The Humanistic View of Merleau-Ponty
Chapter 5

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5.1 Introduction

Maurice Jean Jacques Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), French philosopher and public intellectual, was the leading academic proponent of existentialism and phenomenology in post-war France. Best known for his original and influential work on embodiment, perception, and ontology, he also made important contributions to the philosophy of art, history, language, nature, and politics. Associated in his early years with the existentialist movement through his friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty played a central role in the dissemination of phenomenology, which he sought to integrate with Gestalt psychology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Saussurian linguistics.

Today, a half-century after his death, Merleau-Ponty’s ideas are enjoying a renaissance, attracting the renewed attention of scientists and scholars from a wide range of disciplines. Philosophers in the English speaking world have over the last fifty years been slow to recognize the significance of his work, which resists easy classification and summary. He had little familiarity with “analytic” philosophy of 1950, however his ideas speak directly to the theories of perception and mind that have grown out of that tradition. Merleau Ponty was not a structuralist, though he saw sooner and more deeply than his contemporaries the importance of Saussurian linguistics and the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss.
Merleau-Ponty also departed sharply from his predecessors in the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. For whereas they proceeded at a very general level of description and argument, Merleau-Ponty regularly drew from the empirical findings and theoretical innovations of the behavioral, biological, and social sciences.

5.2 life and works

Merleau-Ponty was born on March 14th 1908, his father was killed in World War I. He completed his academic education of philosophy at the Ecole Normale Superieure in 1930 and became one of the foremost French philosophers of the period during, World War II, where he also served in the infantry. As well as being Chair of child psychology at Sorbonne in 1949, he was the youngest ever Chair of philosophy at the College de France awarded in 1952. He continued to fulfill this role until his untimely death in 1961 and was also a major contributor for the influential political, literary, and philosophical magazine that was ‘Les Temps Modernes’. While he repeatedly refused to be explicitly named as an editor alongside his friend and compatriot Jean-Paul Sartre, he was at least as important behind the scenes.

Along with Sartre, he has frequently been associated with the philosophical movement existentialism, though he never propounded quite the same extreme accounts of freedom, anguished responsibility, and conflicting relations with others, for which existentialism became both famous and notorious. Indeed, he spent much of his career contesting and reformulating many of Sartre's positions, including a sustained critique of what he saw as Sartre's dualist and Cartesian ontology. He also came to disagree with Sartre's rather hard-line Marxism, and this
was undoubtedly a major factor in what was eventually acrimonious ending to their friendship. While he died before completing his final opus that sought to completely reorient philosophy and ontology “The Visible and the Invisible”, his work retains an importance place to contemporary European philosophy. Having been one of the first to bring structuralism and the linguistic emphasis of thinkers like Saussure into a relationship with phenomenology, his influence is still considerable, and an increasing amount of scholarship is being devoted to his works.

His philosophy was heavily influenced by the work of Husserl, and his own particular brand of phenomenology was preoccupied with refuting what he saw as the twin tendencies of Western philosophy; those being empiricism, and what he termed intellectualism, but which is more commonly referred to idealism. He sought to re-articulate the relationship between subject and object, self and world, among various other dualisms, and his early and middle work did so primarily through an account of the lived and existential body. He argued that the significance of the body is often too underestimated by the philosophical tradition which has a tendency to consider the body simply as an object that a transcendent mind orders to perform varying functions. In this respect, his work was heavily based upon accounts of perception, and tended towards emphasizing an embodied inheritance in the world that is more fundamental than our reflective capacities, though he also claims that perception is itself intrinsically cognitive. His work is often associated with the idea of the 'primacy of perception', though rather than rejecting scientific and analytic ways of knowing the world, Merleau-Ponty simply wanted to argue that such knowledge is always derivative in relation to the more practical exigencies of the body's exposure to the world.
Merleau-Ponty published two major theoretical texts during his lifetime: “The Structure of Behavior” (1942) and “Phenomenology of Perception” (1945). Other important publications include two volumes of political philosophy, “Humanism and Terror” (1947) and “Adventures of the Dialectic” (1955), as well as two books of collected essays on art, philosophy, and politics: “Sense and Non-Sense” and “Signs”. Two unfinished manuscripts appeared posthumously: “The Prose of the World” drafted in 1950–51; and “The Visible and the Invisible” (1964), on which he was working at the time of his death. Lecture notes and student transcriptions of many of his courses at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France have also been published.

For most of his career, Merleau-Ponty focused on the problems of perception and embodiment as a starting point for clarifying the relation between the mind and the body, the objective world and the experienced world, expression in language and art, history, politics, and nature. Although phenomenology provided the very valuable framework for these investigations, Merleau-Ponty also drew freely on empirical research in psychology and ethology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and the arts. His constant points of historical reference are Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Marx. The characteristic approach of Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical work is his effort to identify an alternative to intellectualism or idealism, on the one hand, and empiricism or realism, on the other, by criticizing their common presupposition of a ready-made world and failure to account for the historical and embodied character of experience. In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty becomes increasingly critical of the intellectualist tendencies of the phenomenological method as well, although with the intention of reforming rather
than abandoning it. The posthumous writings collected in “The Visible and the Invisible” aim to clarify the ontological implications of a phenomenology that would self-critically account for its own limitations. This leads him to propose concepts such as “flesh” and “chiasm” that many consider to be his most fruitful philosophical contributions.

5.3 Early Philosophy

First of all Merleau-Ponty was a reputed French phenomenologist, though, one cannot understand “Phenomenology of Perception” without understanding phenomenology.

“Phenomenology of Perception” stands in the great phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. Yet Merleau-Ponty’s contribution is decisive, as he brings this tradition and other philosophical predecessors, particularly Descartes and Kant, to confront a neglected dimension of our experience: the lived body and the phenomenal world. Charting a bold course between the reductionism of science on the one hand and “intellectualism” on the other, Merleau-Ponty argues that “we should regard the body not as a mere biological or physical unit, but as the body which structures one’s situation and experience within the world.”

Phenomenology is an attempt to describe the basic structures of human experience and understanding from a first person point of view, in contrast to the reflective, third person perspective that tends to dominate scientific knowledge and common sense. Phenomenology calls us to return, Husserl define it as, “to the things themselves.” By “things” Husserl meant not real concrete objects, but the ideal (abstract) forms and contents of experience as we live them, not as we have
learned to conceive and describe them according to the categories of science and received opinion. Thus phenomenology is a descriptive, not an explanatory or deductive enterprise for it aims to reveal experience and frame hypotheses beyond its bounds.

Husserl’s concept of “things themselves,” is very similar with Franz Brentano’s intentionality, that is, the directedness of consciousness, its of-ness or “aboutness.” A perception, for example, is not just a mental state, but a perception or memory of something. To think or dream is to think or dream about something. That might sound trivial, seemingly obvious fact managed to elude early modern (and some more recent) theories of mind.

