Chapter -V

Conclusion

In retrospect, the present thesis was concerned with the concept of Human subject and the meaning of Freedom in the existentialist philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean Paul Sartre. It was purported to examine chiefly the following points of philosophical importance in the existentialist philosophy of these above thinkers. It has been shown that there is a radical difference between the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and the perspective opened by Sartre in his Critique of Dialectical Reason. According to Sartre, the individual existence can be understood in itself and that this individual existence is the 'constituent reason' of history. He calls the individual existence the tantalization of the world, for, from its absolute freedom, this existence transforms the world into a field of existence of which itself is the center, thus making the world 'a whole'. While Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy is principally and primarily phenomenological, he incorporates new subject matter into it. His philosophy includes an extensive discussion of three interrelated topics: perception, which is the primary relation between consciousness and world; the social dimensions of man’s existence, which include inter-subjectivity, politics, language and history; and finally ontology, which provides the ground for all relations between consciousness and world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was influenced by the objective and the scientific form of thinking. Such influence is expressed in two preconceptions. The first preconception is that perception is reduced to units such as “impressions.” The meaning of these units is considered to be a representation of the world. The second preconception is that such perceptual meaning is caused by the world and the living being is passive in its relation to such constitution of meaning. We may say that the results of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of these two preconceptions constitute his two main concepts: the phenomenal body and the perceptual meaning determined by the structural relation with the world. Despite the fact that some traces of these preconceptions can be found in the introduction of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, there is no straight argument that shows as to how he approached these two results from the rejection of these preconceptions. Our thesis is
to present Merleau-Ponty’s view on the phenomenal body based on his criticism of the
two preconceptions described above. Accordingly, it is argued that Merleau-Ponty’s
criticism of these preconceptions can be traced through his argument against Gestalt
psychology, associationism, and behavioural associationism.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is characteristically phenomenological. His best
known and most widely acclaimed work, Phenomenology of Perception, is a
phenomenological understanding on perception itself. His phenomenology attempts a
description of essences, but essences imbedded in existence. For Merleau-Ponty the
subject matter of phenomenology, as well as its guiding light, is existential. It starts from
the facticity of man and world, which are always already there before reflection begins.
This philosophy does not seek a divine, abstract or absolute understanding but a human
reflection upon the world, history and meaning as they are lived. Phenomenology works
to unveil what is fundamental and original in our lived experience. It is a transcendental
philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the
better to understand them.” Phenomenology steps back from the world in order to see it
better and attempts a reflective grasp of this lived, pre-theoretical layer of human
existence which previous philosophies have left in darkness.

Merleau-Ponty was well trained in the traditions of classical philosophy.
However, he found these philosophies inadequate to answer the contemporary problems
confronting human existence. His basic objection was that most of previous philosophies
had detached consciousness from the world; or, in more traditional terms, previous
philosophies were restricted to the level of the subject-object dichotomy. Depending on
the philosopher’s perspective and the element which he took as primary, either
materialism or idealism resulted. Dissatisfied with the classical solutions to this problem,
Merleau-Ponty sought, through reflection, the pre-dichotomized level. This is the level of
unreflected experience which can neither be objectified nor idealized but only reflectively
described. This is precisely the task of phenomenology. The world is not an object “out
there” which man possesses through the laws of science; nor do the ideas and the truths
of the world inhabit the “inner man” of St. Augustine. “More accurately there is no inner
man; man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.” Phenomenology,
according to him, is an attempt to regain and then to describe the world as it is.
Perception is of central and primary interest in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. It is the explicit subject of his early works and remains a guiding light to help understand his later works. In fact, Merleau-Ponty says “the perceived world is always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence.” Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of perception is homogeneous with his phenomenology. Reflection reveals that the perceiver is always already there. Neither idealism nor materialism can adequately account for perception. Perception is not an act of mental creation by a divine intellect nor is it the passive reception by a divine intellect nor is it the passive reception of objects which impose themselves on consciousness. Rather, it requires both a perceiver and a perceived; to eliminate one or to reduce one to a passive element is to destroy perception and the entire relationship between world and man. Indeed, nothing can be known or thought, unless it is first experienced in a direct perceptual contact with the world. Perception gives us access to meaning, rationality and being. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of perception is not a theory of mental representation or even of constitution by which images of objects are stored within the mind. In the act of perception man grasps himself “... not as a constituting subject which is transparent to itself, and which constitutes the totality of every possible object of thought and experience, but as a particular thought, as a thought engaged with certain objects, as thought in act...” Through perception man is not given objects nor does he create them, but he is enmeshed and enfolded with the world. Reflection can reveal this primordial and perceptual involvement and can reveal the world and man to himself.

