the here and now over and against escapism of all sorts. But it also names the subject as incarnate that first gives birth to meaningful structures in its encounter with the perceived world, and in the ontology that same logic is transposed to the level of auto-affective being in its 'narcissistic' self-relation. The result is, as we have seen, that meaning descends from the immutable realm of ideas and becomes incarnate in flesh, as the invisible *of* the visible. This is what motivates Merleau-Ponty's interest in the Christian idea of incarnation, but also what causes him to oppose the idea of incarnation to that of transcendence. He is not interested in something that would transcend the world, which he thinks can only motivate a rejection of this world here and now – its bodies, its innate meaning, even its goodness.

This brings us to the core issue of *contingency*: Without contingency there can be no genuine philosophical wonder in the face of the world; there can be no freedom and creativity, and therefore no true humanity (we are reduced to 'objects seen,' automata, mechanism); and finally there can be no meaning in the process of unfolding – neither in perception, nor in history or culture at large – since everything is decided beforehand, either by divine decree or by scientific law. Rather than a dialogue or even a self-relation, the perceptual relation between the body and the world is reduced to a material transaction from cause to effect. But as far as Merleau-Ponty is concerned, meaning is made from the stuff of contingency (whether absolute or relative), and this is both wonderful and terrifying. Such, however, is the human condition, and this condition is the ever-flowing source of wonder and philosophy. Yet such

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contingency is fragile, threatened by science and theology alike. For as Merleau-Ponty understands it, to posit an absolute creator of the world *ex nihilo* would kill contingency, and with it all that is philosophically interesting dies too, since God entails an ontology devoid of potentiality and, strictly speaking, a world without humanity. We have, therefore, a clash of ontologies.

This brings us straight to the issue of the *integrity* of the world, as it comes to the fore particularly in the later philosophy of nature and being. While Merleau-Ponty himself does not use the term, I have used it to signify his insistence on the potentiality and power inherent in contingent nature itself as *naturans*, rather than these being evacuated from nature in favour of some external source or first determining cause. Integrity nicely captures the precarious path Merleau-Ponty tries to walk between, on the one hand, the objectivist conception of nature as an in-itself apart from subjectivity, and on the other, the inflated subjectivism of transcendental idealism in its many stripes. The integrity of nature connotes its power to give birth to meaningful structures, the most significant of which is (human) subjectivity, through which experience is born in and of the world. Again, this is connected to contingency and incarnation, since nature or the being of flesh, as the cradle of all potentiality, develops towards increasing complexity, but not, Merleau-Ponty would insist, in a deterministic sense, since – once more – ‘no one can know what freedom may do.’ Consequently, he rejects all theories that lead to the loss of nature’s openness to a plurality of future developments, and he thinks the theology of creation and modern scientific objectivism alike are such theories.

The pivot in all of this is the question of ontology. For the root of Merleau-Ponty’s problem of creation is not to be found in the paradoxes of political action in themselves (the practical corollary), nor in the exigencies of the philosophical task as such (the methodological corollary), even though all of this is implicated as well. The deepest reasons for his critique of the theology of creation are rather, as we have seen, to be found in the very interpretation of the world – the metaphysics – that Christian theology gives rise to. But what does an understanding of the world as it follows from the Christian doctrine of creation really amount to? And has Merleau-Ponty inquired deeply enough into this doctrine to be able to lay at the door of ‘Judeo-Christian ontology’ all the dead weight of modern science? Has he adequately grasped and convincingly represented the consequences following from theology’s affirmation that the world is created *ex nihilo* by a God that transcends it?

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What might the philosophical theologian say in response? It is to these questions we must now turn.

CHAPTER 5

THE LOGIC OF CREATION

AN ALTERNATIVE READING

For from him and through him and to him are all things.¹

You were more intimately present to me than my innermost being, and higher than the highest peak of my spirit.²

Part of the sense of Christian belief is that everything natural is understood to have been created, so the theological context of Creation allows even what is ultimate in the human order to become subordinate to the theological.³

1. Introduction

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is not an empirical thesis about the beginning of the world, but at its heart a metaphysical limit idea about the dependence of everything that is upon God. As such it cannot be proved or for that matter disproved with the tools of ordinary scientific investigation. Let me make this absolutely clear at the outset: I offer no independent demonstration for the truth of creation *ex nihilo*, nor do I believe any such demonstration exists, nor, consequently, any demonstration of its falsity. The doctrine is quite simply and principally beyond this sort of demonstration, and at the end of this chapter, I hope it will be clear why this has to be the case.

¹ Romans 11:36 (NIV).

² Conf. III.6.11. 'Tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo.'

³ Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 11.

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On the other hand, what *can* and *should* be discussed are the consequences of affirming creation *ex nihilo*, that is, what the doctrine actually means – what it has meant historically and what ‘living it’ today amounts to, or should amount to. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss this and, in effect, to provide a different reading of the doctrine than the one we saw performed by Merleau-Ponty. While I do not want to dispute that Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of creation and of Christianity in general might have been justified for him, given the time and circumstances in which he found himself, and in particular his own personal history, I nonetheless want to insist that there is a deeper ‘logic’ to creation *ex nihilo*, one that is not at all evinced in Merleau-Ponty’s writings on the subject. In the following pages I should like to bring out this more subtle logic and present the intrinsic coherence and suasive beauty I believe it still has.

Though it would perhaps be easy to dismiss Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of theology as a caricature, and as therefore not being worth the effort of engaging in debate, I believe this would be somewhat premature and would, in any case, be a missed opportunity to deepen and develop theology’s own point of view. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty’s account is just, or that it represents the proper concerns of historical Christian theology, as will become clear in the following pages. However, I also believe that Merleau-Ponty’s critique, and others like it, at least succeeds in naming a tension that Christian theology always has to negotiate, and this concerns precisely the integrity of the world as created. This is because a participatory ontology, which I will present in this chapter, and in which the world is seen to be continually suspended on a creative act of God, always risks evacuating the world of its own proper reality and integrity, such that created nature is no longer *naturans*, replete with secondary causes and agents with inherent powers. On the other hand, a theology that seeks to safeguard the relative self-sufficiency and inherent goodness of created reality always risks veering towards deism and a God that is no longer present in all of reality. Christian theology has normally tried to walk the precarious path between these alternatives so as to safeguard both the *maior Dei gloria* and the *minor Gloria creaturae*,⁴ but this is a challenge that must continually be taken up anew both for the sake of the internal coherence of a theology that affirms the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and in response to the ever-renewed criticism levelled against it. It is from that point of view that I

⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3*, 97.

embark in this chapter upon an alternative interpretation, clarification and defence of the Christian doctrine of creation.

To facilitate this I shall first of all present the origin and development of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, together with the complex metaphysics it implies. This is largely a historical and conceptual investigation that relies on the contrast between the emerging understanding of the Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus of Lyon and Theophilus of Antioch, and rival interpretations of the world in competing philosophical systems, such as Platonism, Gnosticism and, above all, Neoplatonism. However, the aim is not primarily historical, but it is to clarify the unique understanding of the distinction between God the creator and the created world – what I, following Robert Sokolowski, shall call ‘the Christian distinction’ – as it developed in the theology of the early church to flourish in the theology of Thomas Aquinas.⁵

The following three sections are devoted to discussing those aspects of creation and divine transcendence that most worry Merleau-Ponty: the vexed question of contingency; the problem of a distant God, with its fostering of escapism; and finally, the basic issue of integrity and of articulating an ontology that manages to preserve it. As has become evident in the preceding chapter, these themes intersect, and so, while I endeavour to treat them separately, there will necessarily be some overlap.

While, in the first section, I take a broad view of the ‘early Christian tradition’ as such vis-à-vis the distinction between the creator and the world, in the following sections I have chosen a more circumscribed approach so as to be able to ground the discussion in a close reading of one theological tradition within the whole, or rather of a few central texts within that tradition – the Augustinian tradition. My main protagonist is Augustine himself, who is without doubt the most influential theologian in the Western tradition, and in particular his texts dealing with the topic of creation, but in the last section I also look to Thomas Aquinas in the central discussion about the integrity of created reality. The close reading of Augustinian texts will be continued in chapter 6.

At some points I explicitly counter Merleau-Ponty’s critique from the ‘Augustinian’ perspective developed here. This is in no way intended as a general indictment of Merleau-Ponty, but serves rather a sort of propaedeutic function within the overall project of staging a conversation between Merleau-

⁵ See e.g. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 1-52.

Pontian philosophy and philosophical theology. For a philosophical theology seeking to engage and learn from the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, while still affirming the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, could not remain uncritical of what could be called his ‘immanentism,’ especially since Merleau-Ponty himself worked from the conviction that an affirmation of divine creation was antithetical to his whole project. To get a meaningful interaction off the ground, therefore, it will be helpful to show that what Merleau-Ponty rejected was in fact a reading of the doctrine of creation and divine transcendence that significantly differs from the logic of creation as it was understood in the main current of pre-modern Western theology.

2. The Christian Distinction and Its Rivals

The traditional Christian doctrine of creation includes an affirmation of the belief that God created the world out of nothing – *ex nihilo*. This is not to be taken as a substantializing of the ‘nothing’; rather, it came to be accepted as a sort of shorthand for saying that there is nothing ‘prior’ to creation with which God worked to form the world – no matter, no space or time, only God.⁶ From creation *ex nihilo*, so understood, follows the most far-reaching existential and ontological consequences, and they bear directly on the concerns addressed by Merleau-Ponty, as brought out in chapter 4. In the encounter between Merleau-Pontian phenomenological ontology and the philosophical theology of creation, therefore, much hangs upon the understanding of this particular dogmatic cornerstone, so we must get very clear about its meaning. With this in mind, I begin in this section by outlining the origin and reception of the doctrine and then proceed to disentangle some of its salient metaphysical implications by contrasting it with its closest rivals in the Greek cultural milieu in which it first took root. This, then, takes the form of a historical and conceptual investigation, but its ultimate aim is nonetheless to clarify the philosophical import of the doctrine.

⁶ See Ernan McMullin, ‘Creation *ex Nihilo*: Early History,’ in David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliato, Janet M. Soskice and William R. Stoeger, eds., *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11.

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The Doctrine of Creation Ex Nihilo: Origin and Development

The belief that God is the creator of the world has always been a defining feature of Jewish and Christian faith, though the consequences of this belief and what it would mean for the understanding of God and the world were not immediately obvious; in particular the idea that God created the world *ex nihilo* gestated slowly in these communities and would not come into full flowering until pressed by rival interpretations of God and the world. And to be sure, the Hebrew Scriptures speak of God's creation of the world in polyphonous voices – effortlessly speaking the world into existence, moulding the world as the potter a lump of clay, overcoming the primeval forces of chaos – which leaves room for different interpretations. This does not mean that the hermeneutic field knows no boundaries; some things are made abundantly clear in the text. Particularly, that God and creation are distinct – creation is not God, or made up of some divine stuff – as well as that God is the powerful agent of the order of creation.⁷ However, there is no explicit doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in the biblical texts; it seems that the ancient Hebrews did not, like the Greeks, ask the question of whether there was any matter or primal stuff from which God formed or organized the world as we know it. Some passages seem to suggest this, while others seem to contradict it.⁸ If the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is there, then it is there as a conclusion to be drawn, as a compelling interpretation to account for the different voices of the text, in the same way that one might argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is present in the New Testament.⁹

The same is true of the theme of creation in the New Testament writings, though it must be admitted that they contain formulations that are closer to those of the fully developed doctrine.¹⁰ What these writings above all add is the Christological reading of creation which is performed in the prologue to the Gospel of John, opening up a new way of interpreting the Hebrew testimony to divine creation. For John, the Christ – the *logos* of God – is clearly ontologically prior to the created world. This proved to be decisive, not least

⁷ Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology. Volume One: Nature* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 145-146, 154-155; Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 145-164; Menahem Kister, 'Tohu wa-Bohu, Primordial Elements and *creatio ex Nihilo*,' *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007): 246.

⁸ See e.g. Genesis 1:2; Job 26:7; Isaiah 44:24; Proverbs 8:23; Wisdom 1:14a, 11:17; 2 Maccbees 7:28.

⁹ Cf. Janet Soskice, 'Athens and Jerusalem, Alexandria and Edessa: Is There a Metaphysics of Scripture?,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 2 (April 2006): 11.

¹⁰ See e.g. John 1:1-3; Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3; Revelation 4:11.

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because it made possible a theological appropriation of the Greek philosophical theme of *logos*, something we shall see developed in Augustine's theology of creation.¹¹

Clearly, then, we must not naïvely read the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* into the biblical texts. But that the texts do implicitly contain the doctrine nevertheless became evident when Christian theologians of the first centuries encountered rival interpretations, philosophical as well as religious, of divine creation.¹² This is an important development and offers a privileged view of the maturation of Christian doctrine. Reviewing this history will make it clear that creation *ex nihilo* is not some peripheral doctrinal add-on, but that it is most intimately related to theology proper – the doctrine of God – as well as to the theological understanding of the world and of humanity.

In Gerhard May's pivotal study of the development and rapid acceptance of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, he convincingly argues that it was in the confrontation with Gnosticism on the one hand and with Middle Platonism on the other that early Christian theologians had to begin to enquire more deeply into what their faith entailed about creation and how the biblical texts should be interpreted.¹³ Strongly emphasizing the Gnostic crisis of the second century, May demonstrates the importance of the clash with Greek assumptions that finally led to the expulsion of any notion of an *Urstoff* existing in parallel eternity with God the creator.¹⁴ Indeed, even as the Christian doctrine of creation constituted a break with the philosophical thought of its day, it nonetheless needed Greek philosophical conceptuality to articulate this novelty in something like a dialectical movement.¹⁵

¹¹ McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 156. This is not to suggest that the *logos*-theme is of exclusively Greek origin; the theme of the Word of the Lord [*davar Adonai*] is prominent in the Hebrew scriptures as well.

¹² That the biblical writings contain the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, at the very least as a hermeneutic possibility, seems to be something agreed upon by most commentators, even those who in the end champion different readings. See e.g. Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 46.

¹³ Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

¹⁴ Cf. also Robert Jenson, 'Aspects of a Doctrine of Creation,' in Colin Gunton, ed., *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 19.

¹⁵ May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, xii. A caveat: May's emphasis on the cognitive necessity of Greek conceptuality leads him to be sceptical of early suggestions of the doctrine found in the literature, such as in Philo and in early Palestinian Judaism. Although the question of dating is of less importance for my purposes, I would nonetheless want to claim that a basic 'logic' can be operative even in the absence of explicit conceptual formulation, and this was most probably the

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Ever since Parmenides, Greek thought had operated on the principle classically formulated as *ex nihilo nihil fit* – nothing comes from nothing.¹⁶ This meant that the emergence of new things, everywhere attested to, was naturally understood to be emerging from what was previously there, like children from their parents. By the time Christianity came to itself intellectually, Middle Platonism (c.50 BCE to c.250 CE) had realized the full religious potential of Plato's writings, not least the *Timaeus*, and espoused a doctrine of three ontological principles equal in rank as constituting the world: God, ideas and matter.¹⁷ When the Demiurge made the world he consequently worked with matter to form it after the ideal model, or blueprint. Naturally, the raw material constrained what was in fact possible to make, and could therefore be seen as the recalcitrant aspect of the otherwise rational creation of the demiurge. The image here is essentially that of an artist going to work.

Gnostic thinkers had a different understanding of creation, and seem in fact to have articulated the *ex nihilo*-implication of creation earlier than orthodox Christians, but for different reasons. For the Gnostics it was important that creation and its demiurgical creator were not confused with what they held to be the real God. This was intimately related to their struggle with the problem of evil. As May aptly notes, 'the question about the creation is posed to the gnostic as the problem of theodicy.'¹⁸ Gnosticism's solution was to reject creation and the demiurgical powers responsible for it, and to posit a divinity over and above it all, the real redeemer of mankind and final destructor of material reality.¹⁹ The material world itself, human bodies included, came to be seen as a deviation from the true God's original plan. Salvation, on such a scheme, was to be the final escape from all things material. For such a theodicy and soteriology to work, the material realm could obviously not be seen as eternal, and major Gnostic or quasi-Gnostic teachers consequently rejected the

case also with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. For critical remarks on the question of chronology, see Soskice, 'Athens and Jerusalem'; J.C. O'Neill, 'How Early is the Doctrine of *Creatio ex Nihilo*?', *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 53, pt. 2 (October 2002); Kister, 'Tohu wa-Bohu'; Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 93-145. See also note 34 below.

¹⁶ 'Ek tou mē ontos ouden ginetai,' quoted in O'Neill, 'How Early Is the Doctrine,' 450; cf. William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 250.

¹⁷ May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 3-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

¹⁹ This suggests a difference between generally Platonist and Gnostic approaches to theodicy: The former located the problem primarily in recalcitrant matter, whereas the latter located it in the demiurgical powers themselves. Cf. *Ibid.*, 140.

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philosophical idea of the eternity of matter.²⁰ Yet their reasons for doing so were obviously different from the Judeo-Christian ones, especially since Gnostic teaching also denied the Christian identification of the creator God of the Hebrew Scriptures with the redeeming God of the New Testament.²¹

In their battle against Gnostic tendencies, orthodox theologians often came to think of the heterodox as too dependent upon Greek philosophy, and so when the struggle against Gnosticism in the second century hardened, so did the anti-philosophical rhetoric.²² It was in relation to philosophical and Gnostic teaching, then, that Christian theologians had to begin to grapple with the question of the principles of being in a quasi-philosophical manner, but nonetheless from their own distinctive commitments. May suggests that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was bound to emerge clearly as soon as the biblical witness to divine creation began to interact seriously with the philosophical doctrines of the principles of being, and surely this is a point well made.²³ We might add that this is the emergence of nothing less than an authentic Christian philosophy in the early church.

The theological struggle, then, basically had two fronts that sometimes overlapped: On the one hand, the philosophical doctrine of the eternity of matter seemed to compromise the unconstrained freedom of the creator – and ultimately, to compromise monotheism as such – as well as to suggest a negative appraisal of matter itself, as standing opposed to God’s creative action. On the other hand, the radical dualism of Gnosticism implied a deprecating view of all things material and a rejection of the foundational tenet that the God orthodox Christians affirmed was the only God, and the creator of a good world. In short, the whole issue revolved around the inseparable questions of how to think about God and how to think about the world, their relation and their distinction.

The early Christian understanding of God and of the world was in many ways already antithetical to the implications of these teachings. For God was seen as in some sense a person and thus as a free agent responsible for creating the whole world, thus existing in unparalleled sovereignty. This absolute freedom would be compromised either if it were constrained by recalcitrant

²⁰ Ibid., 39-40.

²¹ Ibid., 54, 59; Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 62.

²² May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 148.

²³ Ibid., 150. Indeed, May goes so far as to call creation *ex nihilo* ‘a necessary conceptual conclusion.’ Ibid., 133.

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matter, or if God were merely one of several originary principles. By contrast, Christians understood creation to be a gift given out of the love of God. And as divine gift it was necessarily seen to be good – indeed, very good – while any deprecation of the material world was also a deprecation of its creator and suggested his impotence. But most important, perhaps, was the belief that God had taken on flesh and thus forever allied himself with the material creation, and indeed, with the human body. As Michael Hanby, discussing Augustine, observes: ‘Where creature is bound to creator in hypostatic union, the nihilation of creation cannot be the path to God, but only the refusal of God’s gratuity.’²⁴ It became increasingly clear, therefore, that (1) if matter is allowed to assume an ontologically absolute status, the concept of God suffers a radical diminishment, as one principle among many; and consequently (2) that the material world as created could not be seen as inherently evil, since its *only* source was the goodness of God. In this way, Christian theologians arrived at a conception of God markedly different from that of the surrounding culture, whether philosophical or Gnostic – as David Bentley Hart suggests, ‘Orthodox trinitarianism ... arrived, for the first time in Greek thought, at a genuine concept of divine transcendence’²⁵ – and this involved a conception of the material world that was more affirmative.

Early Christian theologians, therefore, set about defending the transcendence, goodness and freedom of God the creator as well as the goodness and worth of the world and material bodies as created. And once they did, it soon became evident that the Greek idea of the eternity of matter had to be rejected and that divine creation had to be seen as a creation *ex nihilo*, which is to say that the world has an absolute origin in God’s creative act alone without any interference or assistance of other entities whatsoever. We can in fact trace the articulated formulation of this insight in the early church. While Justin the Martyr (c.100-c.165) dissociated matter from the origin of evil, he could still hold divine creation to mean God’s formation of some already available unformed stuff. However, already his pupil, Tatian (c.120-c.173), taught that divine creation had to entail the creation of matter itself, the very stuff of the world. According to May, Tatian was the first to unequivocally

²⁴ Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 71.

²⁵ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 182. See also Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 84: ‘It is this plenitude, giving being in an act of sheer delight, that in fact constitutes the ontological difference, and constitutes it for the first time in Judaism and Christianity. For this delight, this generosity, knows no opposite, not even non-being.’

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state the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in both wording and meaning.²⁶ But it is from Theophilus of Antioch (c.120-c.181/190) that we have the first known continuous exposition of the opening chapters of Genesis, in which he clearly espouses creation *ex nihilo* and enlists it to defend precisely God's greatness, his freedom in creating and hence the contingency of creation.²⁷ And at about the same time, Irenaeus of Lyon (c.130-c.200) formulated the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to argue at once for the complete goodness of created reality against Gnosticism's dismal view of matter, and for the unlimited freedom of the creator, saying that 'the will of God is the substance (*ousia*) of all things.'²⁸ With Theophilus and Irenaeus, therefore, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is clearly articulated and firmly established within the theological matrix.

One of the interesting aspects of the development of this doctrine is the speed with which it was established in the Christian churches. Theophilus and Irenaeus appear to have been the first Christian theologians to unambiguously state the doctrine, in the second half of the second century, while it was already more or less beyond dispute by the beginning of the third, only a few decades later.²⁹ Once drawn out in full, it seems the Christian churches immediately embraced this understanding of God's creative act. This suggests once again the organic relation, as it were, between the doctrine and the biblical witness in general, and the doctrine and the Christian understanding of God in particular. It is as if once precisely articulated, as a result of external cultural pressure, the *ex nihilo*-implication of Christian revelation appeared as the obvious and natural interpretation within the context of Christian faith in one God, and in the incarnation of the Son for the salvation of the created world.³⁰ And so it has more or less continued up until modern times. It is true that there were disputes about it in medieval philosophy as a result of the renaissance of Aristotelian philosophy, which countenances no absolute beginning of the world, but the doctrine remained unshaken. The Fourth Lateran Council affirmed it in 1215, and Thomas Aquinas made it central to his system of *sacra doctrina*, in which its philosophical implications were meticulously worked out.³¹ In the Reformation period the doctrine was not the

²⁶ May, *Creatio ex Nihilo*, 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49, 156-157.

²⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 169.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹ McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 164-173; Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1953), 47-50.

focus of debate between Protestants and Catholics, but continued to be equally affirmed by all parties.³² There is therefore something manifestly ecumenical in the doctrine of creation, which I shall rely on further when I bring in both Augustine and Aquinas as witnesses to the same fundamental understanding of it, though each may emphasize different aspects.

Such is, in brief, the historical context in which the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* arose as the orthodox hermeneutic of the biblical texts – and indeed, of the whole world. It is necessary to stress here the novelty of this concept in the ancient world of ideas, something we might easily miss, living as we do in a culture that has come to understand the origin of the world after the model of the Big Bang, which of course rather easily lets itself be connected to the concept of *ex nihilo*.³³ But the fact of the matter is that the early theologians, such as Irenaeus and Theophilus, achieved an unprecedented understanding of the transcendence and freedom of God as creator, and consequently of the goodness of the world as creation. However, the vast philosophical ramifications of this specific understanding of the world took a long time to unfold, and they are of such an elusive character that they remain difficult to grasp.

The difficulty involved in talking about God as a free and absolutely transcendent creator of the world derives from the uniqueness of the relation between God and the world it suggests, a strictly singular relation which must be different from every other relation that occurs within the world. Hence, when we as human beings conceive of and talk about this relation, we do so as creatures always situated within the matrix of creation; the world itself is the ultimate horizon of our understanding. Human language and thought, therefore, must operate with a logic that is entirely rooted in the world, with categories that work within our ultimate context – which is again, the context of creation. However, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* teaches us – and this is its novelty and its difficulty – that our ultimate context does not encompass the divine.

³² McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 173.

³³ This is not to say that the metaphysical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is a cosmological hypothesis based on empirical observation, and in that sense the same as the Big Bang theory. But modern cosmology has made the step from physics to metaphysics shorter and thus aids our metaphysical imagination. Cf. Janet M. Soskice, 'Creatio ex Nihilo: Jewish and Christian Foundations,' 24, 38-39; William R. Stoeger, 'The Big Bang, Quantum Cosmology and Creatio ex Nihilo,' 152-175, both in Burrell, Cogliati, Soskice and Stoeger, eds., *Creation and the God of Abraham*.

Creation *ex nihilo* thus implies a unique distinction between God and the world – following Robert Sokolowski, I shall refer to it as ‘the Christian distinction’ – and with that distinction follows a particular *logic* to which theologians and philosophers must apprentice themselves in order to appreciate the beauty and coherence, but also the sheer mysteriousness, of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.³⁴ Indeed, a failure to grasp this logic will wreak havoc with any attempt to gauge the adequacy or desirability of the traditional Christian understanding of creation. In what follows, I shall first develop this logic further in historical and conceptual dialogue with philosophy, and then in the following three sections, turn to Augustine’s elaboration of the doctrine of creation, supplemented by that of Aquinas when needed, and from their works try to provide a reading that challenges the core aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the consequences of the Christian affirmation of divine creation and transcendence.

At the Limit of Greek Philosophy: Contrastive Transcendence

There is nothing self-evident in the claim that God transcends the world. It is the fruit of a very particular understanding of creation and did not, for instance, occur in the Hellenistic milieu prior to Jewish-Christian influence, nor has it, so far as I know, been consistently worked out elsewhere.³⁵ To see this point, let us return to the Greek cultural milieu in which Christianity initially took root. As Sokolowski observes, the deities of ancient Greece, whether those of popular mythology or the refined conceptions of Plato and Aristotle, were almost always thought to be included somehow in the world or dependent on the world. They could be seen as the highest and best of all there

³⁴ My use of ‘logic’ here is inspired by James K.A. Smith’s talk of the ‘logic’ of incarnation, a concept he in turn finds in Pierre Bourdieu and others. It is especially apt here, since Bourdieu was himself deeply inspired by Merleau-Ponty. By ‘logic’ is not primarily meant a theoretical construction, though it may lead to such; it is rather an implicit understanding of the world embedded in praxis and experience, which is a theme I shall address further on. A ‘logic’ is in this sense akin to what Thomas Kuhn calls a ‘paradigm’ and John Milbank calls a ‘mythos.’ See Neal DeRoo and Brian Lightbody, *The Logic of Incarnation: James K.A. Smith’s Critique of Postmodern Religion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 10-11; James K.A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002).

³⁵ On this point, see Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 12-20; Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 37-48. In my presentation of the Christian distinction, I rely to a great extent on these authors, and also on David Burrell’s, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

was, or the principle of unity and rationality of everything else – the freest, happiest and most powerful beings – yet the idea that they could be all this in the absence of the world never occurred. Whatever relations held between the gods and the rest of the world, they were all somehow included within the horizon of being, the very natural ultimate context of human experience and thought.³⁶

This seems to be true even of that ‘last great philosopher of antiquity,’³⁷ Plotinus (204-70 CE), who arguably achieved the highest notion of God in all of Greek philosophy (though here, obviously, we are no longer devoid of Christian, or more generally Semitic, influence).³⁸ With Plotinus the question of divine freedom takes a more subtle turn than in earlier philosophical approaches, and this becomes the critical issue with respect to creation *ex nihilo*. Extending and developing Plato’s reference in the *Republic* to the ‘good beyond being,’ Plotinus certainly gestures towards a certain conception of divine transcendence. However, as Kathryn Tanner argues, this is still not an adequately radical notion of transcendence: it is still too much of a halfway house, and leads, therefore, to an insurmountable tension within the Plotinian scheme itself.³⁹ For Plotinus conceives of the emanation of everything from The One as by a sort of natural necessity, according to what Arthur Lovejoy, in his classic *Great Chain of Being*, called ‘the principle of plenitude.’⁴⁰ The self-diffusive goodness of The One cannot help overflowing; it is compelled by its own nature to realize every possibility. Plotinus asks himself the question of why The One gave rise to something other than itself: ‘From such a unity as we have declared The One to be, how does anything at all come into substantial existence, any multiplicity, dyad, or number? Why has the Primal not remained self-gathered?’⁴¹ And his answer: ‘There is *a certain necessity* that The First should have its offspring.’⁴² Indeed, this ‘metaphysical principle’ holds not only for The First but generally for all real beings, for everything having ‘authentic existence’: ‘All other powers must act in partial imitation of it

³⁶ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 12, 18. Cf. Tanner, *God and Creation*, 39.

³⁷ Plotinus, *The Enneads* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), introduction by Paul Henry, S.J., xlii.

³⁸ Porphyry, in his *On the Life of Plotinus and His Work*, relates how the philosopher studied under one Ammonius, who according to the early church historian Eusebius may at one time have been a Christian. Plotinus, *Enneads*, civ.

³⁹ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 42-45.

⁴⁰ Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961).

⁴¹ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.1.6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, V.1.7 (my emphasis).