The Cartesian–Lockean conception of thought and experience – a conception that in many ways still figures prominently in contemporary psychology and cognitive science – tries to give an account of perception, imagination, intellect, in terms of “ideas,” or what Kant called “representations”, in the mind. Ideas or representations were thought to be something like inner mental tokens, conceived sometimes discursively on the model of thoughts or the sentences expressing them, sometimes pictorially on analogy with non-discursive images or, as Hume said, “impressions.” But the “way of ideas,” as Locke’s version of the theory came to be known, was problematic from the beginning. For ideas are meant to be objects of consciousness; they are what our attitudes are aimed at. But this begs the question of intentionality namely, how do we manage to be aware of anything? Simply positing ideas in the mind sheds no light on that question, then our awareness of our own ideas itself remains mysterious. Do we need a further, intermediate layer of ideas in order to be aware of the ideas that afford us an awareness of the external world? But this generates an infinite regress.
Husserl’s solution to this problem was to distinguish between the objects and the contents of consciousness. There is a difference between the things we are aware of and the contents of our awareness. An intentional attitude is therefore not a relation, but a mental act with intrinsic content of things. Perception is not of something, if the “of” in that formula indicates a causal relation to something in the external world, for there might be no such thing – indeed, as far as phenomenology is concerned, Husserl insisted, there might be no external world at all. Perception is instead of something, identifies as a merely putative object, whether the object exists or not.

Husserl’s distinction between the contents and the objects of consciousness parallels Frege’s distinction between linguistic sense (Sinn) and reference (Bedeutung). To use Frege’s own example, the expressions “Morning Star” and “Evening Star” have different senses, since they involve different descriptive contents and stand in different inferential relations to other terms, but they have one and the same referent, namely the planet Venus. Similarly, for Husserl, my perception of an apple tree in a garden has what he calls a “perceptual sense”, namely the content of my sensory experience, including not just what directly meets my eye, but also a vast background of assumptions, memories, associations, and anticipations that make my experience – like the world itself – inexhaustibly rich. Ponty says that “I see the tree not just as a physical surface facing me, but as a three-dimensional object with an interior and an exterior, a back and sides, and indefinitely many hidden features, which I can examine further by looking more closely. Similarly, in addition to their apparent size, shape and color, the trunk looks strong and solid, the branches supple, the leaves smooth, the apples ripe or unripe and so on. The fact that I have seen trees like this many times in the past
also lends my experience a sense of familiarity, which is no less part of my perceptual awareness."² That horizon of significance, which saturates every experience, distinguishing it from every other in its descriptive content, even when they pick out one and the same object, is what Husserl calls the noema of an intentional state, as distinct from its noesis, or the concrete psychological episode that has the content. Noesis and noema are, respectively, the mental act and its content similarly as the act of thinking and the thought, the act of judging and the judgment, the act of remembering and the memory itself. Similarly, on analogy with language, the noesis is to the noema as a linguistic term is its sense, and the noema is in turn distinct from the object of consciousness (if there is one) just as the sense of a term is distinct from what (if anything) it refers to.

Husserl’s theory of intentionality is thus a paradigm case of what we might call the semantic paradigm in the philosophy of mind. Unlike empiricist versions of the theory of ideas, which construe mental representations on analogy with pictures or images, the semantic model conceives of mental content in general – not just the content of thought and judgment, but also that of perception, memory, and imagination – on analogy with linguistic meaning.

Empiricism and the semantic paradigm are two versions of representationalism and Merleau-Ponty’s descriptive account of intentionality in “Phenomenology of Perception” is a repudiation of both. Intentionality, he insists, is constituted neither by brute sensation nor by conceptual content, but by noncognitive – indeed often unconscious – bodily skills and dispositions.

Merleau-Ponty and Husserl describes the content of experience as a kind of “meaning” (signification) or “sense” (sens), is not semantic content, however the
intuitive coherence things have for us when we find them and cope with them in our practical circumstances.

Things “make sense” for us perceptually as they surely do for animals and pre-verbal children as well. Language deepens and transforms our experience, but only by expanding, refining, and varying the significance we have always found in situations and events before we find it in sentences, thoughts, inferences, concepts, and conversations.

According to Merleau-Ponty, “intentionality is not mental representation at all, but skillful bodily responsiveness and spontaneity in direct engagement with the world.” To perceive is not to have inner mental states, but to be familiar with, deal with, and find our way around in an environment. Perceiving means having a body, which means inhabiting a world. Intentional attitudes are not mere bundles of sensorimotor capacities, but modes of existence, ways of what Merleau-Ponty, following Heidegger, calls “being in the world” (être au monde). Indeed, what fascinates Merleau-Ponty about perception is precisely the way in which it makes manifest a world by carving out a concrete perspective “in the recesses of a body.”

By manifesting itself in our bodily capacities and dispositions, perception grounds the basic forms of all human experience and understanding, namely perspectival orientation and figure/ground contrast, focus and horizon. The phenomenon of perspective is therefore ubiquitous – not just in sense experience, but in our intellectual, social, personal, cultural, and historical self-understanding, all of which are anchored in our bodily being in the world.

Rationalist philosophers like Leibniz, who understood our place in the world in intellectual terms as the relation of a thinking subject to an object, conceived
human knowledge as best finite approximation, indeed a pale reflection, of divine omniscience. God’s perfect and unlimited knowledge of the universe, is the proper standard against which to measure the scope and limits of what we can know. Whereas God’s perspective is the ideal “view from nowhere,” our view is always a view from somewhere – hence, partial and imperfect. And yet the very idea of a view from nowhere is incoherent: a view from nowhere, after all, would not be a view. Merleau-Ponty quotes that “To see is always to see from somewhere.” But how can we understand experience as at once anchored in a point of view and yet open out onto the world? “We must attempt to understand how vision can come about from somewhere without thereby being locked within its perspective.”

While the world itself exists objectively (out there), we can know it only through private subjective experiences (in here). A perspective would then be a kind of extraneous super addition to what there is, a mere instrument or medium, as Hegel put it, by means of which to grasp the world or through which to discern it, however darkly. Skeptical problems entailed by such metaphors have fueled modern epistemology at the expense of the mystery that inspired them, namely that it is a world – not just images or information – that reveals itself to us in perception. Hegel was one of the first philosopher to recommend dispensing with representationalism altogether, and Merleau-Ponty follows him in wanting to overcome what he, too, regards as the crippling effects such models have on how we understand ourselves and the world.

The philosophical mystery that impressed Merleau-Ponty and guided his work has two sides: that we are open onto the world and that we are embedded in it. The first side of the mystery is the astonishing fact that the world is disclosed to us at
all, that our awareness reaches out into the midst of things beyond ourselves, binding us to them in a way seemingly incomparable with the mute external relations in which objects blindly stand to one another. Perception is our “absolute proximity” to things and at the same time our “irremediable distance” from them. The senses seem to banish, as if magically, the density and obscurity of brute physical reality, opening the world up before us.