This world, which is perceptually revealed, is found to be a human world. It is not a private world but necessarily involves the individual’s relation with others. This brings us to the social dimensions of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. This is the most extensive area of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. In an introduction it is impossible to cover all aspects of this area, especially Merleau-Ponty’s relation with Marxism and communism. The following comments will be sufficient to introduce the main points of his social philosophy. The first thing that we must note is that there is no such thing as solipsism, i.e., a view of the self alone in the world. Immediate with the recognition of the self comes consciousness of the world and of the other. The existence of the world and of others is above and beyond proof—they are always already there. Consequently,
Merleau-Ponty is not concerned with proving the existence of the other but with describing and accounting for the basis for human relationships among men.

The difficult task of illuminating the relations among men is compounded by the radical ambiguity and contingency of history. Merleau-Ponty sought a political system which could accept such a history and still promote the recognition of man by man, i.e., a true humanism. Early in his life Merleau-Ponty held a pro-Marist position because of the hope that communism would institute a classless society sensitive to the proletariat as the embodiment of the universal recognition of men. The failure of communism in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes led him to adopt a-communist position. However, he never abandoned the essential need for political and social action in his philosophy. This need for action in philosophy is based on the fact that history, being contingent, is wholly dependent upon man. Man creates history, consequently human actions can create a more or a less human world. Furthermore, since all men are involved in and with the world, it is impossible to withhold action or to remain neutral. Man’s facticity situates him within a political, social and cultural framework; silence or inaction on the part of an individual is tantamount to endorsement of the existing regime. Thus social action is a fact of man’s incarnation in the world; and philosophy, as a reflection on man and world, must consider this social and political dimension of existence.

For Merleau-Ponty any viable social and political philosophy must achieve the recognition of man by man. When Marxism failed to foster this goal, Merleau-Ponty abandoned it. Gradually Merleau-Ponty came to realize that mutual recognition among men could be accomplished only through communication. But neither the liberal democracies nor the Communist Party fostered true dialogue among men. Even though the existing political structures failed in this task, Merleau-Ponty continued to emphasize the importance that communication, language and different forms of expression have for establishing a true humanism. Communication forms the basis on which the relationships among men can be built, and understanding of man by man can be achieved, even though political goals have not been reached.

A third aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is his ontology that part of his philosophy on which he was working at his death. On what ground can Merleau-Ponty
base the relationships between man and the lived, natural world and the relationships
among men within the social, political and historical world? Merleau-Ponty has shown
that perception mediates the first relationship and that communication mediates the
second. These elements mediate but do not ground these vital dialectics. The ultimate
metaphysical category which Merleau-Ponty offers as a ground is flesh. Merleau-Ponty
explains this notion in the “Working Notes” of *The Visible and The Invisible.*

