Dialecitc of institution: Merleau-Ponty’s overcoming of the antinomy of freedom and necessity

A dissertation in philosophy by Sam Gault

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The dissertation of Sam Gault was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Leonard Lawlor  
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Philosophy  
Director of Graduate Studies  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Robert Bernasconi  
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Philosophy and African American Studies

Claire Colebrook  
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of English, Philosophy, and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Emily Grosholz  
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Philosophy, English, and African American Studies

Ted Toadvine  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Nancy Tuana Director of the Rock Ethics Institute

Amy Allen  
Liberal Arts Professor of Philosophy and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies  
Department Head

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
ABSTRACT

Dialectic of Institution: Merleau-Ponty’s Overcoming of the Antinomy and Freedom and Necessity advances an original interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of la chair (“the flesh”), not merely as an effort to reconceive of “being” and “truth” beyond the modern dichotomy of “subjective freedom” and “objective necessity,” but also, and inseparably, as the articulation of an ethics of the flesh in the form of a general account of “virtue.” The fates of ethical meaning and scientific truth are, today, indissolubly bound up precisely by their separation, which renders them abstract. Insofar as the human significance of things and events is conceived of as purely subjective, no formulation of ethics can escape the charge of arbitrariness by appeal to some common evidentiary ground. Conversely, insofar as the truths of science and mathematics are conceived of as purely objective, it is as if they segregate off, from a world of “opinion” or “appearances,” their own proper world of “facts” to which human significance can only arbitrarily (i.e., unverifiably) be attributed. I argue, following Merleau-Ponty, that lived meanings and scientific truths are moments of a single, open dialectical movement of human existence, where each field of sense (e.g., emotion, music, painting, mathematics) becomes instituted (i.e., initially established, and continually sustained) by articulating a possible manner – latent on the horizons of previously established fields – in which living bodies can respond to, and question, other beings.

In the first chapter, I undertake a genealogy, beginning with the thought of Descartes, of the three fundamental modern antinomies of “mind-body,” “self-others,” and “freedom-necessity,” before explicating Merleau-Ponty’s initial attempt to overcome them in PhP. Each antinomy comes to expression in an oscillation between the poles of “objective thought” (the modern identification of “reality” with “truth,” in the sense of what can be measured): epistemologically, “intellectualism” and “empiricism”; metaphysically, “idealism” and “realism.”
Merleau-Ponty does not aim to “refute” these attitudes, but to show their incompleteness, the manner in which each takes the other’s explicit presupposition (i.e., respectively, “absolute subjectivity” and “pure objects”) as its own implicit foundation: a reciprocal “figure-ground” or “founding-founded” relation, which Merleau-Ponty describes by taking up the language of the Gestalt psychologists, and Husserl’s concept of Fundierung (“foundation” or “founding”). The dichotomies of objective thought are not “errors,” but highly formalized expressions of the Gestalt structure of the general movement of existence—the same structure articulated in behavior and perception. In place of the modern conceptions of “freedom” as absolutely unconditioned activity, and “necessity” as passive mechanism, he articulates “free choice” as an essentially conditioned response to the problems and the possibilities expressed by a given situation, and “necessity” as the value retroactively bestowed upon a situation by projects which take it up as their foundation.

In the second chapter, I present my account of the new ontology Merleau-Ponty develops—particularly from the IP lectures on—to escape the language of “consciousness” and “objects” (which yet constrains his thought in PhP) by explaining the genesis of meaning and the individuation of living bodies and things as dimensions of a single movement of being. I take two lines of approach to this ontology: the first, exegetical; the second, phenomenological. First, exegetically, I articulate the passage of Merleau-Ponty’s thought by tracing his gradual transformation of the Husserlian concept of Stiftung (“institution” or “instituting”), from merely a tool for analyzing the acquisition and reactivation of habitualities of conscious life, to, in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, an articulation of the ontological functioning of beings whereby they become co-individuated in what is, simultaneously, the primordial birth of sense. In other words, Merleau-Ponty transforms “institution,” a concept of genetic phenomenology, into a means of explaining the common foundation of “things” and “meanings.” Next, I shift my own investigation to a phenomenological approach: specifically, to an internal critique of
contemporary interpretations of a recent case of “acquired pedophilia” in conjunction with brain lesioning, which affords a concrete approach to Merleau-Ponty’s overcoming of the modern antinomies. Applying the concept of Stiftung to concrete phenomena of “choice,” I conclude that the freedom of life realizes itself in the advent of necessity, and, correlatively necessity arises as the expression of freedom.

In the third chapter, I argue that the ontology of the flesh is simultaneously the outline for a new approach to ethical discourse and action, which makes apparent the truths expressed in both “objectivistic” and “relativistic” thought, as well as the mythical character of any absolute notions of necessity or contingency. Firstly, I explicate Merleau-Ponty’s conception of “authenticity,” arguing that it evokes openness to the ambiguity of the sense of beings: ambiguous because a being’s sense is its function within an always total, and always provisional, network of actual and possible relations. Secondly, I argue that this conception of ambiguity entails both negative and positive meta-ethical consequences: on the one hand, the recognition that a spoken values or principle becomes a dangerous “myth” insofar as it is taken to have a fixed and unconditionally universal sense; on the other, virtue in general must consist in a continual openness to situational demands to reflect upon the sense of one’s words and deeds, as well as to (hyper-)reflect upon the sense and genesis of one’s styles of reflection themselves.

Taking seriously Merleau-Ponty’s own suggestion in Signs, I articulate this conception of virtue via an extension and transformation of Machiavelli’s notion of political “prudence,” in terms of foresight, an openness to others which is neither domination nor subordination, and self-mastery (i.e., freedom relative to one’s past and one’s present values). Finally, I argue that the virtue of hyper-reflective openness to ambiguity possesses not just a meta-ethical, but also a normative function. While various normative principles and systems (e.g., deontology, utilitarianism, etc.) may prove well-suited to one’s efforts in given situations, the practice of Merleau-Pontian virtue alone can prevent them from regressing into delusional mythologies.
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ABBREVIATIONS

René Descartes

DM: Discourse on Method
Meditations: Meditations on First Philosophy
Passions: The Passions of the Soul
Principles: Principles of Philosophy

Immanuel Kant

CPR: Critique of Pure Reason
CPrR: Critique of Practical Reason
CJ: Critique of Judgment

Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

AD: Adventures of the Dialectic
HLP: Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology
IP: Institution and Passivity
IPP: In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays
PhP: Phenomenology of Perception
PP: The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays
PW: The Prose of the World
SB: The Structure of Behavior
SNS: Sense and Non-Sense
TD: Texts and Dialogues
VI: The Visible and the Invisible
WP: The World of Perception

¹ Citations for PhP refer to both Landes’s marginal pagination, and the regular pagination in the 2005 Gallimard edition. For Merleau-Ponty’s other works, English pagination precedes French: “English/French”. I make use of braces – “{}” – to indicate my own modifications in quotations where brackets – “[]” – are already present.
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Introduction

Modern Western thought – a philosophical and scientific tradition inaugurated in 17th century Europe, and particularly, through the writings of René Descartes and Francis Bacon – has unfolded an ambivalent movement, the extreme roots of which lie in Plato’s image of the “divided line” and “allegory of the cave.” 2 In the ethical register, Plato thereby established the problem of distinguishing between “true value” and “merely apparent value,” and correlative to, in the epistemological register, the problem of distinguishing between true knowledge and mere opinion in the epistemological register. Early Modern philosophy transformed these distinctions into an oscillation between, on the one hand, efforts to differentiate “objective reality” (i.e., “truth,” what things are in themselves) and “subjective meaning” (i.e., “appearances,” the ways in which things are experienced or evaluated from a particular perspective); and, on the other, efforts to reintegrate the real and the apparent, truth and semblance, within a single totality. Contemporary philosophy, regardless of its affectations of “post-” or “meta-Modernism,” continues to express this restless rupture between “objective” and “subjective” being through the persistence of three antinomies (i.e., oppositions between contradictory claims, both of which thought is compelled to affirm) arising between Modern conceptions of: “mind” and “body”; “self” and “others”; and, finally, “freedom” and “necessity.”

The “mind-body” antinomy finds articulation in some variant of the “mind-body problem”: on the one hand, I experience myself as indivisibly thinking and embodied; on the other, it seems impossible to conceive of mind and body as one, because the latter’s extension in space and duration in time can be measured, while the former eludes any and all attempts at

2 Plato, Republic, 509D-518B.
objective localization. At stake is the nature of the “self” and its “freedom,” with the mind traditionally conceived of as an “active interiority,” and the body as a “passive exteriority.” The “self-others” antinomy appears in the “Analytic” tradition as the “problem of other minds,” and in the phenomenological tradition as what Edmund Husserl calls “problem of the constitution of the alter ego”: on the one hand, I experience myself as living among other people, with whom I feel myself to be perpetually involved, sharing common world even when I am alone; on the other, I cannot objectively verify the truth of my belief in another person’s “subjective” life, because this life itself can never be given to me in the mode of “original presence” in which I perceive, e.g., my own subjective life, or another person’s body qua sensible form. But if knowledge of others were impossible, then so would be knowledge of my relations to them; although I perceive other people, and our behaviors toward each other, there is no possibility of explaining these experiences in purely objective terms. If interpersonal relations fall outside the realm of what can be explained, then the concept of “ethical discourse,” insofar as it consists of requesting and giving reasons for our behavior in dialogue with others, and thus presupposes some universal standard for judging the “validity” of these reasons, would be nonsensical. The “freedom-necessity” antinomy, finally, finds overt expression in metaphysical doctrines of free will and determinism. The particular dynamism of these concepts’ histories in the period Descartes inaugurred means that even a preliminary explication of this third antinomy requires a more extensive foray into philology and the genealogy of ideas than did the previous two.

Doctrines of free will or determinism, and the debates surrounding them, are often rendered more obscure by the assumption that the sense of concepts such as “necessity,” “chance,” and “freedom” has remained constant over time. On the contrary, as Ian Hacking argues in The Taming of Chance, the word “determinism” began to be used in its contemporary

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connection with the “doctrine of necessity” (i.e., to denote “efficient cause determinism” amongst spatial phenomena) “between the late 1850s and the early 1870s.” Meanwhile, the contemporary idea of the “doctrine of necessity”—encompassing both “the idea of determinism in extended substance” (i.e., the universal causal determination of extended beings), “and the idea of determinism or predeterminism in the mind” (i.e., for every “mental act” or “state,” there is a necessary and sufficient mental cause)—was expressed somewhat earlier, under other names (e.g., “mechanism” or “materialism”). Both these notions of “determinism” are distinctly Cartesian, premised as they are upon the elimination of all but effective causes from spatial being, and both are preliminarily articulated by Descartes himself, so that “although there is no one canonical timeless version of determinism, in the sense of the doctrine of necessity, there is a persistent thread of such determinism running through all post-Cartesian European history.” This means that, by the time the word “determinism” began to be used in its contemporary sense, “strictly causal laws” (i.e., “laws of nature”) were already being supplanted by “statistical laws” in the social sciences, preparing the way for the eventual—and near total—displacement of causal necessity by probability in the natural sciences—in particular, with the advent (i.e., arising in the world) of quantum physics in the mid-20th century. By the 1930s, the “statistical fatalism” of the 1830s (i.e., the assumption that individuals’ behavior is determined by statistical laws, not directly, but insofar as they are part of a real aggregate which is directly and strictly determined) had given way to the conviction that “[a]t most the collective behavior of an enormous collection of entities or events was determined,” so that “individuals within the ensemble might act freely.” Thus, it may seem that the opposition between “freedom” and “necessity” is outmoded, merely a

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6 Ibid., 154.
7 Ibid., 154.
8 Ibid., 1-2.
9 Ibid., 116.
relic batted about by philosophers and scientists who have yet to notice that “causal laws” have been replaced by “statistical norms.”

The retreat of “laws of nature” before “laws of probability” and “statistical norms” has not, however, been total. As R.L. Franklin points out, quantum-level indeterminism is at least perfectly compatible with macro-level determinism, and could even be interpreted as entailing macro-level determinism insofar as “statistical principles operate to produce the classical paradigm of all determinist theories at the macro-level of classical mechanics.” Thus, while laws of probability in the social sciences tend to entail indeterminism at the level of individual persons, laws of probability in physics may entail the opposite. In philosophy and neurology, particularly, efforts to reconcile a deterministic view of physical processes with a libertarian view of “intentional behavior” remain widespread, the sense of their urgency apparently undiminished. These fields still provide fertile soil for doctrines of “hard determinism” – the contention that an organism’s future state is causally necessitated by present “endogenous” (bodily) and “exogenous” (environmental) physical conditions – and classical libertarians – who affirm an objectively indeterminable power of choice (whereby one could, in a given situation, have acted differently than one in fact did) – alike.

Taking “necessity” in the older, but still operative, sense of causal determinism, the freedom-necessity antinomy arises between, on the one hand, the conviction that sufficient explanations of a certain class of phenomena (i.e., “free,” “intentional,” or “volitional” behaviors)

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10 Franklin, “Freewill, Determinism and the Sciences,” 57.
11 Searle, for example, argues that “physiological processes” and “mental states” are both “features of the brain,” but at “different levels of description,” so that it is ideally possible to provide a true description of a given behavior both in terms of series of physical causes, and in terms of “subjective features” (Searle, Minds, Brains and Science, 25-26). Given, however, that “mental states” do not appear in space at all, it may amount to a torturing of language to designate them “features” of a spatially extended object.
12 See, for example: Coyne, “You Don’t Have Free Will.”
13 Mele provides an excellent survey of recent work by defenders of “agent-causal” libertarianism (i.e., the claim that non-physical “agents” are capable of intervening in the course of physical events) and “event-causal” libertarianism (i.e., the claim that certain objectively indeterminate aspects of physical events are subjectively determined) (Mele, “Libertarianism, Luck, and Control,” 381-382.)
14 Banja, “‘Could Have Chosen Otherwise Under Identical Conditions’,” 4.
must, in principle, make reference to irreducibly “subjective” causes (e.g., “intentions,” “volitions,” etc.); and, on the other, the conviction that it is possible to provide a sufficient explanation of any phenomenon whatsoever (including human behavior) with reference to “objective” (i.e., quantifiable, measurable) causes alone. If we affirm the first horn, we thereby affirm that it is impossible to know the “true significance” or “value” (e.g., “morally good,” “morally bad”) of any given human action, because it is impossible to verify the truth of statement about its subjective causes (e.g., “I only meant to help”); the possibility of judgments about “moral responsibility” dissolves in the face of radical indeterminism. If we affirm the second horn, we affirm that it is in principle possible to know the necessary and sufficient cause(s) of any given human action. This would seem to require that any apparently subjective causes (e.g., “deliberations” or “volitions”) be reducible to measurable, objective ones (e.g., “brain activity”). But questions of verification pose a basic obstacle to any such reduction of “subjective” (or “lived,” or “interior,” or “first-person”) to “objective” phenomena: since subjective phenomena cannot be measured, there is no way to verify that they “really do correspond” to objective phenomena. Thus, if a complete explanation of behavior in terms of purely objective causes were possible, it would need to treat all subjective phenomena as ineffectual, e.g., treat “deliberation” and “choice” as merely apparent causes which, in reality, do not participate in causal series. Such an account would provide the “true reasons” for human behaviors, but on condition of reducing their “significance” to an inessential phantom, “mental life” to a mirage.

There is also a persistent danger of adopting an attitude whereby “statistical laws” give rise to a new, less overt modulation of the freedom-necessity antinomy. It seems that the truth-value of statistical data is dependent upon the reality of what is counted; otherwise, the numbers would be arbitrary inventions. Thus, in order to be justified in treating statistical laws as “true,” one would need to assume that the reality of the things counted precedes the activity of counting,
and that a given law of probability really governed events before its “discovery,” even though people living in the past may not have experienced their world as divided into the same categories of things that are now counted, or as governed by laws of probability. As an example of the former, borrowed from Hacking, data is now gathered on rates of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” in the general population, but it would not have been possible for a person to either take up or reject these identities prior to the late 19th century, because the descriptive categories had not been invented yet; there appears to be a feedback loop between our possibilities for being and our possibilities for describing or categorizing. Hacking proposes the concept of “dynamic nominalism” to understand this simultaneous advent of a new “label” and the “thing” it labels, arguing “not that there was a kind of person who came increasingly to be recognized by bureaucrats or by students of human nature but rather that a kind of person came into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented.” As for the assumption that laws of probability preexist our “discovery” of them, here it is likewise an ambiguous case of simultaneous discovery and invention. Marquis de Laplace was articulating a generally accepted truth when he wrote, in 1795, that “final causes or [chance]” are “imaginary causes,” expressing merely our “ignorance of the ties” of causal necessity between events. To grant positive reality to “chance” or indeterminacy “would have been unthinkable in the eighteenth century.” At the very least, it is certain that people living in the 18th century would have behaved differently insofar as they would have experienced and understood their identities in terms of “laws of human nature,” rather than “norms.”

We can now formulate the freedom-necessity antinomy in a manner which applies both when “necessity” is conceived of as causal determinism, and when it is conceived as the objective

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16 Ibid., 165.
18 Hacking, The Taming of Chance, 11.
reality or pre-existence of the objects and laws of statistics. On the one hand, it seems that “truths” express a necessity which is independent of human behavior and experience, which we merely discover; on the other, it seems that “truths” are inventions or products of certain human activities, which is to say, “free creations.” If we follow the first, “objectivist” horn, then we must either deny the fallibility of human knowledge (an absurd proposition, since we now hold many “truths” of the past to be “false”), or else deny the possibility of our ever knowing these eternal truths. But if we cannot, in principle, have knowledge of these objective truths, then we can likewise have no knowledge of the relation of our beliefs to them. Thus, asserting the reality of truth has led us to assert the ideality of all human knowledge. Meanwhile, if we follow the second, “subjectivist” horn, this seems to render “truth” arbitrary, collapsing any distinction between it and “mere opinion,” so that it is the same thing to say “all beliefs are true” or “no beliefs are true.”

The freedom-necessity antinomy is, therefore, both inextricably intertwined with the mind-body and self-other antinomies—concerned, as they are, with ambiguous relations between the “interior” and the “exterior,” and the “active” and the “passive”—and expressive of the fundamental Modern rupture which Edmund Husserl diagnoses in *The Crisis of the European Sciences*: between subjectively meaningless objective “truth,” and objectively indescribable lived “meaning.” David Hume famously articulates the meta-ethical implications of this subjective-objective gap in his critique of what G.E. Moore calls the “naturalistic fallacy”: his assertion that it is impossible to derive an “ought” from an “is,” an ideal from the real. Arguing that “all the vulgar systems of morality” rely upon an unwarranted leap from descriptive to prescriptive statements, Hume goes on to say:

For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation [beyond those expressed by *is*, and *is not*], ‘tis necessary that it shou’d be

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observ’d and explain’d; and at the same time that a reason shou’d be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.\textsuperscript{21}

Hume thus considers moral systems “vulgar” and unfounded insofar as they consider moral values in a purely objectivistic manner, either as real relations between things, or as logical relations between ideas: “the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceiv’d by reason,” which is to say, “vice and virtue are not discoverable merely by reason, or the comparison of ideas.”\textsuperscript{22}

I agree with Hume’s rejection of the possibility of a purely objective ethics, capable of deducing the form and content of “rightness” and “wrongness” from absolute principles. Deducing an “ought” from an “is” would render the “ought” superfluous, so that even if, e.g., a deduction of ethics from natural science or logic were possible, ethics would thereby vanish like a mirage: while cultivated “reason […] be sufficient to instruct us in the pernicious or useful tendency of qualities and actions,” it is “sentiment” which “makes a distinction in favour to those [tendencies] which are useful and beneficial.”\textsuperscript{23}

Concerning the truths of science and morality alike, Hume demarcates, and attempts to explicate the relations between, as Husserl puts it, “the sphere of rational insight” and “the sphere of blind opinion”: between “judgments” of “necessity,” and “presumptions” of “fact.”\textsuperscript{24} Husserl takes up the problem of the relationship between matters of conceptual necessity and “matters of fact,” further distinguishing between “the essence of purely phenomenological analysis in opposition to the psychological”: between, respectively, analyses of the structure of experiences (both of sensible beings and generalized “abstractions”), and the empirical observation and analysis of given “mental states.”\textsuperscript{25} My own project takes up this phenomenological tradition of efforts to articulate the relation between

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] Ibid., SB470.
\item[23] Hume, \textit{Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals}, 83.
\item[25] Ibid., 392-394.
\end{footnotes}
“being” and “sense” in such a way as to overcome the Modern opposition between idealism and realism: between the privileging of, respectively, the “subjective” and “objective” dimensions of being.26

Husserlian phenomenology, in striving to overcome this rupture, takes up the project animating Immanuel Kant’s “transcendental idealism,” which is itself a response to Hume’s pushing empirical realism (i.e., the assertion that what we perceive is “real”) toward the limit where it reverses into empirical idealism (i.e., the assertion that the true referents of all our “thoughts or ideas” are not real, external objects, but sensory “impressions”).27 Kant attempts to explain the relationship between things and concepts by positing the “world,” not as a transcendent thing in itself, but as a manifold of impressions synthesized by consciousness, such that the conditions for the possibility of experience and the conditions for the possibility of cognition are one and the same.28 Husserl radicalizes the Kantian method by altogether rejecting “the possibility of a world of things in themselves,” of a ‘true world’ apart from the phenomenal one which would therefore be absolutely transcendent to consciousness; instead, Husserlian phenomenology takes as its point of departure the “parenthesizing” of all posittings of transcendence so as to gain access to the field of pure sense – of consciousness, its acts, and their correlates – upon which “objective” and “subjective” being are founded.29 But Husserl, for his part, did not reach the point of overcoming the opposition between activity and passivity, between constituting activity and givenness. While his genetic investigations of “prefiguration” via the “horizon” structure of sense opened a path toward thinking beyond the subject-object opposition, it was for later thinkers to walk down it.30

26 Husserl, Crisis of the European Sciences, §23:86.
27 Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, §II:10.
28 Husserl, Crisis of the European Sciences, §23:88; Kant, CPR, Bxvi-Bxviii.
30 Husserl, Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis, 6; Husserl, Crisis of the European Sciences, §72:262.
Martin Heidegger simultaneously took up and transformed the project Husserl inaugurated, by shifting it to the register of ontology. If “truth” is phenomenalization, then Sein (“being”) must be spoken of, not as a supreme or ultimate “thing” (empirical realism), nor as the fundamental structure of an absolute “consciousness” which constitutes the world (intellectualist idealism in the Kantian style), but, rather, as the structure of phenomenalization itself, prior to all possibility of “subjects” and “objects.” While Husserl’s thought, even in his later accounts of “transcendental subjectivism,” remains limited by his traditional starting point (the subject-object opposition) and goal (an absolute “theory of knowledge,” albeit one conceived of as “infinite task”), Heidegger seems to retain an entirely different prejudice from the Enlightenment. Most generally, Heidegger remains loyal to the prejudicial spirit of traditional Enlightenment “humanism,” which conceives of human beings as radically separate from mere “Nature,” positing the former as, in some sense, imposing law upon the latter. Heidegger founds his human exceptionalism, not upon a theological claim concerning the “soul,” nor a rationalist one concerning the “faculties,” but upon his account of (human) “language” as the “house of Being,” absolutely different in kind from the symbolic behavior of non-human animals.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to preserve the contributions of Husserl and Heidegger alike, while holding more faithfully than either of them, I argue, to Husserl’s ideal of genuine philosophical “radicalism” which would “accept nothing given in advance, allow nothing traditional to pass as a beginning, […] but rather seek to attain the beginnings in a free dedication to the problems themselves and to the demands stemming from them.” Husserl’s later investigations of genetic processes underlying actual (and actually possible) idealizations – e.g., the co-advent of the Leib (“living body” or “organism”) and the Umwelt (“environment”) or

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31 Heidegger, Being and Time, 28-29.
34 Husserl, “Philosophy as Rigorous Sciences,” 195.
Lebenswelt ("lifeworld") – implicitly open the possibility of an “ontological mutation” of his phenomenology, a true “phenomenology of genesis”: “And yet, in the end, Husserl presents it again within the frame of constitution as ‘Sinnengebung’ [sense-bestowal,] as transcendental phenomenology.” In other words, while Husserl makes explicit the paradoxical nature of idealism as such (even in its transcendental forms), his radicality is limited by his retention of the language of idealism, of a “consciousness” which “bestows sense” upon beings through its “activity.” But “[p]recisely in order to accomplish its will for radicalism, [philosophy] would have to take as its theme the umbilical bond that binds it always to Being, the inalienable horizon with which it is already and henceforth circumvented, the primary initiation which it tries in vain to go back on.”

Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty ultimately undertakes an ontologization of Husserlian phenomenology, but he does not follow Heidegger in seeking this authentic comportment towards the being of beings in the resources of Greek antiquity. In the latter regard, Merleau-Ponty sees Heidegger as a “victim of the illusion of an unconditional treasure of absolute wisdom contained in language,” leading to his “false etymologies […] , his gnosis.” Heidegger’s “[t]oo quickly trusting language” is, in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes, symptomatic of “[wanting] to see and understand too quickly,” attempting to “make a direct ontology.” Merleau-Ponty’s “‘indirect’ method” approaches “being in the beings,” i.e., through an interrogation of given “facts” (e.g., lived experiences, scientific descriptions, etc.) which seeks to disclose the “ontological functioning,” the “sense,” expressed and realized in them. Heidegger, on the contrary, tends to approach the

35 Merleau-Ponty, HLP, 75/91, 33/39.
36 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 107/144.
39 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 179/233, 217/271.
question of the meaning of being by proceeding more or less immediately to the level of the
“ontological foundations” of “facts” as such:40

Heidegger says in Being and Time that the philosophy-psychology distinction is immediate: the facts cannot teach me anything [because], to my [philosophy], inductive generality presupposes essences. I consider that to be formalism: the facts prepared by ontological presuppositions of science can only disclose to me these presuppositions, but the same “scientific” fact always overflows this ontology, eventually puts it in question again. In any case philosophy has to conceive of it as a modality of being. […] A hermeneutic of facticity cannot be without facts.41

Thus, Merleau-Ponty seeks the overcoming of the antinomies of Modern thought not, primarily, through direct engagements with traditional metaphysical and epistemological ideas, but, rather, through an indirect style of engagement which brings traditional concepts into play analyzing a given phenomenon, pushing them to their limits, and thereby disclosing the horizon of sense, the “depth” or “vertical” being consisting of interwoven horizons of possible relations, which “idealizations” realize through the articulation of a certain possible sense, while simultaneously concealing the original openness of beings’ horizons.42

It is therefore through Merleau-Ponty’s simultaneous taking up of Enlightenment and of phenomenology – each on its own terms, and in their dialogue with one another – that I will pursue the fundamental aim of my present effort: the reconciliation of “truth” and “meaning”: the reconceptualization of the intersection of the scientific and the ethical, the descriptive and the normative. Beyond the “active-passive” and “internal-external” dichotomies of traditional philosophies of the “subject” and the “object,” Merleau-Ponty reconceives of the “being” of the “perceiver” and the “perceived” as the actual and possible manners of their intertwining. The individuation of sentient and sensible beings is not a mere given, but an expression of continual, mutual enfolding of beings. In and through actual relations, the “self,” “others,” and “things”

40 Heidegger, Being and Time, §10-§11:49-51.
41 Merleau-Ponty, Le monde sensible et le monde de l’expression, 47.
42 Merleau-Ponty, Vl, 18/36, 177/231.
continuously weave the “world” (i.e., a dynamic and total system of possible relations); and, conversely, it is through the (re)integration of this always-provisional totality that “individuals” come to articulation as such.43 “Self-identity” is not a property, but a process of (self-)transcendence in and through mutual contact with what thereby takes on a value of “otherness.” The dynamic interpenetration of horizons is both the manner of advent both beings and the world, thereby “sense” in its most primordial form, a silent expression of “truth” calling for its own further articulation in and through expressive behaviors, e.g., speech and writing: “perception is expression, expression of the world, and it confirms itself as human only insofar as it captures this emergence of a truth of the world.”44

I begin my present effort by, in section 1.A of the first chapter, inquiring into the historical genesis of the Modern antinomies. Subsections 1.A.i-1.A.iii explicate the movement of thought whereby Descartes inaugurates an enduring rupture between “objective knowledge” and “subjective meaning,” as if discovering two disparate “worlds”: one of “universal truth,” and one of “personal significance.” Descartes attempts to guarantee the “truth” of human knowledge – in the sense of an actual correspondence between ideas and their objects – by utilizing reflection to situate his thought in an immediate relation of, simultaneously, self-identity and self-knowing. The pure cogito is simultaneously the reality and the self-certainty of the “pure spectator,” i.e., the self-positing of the universal form of all “true knowledge” as such.45 But because the truth of “objective knowledge” about beings can only be guaranteed through reference to this purified intellect, it comes at the cost of rendering any “real” (i.e., causal) relation between the mind and body inconceivable. For Descartes, “embodied thinking” (or, conversely, “thinking bodies”) can only be lived, remaining, for thought, a necessarily incomprehensible mystery. Thus, the freedom of the “will” would be absolutely guaranteed in the sphere of purely intellectual judgment, but,

43 Ibid., 145/191.
44 Merleau-Ponty, Le monde sensible et le monde d’expression, 46 (my translation).
45 Gueroult, The Soul and God, 60.
again, inescapably shrouded in obscurity when it is a question of the “practical” decisions in the perceived world, since concrete “persons,” as mind-body composites, can be only vaguely conceived of as ambivalent conjunctions of spontaneity and mechanism. Unsurprisingly Descartes articulates an “ethics,” in the Passions, which focuses almost exclusively upon managing the body so as to minimize the distorting effects of its processes upon the operations of the pure intellect.

In the fourth subsection of 1.A, I explicate the initial development of the tradition’s horizon in the generations following Descartes, both the early Modern rationalists – Benedict de Spinoza and G.W. Leibniz – and the British empiricists: John Locke, Hume, and George Berkeley. Lastly, I address both Immanuel Kant’s attempt to reconcile the truths of these opposed schools of thought in his transcendental idealism, and Charles Darwin’s effort, from the empiricist side, to reconcile the apparent rationality of nature (e.g., the “purposiveness” of living beings) with the new mechanistic science. My fundamental concern is to articulate those points where the early Moderns sketch out (and, in some cases, explicitly formulate) possibilities for thought which are today expressed in Analytic “philosophy of mind” and Continental “postmodernism”; as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[t]here is something of everything in Descartes, as in the work of all great philosophers.”

In 1.B I turn to Merleau-Ponty’s description, in PhP, of the interminable oscillation (i.e., “bad ambiguity” or “ambivalence”) between metaphysical realism and idealism, and epistemological empiricism and intellectualism, characteristic of any thought which takes as its starting point either “objective reality” or “subjective experience.” Through the notions of “style” and “conditioned freedom,” PhP opens a path beyond “empiricism” and “intellectualism”: the alternatives of naïve “objectivism,” which assumes the metaphysical primacy of the objective

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46 Merleau-Ponty, WP, 64 / Merleau-Ponty, Causeries, 47.
world) concerning the unity or “sense” of sensations. Empiricism adopts an attitude of “realism” toward the “content of perception” (i.e., isolated “sensations” or “impressions”), and then attempts to explain the “structure” of the perceived world “by assembling [these] psychic atoms.” In other words, empiricism attempts to reconstruct, out of the in-themselves insignificant “parts” of a perception, the total sense or significance whereby it seems to point to the possibility, or even the necessity, of other perceptions—e.g., when I see one face of a building, and “know” that I could, through certain motions of my body, see other faces of it, even though the “whole” (i.e., every possible perception of the building) is never given as a real content of perception. Intellectualism likewise recognizes this absence of the “whole” from the “parts,” of the “perceived object” from isolated “sensations,” but adopts an “idealist” attitude, treating the unity of perceived being as something “bestowed” upon it by an activity of consciousness. The fundamental problem of intellectualism lies in its inability to explain why objects of perception “in themselves” provide a suitable canvas for the “intelligible structure” projected upon them. Empiricism begins from the parts of the “perceived object,” but cannot explain how they are united in a whole; intellectualism begins from the “whole,” but cannot explain how it acquires content. Merleau-Ponty, however, reconceives of “intellectual sense” – i.e., the “knowing” which empiricism and intellectualism attempt to explain – as the making-explicit of the mutually-implicated styles (ways of being in the world) of dynamic bodies, so that “thetic” or “spoken” consciousness is simply a formalized articulation of a body’s sensorimotor styles of gearing into its physical and cultural environment.

48 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 50.
49 Ibid., 49.
50 Ibid., 37-38.
51 Ibid., 51.
52 Ibid., 51.
53 Ibid., 465.
unconditioned choice, but the expression of the dynamic interlocking of the body’s and the
world’s horizons of possible sense wherein the very reality of the “possible” consists.

In Section A of Chapter 2, I undertake an initial explication of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology
by outlining the total development of his thought in terms of his gradual transformation of
Husserl’s concept of *Stiftung* (“institution” or “instituting”). The history of this simultaneously
conceptual and methodological development brings into relief a certain divergence between his
earlier (approximately from *SB* to *WP*) constitutive-genetic phenomenological analyses of the
Gestalt (“figure-background”) structure of lived experience – wherein he takes up Husserl’s
notion of *Fundierung* (“foundation” or “founding”) – and his later (approximately from *IP* to *VI*)
toonto-genetic analyses of perception and behavior as the continual co-advent (i.e., co-
phenomenalization) of “beings” through the sedimentation-reactivation of schemas of relational
possibilities. It is in these later works that Merleau-Ponty explicitly overcomes the alternative of
subjectivism and objectivism, opening up an onto-genetic field of inquiry, or what he (taking up
the language of *Generativität* in Husserl’s post-1930 manuscripts) sometimes calls a
“phenomenology of genesis.”54 I argue that Merleau-Ponty discovers his means of articulating the
“vertical” dimension of being – the dimension of advent or genesis – through a creative
redeployment of *Stiftung*, which comes to function as an evocation of the structure of “being”
itself, i.e., the system of ontological operations – of processes of divergence in and through
mutual encroachment – whereby beings as such advent. It is the beings or “phenomena”
themselves which, through their actual relations, both bring to primordial articulation, and
continually (re)create, the “invisible” horizon structure of perceived being which is the original of
all sense: the advent of sensible and sentient beings is simultaneously the birth of ideality.

Teleology,” 337.
The Modern alternative between “facts” (i.e., ‘purely objective descriptions’) and “meaning” (i.e., ‘purely subjective significance’) is an abstract idealization of the “reversibility” of the body and of sensible “things.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, VI, 136/179.} The “givenness” of a perceived being expresses more than is actually given; because its actual appearance is but one possible modulation a general style of appearing, its actual visibility is simultaneously the expression of an invisible “sense” or “ideality,” i.e., a horizon of other possible appearances.\footnote{Ibid., 132/174-175.} The primordial “meaning” of given being as such is this divergence between the actual and the virtual, between a visible “figure” and its invisible “background”: “between the flesh and the idea.”\footnote{Ibid., 265/319, 149/195.}

The “sensible sentient” body (e.g., a human body) “is a very remarkable variant” of this “flesh of the visible,” a particularly dramatic expression of the general “paradox” of sensibility: on the one hand, as sensing, as an operative power which makes “things” appear, my body does not seem to be “in” the world, so much as my “opening” to the world; on the other, as sensible, as a “thing” appearing amongst others “in the world,” it seems rather “as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it.”\footnote{Ibid., 136/179, 8-9/22-24.} But these two “dimensions” of the body are not contraries. Rather, it is in and through its activity of perceiving that my body advents in the world as a “thing” that perceives, e.g., it is in and through actually seeing that the body both realizes the visibility of visible things, and itself becomes visible as a thing which sees: “[t]he body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis.”\footnote{Ibid., 136/179.} The style of functioning whereby my body sees is simultaneously its style of becoming visible as seeing. The living body is neither “subject” nor “object,” nor some impossible mixture of the two, but flesh: in and through its

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Merleau-Ponty, VI, 136/179.} Merleau-Ponty, VI, 136/179.
\item \footnote{Ibid., 132/174-175.} Ibid., 132/174-175.
\item \footnote{Ibid., 265/319, 149/195.} Ibid., 265/319, 149/195.
\item \footnote{Ibid., 136/179, 8-9/22-24.} Ibid., 136/179, 8-9/22-24.
\item \footnote{Ibid., 136/179.} Ibid., 136/179.
\end{itemize}
visibility, it is “the concrete emblem of a general manner of being,” the expression of a general style of being and the horizon of its possible modulations.\textsuperscript{60}

But the body’s “constitutive paradox” – i.e., the unity-in-divergence of the body as sensible \textit{and} sentient, as simultaneously “absolute proximity” to, and “irremediable distance” from, the world of perception – “already lies in every visible.”\textsuperscript{61} In and through seeing, my body becomes visible as seeing, and thereby becomes \textit{expressive}: of an internal horizon of possible activities of seeing, and of an external horizon of possible appearances qua seeing. \textit{In the same way}, my desk has certain styles of relating to other bodies, among which is a style of relating to bodies which see. My present vision of the desk is not just a certain crystallization of my body’s general style of acting on sensible beings, but is, simultaneously, a modulation of the desk’s general style of relating to sentient beings: “my activity is equally passivity.”\textsuperscript{62} The flesh of visible beings is the mutual encroachment on one another, the \textit{chiasm}, in and through which the horizon of each one’s possibilities for functioning diverges from its actual functioning, hollowing out an invisible “interiority” of its visible “surface.”\textsuperscript{63}

In 2.B, I shift – from my relatively “frontal” (i.e., conceptual) method, in 2.A, of explicating Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh in terms of the evolution of the concepts of \textit{Fundierung} and \textit{Stiftung} across his writings – to a more oblique approach. Through an interrogation, in 2.B.i, of neurological literature concerning a recent case of “acquired pedophilia” (i.e., pedophilic behavior arising after brain damage), I crystallize the general Modern “problem” to which Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh responds. Then, in 2.B.ii-2.B.iv, I articulate this ontology as an overcoming of, respectively, the mind-body, self-others, and freedom-necessity antinomies. I argue, in 2.B.ii, that what has traditionally been called “mind” is an abstract

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 147/193.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 8/23, 136/179.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 139/183.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 131/173.
idealization of the expressivity of the body qua flesh: a system of virtual relations primordially articulated, and continually recreated, in and through the body’s actual relations. The “mind” is the invisible lining of the flesh of the visible body, its “interior” or individuation—but it is only in and through the *intertwining* of the flesh that beings become individuated, so that the mind is not a closed “Cartesian theater,” but the expression of the primordial *openness* of all beings as fibers of a *single* flesh of sensible being.64

Thus, the “problem” of self and other, which I address in 2.B.iii, is transformed into a recognition of the *ambiguity* of identity and difference. The individuation of “persons” likewise occurs against the background of the primordial openness of all beings qua flesh. We are not purely intellectual “subjectivities,” who would be *separated* by our bodies; rather, a “mind” is the excess of a body’s system of corporeal possibilities over its own realizations, in and through each real contact with other bodies. A relation between two bodies is a commingling which realizes the “kinship” of all flesh, prior to “self” and “other”; *and*, simultaneously, it is the advent of a distance insofar as each body expresses a virtual horizon of relations which transcends their actual contact.65 Properly “human” processes of individuation diverge from those of other living beings we have encountered due to the greater expressivity of the human beyond, and particularly, the extension of its expressive power, of its life, into the “organs” of symbols:

> [T]oday as in the past, there is only one single marvel[...] which is that man speaks or calculates. [...] He has constituted for himself these prodigious organs of algorithm and language which do not wear out, but on the contrary grow through use, being capable of indefinite labor, of returning more than has been invested in them, and yet relating themselves unceasingly to things.66

While human existence remains always and inescapably an articulation of the world of perception, the same “realm of the real” toward which “animal perception” is directed, for human beings the animal *Umwelt* is, through the functioning of signs, taken up – its “silent” sense both

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64 Ibid., 198/252.
65 Ibid., 208-210/262-263.
preserved and transformed – in the total symbolic schema of the Welt.67 As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “[O]ne might think that I hold that man lives only in the realm of the real. But we also live in the imaginary, also in the world of ideality.”68

This taking up of the world of perception in and through the institution of a human Welt of symbolic being is exemplary of the authentic senses of “freedom” and “necessity,” to which I turn in 2.B.iv. The freedom of any living being is a power of creative repetition: its ability to respond to the “question” of a given situation by taking up an available style of functioning and transforming it, thereby simultaneously realizing a sense of the past which had been only implicit, and opening a new horizon of future possibilities. “Choice” makes use of the past to project a future, so that a certain possible sense of the past becomes crystallized as the necessary ground of the future’s very openness, although the original contingency of the sense past (prior to the choice) is thereby preserved as forgotten (i.e., taken for granted because it is operative) in the present. All life is “the use of chances,” the deployment of available styles to realize certain “convergences […] which are in no way the only [ones] possible […], [and] are thus neither causally imposed nor logically imposed, nor absolutely the best; they are at the jointure of all the conditioning, satisfying to all, and adding to it a [new] manner of being improbable.”69 Humans do not possess a power of freedom, a “will,” absent from other life; rather, because human behavior extends into a world of symbolic meanings operative between the relatively enduring forms of spoken and written signs, “[a]t the level of man evolution is transported on[to] technique and accelerated.”70

Finally, in Chapter 3, I seek to articulate the implicit ethical dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh. In 3.A, I compare and contrast Merleau-Ponty’s notion of

68 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 265/333.
“authenticity” – which he, following the “existentialist” tradition in general, associates with a genuinely ethical comportment – with those of Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Kant, and Simone de Beauvoir. Like Beauvoir, in particular, Merleau-Ponty conceives of authenticity as an authentic relation to the “ambiguity” of existence—or, in Heideggerian terms, a comportment in and toward the world which lets the possible be (qua possible). But whereas Beauvoir, like Sartre, conceives of ambiguity as an unresolvable tension or ambivalence between being-in-itself and being-for-itself, Merleau-Ponty, from IP on, conceives of it as the (re)intertwining of horizons of sense whereby the styles of “self,” “others,” and “things” come to expression as individuals by continually differentiating themselves through their simultaneous articulation of, and integration into, an ever-provisional totality of virtual relations: a single “world.”

Then, in 3.B, I evaluate the meta-ethical implications of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh as a hyper-dialectical movement of chiasm-écart (“intertwining”-“divergence”), wherein “freedom” and “necessity” are neither objective properties of “things,” nor merely nominal concepts, but ontological functions: respectively, the opening and the articulation of horizons of possibility. I agree with Mauro Carbone and Ted Toadvine that the ontology of the flesh cannot found a moral system in the traditional sense, because the structure of the flesh underlies the genesis of all values and value-systems, even those “abstract” ones which aspire to be “objective sciences” of morality. I argue, however, that Merleau-Ponty’s indirect approach to ontology is inseparable from his account of authenticity, so that his articulation of an ontology is simultaneously an outlining of certain negative (3.B.i) and positive (3.B.ii) meta-ethical valuations.

In 3.B.i, I argue that, by revealing the structural risk of delusional violence inherent in the mythical character of “objectivism” and “relativism,” Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh

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implicitly outlines a negative meta-ethics. By “objectivism” in the pejorative sense, I mean thought – regardless of the particulars of its metaphysics and epistemology – which conceives of “truth” as eternal and unchanging. Ethical objectivism can take the form of either a “realism” or an “idealism” of values: conceiving of them, respectively, as *a posteriori* knowable “facts” (e.g., consequentialism), or as *a priori* knowable “ideas of reason” (e.g., deontology). In either case, objectivism is founded upon the assumption that “there is” a single, true value of every deed, regardless of whether or not it is ever known, and independent of any and all actual judgments. Ethical relativism presupposes precisely this notion of “objective truth,” and then goes on to deny that any such unconditional truth exists. There would then be a multiplicity of truths corresponding to the multiplicity of evaluative standpoints on a given event (e.g., a truth for each person, a truth for each culture, etc.), each of which really “is” the truth for that particular standpoint.

By contrast, Merleau-Ponty advances his notion of the “primacy of perception” precisely as an account of *true* objectivity, i.e., “objectivity” which in no way excludes, but explicitly takes up what has traditionally been termed the “subjective”: “As Gestalt psychology has shown, structure, *Gestalt*, meaning are no less visible in objectively observable behavior than in the experience of ourselves—provided, of course, that objectivity is not confused with what is measurable.”\(^2\) Thus, naïve objectivism is “scientism,” the reduction of the being of beings to what can be measured with contemporary scientific techniques. We are “truly objective” when we recognize “that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside all

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dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action.”\(^{73}\)

There is no objective means of determining, once and for all time, the value of a particular (nor, therefore, of an abstract type of) human undertaking. But it is also true that, in a given situation, the ways in which beings realize their differentiations through the interweaving of their “interior” and “exterior” horizons, the operative styles whereby persons and things become individuated via their integration into a total field, realize a certain possible sense of the past, and pose certain questions which the future must answer.\(^{74}\) The present situation thus poses certain general questions or “problems,” which call for certain styles of response, while foreclosing on others. The being of truth is this \textit{becoming}, this process of the continual (re)integration of “beings” into a single “world,” and the sense of the past into that of the present. Thus, truth insofar as it is \textit{given} (i.e., handed down as a “lasting acquisition”) is always provisional, though not in the relativistic sense that its veracity would be limited to a certain span of objective time.