The second side of the mystery is that we ourselves are neither angels nor machines but living beings. We come to the world neither as data crunching information processors nor as ghostly apparitions floating over the surface of the world like a fog. Perceptual perspective is not just sensory or intellectual, but bodily perspective. We have a world only by having a body: “the body is our anchorage in a world”; “The body is our general means of having a world.” Of course, it is misleading to say that we “have” bodies, just as it would be misleading to say that we “have” minds or selves. It is better to say that we are minds, selves, bodies. It is equally misleading to say that we “have” a world, as if having a world were a kind of lucky accident, as if it might turn out that we don’t really have one, however much it seems as if we do. To say that we are bodily beings is to say that we are our bodies, just as saying that we are worldly beings is to say that worldliness is neither a property nor a relation, but our existence. Again, for human beings, to be at all is to be in the world.

The looming target of all Merleau-Ponty’s efforts was rationalism, the idea that thought constitutes our essential relation to the world, that for our attitudes to have content at all is for them to be, as Descartes said, modes of thinking. But perception is not a mode of thought; it is more basic than thought; indeed, thought
rests on and presupposes perception. As children, we do not learn how to attach thoughts to a sensory world we encounter in the course of already thinking however we learn how to think about what we already find ourselves seeing, hearing, grasping: “a child perceives before it thinks.” Moreover, the intelligible world, being fundamentally fragmentary and abstract, stands out as foreground only against the stability and plenitude of a perceptual background: “the sensible world is ‘older’ than the world of thought, for the former is visible and relatively continuous . . . the latter, invisible and sparse.”

One could say that thinking is more like perceiving than rationalists think it is. Not because perception and judgment have the same kinds of intentional content, which just happens to be coupled to different kinds of subjective attitudes, but because thought and perception shares many of the same underlying intuitive structures. Thought, like perception has its own sort of perspectival orientation, we often approach a problem from a different angle, grasp it or lose sight of it; when we struggle to comprehend something, we try to get our minds around it, and so on. So like perceiving, thinking focuses on something bound in a horizon; it distinguishes figure from ground. Even very abstract ideas can be at the center or on the periphery of our attention.

Merleau-Ponty’s central philosophical insight about perception is that it is not just contingently but essentially bodily. Perception is not a private mental event, nor is our own body just one more thing in the world alongside others. We are consequently in danger of losing sight of perception altogether when we place it on either side of the distinction between inner subjective experiences and external objective facts. Interior and exterior, mental and physical, subjective and objective
these notions are too crude and misleading to capture the phenomenon. Perception is both intentional and bodily, both sensory and motor, and so neither merely subjective nor objective, inner nor outer, spiritual nor mechanical.

The middle ground between such categories is thus not just their middle but indeed their ground, for it is what they depend on and presuppose. There are such things as subjective sensations and sensory qualities, but only because we can sometimes conjure them up by abstracting away from our original openness onto the world and zeroing in on the isolated features of things, and on bits of experience that we suppose (rightly or wrongly) must correspond to them, just as we can abstract in the other direction away from ourselves toward a world regarded as independent of our perspective on it.

According to Merleau-Ponty it is difficult to draw a distinction for analytical purposes in that primitive middle ground between two aspects of perception that arguably underlie and motivate all subsequent distinctions between subjective and objective, inner and outer, mental and physical. The two underlying aspects of perception are the (relative) passivity of sense experience and the (relative) activity of bodily skills. The Kantian contrast between receptivity and spontaneity, though crude and abstract in its own way, comes closer than other such distinctions to capturing the two essential aspects of perception, namely its sensory and its motor dimensions. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “The structure ‘world,’ with its double moment of sedimentation and spontaneity, is at the center of consciousness.” Those two moments are not sharply distinct, self-sufficient states, but are interwoven and inseparable aspects of a single, unified phenomenon. They are not, like Kantian intuitions and concepts, discrete parts or ingredients of a
composite product, but more like two sides of a coin or two dimensions of a figure. Perception is always both passive and active, situational and practical, conditioned and free.

Perception is the ground of both the subjectivity and the objectivity of experience, of its inner feel and its outward “grip” (prise) on the world. Perception is not a “mental” event, for we experience our own sensory states not merely as states of mind, but as states of our bodies and our bodily behaviors. Even Descartes had to concede this point to common sense, albeit in trying to coax us out of it by means of purely rational – often strikingly counter-intuitive – arguments to the contrary.

We feel pain in our bodies, he admitted, but only because we are confused, for a pain can exist only in a mind. Similarly, we imagine that we see with our eyes, but this is impossible, for seeing is not a physical but a mental event. Like many professional philosophers today, Descartes regarded experiential phenomena as mere appearances, eminently revisable, indeed supplantable, by the discoveries of pure rational inquiry. Our naïve conception of ourselves as bodies, he thought, could be accommodated simply by acknowledging a close causal relation between our physical and mental states. We do not, of course, feel like minds housed or lodged in our bodies, “as a sailor is present in a ship.” And yet, for Descartes, the metaphysical fact of the matter is that the relation between experience and the body is not an identity, but a causal relation between two substances.

The body and experience are not just causally connected, but identical. Is such an identity conceptually necessary, deducible a priori? Do concepts pertaining to perception entail concepts pertaining to the body? What purely rational inferences to bodily phenomena can be drawn from our best understanding of perception,
sensation, recognition, judgment? For Merleau-Ponty, the relation between perception and the body is neither causal nor logical, for those are not the only ways in which the coincidences and dependencies between the body and experience make sense to us. Instead, all explicit thought about perception is parasitic on a more basic understanding we have of ourselves simply in virtue of being embodied perceivers. We have a pre-reflective grasp of our own experiences, not as causally or conceptually linked to our bodies, but as coinciding with them in relations of mutual motivation. To say that perception is essentially bodily is to say that we do not and cannot understand it in abstraction from its concrete corporeal conditions. The phenomenal field is neither caused nor defined but constituted by the sensorimotor structures and capacities of the body. The structure of perception just is the structure of the body: “my body is my point of view upon the world.”

Of course, from a third person point of view, the structures and capacities of the body are mere contingent, ultimately arbitrary facts about the kinds of creatures we happen to be. And yet those facts cannot manifest themselves as contingent and arbitrary for us, from our point of view, for they just are our perspective on the world. The body is not just one more object in the environment, for we do not understand our own bodies as merely accidentally occurring things. The point is not just that the boundary between my body and the environment cannot be drawn very sharply; what matters is not where the boundary lies, but rather that there is a difference in principle between myself and my world. My body cannot be understood simply as that chunk of the material world that sits in closest contact with my mind. However vague the material boundary between body and environment may be, it cannot collapse entirely, for an environment is an
environment only for a body that cannot perceive itself as just one more object among others: “I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, inspect them, and walk around them. But when it comes to my body, I never observe it itself. I would need a second body to be able to do so, which would itself be unobservable.”

My body is my perspective on the world and so constitutes a kind of background field of perceptual necessity against which sensorimotor contingencies show up as contingent. Manifestly contingent facts about perception, that is, presuppose (more or less) invariant structures of the phenomenal field, for example perspectival orientation in space and time and figure/ground contrast. This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenal field is always a “transcendental field,” that is, a space of possibilities, impossibilities, and necessities constitutive of our perceptual world.