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology attempts a radical reflection to illumine the
founding level of experience, meaning and philosophy itself. That which is revealed in
this phenomenological reflection is the world and its different aspects. In *The
Structure of Behavior* and the *Phenomenology of Perception.* Merleau-Ponty “… sought
to restore the world of perception.” He established that perception was neither the
imposition of the images of material things on a passive mind nor was it the creation of
objects by an absolute consciousness. But “the perceiving mind is an incarnate mind. I
[Merleau-Ponty] have tried, first of all, to reestablish the roots of the mind in its body and
in its world…” Materialism and idealism have forgotten”…the insertion of the mind in
corporeality, the ambiguous relation which we entertain with our bodies and ,
correlatively, with perceived things. Because man is an incarnate being-in-the-world he
cannot rise above things and perceive them as a detached intellect. Objectivistic and
intellectualistic thought forgets that it is the subject who perceives, and that this subject is
man. It is our body which places us in the world. When philosophy attempts to reflect
upon man or upon any human experience it must take into account man’s fundamental
perspective and his situation as a being in a lived world. Phenomenology is the only
philosophy which Merleau-Ponty thought could philosophically deal with this
fundamental situation.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology attempts to arrive at an understanding of man
by starting from man’s factual or existential situation in the world which is always given
before reflection. Merleau-Ponty saw his philosophy as a continuation of Husserl’s
phenomenology of the *Lebenswelt,* the life-world. He acknowledges his indebtedness to
and dependence upon Husserl in the “Preface” of *Phenomenology of Perception* and in
the article “The Philosopher and His Shadow” in *Signs.*
For Merleau-Ponty, as for Husserl, phenomenology is genetic. It attempts to grasp what is fundamental and original in our experience of world. Phenomenology is archaeology, a digging deeper to the primordial and founding roots out of which all experience grows. Husserl called the first stage of this search for origins a return to things themselves. This return is a return to the phenomenon and not to a noumenon. This is a description of the thing as it is or as it appears without presuming a noumenon or thing-in-itself hidden behind the appearance. This first step may seem naïve. However Merleau-Ponty, quoting Plato’s *Meno*, notes that man is unable to know a thing whose nature totally transcends him since it would therefore be totally beyond his knowledge. In other words man can experience and know only that which appears to him. It is, therefore, not such a new thought for a philosophy to restrict itself to phenomenon. “No in itself would be accessible to us if it were not at the very same time for us, and the meaning we find in it depends on our consent.”

Implicated in phenomenology’s first step is its second. Phenomenology is first a description of things as they appear. This implies that the description of appearances is a description of things as they appear to man. Thus the much heralded notion of intentionality is introduced. Strictly speaking, if there is an appearing thing, then there must be something to which it appears; this is consciousness. Things, appearances, imply consciousness, a perceiver. Appearing things, the world, and consciousness, man, reciprocally imply each other. In other words, all consciousness is consciousness of something; consciousness is intentional. Ultimately that which is intended by consciousness is the world, and it is the task of philosophy to learn again to see the world. This cannot be accomplished by seeking an a priori truth or the being of the world. But rather philosophy is like an art by which truth is brought into being through the mutual cooperation of man and world.

But how do we gain access to things as they appear, to the world in general and to the founding level of meaning and experience? Merleau-Ponty tells us that “Phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method.” For Merleau-Ponty the phenomenological method is a standing back so as not to prejudge the appearances of the thing and a reflection upon the thing and the world. In order to gain access to the primordial, a radical or hyper-reflection is needed. This reflection is not an
introspection of an isolated self, but is reflection which finds the self and the things in the world. “When I return to myself...I find not a source of intrinsic truth, but a subject destined to be in the world.”

According to Merleau-Ponty, reflection and the resulting phenomenological description reveal the meaning of the phenomenological or transcendental reduction. But the phenomenological and eidetic reductions of Merleau-Ponty are different than those of Husserl. For Husserl the phenomenological reduction was to place within brackets or to abstain from any judgment concerning the natural world, society, science or any individual considerations. Merleau-Ponty does not accept Husserl’s bracketing, for if the world was held in suspension nothing would appear to consciousness. The world cannot be separated from man in any way whatsoever, this is the central fact of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and the core of this paper. Merleau-Ponty sees the phenomenological reduction as a standing in wonder in the face of the world.

Reflection [which Merleau-Ponty here equates with the reduction] does not withdraw from the world towards 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.

Merleau-Ponty always viewed the world only in relation to man and man only in relation to the world. The relationship which exists between man-world is dialectical, i.e., it is a continual and progressive relation which permits the access of one to the other but does not reduce them to a single entity. To understand Merleau-Ponty’s ontology (chapter ii) we gain access to the founding principles which permit man to have a world. Merleau-Ponty’s last philosophical investigation returns to his original search for that which institutes and grounds man and world. In the last analysis man is at home in the world because both world and man share in the same basic element; both are made of the same primordial stuff; both share in flesh. Because the world is of us and we are of it, our common flesh—the flesh of our conscious incarnation and the flesh of the thing—
provides a meeting place for man and world. Flesh is the ultimate metaphysical category and the final dialectical mediator which grounds the man-world relation.