In 3.B.ii, I articulate the \textit{positive} meta-ethical implication of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology by taking seriously his suggestion, in “A Note on Machiavelli,” that what is a “precept” of politics “could well be” (\textit{pourrait bien être}) the “rule of a true morality” (\textit{la règle d’une vraie morale}) as well: that a historical actor ought to cultivate a certain self-mastery whereby she is free to act in ways that presently appear “good” or “cruel,” according to what is called for by the situation—according to the present horizons of the possible.\(^{75}\) A “true morality” cannot consist in a universal system for determining the “rightness” or “wrongness” of actions (like deontology or utilitarianism), nor can its values be founded upon any absolute, positive or negative (e.g., respectively, Plato’s “form of the Good” or Emmanuel Levinas’s “face of the Other”). Just as the

\(^{74}\) Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 131-132/173-175.
question of the meaning of being must, for Merleau-Ponty, be approached laterally, in and through beings, because a frontal approach can yield only abstractions, so the question of the meaning of “good” or of “evil” (or of any other ethical value) must be approached through the interrogation of concrete events embedded in the total-dynamic field of history.\(^76\)

Because each situation is a modulation of a total history, always singular and always in progress, its provisional truth explicitly recoils onto the whole of what came before (e.g., with the discovery of non-Euclidian geometry, the sense of Euclidian geometry’s truths is retroactively transformed from “unconditional valid” to “valid for objects in Euclidian space”), and implicitly projects the whole of what is presently possible (e.g., the discovery of Euclidian geometry opened up the horizontal possibility of non-Euclidian geometry’s discovery), having not yet crystallized into the “necessity” of a past which will be taken up in its turn, whether authentically or not. If a truth of the present is subsequently cancelled and replaced by some new truth, it nonetheless always will have been true, because that future truth will be the truth of the past, not only transforming that which preceded it, but thereby preserving it as well.\(^77\) In Signs and AD, Merleau-Ponty describes the “success” of human endeavors, which arises in and through modulations of the style of “communication” or “coexistence,” in terms of fecundity, the (re)opening of a horizon of expressive behaviors’ possibilities for self-transcendence “toward a universal meaning,” i.e., toward the (re)institution of a style of co-existing in and toward a common world; and “failure,” which arises in and through modulations of the style of “force” or “violence,” in terms of the constriction or death of lived meaning.\(^78\) Because coexistence and violence are general styles, the meaning of their particular modulations remains always ambiguous, so that they cannot serve as absolute principles of an ethical system that would articulate and apply its values once and for all time. The being – i.e., the general style of advent –

\(^76\) Merleau-Ponty, VI, 179/233.
\(^77\) Ibid., 88/121.
\(^78\) Merleau-Ponty, “Man and Adversity,” in Signs, 239/390-391; Merleau-Ponty, AD, 220-221/304-305.
of “values” is the fecundity of life, e.g., for human beings, the (re)institution of a “common life” in and through “common striving”: the continual genesis of a human “world,” a meaningful world. But this means that, in certain situations, closing off certain present possibilities for coexistence may prove to have been necessary in order to avoid greater violence, or to institute a richer horizon of common endeavors. Acknowledging the ineradicable possibility – that what appears to be violence now will appear to have been the greatest possible mercy in a future which it opens – is a valorization, neither of violence in general, nor of particular instances of it. On the contrary, the fact that the integrity of some historical process (e.g., a person, a state, etc.) can be maintained only through violence expresses present weakness, and past failures.

Merleau-Ponty outlines a positive meta-ethics of the flesh through his account of “virtue” as an authentic openness to the irreducible ambiguity of the sense of human efforts and institutions. The danger of adherence to “universal” or “absolute” values lies in the fact that it tends to produce a “paranoid” attitude wherein the sense of phenomena is a modulation of “bad ambiguity,” an unstable oscillation between contrary absolutes (e.g., according to Kant, all persons are determined as purely good or purely evil via an eternal, “transcendental” decision, which means that, from the perspective of empirical consciousness, it is impossible to determinatively judge persons as either good or evil, though each of us has always already “chosen” one or the other). Thus, the requirement for “hyper-reflection” (i.e., suréflexion, a reflection upon our reflections concerning the sense of phenomena, seeking to give voice to the unreflected “soil” of the latter reflections) is not just an epistemological, but a moral requirement:

80 Ibid., 216-217/352-354.
a *normative* ethics of flesh.83 The “virtue” of concrete historical actors consists in openness to the openness of sense, and particularly ethical value, itself: negatively, the foregoing of absolute principles and strictly universal norms. Positively, virtue is realized in the endless task of interrogating present truths to give voice to the silent histories operative in and through – and thus exceeding – given “identities” and “differences.” To lend one’s voice to the continual becoming of truth is to become dispossessed of illusions of unconditional sovereignty concerning meaning, and, simultaneously, to *cease* being possessed by apparently unconditional truths. Hyper-reflective virtue is not a replacement for any or all systems of ethics or practical deliberation, but a more radical form of reflection with the potential to rescue the latters’ truths from distorting absolutization by making the becoming of truth explicit.

In 3.B, I contrasted my account of a Merleau-Pontian approach to ethics with a “positivistic” grounding of ethical significance in some absolute “identity” (objectivism, e.g., Kantian deontology) or, conversely, in “difference” *relative to* such an absolute identity (relativism). Finally, in 3.C, I clarify the normative implications of my account by differentiating it from Levinas’s “negativistic” grounding of ethical significance, which reverses the positivistic tradition by setting up “alterity” (the absence and incomparability of the other) as the wellspring value, and the value of identity as merely relative. For Merleau-Ponty, a living ethics – as opposed to an abstract ethics, a system of words expressing meanings that can *only* be taken up in speech – cannot, in principle, be oriented toward an absolute in either of the traditional senses, i.e., absolute “interiority” (e.g., “reason” in the Kantian sense) or “exteriority” (e.g., “the Other,” whether in the sense of the Judeo-Christian God Himself, or Levinas’s attempt to once more found the significance of the world upon that God, not through some traditional revelation of a positive doctrine, but through an experience of absolute transcendence in the face-to-face

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encounter with “the Other”). Ethics slips into abstract mythology insofar as one imagines one’s values to be grounded in something unchanging, in a place somewhere “before” or “beyond” the single, living “history” of “human interrelations”: “a single experience which develops itself of itself and in whose development, so to speak, truth capitalizes itself.” The true “absolute” is the structural process of the continual becoming of a truth—a structure which can be articulated, but, like all truth, never univocally, because each event of “comprehension” is simultaneously a creative advent of sense.

Ultimately, I argue that Merleau-Ponty outlines an ontology of Stiftung as the operative structure of beings qua flesh, the style of styles of being—and also, therefore, as the concrete ‘principle’ of any living ethics as such, i.e., the immanent ground idealized in thought and speech concerning “moral value” in all its variations. Merleau-Ponty writes, in 1962, at the close of an unpublished reflection upon his works thus far, and outline of his (never to be completed) subsequent projects:

The study of perception could only teach us a “bad ambiguity,” a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority. But there is a “good ambiguity” in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole. To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics.

Far from being ethically neutral, the ontology of the flesh is itself, simultaneously, the outline of an ethics. And I argue that the name of this “spontaneity,” the common structure sublimated in metaphysics and ethics alike, is Stiftung. I do not claim to have discovered the univocal truth of Merleau-Ponty’s work, because there is no such truth of any “great” work—i.e., a work which

institutes new styles of being, “founding a new universality” by opening new horizons of perception and expressive behavior, which is to say, new horizons of “freedom.””87

Perhaps I am attempting to articulate the “unthought” of Merleau-Ponty’s works, i.e., that general style or “element […] which is wholly his and yet opens out on something else.”88 I remain hesitant at this characterization, because the unfolding of the style I seek to articulate was ultimately limited, not by its author’s intentions, but by his death; it is, in any case, a thought which has remained quiet. At the level of perception, a “sentient body” advents as such in and through the functioning of sensible beings, and, conversely, a “sensible body” advents as such in and through the functioning of sensing beings, each articulating itself via its integration into “the total field that is the perceptual truth,” the “ambiguous order of perceived being.”89 And we find this same relation of individuation through intermingling at the level of thought, e.g., in the relationship between a writer and a reader. To think, after all, is not to depart from the living body, woven into the fabric of the world of perception; it is, rather, to realize a new sense, a new use, of the sensible-sentient body’s primordial reversibility by extending it into the new “organs” of words.90 Thus, it is a mistake to “think that interpretation is restricted to either inevitable distortion or literal reproduction,” a mistake founded upon the fantasy of an unconditional truth whereby “we want the meaning of a man’s works to be wholly positive and by rights susceptible to an inventory which sets forth what is and is not in these works.”91 On the contrary, “to comprehend is not to constitute in intellectual immanence” – to reduce what is heard or read to a single, correct text stamped with a certification of unconditional universality – but rather “to

89 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 22/40-41.
90 Ibid., 204/257.
apprehend by coexistence, laterally, *by the style*.”92 All thinking takes up – both preserving, and transforming – a style which is already available, whether in the world of perception, or in a cultural artifact, in the works of a philosopher, and it is in this sense that the *discoveries* of thought are equally its *creations*. Any expressed “meaning” is both a *modulation* and a *recreation* of an entire “diacritical system” wherein the significance of, e.g., a sentence, lies in the way that it brings the entire “system” of a language into operation to respond to a certain concrete situation.93 Thus, “the works and thought of a philosopher are also made of certain articulations between things said,” so that “we can be faithful to and find them only by thinking them again,” reactivating the general style which *is* their “truth” by putting it to new uses in our present situation.

Merleau-Ponty expresses the structure of the flesh in and through his account of *Stiftung* not, primarily, in a direct and explicit manner, but rather, obliquely. In his gradual articulation of the concept of *Stiftung*, he simultaneously articulates his own thought’s development: a movement of thought oriented toward the problem of how to give voice to the silent world of perception, the truly radical problem of “how every philosophy is language and nonetheless consists in rediscovering silence.”94 In this sense, he accomplished a truly foundational thinking of being, of the primordial structure of sense—where “foundation” signifies, not a static formal unity, nor an absolute existent, but the immanent structure of beings, the schema of virtual relations which they express in and through each of their actual relations. Sensible and sentient beings, as operative schemas, as flesh, are always already expressive of a silent sense, continually giving birth to the primordial idealities of the “world of perception” which function as the inescapable ground of all other idealizations. “Universal truths” are not attained via a rupture with

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the world of perception, but are its “sublimation” through the use of language, “preserving” and “transforming” the silent logos of perception in a single movement: “Knowledge and communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation, and the characteristic operation of the mind is in the movement by which we recapture our corporeal existence and use it to symbolize instead of merely to coexist.”

Merleau-Ponty’s account of “authenticity” in his later works – as an ontologically motivated critique of abstract thinking and articulation of a general style of virtue – is inseparable from his ontological methodology, the genuinely radicality of “hyper-reflection.”

Sense is born at the “hinge” between visible and invisible being, the actual and the possible, which designates neither a content of consciousness nor objective coordinates, but the co-realization, of sensible being in the functioning of sentient being, and of sentient being in the functioning of sensible being. The givenness of a being is, simultaneously, a primordial articulation of sense, an expression of its being, in and through other beings. By reconceiving of the “givenness” of beings as the primordial co-expression of the sense of perceptible and perceiving beings, Merleau-Ponty overcomes the traditional alternative between “meaningless facts” (naïve objectivism) and “merely subjective meaning” (subjectivist relativism). It is on the terms of this false dilemma that “objective truth” (identified with “scientific facts”) and “subjective meaning” seem to constitute mutually contradictory spheres of existence. And it is because of the predominance – in the epoch called “Modern” – of this notion of “objectivity” that ethical thought in particular, and philosophy in general, has sought to become an “objective science” itself, and thereby attain equal footing.

96 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 148/194-195.
Chapter 1

Operative Concepts of the Cartesian Tradition: Reflection, the Mind-Body Union, and Freedom

With his Meditations, Descartes inaugurates a tradition of thought and practice characterized by a seemingly unbridgeable gap between “objective” truth and “subjective” meaning, between “reality in itself” and “reality for consciousness.” In part 1.A of this chapter, I investigate the manner whereby Descartes’s movement of reflection simultaneously grounds itself, and founds his conceptions of extended and thinking substance – physical and psychical being – in such a way that our knowledge of the latter constitutes originary, absolute truth, upon which the relative truth of our knowledge of the former is parasitic. The independence of thinking substance from corporeal substance, in turn, founds a double conception of freedom: the unconditional freedom of the pure intellect, and the conditioned freedom of the mind-body composite, which is to say, of living human beings. Finally, I show that the Cartesian rupture between, on the one hand, a realm of certain, abstract knowledge (i.e., the “objective knowledge” which a supposedly self-transparent thought has of itself, and of its own purely conceptual constructions) and, on the other, a realm of relative, always-indefinite certainty (i.e., the “obscure truth” of concrete, lived experience) gave birth to seemingly conceptual dichotomies. We today remain “Cartesians” insofar as we still struggle to comprehend the relationships between mind and body, self and others, and free choice and necessity.

In part 1.B, I turn to Merleau-Ponty’s initial efforts – in PhP and in his transitional interrogations of expressive phenomena prior to IP – to overcome the alternative of being-for-itself and being-in-itself, of consciousness and things. Merleau-Ponty discovers that any and all thinking which begins from either side of the opposition inevitably recoils into its opposite, *ad*
Infinitum, and therefore calls for a new starting point, an engagement with actual perception and behavior that does not subsume lived experience under the abstract categories of either intellectualism or empiricism. This methodological style of “radical reflection” consists in the effort to give voice to operative styles of being in the world, to the structure of the advent of “things” and “ideas,” the ambiguous network of becomings that animate abstract conceptions of “beings” in their positivity and “thought” in its negativity. Merleau-Ponty is ultimately led, at the conclusion of PhP, to a reconceptualization of true “freedom” in terms of the structure of Fundierung (“foundation” or “founding”), as the essentially conditioned taking up of a possibility already sketched out in and through the interlocking of the horizons of a living body and the world.
1.A. Interrogating Descartes

In the following section, I show that Descartes considers the impossibility of conceiving of the mind-body union the necessary cost of securing the soundness of mathematical models of extended nature, so that the “mind-body problem” is already explicit in his writings, its insolubility the outcome of an explicit trade-off on his part. The “problem of other minds,” however, is not explicitly a concern for him, and it is easy to understand why: coherently conceiving of the experience of one mind by another is not a condition for the possibility of “pure science,” but rather, a condition for the possibility of ethics and politics within a world organized according to precisely the notion of objective scientific “truth” that Descartes himself set out to secure.97 Finally, while Descartes explicitly addresses the problem of how to reconcile a notion of “free choice” with universal determinism in the natural world, he does so with a focus on securing a deterministic image of the natural world against the intervention of any transcendent intentionality (i.e., supernatural or anthropomorphic prejudices), and safeguarding our capacity to create predictive models of this deterministic reality. He does not appear to recognize the horizontal dangers of styles of thought which would reduce consciousness itself to a mere “thing” (realism), or reduce the world of things to a content of consciousness (idealism).

I begin, in 1.A.i, by explicating Descartes’s method of “reflection,” whereby he establishes his own discursive position as a pure observer at the site of thought’s immediate relation of identity with itself, and then proceed, in 1.A.ii, to his distinction between “mind” and “body.” Cartesian reflection serves to reveal the existential independence of thinking and

97 Grosholz argues that, while contemporary scholars of Descartes tend to emphasize his effort “to ensure the certainty of knowledge,” Descartes’s fundamental project in the Meditations is better conceived of as centered around “the unity and competence of the knowing human self as the central issue,” since the “simples” of this work “are not propositions,” but “clear and distinct ideas”—not items of knowledge as such, but psychical contents (Grosholz, Cartesian Method, 133). While I concur with Grosholz on this point, I see Descartes’s attempt “to reconstruct the human self as knower” as the unthought, implicit project of his Meditations; Descartes, in explicitly attempting to render the world absolutely intelligible, can only do so by making it the correlate of an absolutized “subjectivity,” a pure intellect (Grosholz, Cartesian Method, 133).
extended substance, and this thought thereby renders explicit the metaphysical ground of its own possibility, establishing itself as the foundation of a self-grounding edifice of knowledge. This means, however, that Descartes can only retain his guarantee of the veracity of objective knowledge of the material world by rendering the union of the mind and the body, along with the “freedom” of concrete human beings (mind-body composites), unthinkable. Despite his various efforts to articulate middle terms between thinking and extended substance (e.g., animal spirits, the pituitary gland, memory, and imagination), each of these must ultimately fall entirely on one side or the other, or else it would contaminate the immediate self-presence of the cogito with the imperfections of time and finite, with their concomitant necessity for mediation, which would destabilize the entire edifice of indubitable knowledge. Thus I argue, in 1.A.iii, that the unrestricted freedom of theoretical consciousness comes at the price of rendering practical freedom an impenetrable mystery.

I propose to interpret Descartes’s work, not so much in terms of the “correctness” or “incorrectness” of his explicit claims, but rather in terms of the ways in which it has functioned to restrict certain possibilities for thought and behavior, while opening others. I aim to give voice to the grounding problems which animate Descartes’s reflections, and for that very reason elude explicit articulation in them. The Western tradition following Descartes has, after all, remained almost entirely bound to the metaphysical possibilities already present in Descartes’s own thought: dualist and monist conceptions of being. These, in turn, boil down to mixtures and variants of “realism” or “idealism,” in Merleau-Ponty’s senses of the terms: respectively, the reduction of all manners of existing to “being-in-itself” (i.e., pure exteriority, to which “actualism” or realism reduce being) or “being-for-consciousness” (i.e., pure interiority, to which idealisms reduce being).98

98 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 82.
I outline these trajectories, in 1.A.iv, through a survey of Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Kant, and Darwin. Spinoza and Leibniz both attempt to reconcile the relativity of being-for-consciousness with the unconditionality of being-in-itself – to reconcile lived meaning with eternal truth – by positing the actuality of an immediate, positive infinity: conceiving of the totality of beings as, respectively, the self-realization of an infinite substance, or an infinity of substances each expressing a single whole fabric. Locke, Hume, and Berkeley react against this rationalist tradition with the empiricist demand that all concepts either be traceable to experience, or regarded as empty. This principle results in increasing degrees of skepticism through their acceptance of the Cartesian assumption that “experience” is “internal” to mental life, so that Berkeley finally pushes empiricism into skeptical idealism, denying the meaningfulness of the very notion of “matter.”

Kant sidesteps empiricist critiques of Cartesian metaphysics of substance by turning inward in a different manner, positing the “world” – the systematic totality of actual and possible beings – not as an ultimate reality in and for itself, but as the necessary ideational correlate of human consciousness, which alone can be posited as existing in and for itself. He thereby grounds the truth of human understanding, not in the actual infinity of a “God” or “Nature,” but in the absolute sovereignty of human reason over itself, which grounds the power of understanding through an act of teleological reflective judgment: the (logical) categories of the understanding must apply to all possible experience as such, so that there can be unified consciousness, and its correlate, a knowable (phenomenal) world. Darwin, meanwhile, sidesteps the fundamental idealist critique of empiricism – that there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between singular sensations, and knowledge of universal forms – by formulating an account of the genesis of observable forms in nature entirely in terms of processes immanent to the empirical world through the creative power of the encounter between living beings and their environments.
I close 1.A.iv with a consideration of contemporary “postmodern” and “post-Cartesian” philosophy, taking Judith Butler as exemplary of the former, and Daniel Dennett as exemplary of the latter. Each of them – Dennett from the Analytic side, and Butler from the Continental – advocates a sort of “constructivism” in regard to sense; Dennett locates the genesis of sense in experiential “stances,” and its confirmation in experimental results, while Butler locates the genesis of sense in “performances” that continually reiterate “power,” and argues that it is accessible only in and through language. Both of these perspectives on the being of sense display the oscillation, characteristic of Modern thought in general, between intellectualist spontaneity and empiricist determinism that Merleau-Ponty traces in *PhP*, to which I will therefore turn in 1.B.
1.A.i. Cartesian Reflection: The Immediate Self-Reference of the PureCogito

Before turning to Descartes’s doctrine of reflection, I will outline his notion of “substance,” the presupposition of which predetermines the nature of the “subject” that will become present to itself in reflection. In the Principles, Descartes defines “thought” and “extension” as the “principle properties,” or essential attributes, of, respectively, “thinking substance” and “corporeal substance.” He defines “substance” in general by its existential independence—“a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence”—so that God is the only substance which exists by virtue of itself alone, whereas created substances require “the help of God’s concurrence” in order to exist. This earlier account is consistent with his statements in the Meditations, where he posits the “human mind” and “body” as distinct substances, defining “substances” in general as “things which must be created by God in order to exist, are by their nature incorruptible and cannot ever cease to exist unless they are reduced to nothingness by God’s denying his concurrence to them,” meaning that created substances are both produced and continuously maintained in their existence by God’s free act; God is the cause of both the “coming into being” and the “being itself” of created substances.

Created substances thus exist independently of one another, insofar as they are initially and continuously dependent upon God for their existence, and they are the substrata of all particular created things. It should be noted, however, that Descartes frequently equivocates on the term “substance,” using it not just to refer to thought and extension themselves, the

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100 Ibid., §51:24.
101 Descartes, Meditations, “Preface,” 14; Descartes, Meditations, III:49; Descartes, “Fifth Set of Replies,” §9:369. Descartes implicitly maintains, in the Meditations, his earlier claim, in the Principles, that God is a third kind of substance, as when he contrasts his “understanding of a supreme God” with “the ideas that represent finite substances” (Descartes, Meditations, III:40, my emphasis; Descartes, Principles, §51:24).
unchanging substrata of particulars, but also to refer to particular minds and bodies. As proof of the independence of thought and extension from one another in their existence Descartes argues, firstly, that two things which can be clearly and distinctly “conceived of” apart from each other must be really separable, at least by God; secondly, he argues that, because I can form a clear and distinct idea of “myself” as pure, non-extended thought, and because I can form a distinct idea of my body as pure extension, a mere “machine” devoid of thought, it must therefore be the case that thought and extension are really distinct. The concept of thought does not presuppose the concept of extension, and vice-versa.