The body is not just a causal but a transcendental condition of perception, which is to say that we have no understanding of perception at all in abstraction from body and world.

What Merleau-Ponty advances in “Phenomenology of Perception”, then, is in effect a new concept of experience. His aim is to realizing our philosophical understanding of perception and the body with things we are always already familiar with before we begin to reflect and theorize. What we can learn from Merleau-Ponty’s efforts is thus something we already knew, if only tacitly, something we acquire neither from logical analysis nor from empirical inquiry. In this way, his work performs the recollective function of philosophy as Plato conceived it: to remind us in a flash of recognition what we feel we must already have comprehended, but had forgotten precisely owing to our immersion in the visible world.
5.4 Phenomenology of Perception

Published in 1945, Merleau-Ponty’s monumental work “Phenomenology of Perception” signaled the arrival of a major new philosophical and intellectual voice in post-war Europe. Breaking with the prevailing picture of existentialism and phenomenology at the time, it has become one of the landmark works of twentieth-century thought.

Completed in 1944 and published the following year, “Phenomenology of Perception” is the work for which Merleau-Ponty was best known during his lifetime and that established him as the leading French phenomenologist of his generation. Here Merleau-Ponty develops his own distinctive interpretation of phenomenological method, informed by his new familiarity with Husserl’s unpublished manuscripts and his deepened engagement with other thinkers in this tradition, like Eugen Fink and Martin Heidegger. “Phenomenology of Perception” again draws extensively on Gestalt theory and contemporary research in psychology and neurology. Psychological research complements and, at times, serves as a counterpoint to phenomenological descriptions of perceptual experience across a wide range of existential dimensions, including sexuality, language, space, nature, intersubjectivity, time, and freedom. In Phenomenology of Perception” Merleau-Ponty develops a characteristic rhythm of presenting first, the realist or empiricist approach to a particular dimension of experience, followed by its idealist or intellectualist alternative, before developing a third way that avoids the problematic assumption common to both, namely, their “unquestioned belief in the world”: the prejudice that the objective world exists as a ready-made and fully present reality.
“Phenomenology of Perception” introduces its inquiry with a critique of the “classical prejudices” of empiricism and intellectualism. Merleau-Ponty rejects the empiricist understanding of sensation, with its correlative “constancy hypothesis”, and the role of empiricism grants to association and the projection of memory for treating the basic units of sensation as determinate atoms rather than as meaningful wholes. These wholes include ambiguities, indeterminacies, and contextual relations that defy explanation in terms of the causal action of determinate things. Intellectualism aims to provide an alternative to empiricism by introducing judgment or attention as mental activities that synthesize experience from the sensory givens, yet it adopts empiricism’s starting point in dispersed, atomic sensations. Both approaches are guilty of reading the results of perception (the objective world) back into perceptual experience, thereby falsifying perception’s characteristic structure: the spontaneous configuration of perceived phenomena themselves, with their indeterminacies and ambiguities, and the dynamic character of perception as an historical process involving development and transformation. By treating perception as a causal process of transmission or a cognitive judgment, empiricism and intellectualism deny any meaningful configuration to the perceived phenomena and treat all values and meanings as projections, leaving no basis in perception itself for distinguishing the true from the illusory.

In contrast, Merleau-Ponty argues that the basic level of perceptual experience is the gestalt, the meaningful whole of figure against ground, and the indeterminate and contextual aspects of the perceived world are positive phenomenon that cannot be eliminated from a complete account. Sensing, in contrast with knowing, is a “living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life,” providing the perceived world with meanings and
values that refer essentially to our bodies and lives. We forget this “phenomenal field”, the world as it appears directly to perception, as a consequence of perception’s own tendency to forget itself in favour of the perceived that it discloses. Perception orients itself toward the truth, placing its faith in the eventual convergence of perspectives and progressive determination of what was previously indeterminate. But it thereby naturally projects a completed and invariant “truth in itself” as its goal. Science extends and amplified this natural tendency through increasingly precise measurements of the invariants in perception, leading eventually to the theoretical construction of an objective world of determinate things. Once this determinism of the “in itself” is extended universally and applied even to the body and the perceptual relation itself, then its ongoing dependence on the “originary faith” of perception is obscured; perception is reduced to “confused appearances” that require methodical reinterpretation, and the eventual result is dualism, solipsism, and skepticism. The “fundamental philosophical act” would therefore “return to the lived world beneath the objective world.”

This requires a transcendental reduction: a reversal of perception’s natural tendency to cover its own tracks and a bracketing of our unquestioned belief in the objective world. Yet this cannot be a recourse to any transcendental consciousness that looks on the world from outside and is not itself emergent from and conditioned by the phenomenal field. Rather than a transcendental ego, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “transcendental field”, emphasizing that reflection always has a situated and partial perspective as a consequence of being located within the field on which it reflects.

The first of the three major parts of “Phenomenology of Perception” concerns the body. As we have seen, perception transcends itself toward a determinate object
“in itself”, culminating in an objective interpretation of the body. Part One shows the limits of this objective account and sketches an alternative understanding of the body across a series of domains, including the experience of one’s own body, lived space, sexuality, and language. Through a contrast with pathological cases like phantom limbs, Merleau-Ponty describes, the body’s typical mode of existence as “being-toward-the-world”—a pre-objective orientation toward a situation that is explicable neither in terms of third-person causal interactions nor by explicit judgments or representations. The body’s orientation toward the world is essentially temporal, involving a dialectic between the present body (characterized, after Husserl, as an “I can”) and the habit body, the sedimentations of past activities that take on a general, anonymous, and autonomous character. While the body’s relation to the world serves as the essential background for the experience of any particular thing, the body itself is experienced in ways that distinguish it in kind from all other things: it is a permanent part of one’s perceptual field, even though one cannot in principle experience all of it directly; it has “double sensations”, such as when one hand touches another, that enact a form of reflexivity; it has affective experiences that are not merely representations; and its kinesthetic sense of its own movements is given directly.

This kinesthetic awareness is made possible by a pre-conscious system of bodily movements and spatial equivalences that Merleau-Ponty terms the “body schema”. In contrast with the “positional spatiality” of things, the body has a “situational spatiality” that is oriented toward actual or possible tasks. The body’s existence as “being-toward-the-world”, is a projection toward lived goals, is therefore expressed through its spatiality, which forms the background against which
objective space is constituted. Merleau-Ponty introduces here the famous case of Schneider, whose reliance on pathological substitutions for normal spatial abilities helps to bring the body’s typical relationship with lived space to light. Schneider lacks the ability to “project” into virtual space; more generally, his injury has disrupted the “intentional arc” that projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships.”¹³ The body’s relationship with space is therefore intentional, bodily space is a multi-layered manner of relating to things, so that the body is not “in” space but lives and inhabits it.