[The First]. Now other beings, coming to perfection, are observed to generate; they are *unable to remain self-closed*; they produce.⁴³

As a consequence, the transcendent One is necessarily related to what emanates from it, which ‘may be compared to the brilliant light encircling the sun and ceaselessly generated from that unchanging substance.’⁴⁴ Plotinus also uses the image of fire naturally giving heat, of snow giving cold, of fragrant substances diffusing their fragrance, or of drugs having their effects.⁴⁵ This gives rise to the tension in Plotinus’ account; it follows from affirming both the radical transcendence of The One *and* the necessity of its overflowing and hence of its relation to what comes to be – all the way from the second hypostasis down to matter on the very brink of non-existence. Plotinus’ God seems to be subject to a necessity that threatens to destroy its transcendence.

There is in this conception of necessary emanation a suggestion of univocity between The One and what it immediately gives rise to – *Nous*. Especially since Plotinus describes *Nous* (which is both mind and being) as an image of The One, sharing many of its characteristics: ‘[*Nous*] stands as the image of The One ... carrying onward much of its quality ... its nature is in some sense a definite part of the content of that First.’⁴⁶ However, *Nous* is also *not* continuous with The One insofar as the intelligible realm of *Nous* is plurality and diversity. As Rowan Williams observes: ‘The plurality of the intelligible world measures, so to say, the endless gradations of possible distance from true actuality.’⁴⁷ There is a contrastive relation, therefore, between The One and *Nous* as a result of what *Nous* is – insofar as *Nous* is plurality it is distanced from The One.

Two understandings of divine transcendence are here brought into play. On the one hand, Plotinus is anxious to safeguard the utter transcendence of The One and therefore denies that what emanates from it is to be identified with it; rather composition, multiplicity, determinacy are *contrasted* with their transcendent source. But on the other hand, Plotinus is concerned to show that what was contained in the One and emanates from it must in some sense be *continuous* with it – indeed, this is the major premise of Neoplatonist spirituality, which enjoins us to find the divine in ourselves beyond the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, V.4.1 (my emphasis) Cf. V.1.6 n. 15 (354); V.2.1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, V.1.6. Cf. xxxii-xxxiii; V.1.3

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, V.4.1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, V.1.7.

⁴⁷ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 193; cf. 220.

fractured diversity of our present lives.⁴⁸ (Lovejoy identified this as the ‘principle of continuity.’)⁴⁹ The tension in this account, then, stems from this vacillation between identity and difference built into Plotinus’ understanding of emanation.

The emanationist scheme of Plotinus tries to answer to both of these concerns – transcendence as well as continuity – but in a way that must ultimately lead to an understanding of divine transcendence in contrastive terms. The One is indeed the source of the entire chain of being, but *only mediately*. For from The One, *Nous* proceeds directly, and while *Nous* is connected ‘upwards’ to The One, it is also generative ‘downwards’ in that Soul proceeds from it, from which in turn proceeds the material world. Each new emanation proceeds directly from the one preceding it, but not directly from The One or The First. The net result is that Plotinus must understand the transcendence of The One in inverse proportion to its direct involvement in the world: with each new emanation the fullness of The One is a little further removed. While The One is the first member of a series emanating from it, its direct productive agency extends only to the next member of the series. The One is not directly involved with the rest of the series – its transcendence is tantamount to a distance between it and what it has given rise to. Indeed, this contrastive logic was to assert itself ever more strongly in subsequent Neoplatonists, with Iamblichus (c.245-c.325) going so far as to introduce a separation in The One itself between The One in which *Nous* participates and the strictly unparticipated One.⁵⁰

Tanner calls this understanding of divine transcendence ‘contrastive,’ indicating with this expression precisely the logic according to which transcendence is defined in contrast to its other, which means that transcendence translates into distance. This is the conception that ‘infiltrates Plotinus’ cosmology ... A non-contrastive definition ... should suggest that the divine source of being is not in a serially proceeding chain of being at all.’⁵¹ Thus, we have two basic ways of construing transcendence, contrastive and non-contrastive, and it is the latter we must now try to understand better, as it

⁴⁸ Cf. John Bussanich, ‘Plotinus’ Metaphysics of the One,’ in Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 55-57.

⁴⁹ Lovejoy, *Great Chain*, 55-63.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Arius*, 194-195.

⁵¹ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 44.

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lies at the heart of the Christian distinction.⁵² As a mere indication of its meaning, at this point, we may note that it will be a transcendence that does not translate into distance, but, paradoxically, into the most radical immanence.

To sum up, what we have seen so far is that Greek religion and philosophy tended to think of God as a part of the cosmos, and even when they did reach for a radical notion of divine transcendence in relation to the world, as in Plotinus, they kept a notion of necessity in the relation between God and the world, and landed instead in a conception of mutual dependence between them. Sokolowski gets to the heart of the matter:

Even the One written about by Plotinus ... cannot 'be' without there also being its reflections and its emanations in the other hypostases (the Mind and the Soul) and in the things of the world. The Plotinian One may not want or need anything else to be itself, so other things do not arise in order to make up any deficiency in the One; but such other things are still not understood as being there through a choice that might not have been made.⁵³

Two issues, then, intermingle in this account: the natural necessity of emanation and the contrastive logic of transcendence. Understanding the emanation of all existence from The One after the model of a natural productive process tends to involve The One in a necessary relation not only in a limited way with *Nous*, but with everything else down to the material substratum – and this threatens to eliminate divine transcendence. But in effect, this sort of relation is reserved for the relation between The One and *Nous* (or not even that); for everything else The One is only mediately involved, and hence, not present – or at least not present to the very plurality and diversity of the world. Divine transcendence is here preserved, but only by augmenting the contrast between God and world, which is to say at the expense of God's involvement in the world. What is implicitly set up is a sort of scale on which 'God's transcendence and involvement with the world vary

⁵² In setting up the contrast between Plotinian and Christian in this way I do not wish for a moment to deny the extraordinary importance of Platonist and Neoplatonist philosophy for the articulation of early Christian theology, even when it comes to creation and divine transcendence. For a meticulous presentation of this influence for the doctrine of creation, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *What has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1997). My intention in this section has rather been to set the stage for bringing out the necessary modifications implied by the Christian understanding of God and the world, as articulated in the Christian distinction.

⁵³ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 18.

inversely.⁵⁴ The more transcendent God is, the less he is present in the world. The spirituality consonant with this understanding will necessarily involve a flight from the here and now to the elsewhere of God.⁵⁵

The conceptions of necessary emanation and contrastive transcendence were incongruent with the Christian understanding of God and creation, since God was understood to *freely* create out of love for creation. Apropos of necessary emanation, Williams observes that ‘the difference is the familiar Jewish-Christian insistence on ascribing will or purpose to God ... that God’s self-diffusion and generative power are rooted in something like conscious decision (and so can properly be seen as intelligent love) is a conviction that consistently challenges the Neoplatonist view of a wholly purposeless deity throughout later patristic theology.’⁵⁶ Moreover, Christians understood God to be intimately present to his creation, which made contrastive transcendence problematic. This followed not only from their own experience, but also from their inscription into the salvation history of the Hebrews, in which the acting God was prominent, and from the central doctrine of the incarnation. They had to find a way, therefore, of talking about the transcendence of a free creator that did not imply his absence from the world, but rather his singular presence to all its teeming diversity. The Christian distinction names this subtle yet all-changing departure from the Greek mindset in an attempt to be faithful to the revelation of God the creator.

I have briefly presented the case of Plotinus not only as a foil against which better to grasp the ingenuity of the Christian understanding of divine transcendence, but for two additional reasons: First, because of the affinities as well as differences between the Neoplatonist construal and that of Augustine, which I will exploit further on. The differences in particular, which concern precisely the dimension of divine freedom, have not always been sufficiently appreciated.⁵⁷ Second, because I believe there is a subtle influence of

⁵⁴ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 45.

⁵⁵ Cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 82-83.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Arius*, 205.

⁵⁷ Consider, for instance, that Arthur Lovejoy believed that Augustine ascribed to the principle of plenitude, whereas in fact he stressed the divine decision to create. Lovejoy, *Great Chain*, 67. For a critique of Lovejoy’s claim, see Simo Knuuttila, ‘Time and Creation in Augustine,’ in Eleanore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104-105, 108-109. However, it must also be said that Augustine stresses that the divine decision to create, rather than being arbitrary, follows naturally from God’s love, which is to say from God’s nature. This is a difficult point to grasp, and to judge it rightly we would do well to pay heed to David Burrell’s insights into our

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Neoplatonism on the thought of Merleau-Ponty and especially on his assumptions regarding creation and contingency.⁵⁸ In any case, Merleau-Ponty indeed believes that divine transcendence as it follows from the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* must lead to a flight from the world, from temporality and embodiment, as well as that the presence of God in the world would have to mean a rejection of divine transcendence. As I have here tried to show, these are essentially Neoplatonist assumptions, insofar as transcendence is construed contrastively.

In the following three sections I shall try to show how the logic of the Christian distinction operates on different assumptions and what the consequences of this are. In particular, I want to critically engage those issues that especially concerned Merleau-Ponty: (1) the role of contingency; (2) the worry about escapism and the denigration of material reality; and (3) the question of the integrity of the world with its complex causal matrix, and in particular of the phenomenon of the human. I believe it will become increasingly clear that the logic of creation, understood in all its depth and complexity, neither leads to the annihilation of contingency, nor to a ban on the sacral enchantment of the material world, nor finally to a rejection of the integrity of the complex causal structure of the world and of the freedom characteristic of intentional creatures. *Pace* Merleau-Ponty, the logic of creation

interrelated conceptions of human and divine freedom. For as long as we conceive *human* freedom, after the modern voluntaristic paradigm, as the mere absence of constraint, rather than as the ability to act in accordance with the right ‘order of love,’ as it is grounded in reality, then Augustine’s understanding of the *divine* freedom to create will not make much sense. However, if freedom is construed as the ability to consent, or not, to act in accordance with one’s own natural inclination, much as Augustine understood it, then it makes more sense to say both that God freely created and that creation followed naturally upon God’s self-communicative goodness. In this way God’s actions are seen to be neither constrained nor arbitrary. Admittedly, this brings Augustine closer to Plotinus on this score, but without compromising the freedom of the deity. From a theological perspective, it should also be borne in mind that models such as these never capture the reality of divine life; they are rather to be seen as more or less adequate grammars for theological speech. In this sense, it could be said that, from the point of view of the Christian understanding of God and the world, Plotinus’ grammar of divine transcendence is inadequate. Cf. Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 76-90, 129-142; John W. Cooper, *Panentheism, the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 28-29; William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 7-15.

⁵⁸ This is not because I have come upon any direct reference to Plotinus or Neoplatonism in the published works of Merleau-Ponty, though it must surely be significant that in his formative years at the ENS he wrote his diploma thesis on Plotinus, under the supervision of the noted classical scholar Emile Bréhier. More importantly, however, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of transcendence, as we shall see, follows the contrastive logic of Plotinian philosophy.

is not to be assimilated with modern naturalistic determinism, but might instead prove a congenial framework for a more adequate scientific and philosophical understanding of the world, one in which even subjectivity may find a natural home.

3. Divine Freedom and Created Contingency

It will be apparent from the foregoing discussion that divine freedom and the contingency of the created world are closely connected. The claim that God creates everything out of nothing brings with it the most radical notion of divine freedom – since there is absolutely nothing to constrain God’s creative act, no recalcitrant matter without and no necessity within – and this in turn implies a most radical notion of contingency. We have seen that Neoplatonist construals of God, or The One, seemed to negate the personal dimension so central to the Abrahamic understanding of the divine, and seemed also to negate the distinction by seeing the world as a sort of natural procession from divinity – the world is created *ex Deo*, instead of *ex nihilo*. But for early Christian theologians, who came to stress divine freedom as a way of safeguarding God’s ‘personhood’ and transcendence, there could be no necessary relation between God and creation; nor could creation be seen to complete God, to supply a lack in the divine or to bring God into relation or manifestation, since all such notions compromise divine freedom and transcendence.

Note well that the theological context in which this was first brought out was one in which the need to rationally deduce a necessary being did not figure. Rather, the intent was to be consistent with an understanding of God as ‘person,’ as freely related to the world and as present and active within it. I should like to emphasize this point: the very strong insistence on God’s freedom and self-sufficiency, understood by some commentators as little more than a self-serving theological legitimation of patriarchal power,⁵⁹ were

⁵⁹ E.g. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 43-64. Writes Keller: ‘In their triumphant logos [the Church Fathers’ understanding of creation *ex nihilo*] we have read a logic whereby the creation doctrine guards God’s unity against gnostic complexity; unconstrained omnipotence against constraining conditions; masculine symbolic privilege against the affective, sensual and unruly femininity; the prestige of the disembodied Father against all maternalized chaos ...’ *Ibid.*, 64. Our very different readings of creation *ex nihilo* notwithstanding, I shall briefly return to Keller in chapter

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necessary in the attempt to defend the complete goodness of creation and the possibility of relations between the creator and creatures that are free rather than necessitated.

Sokolowski tries to bring out the meaning of this divine 'self-sufficiency' by saying that God does not need creation to be and to be what God is: 'We understand God as capable of existing, in undiminished goodness and greatness, even if the world had not been.'⁶⁰ In other words, God would have been all that God is even in the absence of creation; creation, wonderful as it is, does not add to the perfection of God, for if it did God would stand in need of creation. What the logic of creation implies is that the existence of the world can be grounded in nothing but the gratuitous love of God for creation.

In chapter 4, we saw Merleau-Ponty repeatedly suggest the dangers of such a radically self-sufficient notion of God, and saw him stress instead the value of those theological and philosophical currents that would bring God into a reciprocal relationship with the world. His positive appraisal of Bergsonian theology is a case in point, as is the desire to interpret the incarnation as a moment of divine development towards greater perfection, and the general idea that 'transcendence no longer hangs over man: he becomes, strangely, its privileged bearer.'⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty fears that the affirmation of divine transcendence brings with it a denigration of the world, and above all, that it obliterates contingency.

From the point of view of the Christian distinction, however, there is something odd in this fear of lost contingency. For while ordinary distinctions presuppose the world as their ultimate horizon, the Christian distinction assumes that the world as distinguished from God could have not existed. Rather than the world being a necessary horizon for all our thinking, the Christian distinction manages to think the radical *contingency* of the world in a wholly new way. Now, if it is possible that the world could not have been, it is *ipso facto* possible that God could have been all there was, and that God could have been all that God is without the world. The Christian distinction, then, ushers in a new understanding both of the world (radical contingency) and of God (radical independence), by drawing out the consequences of the belief that the world is a creation, the result of the free act of a creator, who, not meeting any need in himself, simply gave the world to be out of sheer generosity. For

6, where I look for similarities, as well as differences in our interpretations of Augustine on creation.

⁶⁰ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 19; cf. Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence*, 37-38.

⁶¹ S., 88/71

this is the upshot of the self-sufficient independence of the creator – the world exists only because God desired it to be and gave it out of the abundance of his love, rather than out of compulsion. The existence of the world must now be reconceived as an unparalleled gift of grace.⁶²

This emphasis is clearly seen in Augustine, who is careful to interpret the creation narrative in such a way that God's love will not appear needy 'in case it should be thought that it was out of the compulsion of his needs that God created the things which were to be made, rather than out of the abundance of his generosity.' And he continues: 'There are two things, in fact, on account of which God loves his creation: in order that it should be, and in order that it should abide.'⁶³ Augustine sees that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* implies that the world in its entirety must be seen as given out of love: to be is to be gifted with existence. Because, if the world were to be seen as created to meet a need in God, or alternatively, as some kind of unfolding of God's own being, then the distinction would be violated; a sort of necessity would then step in to bridge the distinction and the contingency of the world would be compromised. In other words, the distinction would disappear and God would be reduced to the highest entity in a hierarchy of being.

Compare this with the Plotinian understanding of The One, which while subtly gesturing beyond being, nonetheless views being as the necessary outflow of The One, on the model of a conclusion drawn from a set of premises. A gift, on the other hand, implies the freedom of the giver, even as it implies the gratuity and contingency of what is given.⁶⁴ The radical contingency of the world appears, then, with the Christian distinction and can be contrasted with the Plotinian principle of plenitude, from which follows, as Lovejoy notes, that 'there is no room for any contingency anywhere in the universe.'⁶⁵ Philosophy in its Plotinian variant does indeed manage to talk about the source of the world in God, but not about the radical contingency of the world, for that requires a concept of God more like the Judeo-Christian

⁶² Sokolowski aptly notes that to the Aristotelian sense of wonder is added a Christian sense of gratitude. *God of Faith and Reason*, 19.

⁶³ De Gen ad litt. I.7.13-8.14. Cf. De Gen. ad litt. IV.15.26-16.27; VIII.11.24; De civ. Dei XI.24; De doct. christ. I.31.34.

⁶⁴ I cannot here enter the subtle debate, going back to the work of Marcel Mauss, about the economy of gifts. Suffice it to say that it seems obvious to me that the gift of creation *ex nihilo* is *sui generis* and cannot, therefore, be understood according to the standard logic of giving gifts. Put differently, if it were so understood, this would simply amount to a rejection of creation *ex nihilo*, since God would somehow be compelled to give out of some prior obligation.

⁶⁵ Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*, 54.

than the Plotinian. There is the most intimate connection between the doctrine of God and the understanding of the world as contingent.

According to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, then, the existence of the world is contingent upon God's free act of creation: The world exists; yet it did not have to exist, it is contingent on the level of existence. As far as I am aware, Merleau-Ponty never recognizes the provenance of this radicalized notion of contingency in Judeo-Christian thought, but speaks of theology's relation to contingency only as a problem, since he believes that theology affirms contingency only to get rid of it by affirming an absolute creator, thereby securing the existence of the world beyond contingency.⁶⁶ In this way he neglects to interact with the entire historical context in which a theological revolution gave birth to the idea of the contingency of the whole world in tandem with divine freedom and transcendence. As we have seen, this was not an affirmation premised on the desire to rationally derive the necessary existence of God, but rather to safeguard the revealed understanding of God as the free creator of all that is, and the existence of the world as given out of love, and as such implying a relation that is more personal than logical.⁶⁷ Moreover, far from issuing in a denigration of the world and a necessitarian conception of its workings, human life included, early theologians positioned themselves precisely against the denigration of material reality intimated by Gnosticism and Neoplatonism – as we shall soon see in more detail – and against the necessitarian conception of life.⁶⁸ Indeed, Greek thought in general was marked by a fatalist leitmotif, and it would not be stating the case too strongly to say that existentialism, as a philosophy centred on the free human subject, could be possible only within a culture steeped in Judeo-Christian sensibilities, though obviously not as an all-out rejection of limits external to the free subject.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Although he does at one place obliquely hint at the provenance of the concept of contingency in 'Catholicism.' S., 307/242.

⁶⁷ It seems to me, however, that even when later theologians proceed to deduce the necessary existence of God from the fact of contingency, by way of a principle of sufficient reason, this cannot be seen as a threat to the sort of contingency Merleau-Ponty is interested in preserving, since, according to Christian doctrine, even if God's existence is necessary rather than contingent, God is under no obligation to create and the existence of creation remains contingent. It is only on Neoplatonist assumptions that the existence of the world can be deduced from the existence of God.

⁶⁸ Cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology: Consonance Between Theology and Science* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 46, 57-58.

⁶⁹ Cf. Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952), 167; Marie-Anne Vannier, 'Creatio,' 'conversio,' 'formatio' chez S. Augustine (Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1991), xxvi; Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 43.

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With this in mind, let us revisit the distinction between the absolute contingency of the world and the relative contingency that is operative within the world. Things or events may be relatively contingent in the sense that the causal nexus in which they are situated could have played itself out differently with appropriately different results, including within this matrix the freedom and creativity of human beings. There are also necessary factors, which may be understood as the unchanging structures of the matrix itself. On such an understanding, to give an example, the spatial location of my body at this time is typically contingent, whereas the natural constants are typically necessary.⁷⁰ Now, if we accept (with Merleau-Ponty) that relative contingency drives individual existence and human history, and that philosophy feeds off this situation, this need not imply anything about the contingency of the world as such, as disclosed by the Christian distinction. To see this, consider that there is no contradiction in claiming that human contingency and freedom are operative within the matrix of being and still believe that this very matrix is itself a necessary context.⁷¹ The reverse holds as well: Claiming that the world itself is contingent upon God's gratuitous creation, one may nonetheless believe that the world so created is devoid of internal contingency, even as one may also believe the contrary, that the absolutely contingent world has its own internal contingencies as well as necessities. There is therefore simply no necessary connection between the contingency of the world created *ex nihilo* and contingencies or necessities holding within the world as a result.

Let me be very clear: I am not saying that the idea of a world contingent upon a divine act of creation cannot lead to a necessitarian conception of the world so created, which is to say, to a world devoid of internal contingency. Indeed, I believe this tendency rose to prominence in the modern period under the influence of scientific determinism and is still alive and well today in many quarters of academia and popular culture. What I am denying, however, is that the logic of divine creation straightforwardly leads to such a philosophy of nature, and that it did so from the very beginning of theological reflection on these themes. To the contrary, I claim that, as a rule, this was not the case – and I shall soon provide salient examples of this.

Let us return to Merleau-Ponty, though: He criticizes the idea of the divine creation of the world for the same reason that he criticizes modern scientific

In fact, Merleau-Ponty himself suggests something very similar to this without connecting it to the concepts of creation and contingency. See the quote above on p. 228.

⁷⁰ Cf. Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence*, 43.

⁷¹ As I suggested in chapter 3, this may be Merleau-Ponty's later position on the flesh.

determinism. Indeed, he seems to have approached the problem of creation and contingency almost exclusively through the lens of a modern philosophy of nature. In both cases, what he wants above all to preserve is the contingency internal to the world, the contingency needed to make the creativity of human meaning-making possible, and he believes that only by rejecting the divine creation of the world *ex nihilo* can its internal relative contingency be preserved. But why would this be so? By what law is it excluded that God could create a world with a significant amount of contingency and in particular with creatures endowed with the power of a qualified self-determinacy – indeed, with creatures who themselves have the character of an origin? Clearly posed like this, it seems this is an obvious possibility, and when we look at how theologians such as Augustine or Aquinas conceived of the matter, it is unsurprising that creatures are conceived of as existing in such a framework and as having such powers. In fact, from the point of view of creation *ex nihilo* creation must have its own integrity, though never in complete autonomy from its creator.

We can therefore agree with Robert Sokolowski, himself a noted phenomenologist, when he says that ‘the move into the Christian understanding of the world must be so achieved that the integrity of natural necessities is maintained.’⁷² But the affirmation of natural necessities, in Sokolowski’s language, does not translate into determinism or fatalism, for it is a natural necessity that there should be such things as human persons with their own distinct powers.⁷³ At least as far as phenomenology is concerned, there can be no question of reducing subjective agents to mere effects in a causal chain, whether couched in the terms of reductionist science or of theology. And when Sokolowski enumerates the natural necessities whose integrity remains within the theological context, he mentions such things as ‘the laws of material nature, the biological patterns of existence that make up

⁷² Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 21. What Sokolowski calls the natural necessity of things is what I have simply called their integrity. This ‘necessity’ means only that they are allowed to be what they really are; Sokolowski is in no sense suggesting determinism. See *ibid.*, 43-44.

⁷³ Again, it is the non-contrastive understanding of divine transcendence that allows for this: ‘We must think of God as the one who can let natural necessity be maintained and let reason be left intact: that is, *God is not himself a competing part of nature or a part of the world*. If the incarnation could not take place *without a truncation of human nature*, it would mean that God was one of the natures in the world that somehow was defined by not being the other natures; it would mean that his presence in one of these other natures, human nature, would involve a conflict and the need to exclude some part of what he is united with.’ *Ibid.*, 36 (my emphases).

the reality of living things, the various forms of presentation ... the patterns of psychological development.⁷⁴

It seems to me that if Merleau-Ponty had looked at some of the sources of the Christian doctrine of creation instead of contenting himself with their modern metamorphoses, he might at the very least have recognized their tension in relation to modernity, and perhaps even their compatibility with his own account vis-à-vis the question of contingency, and in particular with his later ontology. Indeed, perhaps he would have detected surprising similarities between his own intuitions and those of, say, Augustine, some of which I shall discuss in the next chapter. But Merleau-Ponty takes God to be understood as cause of the world in the same sense and on the same level as any other natural cause within the world, with the result that divine causality and natural causality must be seen as competing. And since nothing can compete with God, natural causality is evacuated from the Christian story insofar as it affirms a transcendent creator. It is doubly curious to me that Merleau-Ponty did not problematize the univocal concept of causality that his analysis presupposes, since in his own work, both early and late, he developed notions of different levels of causality and consistently rejected the hegemony of linear, deterministic causation. Not that he expressed anything like the Christian distinction between creator and creature, to be sure, but he nevertheless had an awareness of the need for a much more complex understanding of causality. Why, then, did he limit himself to a univocal concept of causality in discussing religion?⁷⁵ In fact, Merleau-Ponty and Christian theologians ought to be able to agree that we live in a world of unfathomable potentiality and this does indeed suggest that 'no one can know what freedom may do.' We can affirm both that our world is structured in highly particular ways and still firmly believe that there is significant scope for subjectivity to achieve what it alone could do, for contingency and for human freedom. Nothing in the theology of creation *ex nihilo* contradicts this; indeed, as we are about to see, it forcefully drives it home.

One final point should be made with regard to contingency: Is it, as Merleau-Ponty claims, the case that the belief in a transcendent creator God terminates that 'wonder in the face of the world' which springs from the fact of contingency and which alone leads to radical and authentic philosophy? For this was the methodological corollary suggested in the preceding chapter. This

⁷⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁵ See Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 133-134, for a similar critique.

is really the Merleau-Pontian version of the accusation of ontotheology, or explanatory theology, as he calls it. As we have seen, philosophy is for Merleau-Ponty above all a questioning that keeps itself open – it dies when a putatively final answer is given. However, are there any grounds for claiming that an affirmation of God as creator quiets all our questions? How should we understand Merleau-Ponty's accusation that 'theology affirms the contingency of human being only to derive from it a necessary Being, that is, to get rid of it; it uses philosophical wonder only to motivate an affirmation that terminates it'? The answer, I believe, can be quite straightforward: It is because Merleau-Ponty reads the theology of creation with modern spectacles that he is so quick to deny theology the right to wonder. For if the Christian distinction is affirmed, there can be no question of rationally securing God's existence and then proceeding to use God for the purposes of justifying an explanatory ontology – one that would finally give us the total mastery of reality.⁷⁶ If the creator God is the 'answer' to the question posed by the contingency of the world, this 'answer' is itself an even greater mystery; and though Christian theology may find itself prompted by revelation to speak in response to this question of the world's contingency, still it knows – insofar as it is governed by the logic of the Christian distinction – that it will never comprehend that of which it speaks. A theology faithful to this understanding of the mystery of God could not domesticate the divine such that it would serve as the foundation of the human project of knowledge. Put differently, while it may be possible to sometimes see the back of God, human being in its createdness shall never be able to peek over God's shoulder to behold reality *sub specie aeternitatis*.⁷⁷

Moreover, it is quite possible to raise doubts about Merleau-Ponty's own use of contingency to affirm wonder and philosophy. Is it not rather odd to say that you are supposed to question contingency in the name of philosophical wonder while at the same time adamantly insisting that an answer must never be proffered? Is that kind of questioning not just a dress-up? Is it not in the nature of an honest question to be seeking an answer? I agree with Merleau-

⁷⁶ It is significant that Heidegger's central critique of ontotheology targets Aristotle and Hegel. See Martin Heidegger, 'Der Rückgang in der Grund der Metaphysik,' in *Einleitung zu 'Was ist Metaphysik?'*, printed in *Wegmerken* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1962); and 'Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik,' in *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006).

⁷⁷ I have the metaphor from Merold Westphal, 'Overcoming Onto-Theology,' and 'Appropriating Postmodernism,' both in *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

Ponty that some answers terminate wonder, and if the contingency of existence is ontotheologically deployed this may well be the result. Not, however, because a transcendent creator is affirmed, but rather because human rationalism believes it has access to all the answers, thereby denying the Christian distinction itself. On the other hand, we can easily imagine someone being wondrously moved by the contingency of the world, realizing that it goes beyond human reason, yet letting this wonder constitute an openness for the revelation of creation, which comes as a grace rather than as a human achievement – and hence, does not terminate wonder. Is it not still a cause for wonder that God created the world?⁷⁸

Merleau-Ponty accuses Henri de Lubac of eliminating contingency itself. However, as Remy Kwant observes, Merleau-Ponty in fact fails to answer de Lubac's charge; it is Merleau-Ponty who eliminates the problem of contingency.⁷⁹ For the issue is about contingency, not as a fact, but as a *problem*. What de Lubac wants to know is why an existentialist philosopher such as Merleau-Ponty is driven to reject the problem of contingency *qua* problem, as something that stands out as being in need of some kind of explanation – why is there a world? It seems to me that this is a question that Merleau-Ponty cannot countenance, since he assumes, either that existence should simply be taken as a *factum brutum*, or, in the later ontology, that the context in which we are situated is the ultimate context, and as such is not contingent. 'The flesh is an ultimate notion [*notion dernière*].'⁸⁰ In other words, and to put the point provocatively, Merleau-Ponty seems to believe that we can only safeguard the fact of contingency if we stop asking questions about it, or else we will have to reject it altogether.

This approach to contingency is echoed in a related remark Merleau-Ponty makes about religion understood as an answer to the contingency of human existence: 'As a questioning, it is justified on the condition that it remains answerless.'⁸¹ Yet this strikes me as profoundly unphilosophical and frankly dishonest. As we saw in chapter 4, however, this probably does not remain Merleau-Ponty's approach, since he indicates that he has been led to 'posit the

⁷⁸ This understanding of the relations between contingency, philosophical wonder and religious revelation bears some resemblance to that envisaged by the French philosopher Maurice Blondel, whom, moreover, Merleau-Ponty held in high regard. See the discussion in S., 176-185/140-152.