The world is a dynamic and evolving notion which Merleau-Ponty develops from his first writings on behaviour and perception, through his social and political philosophy, to his final, but incomplete, grounding of the world. These three divisions of Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy: psychology, politics and ontology, are interrogated to yield three interdependent but distinct philosophical aspects of world: the natural and lived world of perception, the social world of intersubjectivity and communication (chapter II) and an ontology of world as flesh (chapter iv).

Another point of discussion in the present thesis is the contention of Sartre’s philosophy of communication which asserts a dualism within a dualism. In Sartrean ontology, there is a duality of for-itself or Consciousness and the in-self or being, and, there is a duality within the for-itself, so to say, indirect communication and lack of communication. This dimension of communication in the existentialist understanding is a matter of contested claim. According to Sartre, consciousness is essentially aware of itself, but not as an ego. Consciousness is necessarily conscious of itself as consciousness (of) an object. According to Sartre this is even a necessary feature of consciousness. It is not to be confused with the reflexivity of the Cartesian cogito. There is no self in this consciousness (of) an object, and all of this is still pre-reflective. The cogito is based on this “second-order” consciousness (the term comes from Merleau Ponty) but it is only a “necessary possibility”. Consciousness can then be characterized as “being-for-itself” because its existence consists in its dependency on objects, its knowledge of its own dependency on objects, and the possibility of explicit recognition of itself in the Cartesian cogito.

Let us try to recapitulate the important points that have emphasized in the course of study through this thesis.

1. The present thesis is devoted to critically examine Merleau-Ponty’s methodology of phenomenology as a method of knowing existence and thereby compare such a claim with Sartrean concept of philosophy as a synoptic discipline which has a place in all fields of knowledge. The issue is whether freedom is best understood as
categorical, as what human existence simply is, such that at every moment the entire
meaning of our lives is at stake, or whether it is better understood as contingent, as a
power, characteristic of our actions only in some measure, through which conditions
having at least a general and fragmentary meaning independent of us are brought to some
successful resolution.

2. For both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, the fundamental phenomenon to be
elucidated is that of a "situated" freedom. "We shall use the term situation," says Sartre,
"for the contingency of freedom" that is, for the given and limiting conditions under
which freedom appears, for the state of affairs in reference to which one must act.

3. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty views human being as an embodied subject and
embodiment is a contingent way of "existing" or "living" the world. But, the present
thesis argues that Merleau-Ponty follows Marcel's original notion of embodiment more
closely than does Sartre. For Sartre, to be embodied is simply to exist as situated, to
occupy a place and time, to be in certain circumstances and conditions.

4. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the lived body is the conception that existence
is the perception of essences in their primordial or imminent structure. It is this
immanence that is taken up in the act of transcendence to become the 'presence' that is
existence. In short, the essential spontaneity is the material of existential analysis through
a phenomenological method. 'To experience a structure is not to receive it into oneself
passively, it is to live it, to take it, assume it and discover its immanent meaning'. The
phenomenal body which is the lived experience is primordial structure that is itself
temporality. This is to suggest that the existential presence of the body is the common
structure that is manifest in the on-going immanence and transcendence that is spatiality
in genesis. It is only through this structure that the lived experience is manifest. The flesh
is the visible-seer, the audible hearer, the tangible touch-the sensitive-sensible. The lived
body experience can be illustrated in the grasp of your right hand with the left.

5. The present thesis primarily gives importance to a phenomenological analysis
of man, his situatedness in the world, his environing a world, and his constitution as a
person. Accordingly, we argue that two points of departure from which the
phenomenological approach to the question of personality proceeds can be stated as
follows. In the phenomenological order, the phenomenon of person belongs to the first instance to be a subject of a world around us. So far as I am a person – and that applies intentionally to every other person, I am inseparably bound with the world around me. This world around me/us is that of which personal I is conscious of and to which it is related in different ways.

6. Sartre begins his description of human existence by discussing the ontology of two primary modes of being: being for-itself and being in-itself. To be for-itself is to be conscious, to be human in the sense that the subject is able to be separated from itself, to be filled with dynamic potentiality. To be in-itself is the reality of a static thing, the being of anything inanimate without consciousness that cannot be anything else. Whereas for-itself is the nihilation of being, the in-itself is being. The task of ontology is to describe these two sorts of being, which by their very nature are contradictory and absolutely mutually exclusive.