Just as bodily space reflects an originary form of intentionality—a pre-cognitive encounter with the world as meaningfully structured—similarly shown to be the case for sexuality and language. Sexuality takes on a special significance because it essentially expresses the metaphysical drama of the human condition while infusing the atmosphere of our lives with sexual significance. Like space and sexuality, speech is also a form of bodily expression. Language does not initially encode ready-made thoughts but rather expresses through its style as a bodily gesture. We mistake language for a determined code by taking habitual or sedimented language as our model, thereby missing “authentic” or creative speech. Since language, like perception, hides its own operations in carrying us toward its meaning, it offers an ideal of truth as its presumptive limit, inspiring our traditional privileging of thought or reason as detachable from all materiality. But, at a fundamental level, language is comparable to music in the way that it remains tied to its material embodiment; each language is a distinct and ultimately...
untranslatable manner of “singing the world”, of extracting and expressing the “emotional essence” of our surroundings and relationships.\(^{14}\)

Having rediscovered the body as expressive and intentional unit, Merleau-Ponty turns in Part Two of “Phenomenology of perception” to the perceived world, with the aim of showing how the pre-reflective unity of co-existence that characterizes the body has as its co-relation and the synthesis of things and the world; “One’s own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism,”\(^{15}\) and its expressive unity therefore also extends to the sensible world. Merleau-Ponty develops this interpretation of the sensibility through detailed studies of sensing, space, and the natural and social worlds. Sensing takes place as the “co-existence” or “communion” of the body with the world that Merleau-Ponty describes as a reciprocal exchange of question and answer: “a sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that will provide it with the means to become determinate … I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet I only do this in response to its solicitation…. The sensible gives back to me what I had lent to it, but I received it from the sensible in the first place.”\(^{16}\)

As co-existence, sensing is characterized by an intentionality that sympathetically attunes itself to the sensed according to a dialectic in which both terms—the perceiving body and the perceived thing—are equally active and receptive: the thing invites the body to adopt the attitude that will lead to its disclosure. Since the subject of this perception is not the idealist’s “for itself”, neither is the object of perception the realist’s “in itself”; however the agent of perception is the pre-reflective and anonymous subjectivity of the body, which remains enmeshed in
and “connatural” with the world that it perceives. The senses are unified without losing their distinctness in a fashion comparable to the binocular synthesis of vision, and their anonymity is a consequence of the “historical thickness” of perception as a tradition that operates beneath the level of reflective consciousness. For first-person awareness, one’s anonymous perceptual engagement with the world operates as a kind of ‘original past, a past that has never been present’.

The pre-historical pact between the body and the world informs our encounters with space, revealing a synthesis of space that is neither “spatialized” (as a pre-given container in which things are arranged) nor “spatializing” (like the homogenous and interchangeable relations of geometrical space). Drawing on psychological experiments concerning bodily orientation, depth, and movement, Merleau-Ponty argues that “empiricist and intellectualist accounts of space must give way to a conception of space as co-existence or mutual implication characterized by existential “levels”, our orientation toward up and down, or toward what is in motion or stationary, is a function of the body’s adoption of a certain level within a revisable field of possibilities.” 17 Lived inherence in space contrasts with the abstract space of the analytical attitude, revindicating the existential space of night, dreams, or myths in relation to the abstract space of the ‘objective’ world.

The properties of things that we take to be “real” and “objective” also tacitly assume a reference to the body’s norm and its adoption of levels. An object’s “true” qualities depend on the body’s privileging of orientations that yield maximum clarity and richness. This is possible because the body serves as a template for the style and logic of the world, the concordant system of relations that links the
qualities of an object, the configuration of the perceptual field, and background levels such as lighting or movement. In this symbiosis or call-and-response between the body and the world, things have sense as the correlates of my body, and reality therefore always involves a reference to perception. Yet, to be real, things cannot be reducible to correlates of the body or perception; they retain a depth and resistance that provides their existential index. While each thing has its individual style, the world is the ultimate horizon or background style against which any particular thing can appear. The perspectival limitations of perception, both spatially and temporally, are the obverse of this world’s depth and inexhaustibility. Through an examination of hallucination and illusions, Merleau-Ponty argues that “skepticism about the existence of the world makes a category mistake.” While we can doubt any particular perception, illusions can appear only against the background of the world and our primordial faith in it. While we never coincide with the world or grasp it with absolute certainty, we are also never entirely cut off from it; perception essentially aims toward truth, but any truth that it reveals is contingent and revisable.

Rejecting analogical explanations for the experience of other people, Merleau-Ponty proposes that the rediscovery of the body as a third genre of being between the pure subject and the object makes possible encounters with others. We perceive others directly as pre-personal and embodied living beings engaged with a world that we share in common. This encounter at the level of anonymous and pre-personal lives does not, however, present us with another person in the full sense, since our situations are never entirely congruent. The perception of others involves an alterity, a resistance, and a plenitude that are never reducible to what is
presented, which is the truth of solipsism. Our common corporeality nevertheless opens us onto a shared social world, a permanent dimension of our being in the mode of the anonymous and general “someone”. The perception of others is therefore a privileged example of the paradox of transcendence running through our encounter with the world as perceived: “Whether it is a question of my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always to know how I can be open to phenomena that transcend me and that, nevertheless, only exist to the extent that I take them up and live them.”

This “fundamental contradiction” defines our encounters with every form of transcendence and requires new conceptions of consciousness, time, and freedom.

The fourth and final section of “Phenomenology of Perception” explores these three themes, starting with a revision of the concept of the cogito that avoids reducing it to merely episodic psychological fact or elevating it to a universal reality of self and my cogitationes. Merleau-Ponty argues that “we cannot separate the certainty of our thoughts from that of our perceptions, since truly perceive is to have confidence in the veracity of one’s perceptions.” Furthermore, we are not transparent to ourselves, since our “inner states” are available to us only in a situated and ambiguous way. The genuine cogito, Merleau-Ponty argues, is a cogito “in action”: we do not deduce “I am” from “I think”, but rather the certainty of “I think” rests on the “I am” of existential engagement. More basic than explicit self-consciousness and presupposed by it is an ambiguous mode of self-experience that Merleau-Ponty terms the silent or “tacit” cogito—our pre-reflective and inarticulate grasp on the world and ourselves that becomes explicit and determinate only when it finds expression for itself. The illusions of pure self-
possession and transparency—like all apparently “eternal” truths—are the results of acquired language and concepts.