⁷⁹ Kwant, *From Phenomenology*, 135-136.

⁸⁰ VI., 183/140.

⁸¹ S., 257/203.

existential eternity – the eternal body.⁸² In the end, then, it seems that Merleau-Ponty does not himself keep the question open. Curiously, the discussion begins to look like a replay of the Greek debate about whether the world had a beginning, with Merleau-Ponty coming down on the side of eternity. In any case, whether we are to stop asking questions about ontological contingency, thus rejecting it as a problem, or indeed should affirm the eternity of being, thus rejecting it as a fact, Merleau-Ponty will not let the gratuitous facticity of the world constitute a space of openness for divine creation *ex nihilo*.

4. The Relation of the Creator's Transcendence and Presence

The Christian distinction also has consequences that concern the interrelation of God's transcendence of creation and God's immediate presence in all created things, which in turn relates to Merleau-Ponty's worry about a distant, otherworldly God and the escapism that the affirmation of such a God entails. Operating with a contrastive account of transcendence will let you infer that the more transcendent God is, the less he can be involved in creation. And if divine transcendence is as radical as creation *ex nihilo* suggests, then the created world must be devoid of divine presence altogether, or so the reasoning goes.⁸³ But as we have now clearly seen, this line of thought presupposes an understanding of divine transcendence which is more closely linked to Greek philosophical thinking than to the conceptual revolution of the Judeo-Christian tradition. For this is the contrastive understanding of divine transcendence that prompted Plotinus and his followers to continually augment the distance that separated the unparticipated One from the world of embodied difference and particularity.

Now, the challenge of thinking divine transcendence non-contrastively is universal and does not bespeak an imaginative limitation peculiar to ancient Greek culture. Instead, it is a reflection of the natural context for human

⁸² VI., 313/265.

⁸³ Indeed, not only is such a God not present in the world, according to the champions of an immanence decoupled from divine transcendence, but God cannot even be said to care for the world from a distance. Though examples of this line of reasoning are *legio*, consider the following recent claim: 'Such an abstract Being [a self-sufficient entity with no *need* to refer to anything or anyone beyond itself] does not care for widows, orphans and strangers. It does not care tout court.' Kearney, *Anatheism*, 204 n. 2.

experience, language and thought.⁸⁴ Hence, when a distinction between God and the world is made, it is often in the same way that ordinary distinctions are made: Ordinary distinctions work by means of contrasts within a unifying context. For what a distinction achieves is an understanding of one thing in terms of its difference from another. This is why the classical understanding of a definition, going back to Aristotle, is to provide a thing's proximate genus and its *differentia specifica* – that is, the way in which it is distinguished from other things within the same genus. If you know that, you have defined the thing in question. This is not a spurious connection, then, because distinguishing things is closely connected with defining or positioning them. Writes Sokolowski: 'The distinction provides each term with a sense of definiteness and with a sense of otherness: the thing is itself, and it is not this other; it is other than this other thing.'⁸⁵ Thus, in distinguishing we divide things up by noting the way in which they differ from each other, the way in which they contrast, even as they belong together in some other overarching sense. Such distinguishing can go on indefinitely and against ever-wider horizons of unity, but the ultimate horizon we naturally encounter is that of the world itself, or of being – being is home to all contrasts.

If this logic is applied without modification to the distinction between God and the world, however, the peculiar power of the logic of creation *ex nihilo* will inevitably be lost, since the identifying distinction will posit God as other *within* an unproblematic horizon of being, such that God is contrastively defined by being other to the world. But according to the Christian distinction, God cannot simply be thought of as other to the world, since that would inscribe God as one term of a masterable distinction: world here and God there, yet both, as it were, observed from a single vantage point. In this case sameness and otherness are still at work within the ultimate setting that comes naturally for human thinking – that of the being of the world – since in ordinary distinctions each term is defined by not being the other. In other words, the being of the terms of a distinction are normally interdependent. With the Christian distinction, on the other hand, God is not defined by being other, since God would be no less God in the absence of the world. Indeed,

⁸⁴ We can here usefully recall the *Fundierung* model for linguistic meaning presented in chapter 3, since it illustrates so well the situatedness of linguistic meaning structures, their rootedness in the perceived world as the natural context of human thought.

⁸⁵ Robert Sokolowski, *Pictures, Distinctions, Quotations: Fourteen Essays in Phenomenology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 75.

God would be no less God in the absence of the creator-creature distinction.⁸⁶ And, to repeat, this is because the world and therefore also the distinction itself are seen to be created *ex nihilo* – they have no ultimacy.

As well-intentioned as talk about God as Wholly Other may be, it always risks positing God as another *object* located somewhere else. But the Christian God is, as David Bentley Hart observes, ‘immeasurably *more* incomprehensible than the One, which is simply the Wholly Other, and which is consequently susceptible of a fairly secure kind of *dialectical* comprehension.’⁸⁷ This ‘dialectical metaphysics of transcendence,’ then – or what I, following Kathryn Tanner, have called a contrastive understanding of transcendence – means that ‘the One is, in some sense, *there* rather than *here*. To fly thither one must fly hence, to undertake a journey of the alone to the alone, a sweetly melancholy departure from the anxiety of finitude, and even from being itself, in its concrete actuality: self, world and neighbour.’⁸⁸ In short, on the contrastive understanding of divine transcendence it is indeed the case that creation *ex nihilo* implies a God of absolute distance and with such distance follows – here I can agree with the critics of divine transcendence – a host of ethical problems. Such a God could not be imagined to care for the world any more than did the Gods of Aristotle and Plotinus. Yet this is not the Christian understanding of the relation between creator and creation.

If this peculiar logic is grasped, it must thoroughly qualify many of Merleau-Ponty’s worries about the possibility of being engaged in the world while at the same time affirming divine transcendence, which is the essence of the practical corollary mentioned in chapter 4, since it is premised on the notion that creation implies a distant God, a God not present in the world, such that one must negate the world to approach God. By the same token, it raises serious doubts about his critique of orthodox Christology in favour of an entirely immanentist revision of this central doctrine.⁸⁹ I am not saying that an understanding of the creator-creature distinction establishes the Chalcedonian doctrine or anything of that sort; I am merely pointing out that Merleau-Ponty’s reasons for rejecting it are unconvincing, since this rejection is

⁸⁶ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 33.

⁸⁷ David Bentley Hart, ‘The Hidden and the Manifest: Metaphysics After Nicea,’ in George E. Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou, eds., *Orthodox Readings of Augustine* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 207.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸⁹ On the relation between the Christian distinction and the incarnation, see Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 31-40; Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 234-244.

premised on a conception of transcendence that owes more to Neoplatonism than to orthodox Christianity, one according to which God's immanent presence in the world could only be affirmed at the expense of God's transcendence of the world. This opposition is entirely grounded in the logic of contrastive transcendence. It may be true, as Merleau-Ponty says, that the incarnation changes everything, but this is not because God has now deigned to be present in the world, since a non-contrastive understanding of creation *ex nihilo* implies that God has never been absent from the world. This is a point that must now be more fully worked out.

As we have seen, what the early Christian theologians previously referred to were anxious to affirm was at once the absolute transcendence of the creator of all that is, and the creator's intimate presence with creation – for nothing less could do justice to Christian revelation and experience. This required the elaboration of a notion of divine transcendence that was non-contrastive, where God was no longer seen as the apex of a serial totality and hence removed from the lower rungs of the continuum, which would then have to be negated in order to reach the divine. Creation *ex nihilo* names this attempt, which, citing David Bentley Hart, I have already described as the first genuine concept of divine transcendence.

I should like to stress that making the specific Christian distinction does indeed begin with experience and is more than a merely theoretical exercise, even if it is that too. For just as ordinary distinctions are grounded in lived experience, so the Christian distinction is grounded in the experience of the primary practises of Christian faith, as Sokolowski would say.⁹⁰ In the same vein, Kathryn Tanner remarks that the distinction between God and the world is 'at least a presumption of a number of common [Christian] practices.'⁹¹ These experiences and practises would include the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, doxological confession, the saying of creeds, the practise of prohibitions (such as that against idolatry), the experience of trust in a loving God despite appearances to the contrary, personal prayer and so on. Arguably, all of these tacitly presuppose that God is indeed radically transcendent, yet somehow also present. What theological reflection does with the Christian distinction is to clarify and bring out what these practises implicitly contain.⁹² Practise and experience, then, revelation and proclamation – these are the

⁹⁰ Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence*, 198; *God of Faith and Reason*, 23-25, 90-92, 115.

⁹¹ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 38.

⁹² The development of Christology would be a similar case, where arguably the primary practises of worship and prayer directed the theoretical development.

birthplaces of the Christian distinction. Philosophical and theological reflection are its nurseries.

Augustine and the Turn Inward

Let us look now at one particular case where this logic of non-contrastive transcendence plays itself out – that of Augustine – in order to gauge Merleau-Ponty’s general critique of the Augustinian turn inward and thus away from the world, as well as the concomitant notion that God is distant from the concrete world rather than intimately present within it. Augustine’s turn to memory [*memoria*] in Book X of *The Confessions* has often baffled commentators. However, after having spent nine books recollecting his temporal sojourn, Augustine here begins the attempt to recollect the even more radical origin that is his createdness, leading the reader into the theology of creation (the theme of the last three books of *The Confessions*), the only context in which a human being can truly confess what it most profoundly is – a creature.⁹³ If this is where *The Confessions* end, it is also, for Augustine, where they necessarily begin.

Augustine here significantly contributes to the venerable theological tradition according to which self-knowledge and knowledge of God are most intimately connected.⁹⁴ Indeed, one conclusion to be drawn from Books VII to XIII of *The Confessions* is that God is not merely external to the self, like an object in the world, but can be found and known by turning back to oneself. For radical self-questioning leads to the insight that a human being lacks a sure foundation in itself, that human existence is creatively given out of the abundance of God’s ungrudging generosity. ‘I did not even exist to receive your gift of being; yet lo! now I do exist, thanks to your goodness.’⁹⁵ Once given existence, however, human being as temporal and changeable tends of itself back towards nothing, whence it was drawn. ‘So great is the faculty of memory, so great the power of life in a person whose life is *tending towards death!*’⁹⁶ The same goes for all created beings, which must therefore continually be held in existence by God. As Augustine states in his *Literal Meaning of Genesis*: ‘If his working were to be withheld from the things he has set up, they

⁹³ Cf. Michael Fiedrowicz, ‘General Introduction,’ in Rotelle, *On Genesis*, 13-15.

⁹⁴ Cf. James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions III. Commentary on Books 8-13. Indexes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 155.

⁹⁵ Conf. XIII.1.1. Cf. Conf. I.20.31.

⁹⁶ Conf. X.17.26 (my emphasis); cf. Conf. I.6.7; De vera rel. 11.21.

would simply collapse.⁹⁷ In short, creatures possess their own existence only by continually receiving it as gift; in and of itself a creature is not able to subsist. ‘If I do not abide in him, I shall not be able to in myself.’⁹⁸

Let us follow Augustine’s (in)famous turn to interiority, as it unfolds in Book X of the *Confessions*, before considering what conclusions are to be drawn with regard to God’s presence or absence in the world. As Augustine recalls and contemplates his own mind, he is awed and dumbfounded: ‘I cannot myself comprehend all that I am.’⁹⁹ What is so startling to Augustine is that the mind is what is closest to us and should therefore be what we are most intimately acquainted with. ‘What can be nearer to me than I am to myself? Yet here I am, unable to comprehend the nature of my memory, when I cannot even speak of myself without it.’¹⁰⁰ Apparently, something in us is unfathomable by us, as a recollection of the human mind makes clear: ‘How awesome a mystery! It is the mind, and this is nothing other than my very self. What am I, then, O my God? What is my nature?’¹⁰¹ Augustine realizes that he must press on beyond his own mind to God, that he must try to recollect something he has all but forgotten, but that might possibly have left a trace which is clear enough to follow. Happiness is the trace that suggests itself to him, since it is a universal desire, indicating that it is constitutive of human being to long for something it once had, but has since lost. The problem is only to understand how it can be that everybody longs for a life of happiness (*beata vita*). Whence this universal desire? In the end, Augustine does not find a satisfying answer to this question.¹⁰²

However, this happiness that all desire, says Augustine, is only to be had in God, and so the mind is led beyond itself to the *true* object of its desire. ‘This is the happy life, and this alone: to rejoice in you, about you and because of you.’¹⁰³ And in doing so, Augustine remembers God – who is not the mind,

⁹⁷ De Gen. ad litt. V.20.40. Cf. Conf. X.27.38.

⁹⁸ Conf. VII.11.17. Cf. Conf. VII.15.21; VII.20.26.

⁹⁹ Conf. X.8.15.

¹⁰⁰ Conf. X.16.25. Augustine also realizes that our inability to grasp even our own minds is ‘forcing us to ask where that part of it is which it is incapable of grasping.’ Conf. X.8.15. In other words, he suggests that the mind has a source it can never reach, but which nonetheless forces it to transcend itself.

¹⁰¹ Conf. X.17.26.

¹⁰² The topic broached here is, of course, central to Platonic epistemology, its doctrine of recollection and the concomitant teaching of the transmigrating of souls. This alternative is, however, no longer available to Augustine. See Roland Teske, ‘Augustine’s Philosophy of Memory,’ in Stump and Kretzmann, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, for a discussion.

¹⁰³ Conf. X.22.32.

but who deigns to dwell in the mind as the one who alone may satisfy the human desire for happiness. Augustine realizes that he has known all this since first he came to know God: ‘I have been remembering you since first I learned to know you.’¹⁰⁴ But where did he find God in the first place? ‘You could not have been in my memory before I learned to know you. Where then could I have found you in order to learn of you, if not in yourself, far above me?’¹⁰⁵ God, as it were, remembered Augustine before Augustine remembered God. And what is this, if not the very condition of existence – that God is *mindful* of creation? As Augustine exclaims, ‘upon you I call, O God, my mercy, *who made me, and did not forget me* when I forgot you.’¹⁰⁶

Augustine appears to be saying that the contemplation of his own mind finally leads him to a source beyond himself, a source that is on the one hand present to his mind, yet on the other far beyond it. From the phenomenology of the mind in recollection in Book X, through the biblical hermeneutics of creation in Books XI to XIII, *The Confessions* make sense if these last four books are ultimately a reflection on what it means to be created. This is Augustine’s way of elucidating from scripture the question that had been so forcefully raised in Book X by the contemplation of his mind: ‘What am I, then?’ But it was already announced at the very beginning of Book I, where Augustine reflects on infancy and finally comes the question of ‘whether my infancy was itself the sequel to some earlier age, now dead and gone. Was there nothing before it, except the life I lived in my mother’s womb? ... Was I somewhere else? Was I even someone?’¹⁰⁷ And the answer, to be fully worked out in the later books, is here already given: ‘Where could a living creature like this have come from, if not from you, Lord? ... Could we derive existence and life from anywhere other than you?’¹⁰⁸

This is, in brief, the shape of Augustine’s turn inward, as narrated in the *Confessions*. Two things, I believe, are highlighted in this section. The *first* is that Augustine is able to learn something from turning to the inner recesses of his mind that he was not able to learn otherwise; the *second* is what he learns – that his existence ultimately derives from nothing but the love of God, which sustains him, and without which he would no longer be. In other words, both

¹⁰⁴ Conf. X.25.36.

¹⁰⁵ Conf. X.26.37.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Conf. XIII.1.1 (my emphasis). Note, again, that Augustine never really answers the question about where and when God first entered his memory.

¹⁰⁷ Conf. I.6.9.

¹⁰⁸ Conf. I.6.10.

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how Augustine learns something and *what* it is that he learns are important and should not be separated.¹⁰⁹ For it seems to me that the focus has too often been on *how* Augustine learns (the epistemology), and not on *what* he learns (the ontology), which is to say that the framework of the theology of creation must be taken into account.¹¹⁰

In order to assess the consequences that follow from Augustine's turn inward, then, let us first further consider what he learns. This takes us right into his theology of creation, which also articulates a general ontology premised on what we have called the Christian distinction and the notion of non-contrastive transcendence.

According to the Augustinian logic of creation, distance from the divine source is not a result of our createdness, but of sin and self-estrangement; it is caused by our disordered loves.¹¹¹ Yet even in such a situation – in forgetfulness of God and his true self – Augustine can state, in a nearly untranslatable phrase that has become famous: 'You were more intimately present to me than my innermost being, and higher than the highest peak of my spirit' [*tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*].¹¹² This is as precise a statement of the logic of the Christian distinction as can be had, and we now understand something of it: It is because God is the creator of all that is that God can also be intimately present in all things as the donor of the very existence they continually receive. This is why, in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine

¹⁰⁹ Augustine's turn inward is complex and I do not mean to suggest that my discussion here is comprehensive. For instance, if the account in *The Trinity* of the turn inward had been considered, it would yield a different aspect of Augustinian interiority. In the latter work, Augustine is not so much searching for God as for analogies with which to approach the mystery of the Trinity. However, that discussion bears less upon the issue with which we are here concerned – that of God's presence or absence in the world. For a discussion of these two works, see Roland Teske, 'Augustine's Philosophy of Memory,' in Eleanor Stump and Norman Kretzmann, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 148-158.

¹¹⁰ On the related issue of the scholarly neglect of the concept of participation in Augustine, see David V. Meconi, S.J., 'St. Augustine's Early Theory of Participation,' *Augustinian Studies* 27 (1996): 79-80.

¹¹¹ This is at least arguably the *logic* of Augustine's theology of creation, even though it is true that his writings present us with an unresolved tension in the valuation of temporality, change and materiality. For discussions of this tension, see Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 85-88; James K.A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), 133-148. See also Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Margret Miles, *Augustine on the Body* (Missoula, MT: American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series, 1979).

¹¹² Conf. III.6.11.

first describes God's work in sustaining the universe like this: 'The nature, therefore, of the total bodily or material universe does not receive any external assistance ... But internally it is assisted in a non-material, non-bodily way by God so acting that it should simply be, *since from him and through him and in him are all things*.¹¹³ And then, as a consequence, he can say that God is 'both interior to every single thing, because *in him are all things*, and exterior to every single thing because he is above all things.'¹¹⁴ He says this again in another place, quoting another favourite passage: 'The one who made is nearer to us than the many things which he made. *For in him we live and move and are*.¹¹⁵ There can be no doubt that Augustine links the transcendence of God the creator with the immanent presence of God the upholder of created reality. There is no sense in which God is absent because of his transcendence, since this transcendence is not contrastively conceived. Rather, it is because God is transcendent creator that he is also innermost in each created thing.

The last quote, in particular, indicates an initial Augustinian response to Merleau-Ponty's worries about the distance of God as transcendent creator and the attendant turn away from the world here and now: It is not because God is *not* in the external world that we turn towards ourselves and towards the inner recesses of our minds, but rather because these are closer to us, they are what we are more intimately familiar with. It is true that some statements of Book X do seem to suggest that God is not present beyond the recollecting mind. For instance: 'I have not found you outside [of my memory]';¹¹⁶ and 'you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you.'¹¹⁷ However, if Augustine's concern with the theology of creation, which is the broader context here, is kept in mind, it will be impossible to draw the conclusion that he thinks God is not present in the world beheld by the senses.

A reading of the seventh book of *The Confessions* in light of what we have seen of the logic of creation brings this out. For when Augustine searches for God in the things God has made, he does indeed find that they are created and owe their being to him, and when pressing on towards a mystical vision, he says: 'Then indeed did I perceive your invisible reality *through created things*.¹¹⁸ The possibility of this kind of experience follows from Augustine's

¹¹³ De Gen. ad litt. VIII.25.46, quoting Rom. 11:36.

¹¹⁴ De Gen. ad litt. VIII.26.48.

¹¹⁵ De Gen. ad litt. V.16.34, quoting Acts 17:28.

¹¹⁶ Conf. X.24.35.

¹¹⁷ Conf. X.27.38.

¹¹⁸ Conf. VII.17.23 (my emphasis).

understanding of creation *ex nihilo*, since each created thing subsists only in God. But if this is so, why does he turn from these things towards his own mind? The answer – or at least one answer – is that these things are at a remove from him: he can never know them as intimately as he knows himself; indeed, what he knows of them he knows through his mind and nothing else. And since he seeks to know God as intimately as possible, such knowledge must come through what he himself most intimately knows, which is his mind.¹¹⁹ Put differently, the turn *inward* is premised more on Augustine's epistemology than on his ontology; it is not so much about *what* he learns, but about *how* he learns it.

Indeed, in *The City of God*, after a discussion of the image of God within us, Augustine very clearly states that while the traces of God are most evidently found in the mind, they are also in every part of the world: 'As we run over all the works which He has miraculously established, let us consider His footprints, as it were, more deeply impressed in one place and more lightly in another, but distinct even in those things which are below us.'¹²⁰

It is important to note, therefore, that the turn inward is not a turn away from creation, unless one takes the soul to be uncreated, which Augustine most decidedly does not.¹²¹ Rather, to turn towards the inmost recesses of the soul is equally to turn towards something God has made, not starry skies, mountains and oceans, but another of God's creatures nonetheless, to wit, the creature nearer to me than anything else – myself.¹²² Merleau-Ponty is nowhere attentive to this Augustinian logic of creation, and so naturally assumes, *first*, that the Christian turn inward is a turn away from the created world; and *second*, that the Christian believes God is not to be found in creation, but only beyond it. As the foregoing textual material as well as the more general context of the theology of creation demonstrates, however, this is a reading of the tradition that cannot be sustained.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Sokolowski's related point: 'God's knowledge of creatures through himself is a knowledge of what is *deeper in them than the natures, features, and properties we come to know through our cognitive involvement with them*; their being known and chosen by God is what is most real in them.' *God of Faith and Reason*, 45 (my emphasis).

¹²⁰ De civ. Dei XI.28.

¹²¹ Cf. De civ. Dei XI.22. See also Roland Teske, 'Augustine's Theory of Soul,' in Stump and Kretzmann, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 117-118.

¹²² Unfortunately, Maria Boulding's otherwise excellent translation obscures this by the rubrics given to different sections in Book X. She titles an early section 'Looking for God in creatures,' and the next 'Looking for God in himself,' as though Augustine himself were not a creature. Conf. X.6.8; X.8.12.

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Now, while this would be the most fundamental Augustinian response to Merleau-Ponty's critique, a *caveat* is nonetheless in order. For while we must not assimilate Augustine's epistemology with his ontology, with respect to the presence of God, it is true that the turn inward is not just epistemologically motivated, but carries some ontological weight as well. Simply put, Augustine believes that in comparison to corporeal substances, the soul is more like God. In itself this is not problematic – after all, the idea of a particularity pertaining to human being in virtue of the *imago Dei*, whether or not this is best conceived of in Augustinian terms, is firmly rooted in theological anthropology. However, it can become a problem if likeness is treated as synonymous with closeness, since this would, in fact, imply a contrastive notion of transcendence, where God is seen to be further removed from some created things than others. And Augustine does indeed sometimes show a tendency to think in those terms, even though his philosophical theology of creation in many ways militates against it.

With this aspect of Augustine's thought we are in the vicinity of ideas that do in fact fall under Merleau-Ponty's judgement. But I would suggest that this is not because Augustine subscribes to creation *ex nihilo*; it is rather because he fails sometimes to draw out the full consequences of this belief.¹²³ It is indeed true, as I said, that Augustine never denies the presence of God in the world and even in each particle of it, as Merleau-Ponty's critique mistakenly assumes, and so the turn inward is not a turn away from creation. However, when Augustine suggests that the soul is *ontologically* closer to God than matter is – as if God were more *present* with the soul than with matter – it is hard not to hear it as an illustration of the Neoplatonic logic of contrastive transcendence, rather than the non-contrastive logic of creation *ex nihilo*, which, as we have seen, entails that God is equally close to all creation: there is simply no series of descent from and ascent to God, where some things are closer than others to

¹²³ In this sense I take a critical reading of Augustine, such as that performed by Colin Gunton in his *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 73-86, to raise some interesting issues and indicate where reservations are in order. However, Gunton does not adequately take Augustine's internal tensions and development into account; for this reason I prefer the deconstructive reading of James K.A. Smith, in his *Fall of Interpretation*, 133-148, which seeks to find in Augustine both the disease and the cure, as it were. This seems to me to be a more faithful approach to the Augustinian *corpus* (where the *double entendre* is intended).

the divine source of all being.¹²⁴ As an epistemological and even relational point, Augustine's turn inward can, from the perspective of the doctrine of creation, clearly be accepted; but as an ontological point it must be rejected. It is a tenet rooted more in the Platonic tradition than in the Christian doctrine of creation.¹²⁵ And with regard to Merleau-Ponty's critique, while it still largely misses the mark, it nonetheless manages to give voice to a general worry about Augustinian theology that is not without some warrant in the texts, as we have now seen.

Let me try to be very clear about what I am claiming here: What should be attempted is a discerning reading of the Augustinian corpus, which is much too vast to be comprehended in a few simple formulations devoid of internal tensions. And this was true even for the aged writer of the *Retractions*: It would be most un-Augustinian indeed to imagine that Augustine finally comprehended himself and achieved a full possession of his own mind. With regard to the question of the turn inward that Augustine modelled after Neoplatonism, but which he also supplemented by an incarnational logic of the gracious descent of the Mediator, I am in other words quite prepared to concede a fundamental equivocality. I take the point made by contemporary critics, such as Wayne Hankey, that Augustine's turn to interiority and mind has roots in a scheme that tends to deal despairingly with sensorial reality, and needs therefore to be supplemented by a more affirmative approach to materiality. But I would nevertheless insist that such an affirmation is already well underway in the Augustinian corpus itself, motivated by his fundamental understanding of the logic of creation.¹²⁶ Indeed, as we have now seen, even *materia informis*, reminiscent of the Platonic *chaos*, is to be seen as good *qua* created *ex nihilo*. In light of this, it can neither be a question of an uncritical embrace of every aspect of Augustine's understanding, nor of picking and

¹²⁴ Cf. on this point the unambiguous Neoplatonist echoes of Conf. XII.7.7: 'You were; but nothing else was, from which you might make heaven and earth, two realities: *one near to yourself*, the other bordering on nothingness' (my emphasis).

¹²⁵ Cf. also De civ. Dei XI.26, where Augustine speaks of the image of God within human beings as 'nearer to God in nature than anything else made by Him.' There is, however, a certain equivocality in these expressions. For it is one thing to speak of likeness, where something may be more like God than another; and a different thing to claim that the divine presence is further removed from certain natures than from others. Some things may be more like God than others even though God's presence is equally with all. As far as I can tell, Augustine does not clearly make such a distinction.

¹²⁶ Cf. Wayne Hankey, 'Re-Christianizing Augustine Postmodern Style: Readings by Jacques Derrida, Robert Dodaro, Jean-Luc Marion, Rowan Williams, Lewis Ayres and John Milbank,' *Animus* n. 2 (1997): 3-34.

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choosing the parts we deem suitable while ignoring the problems. Rather, what I am attempting – following here the example of James K.A. Smith – is a retrieval of Augustine’s understanding which is governed by the logic implicit in his own theology of creation. And if I allow that logic to sometimes override other Augustinian themes this should be done in the full light of day so as not to present a simplified and distorted Augustine.

In sum, it seems to me that a deep appreciation of the Christian distinction between the creator and the world and its peculiar logic, where the creator is seen to be intimately present to creation precisely *in virtue* of being its transcendent source, is at cross-purposes with all otherworldliness – or at least ought to be so. Above all, the idea that divine transcendence immediately translates into distance, as held by Merleau-Ponty and many other philosophers and theologians, is seen to be antithetical to the doctrine of creation as it developed in the early church – an idea that has now also been brought out by considering some central Augustinian passages that deal with the turn inward. Any rejection of a God that is a mere distant spectator – ‘the infinite Gaze,’ as Merleau-Ponty puts it – is therefore a rejection already made by Christianity from the very start, and without denying divine transcendence. It can therefore hardly constitute a challenge to the basic understanding of God and the world, as described by the Christian distinction.

5. Participatory Ontology and the Integrity of Creation

In the previous sections it has been repeated that, according to the logic of the Christian distinction, it is *because* God is the transcendent creator *ex nihilo* of all that is that he can also be intimately present in all that is. This was the main point of the last section. In other words, these aspects are not merely coherent in the sense of being non-contradictory, but also in the stronger sense they connect smoothly and reinforce each other. But one might want to ask how this is: What is the precise connection between God’s transcendence and immanence, according to this way of thinking? An answer to that question will involve us in ontology and the issue of integrity. Is it in fact the case that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* implies a negation of the world, since the world falls short of the true being that belongs to God alone? And does an affirmation of divine creation lead to the loss of the world’s integrity, and with it the possibility of human freedom and creativity?

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As I have explained, I believe this is the deepest current of Merleau-Ponty's suspicion towards creation and the transcendence of God. What he wants to affirm and defend, quite simply, are the phenomena – subjectivity above all – and he insists that any ontology that cannot accommodate the phenomena should be rejected. He believes that an affirmation of God the creator implies an annihilation of the integrity of the world and what is most dear to us – our humanity itself – which is to say that it leads to an ontology incompatible with the phenomena.