7. Sartre contextualizes this discussion of existence preceding essence in the framework of “temporality”. It is in the context of temporality that Sartre says humans are beings who are not what they are and who are what they are not. They are not what they are, inasmuch as they are not presently what their respective pasts demonstrate what they have been. At the same time, they are what they are not, because they are not as yet the undetermined future that they will become in terms of the choices they will make. This is Sartre’s way of imaging the transitional and temporal nature of personhood. Being subjected to temporality, humans can never be spoken of as having a completed or permanent being. There is a constant element of “futurity and negativity.”

8. It has been shown in this thesis that both the in-itself and for-itself have three original characteristics. Being-in-itself is ontologically independent or uncaused. Sartre posits this because of his denial of the existence of God. If God does not exist, He has not created being, and therefore cannot be the ground of it. Next, being-in-itself is what it is. This can also be understood as the absolute identity of being with itself. It is complete positivity; there is no negation in being-in-itself. Third, the in-itself is. Sartre sometimes refers to this characteristic of being when he uses the term superfluous. This means that
there is no justification for being, no ultimate explanation. It is contingent and without reason.

9. On the other hand, being-for-itself is characterized first as not itself, meaning it is ontologically dependent upon the in-itself for its being. Second, for-itself is what it is not and is not what it is. This deliberately paradoxical way of understanding an aspect of for-itself refers to its account of negation. Since negation is a reality in the world, which we will see in detail in the chapter entitled “Negation,” Sartre provides an account of it using for-itself as the vehicle by which negation seeps into the picture, since being-in-itself is full positivity, it cannot account for negation. And since negation is a reality, or so Sartre argues, he must give an explanation of this phenomenon. His only recourse is to being-for-itself, since it is conscious activity. Finally, the third characteristic of being-for-itself is that it is. When Sartre says this, he generally means that it lacks justification. However, he slightly modifies, since it is ontologically dependent upon the in-itself. Simply, being-for-itself (loosely, he often means consciousness) is grounded in the in-itself in an important sense, even though it is wholly without explanation. Like the in-itself, for-itself exists contingently and without the ability to refer back to a creator to provide an excuse for its existence.

10. Sartre’s early ontology of freedom can be situated within the context of his particular approach to philosophical thinking. There are two relevant and related aspects of this approach which deserve mention here. Sartre’s work demonstrates a concern with the individual and the individual’s lived experience – with the inner life of humanity. From Kierkegaard, Sartre takes a distrust of systematic thought which subsumes individual experience in its emphasis on the universal. In his early work, Sartre takes this focus on the individual to extremes, and there is a less than adequate regard for sociality. This is reflected in his initial understanding of freedom, which gets caught up in this early individualism. It was in Paris, in my second year at the Lycee Henri IV…that I learned the word freedom, or at least its philosophical meaning. It was then that I grew passionate about freedom and became its great defender. Nizar…was attracted by materialism... We were on opposite sides, he basing himself on rational, concrete arguments, and I defending a certain conception of man).
11. The other aspect of Sartre’s approach has to do with his rejection of determinism. The inner life of humanity, for Sartre, is not determined; as we shall see below, proving this is a central pre-occupation, one that accounts for his interest in the imagination. Again, the early work takes the defense of freedom to extremes, and there is little appreciation for hindrances or obstacles to freedom. The terminology he employs and the characterizations of consciousness in the early work are evidence of the radical nature of his early view of freedom. For Sartre, consciousness is intentional, - in the sense that consciousness is always consciousness “of something”- it is active, creative, (“constituting”), and spontaneous. While the meaning of these terms and the freedom of consciousness in general, will become clear during the course of an examination of some relevant early works, it is important to point out here that right from the outset, Sartre rejects the attribution of all forms of passivity to consciousness. This is related to his rejection of determinism, since Sartre views the latter as seeking to objectify humanity, by making human beings either passive receptacles of external forces and determinations or, importantly for our purposes here, simple conduits of internal determinations such as a “nature”.