Rejecting classic approaches to time that treat it either as an objective property of things, as a psychological content, or as the product of transcendental consciousness, Merleau-Ponty return to the “field of presence” as our foundational experience of time. This field is a network of intentional relations, of “protentions” and “retentions”, in a single movement of self-differentiation, such that ‘each present reaffirms the presence of the entire past that it drives away, and anticipates the presence of the entire future or the ‘to-come’. Time in this sense is “ultimate subjectivity”, understood not as an eternal consciousness, but rather as the very act of temporalization. As with the tacit cogito, the auto-affection of time as ultimate subjectivity is not a static self-identity but involves a dynamic opening toward alterity. In this conception of time as field of presence, which “reveals the subject and the object as two abstract moments of a unique structure, namely, presence”, Merleau-Ponty sees the resolution to all problems of transcendence as well as the foundation for human freedom. Against the Sartrean position that freedom is either total or null, Merleau-Ponty holds that freedom emerges only against the background of our “universal engagement in a world”, which involves us in meanings and values that are not of our choice. We must recognize, first, an “authochthonous sense of the world that is constituted in the exchange between the world and our embodied existence” and second that the acquired habits and the sedimented choices of our lives have their own inertia. This situation does not eliminate freedom but is precisely the field in which it can be achieved. Taking class consciousness as his example, Merleau-Ponty proposes that this dialectic of freedom and acquisition provides the terms for an account of history, according to
which history can develop a meaning and a direction that are neither determined by events nor necessarily transparent to those who live through it.

The “Phenomenology of Perception” offers Merleau-Ponty’s most detailed and systematic exposition of the phenomenological method. His account is organized around four themes: the privileging of description over scientific explanation or idealist reconstruction, the phenomenological reduction, the eidetic reduction, and intentionality. Phenomenology sets aside all scientific or naturalistic explanations of phenomena in order to describe faithfully the pre-scientific experience that such explanations take for granted. Similarly, since the world exists prior to reflective analysis or judgment, phenomenology avoids reconstructing actual experience in terms of its conditions of possibility or the activity of consciousness. The phenomenological reduction, on his interpretation, is not an idealistic method but an existential one, namely, the reflective effort to disclose our pre-reflective engagement with the world. Through the process of the reduction, we discover the inherence of the one, reflects in the world that is reflected on and consequently, the essentially incomplete character of every act of reflection, which is why Merleau-Ponty claims that the “most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction”22. Similarly, the “eidetic reduction”, described by Husserl as the intuition of essential relations within the flux of conscious experience, is necessary if phenomenology is to make any descriptive claims that go beyond the brute facts of a particular experience. But this does not found the actual world on consciousness as the condition of the world’s possibility; instead, “the eidetic method is that of a phenomenological positivism grounding the possible upon the real.”23 Lastly, Merleau-Ponty reinterprets the phenomenological concept of intentionality, traditionally understood as the
recognition that all consciousness is consciousness of something. Merleau Ponty as well as Husserl, he distinguishes the “act intentionality” of judgments and voluntary decisions from the “operative intentionality” that “establishes the natural and pre-predicative unity of the world and of our life”\textsuperscript{24}. Guided by this broader concept of intentionality, philosophy’s task is to take in the “total intention” of a sensible thing, a philosophical theory, or an historical event, which is its “unique manner of existing” or its “existential structure”. Phenomenology thereby expresses the emergence of reason and meaning in a contingent world, a creative task comparable to that of the artist or the political activist, which requires an ongoing “radical” or self-referential reflection on its own possibilities. On Merleau-Ponty’s presentation, the tensions of phenomenology’s method therefore reflect the nature of its task: “The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative style in which it proceeds are not the sign of failure, they were inevitable because phenomenology’s task was to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason.”\textsuperscript{25}

5.5 The concept of Chiasm

The manuscript and working notes published posthumously as “The Visible and the Invisible” (1964), extracted from a larger work underway at the time of Merleau-Ponty’s death, is considered by many to be the best presentation of his later ontology. The main text, drafted in 1959 and 1960, is contemporaneous with “Eye and Mind” and the Preface to Signs, Merleau-Ponty’s final collection of essays. The first three chapters progressively develop an account of “philosophical interrogation” in critical dialogue with scientism, the philosophies of reflection (Descartes and Kant), Sartrean negation, and the intuitionisms of Bergson and
Husserl. These are followed by a stand-alone chapter, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm”, presenting Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh. The published volume also includes a brief abandoned section of the text as an appendix and more than a hundred pages of selected working notes composed between 1959 and 1961. Merleau-Ponty frames the investigation with a description of “perceptual faith”, our shared pre-reflective conviction that perception presents us with the world as it actually is, even though this perception is mediated, for each of us, by our bodily senses. This apparent paradox creates no difficulties in our everyday lives, but it becomes incomprehensible when thematized by reflection.

For Merleau-Ponty the “unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world” is the starting point for developing an alternative account of perception, the world, intersubjective relations, and ultimately being as such. Neither the natural sciences nor psychology provide an adequate clarification of this perceptual faith, since they rely on it without acknowledgment even as their theoretical constructions rule out its possibility. Philosophies of reflection, exemplified by Descartes and Kant, also fail in their account of perception, since they reduce the perceived world to an idea, equate the subject with thought, and undermine any understanding of intersubjectivity or a world shared in common.

Sartre’s dialectic of being (in-itself) and nothingness (for-itself) makes progress over philosophies of reflection insofar as it recognizes the ecceity of the world, with which the subject engages not as one being alongside others but rather as a nothingness, that is, as a determinate negation of a concrete situation that can co-exist alongside other determinate negations. Even so, for Sartre, pure nothingness and pure being remain mutually exclusive, ambivalently identical in their perfect
opposition, which brings any movement of their dialectic to a halt. The
“philosophy of negation” is therefore shown to be a totalizing or “high-altitude”
thought that remains abstract, missing the true opening onto the world made
possible by the fact that nothingness is “sunken into being”. This “bad” dialectic
must therefore give way to a “hyper-dialectic” that remains self-critical about its
own tendency to reify into fixed and opposed these.

The philosophy of intuition takes two forms: the Wesenschau of Husserl, which
converts lived experience into ideal essences before a pure spectator, and
Bergsonian intuition, which seeks to coincide with its object by experiencing it
from within. Against the first, Merleau-Ponty argues that the world’s givenness is
more primordial than the ideal essence; the essence is a variant of the real, not its
condition of possibility. Essences are not ultimately detachable from the sensible
but are its “invisible” and its latent structure of differentiation. Against a return to
the immediacy of coincidence or a nostalgia for the pre-reflective, Merleau-Ponty
holds that there is no self-identical presence to rejoin; the “immediate” essentially
involves distance and non-coincidence. Consequently, truth must be redefined as
“a privative non-coinciding, a coinciding from afar, a divergence, and something
like a ‘good error’.”

In the final chapter of “The Intertwining—The Chiasm”, Merleau-Ponty turns
directly to the positive project of describing his ontology of “flesh”. Intertwining
[entrelacs] here translates Husserl’s Verflechtung, entanglement or interweaving,
like the woof and warp of a fabric. Chiasm has two senses in French and English
that are both relevant to Merleau-Ponty’s project: a physiological sense that refers
to anatomical and genetic structures with a crossed arrangement (like the optic
nerves), and a literary sense referring to figures of speech that repeat structures in reverse order (AB:BA). For Merleau-Ponty, the chiasm is a structure of mediation that combines the unity-in-difference of its physiological sense with the reversal and circularity of its literary usage. A paradigmatic example of chiasmic structure is the body’s doubling into sensible and sentient aspects during self-touch. Elaborating on Husserl’s descriptions of this phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes three consequences: First, the body as sensible-sentient is an “exemplar sensible” that demonstrates the kinship or ontological continuity between subject and object among sensible things in general. Second, this relationship is reversible, like “obverse and reverse” or “two segments of one sole circular course”. Third, the sentient and sensible never strictly coincide but are always separated by a divergence that defers their unity.