Initially, it must be admitted that one immediate implication of the doctrine of creation would seem to be that the existence enjoyed by creation is a dependent existence as opposed to existence that rests in itself. For creation does not result in the erection of a second positivity on a par with God, which would involve a contradiction of the Christian distinction (and of monotheism itself), but in a world that exists precisely as receiving its existence from God.¹²⁷ Augustine does indeed stress this aspect of creation *ex nihilo*, saying, for instance, that '[God] is called being truly and properly in such a way that perhaps only God ought to be called being. He alone truly is.'¹²⁸ He seems to suggest that the concrete world does not quite exist, that it has a sort of shadow-being. Similar expressions can also be found in Aquinas, who is usually thought to stress the 'self-sufficiency' of creation relative to Augustine,¹²⁹ though Aquinas can write: 'Every created thing has its being from another, and, considered in itself, is nothing.'¹³⁰ However, such expressions are not meant as a denial of the genuine existence of the world; this is rather a way of stressing the distinction between creator and creation, from which it follows that created beings do not own their existence but receive it as gift. Traditionally, theologians have borrowed from the philosophical tradition and spoken about this relation in terms of *participation*. To exist as a creature is to be given a share of – and to participate in, therefore – existence itself, which is God. In Aquinas' idiom, the *esse* of creatures is a participation in the creator, who is *ipsum esse subsistens* – self-subsisting existence.¹³¹ We may think of this as a sort of 'existential participation,' which is distinct from the formal

¹²⁷ Cf. Conor Cunningham, 'Suspending the Natural Attitude: Transcendence and Immanence from Thomas Aquinas to Michel Henry,' in Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler Jr., eds., *Transcendence and Phenomenology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 261.

¹²⁸ *De trin.* VII.3.10.

¹²⁹ Cf. Meconi, 'St. Augustine's Early Theory,' 96.

¹³⁰ ST. Ia-IIae, q. 109, art. 2.

¹³¹ ST. Ia, q. 44, art. 1. See also Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xvi, 132-136.

participation of the Platonist tradition.¹³² While the most sophisticated and technically precise treatment of this theme is doubtless Aquinas' metaphysics of *esse*, the theme recurs in different guises throughout early Christian theology.¹³³

The real question raised within this framework, I suggest, does not have to do with existing *per se*, but of existing *with integrity*. The concern of those who worry about the participatory account of created reality is that its integrity is evacuated.¹³⁴ But the question is whether the ontological nakedness, as it were, of creatures is to be construed as the nakedness of destitution or the nakedness of intimacy.¹³⁵ Why would one speak of created beings as continually suspended over the void of nothingness? To begin to answer this question it goes a long way to note that the language of existential participation is neither driven by any need to deprive created beings of their value, nor to depreciate those entities which are perceived to be on a lower rung of existence – quite the contrary. For to do so would logically imply a depreciation of their creator, as Augustine increasingly came to realize. 'So all things are good, since the maker of all things is supremely good.'¹³⁶ For if all beings are created *ex nihilo* out of the goodness of God, as we have seen, then it follows that being is good simply in virtue of being. As Augustine says, 'everything that *exists* is good' [*quaecumque sunt, bona sunt*].¹³⁷ Moreover, realizing that all things are not equally good, he nonetheless understands, when he grasps creation *ex nihilo*, as narrated in Book VII of *The Confessions*, that the totality of existing things is better than the existence of only higher beings would have been.¹³⁸ Nor is this for Augustine an optional attitude to creation in all its variety, for 'there is no wholesomeness [*non est sanitas*] for those who find fault with anything you

¹³² See Sherman, 'Genealogy of Participation,' 86-92.

¹³³ In the case of Augustine, see *De vera rel.* 11.22; Meconi, 'St. Augustine's Early Theory,' and 'The Incarnation and the Role of Participation in St. Augustine's *Confessions*,' *Augustinian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998); Williams, 'Good for Nothing: Augustine on Creation.'

¹³⁴ Merleau-Ponty has a striking phrase for describing this aspect of Christian thought, as he understands it; he calls it the 'malaise of Judeo-Christian ontology.' That is to say, this ontology is never quite able to admit the full and genuine existence of the world. N., 178/133.

¹³⁵ I have the metaphor of ontological nakedness from Cunningham, 'Suspending the Natural Attitude,' 274.

¹³⁶ *Enchiridion.* 4.12.

¹³⁷ *Conf.* VII.12.18 (my emphasis); cf. *De Gen. c. Man.* II.29.43.

¹³⁸ 'A more wholesome judgement showed me that the totality was better than the higher things on their own would have been.' *Conf.* VII.13.19. Cf. *Enchiridion* 3.10: 'Even when they are considered individually, each one of them is good; and at the same time all things are very good, since in all these things consists the wonderful beauty of the universe.' Cf. also the early *De vera rel.* 40.76-41.78; *De Gen. ad litt.* III.24.37; and *De civ. Dei* XI.16; XI.22.

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have created.¹³⁹ Such is the logic of creation *ex nihilo*, where everything that is must in some sense reflect its creator, since there was no material beforehand to serve as the vehicle of evil tendencies. This understanding became something of a general presumption of medieval theology and beyond. Thus Aquinas says that ‘every being that is not God is God’s creature. Now every creature of God is good ... every being as being is good.’¹⁴⁰ I will not belabour the point; let it only be clear that creation *ex nihilo* and the participatory ontology developed out of it seek to affirm the goodness of creation, not to denigrate it.¹⁴¹

As I said, recognizing this point goes a long way towards alleviating the worry that the participatory ontology developed by Augustine and Aquinas, among others, in and of itself results in a negative valuation of created existence. Nonetheless, the question of integrity remains in another form. The fundamental problem of integrity vis-à-vis participatory ontology seems to be the perception that the creature’s utter existential dependence on God would imply the loss of all kinds of self-determination, freedom and creativity. Created beings, it is suspected, are reduced to puppets on the stage of the cosmic puppeteer. With this formulation of the problem we are back at Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental question about the integrity of the phenomenon of human being.

Now, I shall not attempt to present a solution to all the intractable problems of divine and human agency here; rather, I shall once more set out the logic of the Christian distinction as a coherent framework within which this particular issue can be pursued. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty connects the problem of fitting free human agents into a modern deterministic framework to ‘the postulates of Judeo-Christian ontology,’ stating that this modern conception is ‘entirely theological in its infrastructure.’¹⁴² Interestingly, though, pre-modern theologians were, as a rule, keen to affirm the efficacy of creatures and the power of secondary causes (assuming God to be the first cause of all existing things).¹⁴³

As long as one works with a univocal concept of causality there is no hope of reconciling divine creation with created efficacy. Since Merleau-Ponty, particularly in his later writings, brings forward the alleged determinism

¹³⁹ Conf. VII.14.20.

¹⁴⁰ ST. Ia, q. 5, art. 3. Cf. Quodlb. II, q. 2, art. 1, quoted in Aertsen *Nature and Creature*, 83.

¹⁴¹ See Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 146-148 for further pertinent comments on this topic.

¹⁴² N., 123-124/88-89.

¹⁴³ The best general argument for this, as far as I know, is found in Tanner, *God and Creation*, esp. 81-120.

following from creation *ex nihilo* – ‘all that could be interior to Nature takes its refuge in God’¹⁴⁴ – and since this is manifestly based on the premise of univocal causality, I should like to investigate this in greater detail both in Augustine and in Aquinas, with one particular ambition: To suggest that the flesh, as understood by Merleau-Ponty, would in no way lose its inherent dynamism if, from a theological perspective, it were conceived of as created *ex nihilo* by God. Quite the contrary: as we shall see in chapter 6, when Augustine thinks about what a world created by God must be like, he comes to the conclusion that it must be a world brim-full of developmental potentiality.

Augustine on Created Causes

Michael Hanby has recently argued that prevalent readings of Augustine’s anti-Pelagian polemic are bound to misunderstand him as long as they fail to connect his soteriology to his doctrine of creation, and this is surely a point well made.¹⁴⁵ This means that human freedom in relation to divine grace is ‘a subset of this larger question of the causal grammar relating creature to Creator.’¹⁴⁶ Failing to fully appreciate the logic of the Christian distinction, God is reduced to creation’s dialectical other, an object that is contrasted to and competes with creation. Concomitantly, divine causality is juxtaposed with immanent causal forces, and grace is seen to operate like any other causal force in the world. On such a contrastive scheme, the questions can only be: Grace *or* free will? Creation *or* causal efficacy? But what Augustine is saying is that grace establishes free will; it does not compete with it. And in the same sense, the gift of creation – itself a singular grace – should be understood to establish the intrinsic powers of the creature, not make them impossible. As Hanby points out, ‘this attempt to delineate and make discrete the respective contribution of the “two agents” is simply bad theological grammar.’¹⁴⁷

Even though it must be admitted that Augustine tends to stress the need to know the *prima causa*, which is the creator, it is quite possible to follow the theme of secondary or proximate causality in his writings, especially on creation. In Book IX of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, for instance, he states

¹⁴⁴ N., 26/9.

¹⁴⁵ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 82-90; cf. Vannier, ‘Creatio,’ ‘conversio,’ ‘formatio,’ xxv. Augustine himself explicitly makes the connection in Book XIII of the Conf., where he performs an allegorical reading of Genesis 1 in soteriological terms. See also De Gen. ad litt. IX.18.33.

¹⁴⁶ Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 82.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 82.

that ‘the whole course of nature that we are so familiar with *has certain natural laws of its own*, according to which ... the elements of this material world have their distinct energies and qualities, which determine *what each is or is not capable of*, what can or cannot be made from which.’¹⁴⁸ These energies or qualities are connected with Augustine’s notion of the seminal or causal reasons [*rationes seminales, rationes causales*] inhering in creation, which I will discuss further in chapter 6. We note here, however, that Augustine distinguishes between such causal reasons as God would reserve for himself and use in order to let miracles occur – a highly unusual potential in things which is activated by special providence – and such causal reasons as things have ‘according to their natural operation.’¹⁴⁹ These natural potentialities in things are governed by providence in a different way; they involve no extraordinary or miraculous providence, but rather, derive from ‘that work of providence by which *he set up natures* in order for them to be.’¹⁵⁰ Clearly, then, Augustine recognizes a providence – a divine influence – by which God lets things be what they are created to be and lets them unfold in their own manner and with their own integrity. No special divine intervention is required for nature to work well and unfold harmoniously – apart, of course, from that divine power of letting things abide without which created things ‘would simply collapse.’¹⁵¹ Indeed, in this latter sense ‘even the most insignificant and disregarded particles [of the cosmos] ... are governed by divine Providence.’¹⁵² Significantly, Augustine does not suggest that divine providence competes with ‘the natural operation’ of created things. Rather, just as grace *re-establishes* human freedom, so the original grace of creation establishes nature’s own potentiality. Augustine thus concurs with what the noted church historian Robert Louis Wilken describes as the general patristic position on the dynamism of creation: ‘As understood by the church fathers Genesis describes the coming into being of a living system that has within itself the capacity for growth and development.’¹⁵³

Another notable place where Augustine discusses the different levels of causality is in the third book of the *De Trinitate*, which I want to consult in order to shore up my reading so far of Augustine on the integrity of creation.

¹⁴⁸ De Gen. ad litt. IX.17.32 (my emphases).

¹⁴⁹ De Gen. ad litt. IX.17.32.

¹⁵⁰ De Gen. ad litt. IX.18.33 (my emphasis). Cf. De Gen. ad litt. IV.12.23.

¹⁵¹ De Gen. ad litt. V.20.40. Cf. IX.15.27-28.

¹⁵² De Gen. ad litt. V.21.42.

¹⁵³ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 142.

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Here as elsewhere his treatment of secondary causality occurs in a context that is focally devoted to another topic, in this case the question of how to understand the Old Testament theophanies. The burden of Augustine's argument is to show that God uses the natural order as he pleases to achieve his purposes – here to signify his presence – and so once again the stress is laid on God's unlimited power as first cause. However, Augustine wants to argue that God uses the ordinary potential inherent in created things in extraordinary ways so as to reveal himself in a special way. Similar to how Augustine uses the *rationes* to explain how miracles occur, he here uses them to explain extraordinary theophanies. But this means that he must also say something about the ordinary working of nature, which is what interests us here.

The 'order of nature,' says Augustine, works both in mundane regularity and in more irregular ways ('eclipses, comets, earthquakes, monstrous births and similar things'). These ways are such that 'secular scientists come to an understanding of them.' What secular scientists have access to, apparently, is the normal causal matrix of the world; or rather, they can theorize about such causality and may be either right or wrong. What they do not have access to is the transcendent cause.

Not one of them [i.e. natural phenomena] occurs independently of God's will, though many people do not see this. And so it has always been feasible for superficial philosophers to explain such things by other causes, *true ones perhaps*, but proximate and secondary, while the cause that transcends all others, namely the will of God, they have been quite unable to discern.¹⁵⁴

It is well to note that Augustine is not here engaged in defending the efficacy of created causes. Here as elsewhere what he often champions is instead the immanent working of God in all that is. Nonetheless, he never denies that there are natural causes operative in the world, which can be scientifically known – they can be 'true.' He speaks about divine causality and the efficacy of created causes in the same place and with no embarrassment. In the same chapter, for instance, Augustine speaks of medical doctors and how they are able to discern the proximate or 'physical' causes of illness. There is no hint here that such causes are sham causes without a power of their own, no hint of occasionalism.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, in a phrase strikingly similar to one of Merleau-Ponty's favourite metaphors for describing the perceived world and the flesh,

¹⁵⁴ De trin. III.1.7 (my emphasis).

¹⁵⁵ Cf. De Gen. ad litt. VIII.12.25.

Augustine says that ‘*the world itself*, like mothers heavy with young, is heavy with the causes of things that are coming to birth.’¹⁵⁶ What Augustine above all insists on is this: ‘It is one thing ... to establish and administer creation from *the inmost and supreme pivot of all causes* ... it is another matter to apply activity from outside, in virtue of *power and capacities distributed by him* [God].’¹⁵⁷ Here again we see Augustine clearly recognizing non-competitive levels of causation, since this is implied in the logic of creation *ex nihilo*. God is not merely the first cause, but is no less the inmost cause which continually sustains creatures in being, and by the same token, grants them their own distinct powers and capacities.

Thus, Augustine works with a non-contrastive logic, which is consequent upon his understanding of creation. This is true even if his theology tends much more to emphasize God’s ongoing providential governance of all creation, and even though the logic operates without being clearly specified as such. It must be discerned in what Augustine says about God and creation. That which allows the creator God to be radically transcendent as well as intimately present is what also allows God to be sovereign over creation while created things have their own integrity. However, if we want a clear articulation of the logic of this distinction relative to created causes, with the technical precision it warrants, it is to Aquinas we must turn, for his subtle metaphysics of *esse* allows him to be quite specific in his discussion of the relation between divine causality and the efficacy of created causes.

Aquinas and the Non-Contrastive Logic of Causality

Aquinas reiterates and emphasizes Augustine’s point – that creation establishes the efficacy of the creature. Interestingly, though, he connects this with the goodness of being *qua* created. ‘He governs things inferior by superior, not on account of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that *the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures*.’¹⁵⁸ Evidently, a world where creatures lacked the power of a certain self-determinacy would be unfitting of a good creator.

¹⁵⁶ De trin. III.2.16 (my emphasis).

¹⁵⁷ De trin. III.2.16 (my emphases).

¹⁵⁸ ST. 1a, q. 22, art. 3 (my emphasis). In this sense ‘dignity’ bears a close resemblance to what I have called ‘integrity.’ Cf. ‘If God governed alone, things would be deprived of the perfection of causality.’ ST. 1a, q. 103, art. 6.

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What is so instructive in Thomas' creational metaphysics is his clear articulation of two truths that have often been considered incompatible – that God works in nature down to the last detail *and* that nature has its own integrity.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, he argues that the two truths are not only compatible but that the latter naturally flows from the first according to the logic of the Christian distinction. Thomas thus takes up and develops the same basic understanding of creation that we have seen in Augustine's formulations to the effect that God's gift is what establishes the creature in its own integrity – grace and nature do not compete within the same order – but he does so in a very different philosophical setting, one given to address metaphysical questions head-on; he is therefore able to discuss secondary causality as a topic in its own right. Let us follow Aquinas' development of these themes in a few central passages of the *Summa Theologica*.

Aquinas argues, as we have seen, that God is the 'universal cause of being' and that creatures must continually receive their existence from God, which is to say that they must participate in the divine *esse*. 'God is essentially self-subsisting Being ... Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation.'¹⁶⁰ The Latin *esse* signifies the act of being, or simply existence (in its verbal sense: to be, to exist) and the originality of Aquinas consists in no small part in his having seen that the Platonist doctrine of formal participation could be reworked in light of the Christian doctrine of creation to address the question of existence. Indeed, he realized that if the world was created *ex nihilo*, then existence must be prior to anything else – prior even to essence. Before considering *what* a thing is, we must consider *that* it is.¹⁶¹ However, Aquinas does not want to deny that existing things have a nature or essential features, and so he is led to make a distinction between essence and existence, a teaching often referred to as the 'real

¹⁵⁹ That Thomas' metaphysics of *esse* was premised on his understanding of creation, such that it would make sense to speak of it as a creational metaphysics, has been influentially argued above all by Josef Pieper. See in particular his 'The Hidden Key: Creation,' in chapter 2 of Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1957). See also Chesterton's perceptive remark that Thomas could well be called 'St. Thomas of the Creator,' due to the absolutely central role of the doctrine of creation in his thought. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1952), 95.

¹⁶⁰ ST. Ia, q. 44, art. 1.

¹⁶¹ The contemporary retrieval of this 'existentialist' dimension in Thomas' thought has been fuelled by the work of Etienne Gilson. See e.g. *Being and Some Philosophers*, 154-189. For an excellent treatment of the two fundamental questions that can be asked of a being, *what* it is (*quid est*) and *if* it is (*an est*), answering to its status as both nature and creature, where the existential question (*an est*) has primacy, see Aertsen, *Nature and Creature*, 7-53.

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distinction.¹⁶² Every created thing, says Aquinas, is therefore composed of essence and existence, where existence holds logical primacy, since for something to be this or that it must 'first' be. God, however, is not to be characterized as composed of essence and existence, for 'His essence is His existence.'¹⁶³ It essentially belongs to God to exist; hence he can truly be called 'He Who Is' or 'Self-Subsisting Being' [*ipsum esse subsistens*].¹⁶⁴

This is the metaphysical framework that allows Aquinas to so clearly articulate the Christian distinction between the creator and creation: God is existence itself and each created thing must receive its existence from God, which is to say that it must participate in God's act of being. 'Because, just as that which has fire, but is not itself fire, is on fire by participation; so that which has existence but is not existence, is a being by participation.'¹⁶⁵ However, each thing participates in its own way in *ipsum esse*, such that the essence of a thing in fact describes the *manner* in which it receives its existence from God, the mode of its participation. In other words, the essence of any creature is its specific manner of existing, even though this is to be distinguished from the facticity of its existence. To bring out the logic of the Christian distinction within this framework, we say that God as unlimited act of being creates the world *ex nihilo*, such that God is the cause of the very *esse* of creatures, which in limited ways participate in his act of being. It is in virtue of this relation – for creation now comes forward as a unique relation – that the creator radically transcends creation, but in a non-contrastive way, since God is intimately present to each creature as their participated source of existence, each after their own manner.

This brief sketch of Aquinas' metaphysics of *esse*, as it follows from the doctrine of creation, is enough for us to be able to see how, in one stroke, he manages to affirm both the total dependence and the immanent integrity of creation. For in contrast to the Aristotelian notion of being or substance as that

¹⁶² Of course, the distinction between essence and existence had already been made by Arabic philosophers, such as Al-Farabi and Avicenna. See Sherman, 'Genealogy of Participation,' 89-90; Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 7, 132.

¹⁶³ ST. Ia, q. 3, art. 4.

¹⁶⁴ Note that this is not, strictly speaking, to define what God is – God's essence – but to indicate the analogical function of theological language, which is itself based on an appreciation of the Christian distinction: God is not one among beings in the world, necessarily composed of essence and existence, but their creator. Thomas is aware of the apophatic implications of what he is saying: 'We cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not.' ST. Ia, q. 3, prol. Cf. Ia, q. 13, esp. art. 11; Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 113-126.

¹⁶⁵ ST. Ia, q. 3, art. 4.

which subsists in itself, Aquinas' conceptual revolution entails that only the creator subsists in itself while everything else stands in a relation of dependence on God for its very existence. This means, in the words of Gilson, that 'the created world of Thomistic substances is radically contingent in its very existence because it might never have existed ... [and] it might at any time cease to exist.'¹⁶⁶ Hence, as Augustine recognizes a providential working at the inmost of created beings that lets them abide and without which they would return to nothing, so in a similar fashion Aquinas understands that it is the participated presence of God in every created being that holds it in existence. 'Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being. But being is innermost in each thing ... Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermost.'¹⁶⁷ Nothing escapes this divine presence – as long as something exists, God works within it. Such is the total and continued dependence of creation upon its source, which is why David Burrell can describe Aquinas' understanding of all creaturely existence as 'to-be-toward-the-creator' [*esse ad creatorem*].¹⁶⁸ Indeed, as Jan Aertsen reminds us, this relation of dependence is not something *added to* the nature of beings, but belongs to their nature: 'All creatures are said in relation (*relative*) to God, because in their being they are dependent upon him ... this relation is so essential for the creature that the dependence belongs to its very nature.'¹⁶⁹

What, however, about the *essence* of things that exist only by participating in the divine *esse*? How are we to understand the nature and integrity of created beings? It is the way in which something receives existence from God that establishes its own nature, or in our language, its own integrity. This is an aspect that Aquinas stresses again and again. It is the creature's participation in divine *esse* 'according to its mode of being' that makes it be what it is with its distinct powers and capacities. God is in this way 'in all things as giving them being, power, and operation.'¹⁷⁰ Consequently, it is a misunderstanding to oppose the creature's dependence upon the divine source to its own integrity, since its own integrity is precisely established by its participatory mode. And once more, as Kathryn Tanner has so persuasively argued, the participatory relation is not one of contrast. Therefore,

¹⁶⁶ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 160.

¹⁶⁷ ST. Ia, q. 8, art. 1.

¹⁶⁸ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, xx-xxi. Cf ST. Ia, q. 28, art. 1, ad. 3.

¹⁶⁹ Aertsen, *Nature and Creature*, 89-90.

¹⁷⁰ ST. Ia, q. 8, art. 2.

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one must say created being becomes what it is and this all the more fully, not by way of separation and neutrality from God, but within the intimacy of a relationship to divinity as its total ground. The more one talks about the realization and perfection of created beings [i.e. their integrity], the more one must be willing to talk about God's immediate creative working. One must not assume that talk of God's working takes away from what the creature has; talk of the creature's stature does not take away from God's but magnifies it.¹⁷¹

Among the creaturely 'powers and operations' is the power of causal efficacy – 'the dignity of causality,' as Aquinas puts it¹⁷² – which means that if God is to be the one who causes beings to exist with their distinct powers, God must also be the cause of real causal power in the created world. As *causa prima* God must establish the *causa secunda*. There exist, therefore, two orders of causality, where the first – God as giver of existence – establishes the reality and efficacy of the second – created causes. For Aquinas these natural powers and operations presuppose that creatures are subject to the particular kind of causal influence whereby God is 'continually pouring out existence into them,' that they may subsist, through participation, in being and with their own distinct powers.¹⁷³ In other words, it is God as the 'universal cause of being' that establishes secondary or proximate causes. Interestingly, Aquinas supports his case for the efficacy of secondary causes, as following from the first cause, with a reference to the same passage of Augustine's *De Trinitate* that we considered above.¹⁷⁴ Commenting upon Augustine, he says, 'Since God wills effects to proceed from definite causes, for the preservation of order in the universe, it is not unreasonable to seek for causes secondary to the divine will. It would, however, be unreasonable to do so, if such were considered as primary, and not as dependent on the will of God.'¹⁷⁵

Yet the two orders of causality must not be put side by side in forgetfulness of the distinction between the creator and the creation. Let us consider in full a particularly rich text from the *Summa Theologica*, where Aquinas responds to the twin consequences that follow from placing God's primary causality and created secondary causality within the same order – that is, from failing to grasp the peculiar distinction between creator and creation. On the one hand this leads to a sort of theological occasionalism, where 'it would be superfluous for the created agent to work at all'; while on the other hand it leads to a sort of

¹⁷¹ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 85.

¹⁷² ST. Ia, q. 22, art. 3.

¹⁷³ ST. Ia, q. 104, art. 3.

¹⁷⁴ See page 290 above.

¹⁷⁵ ST. Ia, q. 19, art. 5, ad. 2.

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deistic naturalism, where ‘God does not operate any further in the operating creature.’ It is the first of these positions that is critical for our purposes, and Aquinas responds in no uncertain terms.

I answer that, Some have understood God to work in every agent in such a way that no created power has any effect in things, but that God alone is the immediate cause of everything wrought; for instance, that it is not fire that gives heat, but God in the fire, and so forth. But this is impossible. First, because the order of cause and effect would be taken away from created things: and this would imply lack of power in the Creator: for it is due to the power of the cause that it bestows active power on its effect. Secondly, because the active powers which are seen to exist in things, would be bestowed on things to no purpose, if these wrought nothing through them. Indeed, all created things would seem, in a way, to be purposeless, if they lacked an operation proper to them; since the purpose of everything is its operation. ... We must therefore understand that God works in things in such a manner that things have their proper operation.¹⁷⁶

‘St. Thomas of the creator,’ as Chesterton calls him, defends the integrity of creation because a world created *ex nihilo* reflects upon its creator, and a hollow world with no depth to its causal matrix – a sham, really – would reflect poorly on the creator.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, things must be causally efficacious in their own right and have their proper integrity. Yet God works in all, as he says further on, ‘because in all things God Himself is properly the cause of universal being which is innermost in all things; it follows that in all things God works intimately.’ How does he do it? By bestowing on each creature its own natural operation. This, then, is what it means for created *esse* to participate in *ipsum esse*.

By putting it in this way Aquinas clearly illustrates a non-contrastive understanding of divine transcendence, since he does not posit God as a natural cause within the ordinary matrix of being, but as the transcendent cause of the very matrix itself. As he explicitly says, ‘One action does not proceed from *two agents of the same order*.’¹⁷⁸ Therefore, God must not be seen as competing with other causes within the causal matrix, a consequence that Aquinas is very well aware of. He compares, for instance, the causal power exercised by a man on a thing in the world with the causal power exercised by God on creatures. In both cases a causal power is directing something to an end, such as an archer directing an arrow towards a certain goal. However, the cases are not strictly parallel: ‘But there is a difference, inasmuch as *that which*

¹⁷⁶ ST. Ia, q. 105, art. 5.

¹⁷⁷ See note 159 above.

¹⁷⁸ ST. Ia, q. 105, art. 5 (my emphasis).

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creatures receive from God is their nature, while that which natural things receive from man in addition to their nature is somewhat violent.¹⁷⁹ Clearly, for Aquinas that which God gives, or causes, does not stand in violent opposition to the integrity of the creature; it is what constitutes that integrity in the first place. Here we receive confirmation of the point we noted above, that the participatory relation of dependence is not external and opposed to the nature of the creature, but constitutes it internally. And that is the point I have been trying to make: It is because God is the transcendent creator of all creatures *ex nihilo* that he can be immanent in every created thing as its source of existence. If God were simply one being in the world, or one among several originary principles, there would be causal competition – ‘violence,’ in Aquinas’ terms.

In this way, the distinction plays itself out in the sphere of causality. One model that would perhaps aid our understanding, suggested by Kathryn Tanner, is to think of primary causality as a vertical plane and secondary causality as a horizontal plane.¹⁸⁰ On the vertical plane God founds the horizontal plane in its efficacy, such that the former continually founds the latter. In everyday life, science and philosophy we can speak about and investigate the horizontal causal matrix and try to understand its complexities, confident that these are real relations. As Augustine said, they may be true or not: this is a matter of investigation. But within a theological or more metaphysical register we would indeed have to take the vertical plane into account, without which no causal matrix would have existence and operation.¹⁸¹ Put provocatively, naturalism here finds a home within the context of creation *ex nihilo*.¹⁸²

Furthermore, we can speak about freedom and contingency on the horizontal plane without in the least suggesting that the horizontal plane could be free from its total vertical dependence on God. What matters is if God has endowed certain creatures with the power of free self-determination or certain causes with a contingent – which is to say, non-necessitated – relation to their effects. If these planes are not confused – that is, if the Christian distinction is

¹⁷⁹ ST. Ia, q. 103, art. 1 (my emphasis).

¹⁸⁰ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 89-90; cf. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality*, 181.

¹⁸¹ Gilson notes that, for Aquinas, the move to the existential plane is what constitutes an inquiry as metaphysical as opposed to physical, where existence is taken for granted. *Being and Some Philosophers*, 166.

¹⁸² This would be a ‘generic naturalism,’ as Erazim Kohák understands it. Christianity, writes Kohák, ‘is itself deeply “naturalistic” in the generic sense of the term.’ See his *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago, IL: The University Of Chicago Press, 1994), 5-13, for an excellent discussion of this theme.