Unsurprisingly, then, the most methodologically central form of reflection for Descartes is purely intellectual: the intellect, conceived of as wholly distinct from the body, as well as from memory and personality in general, taking itself for an object. The “cogito,” in the sense of the “ego” or subject of thinking, can take itself as an object through the decision – which it is always, in principle, capable of making, although this capability can, de facto, be obscured by the “passions,” or affects – to separate itself from all of its particular beliefs, and direct itself toward the originary source of certainty: the indubitable knowledge of, firstly, the existence of the self as a thinking thing, and, secondly, the existence of God as a being possessing all perfections in the highest degree. Descartes employs this reflexive power of thought as the foundation of his method for attaining “certain knowledge,” which aims to combine the indubitability of logical deduction with the productivity of geometry and algebra. What Descartes aims to enact, in other words, is a method for discovering certain knowledge through step-by-step construction; mere logical analysis can yield certain knowledge but cannot discover anything new, whereas,

102 Descartes, Principles, §60:28-29; Descartes, Meditations, III:44.
103 Descartes, Meditations, VI:78.
104 Gueroult, The Soul and God, 34.
105 Descartes, Passions, §47:365; Descartes, Meditations, III:51.
106 Descartes, DM, II:16-17.
although geometry and algebra are productive, geometry relies on the imagination in addition to the intellect, and the discoveries of algebra remain bound to its abstract symbols.107

It is highly questionable, however, whether there could be any method capable of simultaneously preserving deductive certainty and expanding knowledge, since deductive methods express relationships of essential necessity by refusing to admit new information into a given system of knowledge except insofar as it is derived from (and thus reducible to) what the field already contains, whereas inductive methods add new information to a given system of knowledge by means of, for instance, probability, functional accounts, or historical accounts—all of which can expand or generalize the significance of particulars, but none of which can show their conclusions to be a “logically necessary consequence of the explanatory premises.108 Emily Grosholz illustrates this impossibility of a deductive-ampliative method, in Cartesian Method and the Problem of Reduction, through a close reading of Descartes’s corpus alongside other mathematical and scientific texts of the time:

[T]o the extent that Descartes believes that his method is both ampliative and truth-preserving, it cannot be successfully applied, for as such it is non-existent. Inductive methods which extend knowledge are corrigeable, and deductive methods which reliably transmit truth cannot be ampliative. Thus, Descartes must frequently smuggle in extra bits of knowledge to which he is not strictly entitled in order to generate his new subject-matters. And when he does not, the ‘simplicity’ of his starting-points impoverishes the new domain, or involves him in thorny problems of circularity.109

Thus, Descartes’s “order of reasons” continually faces the dilemma, at each step, of preserving the necessary truth of its conclusions by merely clarifying, rather than expanding, knowledge, or of expanding knowledge by surreptitiously importing claims which actually subvert the transmission of truth.

107 Ibid., II:17-18.
109 Grosholz, Cartesian Method, 8.
There are four rules governing Descartes’s supposedly deductive-ampliative method. Firstly, one must only judge an idea to be “true” if it is “clear and distinct,” which is to say, if one experiences the certainty exemplified in thinking through a mathematical demonstration; secondly, problems must be divided into their simplest component parts; thirdly, one must proceed by constructing more and more complex thoughts from the most simple, while obeying the “order” dictated by the criteria of clarity and distinctness; finally, one must render these construction “so complete” and “so comprehensive” that one is certain of “leaving nothing out.” In other words, Descartes seeks to construct a total edifice of certain knowledge by working his way up from the simplest units of knowledge in an order which renders each progressive stage as indubitable as the preceding one. Descartes’s order of reasons, governed by the requirement of conserving the certainty of its original, simple items of knowledge, in turn prescribes an order of topics which, proceeding from the foundation to the apex, are metaphysics (Meditations), mathematics (Geometry), physics (Principles), physiology (Treatise on Man), and ethics (Passions).

The single point upon which Descartes begins the construction of his edifice of knowledge is the reflective self-knowledge of the cogito: the immediate self-awareness of a thinking thing, which can think about itself. This provides the original paradigm case of a “clear and distinct” idea. “Clarity” and “distinctness,” as Descartes employs them, do not necessarily require precise definitions, because they are something we all experience in certain paradigm cases of thought, such as mathematical reasoning; the insufficiency of one’s certainty of a mathematical demonstration, however, is that there is nothing in the idea itself that assures one of the existence of its object, which is why mathematical knowledge needs to be grounded in


metaphysical knowledge of the *cogito* and of God, the clear and distinct ideas of which do include certainty of their objects’ existence.\(^{113}\)

For the sake of precision, however, I will put forward approximate definitions of clarity and distinctness. “Clarity” is never explicitly defined, but seems to consist in a mental content’s being “illuminated” in a presentation of the intellect, which is to say, its being represented to the intellect in such a way that it can be directly attended to in the fullness of its essence; clarity would thus be an aspect or effect of the “natural light,” which signifies the sense of immediate certainty that accompanies the awareness of a necessary connection between ideas.\(^{114}\)

Distinctness, meanwhile, *is* explicitly defined: an idea is distinct insofar as one attends to it on its own, just as one’s visual perception of an object is more distinct the more that one perceives the object alone.\(^{115}\) As Martial Gueroult points out, this means that absolute certainty can only accrue to a simple idea: one which is “given as noncomposite, simple, and unitary, a thought separated from others, self-sufficient, and because of this, grasped in an instantaneous intuition, which is itself indivisible.”\(^{116}\) The ideas of the *cogito* and of God will, therefore, need to be simple, not composed of parts, and this necessarily entails the exclusion of everything extended in space and time from the *cogito* on account of such things’ divisibility. As Grosholz puts it, Descartes is an epistemological “intuitionist” insofar as he reduces the “true” to the “evident.”\(^{117}\) She goes on to argue, contra Gueroult, that Descartes’s reduction of complex phenomena to constructs composed of simple elements is “a double-edged instrument that blocks as well as opens up areas of research”; although reduction enables Descartes to internally and externally limit and “unify” domains of knowledge, his method also prevents him from inquiring into the “antecedents” of his

\(^{113}\) Descartes, *DM*, I:7, I:36.
\(^{115}\) Descartes, *Meditations*, VI:78; Descartes, *Optics*, VI:134.
\(^{116}\) Gueroult, *The Soul and God*, 58.
\(^{117}\) Grosholz, *Cartesian Method*, 136.
supposedly simple elements, as well as the different possibilities that could have arisen had he chosen to take some other “simples” or “relational structures” as his starting point.118

In the Meditations, Descartes is led to the moment of reflection by the first two rules of his method. Following the first rule, he begins by engaging in “hyperbolic doubt,” which is a systematic generalization of natural, everyday doubt; Gueroult distinguishes these two forms of doubt by pointing out that, whereas the former is based upon “the resolution to doubt” as an act of will, the latter “results from the nature of things.”119 Thus, in hyperbolic doubt, Descartes resolves to treat anything which is not absolutely certain as completely false, and to treat as actually deceptive anything which is potentially deceptive.120 The possibility of deceptive sensory perceptions enables him to doubt the veracity of all knowledge that is gained through the senses, while the possibility that he is dreaming allows him to doubt his knowledge of the existence of corporeal things in general; while all knowledge of “composite things” is doubtful at this point, he has not yet succeeded in doubting mathematical knowledge, which deals with simple things (numbers and geometrical forms).121 Only the hypothesis of the “evil genius,” an omnipotent deceiver, allows Descartes to detach his certainty of the existence of the objects of mathematics from the content of this knowledge, doubting the former.122

118 Ibid., 7-8.
119 Gueroult, The Soul and God
120 Descartes, Meditations, I:18.
121 Ibid., I:18–20.
122 Descartes, Meditations, I:22–23. Putnam’s “brain a vat” thought experiment is a contemporary successor of Descartes’s “evil genius.” Putnam argues that, given that it is impossible to prove that the true causes of my “mental representations” resembles their content, since I could conceivably have the same images transmitted into my mind by a computer if my brain were removed from my body without my knowledge and kept alive in a vat of appropriate chemicals, “concepts” or “meanings” are not “mental objects,” but rather, “abilities to use language and gestures in comprehensible ways (Putnam, “Brains in a Vat,” 481-482, 491-492). Like the “evil genius,” the “brain in a vat” thought experiment rests upon the “internalist” assumption that, whatever the causes of one’s mental contents might be, their existence is wholly internal to the “mind”; I would therefore argue that Putnam’s avowed “externalism” regarding meaning (the claim that meaning is determined by context, rather than by a language user’s inner states) ironically presupposes an internalist, Cartesian metaphysics of mind (Heil, Philosophy of Mind: A Guide and Anthology, 420).
Descartes needs a stable, “Archimedean” point of absolutely certain knowledge, a clear and distinct idea which guarantees the existence of its object, in order to begin extricating himself from the universal doubt accomplished in the first Meditation; this is where reflection comes into play.\textsuperscript{123} The condition for the possibility of doubting or being deceived is the activity of thinking itself, which implies a thinking being; necessarily, therefore, one cannot engage in doubting without affirming the proposition that one exists insofar as one is “a thinking thing,” which is to say, a pure intellect.\textsuperscript{124} The existence the body and the corporeal world in general remains in doubt, as do the presentations of all modes of thought which presuppose them, such as imagination and sensory perception, so that the self-knowledge of the cogito is, as Gueroult puts it, “an exception of fact” to the rule of universal doubt which remains in effect at this point in the Meditations.\textsuperscript{125}

On account of the limitation of the self-certainty of the cogito to its content and existence as “pure intellect,” and because it is given as logically necessary, rather than as a contingent mental act, I agree with Gueroult that it is not a “psychological” given – not “a simple act of self-consciousness,” carried out by a concrete person possessing memories and a unique character – but rather the originary given of “a science of pure understanding.”\textsuperscript{126} The cogito whose existence is indubitable is, in Kantian terms, not the empirical ego, but the transcendental ego: not the consciousness that unfolds as a temporal series, but the non-temporal unity of the series itself.\textsuperscript{127} The pure intellect, whose immediate self-knowledge excludes the possibility of doubt, only possesses the faculties of “understanding” and “will,” which function together to produce “judgments” (affirmations, denials, or temporary neutrality, by the will, concerning ideas

\textsuperscript{123} Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, II:24.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., II:25, II:27.
\textsuperscript{125} Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, II:29; Gueroult, \textit{The Soul and God}, 27.
\textsuperscript{126} Gueroult, \textit{The Soul and God}, 34.
\textsuperscript{127} Kant, \textit{CPR}, B131-132.
presented by the understanding). The pure intellect’s reflective self-knowledge is unique among ideas (excepting the idea of God) because it is characterized by “the exact coincidence between my thought and existence,” insofar as this thought’s object is not external to it; because thought is here its own content, and because this content is absolutely simple and immediately present – therefore clear and distinct – the meditating ego is certain of both the content of its thought, and of the “certainty [it] attribute[s] to it.” Through the act of intellectual reflection, Descartes has therefore acquired his first simple item of clear and distinct knowledge, as demanded by the first two rules of his method. However, by way of foreshadowing Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodied perception as the inescapable soil of intellectual consciousness, I here side with Grosholz’s critique of the Cartesian cogito as inadequately founded and interrogated on the terms Descartes’s order of reasons. Grosholz argues that Descartes violates his own “order of reasons” in asserting “the unity of the cogito at the beginning of the Meditations,” so that the unity of the pure intellect remains insufficiently examined”—and, in particular, the question of whether the supposed content of this unity is truly knowable independent of any and all experience of the external world. Further, “the unity of the complex self [composed of the intellect, senses, memory, and imagination] at the end remains unstable, in constant danger of dissolution,” since too complete an integration would threaten the independence of the intellect from the body, but too absolute a rupture between the intellect and the corporeal faculties would cut it off from the world of experience entirely.

For Descartes, in summary, the act of reflection accomplishes an immediate coincidence of thought with its object, and thus of the content of this idea with the certainty of its object’s existence. In the Scholastic terms of the ontological proof, we might say that, for the cogito,

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128 Descartes, Meditations, II:28, III:37.
129 Gueroult, The Soul and God, 27.
130 Grosholz, Cartesian Method, 135.
131 Ibid., 135.
objective reality and formal reality are one and the same, so that the certainty of the content of this knowledge is identical with the certainty of the existence of its object. The “who” of reflection is the pure intellect, unmixed with imagination or memory, and the “what” is this very coincidence with itself. For Spinoza and Leibniz we will see that, in each case, the “who” and the “what” are starkly different, although forms of reflection still function as a means of attaining indubitable knowledge in both of their systems.
1. A. ii. Substance Dualism and the “Mind-Body Union”

We can now, in light of Descartes’s notions of clarity and distinctness, consider his argument that there is a real distinction between the mind and the body. Descartes argues, firstly, that two things which can be clearly and distinctly “conceived of” apart from each other must be “really” separable, at least by God’s power, because the thought of them existing independently harbors no contradiction (i.e., God’s power is limited only by the law of contradiction). Secondly, he argues that, because I can form a clear and distinct idea of “myself” as pure, non-extended thought, and because I can form a distinct idea of my body as pure extension, a mere “machine” devoid of thought, it must therefore be the case that thought and extension are really distinct. The concept of thought does not presuppose the concept of extension, and vice-versa. To understand why Descartes nonetheless argues that the soul and the body constitute an intermingled unity, I will turn to his proof of the existence of material things. As Martial Gueroult puts it, in the second volume of his meticulous explication and reconstruction of Descartes’s systematic thinking, Descartes’ Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons, “the proof of the union [of soul and body] will be founded exclusively” upon the proof of the reality of “sensations”—with the latter understood, not as real qualities of corporeal things, but as “real in me,” possessing their own kind of “truth” distinct from that of “geometry,” “physics,” and “pure understanding.”

Descartes opens Meditation VI by arguing that the existence of material things is at least possible for two reasons: on the one hand, through a metaphysical appeal to pure mathematical knowledge, the objects of which he is already certain of the existence of, and, on the other,

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132 Descartes, Meditations, VI:78.
133 Ibid., VI:78, VI:84.
through an empirical appeal to his actual use of the “faculty of imagination.”

His appeal to pure mathematics rests upon the fact that it is possible to construct mathematical models of material things insofar as their properties are quantifiable and, in this way, to “perceive them clearly and distinctly.”

If an idea is perceived clearly and distinctly, it is certain that it contains no contradiction, which means that God could, potentially, create its object—although he is not bound by any necessity to do so, since the only idea in which “essence” and “existence” are inseparable is the idea of God himself.

Descartes’s appeal to imagination is less straightforward, because imagination and sense perception were only included in the content of the cogito as pure thoughts; up to this point, it has only been certain that the ‘I’ thinks it imagines and senses, since the objects of both of these faculties are extended things. Thus, while it is certain that the cogito possesses ideas of the faculties of imagination and sense perception, it is not certain that such faculties actually function to represent anything. The ‘I’ can clearly and distinctly perceive itself, as a pure intellect, without these faculties, whereas it cannot conceive of them except as belonging to an intellect, so that intellectual substance must be really separable from them. Thus, in Meditation VI, when Descartes argues that “imagination […] seems to be nothing else but the application of the cognitive faculty to a body which is intimately present to it, and which therefore exists,” this remains merely “a probable conjecture”; a “necessary inference” from the imagination’s representation of the body to the actual existence of the body would require that one first be certain of the existence of what is represented through the imagination.

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135 Descartes, Meditations, VI:71-2.
136 Ibid., V:63, VI:71.
137 Ibid., VI:71, V:68.
138 Ibid., II:29.
139 Ibid., VI:78.
140 Ibid., VI:72-73.
In order to grasp Descartes’s ultimate proof of the body’s existence, we must return to the starting point of his investigation. Descartes begins the *Meditations* from a position similar to what Husserl calls the “natural attitude”—from the position of his everyday, uninterrogated experiences and beliefs.\(^{141}\) Initially, he believes that the parts of his body, which he perceives through his senses, are a “part of [him]self,” that he has sense perceptions, and that the things he thus perceives actually exist.\(^{142}\) All of these beliefs seem to come naturally, because he does not experience his will as being the cause of his sense perceptions—in fact, he can recall that he had “the use of [his] senses” before “the use of [his] reason,” developmentally speaking—and because the ideas of objects which were given to him through the senses “were much more lively and vivid and even, in their own way, more distinct than” the ideas he “formed through meditating,” or presented to himself through recollection.\(^{143}\) He believed that his body “belonged” to him, meanwhile, because he experienced himself as inseparable from it (unlike other bodies), because it was the condition for, and site of, his experiences of “appetites and emotions,” and because he was aware of sensations in his own body, “but not in other bodies external to it.”\(^{144}\)

As we saw in 1.A.i, Descartes’s beliefs in the existence of his body, and in the material world in general, fall into doubt through the application of the first rule of his method—to assume the falsity of anything and everything that he is capable of doubting. The fact that sense perceptions can be false causes him to doubt all particular knowledge gained through the senses, while the possibility that he might be dreaming causes him to doubt his knowledge of extended things universally, and finally, the possibility of the evil genius causes him to doubt the very possibility of having a true representation of anything external to pure thought. The second rule, that he should divide problems into the simplest ideas possible, leads him to affirm his certainty

\(^{142}\) Descartes, *Meditations*, VI:74-75.
\(^{143}\) Ibid., VI:75.
\(^{144}\) Ibid., VI:76.
of the absolutely clear and distinct, and absolutely simple, idea of the pure cogito: thought in relation to itself alone. But Descartes’s certainty of the existence of the cogito is only possible because the idea is its own content, the pure self-presentation of consciousness to itself, so that certain knowledge of the cogito’s existence leaves the existence of the body, which is distinct from the thought of the body, under the umbrella of hyperbolic doubt.

It is only Descartes’s second simple item of clear and distinct knowledge – the knowledge of God – that enables him, in Meditation VI, to prove the existence of material things, in the first place, and, in the second, to conceive of the relationship between the soul and the body. Like his knowledge of the nature and existence of the cogito qua “thinking thing,” Descartes acquires his second simple item, the knowledge of God’s nature and existence, through self-reflection. It is precisely through the knowledge of its own imperfection – of which it is necessarily and immediately aware in the act of reflection – that the ego arrives at the idea of God.\footnote{Descartes, Meditations, III:51; Gueroult, The Soul and God, 172.} The cogito knows, by inspecting its own nature, that it is imperfect (it does not possess all possible attributes, and, aside from will, the attributes it does possess are all finite), that its existence is not a necessary effect of its own imperfect essence, and that it has an idea, unmixed with anything corporeal, and thus simple, of an absolutely perfect being whose existence is necessary (because existence is a perfection); therefore, being certain of possessing the idea of God entails being certain of God’s existence, because this idea’s “objective reality” exceeds the cogito’s “formal reality.”\footnote{Descartes, Meditations, III:51-52.} In the Scholastic language which Descartes employs in this “ontological proof” of God’s existence, “formal reality” designates a thing’s degree and kind of existence in itself (as substance or mode, for instance), whereas “objective reality” designates the reality of a representation qua representation, such that its existence is parasitic upon the existence of what it represents (e.g., a representation of nothing would not exist at as a
representation, because a representation must be a representation of something). Thus, any idea which is “true” possesses genuine objective reality, and must therefore represent something which possesses genuine formal reality.

In Meditation V, Descartes argues that the knowledge of God’s existence and perfection serves as the guarantee – since intent to deceive implies imperfection – of knowledge beyond the sphere of reflection: of the clear and distinct knowledge of mathematics and the external world, insofar as the latter is understood to be the quantifiable object of physics. The objects of pure mathematics must exist because, given that God necessarily exists and is necessarily not a deceiver, whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived must be true, and “whatever is true is something”; any clear and distinct idea possesses genuine objective reality, and must therefore have its cause in something possessing at least as much formal reality. The objects of pure mathematics include not just the objects of arithmetic, but those of geometry, as well, which is to say, “exten[ded…] quantity,” the abstract objects of pure mechanics. It remains unsettled, however, whether there is any truth to ideas given through the senses.

In Meditation VI, Descartes proves that the objects of the senses exist, insofar as one perceives them as purely extended quantities, by appealing to the distinction between a substance and its modes. The idea of the cogito is simple because its faculties are not separate parts, but modes inhering in a single, intellectual substance. It is certain that a faculty of sense perception inheres in the intellect, but it was not certain up to this point whether the objects of its ideas exist, nor, therefore, whether its ideas are true. Because sensory perception is a “passive faculty” which merely receives affections, there is necessarily some substance possessing an “active faculty”

147 Descartes, Meditations, III:41.
148 Ibid., V:70-71.
150 Ibid., V:63.
151 Ibid., VI:78.
which affects the senses.\textsuperscript{152} This active power to affect sense perception must inhere in either an extended substance (“a corporeal nature”) or else in another thinking substance—“God, or some other creature more noble than a body,” which would itself be another of God’s creatures.\textsuperscript{153} But because God is not a deceiver, and, rather than making ideas which are presented through the senses appear to come from himself or some ‘angelic’ intermediary, has given human beings “a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things,” it must be the case that “corporeal things exist.”\textsuperscript{154}

At this point, however, the relation between the ideas of physics and what seems to be perceived through the senses remains unresolved, because ideas presented through the senses are often “very obscure and confused,” whereas the ideas of geometrical forms are clear and distinct, so that corporeal things “may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them.”\textsuperscript{155} He must now inquire into the reality of the body, and then into the reality of the sensible properties of corporeal things—with the latter enquiry concerning both the reality of “particular” primary qualities of corporeal things, and the reality of “secondary qualities” of corporeal things (e.g., “light or sound or pain”), which (if they are real) are ways in which the body is affected by them.\textsuperscript{156} In other words, he has only proven, thus far, that the objects of pure geometry are objectively real, and that corporeal things exist in some sense, but that sense must now be specified. On the one hand, the truth of a statement such as “the sun is of such and such a size or shape” has yet to be established, for although this statement refers to geometrical

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., VI:79.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., VI:79.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., VI:80.
\textsuperscript{155} Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, VI:80. Here, we can see Descartes taking up the resurgent, in his time, sensory skepticism of the ancient Atomists, who consider the “conventional” knowledge gained through the senses to be “obscure” whereas, “to a finer means of knowing,” and “in reality,” it is apparent that “there are only atoms and the void.” (Democritus, “Fragments,” in \textit{The Presocratics}, 182-183). As Grosholz puts it, Descartes’s abstraction away from all materiality in Meditation II “is motivated by [his] anti-Aristotelian mistrust of the senses, motivated in turn by the revival of Atomism that inspires many Early Modern thinkers” (Grosholz, “Searching for the Middle Term,” 297).
\textsuperscript{156} Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, VI:80, II:30.
properties of the sun, these properties can only be discovered through the analysis of sensory experiences; on the other, it could still be the case “secondary qualities” only appear to have reference to external causes, and that their true source is immanent to the imagination.\(^\text{157}\)

Descartes’s proof of the existence of the perceived body rests upon his definition of “my own nature” as “the totality of things bestowed upon me by God,” whereas “nature” in general means “nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God.”\(^\text{158}\) Thus, to say that one is “taught something by [one’s own] nature” is the same as saying that God has inclined one to hold a certain belief, while to say that one is taught something by nature in general is the same as saying that God has so ordered one’s own nature and the nature of the world that one’s affections by the latter incline one to hold a certain belief.\(^\text{159}\) The notion that God has inclined us to hold certain beliefs, combined with the certainty that God is a benevolent non-deceiver, enables Descartes to appeal to a new kind of evidence.