Chiasm is therefore a crisscrossing or a bi-directional becoming or exchange between the body and things that justifies speaking of a “flesh” of things, a kinship between the sensing body and sensed things that makes their communication possible. Flesh in this sense is a “general thing” between the individual and the idea that does not correspond to any traditional philosophical concept, but is closest to the notion of an “element” in the classical sense. Merleau-Ponty denies that this is a subjective or anthropocentric projection: “carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible.”

The generality of flesh embraces an inter-corporeity, an anonymous sensibility shared out among distinct bodies: just as my two hands communicate across the
lateral synergy of my body, I can touch the sensibility of another: “The handshake too is reversible”.\textsuperscript{31}

Merleau-Ponty calls the sensible flesh “visible” —is not complete flesh at all because flesh also “sublimates” itself into an “invisible” dimension: the “glorified” flesh of ideas. Taking as his example of the “little phrase” from Vinteuil’s sonata (in \textit{Swann’s Way}), Merleau-Ponty describes literature, music, and the passions as “the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas”, although in such cases these ideas “cannot be detached from the sensible appearance and be erected into a second positivity.”\textsuperscript{32} Creative language necessarily carries its meaning in a similarly embodied fashion, while the sediments of such expression result in language as a system of formalized relations. What we treat as “pure ideas” are nothing more than a certain divergence and ongoing process of differentiation, now occurring within language rather than sensible things. Ultimately we find a relation of reversibility within language like that holding within sensibility: just as, in order to see, my body must be part of the visible and capable of being seen, so, by speaking, I make myself one who can be spoken to (allocutary) and one who can be spoken about (delocutary). While all of the possibilities of language are already outlined or promised within the sensible world, reciprocally the sensible world itself is unavoidably inscribed with language.

This final chapter of “\textit{The Visible and the Invisible}” illustrates chiasmic mediation across a range of relations, including sentient and sensed, touch and vision, body and world, self and other, fact and essence, perception and language. There is not one chiasm but rather various chiasmic structures at different levels. As Renaud
Barbaras notes, “It is necessary … to picture the universe as intuited by Merleau-Ponty as a proliferation of chiasms that integrate themselves according to different levels of generality”.

The ultimate ontological chiasm, that between the sensible and the intelligible, is matched by an ultimate epistemological chiasm, that of philosophy itself. As Merleau-Ponty writes in a working note from November 1960, “the idea of chiasm, that is: every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being held, the hold is held, it is inscribed and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of. Starting from there, elaborate an idea of philosophy. It is the simultaneous experience of the holding and the held in all orders.”

The lived body has an essential structure of its own which cannot be captured by the language and concepts used to explain inanimate objects in the world, that is, the lived body is directed toward an experiencing world. The world of everyday experience is described as the “lived-through-world”.

This contrasts from Descartes idea of the body. Our lived and objective body allows us to perceive the world as one entity; Merleau-Ponty claims that the unity of experienced objects is not accomplished through the application of mental rules and categories, but through pre-conscious power of bodily synthesis. One does not separate the senses individually, like auditory and visual experiences, the synthesis of the senses of the body allow us to perceive a unified world. This extends beyond the sense organs in that we move spatially in the world, extending sensation into perception. One can perceive objects in the world relative to their purpose and significance to needs and capacities of the lived body. The objects in the world display themselves, in other words to look at an object is to inhabit it.
The world is not a spectacle with the body as an observer; rather the world is given as a system of possibilities, not as an “I think” but as “I can.”

David Abram explains Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” as “the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its spontaneous activity,” and he identifies this elemental matrix with the interdependent web of earthly life. 36

Merleau Ponty was maintaining a traditional dualism in which mind and body, subject and object, self and other, and so forth, are discrete and separate entities, in “The Visible and the Invisible” Merleau-Ponty argues that there is an important sense in which such pairs are also associated. For example, he does not dispute that there is a divergence, or dehiscence, in our embodied situation that is evident in the difference that exists between touching and being touched, between looking and being looked at, or between the sentient and the sensible in his own vocabulary. On the contrary, this divergence is considered to be a necessary and constitutive factor in allowing subjectivity to be possible at all. However, he suggests that rather than involving a simple dualism, this divergence between touching and being touched, or between the sentient and the sensible, also allows for the possibility of overlapping and encroachment between these two terms.

Merleau-Ponty has somewhat famously suggested that the experience of touching cannot be understood without reference to the tacit potential for this situation to be reversed. As Thomas Busch points out, “The Visible and the Invisible” highlights that "in the body's touching of itself is found a differentiation and an encroachment which is neither sheer identity nor non-identity."37 To substantiate this claim in adequate detail would take us too far afield of this essay's main concerns, but it is
important to recognize that Merleau-Ponty's initial, and I think permissible presumption, is that we can never simultaneously touch our right hand while it is also touching an object of the world. He suggests that "either my right hand really passes over into the rank of the touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted, or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it."³⁸

There is then, a gap (or ecart in French) between ourselves as touching and ourselves as touched, a divergence between the sentient and sensible aspects of our existence, but this gap is importantly distinct from merely reinstating yet another dualism. Touching and touched are not simply separate orders of being in the world, since they are reversible, and this image of our left hand touching our right hand does more than merely represent the body's capacity to be both perceiving object and subject of perception in a constant oscillation (as is arguably the case in Sartre's looked at, looked upon, dichotomy, as well as the master-slave oscillations that such a conception induces). As Merleau-Ponty suggests: "I can identify the hand touched in the similar which will in a moment be touching... In this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them. The body tries... to touch itself while being touched and initiates a kind of reversible reflection."³⁹

This suggests that the hand that we touch, while it is touching an inanimate object, is hence not merely another such 'object', but another fleshy substance that is capable of reversing the present situation and being mobile and even aggressive. Given that we cannot touch ourselves or even somebody else, without this recognition of our own tangibility and capacity to be touched by others, it seems
that the awareness of what it feels like to be touched encroaches, or even supervenes upon the experience of touching. Any absolute distinction between being in the world as touching, and being in the world as touched, deprives the existential phenomena of their true complexity. Our embodied subjectivity is never located purely in either our tangibility or in our touching, but in the intertwining of these two aspects, or where the two lines of a chiasm intersect with one another. The chiasm then, is simply an image to describe how this overlapping and encroachment can take place between a pair that nevertheless retains a divergence, in that touching and touched are obviously never exactly the same thing.