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properly understood – then as Tanner observes, ‘there need be no contradiction in saying that relations that are free or contingent along the horizontal axis of a created order are determined to be so in a vertical relation of absolute dependence upon divine agency.’¹⁸³ Or as David Burrell puts it:

The presence of human freedom would follow as a perfection utterly consonant with the existential order of a universe conceived of as the gift of a free creator. Such a One would be empowered to create existents whose operations were natural as well as others whose operations were also intentional. In fact, the natures of intentional beings would be to be free. Just as the creator who is the cause of being ‘imparts to creatures also the dignity of causing,’ so also that same creator makes some such creatures free agents.¹⁸⁴

Aquinas himself comes to much the same conclusion when he considers the related question whether anything can resist the divine government.¹⁸⁵ Insofar as God is the universal cause of being, without which nothing would exist, Aquinas says, he can obviously not be resisted. If he could, the one resisting would simply cease to be. But as to the providential ordering of the natural causal matrix, Aquinas shows no inclination to determinism and holds that ‘some one thing can resist the order of a particular cause.’ He even goes so far as to state that ‘certain effects are said to be contingent as compared to their proximate causes, which may fail in their effects.’¹⁸⁶ And in discussing the will of God, he states that ‘to some effects He has attached necessary causes, that cannot fail; but to others defectible and contingent causes, from which arise contingent effects.’¹⁸⁷ The reason for God’s doing so is ‘for the building up of the universe.’ Aquinas apparently thinks that a universe made up of both necessary structures and contingent change and development is a universe better ordered.¹⁸⁸ It would be precarious, of course, to compare his pre-modern and much more dynamic view of causality with the more mechanistic construal that has prevailed in the modern period. Nonetheless, since Merleau-Ponty charged the doctrine of creation with evacuating the relative contingency of the world, thus negating the possibility of freedom and leading to a strict theological determinism, it seems we are warranted in countering that claim from the theological sources. At the very least, we must acknowledge that there is in Aquinas *no sense* that the matrix of secondary causes is a closed system of

¹⁸³ Tanner, *God and Creation*, 90.

¹⁸⁴ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 83.

¹⁸⁵ ST. Ia, q. 103, art. 8.

¹⁸⁶ ST. Ia, q. 103, art. 7.

¹⁸⁷ ST. Ia, q. 19, art. 8.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Anders Piltz, *Medeltidens lärda värld* (Skellefteå: Norma bokförlag, 1998), 164-166.

necessities, such as the universe of Laplace, in which a complete knowledge of causal laws and of causal transactions at any point in time would allow you to infer all that had been and all that would come to pass, down to the last detail. The impoverished notion of causality that Merleau-Ponty polemicizes against is a fruit of modern developments and should not be laid at the door of 'Judeo-Christian ontology.'¹⁸⁹

Now, if Merleau-Ponty's later ontology suggests that being – flesh – allows for contingent meaning-making within an encompassing necessary structure of unlimited potentiality, it would seem that such a world is not so very far removed from the created world as understood by Augustine and Aquinas, at least not with regard to the play of necessity and contingency. In contrast to modernity's general scientific conception, Augustine, Aquinas and Merleau-Ponty would all hold that the world is an incredibly complex matrix wherein necessities and contingencies mingle with intentional and free subjects. Far from reducing every event to its place in a linear and deterministic chain of cause and effect, the creational ontology arrived at by Augustine and, in particular, by Aquinas is open both to freedom and contingency. Above all, Augustine and Aquinas are intent to defend the integrity of creatures against all who would deny it, since nothing less would do justice to the goodness of the world as it follows from its being created *ex nihilo* by a good creator. It seems to me, therefore, that as Christian theology grasps the logic of creation, it not only has reason to affirm the general Aristotelian-phenomenological ethos of saving the phenomena that was such a major part of Merleau-Ponty's vision of philosophy; this logic also already operates within a framework in which the phenomena *can* be saved. Instead of being antithetical, therefore, I believe that his ontology of flesh and the creational ontology of Augustine and Aquinas may be closer to each other than Merleau-Ponty suspected. Close enough, in fact, for us to stage a meaningful encounter well beyond the polemical. It is to that task I now turn.

¹⁸⁹ The question of causal contingency, human freedom and divine governance is obviously much more complex when it comes to working out the details, especially when this is done in dialogue with contemporary science. Here I have wanted merely to establish the framework within which these questions can be coherently pursued in light of the Christian distinction, and thus to vindicate theology from Merleau-Ponty's charge that creation *ex nihilo* leads to a closed and mechanistic world. For a useful discussion of the intricacies of these issues, and in particular the issue of contingency, see Thomas F. Tracy, 'God and Creatures Acting: The Idea of Double Agency,' in Burrell, Cogliati, Soskice and Stoeger, eds., *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 221-237.

CHAPTER 6

FLESH AS CREATION

A CONVERSATION IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Each and every man can share in the common good of his species, and nothing that is human remains foreign to him. Nay, nothing that *is*, is foreign to him. A member of the universal *brotherhood of being*.¹

Nobody has yet managed to persuade me I can ever have such a grasp of the soul, that I may assume there is no further question to be asked.²

An adequate sense of tradition manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present.³

1. Introduction

Having cleared the ground in chapters 4 and 5 for a more constructive approach to the conversation between Augustinian philosophical theology and Merleau-Pontian philosophy, I propose in the present chapter a reading of Augustine's creational ontology alongside the main themes presented in Part One, in order to yield a fresh and creative perspective for contemporary philosophical theology. The three main themes of Part One, to recapitulate, were the following: In *chapter 1*, the attempt to understand human being non-dualistically and non-reductively as an integral part of the natural world; in *chapter 2*, the question of the dynamics of meaning, its origin and development; and in *chapter 3*, Merleau-Ponty's later development, and the

¹ Gilson. *Being and Some Philosophers*, 186-187 (second emphasis mine).

² De Gen. ad litt. VI.29.40.

³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.

way in which the previous two themes are reconceived within the intricate framework of the ontology of flesh. In the present chapter I change the order of these themes, beginning with the ontological framework, followed by philosophical anthropology, and finally, the development of meaning, as the progression of the argument requires.

As will become apparent, Augustine's philosophical theology of creation addresses itself in various ways to all of these themes, making possible the kind of conversation I here attempt to stage. However, as stated in the introduction, the point is not to find agreement on these issues, but rather to let the different perspectives bring out hermeneutical possibilities that might not have been seen in the absence of the conversation. Specifically, I want to consider how Merleau-Ponty's approach to these themes may open up ways of reading the Augustinian texts in such a way that they lend themselves to a contemporary appropriation. Would it be possible to affirm the basic framework of Augustine's creational ontology while going significantly beyond some of the conclusions he draws, being motivated by concerns intrinsic to his framework, but also by insights derived from Merleau-Pontian philosophy? This is the question that drives the present chapter, and in a sense, the whole book. For as I said in the introduction, what I seek is ultimately a philosophical theology that is able to articulate a vision of the natural world and of human beings within it, in a way that preserves their integrity. On my way to this goal, I found it necessary, in chapter 5, to articulate an alternative logic of creation – one that in itself constituted a critique of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of so fundamental a tenet of the Christian faith as the relation between the creator and the creation. In the present chapter, however, I contend that Merleau-Pontian philosophy gives philosophical theology an opportunity to be challenged, to learn and to appropriate vital insights that will allow it to rearticulate its own most profound convictions about the created world and about human beings in a compelling way.

I begin, in the next section, by briefly laying out the main lines of Augustine's hermeneutic of the biblical narratives of creation, explaining the basic notions. I then proceed to discuss the way in which Augustine draws from the creation narratives an ontology of surprising dynamism, considering both his notion of unformed mater and the important idea of seminal reasons, which inhere in the world as potentialities to unfold. This section, then, answers primarily to the ontological framework, as discussed in chapter 3, where the notion of potentiality is of central importance. However, unearthing the Augustinian understanding of the created world in dialogue with the

ontology of flesh leads to the paradox of the soul, which Augustine, in contrast to Merleau-Ponty, withdraws from the mundane processes of becoming characteristic of vegetative and sentient life in a way that creates a difficult tension in his account.

The next section therefore takes up the question of Augustine's understanding of the creation of the human soul, in a way that primarily pertains to philosophical anthropology, as discussed chapter 1. I review Augustine's honest struggle to make sense of the soul, seeking to retrieve a somewhat subdued possibility in his work with regard to the provenance of the soul, while also suggesting ways to take that particular approach further, in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty. However, here I also criticise Merleau-Ponty's lack of thematization of the rich human life of interiority, so important for Augustine, and argue that any philosophy bent on understanding the rootedness of human beings must do so in a way that also gives full attention to their verticality.

In the final section, I turn to the issue of human meaning-making, which is something we primarily considered in chapter 2, and something that remains central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole. Taking the freedom and creativity with which human beings participate in the structures of meaning, on any number of levels, to be a truly important theme, I proceed to investigate whether there are in Augustine's creational ontology any significant traces or openings for just that kind of activity. Taking my cue, in this case, from developments in contemporary theology, I argue that there are indeed such openings, but that they need to be fully developed, and that Merleau-Ponty's sophisticated philosophy of meaning would be an important resource in that endeavour.

2. Augustine's Interpretation of Genesis 1-3

Throughout his long writing career Augustine returned again and again to the biblical narratives of creation and to their theological and philosophical consequences, publishing theological commentaries on the opening chapters of Genesis no fewer than five times, in addition to his recurring attention to these chapters in sermons and more devotional material.⁴ While his treatment of the

⁴ *De Genesis contra Manichaeos* (388/389); *De Genesis ad litteram liber unus imperfectus* (393-395); *Confessiones*, Books XI-XIII (397-401); *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-416); *De civitate Dei*,

theme in *The Confessions* is without doubt the most well known, it is his *Literal Meaning of Genesis* that is the master work, the mature Augustine's 'summa on the subject of creation,' as Edmund Hill puts it.⁵ It is therefore *The Literal Meaning* that will be my starting-point, and I shall bring in the other works mainly to elucidate certain points of interpretation.

Augustine's 'philosophy of creation' can rightly be called hermeneutical, both in the sense that it is expressed in the context of biblical interpretation, and in the sense that the theme of creation constitutes the horizon against which Augustine interprets human existence.⁶ Indeed, biblical interpretation is for Augustine never severed from the reality of human existence in the world, or from distinctly human activities such as science and philosophy. Indeed, he always insisted that biblical interpretation should be conversant with the best science of the day so as not to talk nonsense;⁷ and it is impossible to read more than a few pages in any of his commentaries on creation without seeing that his biblical interpretation is in constant dialogue with philosophy as well.

With this in mind, let me begin now by briefly laying out the basic lines of Augustine's 'literal' interpretation of Genesis 1-3, which is nothing if not complex. Initially we must note that, like all other readers of these texts, Augustine faces the problem of 'reconciling' the two distinct narratives. This he does by reading the first narrative (Genesis 1:1-2:4a, as he understands it) as being about God's original founding of creation in one simultaneous creative act, described as a work spanning six days for largely pedagogical reasons and for the purpose of indicating the order and harmony of the ensuing creation. Then he reads the second narrative (Genesis 2:4b-3:24) as being about the temporal unfolding of creation under God's providential governance. This is a hermeneutical decision rich with philosophical and theological consequences, as we shall see.

The question of temporality is important here. Augustine describes the first creative act as somehow on the threshold between time and eternity, or as he puts it, as 'occurring in the roots of time.'⁸ The providential unfolding of creation, however, occurs within the history of the world, and is therefore

Book XI (c.416). The three explicit commentaries can be found in John Rotelle, O.S.A., ed., *On Genesis* (New York: New City Press, 2002).

⁵ Edmund Hill, 'Introduction,' in Rotelle, *On Genesis*, 155.

⁶ Cf. Fiedrowicz, 'General Introduction,' 21. On the expression 'philosophy of creation,' see Christoffer O'Toole, *The Philosophy of Creation in the Writings of Saint Augustine* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1944).

⁷ E.g. De Gen. ad litt. I.19.38-39. Cf. McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 61.

⁸ E.g. De Gen. ad litt. V.4.11.

strictly speaking temporal. Perhaps one could say that Augustine thinks of the first as a thoroughly metaphysical account, whereas he thinks of the second as something like a historical account. For the purpose of clarity I shall refer to Augustine's understanding of the first narrative as God's *original founding* of creation, and of the second as God's *providential governance* of creation.⁹

The original founding of creation, as Augustine reads it, contains two 'moments,' which are not to be understood as temporally distinct but as logically or causally distinct: (1) the creation *ex nihilo* of what he calls unformed matter [*materia informis*]; and (2) the conversion [*conversio*] of unformed matter to the Word (which we must understand here in all the rich philosophical connotations of *logos* in terms of origin and order), whereby matter is formed [*formatio*] into an ordered creation that can truly be said to be 'very good.'¹⁰ This distinction between matter and its formation – with clear echoes in Greek thought, as well as in the general Near Eastern and subdued biblical motif of *Chaoskampf* – allows Augustine to interpret what Karl Barth called a major *crux interpretum*: If creation is *ex nihilo*, whence the formless void, the infamous *tohu wabohu*?¹¹ For Augustine even this is God's creation, and furthermore, as such it must be seen as good simply in virtue of being and also, presumably, in virtue of having its potentiality for formation. Even if this distinction, then, does not specify two temporal events, it structures Augustine's interpretation of the six days creation. Each 'day' can now be seen as something of a repetition of the same creative action, namely, bringing out different aspects of the created world as it was originally founded.

When creation has been originally founded, the providential governance of God takes over, which is what the second Genesis narrative, according to Augustine, is about. Here, the most interesting feature of Augustine's interpretation is his use of the so-called seminal reasons [*rationes seminales*].¹² The formation of the world in God's original creative act includes the

⁹ I follow Scott Dunham in this. Cf. his *Trinity and Creation in Augustine: An Ecological Analysis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 63–64.

¹⁰ The best general treatment of this Augustinian scheme is found in Vannier's, *Creatio, Conversio, Formatio*. The often overlooked Trinitarian logic of the scheme is brought out in Dunham, *Trinity and Creation*.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.1.102, quoted in Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 84. Augustine explicitly connects *materia informis* with the Greek notion of *chaos*. See De Gen. ad. litt. liber imp. 4.12; De Gen. c. Man. I.5.9.

¹² It is disputed among scholars where Augustine found his idea of the seminal reasons, whether in Plotinus and his notion of the *logoi genētikoi*, or in the Stoics with their notion of the *logoi spermatikoi* – or indeed, somewhat closer to hand, in the development of these notions by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. Cf. O'Toole, *Philosophy of Creation*, 71–72.

formation of these seeds that Augustine thinks of as inherent potentialities in the world, and which in the course of temporal development will evolve into new things and species – vegetation, animals and human bodies.¹³ In other words, the original foundation of the world does not result in a completed and static world, but in a world replete with a potentiality to develop its rich variety.¹⁴ The introduction of the concept of seminal reasons helps Augustine to reconcile the biblical statement that ‘God rested on the seventh day from all his work’ (Genesis 2:2) with Jesus’ words that ‘My Father is working until now, and I myself am working’ (John 5:17). Apart from this perhaps rather quaint exegetical problem, Augustine is here dealing with the relation between *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio continua*, that is, with God’s ongoing providential care of creation after its initial establishment.¹⁵ Divine providence works through the secondary causality of the seminal reasons which are hidden in creation, such that no new creative activity *ex nihilo* is ever needed.

This, then, is Augustine’s basic interpretive scheme in *The Literal Meaning*. Incidentally, it should be noted that the distinction between a simultaneous original founding of the world, on the one hand, and its providential governing over time, on the other, was already present in Augustine’s interpretation of Genesis in the *Confessions*. But the notion of seminal reasons – of a potentiality inherent in creation and unfolding over time – is new to *The Literal Meaning*. Let us now proceed to consider how these notions are put to work in Augustine’s philosophical theology of creation.

3. Primordial Potentiality

In his lectures on nature, Merleau-Ponty characterized the earth as a ‘carrier of all the possible,’ as we have seen, and stressed the productivity inherent in

¹³ Eg. De Gen. ad litt. VI.3.4-5.8.

¹⁴ It has been observed that this understanding would make Augustine a precursor of modern evolutionary theory, but this might be stating the case a bit too strongly. What we have in Augustine is certainly a very dynamic view of created reality, but there is no suggestion that this would be a development from one species into another. It is likely that Augustine thought that each species has its own *ratio*. Cf. De Gen ad litt. V.20.41; see also O’Toole, *Philosophy of Creation*, chap. 6; Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1961), 207; Jules M. Brady, S.J., ‘St. Augustine’s Theory of Seminal Reasons,’ *New Scholasticism* 38 (April 1964), 149 n. 44.

¹⁵ De Gen. ad litt. IV.12.22-23.

nature.¹⁶ These are also defining features of his late ontology, where being was understood as ‘a pregnancy of possibles.’¹⁷ In fact, it is this sense of the fecundity of the world in bringing out new forms of meaning – vital and human forms, consciousness and the whole range of cultural expressions – that motivates Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and that he seeks to defend. In particular, the idea that human beings, who are themselves such actualized potentialities, assist at the birth of new meaning-structures at various levels is important throughout his writings. It is with this in mind that I should like now to go deeper with the role of potentiality in Augustine’s understanding of creation, not least because the dynamic nature of his creational ontology is not always appreciated, and one must admit that it is not free of internal tensions. Nevertheless, even Augustine characterizes the world as ‘pregnant’ with temporally unfolding potentialities. Does this open up a conversation, or even a possible rapprochement, between Augustine’s creational ontology and Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh? What are the limits of such a rapprochement? And above all, what could a contemporary Augustinian philosophical theology learn from their interaction?

We begin, then, with the primordial potentiality of creation, which in *The Literal Meaning* is a very complex idea – not least since Augustine’s hermeneutic scheme splits it in two, as it were; I believe one must bring these elements closer together to bring out their full meaning. I am referring to the potentiality inherent in the *materia informis* as well as in the *rationes seminales*. We have seen that these concepts figure in the two accounts of creation respectively, but we shall now see that the distinction between them might not be so neatly drawn after all.

Created Nothing-Something

When God created the world, he created unformed matter and ‘then’ imbued it with form. Augustine indicates that he was led to this opinion by considering the obvious fact that ‘everything changeable is given form or shape out of something lacking form or shape,’ in combination with his catholic affirmation of creation *ex nihilo*.¹⁸ Now, everything God creates must have its measure of goodness, as we have already seen – a postulate that follows necessarily from

¹⁶ N., 110-111/77.

¹⁷ VI., 298/250.

¹⁸ De Gen. ad litt. I.14.28.

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this doctrine of creation. Consequently, since this primordial matter was so created, it cannot simply be defined as lack of form, as mere chaos or nothingness, but must in some sense also be good. From this point of view we can understand Augustine's self-confessed vertigo at the thought of it:

My mind passed in review disgusting, hideous forms, distortions of the natural order, certainly, but forms nonetheless. I dubbed 'formless' not something that really lacked all form, but what had a kind of form from which, if it were to appear, my gaze would turn away as from something weird or grotesque, and liable to upset human sensibility very badly.¹⁹

The manifest impossibility of a good God creating something 'weird or grotesque' leads Augustine to another understanding of this initial consequence of the creative act. Unformed matter, he says, is not yet formed, but neither is it nothing, since it has been created. Hence, it must be 'something midway between form and nothingness.'²⁰ It must be that in virtue of which things can change from one form to another. As such it has 'some kind of being' – the being of potentiality.

The mutability of mutable things itself gives them their potential to receive all those forms into which mutable things can be changed. And what is this mutability? ... I would call it 'a nothing-something' [*nihil aliquid*] or 'an-is-that-is-not' [*est non est*] if such expressions were allowed.²¹

This already brings out something paradoxical in Augustine's account. For unformed matter is more than a hermeneutical necessity in his reading of scripture; he makes much of it in a more existential register as well, since it would seem to follow naturally that what has been formed from the unformed could also lose this form and, so to speak, lapse back into formlessness. And this is in fact the precarious position of all creatures (perhaps with the exception of angels), as Augustine understands it – we are drawn to the 'nothing-something' from whence we came and are held in being only by the providential work of God, as we saw in chapter 5. This, then, is the paradox: on the one hand, Augustine writes as if unformed matter were only a logical concept and never in fact instantiated; yet on the other hand, unformed matter is constantly present as the mutability intrinsic to human creatures and towards which they might at any time fall back. 'Every changeable thing suggests to us

¹⁹ Conf. XII.6.6.

²⁰ Conf. XII.6.6.

²¹ Conf. XII.6.6.

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the notion of a certain formlessness.²² Consequently, a gradual loss of form – and in the end, perhaps, a state of formlessness – continue to be existential possibilities for Augustine; formlessness is not merely a quasi-logical concept that is forever left behind at the founding of creation. There is a sense in which the potentiality of matter is thought of as both a non-temporal absolute potentiality at the initial foundation of the world, and as a temporal potentiality of things formed.²³ The potentiality of unformed matter, then, is not limited to its role at the original founding of creation, for it is that which subtends the mutability of temporal things; as such it plays an existential role in Augustine's thought, since Augustine is himself a mutable thing.²⁴

Now, the primordial unformed matter is formed [*formatio*] by a process of conversion [*conversio*] to the divine Word – the *Verbum Dei*, the *Logos* – in which inheres the ideas of all things. In this way differentiation occurs – a world of forms, *species* and order. Augustine takes the description of the works of the six days (Genesis 1:3-31) to suggest this – in reality simultaneous – proliferation of forms in the world. However, the notions of *conversio* and *formatio* are themselves ambiguous. For instance, conversion would seem to indicate some sort of activity on the part of unformed matter. Augustine interprets the words 'And God said ...' that precede the bringing into being of distinct kinds as a Christological reference to the *Verbum Dei*, but also as indicating the basic figure of call and response: The Word of God calls and the creatures (to be) respond.

Where scripture states, *God said, Let it be made*, we should understand an incorporeal utterance of God in the substance of his co-eternal Word, calling back to himself the imperfection of the creation, so that it should not be formless, but should be formed, each element on the particular lines which follow in due order. By so turning back and being formed creation imitates, every element in its own way, God the Word.²⁵

²² Conf. XII.19.28.

²³ That time itself is a result of formation indicates that *materia informis* is really a limit concept for Augustine, at the limit of what can be thought. Cf. Conf. XII.11.14. See also Conf. XII.5.5: 'If human speculation runs on these lines, it would be well advised to aim at knowledge by way of unknowing, or be content with an ignorance that is yet a kind of knowledge.'

²⁴ Cf. 'Created things have their beginning and their end in time, their rising and setting, their growth and decline, their beauty of form and their formlessness. ... Inevitably so because they were made by you out of nothing; not made from you, nor from any matter not of your making, nor from anything pre-existent, but from concreated matter.' Conf. XIII.33.48. Temporal form and formlessness are here explicitly connected to the primordial matter of creation, and explained by it.

²⁵ De Gen. ad litt. I.4.9. Cf. Conf. XII.28.38.

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One very interesting aspect of this interpretation is that it seems to emphasize the activity of creation in its turning towards God. But this, of course, invites the question, Who is there to heed the call? There are essentially three levels of 'response' in Augustine's treatment of this. First of all, he constantly returns to the angelic creatures that he thinks are indicated by the words, 'In the beginning God created *the heavens*,' supposedly from some 'unformed spiritual matter' suggested to him by the words 'darkness was over the surface of *the deep*.' We may note here, however, that Augustine was unsure of whether he should think of this as a distinct kind of unformed matter at all, or whether everything – angels as well as material things – were in fact drawn from one sole created matter.²⁶ This is something we shall come back to in a discussion of the soul. However, while Augustine spends a lot of time on this issue of an 'intellectual creation,' it would take me too far afield to go further with his angelology in the present context.²⁷

The second response to the divine summons is that of physical things or of animate creatures (other than humans), on which Augustine spends much less time. Now, here it is immediately obvious that the notion of a response must be figurative, since these things have no such powers. The conversion and formation here is thus fully God's action. Rather than them turning to God, they must be turned by God.²⁸ However, this is a question that Augustine treats infrequently, and it is better approached through the operation of the seminal reasons.

The third response, however, is the most interesting, since it is the response made by human beings, who, as Augustine understands it, have a part in the material and a part in the intellectual, being composed of body and soul. In contrast to other material things, which lack freedom; and in contrast to the angelic creatures, which are non-temporal and no longer changeable once turned to God: human beings must continually choose their conversion, such that their conversion must be seen as occurring over time.²⁹ Now, if this continual conversion and consequent formation is ontologically constitutive of human being, as the context of the theology of creation makes clear, then a

²⁶ De Gen. ad litt. I.1.2-3. Cf. Conf. XII.12.15-29.40.

²⁷ Even though the angelic creation is a significant theme in these writings, for our purposes I do not believe it will change the overall picture. Suffice it to note that Augustine believes there is a first angelic response to the divine call that results in fully formed, quasi-eternal 'intellectual' creatures.²⁷ That is, the *conversio* of these angelic beings – signified by the expression 'heaven of heaven' [*caelum caeli*] – results in its immediately consummated *formatio*.

²⁸ Cf. De Gen. ad litt. liber imp. 4.11.

²⁹ Vannier, '*Creatio, conversio, formatio*,' 123.

dynamic ontology of becoming opens up. And at its centre is human freedom, with its dialectic of turning to God [*conversio ad Deum*] and turning from God [*conversio a Deo*], the fundamental matrix of human existence.³⁰

One sees in the case of human formation a second interesting tension in Augustine's account of unformed matter. Not only are material and temporal things, as mutable, continually subtended by primordial matter; human beings are incompletely formed, as it were. It must be said that a certain formlessness remains in them, or at least that they have yet to reach their true form. 'Let me not waver from my course before you have gathered all that I am, my whole disintegrated and deformed self ... so you may reshape me to a new form.'³¹ Once again, 'a certain formlessness' is not simply left behind at the original founding of creation, but continues in various ways to play its temporal role.

Such is the potentiality inherent in the Augustinian notion of *materia informis*, which suggests a variety of levels of becoming, yet in which the place of human beings is particularly interesting, since they are in one sense obviously formed, but in another sense are on their way to fully inhabiting their proper form.³² This is ambiguous, and one reason may be that Augustine seeks to read creation soteriologically and salvation creationally – creation is already a conversion to God, and salvation is to finally be fully created.³³ As Anne-Marie Vannier points out, for Augustine, conversion is in some sense *ontologically* constitutive, and indeed, is nothing more than a first step towards a fully realized form.

My reading so far has some affinities with Catherine Keller's reading of Augustine on *materia informis*. Augustine reads the second verse of Genesis – about the earth being '*formless and void*,' and about 'the surface of *the deep*' – as speaking about this unformed potentiality of things, since as he says, 'can anything be found more akin to total formlessness than "earth" or "the deep?"'³⁴ Keller sees in this Augustinian elaboration of the formless depth an ally for a 'tehomophilic' theology (a deep-loving theology) of becoming, and reads Augustine in tandem with Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. Says Keller: 'For a moment, in this space of nothing full of something, a

³⁰ Ibid., 132.

³¹ Conf. XII.16.23.

³² Cf. Emilie Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine: Being and Nothingness* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1988), 38-41.

³³ Cf. Conf. XIII.1.1; XIII.2.3; XIII.12.13-14.15. See also Vannier, '*Creatio, conversio, formatio*,' xxv; and Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine*, 75.

³⁴ Conf. XII.4.4.

counter-ontology seems to emerge, a phenomenology of becoming akin to Whitehead's notion of "transition."³⁵ Thus, Keller agrees that there is a dynamic ontology of possibilities in Augustine's original interpretation of the first creation narrative, or at least parts of it. However, she is very critical of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which, she argues, stifles the potentiality of the original chaos glimpsed by Augustine. What I seek to do here is rather to develop some of the same themes, yet without rejecting the *ex nihilo* and the non-contrastive transcendence of God.³⁶ It is significant, I believe, that Keller limits her analysis of Augustine's treatment of this theme to the *Confessions*, where he does not discuss the potentiality inherent in creation, even as originally formed, in virtue of the seminal reasons. This means that formation – which is to say, becoming – can more easily be seen as limited to the original founding of creation, or perhaps to the spiritual life of human beings, whereas in fact it is ontological and spans both the divine founding of the world and the providential order. The latter understanding obviously yields a much more open and dynamic understanding of creation. However, even though unformed matter plays its role even in the temporal unfolding of the world, it is an ambiguous concept, rooted in the Aristotelian metaphysics of change and put to work by Augustine in ways that sometimes seem to stretch it to its limit. To truly gauge Augustine's understanding of the primordial potentiality of creation, it is rather to the notion of seminal reasons we must turn.

The Theory of Rationes Seminales

As Augustine interprets creation, the original founding of the world was only the beginning of its unfolding, and in Book V of *The Literal Meaning*, he begins to describe a new sort of potentiality inherent in creation. For in fact, Augustine also sees the world as being created much like a 'carrier of all the possible.' He thinks of these potentialities like seeds buried in the earth, which will begin to develop when the time and circumstances are right.³⁷ The master image is that of a magnificent tree growing from a tiny seed:

³⁵ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 75.

³⁶ A major inspiration here is the work of Janet Martin Soskice, who apropos of Keller's work shrewdly observes that 'the considerable merit of a sophisticated handling of *creatio ex nihilo* is to ... facilitate precisely what Catherine Keller is after – a theology of becoming.' '*Creatio ex nihilo: Jewish and Christian Foundations*,' in Burrell, Cogliati, Soskice and Stoeger, eds., *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 37 n. 37.

³⁷ Cf. De trin. III.2.16.

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This admirable sight did not of course spring into being in its full stature and glory ... it rose up from its roots, which the first sprig had fixed in the earth, and from there grew all these forms with their distinct forms and shapes. That sprig, furthermore, came from a seed; so it was in the seed that all the rest was originally to be found, not in the mass of full material growth, but in the potentiality of its causative virtue. ... But both [seed and tree] come from the earth, not the earth from them. So their first parent is the earth. ... Now just as these elements, which in the course of time and in due order would constitute a tree, were all invisibly and simultaneously present in the grain, so too that is how, when God created all things simultaneously, the actual cosmos is to be thought of as having had simultaneously all the things that were made in it.³⁸

This is a remarkable idea and a provocative interpretation of the creation narrative of Genesis. Augustine is able to affirm both a creation *ex nihilo* of the cosmos and an ongoing evolution or development internal to it – both *coming to be* and *becoming*.³⁹ An absolute creation of space and time, as Augustine sees it, does not in the least lead to a denial of the temporal evolution of the world so created. Connecting this with the notion of unformed matter, and to the scheme creation-conversion-formation, this must mean that Augustine sees seminal reasons as particular formations of unformed matter – the formation of a potentiality from a potentiality, as it were.