12. The *Transcendence of the Ego* is a significant work to the extent that it reveals Sartre’s attempt to empty consciousness of all “content”, as well as demonstrating the connection between this endeavor and Sartre’s establishment of the thesis that consciousness is radically free. In this initial work, Sartre attempts to explain consciousness phenomenologically, and the issue he takes up concerns the status of the ego. Sartre refuses to accept the notion the ego is somehow in or behind consciousness. According to Sartre, psychologists had too often made the mistake of viewing the ego as an “inhabitant” of consciousness, and Sartre sets out to demonstrate that “the ego is neither formally nor materially in consciousness, it is outside, in the world.” In making his case, Sartre focuses on what he terms the unreflected or pre-reflective consciousness. This primary consciousness knows itself only as absolute inwardness, and its objects are by nature outside of it. This is consistent with the principle of intentionality that informs Sartre’s thought from the very beginning, a principle borrowed from Husserl. Consciousness is always consciousness of something. Sartre’s view of consciousness cannot be identified with a kind of narrow subjectivism, concerned solely with inner
states or feelings. Sartre’s consciousness is referential, and therefore must be viewed as involved in the world. 13. Merleau-Ponty denies the existence of the Sartrean dualisms. He maintains that we are a presence-at-the-world or being-with-the-world [être-au-monde] in which the pour-soi and en-soi are a unitary presence. Second, he denies the dualism of direct and indirect communication by suggesting that direct communication is a primordial or existential communication of our presence-at-the-world. This communication can become “sedimented” in the sense that its meaning can be recalled, realizing that such a recollection is no longer primordial and therefore a secondary or indirect communication. This indirect communication is positive in nature by suggesting the essence of the primordial communication, rather than negative in the Sartrean sense of suggesting the lack of primordial essence in the recalled communication.

14. According to Merleau-Ponty, freedom is not absolute but embodied. One can talk about freedom only in a situation, in a field, in a social space which is not of our own making or choosing. It is limited to one’s capacities, knowledge and situation. Freedom understood in this way is a creative repetition. It is a rooted creativity. Merleau-Ponty writes: We shall call “philosophy” the consciousness we must maintain—as our consciousness of the ultimate reality whose functioning our theoretical constructions retrace but could not possibly replace—of the open and successive community of alter egos living, speaking, and thinking in one another’s presence and in relation to nature as we sense its presence behind, around, and before us at the limits of our historical field. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis has one goal in mind and that is to demonstrate that philosophy qua philosophy is existential philosophy. 15. The “subject” is no longer just the epistemological subject but is the human subject who, by means of a continual dialectic, thinks in terms of his situation, forms his categories in contact with his experience, and modifies this situation, and this experience by the meaning he discovers in them. In particular, this subject is no longer alone, is no longer conscious in general or pure being for itself. He is in the midst of other consciousnesses which likewise have a situation; he is for others, and because he undergoes an objectivation and becomes generic subject. For the first time since Hegel, militant philosophy is reflecting not on subjectivity but on inter subjectivity. Phenomenological description of human action does not support the claim that reason is the determining factor in action. He agrees with the Sartrean position that
all human beings are free to the extent that they are open to different possibilities. Merleau-Ponty’s methodology of phenomenology as a method of knowing existence, it will help to understand his concept of philosophy in general and philosophy as a synoptic discipline which has a place in all fields of knowledge. Merleau-Ponty felt philosophy as philosophy to be “philosophy militant” – a philosophy charged with action in the theoretical and practical life of man. “There is not a philosophy which contains all philosophies; philosophy as a whole is at certain moments in each philosophy. To take up the celebrated phrase again, philosophy’s center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere”. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes in these remarks, philosophy is in the midst of “life’s contagion”. As a vital force in man’s being and history, philosophy assumes the role of a certain consciousness that we have of ourselves, nature, and other people.