Whereas previously, he had proven that clear and distinct ideas are necessarily true, he can now assert that what his nature teaches him “vividly” is at least true in some sense, because God would not incline him to hold an entirely false belief. Thus, Descartes concludes that, because “[t]here is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly than that I have a body,” there must be “some truth in this.”\(^\text{160}\) Further, because his nature vividly teaches him that his sensations correspond to states of his body, and because these are “confused sensations” rather than the sort of “explicit understanding” that would arise from the pure intellect, he is able to conclude that he (qua mind) is “closely joined” to his body in some sort of unity.\(^\text{161}\) The senses, then, can indeed furnish true knowledge of how one’s own body is affected by other bodies, although such knowledge must not be taken for “judgments about the essential nature of the

\(^{157}\) Ibid., VI:80.  
\(^{158}\) Ibid., VI:80.  
\(^{159}\) Ibid., VI:82.  
\(^{160}\) Ibid., VI:80.  
\(^{161}\) Ibid., VI:80-81.
bodies located outside us,” which can only be grasped through the pure intellect’s mathematical ideas.\(^{162}\)

Descartes concludes Meditation VI by attempting to account for erroneous sense perceptions. Earlier, he had argued that erroneous judgments are possible because the scope of the will (the power of affirming, denying, or withholding judgment concerning ideas) is infinite, whereas the scope of the intellect is finite.\(^{163}\) Erroneous sense perceptions, however, are possible because God created the human body in such a way that its functioning would be “most frequently conducive” to its natural purpose, which is “the preservation of the healthy man.”\(^{164}\) Because it is possible for a motion in the body – which is then transmitted, via the brain, to the soul – to be caused by something other than its most frequent and significant cause, and because it would be deceptive of God to make the same motion in the body cause different sensations in the soul, “the nature of man as a combination of mind and body […] is bound to mislead him from time to time.”\(^{165}\) It is always possible to weed out these deceptive sensations by checking for conflicts between the “reports” of the senses, past experience, and the intellect, although the urgency of practical tasks means that there will not always be time for “such a meticulous check,” so that human beings qua unions of mind and body are “often liable to make mistakes about particular things.”\(^{166}\) Whatever we know as composite beings can never be absolutely certain, unlike the knowledge of the pure intellect.

The contemporary “problem of other minds” (or problem of the constitution of the “alter ego,” in phenomenological terms) is born of this ineradicable falsifiability of judgments concerning the phenomenal world, although it is not a problem which troubles Descartes himself. Descartes’s assertion, in Meditation II, that he only judges “that he sees” people, rather than

\(^{162}\) Ibid., VI:83.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., IV:58.

\(^{164}\) Ibid., VI:87.

\(^{165}\) Ibid., VI:88-89.

\(^{166}\) Ibid., VI:90.
“automatons,” while watching “hats and coats” cross the square serves as a means of demonstrating that judgments alone, and not perceptions, possess objective truth-value.\textsuperscript{167} The self-other antinomy originates, therefore, as a corollary of the mind-body antinomy, combined with the assumption that “mental things” are given immediately to their subject’s reflection, whereas “sensible things” are given only mediately, and thus constitute an impenetrable barrier between different minds.

The mind-body antinomy itself, however, is explicitly of interest to Descartes. Although he proves the necessity of the union of mind and body in the \textit{Meditations}, he does not thereby render their relation comprehensible; to do so would require explaining their mechanism of interaction. While mind and body exist independently, Descartes nonetheless posits relations of effective causality between them – the mind receives impressions from motions in the body, and can, in turn, cause motions in the body with its active thoughts (volitions) – which seems quite impossible, given that the mind is completely incorporeal, whereas the body is completely corporeal.\textsuperscript{168} He attempts to specify the mechanism of interaction and its nature in the \textit{Passions}, as well as in his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth. He locates their point of interaction in the pineal gland (the “conarium,” in Latin), arguing that it is mobile enough to receive sense impressions, and yet situated in such a way that only the “animal spirits” which transmit information from the senses can move it.\textsuperscript{169} Descartes conceives of the body itself as a hydraulic machine – the most advanced type of machine in existence at the time\textsuperscript{170} – and theorizes that

\textsuperscript{167} Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, II:31-32. It is thus rather ironic that this passage in the \textit{Meditations} has lately been taken up as the ground for thought experiments concerning “robots” and “zombies” – beings physically identical to humans, but totally lacking in consciousness, which, if they are indeed conceivable or actually possible, would seem to problematize any assertion of a necessary relation between physical and mental facts, as well as any physicalist claim that beings differ only by their physical properties – in contemporary philosophy of mind (See, for example: Nagel, “Armstrong on the Mind,” 401-402; Stoljar, “The Conceivability Argument,” 393).

\textsuperscript{168} Descartes, \textit{Passions}, §34:355.


\textsuperscript{170} If anyone wishes to criticize Descartes for the “error” of employing a hydraulic model of the nervous system, I would argue that they can only do so by admitting that it is equally arbitrary to conceive of the
nerves are like pipes carrying “a certain very fine air or wind, called the animal spirits,” which are produced in the brain from “the liveliest and finest parts of the blood that the heat has rarefied in the heart.” These spirits can move the pineal gland in certain ways, and thereby cause certain states in the soul, and the soul itself can move the pineal gland, and thereby direct the course of the spirits.

His account of the nervous system, however, does not answer the question of how a corporeal and an incorporeal substance can interact, because animal spirits themselves are still corporeal, being “nothing but bodies […] which are very small and which move very rapidly.” Unsurprisingly, Descartes’s characterization of animal spirits is ambiguous. They must be merely extended bodies if he is to maintain the absolute immateriality (and thus indivisibility, and thus simplicity and unity) of the cogito. And yet, as Grosholz points out, insofar as Descartes describes animal spirits as “active and patterned, conveying information on the way in and directing action on the way out […] they embody both information and intelligence,” and thereby enable nervous system on the model of a computer. Evelyn Fox Keller and Grosholz both argue convincingly that it is often precisely the ambiguity of a theoretical model which makes it useful in enabling the advance of scientific knowledge in a given time and place. Keller shows, in The Century of the Gene, that the ambiguity of a scientific metaphor can actually be a virtue up to a certain point: “Some flexibility in terminology is necessary for the construction of bridges between […] different [experimental] contexts; in turn, such bridges work to guide biologists in their exploration of phenomena that are, by definition, still poorly understood, ill-defined, and open-ended,” so that “the construction of scientific meaning depends on the very possibility of words taking on different meanings in different contexts,” which is to say, “it depends on linguistic imprecision” (Keller, Century of the Gene, 140-141). According to Keller, it was, for instance, the very ambiguity of “agency” in a computer program – which can be viewed either “as part of a machine,” or “as directions specifying functions” – which rendered the metaphor of “genetic programs” useful in the advancement of molecular biology in the mid-20th century (Keller, Century of the Gene, 87; Grosholz, “The Middle Term,” 312). Grosholz argues that the ambiguity of Descartes’s notion of “animal spirits” – which can be viewed either as “active and patterned” insofar as they bear information from the body to the soul, and instructions from the soul to the body, or as “just flows of particles” – is of the same kind: “animal spirits” and “genetic programs” are both “middle terms” utilized in an effort to bring “dichotomized” terms “back into some kind of rational relation” (Grosholz, “The Middle Term,” 301, 312). Grosholz approvingly summarizes Keller’s theory of the productive use of ambiguous metaphors in science as follows: “Keller argues both that this ambiguity allows science to advance, with a flawed but serviceable model, and that eventually it impedes science, because the model is in fact flawed and the smuggling is illicit” (Grosholz, “The Middle Term,” 312).

\[171\] Descartes, Passions, §7:332, §10:334.

\[172\] Ibid., §31:352.

\[173\] Ibid., §10:335.
Descartes to covertly import aspects of spirit into the material world, violating his own order of reasons.\textsuperscript{174}

The pineal gland, for its part, is undeniably corporeal, so that it is natural to ask, as Princess Elisabeth does, how the soul can move, and be moved by, it.\textsuperscript{175} Descartes denies that the interaction between the mind and the body consists in any real “contact,” which could only take place between two extended physical objects. Rather, in his May 21, 1643 letter to Princess Elisabeth, he proposes that the soul moves the body in a manner analogous to the way that, for the vulgar understanding, “heaviness” moves a body, as a power that is joined to it without “a real contact of one surface against another”—although Descartes himself maintains that heaviness is not, as the vulgar understanding supposes, a “real quality,” and that it is therefore, unlike the soul, “nothing really distinct from body.”\textsuperscript{176} Princess Elisabeth, however, is unconvinced, insisting that “it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede the capacity to move a body and to be moved by it to an immaterial thing,” and thereby hinting that she might entertain the possibility of the mind-body union itself as a third type of created substance.\textsuperscript{177} This latter approach is, in fact, quite close to the one that Descartes takes.

Descartes responds to Elisabeth by, firstly, differentiating between the “notions” of the soul, the body, and their union in terms of the faculties which best apprehend each of them; the soul can only be known by the “pure understanding,” whereas the body is known most clearly when the understanding is “aided by the imagination,” and the union of the two can only be “known very clearly by the senses.”\textsuperscript{178} He posits each of these faculties, along with its proper object, as corresponding to a specific realm of knowledge. The faculty of understanding acquires

\textsuperscript{174} Grosholz, \textit{Cartesian Method and the Problem of Reduction}, 129; Descartes, \textit{Treatise on Man}, 176.
\textsuperscript{175} Elisabeth & Descartes, AT 3:661.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., AT 3:667.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., AT 3:685.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., AT 3:691-692.
metaphysical knowledge by taking the immaterial soul (i.e., itself) as its object. The understanding and the imagination together acquire mathematical knowledge by taking bodies as their object; “mathematics” therefore encompasses not just geometry and arithmetic, but also physics and physiology (as an applied physics of living “machines”). Finally, the imagination and the senses together acquire practical knowledge of “life and ordinary conversation,” by taking composite beings as their object. As a result, Descartes claims, it is impossible to conceive of both the distinction and the union between mind and body clearly and distinctly at the same time, since we are using different faculties in each case: the faculty of understanding, in the first case, and the faculties of imagination and sense perception, in the second.

In fact, we cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of their union at all. The “notion of the union” is of such a nature “that each [person] always experiences [it] within himself without

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179 Ibid., AT 3:692.
180 Descartes conceives of physics as a pure “kinematics”: a mechanics of bodies in motion wherein the only variables are “pieces of matter” and what we now call “velocity” (speed and direction of motion), without a genuine conception of “acceleration” (change of velocity of time), nor of “force” (the cause of acceleration) (Descartes, Principles, II:§23-25:52-53; Grosholz, Cartesian Method and the Problem of Reduction, 86-67). Descartes’s reliance on “bulk” and “motion” as the “simples” from which he attempts to (re)construct all complex physical phenomena severely restrict the explanatory power of his physics, so that, e.g., he attempts to account for gravitational force by an obscure notion of the “heaviness” of bodies— as indeed he must, if the only interaction between bodies is “transfer of motion,” and transfer of motion is only possible between “contiguous bodies” (Descartes, Principles, II:§26:54, II:§29:55). Whereas Descartes defines “force” as mass multiplied by speed, and thereby avoids the notion of acceleration and the problem of explaining it, Isaac Newton arrives at a genuine conception of “force” as the cause of acceleration; unrestricted by Descartes’s notion of “simples,” Newton did not exclude “areas and volumes, and curves and infinitesimals” from his geometry was thereby able to conceive of gravitational force as the “action at a distance” whereby one body causes the uniform acceleration of another (Grosholz, Cartesian Method and the Problem of Reduction, 87, 100; Descartes, Principles, II:§40:65; Newton, Principia, ID5:405-406).
181 Of course, even if Descartes had been able to arrive at an account of action at a distance in his physics, this would not have helped him to conceive of the interaction between immaterial soul and material body, which he compared to the action of bodies on one another through their “heaviness,” since the soul would still need to possess some kind of mass in order to exercise gravitational force on the body (Elisabeth & Descartes, AT 3:667).
182 Elisabeth & Descartes, AT 3:692.
183 Ibid.
184 Ibid., AT 3:693.
Descartes was unable to develop a coherent account of the mechanism of interaction between material and immaterial substance but, by positing the soul, the body, and their union as three distinct objects, he is able to furnish a coherent explanation of this inability itself. The soul and the body are really distinct, because they can each be clearly and distinctly conceived of without the other, but it is impossible to clearly and distinctly conceive of their union, because that would require that one “conceive of them as a single thing and at the same time […] conceive of them as two, which is contradictory.” Crucially, this does not mean that the idea of the union itself is contradictory – if it were, then God could not create it – but only that it is obscure, since a clear idea of it would require the simultaneous differentiation and identification of our simple idea of the mind and our compound idea of the body.

Still, Descartes concedes that, insofar as one conceives of the unity of the soul and the body (i.e., conceives of a living person), one does attribute “matter” and “extension” to the soul, although one must be careful to recognize that the matter thus attributed to thought is “not the thought itself,” and that the extension attributed to the soul differs from that attributed to the body, because the soul’s extension is not such that “it excludes all other extended bodies,” given that the soul itself is immaterial. There is a distinction between metaphysics, on the one hand, and what we today call “hard science” and practical life, on the other, at play here. When one engages in metaphysical thought, it is impossible to form a clear and distinct idea of the mind-body union, although, in practical life, we have the constant and vivid experience of this union, and so it is permissible, and perhaps necessary, to attribute some sort of materiality to the soul in our everyday affairs. It is, after all, only “necessary to have understood well once in one’s life the principles of metaphysics,” after which one can go about accumulating scientific knowledge of

185 Ibid., AT 3:694.
186 Ibid., AT 3:693.
187 Ibid., AT 3:694-695.
the world, the certainty of which remains securely grounded in these metaphysical principles.\textsuperscript{188} Thus, Descartes will write, in the \textit{Passions}, “[t]hat the soul is jointly united to all the parts of the body”; even though the soul and the body \textit{interact} through the pineal gland alone, the spatial “extension” of the soul covers the body as a whole.\textsuperscript{189}

It is crucial for Descartes, however, that he restrict this material conception of the soul to practical life, as opposed to the realm of metaphysical thought. The \textit{cogito} of the \textit{Meditations} is a wholly immaterial thinking substance, modified by its faculties of understanding and will – which function together to produce judgment – and imagination and sense perception, but without any verified content (thoughts) beyond this idea of itself; it is not a “personal” mind, but the universal form of pure thought.\textsuperscript{190} In the Scholastic terms of the ontological proof, we might say that, for the \textit{cogito}, objective reality and formal reality are one and the same, so that the certainty of the content of this knowledge is identical to the certainty of the existence of its object. If Descartes were to concede the materiality of the mind, or the spirituality of the body, to any degree in the metaphysical register, then the \textit{cogito} would cease to be simple, and could no longer constitute the immediate and total self-coincidence of thinking substance; the Archimedean point of the entire system would thereby be lost. For this reason, he must eschew any attempt at achieving absolute certainty in ethical judgments, which are premised on the necessary, though necessarily obscure, idea of the mind-body union.

Grosholz points out that Descartes actually seems to vacillate on his account of the unity of the “self” as a unity of faculties. In keeping with his order of reasons, Descartes cannot acknowledge the diversity of the faculties until he proves the existence of the body, because sensibility is entirely, and memory and imagination at least partially, dependent on the body—

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., AT 3:695 (my emphasis).
\textsuperscript{189} Descartes, \textit{Passions}, §30:351.
\textsuperscript{190} Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, II:28, III:37.
unlike pure intellect. Thus, he has two options: either\textsuperscript{191} he can acknowledge the diversity of the faculties from the beginning, in which case they cannot be reduced to intellect and, hence, cannot be unified in a single “self”; or\textsuperscript{192} he can “intellectualize” memory and imagination, while “segregating” sensation off from the “self” proper as “only contingent, not essential,” in which case “[t]he thinker’s self-knowledge of his true self is cut off from the dimension of particularity that the corporeal faculties of memory, imagination, and sense might provide,” leaving only an abstract self to whom “history and moral experience” are inessential, alien.\textsuperscript{193} In other words, Descartes can either affirm the existence of a concretely individuated “I” (qua mind-body composite) at the cost of sacrificing clear and distinct knowledge of it, or else he can secure clear and distinct knowledge of the “I” (qua pure mind) at the cost of rendering it wholly impersonal. But without clear and distinct knowledge of the mind-body union, there can be no clear and distinct knowledge of \textit{res extensa}, since the former is our means of access to the latter, which means that Descartes’s derivation of “extension and figure” from the pure \textit{cogito} amounts to his having “smuggled in acquaintance with a kind of alterity, externality or spatial outness” where only the pure identity and internality of a worldless intellect are permitted by the order of reasons.\textsuperscript{194}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{191} See, for example: Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, II:29.
\bibitem{192} See, for example: Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, II:63-64.
\bibitem{193} Grosholz, \textit{Cartesian Method}, 141-142.
\bibitem{194} Ibid., 144.
\end{thebibliography}
1.A.iii. Cartesian “Ethics”: Practical Freedom as the Foundation of Intellectual Freedom

Descartes grounds his notion of human freedom upon the metaphysical claim that human beings are created in the “likeness of God”; specifically, the human will is just as infinite as God’s own, although the human intellect is merely a finite version of God’s, and human beings’ effective causal power is, obviously, a highly diminished version of God’s. The will constitutes a power of choice, i.e., the capacity to accept or to reject what is put forward by the intellect, which is itself a power of representation: “the will simply consists [...] in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force.” Freedom, then, has both an intellectual and a practical instantiation: on the one hand, the will can judge a certain thought, given by the intellect, to be true or false, or it can withhold such judgment; on the other hand, the will can choose to enact, or not to enact, an inclination toward a certain action.

Human freedom differs substantially from divine freedom for Descartes, however, in terms of the value of indifference. By “indifference,” Descartes means a lack of inclinations—a lack of reasons for acting. For human beings, a state of indifference toward the options which are presented to the will constitutes the very minimum of free choice; human indifference arises from a lack of knowledge, from the finitude of the human intellect, because “if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate [...] and thus] I should be wholly free.” The less indifferent I am toward my options – which is to say, the more that I possess clear knowledge of which one is the best – the greater is “the spontaneity and freedom of my belief.” Thus, indifference is an accident of human freedom; it is not essential to the human

195 Descartes, Meditations, IV:57-8.
196 Ibid., IV:57.
197 Ibid., IV:56.
198 Ibid., IV:58.
199 Ibid., IV:59.
will, but rather, constitutes a byproduct of the finitude of the human intellect. In his theory of decision-making, then, Descartes is – like, as we will see below, Spinoza – a necessitarian: any given decision is strictly determined by the agent’s present mental contents. It is, perhaps, on account of this theoretical commitment that Descartes shows little interest in the libertarianism-determinism antinomy, which necessarily arises as a corollary of the mind-body problem if and only if one affirms a libertarian notion of “freedom” as the real possibility of having chosen differently than one in fact did in a given instance.

I agree with Grosholz, however, that Descartes, unlike Spinoza, smuggles a sort of “intelligence” into the supposedly pure causal-physical mechanism of the body. Grosholz points out that, in Treatise on Man, Descartes equivocates in his discussion of animal spirits:

On the one hand, they are ‘nothing but’ aggregates of bits of matter in motion and so are the subject of physics. On the other hand, they are active and patterned, conveying information on the way in and directing action on the way out; they embody both information and intelligence.

Whereas Cartesian physics claims to deal solely with particles individuated and related by their quantitative characteristics (size, “geometric shape,” and speed and direction of “rectilinear motion”), his characterizations of animal spirits as bearing information by virtue of their arrangement shifts from the level of physical description (relations of “causality”) to the “biological” or “even the psychological” level (relations of “consequentiality”). This is because “[p]atterns _qua_ patterns cannot be physically-causally transmitted”; rather, “for a pattern to be consequential it must be recognized as such, interpreted, cognitively grasped, by a consciousness.” In order for a creature to grasp the pattern transmitted via the animal spirits as a pattern, its relation to its environment must be conceived, not as purely physical-mechanical,

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200 Descartes, _Meditations_, “Sixth Set of Replies,” §6:433.
201 Grosholz, _Cartesian Method_, 129; Descartes, _Treatise on Man_, 101-105.
202 Grosholz, _Cartesian Method_, 94-95, 129
203 Ibid., 129.
but as “cognitive, intentional, localized in an only indeterminate way, non-linear, and direct.”

Again, Descartes must surreptitiously enrich his impoverished starting-point, smuggling meaning into what is supposedly a merely quantitative description. Even in his physiology Descartes cannot escape with the antinomy of “meaning” and “mechanism,” “spontaneity” and “necessity.”

Insofar as he describes creatures as responding to their environment as significant – and, indeed, Descartes’s account of concrete human freedom is founded upon precisely this *consequentiality* of embodied experience – he must covertly spiritualize matter; if he did not, then we would be indifferent in all but purely intellectual matters.

In the case of Descartes’s God, however, absolute indifference is essentially tied to absolute power, because there are no reasons that could incline God’s will except insofar as God had previously made the free decision to create them: “it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.”

If God were “not indifferent from eternity,” then he would not be truly omnipotent, because there would then be some external force acting on him to determine his choices.

Human freedom also differs from divine freedom because, again on account of the finitude of the human intellect, human unfreedom is, in a sense, identical with falling into error. We saw that indifference was, for human beings, both the lowest degree of freedom, and the result of a lack of knowledge which would incline the agent in one direction over others; this is already akin to error. The possibility of genuine error likewise arises from the more extensive scope of the will relative to the intellect: I can only fall into error when I choose to make a judgment concerning something about which I do not have clear knowledge, so that

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204 Ibid., 130.
206 Descartes, *Meditations*, “Sixth Set of Replies,” §6:432-3. Here, Descartes is coming down firmly against Plato’s Socrates and Leibniz, in favor of the “second horn” of Euthyphro’s dilemma; according to Descartes, any value (including the “good” and the “true,” and, by inference, the “pious” as well) accrues to a thing purely because of God’s unconditioned free choice to make it be so, rather than it being the case, as Socrates and Leibniz believe, that God’s choices are determined by criteria which preexist them, and which God merely chooses to follow (Plato, “Euthyphro,” 10a1-3).
error can be avoided either by acquiring a “clear perception,” or by “remembering to withhold judgment on any occasion when the truth of the matter is not clear.”207 The greatest inhibitors of perceptual clarity are what Descartes calls the “passions of the soul”: mental states caused by motions in the body, which were themselves caused by external objects affecting the body, or by the body’s own “natural appetites.”208

Descartes’s ethical writings, in the Passions, focus upon achieving a healthy relationship between the soul and the body which, he explains, can be accomplished through techniques of habituating the body in such a way that its affections will not incline a person toward erroneous judgments. In order to explicate Descartes’s ethical system, it is necessary to grasp his notions of “cause,” “terminus,” and “reference.” The “cause” of a thought consists in an active faculty of some substance, the effect of which is a motion in the body or a thought in the soul, while the “terminus” is the place (in the body or soul) where the effect becomes manifest.209 The “reference” of a thought consists in its connection to a cause, so that rather than perceiving a torch and light, or a bell and ringing, “we think that we see the torch itself and hear the bell, and not that we only feel the movements proceeding from them.”210 We can therefore understand reference to be a synthetic function, which accomplishes the unification of perceived effects with their perceived causes.