Now, the seminal reasons refer to the potentiality of life forms to evolve over time, and they are the key to Augustine's reading of the second creation narrative: 'So the earth is said to have produced grass and trees in their causes, that is, to have *received the power to produce* them. It was in the earth, that is to say, that things which were going to be realized in the course of time had already been made ... in the roots of time.'⁴⁰ Here again is suggested the integrity of nature that we considered in chapter 5, since the earth, as Augustine understands it, had itself been given the power to produce. Indeed, in the terms of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, the earth is here given the role of *naturans*. Not only vegetation, however, is included in Augustine's seminal reasons, but 'all species, whether of animals or grasses or trees.'⁴¹ In short, all of life is included.

This means, of course, that humankind – man and woman – is also included among the seminal reason. '*Male and female he made them* ... that is

³⁸ De Gen. ad litt. V.23.44-45. Cf. De trin. III.2.13.

³⁹ On the distinction between *coming to be* and *becoming*, see Desmond, *God and the Between*, 248-249.

⁴⁰ De Gen. ad litt. V.4.11 (my emphasis).

⁴¹ De Gen. ad litt. V.7.20.

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to say, in terms of a potentiality inserted as it were seminally into the universe.⁴² For Augustine, this is apparently an important point, and one that he realizes is likely to be misunderstood by his fellow Christians.⁴³ Thus he struggles through all of Book VI to drive home the point that humankind must have had this twofold creation, like other living beings: once ‘invisibly, potentially, in their causes,’ and then temporally, ‘in actual fact.’⁴⁴ It is important to note that Augustine speaks of seeds here only analogically. He does not imagine humankind as a material seed in the earth, but as a more sublime causal power – a theoretical concept, no doubt. ‘Seeds do indeed provide some sort of comparison with this, on account of the growths to come that are bound in with them; before all seeds, nonetheless, are those causes.’⁴⁵ What he is saying here is essentially that God created the world such that the world coming into being had within itself the power to ‘create’ life – human life included – in due time and when the circumstances were right, though Augustine himself would have rather used the word ‘unfold’ than ‘create,’ stressing God’s role as *causa prima*.

However, this is the time to raise a critical point. Does Augustine really envisage human beings as emerging in this way from nature’s ‘power to produce’? This would in fact amount to something very similar to the later Merleau-Ponty’s version of emergence – what I have called *carnal emergence* – according to which human beings emerge in the intertwining of the flesh. Does Augustine in this way imagine a world so to speak front-loaded with the possibility of human existence in all its richness? Not quite. For Augustine cannot bring himself to believe that even the human soul, the *animus*, was created only as a seminal reason among other forms of life, and his dualistic anthropology lets him say that it must have been only the body of the human that was included among the seminal reasons, while the soul must have been otherwise created and later infused into the body, when God breathed upon it the breath of life, as Genesis 2:7 suggests. In other words, Augustine seems to withdraw what he takes to be the most essential aspect of human beings – the soul – from the processes of natural production that otherwise characterize the created world.

This returns us to the issue of *materia informis*. We noted above that Augustine hesitates about whether to think that God formed two basic kinds of

⁴² De Gen. ad litt. VI.5.8.

⁴³ De Gen. ad litt. VI.6.9.

⁴⁴ De Gen. ad litt. VI.6.10.

⁴⁵ De Gen. ad litt. VI.6.11.

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‘stuff’ into the angelic world on the one hand, and the world of physical bodies on the other, or whether these two realms of created reality were formed from one and the same basic ‘stuff.’ He had held the latter opinion in his earlier works on Genesis, as we shall see, but in *The Literal Meaning* he comes down on the side of two basic materials – one spiritual and one material – from which God formed all creatures. That means that the *materia informis* that was formed so as to contain within itself the potentiality for vegetative and animal life, and even the animal body of humans, is in the final analysis read precisely as matter – and that is the crux. For though this unformed matter is full of potential for development, what it may grow into is constrained by conceiving of it as *mere* matter, as opposed to the mind or the spiritual. In contrast, the Merleau-Pontian notion of flesh is wider, containing within itself the potentiality not only of life, but also of human consciousness and the mind itself. Consequently, this concept of the flesh allows for *carnal emergence*, which is to be distinguished from the standard non-reductive physicalist emergence, as well as from dualism, such as that of Augustine.

In other words, while Augustine does in fact present us with a highly suggestive interpretation of creation in terms of rootedness and vertical growth (the organic metaphor is important here), where all of life is seen to inhere in nature as created – originally created as *ratione naturae*,⁴⁶ the life of the mind or the soul is nonetheless not originally included within this dynamic ontology.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ De Gen. ad litt. II.15.30.

⁴⁷ Perhaps a word about why I do not address the debate over ‘traducianism’ and ‘creationism’ with respect to the propagation of souls is in order. Traducianism is the view that the soul is transmitted to the offspring via the parents in intercourse. Creationism, on the other hand, is the view that God creates each individual soul, inserting it, as it were, into the body at the appropriate time. Augustine, especially in his later years, was drawn to traducianism, since it makes the doctrine of original sin easier to conceive. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how an incorporeal substance, such as the soul, could be transmitted in the decisively corporeal act of sexual intercourse. Creationism solves the latter problem, but in turn makes it hard to conceive how souls created by God could be infected, as it were, with original sin. (See Teske, ‘Augustine’s Theory of Soul,’ 120-122, for a clear exposition of these alternative.) Incidentally, traducianism (in its corporeal form) – which was never popular and is now widely rejected – has some obvious affinities with certain forms of emergentism, in that the soul is somehow contained in bodily stuff, but is only later to come into full bloom. Now, while Augustine was drawn to traducianism, he always claimed that he did not know which position was correct, claiming only to be absolutely certain that the soul was not in any way ‘a body or any bodily quality or interlock’ (De Gen. ad litt. X.21.37). And what I am concerned with here is the dualism of soul and body as such, not the *propagation* of souls subsequent to the original creation of a first human soul. Hence, it suffices to look at Augustine’s treatment of the *creation* of the original soul, which is also what the texts we are considering are primarily about.

To understand why Augustine makes these hermeneutical moves, and to further sound the depths of the Augustinian created potentiality, it is thus his anthropology we must question. But I should also like to inquire into whether a contemporary constructive philosophical theology could remain true to the basic thrust of Augustine's creational ontology, while nonetheless moving beyond his anthropological dualism. Moreover, while Augustine's dualism is certainly opposed to the Merleau-Pontian understanding of human being, I do believe there are submerged lines of reasoning in Augustine's work that can profitably be read alongside the ontology of flesh, in order to yield a fresh perspective for philosophical theology.

4. The Rootedness of Body *and* Soul

In the seventh book of *The Literal Meaning*, we witness Augustine struggle with the question of the soul, a discussion that he prefaces with an extraordinary statement of humility in face of the difficulty of the question: 'There follows, you see, a question about the soul of extreme difficulty ... I must confess that nobody has yet managed to persuade me I can ever have such a grasp of the soul, that I may assume there is no further question to be asked.'⁴⁸ Augustine then proceeds to discuss the question of the manner of the soul's creation – what kind of being is the human soul?

Augustine first enquires into what the soul is made from, rejecting the notion that it is to be seen as a part of God, as well as the materialistic theory that it is made up of matter – that is, of any of the four elements, some other element, or indeed a mix of material elements of any kind. 'It is quite credible that every kind of body can be changed into every other kind of body; but to suppose that any kind of body can be changed into soul is ridiculous.'⁴⁹ This seems to leave two options: either the soul is made from some 'spiritual matter' or it is made from nothing – *ex nihilo*. The significantly excluded option is that it is made from the aforementioned *materia informis*.

What is the problem with materialism, as Augustine sees it? This is a complex question, and one that can only be thoroughly answered if Augustine's whole corpus is taken into account. Only a couple of short

⁴⁸ De Gen. ad litt. VI.29.40. Augustine kept this attitude to the end of his life. See Teske, 'Augustine's Theory of Soul,' 121, referencing Augustine's *Retractiones* 1.1.3.

⁴⁹ De Gen. ad litt. VII.20.26.

observations are in order. It seems clear that Augustine's turn from Manichaeism with the assistance of Neoplatonism, as recounted in Book VII of the *Confessions*, continued to negatively guide his understanding of Christianity, that is to say that it convinced him about what he was *not* to believe, rather than about what he was to believe.⁵⁰ As a Manichaean 'hearer,' his understanding of God and of the soul had been materialist: 'Whatever was not stretched out in space, or diffused or compacted or inflated or possessed of some such qualities, or at least capable of possessing them, I judged to be nothing at all.'⁵¹ Indeed, as Peter Brown points out, this kind of materialism was something of a default position in the world of late antiquity.⁵² For Augustine, however, this changes drastically with his discovery of 'some books of the Platonists,' through which he understands that God is not to be thought of as any kind of body at all: 'After reading the books of the Platonists and following their advice to seek for truth beyond corporeal forms, I turned my gaze to your invisible reality ... I was certain that you exist, that you are infinite, but not spread out through space either finite or infinite.'⁵³ And from 'the Platonists' Augustine would have learned the same about the soul. Here, I believe, is one significant key to Augustine's position: what is said about the soul is immediately connected to the doctrine of God. In short, if the soul is held to be 'some kind of bodily quality or interlock,' then Augustine thinks you will soon be led to believe the same about God.⁵⁴ 'There is no nature, you see, closer to God than the one that was made to his image ... and there is nothing you are nearer to once you believe that the soul is a body, or nothing which will more inevitably follow, than you believing that God too is a body.'⁵⁵

⁵⁰ On Manichaeism and Neoplatonism in Augustine's development, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 35-49, 74-92.

⁵¹ Conf. VII.2. Augustine continues: 'I thought that even you, Life of my life, were a vast reality spread throughout space in every direction: I thought that you penetrated the whole mass of the earth, and the immense, unbounded spaces beyond it on all sides, that earth, sky and all things were full of you, and that they found their limits in you, while you yourself had no limits anywhere.' And a little later, with an image from Stoic philosophy, which later shows up in Plotinus and subsequent panentheist philosophy and theology as well: 'I imagined you, Lord ... like a sea extending in all directions through immense space, a single unlimited sea which held within itself a sponge as vast as one could imagine, and the sponge soaked in every fibre of itself by the boundless sea.' Conf. VII.5.7. Cf. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 76; Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.3.9.

⁵² Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 75; cf. Teske, 'Augustine's Theory of Soul,' 118.

⁵³ Conf. VII.20.26.

⁵⁴ De Gen. ad litt. X.21.37.

⁵⁵ De Gen. ad litt. X.24.40.

It appears that Augustine's reasoning here is the very reverse of that of Merleau-Ponty. Augustine thinks that if the soul is thought of as in some sense material, God will also be thought of as material; no longer transcendent, God will come to be seen as part of the material world. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, thinks that if God *is* conceived as transcending the material world, then this world will lose its reality and integrity; the concrete here and now will be rejected in favour of the ethereal there and then. One is concerned with defending the greatness of God, the other with defending the greatness of the world.

Not a part of God, then, as Augustine sees it, and yet not a material structure of any sort: What kind of being is the human soul? Clearly, since it is not God, it is created by God, and as such must be created either *ex nihilo* at the original founding of creation, or must unfold from a seminal reason by the temporal, providential governance of God. In the latter case, there must have been some suitable spiritual material created in which the soul would inhere as a potentiality. 'Soul too, possibly, before being made in the actual nature which is called soul ... could have had some appropriate spiritual material.'⁵⁶ Both of these options give rise to new questions in Augustine's hermeneutic scheme.

As to the postulate that there was some soul-material that could serve as the vehicle of the seminal *ratio* of a later developed soul, Augustine takes this to be almost too odd. For after all, that would be a creature created merely as a container for the *ratio* of the human soul, which was later to be joined with a human body. But the decisive problem with this interpretation is that Augustine sees no such 'material' indicated in the text, and for a hermeneutic of Genesis that professes to be 'literal' this is obviously a major obstacle. In the end, he rejects this hypothesis.⁵⁷ Augustine also considers the possibility that the causal formula of the human soul as created at the founding of the world was inserted, as it were, in the angelic nature, but dismisses the possibility since it would entail that 'angelic spirit is the quasi-parent of the human soul.'⁵⁸ In sum, Augustine thinks there is little hope of locating some suitable spiritual material in which the causal formula of the human soul could have been inserted at the original founding of creation, and then later unfolded with the temporal development of the world under God's governing providence.

This leaves the possibility that God created the soul *ex nihilo*, but unsurprisingly, this option comes with its own hermeneutical problems. Recall

⁵⁶ De Gen. ad litt. VII.6.9.

⁵⁷ De Gen. ad litt. VII.22.33.

⁵⁸ De Gen. ad litt. VII.23.34; cf. X.2.3; X.5.8.

that Augustine understands the second creation narrative, in which God forms the man out of mud and breathes upon him the breath of life, as referring to the temporal unfolding of that original, simultaneous founding of all things *ex nihilo* in ‘the roots of time’ that is the subject of the first creation narrative. And since human being is already called the image of God in the first narrative, which for Augustine properly refers to the soul, soul must have already been created, either as fully actual or in potentiality, as a *ratio*.⁵⁹ Yet since God no longer creates anything new *ex nihilo* after the first foundation of the world, the soul blown into man in the second narrative could not at that time have been created *ex nihilo*, but must rather have been made at the original founding, either as a seminal reason in some suitable material (that is, not bodily matter), or indeed, as an already actualized being. Since, as we have just seen, Augustine rejects the first option, he is forced into the latter position:

So let it be supposed then, if there is no scriptural authority or evident argument of reason against it, that the man was made on the sixth day in such wise that while the causal formula of the human body was created in the elements of the world, the soul was itself created just as the original day was established, and once created was stored away among the works of God until in due time he chose to insert it by puffing, that is by breathing it into the body formed out of mud.⁶⁰

Here, then, is the problem: Augustine’s whole hermeneutic hinges upon the idea of a potentiality inherent in creation in the form of seminal reasons. It is this move that makes sense of the two dimensions of creation – its original foundation, where all things were created simultaneously; and its providential unfolding, where living things temporally come to actualize the manifold potentialities inherent in that original founding. The human body causes Augustine no trouble, but the soul just does not fit this model, and so he bends over backwards to solve the problem, eventually ending up with a conjecture – the chief virtue of which seems to be that it is not *against* scriptural authority, nor evidently *against* reason. But what speaks for it? The conjecture itself is odd: Augustine proposes here that God created the human soul *ex nihilo* at the original foundation of creation – not as a potentiality like the human body, but as fully formed – and that it was then ‘stored away among the works of God until in due time he chose to insert it.’ But this raises further problems, since why would the soul stored away with God be willing to part and be ‘inserted

⁵⁹ De Gen. ad litt. VII.22.32; cf. III.20.31.

⁶⁰ De Gen. ad litt. VII.24.35.

into the life of this flesh’?⁶¹ This seems especially true as the soul is not created as a potentiality to be actualized by being joined with a body, but rather is created complete and perfect, just waiting for its body to evolve.⁶² Augustine suggests that the soul would have been created with a ‘natural inclination’ to be joined with a body.⁶³

While this last solution appears to be the one Augustine favours, he is apparently not satisfied with it, and the convoluted seventh book of *The Literal Meaning* ends with Augustine opening up once more for the possibility of the soul being formed from some originally created spiritual material, in parallel to the body’s formation from matter.⁶⁴ It is this inability to come to a conclusion about the soul that I want to pick up here. Now, there is clearly something appealing in Augustine’s willingness to keep a difficult question open, and I would certainly not want to exchange that most amiable strand of Augustinian hermeneutics for dogmatic assertion. But when it comes to the question of the soul, his proposed alternatives are simply too contrived with respect to his overall scheme for interpreting creation, and he seems to be aware of this himself; it is difficult not to feel a sense of frustration coming through in these pages.

Let me try to be clearer about the tension I am detecting. As I see it there is something striking and congenial about Augustine’s creational ontology in its general outline. That is, the conception of divine creation as both the coming into being *ex nihilo*, once and for all, of the whole world *and* the dynamic and temporal becoming internal to the world, resulting in all its rich diversity. And it is clear from *The Literal Meaning* that Augustine has found this to be the key that unlocks for him an understanding of the creation of the world that is both faithful to the biblical texts and philosophically sophisticated. Yet there is this anomaly, the human soul, that refuses to be smoothly incorporated into his interpretive scheme, and for which no other truly satisfactory solution presents itself.

This is where I would introduce the aforementioned submerged lines of reasoning in Augustine, and read them alongside Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh. The trouble for Augustine, I want to suggest, begins with the definition of the *materia informis*, the basic material of creation which, in *The Literal*

⁶¹ De Gen. ad litt. VII.25.36.

⁶² On the immediate perfection of the soul, after the manner of the angelic intellectual creatures, see De Gen. ad litt. III.20.31-32.

⁶³ De Gen. ad litt. VII.25.36; cf. XII.35.68.

⁶⁴ De Gen. ad litt. VII.27.38.

Meaning, Augustine understands as being of two fundamental kinds – spiritual (angelic) and bodily (even as, tentatively, he also opens up the possibility of a third distinct kind, namely that constitutive of human soul). Consequently, since the soul is not in any way bodily, it must either be made of spiritual matter and akin to angels, or of soulish matter, or finally created fully formed *ex nihilo* and stored away with God. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that all of these suggestions are inadequate. But there is another way of understanding the *materia informis*, one that Augustine had already entertained around 393, when he began to write what is now known as the *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis*. Though he came to reject it in *The Literal Meaning*, this notion of the *materia informis* takes it as encompassing the spiritual and the bodily alike. Writing about the first verse of Genesis, Augustine says that ‘it can also be reasonably supposed that “heaven and earth” are put here for the whole of creation, so that both this visible firmament of ether is called heaven, and so too is that invisible creation of the higher powers.’⁶⁵ Now, this ‘heaven and earth’ that includes the invisible world (the angelic world and the soul) refers here, as in *The Literal Meaning*, to the basic material from which God formed the world. But in contrast to the later work, Augustine does not distinguish between different kinds of basic material; rather, he says that ‘the basic material was named “heaven and earth,” as being the seed, so to say, of heaven and earth, as being heaven and earth *all mixed up and thrown together* by the craftsman, God, ready for receiving those forms.’⁶⁶ Apparently, at this time Augustine conceived of *materia informis* as one shared basic stuff out of which every formation whatsoever was to be made, spiritual or bodily. Again he states: ‘What was called heaven and earth was a kind of *mixed-up material* out of which the world (which consists of two main parts, namely heaven and earth) would be fashioned, by the sorting out of its elements and the bestowal on them of shape and form.’⁶⁷

In fact, Augustine makes a very similar point already in his *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, written in 388-389, when commenting on the passage in Genesis 1:6-8 wherein a division is made to separate water above

⁶⁵ De Gen. ad litt. liber imp. 3.9.

⁶⁶ De Gen. ad litt. liber imp. 3.10 (my emphasis).

⁶⁷ De Gen. ad litt. liber imp. 4.11 (my emphasis). A little later he explains that ‘the mishmash of material ... is also called *Chaos* in Greek.’ Cf. De Gen. c. Man. I.5.9. This explicit recognition of the conceptual resemblance between unformed matter and the Greek notion of chaos would seem to justify Catherine Keller’s qualified reading of Augustine as an ally for a ‘tehomophilic theology.’ Interestingly, Keller connects this to contemporary chaos theory; to pursue this line of investigation here, promising as it is, would take us too far afield.

from water below. Since Augustine has already let ‘the water over which the Spirit was being borne’ signify the formless basic material out of which the cosmos was made, it is natural for him to suggest that the division between water and water on the second ‘day’ signifies that ‘the basic bodily material of visible things was separated from the basic non-bodily material of things invisible.’⁶⁸ But this is of course already something like a formation, a distinction within what was originally unified. It presupposes, that is to say, that the *materia informis* created by God *ex nihilo* and signified by the ‘heaven and earth’ of Genesis 1:1, was that from which both the bodily and the spiritual were to be made.

Between these early works and his late *Literal Meaning* lies the *Confessions*, written in 397 or thereabout, which repays a close reading with this question in mind. For as I have already said, in this work Augustine’s main line of interpretation is that God originally created two basic kinds of material *ex nihilo* – spiritual and bodily matter: ‘*Two realities*, one near to yourself, the other bordering on nothingness.’⁶⁹ ‘You made *two kinds of creature*.’⁷⁰ ‘My present view, then, is that it was on account of these *two realities* ... that your scripture states ... *in the beginning God made heaven and earth*.’⁷¹ However, as Augustine also says with characteristic hermeneutic openness, the view that there was only one primordial unformed *materia* shared by visible and invisible beings alike is still an admissible and quite possibly true interpretation of the biblical narrative, and he goes on to discuss this and other alternatives.⁷² Indeed, ‘a great variety of interpretations, many of them legitimate, confront our exploring minds as we search among these words to discover your will.’⁷³ One such legitimate interpretation, then, is the one previously held by Augustine: ‘As for those who take the names “heaven and earth” to signify the still unformed matter from which heaven and earth were to be formed ... one understands the formless matter to be *that from which both intelligible and sensible creatures would come*.’⁷⁴ The discussion of this issue in the *Confessions* takes up many pages, and lets us understand that this was an issue Augustine truly struggled with. In the end, he keeps the question open as to the different

⁶⁸ De Gen. c. Man. I.11.17.

⁶⁹ Conf. XII.7.7 (my emphasis).

⁷⁰ Conf. XII.12.15 (my emphasis).

⁷¹ Conf. XII.13.16 (first emphasis mine).

⁷² Conf. XII.20.29-25.35.

⁷³ Conf. XII.24.33.

⁷⁴ Conf. XII.28.39 (my emphasis); cf. XII.29.40.

ways in which *materia informis* may be understood, but he clearly favours the creation *ex nihilo* of two distinct materials, as it were, one spiritual and one bodily – to wit, ‘heaven and earth.’

It is nonetheless clear that there is in the Augustinian corpus an alternative that *The Literal Meaning* does not really address, namely, seeing the bodily and the spiritual dimensions of human beings as originating in one and the same primordial ‘mishmash.’⁷⁵ Does not this *nihil aliquid* begin to approximate Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh, as that which is neither matter nor mind, but rather their common element? What I am driving at and have been continually suggesting here is simply this: If the primordial unformed *materia* is taken to contain the potentiality of bodily and spiritual formation alike – a manifest exegetical and theological possibility for Augustine – rather than conceiving of a primordial distinction between the bodily and the spiritual, then this would tend to underwrite a conception of the unity of all created being, a common rootedness in this absolute potentiality, which is itself underwritten by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, through which all created things are united precisely in being thus created. It is in this sense that Etienne Gilson, speaking of Aquinas, can say that humankind is ‘a member of the universal brotherhood of being,’ and thus related to all things.⁷⁶ Granted the possibility of this reading, let us proceed with the conversation and see if Merleau-Ponty’s ontology can elucidate and challenge the theological understanding of what it means to be soul and body – to be flesh. This will suggest a precise direction, but also the presence of certain limits.

A Dynamic Creational Ontology and Anthropology

The question that presses itself upon us is whether it is possible to discern a logic in Augustine’s creational ontology, and to contrast this logic with some of the anthropological conclusions he draws. More precisely, could one read Augustine’s dynamic creational ontology of becoming against his dualism of soul and body? I do not raise these questions out of a need to claim the patronage of Augustine at all costs, but rather in an attempt to practice traditioned theological and philosophical thinking – to situate myself within

⁷⁵ Pace Frederick Van Fleteren, who says that in Augustine ‘there is little apparent development in this notion.’ And again, ‘throughout his writings Augustine is consistent as to what *materia* means.’ ‘Matter,’ in John C. Cavadini, ed., *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 548.

⁷⁶ See the epigraph to the present chapter.

the ongoing argument – and to probe what sense can be given to the adjective ‘Augustinian’ in a contemporary context of philosophical theology.⁷⁷

There is an inconsistency, or at least a tension, in Augustine’s distinction between ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ *materia informis*; such a distinction is not quite consistent with the basic thrust of the idea. For if this matter is really *unformed*, what sense can be made of the distinction between these basic *types* of it? Such a distinction would already entail a serious measure of formation. If, as Augustine suggests in the *Confessions*, he had to learn to conceive of unformed matter not as poorly or minimally shaped matter, but rather as pure potentiality,⁷⁸ then to describe it as already distinguished into the material and the spiritual would seem to beg the question. Here we must keep in mind, as Rowan Williams reminds us, that Augustine’s idea of unformed matter must be distinguished from our spontaneous notion of unformed matter as mere atoms, or quarks, or strings or whatever – for these are precisely already formed, just like the four elements of the physics of antiquity. Rather, the Augustinian idea is the theoretical limit idea of pure potentiality.⁷⁹ But if this is so, then again: what are the grounds for a distinction within it? Arguably, if the notion of *materia informis* is to be truly radical, it must be conceived as that from which God creates everything. Emilie Zum Brunn suggests something similar when she notes that Augustine really does not push the idea of unformed matter – as *capax formarum omnium* – very far, ‘since he accepts two

⁷⁷ In the very different context of political theory, Eric Gregory does something along these lines in his *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Gregory’s claim, however, is stronger than mine, since he argues that contemporary political liberalism must adopt the Augustinian notion of an order of love [*ordo amoris*], or something similar to it, to be able to articulate a coherent theory of political formation. I do not in a parallel way claim that contemporary philosophy needs to retrieve Augustine’s understanding of the soul in order to offer a coherent account of human being. What I am going to suggest, however, is that contemporary theory, especially as inspired by Merleau-Ponty, needs to develop a stronger account of the specificity of human consciousness, and that Augustine is one of the philosophers who most brilliantly thematizes the experience of self-consciousness and would therefore be a resource. Hence, contemporary philosophy would do well to meditate on Augustinian insights; but this is still not to claim that only Augustine could provide that kind of supplementation. In the end, however, my interest in this chapter is not so much to demonstrate that Merleau-Pontian phenomenology needs Augustine, as to argue that there are openings even in Augustine for a more holistic approach to human being, and to use Merleau-Pontian insights to supplement Augustine – which is to say, to use phenomenological philosophy as a resource for the project of constructive philosophical theology.

⁷⁸ Conf. XII.6.6.

⁷⁹ Williams, ‘Good for Nothing?’ 17.

different kinds of matter for the corporeal created being and for the spiritual created being.’ She goes on to say that Augustine really ‘only distinguishes between them through the different formation they receive from the Word.’⁸⁰ In other words, when the notion of *materia informis* is understood in its true radicality – that is, as going to the very roots of created being – distinctions of whatever kind within creation ought to be seen as derived rather than primordial.

Granted such a unified conception of *materia informis*, we will have come much nearer to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh, which is not to say that the two are in all respects similar. For while the flesh is the unified matrix of potentiality, from which all that is emerges, it is nonetheless thought of as containing at least a minimal self-differentiation – the flesh is never self-coincidence, but always already ruptured in the *écart* and intertwining, as we have seen in chapter 3.

In connection with this point, however, it must also be remembered that even unformed matter is not utterly devoid of what I, in discussing Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, have called structure. For as Rowan Williams, Michael Hanby and others have argued, Augustine does not understand unformed matter to be entirely passive with respect to its formation by the Word of God, for it has at least the capacity of formation. As Williams puts it, ‘The action of form on matter ... is simply the process of actualization itself, the process by which organization appears.’⁸¹ And Hanby argues that the conversion of formless matter into form occurs according to a Trinitarian logic, as formless *hyle* is ‘interposed in the interval between the Father’s intention of and delight in the Son and the Son’s response to and vision of the Father, and it is by virtue of this location that the *hyle* ... can be understood to participate in the conversion to form.’⁸² In other words, as created by a Triune God, unformed matter always already participates in the Trinitarian non-coincidence, and so it is not quite right to think of it as merely a passive and entirely undifferentiated plenum of potentiality. Again, Dunham summarizes the point: ‘Conversion is best characterized as *the response of the formless void* to the love between the Father and the Son (Word), by which the formless void becomes actually ... what it only was potentially.’⁸³ What makes all the difference here is that Augustine must follow the logic of creation *ex nihilo* and affirm the goodness

⁸⁰ Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine*, 75-76; cf. 89 n. 72.

⁸¹ Williams, ‘Good for Nothing?’ 16.

⁸² Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 86.

⁸³ Dunham, *Trinity and Creation*, 101 (my emphasis).

even of unformed matter. Logically, therefore, it cannot be utter privation only, but must have some good-making trait – at the very least its existence as created – and so must always already be related to its creator. This is why it cannot strictly be seen as nothing, but must be described as a nothing-something [*nihil-aliiquid*], ‘hovering somewhere between form and formlessness.’ In short, even unformed matter, as created, must be understood to have some inchoate structure by which it ‘responds’ – or better, lends its potentiality – to the ongoing work of formation.⁸⁴

There is therefore a genuine proximity between the description of Augustinian unformed matter and the description of Merleau-Pontian flesh. However, if we were to do full justice to Merleau-Ponty’s characterization, it would probably be more correct to situate the flesh somewhere in between Augustine’s *materia informis* and his structured world of potentiality as inherent in seminal reasons, since the flesh is not so much a theoretical limit concept of pure potentiality as a lattice of already intertwined structures which are ready to further unfold. And while unformed matter is logically prior to formation, Augustine envisages the actual structures of the spatiotemporal physical universe as immediately created: God simultaneously formed them along with living things, but the latter only ‘in their causes,’ which is to say, in the seminal reasons to be unfolded over the course of time. In other words, the simultaneous creation *ex nihilo* of the world refers to its actual spatiotemporal structures and along with them its life forms in potentiality. The created world thus has structures, while it does not yet have life. As far as the dynamics of potentiality of their respective ontologies is concerned, then, Augustine and Merleau-Ponty are not too far removed.