16. We shall call “philosophy” the consciousness we must maintain –as our consciousness of the ultimate reality whose functioning our theoretical constructions retrace but could not possibly replace- of the open and successive community of alter egos living, speaking, and thinking in one another’s presence and in relation to nature as we sense its presence behind, around, and before us at the limits of our historical field. Merleau-Ponty’s theme in this view of philosophy is that man in the very practice of his affairs, in fact, every level of experience is dependent on the intersubjective exchange that occurs between one subject and another. This primary philosophical consciousness is prerequisite to our understanding of the world in an objective sense. Without this concern for philosophy as philosophy, we would have no awareness of our subjective movement within our world. Because “we are born into reason as into language”, our concern is not with the history of man’s involvement in the creation and solution of “problems”, but in the structural experience that is to us an “interrogative ensemble”. In this context, the person’s project as a philosopher “is indeed, and always, a break with objectivism and a return from constructa to lived experience, from the world to ourselves”.

17. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis has one goal in mind and that is to demonstrate that philosophy qua philosophy is existential philosophy. The “subject” is no longer just the epistemological subject but is the human subject who, by means of a continual dialectic, thinks in terms of his situation, forms his categories in contact with his experience, and modifies this situation, and this experience by the meaning he discovers in them. In
particular, this subject is no longer alone, is no longer conscious in general or pure being for itself. He is in the midst of other consciousnesses which likewise have a situation; he is for others, and because he undergoes an objectivation and becomes generic subject. For the first time since Hegel, militant philosophy is reflecting not on subjectivity but on intersubjectivity.

18. Merleau-Ponty's concern with intersubjectivity lends itself to a deep concern with communication as the mediating force in both personal and interpersonal expression. Existentialism as a philosophy then makes better sense to Merleau-Ponty if it is conceived as the idea of a universality that men affirm in the dialectic of living encounter, in the reason that is immanent in unreason, and in the freedom that is found in the act of accepting limits. The practice of philosophy then becomes philosophy as philosophy in which man's existence is affirmed. "Philosophy is irreplaceable because it reveals to us both the movement by which lives become truths, and the circularity of that singular being who in a certain sense already is everything he happens to think". The single movement of the world, time, speech, and history are not to be taken by philosophy as accomplished fact, but must be taken as existential, as the "passage of meaning" in the experience of life.

19. The thesis has been specifically concerned about the Sartrean description of ontological freedom which emphasizes more on consciousness and sometimes tries to identify it with the subject. Sartre recognizes the common sense fact that every person is born in a given situation with a given set of circumstances. As we have seen, in Chapter II, Sartre believes that these givens are not limitations to one's freedom. Man, as free, can either accept these as given or one can transcend them by creating new meaning. Even when one accepts these givens, it is not mere passive acceptance. For Sartre, acceptance constitutes a free choice of the conditions. Only those meanings which are conferred from the outside, for example, when someone says, "he is a Jew," can be suffered. Again, these givens, though considered as obstacles and hindrances to freedom, are necessary to be overcome, something to be changed, there can be no action and as a result no freedom.
21. Merleau-Ponty argues that what is hovering behind “our way of looking at human reality” is René Descartes and his body/soul distinction. Contemporary approaches to human reality, since they have already been attuned by Descartes, find more evidence of the bodily or the spirituality of human reality. Contemporary thought has moved far beyond anything that Descartes could have even imagined, and what has moved it, is its own experiences and what it has truly discovered. For Merleau-Ponty, these are not positions that should be dismissed. For Merleau-Ponty, these are not positions that should be dismissed and discarded as if they are worthless. What one needs to do is make them, and us, aware of how limited these perspectives are, but even more importantly, how human reality is such that it can give rise to such different claims. To do so, we need to take these claims back to the experiences that gave rise to them. For Merleau-Ponty human reality is not “body” or “soul” but rather that which can give rise to either of these concepts: “incarnate consciousness” “incarnate consciousness” is intended to be a radical new category of being much like “ambiguity.” The way that Merleau-Ponty develops these concepts has certain strange effects on the reader. In the first part of the Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty attempts to present the consciousness as something that is bodily. At times this clashes with our understanding of what consciousness is such that it makes it appear that Merleau-Ponty must be some kind of materialist denying the existence of soul. Then about be some kind of materialist denying the existence of soul. Then about half way through the book, he begins to develop the body as something that is conscious and thinks. This equally clashes with our preconceptions so much so that now we begin to wonder if Merleau-Ponty is a subjective idealist. What is important here is that these “clashes” occur for us. The purpose of all these “clashes” is to take us aback and make us begin the process of reflection of our own way of looking at things.