Descartes adopts traditional definitions of a “Passion” as something which is done to a given subject, and an action as what is done by a given subject:

[W]hatsoever is done or happens afresh is generally called […] a Passion with respect to the subject it happens to, and an Action with respect to what it makes happen. Thus, even though the agent and the patient are often quite different, the

207 Descartes, Meditations, IV:61-2.
209 Ibid., §18:343, §19:343.
210 Ibid., §23:346.
Action and the Passion are always a single thing, which has these two names in accordance with the two different subjects it may be referred to. In other words, all psychophysical events are simultaneously “passions” and “actions,” with the distribution of the terms determined by the direction in which the causality flows in a given instance: when the body is the agent, the soul is the patient, and vice-versa. Thus, Descartes designates all thoughts which are not caused by an action of the soul as “passions” in the broadest sense, but defines “passions of the soul” more narrowly as “perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits.” For the sake of clarity, I will call thoughts referred to the body (i.e., the feeling of hunger) “sensations,” thoughts referred to external objects (i.e., seeing a color) “perceptions,” and reserve the term “passions” for those passive thoughts which are referred to the soul alone, which are approximately what we today call “feelings” or “emotions.” Because these are all passive thoughts, rather than volitions, all three have their terminus in the soul, although they differ in terms of their reference (as I explain above), and in terms of their cause. The cause of a sensation lies in the nature of the body itself, while the cause of a perception is an external body, and the cause of a passion is the nature of the soul itself.

Mere perceptions of external objects do not incline a person to make any value judgments about their objects, but sensations do, insofar as they indicate a beneficial, harmful, or neutral affection of the body; sensations, like passions, are passive thoughts that can lead judgment astray, such as when I mistakenly judge that a pain which actually originated in my foot indicates an injury to my leg. Whereas a sensation only indicates whether an affection is harmful or beneficial for the body, a passion indicates the value of an object in relation to the self as a union of mind and body, such “that they incite and dispose their soul to will the things for which they

211 Ibid., §1:328.
212 Ibid., §17:342, §27:349.
213 Descartes, Meditations, VI:87.
prepare their body.”

Even though passions are referred to the soul alone, their natural function (insofar as they are bestowed by God) is to orient and sustain the will's attention toward things that are beneficial to the unified whole.

Passions can incline the intellect toward erroneous judgments because they are capable of distorting our perceptions; the passion of “hatred,” for instance, blinds us to the good “which we would otherwise be able to find” in the hated person’s company, because it causes us to reject the whole of them along with the particular “bad behavior” which excited this passion. Thus, all passions except hatred have some practical “use,” as motivators which can further our acquisition of “virtue,” which Descartes defines as a person’s “[having] lived in such a way that his conscience cannot reproach him for ever having failed to do anything he judged best.” The soul’s limited power over the passions ought, therefore, to be exercised for the ultimate purpose of attaining “mastery” over them, and thereby preventing embodied existence from disturbing the “intellectual joy” which the soul, qua pure thinking substance, feels in reflecting upon its rational ordering and absolute freedom of scientific judgment (where “science” is here used in the broad sense of all clear and distinct knowledge). Despite his aim of mastering the passions, Descartes is not entirely in line with Stoic ethics, because he does not actually advocate the renunciation of the passions; rather, the passional reward and evidence of virtue is “tranquility,” an absence of overbearing negative passions, which is to say, a feeling of being autonomous. As Gueroult puts it, the “soul could not fulfill its possible contentment if it wished to set aside deliberately the satisfactions of its composite nature in order to be contented with the joys of pure thought alone.”

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214 Descartes, Passions, §40:359.
215 Ibid., §47:365; §140:433.
216 Ibid., §148:142.
217 Ibid., §91:396-397.
218 Descartes, Passions, §148:442; Gueroult, The Soul and the Body, 186.
219 Gueroult, The Soul and the Body, 183.
There are three broad levels of virtue, or degrees of the soul’s mastery of the passions. A “strong will” exercises purely mental mastery over its passions, preventing deleterious ones from moving the body by way of firm and resolute judgments based on “the knowledge of good and evil, which it has resolved to follow in conducting the actions of its life,” although this knowledge need not (and cannot) be clear and distinct since it involves unquantifiable experiences of passions and sensations.\(^ {220}\) A will that “cannot test [its] strength,” meanwhile, merely combats its passions with other passions through passive associations (e.g., associating the indulgence of gluttonous passions with subsequent pain), manipulating the body without actively imposing order on it through intentional habituation.\(^ {221}\) A “weak will,” finally, does not master its passions either mentally or physically, but finds itself caught in a tug-of-war between contrary passions, an immaterial battleground for material forces.\(^ {222}\)

Of course, even a strong soul \textit{has} passions, but its passions are all usefully employed, all mastered—meaning that Cartesian virtue can be measured by the degree to which one has achieved self-mastery through the ordering of the body’s patterns of affection according to resolute judgments, in such a way that one’s passions facilitate correct theoretical and practical judgments. The strong soul’s “resolute judgments,” which Descartes believes the majority of people do not enact, can be founded either upon a passion that previously forced itself on the soul, or upon “knowledge of the truth alone,” where only by following the latter variety are we guaranteed to avoid the passions of “regret” and “repentance.”\(^ {223}\) This means that, in practical matters of “good” and “bad,” as opposed to theoretical matters of “true” and “false,” there can be no absolute guarantee that one has avoided, or will avoid, error.

\(^{221}\) Ibid.
\(^{222}\) Ibid.
\(^{223}\) Ibid., §49:368.
In its absolute freedom of theoretical judgment, the pure soul can take immediate and unadulterated “intellectual joy” in its own capacity for understanding, so long as it renders judgment only concerning clear and distinct ideas, and withholds judgment when its ideas are confused or obscure. In its conditioned practical freedom, the pure soul, abstracted from the body, judges that tranquility is a desirable good, but the mind-body unity that acts in the world cannot orient itself directly toward this abstract goal unless it has mastered its passions through habituation, thereby acquiring virtue. A human subject can make the intellectual judgment that tranquility is the sovereign good, and affirm this knowledge of a theoretical good by an act of will, but they do not thereby choose it as a practical goal, a principle for concrete action. Virtuous practical decisions are only possible upon the basis of prior self-training: a habituation of one’s affective nature whereby the “movements of the brain” are “trained” and “guided” to harmonize with, and facilitate, the judgments which the intellect would otherwise make in the absence of any passion.

There is a certain truth to Descartes’s conception of human freedom. Imagine, for example, that you are standing before two doors, capable of opening either one. If, in a first case, you have no knowledge of what lies behind them, then your choice is meaningless: a freedom without value, a freedom of the lowest degree. If, in a second case, you know exactly what lies behind each door, and how it will benefit or harm you as a composite being, then your freedom of choice would seem to have far more value than in the first case. If, in a third case, you believe, on

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224 Descartes, *Passions*, §91:396-397. Descartes’s account of the acquisition of virtue through habituation, ironically, furnishes another example of his anti-Aristotelianism, since he conceives of habituation as a solitary endeavor of self-observation and self-regulation. Aristotle, on the contrary, argues that moral virtues can only be actualized in society with others (e.g., even when all the necessities for maintaining life are taken care of, “a just person still needs people toward whom and with whom he will act justly”), and that the intellectual virtues are at least better actualized in society: although “the wise person is able to contemplate even when he is by himself, […] he will contemplate better, no doubt, when he has people to work with” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a30-1177b1).


226 Elisabeth & Descartes, AT 4:354.

the basis of authority, that opening one door will bring some imperceptible benefits to your non-
temporal, non-extended “soul,” whereas opening the other will cause some imperceptible harm to
your soul, then your freedom is perhaps of as low a degree as in the first case. As the first and
third cases, respectively, illustrate, ignorance and dogmatism alike empty human freedom of
value. Indeed, dogmatism could be said to render the value of freedom negative, since the
dogmatist is like a somnambulist, navigating their way through a world of delusions but capable
of suffering and causing real harm nonetheless.

And yet, Descartes’s rationalistic conception of freedom ultimately does away with the
value of choice entirely, even in cases where one does have perfect knowledge of the situation.
The problem is that, in Sartrean terms, Descartes posits an absolutely unconditioned power of
choice, thus placing all possible motivations – including, most disturbingly, the whole of
“intersubjectivity,” of relations between concrete persons – on the side of “facticity.” To be
genuinely free, for Descartes, means knowing about one’s passions without being determined by
them (indeed, the better one understands the passions, the better one is able to control them,
rather than being controlled by them). As a result, there is nothing left in this system to actually
motivate an ideal Cartesian agent to regulate their passions, since such an ultimate motivator
would need to be an ‘intellectual passion’ (a passion of the pure cogito, which is a contradiction
in terms where anything pertaining to practical choice – as opposed to purely intellectual
contemplation, e.g., of God’s attributes – is concerned).

Again, Descartes’s insistence on maintaining the absolute “simplicity” of his starting
point – which in the case of his ethics, are states of the body and states of the soul – limit his field
of possible discoveries.\footnote{Ibid., §1:328.} Intersubjectivity can only appear as secondary, as an accident, within
an ethical framework which limits its matter to the states of a body and a mind in abstraction any
and all concrete environments. Descartes cannot construct clear and distinct ideas of “benefit”
and “harm” insofar as these pertain to concrete persons as mind-body *composites*, so that he can only articulate the motivation to achieve virtue in purely intellectual terms, insofar as it benefits the pure intellect in abstraction from the living person. Cartesian ethics consists in a model of practical decision-making (i.e., judgments of the “good” and the “bad”), conceived of as subordinate in value to, and the foundation of, theoretical decision-making (i.e., judgments of the “true” and the “false”).

It is, therefore, as solipsistic ethics, focused entirely on regulating the corporeal and psychical states of an isolated individual, with other persons reduced to the level of interchangeable variables insofar as they can function as the “cause” or “reference” of these states.²²⁹ For Descartes, there is no conceptual space to imagine an impulse to virtue arising from a source heterogeneous to his starting point. A relation to others more primordial than the unity of the self – e.g. Aristotle’s account of the beginnings of habituation in childhood, or Levinas’s articulation of the absolute claim of the “Other” upon the ego as a result of the absolute priority of the “intersubjective relationship” – would render Descartes’s assertion of the absolute closure (and thus the simplicity) of the pure *cogito* nonsensical.²³⁰

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1.A.iv. The Tradition Following Descartes

Ontologically, the activity of Cartesian reflection is founded upon the same unconditioned freedom of a pure intellectual cogito which it discloses. There is, however, no such circle at the level of objective thought, at the level of the order of reasons. On the terms of his method, Descartes provides proofs of both the real distinction between mind and body, and the necessity of their unity. But he is incapable of providing a clear and distinct idea – an objective description – of this unity, because doing so would require affirming an impurity in mental or physical substance, and thereby introducing an element of doubt (i.e., mediation) into the pure self-certainty of the cogito, in which case he would no longer be able to guarantee the truth of clear and distinct ideas at all. His commitments do, however, allow him to provide a proof, in his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth, of the impossibility of forming a clear and distinct idea of the mind-body union, so that he seems to explain the failure without admitting a flaw in his method—or, at least, accounts for it on the terms of his method. Further, Descartes’s proof of the necessary obscurity of the idea of the mind-body union possesses a certain empirical plausibility, given that it accounts for experiences of a difference in kind between the certainty of mathematical judgments and the certainty of ethical judgments.

In his ethical writings, Descartes aims at what we might term a “rationalization” of the body. While the mind-body union remains necessarily obscure to reflection, Descartes believes that it is possible, utilizing clear and distinct knowledge of each substance in isolation, to implement techniques that will remove conflicts between them—or, more precisely, prevent the body from coming into conflict with the mind. Given the inscrutable nature of the “community” between the spontaneous mind and the causally determined body, it is hardly surprising that Descartes’s ‘ethics’ touch on issues of genuine intersubjectivity in only obscure and passing
terms, and that he never formulated a political philosophy. The problems of comprehending the mind-body union and the relationship between freedom and necessity would only have become multiplied, had Descartes given thought to the “community” of real, embodied agents with one another. In any case, Descartes’s writings on the mind-body union constitute the birthplace of both Modern idealism, and Modern materialism—the possibilities, which Princess Elisabeth raised in her letter on June 10, 1643, of assimilating matter to spirit, or spirit to matter. But if one is unwilling to allow any obscurity to remain in our knowledge of the world (even in matters of ethical value), then the only options available within the field opened by Cartesian thought are to reduce substance to a single kind (the rationalist approach), or to deny that the real objects of knowledge are substances at all (the empiricist approach).

Such reductions have taken numerous forms in the seemingly divergent “rationalist” and “empiricist” traditions which Descartes inaugurates. The early Modern rationalists – Spinoza and Leibniz – take as their starting point the Scholastic identification of “reality” with “substance” (i.e., existentially independent, inherently unified, and absolutely simple being), as well as the new Cartesian identification of “reality” with “intelligibility,” and then try to explain how substance, as the eternal being of necessary truth, comes to express itself in a world of heterogeneous and changing appearances. During roughly the same time period, the British empiricists – amongst whom I focus on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume – take as their starting point the necessity of sensible intuitions for the acquisition of knowledge about the world, and then try to explain how we come to possess knowledge of “universal and necessary truths,” and what such truths really consist in. This leads to a rejection of traditional metaphysical concepts as empty abstractions, beginning with Locke’s critique “substance,” and then proceeding to Berkeley’s critique of the notion of “externality,” and Hume’s critique of the notion of “causal necessity.”

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231 Descartes, Passions, §82:389.
232 Elisabeth & Descartes, AT 3:685.
Whereas the rationalists proceed from the infinite to the finite, the empiricists proceed from the finite to the infinite.

Each of these traditions gives birth to a revolution in thought. Out of the rationalist tradition, Kant inaugurates “transcendental idealism” in an effort to reconcile the seemingly opposed claims of rationalism and empiricism: the truth of concepts, and the truth of sensation. Husserl terms Kant’s philosophy “transcendental subjectivism”—an apt name, since Kant argues that the rational structure of the phenomenal world is actually the result of the imposition upon sense-data, by the human understanding, of the universal conditions for the possibility of subjective experience, which are none other than the universal forms of rational cognition.\(^{233}\) Kant thus pushes the isolation of Descartes’s non-temporal “pure cogito” to its conceptual limit with his notion of a “transcendental subjectivity” to which the very structure of the world is immanent, and for which transcendent “thing in themselves” are strictly unknowable. Out of the empiricist tradition, Darwin inaugurates the theory of evolution by mutation-selection: an effort to account for the genesis of observable forms entirely in terms of processes immanent to the sensible world, with no need to appeal to some transcendent intentionality. By articulating the creative power of the encounter between living beings and their environments, Darwin can be seen as fulfilling the impulse of the materialistic current in Descartes’s: to construct a self-sufficient explanatory model of the world of “extension.”

Spinoza and Leibniz, the writers most proximate in time and culture to Descartes himself, advance inverse forms of substance monism: respectively, the reduction of all beings to expressions of a single, infinite substance, or the reduction of all beings to a single kind of substance, of which there are an infinity. Spinoza posits “God or Nature” as the single, creating-created substance of which minds and bodies are “finite modes” (expressions) under two of its

\(^{233}\) Husserl, *Crisis of the European Sciences*, §25:97.
infinite “attributes” (respectively, Thought and Extension). Leibniz posits an infinite number of a single kind of created substance (“monads”), each of which is united with a body that constitutes a unique, individuating perspective upon the total web of monads that constitutes the universe; Leibniz does, however, follow Descartes in positing God as an additional type of “ultimate” substance which, unlike created substances, exists by the necessity of its own essence, but neither of them makes the additional Spinozist move of claiming that there could be nothing external to such a substance.

Spinoza thus conceives of the unity of mind and body by positing a “parallelism” between the attributes of thought and extension, which must express “one and the same connection of causes.” “Parallelism” maintains the distinctness of mind and body while avoiding any problematic questions concerning their interaction, although it raises the new problem of how to explain the correspondence between mental and physical states. But Spinoza’s substance monism enables him to reply quite succinctly to this objection, since he conceives of minds and bodies, not as distinct substances, but as modes under distinct attributes of a single substance.

Following Elhanan Yakira, I believe that greater interpretive weight should be given to Spinoza’s second claim that the mind is the “idea of the body,” when it is a question of understanding human freedom: every idea must have an object, so that a human mind is God’s “idea of a thing which actually exists,” and that thing, the immediate object of the idea which is the human mind, is a certain body with which it is “united” insofar as the idea is an adequate expression of the body. Spinoza does not, therefore, conceive of the mind as a “subject” in the Cartesian sense of a power of thought that is conceivable independent of the body; reflection, for

234 Spinoza, Ethics, I1p13.
236 Spinoza, Ethics, I1P7C.
238 Yakira, Spinoza, 98; Spinoza, Ethics, I1P11D, I1P13.
Spinoza, consists in “the idea of the idea” of the body; such reflective ideas can be layered on *ad infinitum*, but always remain rooted in the foundational idea of the body.\(^{239}\) The mind can perceive other bodies insofar as they affect the one with which it is united, and it can likewise reflect upon the ideas of these affections, but it can never separate itself from its existence as God’s idea of the body with which it is united.\(^{240}\) For Spinoza, however, conceiving of the unity of mind and body requires the positing of an overriding and universal “necessitarianism,” wherein he identifies human freedom with adequate knowledge of the necessity of God’s self-expression and, as a corollary, of the necessity of one’s own essence and existence.\(^{241}\)

Spinoza overcomes Descartes’s problem of primary motivation – his inability to explain what can motivate a person to understand and regulate their passions – with his doctrine of “*conatus*,” which claims that every finite mode, “as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being,” and that this striving of a thing to preserve its own being is “the actual essence of the thing”—that is, a being’s striving for self-preservation is the spatiotemporal expression of its eternal essence.\(^{242}\) The affect of “joy” arises with the passage to a higher state of power (to persevere in existence), while the affect of “sadness” arises with the passage to a lower state of power, and “desire” expresses the striving toward sources of joy, and away from sources of sadness.\(^{243}\) Conatus is, therefore, the expression of an organism’s essence as determinative motivational states, from states of hunger to the “intellectual love of God”: a joy (where “joy” signifies the mind’s experience of “pass[ing] to a greater perfection”) arising from intuitive


\(^{240}\) Spinoza, *Ethics*, IP22. Spinoza here founds the tradition of “property dualism” which contemporary proponents of “non-reductive physicalism,” such as Davidson, rely upon: there is a single type of *substance*, which possesses both mental and physical *properties* (Heil, *Philosophy of Mind*, 184-185; Davidson, “Mental Events,” 107).


\(^{242}\) Ibid., IIP6-IIP7.

\(^{243}\) Ibid., IIP11d, IIP9s.
knowledge of God qua eternal cause (*natura naturans*), first of oneself, and subsequently of other finite modes.244

As Jonathan Bennett points out, Spinoza’s positing of the doctrine of *conatus* marks a rare break in the logical rigor of the *Ethics*, since the claim that a being will strive to preserve its existence is founded upon IIIP5, which states simply that “contrary” things cannot be found in one and the same essence (i.e., there can be nothing in a thing’s essence which is contrary to its existence)—but this premise only seems to warrant the negative conclusion that a thing cannot pursue its own destruction, not the positive conclusion that a thing must actively strive to maintain its existence.245 What I find more fundamentally problematic about the doctrine of *conatus*, however, is the assumption concerning “identity” upon which it is founded—the assumption that the identity of a body (of which the mind is simply the idea) consists in a single, fixed “ratio of motion and rest.”246 This is, perhaps, a viable way of modelling non-living systems, but it seems to me that living systems are better conceived as self-modifying processes, rather than as expressions of static ratios of motion and rest.

Further, Spinoza here slips into the Western – particularly rationalist – error of according *a priori* to essence over existence, conceiving the non-temporal essence of a being as prior to its changes within time and its relations with other beings. I follow Heidegger in asserting that “existence defines Dasein,” which is to say, the essence of a human being is to existentially unfold its existential possibilities in the form of a continuous questioning of self, others, and

244 Ibid., IIIP11d, VP32-VP33.
245 Bennett, “Teleology and Spinoza’s Conatus,” 155-156 ; Spinoza, *Ethics*, IIIP5. Bennett, it is worth noting, seems to misinterpret Spinoza’s anti-teleological stance, which is a rejection of explanations in terms of *divine* purposes, but not in terms of *human* purposes. Whereas Bennett claims that Spinoza rejects teleological explanations even of human actions, Spinoza states explicitly that, whereas God does not act on account of any end (because God is determined only by the necessity of its own nature), “men act always on account of an end, namely, on account of their advantage” (Bennett, “Teleology and Spinoza’s Conatus,” 143; Spinoza, *Ethics*, IA[I]).
Further, and now going beyond Heidegger, I follow Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch—themselves taking up Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and motility—in conceiving of living systems in general as “enactive”: a living system’s styles of soliciting and responding to its environment both shape, and, reciprocally, are shaped by its environment. Action and perception are simultaneously and reciprocally founded upon one another, such that “(1) perception consists in perceptually guided action and (2) cognitive structures emerge from the recurrent sensorimotor patterns that enable action to be perceptually guided,” as are the organism and its lifeworld, such that “the organism both initiates and is shaped by the environment.” To quote a phrase which Varela takes up from the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, the concept of “enaction” describes living systems as those that “lay down a path in walking.”

As Hans Jonas puts it, “Spinoza, with the knowledge of his time, did not realize that the conatus to persevere in being can only operate as a movement that goes constantly beyond the given state of things,” which is to say, that “[t]here is an openness, a horizon, intrinsic to the very existence of the organic individual.” It is this process of perpetual self-transcendence characterizing an organism’s existence that Varela, Thompason, and Rosch signify under their expanded notion of “cognition” as “sense-making” or “enaction,” which is founded upon the processes of “autopoiesis” (operationally-closed self-organization) and “adaptivity.” What Spinoza misses, then, is that living is not the striving to preserve a static essence, but rather, the continual production of new sense through the perpetual dialogue between an organism and its surrounding world.

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247 Heidegger, Being and Time, 12-13
249 Varela, “Laying Down a Path in Walking,” 63.
251 Thompson, Mind in Life, 155, 158-159.
Leibniz, meantime, intent upon rescuing a notion of contingency – a genuinely libertarian notion of “freedom” that consists in the real possibility of choosing otherwise than one actually does – without sacrificing divine omnipotence and omniscience, defines contingency as a type of “conditional necessity,” in opposition to logical necessity. Thus, in the *Theodicy*, he specifies the “what” of human freedom in terms of three necessary conditions, which are jointly sufficient: intelligence, spontaneity, and contingency, where “intelligence” designates “a clear knowledge of the object of deliberation,” “spontaneity,” the state of being internally determined, and “contingency,” “the exclusion of logical or metaphysical necessity.” In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, he distinguishes between “absolute,” or logical necessity, wherein the “contrary implies a contradiction,” on the one hand, and “accidental” or “contingent” necessity, on the other. The former kind of necessity belongs to the “necessary truths” of mathematics and metaphysics, whereas truths of the latter kind are necessary on account of God’s free decision – which is itself constrained only by God’s “primary free decision [...] always to do what is most perfect” – to create this particular world, rather than another. All true contingent propositions about a person are “certain,” meaning that while they do “have a priori proofs of their truth,” they do not admit of “necessary demonstrations” based on the principle of contradiction; in other words, while there is a reason that the truth of such a proposition is contingently necessary, the proposition is not “necessary in itself.”