According to Merleau-Ponty, these observations also retain an applicability that extends well beyond the relationship that obtains between touching and being touched. He contends that mind and body, the perceptual faith and its articulation, subject and object, self and world, as well as many other related dualisms, are all associated chiasmically, and he terms this interdependence of these various different notions the flesh. The radical consequences of this intertwining become most obvious when Merleau-Ponty sets about describing the interactions of this embodied flesh. At one stage in “The Visible and the Invisible” he suggests that the realization that the world is not simply an object: “does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things.”40
According to Merleau-Ponty then, this non-dualistic divergence between touching and being touched, which necessitates some form of encroachment between the two terms, also means that the world is capable of encroaching upon and altering us, just as we are capable of altering it. Such an ontology rejects any absolute antinomy between self and world, as well as any notion of subjectivity that prioritizes a rational, autonomous individual, who is capable of imposing their choice upon a situation that is entirely external to them. To put the problem in Sartrean terms, while it may sometimes prove efficacious to distinguish between transcendence and facticity [a technical term of Martin Heidegger's that in Merleau-Ponty's usage refers to the sum of brute ‘facts’ about us, including our social situation and our physical attributes, abilities and circumstances], or Being-for-itself and Being-in-itself, Merleau-Ponty thinks that such notions also overlap in such a way as to undermine any absolute difference between these two terms. As a consequence, Sartre's conception of an absolute freedom in regards to a situation is also rendered untenable by the recognition of the ways in which self and world are chiasmically intertwined, though this is not to suggest that the world can be reduced to us. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explicitly asserts that precisely what is rarely considered is this paradoxical fact that though we are of the world, we are nevertheless not the world, and in affirming the interdependence of humanity and the 'things' of the world in a way that permits neither fusion nor absolute distance, he advocates an embodied inherence of a different type.

5.6 Philosophy of 'The Other'

Merleau Ponty rarely makes any distinction between the structure of our relations with others and the structure of our relations with the world, his descriptions also
pertain directly to the problem of the other, which has come to be accorded of lot of attention in recent times under the auspices of what is frequently termed alterity. Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology ensures that in some sense the other is always already intertwined within the subject, and he explicitly suggests that self and non-self are but the obverse and reverse of each other. If I can present his position a little schematically, basically his later philosophy attempts to reinforce that self and other are also relationally constituted via their potential reversibility. One example of this might be the way in which looking at another person - or even a painter looking at trees, according to one of Merleau-Ponty's more enigmatic examples - always also involves the tacit recognition that we too can be looked at. However, rather than simply oscillating between these two modes of being - perceiver and perceived upon, as Sartrean philosophy would have it - for Merleau-Ponty each experience is betrothed to the other in such a way that we are never simply a disembodied perceiver or a transcendental consciousness. However the alterity of the other's look is always already involved in us, and rather than unduly exalting alterity by positing it as forever elusive, or as recognizable only as freedom that transcends my freedom, he instead affirms an interdependence of self and other that involves these categories overlapping and intertwining with one another, but without ever being reduced to each other. One consequence of Merleau-Ponty's position is that questions regarding the otherness of the other are rendered something of an abstraction, at least if they attempt to conceive of that other without reference to the subjectivity with which it is always chiasmically intertwined. As Dorothy Olkowski has suggested, "if there is to be room in the world for others as others, there must be some connection between self and other that exceeds purely psychic life" and this is envisaged as an ontological necessity.
rather than an attempt to propound a thesis that restores us to the primordial affection that we have for the other. For Merleau-Ponty, a responsible treatment of alterity consists in recognizing that alterity is always already intertwined within subjectivity, rather than by obscuring this fact by projecting a self-present individual who is confronted by an alterity that is essentially inaccessible and beyond comprehension. Far from merely being a negative thing, the alterity of the other is too complicated to simply be posited as that which will forever elude us, and such a description ignores the important ways in which self and other are partially intertwined.

In “The Visible and the Invisible” then, there is a tacit claim regarding what a responsible treatment of the alterity of the other consists in, even if Merleau-Ponty rarely considers notions like responsibility in any explicit fashion. His final ontology wants to insist that alterity is something that can only be appreciated in being encountered, and in a recognition of the fact that there can be no absolute alterity. If absolute alterity is but a synonym of death, and inconceivable to humanity, then what needs to be considered, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the paradoxical way in which self and other are intertwined and yet also, and at the same time, divergent.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty is also careful not to fall prey to what has been termed, sometimes disparagingly, the horizonality of phenomenology. He devotes an entire chapter titled "Interrogation and Intuition" to distancing himself from this tendency of phenomenology - which he traces to Hegel, Husserl and Bergson - to subsume all else under the concept of context and background. Engendering a coincidence between self and world (or self and other), is just as antithetical to his
philosophical purposes as advocating a vast abyssal difference, and Merleau-Ponty asserts that when we are overly sure of the other, just as when we are overly unsure of the other, an inadequate apprehension of human relations beckons. For Merleau-Ponty, alterity is that which cannot be reduced to the logic of an either/or, as he doesn't want to espouse a Sartrean version of human relations where the other can never really be understood and yet nor does his philosophy reductively ignore this alterity. He suggests that “this infinite distance, this absolute proximity express in two ways - as a soaring over or as fusion - the same relationship with the thing itself. They are two positivisms...”,\textsuperscript{42} indeed, neither of which he wants to associate with his new ontology.

In an attempt to avoid this dualistic tendency to conceive of the other as either beyond the comprehension of a subject, or as domesticated by the subject and their horizons of significance, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible} emphasizes that the other is always already encroaching upon us, though they are not reducible to us, and for Merleau-Ponty, the risk of this overlapping with the other can and should always be there. His philosophy consistently alludes to the manner in which this encroachment is not simply a bad thing. For Merleau-Ponty, interacting with and influencing the other (even contributing to permanently changing them), does not necessarily constitute a denial of their alterity. On the contrary, if done properly it in fact attests to it, because we are open to the possibility of being influenced and changed by the difference that they bring to bear upon our interaction with them. This is the ethics that his ontology of the flesh tacitly presupposes, and it is a position that is importantly different from those proposed by more recent philosophers, including Sartre, Levinas and Derrida respectively.
Notes and References


3. Ibid, p.12

4. Ibid, p.13

5. Ibid, p.15

6. Ibid, p.16

7. Ibid, P.18

8. Ibid, p.22


10. Ibid, p.83

11. Ibid, p.170

12. Ibid, p.228

13. Ibid, p.245


15. Ibid, p.252
17. Ibid, p.422
18. Ibid, p.483
19. Ibid, p.494
20. Ibid, p.504
21. Ibid, p.14
22. Ibid, p.17
23. Ibid, p.18
24. Ibid, p.21–22
26. Ibid, p.121
27. Ibid, p.166
28. Ibid, p.182
29. Ibid, p.184
30. Ibid, p.179
31. Ibid, p.187
32. Ibid, p.196
33. Ibid, p.352
34. Ibid, p.319
39. Ibid, p.93
40. Ibid, p123
41. Ibid, p. 83
42. Ibid, p.127