Would this way of reading *materia informis* help Augustine to resolve the vexing question of the being of the soul, or to push it in a more promising direction? I believe it would, and though this is not the main point I wish to make, something should be said about it. If *materia informis* can be read as a unified structure of potentiality, more like the Merleau-Pontian flesh than like the later Augustinian notion of a primordial distinction between spiritual and material stuff, then it might be possible to understand the unfolding of the

⁸⁴ It is interesting that, for Augustine, this follows logically from creation *ex nihilo*, since all that God creates is in some way good. If, on the other hand, unformed matter is seen to be eternally available rather than created, it is perhaps possible to say that it lacks all structure whatsoever. In that case it will be much easier to conceive of formation as the overpowering by an active agency of an entirely passive partner. Since Augustine thinks of the potentiality in question as a readiness to respond to an invitation or call, his is a much more dynamic idea.

whole human being, with its bodily and spiritual dimensions, along the lines of *carnal emergence* – that is, as the unfolding of a potentiality which is somehow present from the beginning. A reconstructed Augustinian interpretation could thus read as follows: In the beginning God created the formless potential of all things *ex nihilo*, and gave it various layers of form or structure. This creation included any number of possibilities for a temporal progression or development, among which were the development of the whole human being, which would in a specific way come to actualize the image of God that was only potentially present in the original founding of creation. Now, this is neither materialism nor panpsychism, since the basic stratum of the world is neither matter nor spirit, but their common root or element. Nor does it require us to think of the potentiality of the human soul as somehow implanted into angelic substance, or stored away ready-made with God, just waiting to migrate into the human body. Finally, it does not lead to the absurd idea of a sort of container material, later to be discarded, wherein the soul could be present in *ratio*.

It is also true, however, that this notion of a unified primordial ‘stuff’ would not immediately solve all of Augustine’s troubles with the soul, for as he sees it, the biblical texts suggest a formation of primordial matter into various kinds of things prior to the actual unfolding of life forms and human beings. And while he has no apparent trouble conceiving of the formation of matter, as we now know it, and the intellectual angelic creation, there remains the question of the human soul. In other words, even granted the unity of one *materia informis*, there would still be a first formation into spiritual beings and material beings proper, and it is only the latter that really allow for the inherence of seminal reasons. Hence, if the soul were to be seen as a seminal reason, it would still have to inhere in that particular formation of unformed matter that we now know simply as matter – that is to say, formed matter. In the end, therefore, this position would be reduced to materialism of some kind. In light of this, it would seem Augustine could not have resolved his difficulties with this broadening of the concept of unformed matter to include material and spiritual alike.

Yet this conclusion is premature. This is because of the already noted tension in Augustine’s account of unformed matter – unformed matter is not merely left behind at the original founding of creation, but continues to subtend the variously formed creatures, such that seminal reasons can be seen as a continuation of the primordial potential which inheres in the *materia informis* itself, thus in a sense bridging the founding and unfolding of creation.

Even formed material things must therefore still somehow or other be rooted in this primordial ‘basic material.’ This in turn suggests that the distinction between the already formed matter with its potential in the form of seminal reasons on the one hand, and *materia informis* on the other, may not be so neatly drawn after all. In short, taking the entire framework of Augustine’s creational hermeneutic into account, it would seem that a certain potentiality for soul can be seen as inhering in matter even as formed. This is a possibility not considered by Augustine himself, but I nonetheless want to suggest it as a possible if somewhat unorthodox reading of his interpretive scheme. The potentiality of soul could be seen as lingering in matter, not on account of its status as matter, but because matter is a concrete formation of that prior potentiality inhering in what the Reformed philosopher of biology, Johann Diemer – who was deeply inspired by Augustine – aptly called ‘the religious root of nature.’⁸⁵ This ‘root’ is what Augustine himself called *materia informis*, and what a philosophical theology inspired by Merleau-Pontian ontology might even call the flesh.

I have been trying to argue, within the framework of Augustine’s hermeneutic of creation, for a creational ontology that, contrary to Augustine, would view the soul as entirely rooted in the body and in the flesh of being. In this attempt I have drawn attention to certain tensions within Augustine’s own account that might be resolved differently; hence, this is something of an immanent critique that nevertheless does not reject the broader Augustinian framework for thinking theologically about divine creation. In order to suggest an alternative approach, I have used two resources in particular: I have picked up some submerged themes from Augustine’s earlier work on creation, suggesting a more holistic approach to creation and to human being; and I have pointed to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of a *carnal emergence* within the potentiality of the flesh – which is neither matter, nor mind – as a way to further develop these suggestions. When read in tandem like this, I submit that the Merleau-Pontian ontological framework helps us to appreciate the fruitfulness of some of Augustine’s main ideas, and the possibility of a contemporary retrieval that stays with Augustine’s overall hermeneutic of creation, though significantly going beyond his understanding of anthropology.

In the introduction to this book I gave several reasons for conducting my argument in dialogue with the Augustinian tradition of philosophical theology,

⁸⁵ Johann H. Diemer, *Nature and Miracle* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1977), 5.

but I should now like to add another: Augustine celebrates the intricacies of the human mind like few others.⁸⁶ This could be construed as a problem, if the valuation of the qualities of mind takes place at the expense of materiality and embodiment. As I have argued, however, this is not a consequence of the Augustinian logic of creation, though it may be a residue of the contrastive notion of transcendence suggested by Neoplatonism.⁸⁷ And Augustine's absorbed fascination with the human mind clearly also has positive value and in fact suggests a correction to the Merleau-Pontian emphasis on the body. For just as one can emphasize the mind at the expense of the body, the reverse is also possible – and as we saw in chapter 3, Merleau-Ponty's fixation on rootedness does not allow him to properly investigate the vertical realm of free-ranging human thought, what Augustine calls 'the fields and vast mansions of memory.'⁸⁸ Indeed, as Remy Kwant points out, one searches in vain for a description of the innermost character of human thought in Merleau-Ponty's work.⁸⁹ That is, Merleau-Ponty lacks a thorough analysis of conscious subjectivity *qua* self-conscious. To be sure, his works are full of hints and suggestions, and the assumption – his own as well as the reader's – is that the

⁸⁶ It is a legitimate question, at this point, why I do not in the present chapter, as in chapter 5, extend and supplement Augustine's account with that of Thomas Aquinas – not least since the latter's Aristotelian approach must be understood as more holistic to start with and, as such, closer to Merleau-Ponty. I would answer as follows: *First*, for reasons given in the introduction, the choice has been made to stage the present conversation between Merleau-Ponty and the *Augustinian* tradition. (And any project must have its limits.) When I considered Aquinas' development of secondary causes, I did so because I recognized in Aquinas a distinctly Augustinian trajectory with regard to this question, one that advanced the discussion. However, when it comes to the soul, Aquinas arguably represents more of a new direction in theology, than a continuation of the Augustinian trajectory. To take his theological anthropology into account would quite simply be a different project. *Second*, however, I do not believe that the Thomistic approach would necessarily link with the Merleau-Pontian approach in a more fruitful way. It is true that Aquinas stresses the necessary interaction of body and soul much more than Augustine, but he is still some form of anthropological dualist – perhaps a holistic dualist – and he still affirms that God directly creates the individual soul and inserts it into the body at the appropriate time; and in his case this holds for the original soul, as well as for all subsequent souls coming into being (ST. 1a, q. 90, art. 2-4; q. 118, art. 2-3). I should mention, in this context, an article by John Milbank – 'The Soul of Reciprocity' – referred to in the introduction, which resonates with the present project. Milbank, however, is concerned with the Aristotelian (and therefore Thomistic) tradition; for this reason that article also falls beyond the scope of the particular conversation engaged in here.

⁸⁷ See the discussion on p. 282-284 above. For a reasoned position on the relative value of soul and body in Augustine, see Anna N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 188.

⁸⁸ Conf. X.8.12.

⁸⁹ Kwant, *Phenomenological Philosophy*, 225-228.

penetrating analysis of the anonymous subjective life of the body will usher in the same kind of analysis of mind proper. This, however, never happens. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is in this sense curiously incomplete. From an Augustinian perspective, the pressing question will always be: What about the mind? What about the experience of being ensouled (regardless of how we finally cash this out ontologically)?

Given the desirability of overcoming anthropological dualism, I suggest that this is rendered more difficult in proportion to the grandeur of the conception of human being one starts out with, which is closely connected to the issue of the integrity of the phenomenon of human being. If human being is conceived of as entirely carried by and reducible to its material infrastructures, the overcoming might be almost axiomatic. If with Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, there is a relation of intertwining and sedimentation between body and mind, it becomes more difficult as the desire to respect the integrity of the human phenomenon is so clearly there. However, since Merleau-Ponty almost always stays close to embodied rootedness, he avoids some of this difficulty. Kwant, once again, correctly notes that 'Merleau-Ponty has made the radical victory over dualism easy for himself by closing his eyes to these aspects of our experience.'⁹⁰ Within Christian theology, in contrast, the problem at hand receives sharper contours, since theology is committed from the start to the magnificence and dignity of human being – as only 'a little lower than the angels,' and indeed, as *imago Dei*.⁹¹ This does not imply that theology is committed to dualism, but it does suggest something of a theological unease, warranted from its own presuppositions, with any philosophy that fails to adequately thematize what is most distinctly human: the 'vast mansions' of interiority. An Augustinian philosophical theology could therefore only approach the ontological and anthropological convictions of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy with a certain reserve: yes, it contains numerous fruitful indications, but they would have to be developed so as to be able to take the whole of human being into account. And from the opposite direction, if philosophical theology calls Merleau-Pontian philosophy to such a development, it seems to me that this would be a call for Merleau-Pontian philosophy to be true to its own deepest motivation – to better understand the relation between consciousness (precisely *as* consciousness) and nature, and

⁹⁰ Ibid., 239.

⁹¹ Psalm 8:5; Genesis 1:26. On this theme, I recommend Marilynne Robinson, 'Psalm Eight,' in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998).

thus to better understand the phenomenon of human being, while preserving its integrity.

So, what is the solution to the problem of the soul, or the mind? Perhaps Augustinian and Merleau-Pontian thought cannot be called upon to answer the question of human being, after all, but usher in instead a certain *posture* with regard to the question and a certain way of proceeding towards the human enigma. Being patient with the phenomenon of the human – even committed to it. This does not exclude a theoretical encircling of the phenomenon – there should be no general aversion to metaphysics in this perspective, only a decided rejection of premature closure. For instance, both from an Augustinian and a Merleau-Pontian perspective, reductive materialism is out of the question; and as I have tried to argue, the rejection of dualism is also an option within a reconceived Augustinian creational ontology. There are, therefore, at least certain negative determinations of the question: neither standard materialism nor dualism is a live option within the perspective I have suggested. Moreover, we are not without positive characterizations: the Merleau-Pontian framework ushers in an unprecedented understanding of the ways in which human beings are rooted in bodies and in nature, as well as being oriented towards vertical development. This framework includes a rich vocabulary for thinking about the interaction between mind and body, human and nature. In the end, however, the fundamental posture must be that of Augustine himself: ‘Nobody has yet managed to persuade me I can ever have such a grasp of the soul, that I may assume there is no further question to be asked.’⁹²

5. Augustinian Traces of Autopoiesis and Co-Creation

Granted that Augustine – or at least a certain reading of Augustine – lays out a dynamic creational ontology, replete with potentiality for temporal development, and that there are openings for the articulation of a more holistic

⁹² De Gen. ad litt. VI.29.40. Such an approach ties in nicely with that of some recent analytic philosophers of mind, the so called ‘new mysterians,’ who have begun to defend the position that the jury is out on the question of the mind, not for lack of empirical evidence, but for reasons of principal inaccessibility. See e.g. Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Thomas Nagel, ‘What Is It Like to Be a Bat?’ *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435-450. It may even be that these limitations are not to be lamented, but rather celebrated.

anthropology in his work, there remains one final issue that we bring with us from chapter 2 and that I should now like to broach – the question of human meaning-making. Can we draw from Augustine’s creational ontology any significant role for the human subject in the development of the potentiality inherent in creation? If we can *not*, then the creation that began to take on the appearance of flesh begins to look more like an already constituted object. After all, to demonstrate that Augustine’s ontology is more dynamic than its caricatures would not quite suffice as a justification for the kind or scale of interaction that we have so far undertaken. The missing piece of the puzzle, in a word, concerns the transcendental status of subjectivity. This returns us to chapter 2, where we saw that a major part of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking is concerned with the way in which human embodied subjectivity participates in the constitution of the world – first through the body-world dialogue, and then in the sublimations of language, art, culture and so forth – all the while insisting that these meaning-structures follow a logic of *Fundierung*, where the structures to be constituted always build upon already acquired structures without being determined by them. That is to say, rootedness and verticality are mutually implying: what is rooted grows and that which grows must be rooted.

I believe it is fair to say that theology has so far insufficiently thematized the co-creative role of human subjectivity.⁹³ There seems to be an especially glaring lacuna with regard to theological reflection on how the doctrine of creation would be related to human participation in the development of meaningful structures. This is not to say that recent theology has been entirely lacking in such attempts. It is possible to identify at least two important theological arenas where these topics have been broached: The first is associated with the movement known as Radical Orthodoxy, which as an heir to *la nouvelle théologie* seeks to retrieve classical sources of Christian theology, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, while also recognizing the achievements of modern philosophy since Kant.⁹⁴ In this vein, Henri de Lubac already passionately argued that Christianity abolished fatalism and called the faithful

⁹³ This may not be an accurate description of modern theologies following out a largely Feuerbachian approach to religion, where human construction obviously takes centre stage. Contemporary anti-realism in theology – such as that of Don Cupitt – is a case in point. However, I continue to be concerned here with theologies that embrace the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and the understanding of God it yields, as discussed in chapter 5.

⁹⁴ For a clear exposition of this project, see John Milbank, ‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,’ in John Milbank and Simon Oliver, eds., *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009).

to work for the transformation of the world: ‘Man is called to pursue the work of the One who made him. No, he has not been installed ... in a ready-made world: he *cooperates in its genesis*.’⁹⁵ And John Milbank continues: ‘The point is not to “represent” this externality, but just to join in its occurrence; not to know, but to intervene, originate.’⁹⁶ And again Milbank says that there is constantly a ‘new temporal unravelling of creation *ex nihilo*, in which human beings most consciously participate.’⁹⁷ However, there is also another trajectory of contemporary theology for which the co-creative role of human subjectivity has become an important theme – the science and religion debate, especially as carried out in the journal *Zygon*. Its most important contribution to date has been that of the journal’s previous editor, Philip Hefner, who develops the notion of ‘the created co-creator.’⁹⁸ In contrast to Radical Orthodoxy, Hefner’s primary dialogue partner is evolutionary theory and his concern is to show how human beings, as the outcome of evolutionary processes of development, can nonetheless be free moral creatures, with their roles to play in the continuation of evolutionary processes for the better. Says Hefner, ‘The human being is God’s created co-creator, whose purpose is the modifying and enabling of existing systems of nature so that they can participate in God’s purposes in the mode of freedom.’⁹⁹ He also tends to emphasize human technological advance and our high-level possibility to change the world for good or evil.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 415 (my emphasis).

⁹⁶ Milbank, ‘Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,’ 50.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹⁸ Philip Hefner, ‘The Evolution of the Created Co-Creator,’ in Ted Peters, ed., *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 211-233. Hefner develops the notion at some length in *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁹⁹ Hefner, ‘Evolution of the Created Co-Creator,’ 212. It should be noted that radically orthodox theologians have recently turned their attention to evolutionary theory, as witnessed by the publication of Conor Cunningham’s *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), and the 2011 conference *What Is Life?*, organized by the Centre for Theology and Philosophy.

¹⁰⁰ For a deepening of that particular perspective in the science-religion debate, see Ulf Görman, Willem B. Drees and Hubert Meisinger, eds., *Creative Creatures: Values and Ethical issues in Theology, Science and Technology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005). I should like to mention here that Hefner, though proceeding rather differently than I do, nonetheless articulates a governing question that is strikingly similar to the one I posed in the introduction vis-à-vis the integrity of both nature and human being, and of human being precisely as part of nature. Says Hefner: ‘Can culture open up genuine possibilities that are appropriate to both the biological and the cultural dimensions without either destroying the biological or betraying the cultural?’ ‘Evolution of the Created Co-Creator,’ 221.

While certainly overlapping, these arenas of contemporary theology are quite different, not least in that the latter has tended to be more open to incorporating process philosophical ideas into their accounts of the relation between God and the world (though not in Hefner's case). It is also clear that Radical Orthodoxy has so far found its primary dialogue partners in the history of philosophy and in contemporary Continental thought, while participants in this strand of the science and religion debate tend to focus on evolutionary theory. It seems to me that both of these approaches are valuable, but they are not sufficient. In particular, what we are still lacking is a rich and nuanced account of precisely *how* human beings participate in the unfolding of meaning, and how this is related to the originary divine creativity. For example, in his programmatic article, Hefner only briefly considers such participation in terms of conscious decision-making and larger scale technological interventions in the order of nature.¹⁰¹ Important as this is, it is just too thin an account. Radical Orthodoxy, on the other hand, has of yet not really entered into debate with the kind of contemporary resources that would be able to flesh out its account of human *poiesis* – the interface between phenomenology, cognitive science and biology. It is here that I believe reading Augustine together with Merleau-Ponty may prove very instructive, since it will allow us to connect the central doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* with a subtle approach to meaning-formation in tune with Continental philosophy on the one hand, but also with contemporary cognitive science and biology. Most importantly, it will allow us to say something about *how* we participate in the becoming of the world, and how such participation is grounded in divine creation. It will also be able to address the ever-increasing complexity of this interaction in cultural formation.

There is yet another issue at stake with the development of a theological account of human participation in the evolving structures of meaning, one that we have already begun to tease out. As we saw in chapter 4, the lack of human participation was one of Merleau-Ponty's main criticisms of Christian theology, which as he saw it makes human freedom and participation difficult to sustain. In chapter 5, I responded to this criticism through looking closely at what follows from the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, for early theology in

¹⁰¹ Cf. 'We human beings have certain characteristics that constitute the *imago dei* in us – we are able to make self-conscious and self-critical decisions, we are able to act on those decisions, and we are able to take responsibility for them. The human race can be dubbed *homo faber*, as our great technological achievements testify. We have altered the face of the earth and even dented the facade of outer space.' 'Evolution of the Created Co-Creator,' 228-229.

general, but especially for Augustine and Aquinas. I argued that this theology is fundamentally open to the genuine activity of the created world, since a measure of contingency, freedom and causal power is necessary for it to have its integrity as God's good creation. However, it is desirable to do more than merely point out that theology is indeed open for human participation in the world; something should be said about how theology begins to envisage this co-operation with the divine. In this section I should like to do just that, in order to further shore up my theological reading against its critics, but also – and more importantly – in order to open a conversational space in which contemporary constructive philosophical theology may learn from Merleau-Pontian phenomenology and perhaps appropriate its insights in its own ontological interpretation of the world.

First, however, a *caveat* is in order: The transcendental role of subjectivity is a discovery, if you like, that belongs properly to modern philosophy, especially post-Kantian philosophy, and we must beware of reading distinctly modern concerns into ancient texts. Let it be clear, therefore: Augustine is not overly concerned with the world-disclosing or constitutive function of human existence. That said, however, I do believe it is legitimate to look for significant openings and traces of an understanding of the transcendental throughout the history of human thought. This is especially the case if, with Merleau-Pontian existential phenomenology, the transcendental is primarily a function of the lived body, such that consequently, the backdrop of modern dualism is not needed to make the transcendental as such conceivable.

With that in mind, I should like to investigate two significant traces of human co-creation in the Augustinian corpus. The first of these concerns the ontological constitution of human being in conversion, and the second intimates an interactive co-creation of the cultural world in all its richness. In what follows, I shall explore these significant openings, discuss how they may be related, and seek to relate this in turn to the Merleau-Pontian vision of flesh folding back upon itself in ever richer patterns of intertwining.

The Ontology of Conversion

When laying out Augustine's interpretive schemes it can easily be missed that the concept of *conversio* spans both the original founding act of creation and its temporal providential governance. Conversion, and hence formation – since they go together – are ongoing operations having their origin in what he calls 'the roots of time.' As Scott Dunham points out,

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conversion is not only into the forms given by the Father through the Son and Holy Spirit at the founding of creation, but is also the continual attraction of the formed creature away from its natural tendency to 'decay,' 'disappearance,' and 'loss of form' ... The conversion of the creature from formlessness to form in the divine Word and through the love of the Holy Spirit can be described both in terms of the start of creaturely existence in the founding of creatures, as well as throughout the duration of creation's existence under God's providential governance.¹⁰²

Significantly, for the purposes of finding openings for creaturely participation, conversion will at some point and for some creatures come to involve their freedom, decision and active turning to God, because 'this image of God in man is not static, but requires to be achieved by the free choice of the created being.'¹⁰³ The ontological and the soteriological gear into each other at this point, since the salvific turning towards God is a continuation of that conversion whereby God ontologically established the creature in the first place. Indeed, on such a scheme salvation itself can be nothing less than the ontological realization of human being in motion towards God.¹⁰⁴

We have already noted the basic lines of this understanding in the present chapter, but what consequences follow from it? How can we understand such a dynamic 'metaphysics of conversion'?¹⁰⁵ For surely, a human being must first *be* in order to respond so as to be fully constituted. There is a dynamic tension in Augustine's metaphysics of conversion that I propose can be understood after the model of co-creation, that is, in terms of the partly constitutive role of human being – which in this peculiar case would be something like an *autopoiesis*, since it is the human being itself that in this case is being made.

The French Augustine scholar Emilie Zum Brunn has delineated a helpful distinction in the Augustinian use of the concept of participation that lets us approach this issue. There is first of all, Zum Brunn argues, a minimal participation in God, in which all human beings (and indeed, all created things) share simply in virtue of being created. This gives them a sort of default kind of being at the level of existence that they cannot lose save by an intentional act of God – Augustine describes this minimal participation as *minus esse*. This is, in Zum Brunn's words, a 'participation of simple existence.'¹⁰⁶ But there is also a richer and fuller participation in God that

¹⁰² Dunham, *Trinity and Creation*, 87-88.

¹⁰³ Vannier, *Creatio, Conversio, Formatio*, 61 (my translation).

¹⁰⁴ Cf. 'L'image détermine le statut ontologique de l'homme.' *Ibid.*, 78; cf. xxv.

¹⁰⁵ Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine*, 74.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

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results from the creature's free conversion to God, which is described as *magis esse*, and which ushers in a plenitude of being. This is when a human being begins to participate more fully in the wisdom by which God, in the words of one of Augustine's favourite scriptural passages, 'arranges all things according to measure, number and weight.'¹⁰⁷ In short, *magis esse* – an increased fullness of being as a result of conversion – entails greater wholeness and harmony. Or in other words, there is an ontological relation to God that is prior to conversion, but one that suggests only a minimal formation balancing on the verge of the *nihil*, and this relation is to be fulfilled in the creature's willed movement towards God in the continual act of conversion, by which it is formed into a more perfect likeness of God. Thus, Augustine says, 'we ought always to go on being made by him, always being perfected by him.'¹⁰⁸

In this dynamic anthropology of becoming, the human being thus participates in its own making by freely turning to its creator. The power of this suggestion comes from the Augustinian insistence that conversion is ontologically constitutive, a constitution to which God invites the participation of the constituted. Zum Brunn summarizes:

The first stage is that of existence, of the fact of being. But it is an existence of a specific nature ... [However,] it is necessary to recall that it is not a question of a reality that is completed. This 'nature' only finds its proper dimension thanks to the conversion of the will ... It then has access to this second ontological stage, which is that of participation in true being, in which it is constituted, edified, thanks to this conversion. Man reaches it when he conforms by means of his free will to the finality inscribed in his nature, whose completion is made up of this choice.¹⁰⁹

Let me stress at this juncture that I am obviously not proposing that Augustine is saying that we can save ourselves by such a turning, as if it lay within human powers to reach God and be fully constituted as *imago Dei*. To the contrary, Augustine always stresses the role of the Mediator descending so that humanity might ascend with him.¹¹⁰ Put differently, the autonomy by which creatures participate in their own becoming is an autonomy itself given by God; it is a derived autonomy, which ultimately only fits within the framework of the

¹⁰⁷ Wisdom 11:20. For some acute observations on the relation of this verse to the theme of participation, see Williams, 'Good for Nothing?' See also De Gen. c. Man. I.16.26 and 21.32; and De Gen. ad litt. IV.3.7-5.12, for examples of Augustine's use of this verse.

¹⁰⁸ De Gen. ad litt. VIII.12.27.

¹⁰⁹ Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine*, 39-40 (Latin quotes omitted).

¹¹⁰ Cf. Conf. VII.9.13-21.27; De trin. IV.4.20-4.24. See also Meconi, 'Incarnation and the Role of Participation.'

Christian distinction whereby God does not compete with the creature on the same level, but establishes the creature in its operation. Augustine's entire hermeneutic scheme implies that while we cannot save ourselves, we are yet invited to participate in the salvation wrought by God, and in this sense we have something to do with our own making – with our own *poiesis*.¹¹¹ Says Zum Brunn, '*magis esse* has been characterized as a "self-creation" in which are combined the freedom of this created being and the passive part which is its own in relation to the divine act that constitutes in into being.'¹¹² She finds such an understanding confirmed in the work of A. Solignac, who says that according to Augustine 'the created being conspires to its own making ... The *conversio* is thus a counterpart of the *creatio*: it is a self-creation, or at least this self-creation is an essential and necessary stage in the dialectic of the relationship between man and God.'¹¹³

The *Confessions* can be read in this light, as the journey of one man towards the still longed-for ontological fullness of salvation, and where, significantly, his journey ends with a prolonged meditation on what it means to be created. In this way, salvation – being made – is always also a conversion to the one from whence we come. Paradoxically, but with full internal consistency, the journey ends where it started, such that the statement that opens the *Confessions* is finally fulfilled: 'You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'¹¹⁴ This is soteriology, ontology and narrative all at once.

This, then, is the argument *in nuce*: Augustine's existential elaboration of the theme of creation delineates nothing less than an *autopoiesis* of the human person as it turns towards its maker, a co-creation of the self on its way to realizing the potentiality of its created nature, which is to truly become the *imago Dei*. In this way the first instance of the role of human beings in bringing out the potentiality of the world pertains to their own becoming, but we shall now see that it spills over into the becoming of the whole world.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Incidentally, this is brought out also by the use of the Greek *poiesis* rather than *ktisis*, since the former connotes making in the sense of shaping, moulding and forming, while the latter tends to be used for the absolute creation which is the work of God alone, and which therefore better translates the Hebrew *bara*. From this point of view, *autopoiesis* seems quite appropriate.

¹¹² Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine*, 77.

¹¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 90, n. 81.

¹¹⁴ Conf. I.1.1. Literally: 'You have made us *to yourself* ...' [*fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*].

¹¹⁵ Incidentally, it is worth noting that Augustine thinks that the formation or deformation of the human soul affects the entire person, and thus has consequences beyond the mind as such.

Conversing with the Nature of Things

The second – and for the purposes of this discussion, more consequential – trace of the co-creative role of human beings is glimpsed in Augustine's discussion of 'work,' broadly understood, which, as he sees it, was something originally given to humans to do, rather than being a result of the fall. Describing the role of human work in Paradise, Augustine says that 'things which God had created flourished in more luxuriant abundance *with the help of human work*.'¹¹⁶ Here he is describing agriculture, and using it to describe human culture in general. Together with the practise of medicine, agriculture seems to be Augustine's favourite example of human cooperation with God.¹¹⁷ He speaks of this as the 'twin functioning of providence, partly through natural, partly through voluntary activity.'¹¹⁸ Here it must once more be remembered that, according to the logic of the Christian distinction, divine providence is not to be understood as a divine overpowering of the natural causal matrix, but precisely as God's sustaining of created things in their created natures. Hence, Augustine describes natural providence as what 'happens in things through the *inner impulses of nature*.'¹¹⁹ Interestingly, though, such natural operations may be coupled with the cooperative activity of human subjects to bring out the inherent potentiality of natural things, as in the case of agriculture. In an oblique reference to the great materialistic poem of the Latin philosopher Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, Augustine says that in this way 'human reason ... [is] able after a fashion to converse with the nature of things [*cum rerum natura*].'¹²⁰ Indeed, in this way, through interaction,

This is at least the argument of Zum Brunn, who notes the following apropos of the deformation of the soul that results from neglect of the true *ordo amoris*: 'Indeed, in this incarnate spirit that man is, the ontological degradation of the soul falls on the body. ... Because of the mistake made by its master, the body is less than before. ... Therefore, not only moral evil, but physical disorder itself is the consequence of a warped choice made by the soul. It is the explanation for illness and finally for the body's death. *The soul degrades the object of its choice* by the very fact that it chooses it as an end.' Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine*, 51 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁶ De Gen. ad litt. VIII.8.15 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁷ See e.g. De Gen ad litt. VIII.12.25; IX.15.28.

¹¹⁸ De Gen. ad litt. VIII.9.17. In my treatment of this theme I shall ignore some passages in which Augustine considers the way in which angels contribute with voluntary activity in the providential ordering of things; Augustine's angelology is no part of my concern here and, in any case, I believe what he says on the subject defies coherent exposition. See e.g. VIII.19.38-24.45.

¹¹⁹ De Gen. ad litt. VIII.9.17 (my emphasis).