In rescuing a notion of free choice, however, Leibniz seems to render himself incapable of clearly and distinctly conceiving of the mind-body union, concerning which he vacillates. On the one hand, in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), he shies away from outright idealism,
stating that: “Something I don’t attempt to decide is whether, in metaphysical strictness, bodies are substances, or whether, like the rainbow, they only true phenomena, and consequently whether there are substances, souls, or substantial forms which are not intelligent.”257 He is not here entertaining the notion that bodies might be substances in themselves, but rather, leaving open the question of whether there might be some reality to matter, or whether matter exists solely in perceptions, which are immanent to monads. In any case, though, he makes clear that, however much of “extension” proves to be “something imaginary,” a monad alone is a body’s “principle of identity,” and every monad (besides God) is assigned to a body “which belongs to us despite not being attached to our essence.”258 Leibniz does, however, draw a stark line between humans (“intelligent souls” or “minds”) and “the souls and substantial forms of other bodies” in this work.259 Unconscious monads would perceive the present alone, but not remember, if such substances truly exist (a question which Leibniz does not here decide), while animal monads possess varying degrees of memory, but not the capacity for reason.260 “Minds,” though, are monads capable of remembering their past states, and of reflecting upon them, which, in turn, renders them capable of self-awareness and of “discover[ing] necessary and eternal truths.”261 “Reason,” for Leibniz, means the capacity to express the infinite: the innate possession of necessary and eternal truths in the form of “ideas,” which are not actual mental contents, but “capacities” or “dispositions” to think certain thoughts, if the necessary occasion is provided by sense perception and memory.262

257 Ibid., §34:86.
259 Ibid., §12:63.
260 Ibid., §12:63, §34:86.
261 Ibid., §34:86.
262 Ibid., §26:78, §27:79.
Whereas “minds express God rather than the world,” other monads (i.e., unconscious monads and animals) “express the world rather than God.”\textsuperscript{263} Monads mirror God’s general nature insofar as they are simple (a unity without parts), immaterial, and indestructible because what is without parts cannot decompose (unless annihilated by God).\textsuperscript{264} They mirror God’s omniscience insofar as each one “expresses, albeit confusedly, everything which happens in the universe, past, present, and future,” and (in the case of human monads, though not unconscious monads without memory, if such substances exist, or animal monads without reason) are capable of, to some degree, rendering the structure of this infinitely complex system explicit through the use of reason.\textsuperscript{265} Finally, monads mirror God’s omnipotence insofar as they are relatively causally self-sufficient (determined solely by their own complete concepts and maintained in existence by God alone) and insofar as the harmonization of all other monads with a particular monad’s state means that each, in this sense, “extends its power over all others.”\textsuperscript{266}

On the other hand, Leibniz formulates an explicitly idealist doctrine in the \textit{Monadology} (1714). Here, he defines a “monad” as “a simple substance, which enters into composites,” and which contains nothing but “perceptions and their changes.”\textsuperscript{267} “Perception,” meanwhile, is defined as “[t]he transitory state which incorporates and represents a multitude within a unity or within a simple substance,” so that “a monad is representative in its nature.”\textsuperscript{268} “Matter,” meanwhile, “is […] divisible to infinity” and “actually subdivided without end,” with each part assigned to its own “entelechy”—a term encompassing all types of “substantial form,” from “naked monads” possessing only instantaneous perceptions, to those possessing “memory” (i.e., “souls,” encompassing both animals and humans), to those possessing “reason,” the capacity to

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid., §35:87.
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., §9:59-61, §14:67.
\textsuperscript{267} Leibniz, \textit{Monadology}, §1:268, §17:270.
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid., §14:269, §60:276.
\end{footnotes}
discover “necessary and eternal truths” (i.e., “minds,” a category reserved for humans alone). In this case, “matter” is only a certain type of perceptual content, given that Leibniz here accords substantial reality only to “monads,” and here conceives of them as beings of pure perception.

Leibniz therefore conceives of the universe as an infinitely intelligible system, governed down to its smallest parts by the “principle of contradiction” (i.e., whatever contains a contradiction is false and impossible) and the principle of “sufficient reason” (i.e., in order for a thing to be “true or existence,” there must be “a sufficient reason why it was thus and not otherwise”), although finite minds can never comprehend this system in its entirety. For Leibniz, as Husserl puts it, metaphysics are the *mathesis universalis* (“universal mathematics”): “a science of the forms of meaning of the ‘something-in-general’ which can be constructed in pure thought and in empty, formal generality” such that the “substances” of the Scholastics are – implicitly, in Leibniz’s writings – transformed into “‘manifolds,’” i.e., “compossible totalities of objects in general which are thought of as distinct only in empty, formal generality and are conceived of as defined by determinate modalities of the something-in-general.” Monads are compossible manifolds of the entire universe of monads, each individual a singular determination of the whole. Or, as Grosholz and Yakira put it, “Leibnizian method” is a “monadology” in the sense of “a search for the rational simples that underlie infinitely complex reality and the reflective examination of how the simple and the complex may then be related.” Whereas Descartes’s “order of reasons” rested on the assumption “that the simple and the complex are homogeneous with each other,” Leibniz can recognize the “heterogeneity” of the simple and the complex without sacrificing the ideal of “universal intelligibility” through his deployment of the

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principle of continuity.”273 Monads function, in Leibniz’s epistemology-ontology, in a way analogous to “‘blind,’ symbolic notation” in algebra, “allowing the hypothesis of similarity of structure while at the same time preserving the differences between the things compared.”274

Whether Leibniz conceives of bodies as “aggregates” of substances, or as mere phenomena, wholly immanent to monads, it remains certain that for he, like Spinoza, denies any possibility of real causal interactions between minds and bodies.275 Throughout his work, Leibniz maintains that monads are “windowless,” in the sense that “what happens to each one is only a consequence of its idea or complete notion and nothing else, such that God is the mind’s only “immediate object” in its perceptions of the external world.276 According to his doctrine of a “pre-established harmony of substances,” God continually ensures both the harmony of all monads’ states, so that they appear to interact with one another causally, as well as the harmony between the states of a specific mind and the states of the body belonging to it; the latter cannot be causally related, because whereas “[b]odies act according to the laws of efficient causes,” minds “act according to the laws of final causes, through appetition, ends, and means.”277 While the doctrine of pre-established harmony may sound mystical, it does follow rationally from Leibniz’s claim that “God produces a variety of substances according to the different views he has of the universe.”278 Since substances express the various perspectives of a single being (God) on a single object (the universe), and God possesses infinite and perfect knowledge, a conflict between these substances is inconceivable. As Nicholas Jolley points out, however, Leibniz’s appeal to pre-

273 Ibid., 20-21.
274 Ibid., 21.
275 Jolley, Leibniz, 101. While Spinoza denies the possibility of relations of causality or even dependence between modes of thought and extension, contemporary property dualists tend to subscribe to some variant of the “supervenience”—the grounding or dependence—of the mental on the physical (Heil, Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction, 188; Davidson, “Mental Events,” 111).
established harmony is not entirely satisfying as an explanation for the mind-body union, given that the harmony is between substances, and he explicitly denies that bodies are substances.279

Once the presupposition of “God” or “Nature” as an actual, immediate, positive infinity drops out of the picture in the “Modern period” proper (i.e., the European Enlightenment), however, Spinoza and Leibniz’s reductions of the totality of beings, respectively, to the self-expression of an infinite substance or to an infinity of substances expressive of a single totality, give way to the more contemporary alternative between materialist or idealist reductionism in their myriad forms. This shift can be seen in the writings of Kant, who argues that human understanding is incapable of determining the phenomenal world (“Nature”) either as finite or as infinite, and, equally, incapable of determining either that there is or that there is not an “absolutely necessary being” (a God qua prime mover).280 Kant thereby renders these metaphysical questions wholly alien to the practice of natural science, which concerns itself only with the phenomenal world as such, the realm of understanding; he thus codifies the original Cartesian rupture between “truth” and “meaning,” natural science and ethics, in his architectonic, freeing the faculty of pure reason upon which scientific understanding is founded to conceive of a phenomenal world wherein “[t]here is no freedom, but everything in the world occurs solely according to laws of nature,” and the faculty of practical reason operant in ethics to conceive of an intelligible “causality through freedom” which neither phenomenalizes itself nor contradicts phenomenal causality.281

Before further explicating Kant’s reorientation of the tradition, however, I will turn to the British empiricists, a tradition rooted in the writings of Francis Bacon (roughly contemporaneous with Descartes) and Thomas Hobbes (roughly contemporaneous with Spinoza), and coming to full expression in the writings – upon which I will here focus, on account of their explicit

279 Jolley, Leibniz, 102.
280 Kant, CPR, A426/B454, A453/B481.
281 Ibid., A445/B473.
engagement with early Modern rationalism, and their functioning as the latter’s antipode in the
writings of Kant – of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. The British empiricists can be seen as
marching, in their compounding critiques of Scholastic metaphysics, toward “phenomenalism”: the reduction of “material realities” to mental contents.

Locke founds the British empiricist tradition with his rejection of the possibility of innate ideas, arguing negatively that the hypothesis of innate ideas is disproven by the fact that there is not a single principle that is known, much less assented to, by all human beings (particularly when “children” and “idiots,” as Locke puts it, are taken into account), and positively that innate ideas are a null hypothesis because it is possible to explain the acquisition of all human knowledge by appealing to our “natural faculties” alone; thus, even if there were some point upon which all human beings agreed, this would not prove it to be innate.282 To the Leibnizian conception of “innate ideas” as the innate capacity for certain ideas, given the proper occasion, Locke replies that this is an erroneous conflation of the “capacity” to acquire knowledge with “the knowledge acquired”; Locke makes a distinction in kind, in other words, between mental processes and mental contents, whereas Leibniz conceives a process as always already ‘sketching out’ all of its actual and possible contents.283 According to Locke, all “particular” or “simple ideas” are acquired passively via sense perception, reflection, or a combination of the two, whereas all “complex ideas” are actively produced through the mental operations of “combination,” “relation,” or “abstraction.”284 Thus, our only “knowledge” is of simple ideas, of which complex ideas are but voluntary manipulations.285

Locke argues, therefore, that we can neither affirm nor deny the existence of “substances” in general, and corporeal or spiritual substances in particular (respectively, “an

282 Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, I.ii.1-5.
283 Ibid., I.ii.5.
284 Ibid., II.iii.1, II.xii.1.
285 Ibid., II.xxiii.32.
extended solid substance, capable of communicating motion by impulse,” and “a substance that thinks, and has a power of exciting motion in body, by will, or thought”); although we acquire simple ideas of various “primary qualities” (properties of the objects in themselves), “secondary qualities” (“powers” to affect the senses), and powers “to give or receive alterations of primary qualities” through our internal and external senses, the idea of a substrate of these qualities and powers is complex, and can never be clear and distinct, since a substance in itself would possess no qualities or powers.286 Since we can comprehend neither a “thinking thing” nor an “extended thing,” but only the qualities and powers that we suppose to adhere to each of them, there is no reason to suppose that a “thinking thing” must be immaterial, or a material thing incapable of thinking: “it is no harder to conceive how thinking should exist without matter, than how matter should think.”287

“Identity,” for Locke, is not a matter of some persistent substance. A non-living body remains the same so long as its component parts remain unchanged, while a living body remains the same so long as it persists in the same “life” by maintaining the “organization” of parts necessary for it, and the identity of a “person” – “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself” – extends to all those thoughts and actions, present or recollected, of which they are capable of being “conscious.”288 The “same man,” in becoming intoxicated or dreaming of being someone else, becomes a different person, so that a person is not

286 Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II.xxiii.4, II.xxiii.22, II.xxiii.9. Locke’s system of “powers” prefigures the “functionalist” style of analysis in contemporary philosophy of mind. Functionalism, in general, holds that what properly characterizes a “state of mind” as such is not its intrinsic character—about which many functionalists remain agnostic, neither affirming nor denying the materiality or immateriality of mind—but the “causal relations” in which it stands to “sensory inputs,” “output behavior,” and “other states of mind” (Heil, *Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction*, 99).


288 Ibid., II.xxvi.3-5, II.xxvii.9-10.
“responsible” for actions performed during a lapse of consciousness (although, since we have genuine knowledge only of our own consciousness, this cannot serve as a legal defense).\textsuperscript{289}

Echoing Descartes’s theory of intellectual choice and Spinoza’s theory of choice in general, Locke espouses a thoroughgoing determinism. He defines the “will” as a power, of which we acquire a simple idea through introspection, to “to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move.”\textsuperscript{290} For a will to be “free,” then, simply consists in the agent being in a situation where they are capable both of thinking and of not thinking, or both of moving and of not moving; “free will” is nothing more than “a power to suspend the prosecution of this or that desire,” as opposed to a power of spontaneous and unconditioned choice.\textsuperscript{291} Locke therefore argues that “every man is put under a necessity by his constitution, as an intelligent being, to be determined in will\textit{ing} by his own thought and judgment, what is best for him to do” – that one’s “free” choices are entirely determined by one’s mental contents and one’s power of processing them – and that “unfreedom” consists in determination by external necessity or in indifference.\textsuperscript{292}

Hume, meanwhile, takes up Locke’s critique of the concept of “substance” and extends it to the concept of “powers,” arguing that we can never comprehend the \textit{relation} between a supposed “cause” and “effect.”\textsuperscript{293} All that we perceive are objects, and when we generally or constantly perceive them in a given order we form an “idea of a necessary connexion among events”—and yet, this “idea” is really nothing but a “habit” of the mind whereby, “after a repetition of similar instances,” it comes, “upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant, and to believe that it will exist.”\textsuperscript{294} Any supposed “connexion” between two events is, therefore, not an item of “knowledge,” but the “feeling” – “the sentiment or impression” – of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{289} Ibid., II.xxvii.20-22.
\textsuperscript{290} Ibid., II.xxi.8.
\textsuperscript{291} Ibid., II.xxi.47.
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid., II.xxi.48.
\textsuperscript{293} Hume, \textit{Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding}, 45.
\textsuperscript{294} Ibid., 50.
\end{footnotesize}
“this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant.”\footnote{Ibid.} All inferences concerning connections between events are, therefore, founded upon sentiment arising from experience, rather than reason.\footnote{Ibid., 52-53.}

Knowledge of the existence of other minds does not constitute a problem for Hume’s style of thinking, since his criterion for the truth of beliefs is pragmatic, in stark contrast to Descartes’s edifice of absolutely guaranteed knowledge. As Anik Waldow puts it, for Hume “a belief is approvable not because an extra act of reasoning legitimizes it; it is approvable if it integrates well into the broader body of beliefs,” which is to say, integrates well into a meaningful world of experience, shared with others.\footnote{Waldow, \textit{David Hume and the Problem of Other Minds}, 163.} From this perspective, any philosophical system that does not take the fact of such a meaningful world as its foundational criterion must be dismissed as an empty abstraction, at best useless (and at worst detrimental) for human beings. It is a fact that we make and utilize “general observations concerning mankind,” which would be pointless and impossible if there were not some thoroughgoing similarity between all human minds.\footnote{Hume, \textit{Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding}, 56.} We must be cautious, though, because what is at stake here for Hume is not the \textit{existence} of other minds, but, rather, their \textit{similarity to one’s own}. His argument is that, because we make judgments which are premised upon the similarity of other minds to our own, and find such judgments efficacious in practical life, we are justified in assuming that other minds really do operate in ways similar to our own. In \textit{Treatise of Human Nature}, meanwhile, Hume broadens the recognition of this similarity to include animal minds, relying on an analogical argument which begins by (1) noting the similarity of animal behavior to certain human behavior, then (2) points out that, in humans, such behavior is considered “rational,” and, finally, (3) concludes that it
must, therefore, be considered rational in animals as well. Hume further concludes that what we call “rationality” is simply a species of “instinct,” a natural and customary way of engaging with the world. His concern here, then, is to show that reason is a natural process, which takes place in a meaningful world of experience, even as it helps to constitute it for us.

Concerning “free will,” Hume argues that, in observing human thoughts and actions, we are likewise confronted with certain “uniform and regular conjunction[s]” of events which lead the mind to habitually “infer the existence of one from that of the other,” so that we must regard “the actions of the mind” as being just as necessary as “the operations of external bodies.”

There is, then, no difference between the feeling of necessity arising from one’s experience of the consistent conjunction of events, whether they are both “physical,” both “mental,” or a combination of the two: “The same experience’d union has the same effect on the mind, whether the united objects be motives, volitions and actions; or figure and motion,” so that when the mind is following “a connected chain of natural causes and voluntary actions,” it “feels no difference betwixt them in passing from one link to another.” Since the problem of the mind-body union concerns necessary causal interactions between distinct substances, Hume sidesteps it even more effectively than Locke: we observe various consistent conjunctions of “mental” and “external” events, but, as with conjunctions between external events, the feeling of their connection in the imagination constitutes explanatory bedrock for Hume. The illusion of an unconditioned power of choice, according to Hume, tends to arise because, when we reflect upon our past actions, imagining various other courses than the one we took, “we feel that [the will] moves easily every way, and produces an image of itself even on that side, on which it did not settle,” so that we may

299 Hume, Treatise of Human Nature, 118.
300 Ibid., 119.
301 Ibid., 257-258.
302 Ibid., 261.
acquire the false impression that we really could have willed otherwise than we did.\textsuperscript{303} The fact remains, however, that

a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition.\textsuperscript{304}

This feeling of expecting certain events to follow others, arising from prior experiences of their conjunction, is, Hume concludes, “the very essence of necessity.”\textsuperscript{305}

Given that he founds all judgments concerning “relations of objects” (as opposed to “abstract relations of ideas”) upon “sentiment,” rather than reason, it follows quite naturally that Hume likewise reverses the traditional (Platonic, and subsequently Cartesian) priority of reason over the passions in matters of morality, arguing that “[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”\textsuperscript{306} The passions of “aversion” and “propensity” – arising from, respectively, “the prospect of pain or pleasure” – alone can determine us to act, and in this regard reason’s only proper functions consist of making us aware in cases when a passion is founded upon an erroneous belief about an object’s existence, or when we “deceive ourselves in our judgment of causes and effects,” and so choose an insufficient means for the end at which we aim.\textsuperscript{307}

Berkeley, finally, takes up Locke’s claim that “secondary qualities” exist only relative to the mind, and extends it into the argument that all qualities of “material things,” and indeed the “material world” itself, can only be conceived as an idea, the existence of which is therefore dependent upon the mind.\textsuperscript{308} According to Berkeley, only talk of “spiritual substances” and “ideas” (as contents of the latter) possesses a genuine referent, whereas any and all talk of “matter

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{303} Ibid., 262.
\bibitem{304} Ibid., 262-263.
\bibitem{305} Ibid., 263.
\bibitem{306} Ibid., 266.
\bibitem{307} Ibid., 266-267.
\bibitem{308} Berkeley, \textit{Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge}, I.10.
\end{thebibliography}
or corporeal substance” is meaningless because it is contradictory: a “substance” is an independent existent, whereas the only reason we have for believing in corporeal things is that we have ideas (supposedly “impressions”) of them, so that, as far as we can know, the existence of corporeal things is wholly dependent upon the mind. To put it differently, all that we perceive are phenomena, which are all of them “ideas” (i.e., “inert, fleeting, dependent beings”), which are “supported by, or exist in minds or spiritual substances (i.e., “active, indivisible substances”); we have a immediate knowledge of “our own existence by inward feeling or reflection,” and a mediate knowledge of the existence of other minds “by reason,” so that all of our ideas are real ideas, but we have no reason to posit the existence of any objects besides ideas and minds. In the same manner that we are rightly convinced of the existence of other minds by analyzing our “perceptions” (ideas) of their actions, reason convinces us even more firmly of God’s existence by the “works of nature,” i.e., “the far greater part of the ideas or sensations perceived by us, [and yet] not produced by us, or dependent on the wills of men,” which must therefore affect our minds with all of those ideas of which we are not the authors.

Berkeley’s transition from strict empiricism into absolute idealism foreshadows Kant’s attempt, in CPR, to reconcile empiricism with idealism, the reality of sensation with the a priori necessity of logical relations of abstract concepts. Kant’s “transcendental idealism” attempts this feat by reconceiving of the unity of the phenomenal world as the necessary correlate of the unity of consciousness, in which case the rules governing the continual synthesis of the phenomenal world into a coherent whole would not arise from “noumenal” things in themselves, but from the necessary “categories” (universal principles) of the human faculty of understanding whereby it unites the manifold presentations given in sensible intuition. The “I, as simple presentation,”

309 Ibid., I.9, I.18.  
310 Ibid., I.89.  
311 Ibid., I.145-146.  
312 Kant, CPR, B130-133.
the transcendental ego, is the formal unity of any and all possible experience, and the thoroughgoing determinative power of the categories of the understanding over any and all possible empirical objects is the necessary condition for the reality of this unity.313

In articulating what he sees as the true insights and the errors of both empiricism and idealism, Kant makes use of an extreme interpretation of Leibniz’s thought, portraying it as a pure intellectualism (i.e., the reduction of things in themselves to concepts), as a counterpoint to Locke’s pure sensualism (i.e., the reduction of all ideas to sensations, or modifications of sensations):

These great men did not seek in understanding and sensibility two quite different sources of presentations which could, however, only in connection make objectively valid judgments about things. Instead, each man kept to only one of the two sources, viz., the one source that in his opinion referred directly to things in themselves, while the other source did nothing but confuse or order the presentations of the first source.314

In other words, Kant interprets Leibniz as positing the power of cognition as the solitary, independent source of true knowledge, and the senses as a mere source of distortion; he interprets Locke, meanwhile, as positing the senses as the only source of truth, and the power of cognition as the source of all error.