22. It should not be surprising to discover that Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of freedom follows a similar pattern. The contemporary perspective seems to demand that one is either free or not. It is almost as if there is a natural logic that forces us to radicalize our conceptions. And yet everyday experience reveals that we feel the burden and responsibility for what we have done while at other times we feel like a leaf being pushed this way and that by circumstances totally beyond our control. What philosophy
and the social sciences have done is radicalize such experiences. For example, Sartre has
done a masterful job of showing how, because of bad faith, we make ourselves think that
things are beyond our control when deep down we are free, maybe better, we are freedom,
absolute freedom. At the same time, the human sciences attempt to explain human reality
in terms of nature or some strange combination of both never leaving any room at all for
human freedom. Many human scientists would even be shocked if someone asked them
about freedom. For these social scientists freedom is not one of those things that even
enter into their study of human reality.

23. Merleau-Ponty’s reaction to claims like Sartre’s is much more temperate.
Sartre claims that there is human freedom and that it is absolute. Probably nowhere in the
history of philosophy has there been such a radical claim about the nature of freedom.
While Merleau-Ponty attacks the “radicalness” of this claim, his major concern is with
the conception of freedom itself. For Sartre, freedom is independence and freedom from
restraint. You are free only to the extent that there are not forces making you do this or
that. this is the kind of independence that teenagers seek and think will fulfill their lives
only to find out as they mature that it is an illusion. But it is this conception of freedom
that is not only behind Sartre’s absolute freedom but also determinism. Merleau-Ponty
argues that they both have a piece of what is given in experience. When we go to our
lived experience, one always find conditions that somehow restrict freedom and yet such
experiences reveals freedom at the heart of what it means to be human. But when these
elements of lived experience are radicalizes, one ends up in determinism or absolute
freedom. There is a sense in which freedom is fundamental to human reality but not in
the way that Sartre describes it. There is also a sense that experience always shows us
factors limiting our freedom. In order to make sense out of our experience we need to
question our perspectives and transform our way of looking at them.

24. The source of the problem is conceiving freedom as “freedom from” this or
that obstacle. As long as this is how freedom is conceived we are left with either absolute
freedom or determinism. Merleau-Ponty proposes that we conceive of freedom as
‘freedom to’ do this or that. To be able to drive down the street of a large city requires
that we follow the rules of the road. If we had to fear that the driver coming towards us
would cut into our lane, or that people would not obey stoplights, it would become
impossible to drive down a street. The restrictions, the rules of the road in this case, do not eliminate our freedom to drive but in fact make it possible. Merleau-Ponty is not claiming that all obstacles make action possible, since there are clearly cases in which we are not free. Sartre’s analysis, however, does not even allow for this possibility. What Sartre is claiming in developing this idea of freedom is not even a possibility because obstacles are always the ground of our freedom. But we have been dealing with this issue in a rather superficial way. Remember that Merleau-Ponty agreed with Sartre that there was something fundamental about freedom. Freedom exists because human reality is a self-transcendence. In fact, Merleau-Ponty will argue that freedom in its most fundamental sense is nothing other that human reality in its self-transcendence. This is not the absolute freedom of Sartre because human reality is very different for Merleau-Ponty. Human reality goes beyond what it has become and moves to what it is not. This movement is always situated because human reality is always situated and yet it is always going beyond. It is in this dynamic character of human reality that we find truth and time; it is also the domain of freedom.

25. Finally, one of the objectives of the present study is to compare and contrast both these thinkers in a critical-creative perspective so that the views of both of them can be understood for further critiquing. For Sartre the freedom of for-itself is a fundamental condition of its existence which cannot be pre-determined in any way by its essence. In this regard he seems to have borrowed, at least, from the language of Martin Heidegger as presented in 'Being and Time', 'The Essence of Reasons' and 'what is Metaphysics'? Since he uses such terms as "existence", "transcendence" or "nothingness" which are found in these writings of Heidegger, he clearly understands them in view of his own ontological point of view.

To conclude, in discussing these and certain other issues which are related to the human subject and freedom in the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean Paul Sartre, hopefully, we have made some contribution to a clearer and better understanding of these and related issues. Any degree of success attained in this task may be taken as a vindication of the approach adopted in this thesis.