¹²⁰ De Gen. ad litt. VIII.8.16. I have slightly altered Edmund Hill's capitalization and use of quotation marks. The reference to Lucretius is his; see *On Genesis*, 357 n. 28. An excellent treatment of Lucretius' poem in relation to the Christian doctrine of creation is found in Pelikan, *What has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?*, 1-22.

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humans enter into a more intimate dialogue with things as to ‘the range of their inner, invisible power.’ As this master example of agriculture makes clear, there is for Augustine a notion of human beings as the ones who bring out the potentiality inherent in the natural world – not in and of themselves, to be sure, but as part of the way divine providence has arranged things and in intimate communion with the natural things of the world.

Augustine proceeds to extrapolate from the example of agriculture a more general picture of nature and human subjectivity, to use our terms: ‘From [this example of agriculture] the eye of the mind can be raised up to the universe itself as if it were all some huge tree, and in this too will be discovered the same twin functioning of providence.’¹²¹ On the side of human activity, Augustine includes the following: ‘signs are given, taught and learned [i.e., language], fields cultivated, communities administrated, arts and skills practised.’ Now, Augustine does not elaborate very much on this topic, but this much seems clear: things evolve by the contribution both of a power inherent in nature, as a result of the seminal reasons, and by the contribution of human activity of different kinds. Through language, culture, arts and skills, human beings cooperate with nature to bring out a beneficial result.

Now just as in the case of a tree agriculture acts from the outside to ensure the effectiveness of what nature is busy with on the inside, so in the case of a human being; as regards the body, what nature is doing for it inwardly is being preserved outwardly by medicine; and again as regards the soul, in order that nature be blessed within, education offers its services from without. On the other hand, what neglect of cultivation is to the tree, that is what failure to take proper medical care is to the body, is what slackness over studies is to the soul; and what harmful spraying does for a tree, that is what poisonous food does for the body, what inducement to wickedness does for the soul.¹²²

To be what they are, or to become what they can become, things are, thus subject to two fundamental kinds of influence: that which God gives them ‘to be the natures they are,’ as well as what God gives them through the (non-contrastive) contribution of human beings ‘to help them be in better shape, as with nourishment, agriculture, medicine and all the things that are done by way of adornment.’¹²³ In other words, a human being may lend its services to God, and, to use Hefner’s expression, become the creator’s created co-creator.

¹²¹ De Gen. ad litt. XIII.9.17.

¹²² De Gen. ad litt. VIII.9.18.

¹²³ De Gen. ad litt. VIII.25.46.

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'Farmers ... lend their services as a kind of favour to God who is indeed the creator of the course of nature ... farmers serve God in his act of creating.'¹²⁴

The same idea is expressed in the treatise on creation in Augustine's *City of God*, though it requires some unearthing. Augustine is here engaged in defending God's role as absolute creator of matter and form – that is, of God as first cause – and he therefore rejects the suggestion that the notion of creation can properly be extended beyond the activity of God.

We do not say, then, that farmers are the creators of each kind of fruit ... we do not call the earth herself a creator, even though she seems to be a fruitful mother to all the things which she causes to burst forth from the seed, and whose roots she holds fast ... [we] ought not even to say that a woman creates her own offspring.¹²⁵

Interestingly, though, there is apparently room for participation in this divine activity, which Augustine here describes as 'a divine productive energy' working inmost in created things. We have already seen this in the case of farmers; here Augustine now speaks of the fruitful mothering of nature and of human mothers. Of the latter, he even considers that while they do not create their offspring, they influence it in various ways already in the womb: 'The various states of mind of a pregnant woman can to some extent induce certain qualities in her unborn child.' And again, 'whatever power the desire and mental states of the mother have to produce certain lineaments and colours in the tender and malleable foetus: the natures themselves, which are thus affected in one way or another after their kind, are nonetheless made by none but the supreme God.' He goes on to speak about the masons and architects who built Rome and Alexandria, cities which must nonetheless be seen as ultimately made and founded by the rulers who commissioned them: Romulus and Alexander. In the same way, God is the true creator of all things.

This passage, focally concerned with the power of God as *causa prima*, the ruler who commissions the cosmos, thus gives us a set of images for cooperation with the divine productive energy: Mother Nature in general, the farmer, the human mother, the mason and the architect. These are ways in which God's creative activity is clearly participated by his creatures in various ways. To be sure, Augustine says that God 'neither uses in His work any material which has not itself been made by him, nor any workmen who were not themselves created by him.' But this can also be read as an affirmation:

¹²⁴ De Gen. ad litt. IX.16.29. Cf. De civ. Dei XI.25.

¹²⁵ De civ. Dei XII.26.

God does indeed use workmen created by him. What we have here, once more, are the contours of the idea of the created co-creator.

Now, compare this to the Merleau-Pontian idea that the co-creative, or enactive role of human beings ascends from perception through language, thought, cultural institutions and, indeed, human work. Though Augustine does not consider perception in this light, he does, it seems to me, join Merleau-Ponty already at the level of language, and then of culture and human work in general, insofar as the work of human beings brings out the latent potentiality of the world – which for Augustine is God’s creation, and for Merleau-Ponty the flesh of the world. It is true that Merleau-Ponty never got very far in thinking about the higher forms of the subject-world interaction in language, thought and culture, since he so insistently interrogated their foundation in perceptual dialogue, but it is likely that he would have come to something like this. Can it be that the abstract reflections on being as flesh would have ended up in more mundane reflections on agriculture, care of the body and other cultural institutions? I believe that this would at least be a valid extension of Merleau-Pontian ideas, something like an application of his basic scheme.

Now, as we have already considered in chapter 2, Merleau-Ponty adopts the particular logic of *Fundierung* from Husserl and uses it to understand meaning-making in general, and in particular the transcendental function of language as originally rooted in perceptual dialogue, and also of art. Together with the meaning-forming function of perception, language and art are Merleau-Ponty’s basic categories of enaction in a dialectical structure of originating and originated elements. Here, however, I should like to add another tier to this approach.

Already in *The Structure* we find Merleau-Ponty using the notion of ‘work’ to understand the specificity of the human order:

Human work inaugurates a third dialectic. For between man and the physico-chemical stimuli, it projects ‘use-objects’ (*Gebrauchsobjekte*) – clothing, tables, gardens – and ‘cultural objects’ – books, musical instruments, language – which constitute the proper milieu of man and brings about the emergence of new cycles of behaviour. ... It is by design that ... we chose the Hegelian term ‘work,’ which designates the ensemble of activities by which man transforms physical and living nature.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ ‘Le travail humain inaugure une troisième dialectique, puisqu’il projette entre l’homme et les stimuli physico-chimique des “objet d’usage” (*Gebrauchsobjekte*), – le vêtement, la table, le jardin, – des “objet culturel,” – le livre, l’instrument de musique, le langage, – qui constituent le milieu propre de l’homme et font émerger de nouveaux cycles de comportement. ... C’est à

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty identifies this as the defining feature of the human order in relation to other animals: human beings create new layers of structure that build upon previous structures. ‘What defines man is not the capacity to create a second nature – economic, social or cultural – beyond biological nature; it is rather the capacity of going beyond created structures in order to create others [*dépasser les structures créées pour en créer d’autres*].’¹²⁷ According to Merleau-Ponty, human existence can only be understood in relation to a world made richer by the human presence, that is to say, as disclosing structures of immense complexity that can never be reduced to the basic organism-environment interaction. In short, humans are only truly human in a world they have co-created in all the complexity of which they are able.

In the mid-1950s, Merleau-Ponty devoted a lecture course at the Collège de France to the concept of *institution* [*institution*], that is, to investigating the peculiar logic that makes possible this human culture with its never-ceasing forward movement of meaning-formation. Here it becomes abundantly clear that Merleau-Ponty uses the concept in a very broad sense, to specify the general logic of the development of meaning according to *Fundierung*. But when he chooses to translate the German *Stiftung* or *Fundierung* with the French *institution*, he also stresses the power of cultural and even political structures to influence human meaning; at the same time, institution signifies both the act of establishment and the thing established.¹²⁸ In short, the notion is broadened.

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes clearly between institution and constitution in a way that is pertinent to the argument I have been making: ‘The instituted makes sense without me, the constituted makes sense only for me.’¹²⁹ Apparently, Merleau-Ponty thinks of institution as the origin of subjectivity itself for he speaks of birth as an institution: ‘Birth [is not an act] of constitution, but the institution of a future.’¹³⁰ Birth is in this sense the institution of a sense to come, a potentiality to be unfolded: ‘The sense is deposited ... as something to continue, to complete without it being the case that this sequel is determined. This instituted will change, but this very change

dessin que ... nous choisissons le terme hégélien de “travail,” qui désigne l’ensemble des activités par lesquelles l’homme transforme la nature physique et vivante.’ SC., 174/162.

¹²⁷ SC., 189/175.

¹²⁸ See Claude Lefort’s ‘Foreword’ to IP., x.

¹²⁹ IP., 8.

¹³⁰ IP., 8.

is called for by its *Stiftung*.¹³¹ That which is instituted is a latent productivity, the promise of a future development.

After this beginning, a number of institutions may be considered as erected on the basis of the founding event, institutions that all contribute to the sense of the world. They may be personal or public, and occur throughout personal and public history – indeed, they may be animal and, as it were, pre-historical – but the important thing is an emergence of meaning over the course of time in which human history is caught up and which humans radically transform by their meaning-giving activity. In particular, human culture is instituted – and with it language, knowledge, and truth. Merleau-Ponty would never deny these accomplishments; he would only insist that they have evolved – ‘the true and the essence would be nothing without what leads to them’¹³² – and that they are always progressing towards the still unknown – ‘there is no ... absolute knowledge without the implication of an undeveloped sense.’¹³³ This, then, is not to say that what we know of the world is false, but rather that we have participated in bringing out this knowledge and that it is a work that is never complete; there is always more to discover. Only in this sense is the truth never absolute.

Now, among these institutions are language and science, but there must also be agriculture and the therapeutic arts. Among these acquisitions must be the building of houses and the baking of bread, the fermenting of grapes and the keeping of livestock. I have already said enough about the general Merleau-Pontian notion of meaning-formation in the previous chapters, the logic of *Fundierung* that he borrows and develops from Husserl; here I have only wanted to extend this notion with the help of his lectures on institution so that we can begin to see that this notion is intended to cover all aspects of human existence.

It seems to me – and this is the major point I wish to make – that this Merleau-Pontian scheme can be used to extend and develop the Augustinian understanding of our human ability to work together with the creative power of God to bring about and actualize what was previously hidden in creation as mere potential, a suggestive possibility that as far as I know has gone unnoticed. This would be a way to begin to redress the lacuna mentioned above, with respect to the question of how human beings are supposed to be actively participating in the formation of meaningful structures. As we have

¹³¹ IP., 9.

¹³² IP., 51.

¹³³ IP., 56.

seen, there are clearly openings in Augustine's work for this kind of human cooperation with the divine energy as it works through the innermost in all created things. There are even suggestions about the force of language and culture to actualize the potentiality of divine creation. However, these are precisely suggestions and openings; what Merleau-Ponty provides is a much richer account, in constant dialogue with science, which can significantly enlarge the scope of theological reflection on human co-creation. Given that contemporary constructive philosophical theology, exemplified above by John Milbank and Philip Hefner, gestures towards a more sustained theological engagement with human creativity, or *poiesis*, the Merleau-Pontian assist is intended to provide theological reflection with the kind of framework in which this can be more adequately worked out: *How* do we as creatures, within the full web of creation, participate in the emergence of its meaning? Further, how does such a participatory contribution become sedimented in the ever-moving development of human culture? It is here that I believe Merleau-Ponty may offer a substantive contribution to contemporary philosophical theology that goes beyond noting the interesting parallels between the theology of creation and the ontology of flesh – a creative contribution that is nevertheless rooted in the historical core of mainstream theological reflection in the West.¹³⁴

Such a theological apprenticeship, I suggest, is possible largely due to Merleau-Ponty's later development. Recall the critical discussion in chapter 2, concerning his ambivalence about how to characterize that with which subjectivity enters into dialogue. The Merleau-Pontian temptation was, I argued, to make human subjectivity the *sine qua non* of structures as such; but there were also scattered attempts to speak of that in which the subject-world

¹³⁴ I am aware that some contemporary writers deny this aspect of pre-modern theology entirely. Thus, Don Cupitt says that with the advent of (his version of) anti-realism, 'we can thus become creative for the first time in Christian history. In the old scheme of things [before the anti-realist revolution] God did all the creating. God stood on the far side of the world, everything was ready-made for us, and nothing much could be altered.' 'Anti-Realist Faith,' in Don Cupitt, *Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion: Selected Essays* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 44-45. But as we have seen, this cannot be right. We can affirm that modern philosophy has tended to emphasize the creative role of human participation more, and that pre-modern theology was reticent to use the world 'creative' about human beings, without thereby denying a 'creative' role, as the term is nowadays used, for human beings even in pre-Kantian Christian theology. This in turn suggests that the received historiography, which divides the history of philosophy in a pre-Kantian and post-Kantian phase, needs to be criticized and reconceived. For a critical discussion of this, though from the point of view of truth rather than meaning as such, see Robert Miner, *Truth in the Making: Creative Knowledge in Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), xi-xvi; see also Jacob Sherman, 'A Genealogy of Participation,' in Ferrer and Sherman, eds., *Participatory Turn*, 92-102.

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dialogue itself must be rooted. It is the latter approach that is taken up in his later work on nature and in particular in the ontology of flesh. Here we find Merleau-Ponty suggesting that we must understand the flesh as always already ruptured in the *écart* and chiasmically reordered in the intertwining. In other words, he says that being has this very structure, modelled on the human body, though it is not a static structure, for it births subjectivity and thereby comes to manifestation in ever more complex ways. From this perspective human subjectivity is still all-important, and it is our only access to being; however, human being is no longer the necessary support of meaningful structures, since it is itself just such a structure, having come into being as a fold in the flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty has thus arrived at ontology proper, rather than merely a philosophy of access – that is, of subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty suggests, as I argued in chapter 4, that the intertwined structure of the flesh is from eternity; but theology, I surmise, naturally sees the flesh, from within its own story, as God's creation. From that perspective, the flesh cannot be from eternity, but must have been created *ex nihilo*. Christian theology has indeed recourse to something that could well be described as an eternal chiasmic structure, but it is more often described in terms of *perichoresis* – the triune God. The theologian may therefore want to view, not just the human being, but the entire created world as a *vestigium Trinitatis*, and the flesh as chiasmically structured fits well into this perspective.

Reading the flesh in this way as created *ex nihilo* allows the theologian to hold together *coming to be* and *becoming*, where the former refers to the gratuitous gift from God of existence, and the latter refers to the open structures of this creation, in and by which subjectivity has a significant role to play in the bringing forth of its latent meaning.¹³⁵ And this is what I mean by saying that Merleau-Ponty's later development lets him bring much more to the conversation with theology: It is because he increasingly emphasizes that the world – the flesh or creation – has its own integrity, its own structures and powers of development, which subjectivity takes up but of which it is not the origin, that philosophical theology may consider 'the flesh' even as a description of the world created by God, may learn from this concept, and may use it to extend and develop its own understanding of what it might mean to be made in the creator's image. This is especially true from the perspective of an Augustinian theology of creation, for which the world's inherent potential

¹³⁵ On the distinction between *coming to be* and *becoming*, see Desmond, *God and the Between*, 248-249.

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for development and unfolding is, as we have now clearly seen, of such decisive importance.

In summary, I suggest, therefore, that an intertwined reading of Augustine and Merleau-Ponty can yield a philosophical theology that is more attuned to the co-creative role of human beings in the world – through perception, language and ideality; through arts and skills; through science, philosophy and knowledge; through institutional structures, societal organization and work in general. In affirming such a proposal, we would certainly once more go beyond what Augustine himself is saying, but we would be following out a trajectory that he nonetheless opened with his reflections on the structure of the created world as containing within itself numerous possibilities of development, some of which are open to being realized by human work as it participates with the divine creativity in the temporal unfolding of creation. And though this suggestion will have to remain rather programmatic at this stage, I believe Merleau-Ponty's persistent interrogation into *how* the sense of the world develops in the interaction between subjectivity and nature – that is, in the intertwining of flesh – may furnish us with a framework within which to further develop just such an understanding of human being and its place in the world. It will allow us to imagine a world so fecund, so full of potentiality that layers of sense can be endlessly sublimated in a production in which our participation and performance truly matter.

CONCLUSIONS AND TRAJECTORIES

I set out in search for an ontology that could preserve the integrity of human beings as part of the natural world, and the natural world in the presence of human existence. I did so from the perspective of philosophical theology, and with the belief that Merleau-Pontian philosophy – with its governing motifs of rootedness and verticality – would prove a valuable resource. The guiding idea was to stage a conversation between Augustine and Merleau-Ponty that would lead to productive tensions, to a mutual enrichment, but above all to a creative appropriation of Merleau-Pontian insights on the part of constructive philosophical theology. Before evaluating this conversation and drawing some tentative conclusions, let me retrace the most important stages of my argument.

In *Part One*, I presented Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in such a way that its contemporary value and creative potential could be recognized, both on its own terms as an acute philosophical articulation of the enigma of human being in the world, and in the way in which it gears into significant advances in cognitive science, philosophy of mind and theoretical biology. I was concerned with three main themes here. In chapter 1, the discussion revolved around philosophical anthropology and I traced Merleau-Ponty's attempt to steer a clear path between the Scylla of dualism and the Charybdis of reductive materialism. Merleau-Ponty's key idea was seen to be the rootedness of the personal subject in the lived body, which in turn must already be more than an aggregate of material particles related by 'external' causality – it must in some sense already be a subject incarnate. And as such, this body subject fulfils a transcendental function in the constitution of a first layer of perceptual meaning. However, I also considered the rootedness of the lived body and its peculiar intentionality in the phenomenon of life itself. Here I looked at Merleau-Ponty's early work, with an edge against reductionism, and sought to relate his 'emergentist' perspective to more recent developments in autopoietic

theory, organismic philosophy and the philosophy of mind, such that the general Merleau-Pontian approach could stand out as a live alternative within the contemporary debate.

In chapter 2, I picked up the theme of embodied intentionality and the primordial foundations of meaning. Presenting Merleau-Ponty's dialogical conception of perceptual meaning and the way in which it is developed in linguistic and cultural meaning, according to the logic of *Fundierung*, a picture emerged of human beings as deeply involved in meaning-making on all levels, and of meaning-making as a central motif of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. In particular, I looked at the ambiguous role of contingency in his understanding of the teleological development of meaning, which has a profound existential resonance. However, Merleau-Ponty's grounding of meaning in dialogical interaction – such as that between the lived body and the perceived world – and his suggestion that there can be no talk of any kinds of structure in the absence of these dialogical correlations, raised issues about how this notion of perceptual dialogue should be understood, and about whether his philosophy of meaning was adequate to the task of preserving the integrity of the world and worldly objects in the presence of human existence.

Having considered his philosophical anthropology and account of meaning, I proceeded, in chapter 3, to delineate Merleau-Ponty's later movement towards more explicitly ontological reflections, culminating in the merely sketched-out ontology of flesh. I argued that his ever more radical philosophical questioning led to an ontological consummation of phenomenological philosophy, and to the articulation of a framework in which the negative ambiguities and tensions of his earlier works can be more adequately resolved: With respect to philosophical anthropology, the residual dualism of his earlier account is rejected in favour of the primordial unity of being; and with respect to the question of meaning, the ontology of flesh does not construe the dialogical interaction of subject and world as the *primordial* foundation of all potentially meaningful structures. Instead, it understands being as 'auto-productive of meaning,' which makes it possible to say both that the subject emerges as a distinct structure within nature, and that this subject turns back on the world and invests it with new layers of meaning in perception, language, cultural institutions and so on. In this way, the subject is taken up as an integral part within the peculiar unity of being, which is described as always already ruptured in the *écart* and reordered in the intertwining. It seems to me that this approach does in fact manage to significantly preserve the integrity of human beings within the matrix of the

natural world, as well as the integrity of the natural world in the presence of human existence.

In *Part Two*, I attempted to stage a conversation between the Merleau-Pontian philosophy presented in Part One – in particular in the form of the later ontology – and philosophical theology developed along its Augustinian axis. I began, in chapter 4, with a presentation and discussion of Merleau-Ponty's complex relationship to Christian theology. Reviewing material that spans his career, I argued that his critique of theology falls in three main categories: The *first* is largely *practical* and concerns the consequences that follow from the idea of a transcendent creator God, which Merleau-Ponty contrasts with the idea of immanence and incarnation. As he understands it, one can only fully affirm and value the concrete sphere of worldly immanence if one rejects radical transcendence. The *second* is largely methodological and concerns the motivation and practice of philosophy, which for Merleau-Ponty is intimately tied to the affirmation of contingency and wonder at the fact that a precarious meaning emerges in the world and still freely and creatively develops. However, Merleau-Ponty argues that if a divine creator of the world is affirmed, this drives out all traces of contingency, and with it go wonder and philosophy. The *third* category of critique, finally, is more explicitly ontological and can be understood as deriving from Merleau-Ponty's attempt to preserve the integrity of the world as a productive origin of meaning – as *naturans* – and of human beings as genuinely participating in the unfolding development of the meaning of the world. But he takes this understanding of the world, or of nature, to be radically antithetical to the notion of a world created *ex nihilo* by a God who therefore transcends it, since such a world would lack the contingency that makes subjectivity, freedom and the creative participation in the development of meaning possible. At this stage Merleau-Ponty clearly sees his own nascent ontology as being incompatible with the ontology that follows from the Christian doctrine of creation.

Challenged by this critique, I then proceeded, in chapter 5, to lay out a different logic of creation than the one Merleau-Ponty assumed. I described the historical emergence and development of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and attempted to draw out its subtle philosophical consequences. The concept of 'the Christian Distinction,' with its concomitant understanding of divine transcendence as 'non-contrastive,' served as a basis from which to take up and further discuss Merleau-Ponty's three categories of critique. I argued (1) that the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, rather than banishing contingency, ushers in a novel and radical understanding of it – a contingency that pertains

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to the existence of the world, as well as to the structures within it – and therefore does not terminate the wonder that drives philosophy; (2) that according to the non-contrastive understanding of transcendence implied in creation *ex nihilo*, an affirmation of divine transcendence does not imply that God is absent from and is to be sought beyond this world, but rather that God is present in all created things; and finally (3), that the ontology following from the doctrine of creation – as understood by Augustine and later by Aquinas – does not at all lead to the kind of objectification of the world that Merleau-Ponty envisages, but rather to a world where the dynamic of secondary causes is entirely preserved, where there is a measure of contingency, and where there is room for the freedom of intentional subjects. In sum, I argued that the logic of creation neither leads to the loss of the integrity of the natural world, nor of human beings as integral parts of it. To the contrary, it was seen how the logic of creation in the thought of Augustine and Aquinas *demand*ed an affirmation of the integrity of creation, since it is given to be out of the abundance of the divine love alone.

Having cleared the ground for a more constructive conversation between Merleau-Pontian philosophy and Augustinian philosophical theology, I returned, in chapter 6, to the three main themes of Part One – the ontological framework, the emergence of human beings within nature, and the way in which human beings participate in the meaning-structures of the world. This time the larger context was that of Augustine's treatises on creation – especially *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* – which I read alongside Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh in order to yield a fresh perspective for contemporary philosophical theology. I argued that Augustine's creational ontology allows him to understand the created world as a matrix of primordial potentialities which lie ready to unfold when the time and circumstances are right – stressing the fact that Augustine conceives of the natural world as a productive source in its own right. I then considered the problem of the soul, trying to clear a space within the general Augustinian *scheme* for something like the 'carnal emergence' of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, one that would neither be dualism nor materialism. And finally, I traced the notion of a human co-creation or participation in the unfolding structures of the world, in Augustine's thought, arguing that this thought contains significant openings for such an approach to meaning – an approach that could be further developed using Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of meaning as a significant resource.

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Since this has been an explorative project, there will inevitably be something programmatic about the conclusions we can draw from it. For the fact is that in a number of respects I have only hoped to clear the ground for more extensive future work in each of the complex areas I have addressed, even if I have also suggested certain directions in which such work may be fruitfully pursued. The primary justification for the project has emerged, I believe, in the analyses carried out in the preceding chapters; but it will nevertheless be appropriate to conclude by highlighting what I take to be some of the more significant results of the conversation.

The *first* thing that stands out within the conversation as a whole is the continued philosophical relevance and significance of the doctrine of creation. Understood according to the logic of the Christian distinction it speaks not only to the legitimate concerns voiced by Merleau-Ponty, but it is able to serve as the basis for a theological engagement with some of the most pressing concerns of contemporary philosophy – producing a compelling philosophy that is neither dualist nor reductionist. For as I have tried to demonstrate throughout, questions pertaining to the nature of human being, or its participation in the precarious development of meaning, must be situated within a more encompassing hermeneutical framework – which is to say, within an ontology. Rather than an antiquated idea to be jettisoned, then, it seems to me that the doctrine of creation, when handled with all the sophistication it merits, is still the source from which philosophical theology should draw, not only its theology proper, but also the foundations of its ontological framework. And it might be that the full implications of the doctrine have yet to emerge. At any rate, the argument of this book has certainly foregrounded aspects of creational ontology that are usually not considered, but that now demand full attention.

The *second* point I wish to make is related to the first, and concerns an appreciation of just how strange and perplexing the human phenomenon is. It seems to me that we are bombarded – in academia as in popular culture – with theories that purport to explain this phenomenon by appealing to some simple theoretical formula, which, while it may look convincing enough on paper, is nevertheless impossible to square with the lived reality of being human. It is the singular virtue of Merleau-Ponty's work that it resists such simplifications in a philosophy that nonetheless seeks the rootedness of human being. This is why he says, in the *Structure*, that the human dialectic takes up the subordinate dialectics in which it is rooted in such a way as to change them – the mystery of the human form spreads to everything it comes to include. And the same

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attention to the human enigma is also characteristic of Augustine, only more so: No one can read his ‘phenomenology’ of the mind (or memory) in Book X of the *Confessions* without feeling in himself the vertigo of this mystery. As I have indicated, it is even true that Merleau-Pontian philosophy stands in need of a healthy dose of Augustinian interiority, so that it does not make the victory over dualism too easy for itself. The point is a simple one: full attention to the phenomenon guards us from assuming that we have fully understood what we are. And yet we *do* want to understand the phenomenon that we are, at least in some measure. Merleau-Ponty’s general approach is emergentist, and I have tried to make space within Augustine’s ontology – precisely by connecting it to his insistence on the potentiality and productivity which inhere in created nature – for something along similar lines. However, the question is whether ‘emergentism’ must become stranger still in order to fully account for the human phenomenon. I have no answer to that question, but I find it significant that emergence in Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology is no longer rooted in *mere* matter; rather, he comes to suggest what I have called a ‘carnal emergence,’ since, as we have seen, the flesh is ‘neither matter, nor mind, but their common root.’ Sketchy as it is, I believe contemporary philosophical theology would do well to seriously consider this option.

The *third* and final important theme I would like to highlight is the co-creative role of subjectivity – human participation in the meaning-structures of the world. In developing this idea, philosophical theology has less of a tradition to draw upon, though it need not work in a theological vacuum. Here progress is a question of finding the right kinds of roots and nourishing them so that they can bear fruit again. Might the time be ripe, for instance, for theology to fully elaborate the *imago Dei* in human beings also in terms of creativity, and so to begin to understand human beings as fully involved in bringing out the sense of the world? Such a project – primarily intellectual, though rich in ethical consequences – would clearly find roots in Augustine’s work. For Augustine has, once more, recourse to a creational ontology that lets him understand the world as a structure of potentialities, and he suggests that humans interact with these potentialities in order for them to unfold. Surely this is a good start, though it is also just that. To develop these ideas further there are rich resources in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of meaning, which surfaced as a major theme of the conversation I have posed here.

From the perspective of philosophical theology, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of meaning is suggestive precisely because he arrives at an understanding of the world – the flesh of the world – as a productive source of

meaning, a structure of potentiality to unfold over time. Moreover, he understands subjectivity and human beings to arise in the ever more complex intertwining of the flesh, turning back to or folding over the flesh so as to participate in this way in the emergence of those meaning-structures that are constitutive of the human world. And if we have understood the basic thrust of Merleau-Ponty's thinking, we know that this changes everything. What I have suggested is that this 'flesh' may be addressed as 'creation' – and if so, the possibility of a philosophical-theological appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of meaning offers itself. Philosophical theology would be able to figure flesh in creation – the flesh as *creation* and the flesh as *creative*.

What kind of ontology is needed to preserve the integrity of human beings as part of the natural world, as well as the integrity of the natural world in the presence of human existence? This was our governing question. A philosophical theology developed along its Augustinian axis, and in conversation with Merleau-Pontian philosophy, might answer as follows: What is needed is a creational ontology that understands the world as flesh, created with intrinsic structures and with the power to unfold, to produce and to bring forth, a being constantly becoming, in which the human is a particularly rich intertwined pattern, a being woven in the dark night of the flesh by a productive power made and sustained by God the creator, and hence, ultimately created by God *ex nihilo*. Moreover, as such a world unfolds in life, sentience and human consciousness, these things all turn back on the world – engaging in an ever more complex conversation with the nature of things – and in this way actualizing more of its inherent potentiality. Such a world has its integrity precisely as creation *and* creative, and human beings precisely as integral parts of this creative creation, of which they are also the co-creators.

Merleau-Ponty would no doubt say that these co-creators are those for whom being itself becomes a wondrous enigma. Augustine would say that such wonder may even lead to a recognition of the creator in whose image they have been made – which is itself an even greater mystery.

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