Kant maintains that concepts of the understanding can either be applied to other concepts, purified of any admixture of sensible intuition, or to sensible intuitions: “either one must (in logic) abstract from any object, or, if one does assume an object, must think it under conditions of sensible intuition.”315 He interprets Leibniz’s identification of the substantiality of a substance with its “complete concept” as a sign that Leibniz has “intellectualized appearances,” reducing the sensible manifold whereby a noumenal thing gives itself in intuition to a part of its concept.316 But if Leibniz really does reduce objects of experience to pure concepts, then relations between

313 Ibid., A237/ B296.
314 Ibid., A271/B327.
315 Ibid., A279/B335.
316 Ibid., A271/B327.
them would be relations “merely in the understanding,” without any reference to spatiotemporal conditions.317

In other words, Kant believes that Leibniz must, in order to be consistent with his own identification of substances with their “complete concepts,” posit “space” and “time” as illusions and, as a consequence, reduce sensibility to a mere source of confusion for the intellect.318 If extrinsic relations are an illusion, then space and time are not actually forms of sensible manifolds, but forms of intellectual community and sequence between purely conceptual presentations.319 Mere presentations or appearances of things would thereby be erroneously elevated to the status of “things in themselves.”320 But if that were case, the understanding would (impossibly) present itself with the objects to which it applies its concepts, so that the spatiotemporal schemata through which it applies its concepts to appearances would be unnecessary, a mere distortion of concepts whose ‘real’ objects would be purely intelligible, rather than sensible.321 This, Kant argues, is why a “community” of monads is only possible through the intervention of a “third cause,” “a predetermined harmony,” whereby their “reciprocal correspondence among one another according to universal laws,” their reality, ceases to rest on extrinsic relations, becoming a mere idea in the mind of God.322

And if extrinsic (i.e., spatiotemporal) relations are not real, then all differences depending upon spatiotemporal predicates would likewise have to be classed as illusions. Kant’s Leibniz would have to, for instance, consider two drops of water “indistinguishable” on account of the identity of their concept, without taking into account the difference in their determination qua

317 Ibid.
318 Ibid., A275-B331.
319 Ibid., A275/B331-A276/B332.
320 Ibid., A276/B332.
321 Ibid.
322 Ibid., A274/B330-A274/B331.
appearances possessing distinct “physical locations.””\textsuperscript{323} Kant argues that Leibniz mistakes the impossibility of logical contradiction for the impossibility of real contradiction. If Leibniz defines “realities” as positive concepts, then it is true that these “never logically conflict with one another” because the “principle of contradiction” ensures that all really affirmative concepts form a seamless and ideal totality of possible truth, but this has no bearing on the possibility of “real conflict” between phenomena, which is a question of obstructive relations of effective “forces” in sensibility, rather than relations between pure concepts.\textsuperscript{324} Likewise, a pure intellectualist could not posit effective forces as real, given that their reality is purely sensible.\textsuperscript{325} On Kant’s reading, Leibniz becomes hardly distinguishable from Berkeley.

Kant’s criticism, however, reveals more about his own transcendental idealism than it does about Leibniz’s thought. Kant himself conceives of the “possibility” of an object of experience as “a relation of these objects to our thinking”: i.e., a relation, via the categories of the understanding and the schemata into which they are translated by the productive imagination, between the spatiotemporal form of sensible intuition, and the unity of transcendental subjectivity.\textsuperscript{326} If Leibniz intended his notion of “complete concepts” in the same way that Kant defines “concepts of the understanding – i.e., as pure intellectual forms of synthesis, in themselves wholly unrelated to sensible phenomena – then he would indeed need to dismiss the phenomenal world as a source of confusion. But even in the \textit{Monadology}, where he tends more toward idealism than in earlier works, Leibniz defines a monad as the “entelechy” (i.e., form) of a body, meaning that a monad is a singular “representation” of the “whole universe” insofar as it is the representation of a body which “expresses the whole universe through the interconnection of all matter in the plenum—although “this representation of the details of the whole universe is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{323} Ibid., A272/B328.
\item \textsuperscript{324} Ibid., A273/B239-A274/B330.
\item \textsuperscript{325} Ibid., A274/B330-A274/B331.
\item \textsuperscript{326} Ibid., A581/B609.
\end{itemize}
confused,” those things which are imperceptibly distant or imperceptibly minute, relative to the sensory organs of its body, being represented only indistinctly. Thus, a “complete concept” is, as Grosholz and Yakira put it, not a concept of the understanding in Kant’s sense (i.e., a universal form of synthesis for purely intellectual contents), but “everything that can coherently, legitimately, or veridically be said of [an individual substance].” Knowing the “complete concept” or “essence” of an individual would consist, not in the subsumption of that individual under a general concept, but in “a listing, or rather a sort of inferring, of all the circumstances of its ‘life,’” a total grasp of the unique manner in which it expresses the entire universe.

Leibniz’s notion of an “ideal full knowledge,” which “is made intelligible through the idea of ‘divine intellect’ and ‘divine knowledge,’” is therefore a formulation of the same concept of “divine intuition” which Husserl articulates as follows: “God, the subject possessing an absolutely perfect knowledge and therefore possessing every possible adequate perception, naturally has that adequate perception of the very physical thing which is denied to us finite beings.” Husserl rightly points out that Leibniz originally errs by treating perceptions, not as conceptual predicates, but as representations of things in themselves: “by thinking that the transcendence belonging to the spatial thing is the transcendence belonging to something depicted or represented by a sign.” The transcendence of perceived beings does not consist in the difference between a finite (human) and an infinite (divine) explication of the manner in which they express the total system of the world, but in the indeterminability of the horizon of the thing itself, in the inexhaustible range of future possibilities for perception which the thing itself gives in and through its “presence,” which is not a representation within a windowless monad, but a

328 Grosholz & Yakira, Leibniz’s Science of the Rational, 27.
329 Ibid., 31.
331 Husserl, Ideas I, §43:78.
Thus, Leibniz errs in conceiving of ideal being (in this case, the “objective world” constructed through the practices of mathematics and the natural sciences) as a primordial existent, imperfectly represented through perception:

[E]ven such an outstanding genius as Leibniz struggled for a long time with the problem of grasping the correct meaning of the two kinds of existence—i.e., universally the existence of the spatiotemporal form as purely geometrical and the existence of universal mathematical nature with its factual, real form—and of understanding the correct relation of each to the other.333

Perceptions are not indistinct expressions of a system of divine Reason; rather, rational explanations are abstract expressions of perceptions, which are themselves the becoming-present to one another of a perceived and a perceiving being. Leibniz is not truly guilty of the epistemological, intellectualist error of reducing perceptions to concepts, but he does, at least in his later writings (e.g., the Monadology), slip into metaphysical idealism, reducing the perceived-perceiver relation to one of represented-representing by rendering perceived being immanent to consciousness, whereas the phenomenological tradition following Husserl conceives of perception as an opening onto transcendence.

Kant’s criticism of Leibniz does, then, get at a basic obscurity in the latter’s thought, concerning the relation between ideal (logical-mathematical) forms, and perceived forms. Leibniz indeed has great difficulty attempting to explain the relationship between “substantial forms” (i.e., “monads”) and bodies. Bodies, because they express certain forms, cannot be pure matter, but they cannot be true substances either, since they are divisible.334 This is why he can only attempt to explain the interaction between the soul (as an indivisible form) and the body (as an “aggregation” of such indivisible forms) – as well as the interactions between souls, which can have no real interaction through the bodies to which they are merely “attached” in this mysterious way – by appealing to preestablished harmony:

332 Ibid., §43-44:79-80.
333 Husserl, Crisis of the European Sciences, §9:i:55.
334 Leibniz, Correspondence with Arnauld, 2.11:132.
The union of the soul and the body, and also the operation of one substance on another, consists only in the perfect mutual accord, specifically established by the order of the first creation, in virtue of which every substance fits in with what the others need in accordance with its own laws.\[^{335}\]

Kant avoids precisely this difficulty of how to account for the appearance of intelligible forms in nature by specifying the inverse priorities of “matter” (“the determinable as such”) and “form” (“its determination”) within the faculties of sensibility and understanding.\[^{336}\] Like Leibniz, he states that “matter precedes form” in the understanding (because the understanding can only synthesize an already-given manifold), but whereas Leibniz grants the intellect (monad) the power of presenting this matter of determinative judgments to itself (as a determination \textit{of itself}), Kant states that it is presented by the faculty of sensibility wherein “the form of intuition (as a subjective character of sensibility) precedes all matter (the sensations).”\[^{337}\] Thus, the understanding can never be applied to things in themselves, but only to appearances—and, indeed, the understanding is necessarily, always already applied to any and all possible appearances as such because it accomplishes the “\textit{pure}” synthesis of “the manifold in space and time” qua universal forms of sensible experience, guaranteeing \textit{a priori} the applicability of the categories of determinative judgment “to objects of intuition as such.”\[^{338}\] As Husserl puts it, “reason has a \textit{twofold} way of functioning” according to Kant: in sensible intuition, reason is “constantly functioning in concealment, […] ceaselessly rationalizing sense-data and always having them as already rationalized”; explicit understanding, then, “is [reason’s] systematic self-exposition, self-revelation in free and pure mathematizing, in the practice of the pure mathematical sciences.”\[^{339}\]

\[^{335}\] Ibid., 2.13:136.
\[^{336}\] Kant, \textit{CPR}, A266/B322.
\[^{337}\] Ibid., A266/B322-A267/B323.
\[^{338}\] Ibid., A77/B103-A79/B105.
Kant’s reduction of the world to a manifold of appearances synthesized by the understanding likewise enables him to preserve the truth of empiricism – that sensations are caused by external things, and a necessary condition for all of our knowledge of those things – while avoiding the empiricist difficulty of how to account for the possibility of universal and necessary truth. Locke sets himself up fairly well for the charge of being a pure sensualist. He asserts that “impressions” – which can be either “ideas of sensation” or “ideas of reflection” – are the ultimate source of all (non-empty) ideas, conceiving of perception as a mechanical process whereby the really inherent (i.e., extensive) “qualities” of external things are the effective causes of all of the mind’s original, simple ideas. According to Kant, Locke thereby asserts the “empirical derivation” of the “pure concepts of understanding” by “using these concepts for cognitions that go far beyond any boundary of experience” – e.g., speaking of “causality” with reference to things in themselves, whereas the concept of causality can only legitimately be applied to appearances. Kant praises Hume for being more consistent to the principles of empiricism by acknowledging that, if all concepts are all concepts are derived from experience, then their range of application is limited to experience. For example, the concept of “causality” does not express a “necessary connection” between two events, but a habitual expectation that certain events will succeed certain others arising from “remembrance of their constant conjunction,” so that all our supposed “certainty” of causal relations actually consists in degrees of “probability” and refers solely to our own experiences, rather than to relations of the things themselves. Kant, however, deems Hume’s consistent empiricism flawed for contradicting what he takes for a fact, “that we actually have [...] a priori cognitions of pure mathematics and

340 Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, II.i.24, II.viii.8.
341 Kant, CPR, A94/B127.
342 Kant, CPR, A94/B127-128; Hume, Treatise of Human Nature, 1.3.6:SB88-89.
universal natural science”—that we have knowledge of certain truths which is not founded upon any actual or possible experience whatsoever.343

Kant inaugurates the opposition, still current, between, on the one hand, a transcendental idealism which guarantees and explains our access to what seem to be unconditional truths a priori at the price of denying the possibility of illogical or even non-logical experiences, and an empirical realism which, insofar as it remains self-consistent, explains the experiential genesis of ideas at the price of reducing “truth” to “probability.” The former cannot—despite Kant’s own protestations to the contrary—avoid some admixture of dogmatic assertion, while the latter tends toward absolute relativism regarding “truth” in every dimension of existence. Idealism and realism are the twin poles of an objectivist-subjectivist continuum of thought, and both conceive of “truth” as absolute and unconditional, in opposition to lived meaning. Their difference lies in the fact that idealism affirms the reality of this unconditional “truth,” whereas realism denies it.

In CI, for instance, Kant appears to make a realist claim when he says that it is necessary for humans beings to attribute an intrinsic “natural purposiveness” (an objective finality) to the phenomena of organized living beings.344 He argues that organisms (to use the contemporary term) are “both cause and effect of [themselves],” whereas the organization of a geometrical object or of an object of physics can only be granted an extrinsic purposiveness relative in the former case, to the human understanding by which its production is determined, and, in the latter, to the free causality of human reason.345 However, he restricts the truth-value of this assertion to ‘not-false’ insofar as nature in itself is concerned: the judgment that a living organized being is a “natural purpose” is an objective necessity of human reason alone.346 If the objective necessity of applying the concept of “natural purposes” to organisms came from beings themselves, then the

343 Kant, CPR, A94/B128.
344 Kant, CI, 371.
345 Ibid., 364-365, 368.
346 Ibid., 370.
phenomena-noumena distinction would collapse, since this would entail our having direct access to the things themselves.

While, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, Kant “reintroduces the concept of finalized Nature, despite the Cartesian reduction,” he does so by “[making] all that there is of finality rest on the contingent aspect of humanity—freedom,” which is to say, “human being […] as a noumenon.”347 If there are real a priori truths, and they do not reside in the mind of God as an absolute being, then the site of their existence must be human being qua absolute, qua sovereign relative to the phenomenal world: the traditional “humanism” of the Enlightenment. Kant thereby renews and transforms the Cartesian problems of the “mind-body union” and “free will,” though now in terms of a division between phenomenal and intelligible being, rather than between two incompossible types of phenomenal being.

The traditional of transcendental idealism, which Kant inaugurates, explains the genesis of forms and systems in the world of experience by appealing to the universal and necessary conditions for conscious experience, imposed upon experience by a constituting consciousness which is free with respect to it. The major alternative at present is a tradition arising from the empiricist side, albeit from a writer who is often not classed as a “philosopher”: Darwin. In On the Origin of Species, he accounts for the genesis and apparently intentional character of living forms in a thoroughly “realist” manner: in terms of the interaction between, on the one hand, the inheritable physical and behavioral structures of living beings and, on the other, the total system of living and nonliving beings which makes up their environment. Over generations, structural variations appear among living beings as a result of changes in their environment, and the total environmental conditions select for those variations which are most “useful” by making it more likely that the individuals possessing them will reproduce, and in greater numbers.348 Darwin thus

348 Darwin, Origin of Species, 82.
conceives of the genesis of phenomenal forms purely in terms of actual beings and actual conditions, without the idealist reference to a transcendent agency, so that “Morphology” – i.e., the study of “resemblances” between the organizations and parts of different types of organisms – is for him the “very soul […] of natural history.”

Darwin was, of course, constrained by the field of knowledge within which he operated. Thus, while he was able to posit a clear principle of “Natural Selection” upon the basis of his observations, and on analogy with human selection for desirable traits in domesticated species, the discovery of DNA and advent of the field of genetics were still to come, so that he was forced to posit the “laws of variation” simply as “various, quite unknown, or dimly mysterious.” As a result, Darwin’s own theory of evolution places an exclusive emphasis on actual morphology and behavior; only with the advent of genetics would what Merleau-Ponty calls “Neo-Darwinism” recognize the heritability of potentials for certain traits, and thereby reconceive of “selection” as a process operating upon the “material” of both the actual and the possible. Thus, Neo-Darwinism recognizes evolution not just by adaptation, but also by “preadaptation,” whereby a population of organisms can be understood stood as storing up a “bank” of mutations, the realization of which may prove “efficacious” under future conditions. But even while genetics enables the “making-supple” of the “theoretical schema of mutation-selection,” it also enables a purely statistical form of Neo-Darwinism to detach the theory entirely from the “facts,” in place of which it deals exclusively “nonimpossibilit[ies]”; Neo-Darwinism thereby becomes a mere “kinetics” of statistical mechanisms.

Merleau-Ponty sees the slide of Neo-Darwinism into abstract, mechanistic-statistical thinking – far divorced from Darwin’s own speculation upon the basis of observation, and testing

349 Ibid., 434.
350 Ibid., 12.
352 Ibid.
353 Ibid., 248/314, 255/321.
of his theories through subsequent observation – as the result of a false, and thoroughly Cartesian, dilemma concerning the “problem of natural genesis” (i.e., the problem of how to explain the appearance and co-adaptation of natural forms): either science must proceed purely from “principles” to “constructions,” or it must return to some form of “finalism” (e.g., the idealist notion of the imposition of forms upon the world of experience by a sovereign constituting consciousness). The false dilemma is, in other words, between Darwinian realism and idealism, which posit, respectively, that there is: “[o]ne dimension of the actual—the rest is impossible,” or “[a]nother dimension” in which “there is the possible.” Darwinism correctly denies the possibility of explaining (as Leibniz attempted to do) why a given being exists, because it is only possible to explain why certain beings do not exist; but the empiricist impulse to reject the non-actual as non-sense leads either to a neglect of the reality of the possible as such (Darwin), or to a covert substitution of models for the actual (Neo-Darwinism). Idealism correctly denies that an account the actual alone is “sufficient” to explain the genesis of natural forms, but it conceives of the possible as a dimension which “emerges” into or “invades” the order of the actual. Thus, realism responds to the antinomies of Modern thought by affirming only “chance” and “exterior[ity]” (which leaves it unable to account for the experiences of “mind,” “self,” and “freedom,” except by reducing them to illusions or epiphenomena), whereas idealism responds by affirming only “the idea” and “interior[ity]” (which leaves it unable to explain the reality of “bodies,” “others,” and “universal causal necessity,” except by reducing them to acts or contents of consciousness).

Even contemporary “postmodern” philosophy remains haunted by the antinomies of Modernism, tending to vacillate between neo-idealisms (which reduce the material to a

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354 Ibid., 246/312.
355 Ibid., 251/317.
356 Ibid.
357 Ibid.
358 Ibid.
“signification” or to “power”) and neo-realisms (which reduce the psychical to a “sign” or a “performance”). For instance, Butler, in *Bodies that Matter*, takes up a neo-idealist stance through her very attempt to refute interpretations of her as an idealist. She begins by stating that her “radical constructivism” is not a “linguistic monism” wherein language is posited as wholly generating and determining its objects. And yet, drawing on Michel Foucault, she goes on to argue that the enforming operation of power accomplishes the very “constitution” of material bodies, bestowing upon their “ontological weight,” their value of “‘being’,” such that: “‘[m]ateriality’ designates a certain effect of power or, rather, *is* power in its formative or constituting effects,” with the consequence that any “empiricist foundationalism” actually “masks the genealogy of power relations” insofar as it “accept[s] this constituted effect as a primary given.” The operation of power is the cause, and matter is its effect; thus, “[t]o return to matter requires that we return to matter as a *sign*.” Butler’s refutation of idealism is hardly distinguishable from Kant’s. Kant argues that the “existence” (as opposed to the “mere presentation”) of things in themselves is the necessary condition for the permanent existence of the “I” of which I am at all times (at least potentially) conscious; thus, “the consciousness of my own existence is simultaneously a direct consciousness of the existence of other things outside me” precisely insofar as those things in themselves are never, and can never, be given in a presentation. For Kant, things in themselves are the unthinkable material condition for the possibility of thought, just as, for Butler, bodies in themselves are the unspeakable material condition for the possibility of language; Butler is a ‘transcendental linguistic idealist’ (my term), such that linguistic forms are the transcendental condition for the possibility of experience.

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360 Ibid., 34-35.
361 Ibid.49.
362 Kant, *CPR*, B275-B276.
(“intelligibility”), while things in themselves are the material condition, the ‘raw manifold’ to be synthesized.

The assumption of a real distinction between “form” or “meaning,” on the one hand, and inaccessible things in themselves, on the other, merely sublimates the mind-body antinomy into the framework of a philosophy of sense, as opposed to a metaphysics of substance; and, so long as this antinomy persists, so will those of self-others and libertarianism-determinism. The self-others antinomy expresses itself in Butler’s writings as a tendency – inherited from the Hegelian, Lacanian, and Levinasian traditions which she takes up – to slide into the abstractions of “the I” and “the Other”: abstractions which are, in philosophies of intersubjectivity, akin to the reduction of actual beings to statistical variables in Neo-Darwinism. Further, from her earlier emphasis on “constructivism” to her later emphasis on “performativity,” Butler has been unable to exorcise the specter of determinism from her thought, vacillating between the assertion “that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies,” and the assertion that discourse goes all the way down, that “[a]t the most intimate levels, we are social, […] given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally.” But if every identity formation “is a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being for or by virtue of another,” it seems that there is no “we” or “I” capable of laying claim to an autonomy that it does not already possess. Thus, Butler’s notion of “agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power” is akin to Neo-Darwinism’s reduction of processes of realization to pure chance, a random mutation of norms, insofar as the “I” is (i.e., can be posited as) nothing but a certain materialization of norms. Butler resolves the Cartesian opposition between “theoretical truth” and “practical truth” by simply reducing the former to the latter.

363 Butler, Precarious Life, 25, 44-45.
364 Ibid., 24-25.
365 Ibid., 45
366 Butler, Bodies that Matter, 15.
“Post-Cartesian” philosophy tends to designate a movement in the opposite direction: the reduction of concrete existence to abstract models, which is to say, the attempt to fulfill Descartes’s own dream, though by other means. Here, I will treat as exemplary the taking up of Kant’s deployment of reflective judgments of natural purposes by the “interpretationist” approach (to borrow John Heil’s term) approach in contemporary philosophy of mind, currently advocated in the writings of Donald Davidson and Dennett.\(^{367}\) Dennett’s variant of interpretationism holds that taking the “intentional stance” toward a being consists in ascribing intentionality to it, and that the adoption of this attitude is justified, solely and sufficiently, by the accuracy of the empirical predictions that it enables one to make.\(^ {368}\) To call a being an “intentional system” (as opposed to a “designed” or “material” system) is, for Dennett, simply to say that its “behavior is predictable/explicable from the intentional stance,” so that the judgment made here is really a reflective one concerning the human power of understanding, rather than a determinative judgment about the nature of the being in question.\(^ {369}\) Interpretationism, then, claims to forego metaphysical speculation about the nature mind in favor of an exclusive, pragmatic focus on the relative predictive efficacy of taking different attitudes toward phenomena.

However, to reduce what it means for a being to “have a mind” to the fact that its behavior is predictable under the assumption that “representations” (which Dennett conceives of as packets of information for which brain processes are the “vehicles) mediate between its behavioral “inputs” and “outputs” actually does commit Dennett to a metaphysical reduction in the form of “verificationism”: the claim that only empirically verifiable statements possess truth value, so that any and all statements concerning qualities are empty, containing no information.\(^ {370}\) For Dennett, the “reality” of the mind consists solely in what can be measured from a third-

\(^{368}\) Dennett, *Kinds of Minds*, 27.
\(^{369}\) Ibid., 34.
\(^{370}\) Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 111, 460-461.
person perspective, and anything in first-person experience which eludes third-person observation is a misinterpretation, an “abstraction.” Dennett’s “post-Cartesian” thought actually just amounts to treating the normal, *methodological* reduction entailed by the construction of any model in Modern science as a *metaphysical* reduction—exactly the same move which Descartes makes when he reduces perceptions to judgments “that I perceive.” Dennett’s empiricism, therefore, slides into a variant of idealism, insofar as he first determines what measurements are (or will likely be) possible, and then identifies the set of things which can be measured with “the real”: ‘data idealism’ (i.e., something is “real” if and only if it can be measured from a third-person perspective).

I am turning to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, in hopes of overcoming the Modern/post-Modern oscillation between a realist ontology of pure actuality, and an idealist ontology of pure intentionality. In what follows, I will trace and interrogate Merleau-Ponty’s effort to conceive an ontology of “Being as *dimensionality,*” of which the “vertical order” of ideality and the “horizontal order” of actuality “are only the realization and the abstract aspects.” Idealism reaches its limit when it is confronted with “the specificity of the real and […] the necessity of primordial relations of the human” to the “fields” of lived space and lived time, as opposed to considering the latter two abstractly as either pure transcendental forms of experience or *de facto* appearances. The limit of idealism is, in other words, the experience of *real* possibility, both as that upon which a present actuality is founded, and as founded upon a prior actuality. This idea of “Nature” as a brute “residue that we cannot eliminate” – as opposed to the idealist conceptions of “Nature” either as a passive construction of human consciousness, or as the constructive activity of human consciousness itself – brings thought back, not to the naive empiricism which is

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371 Ibid., 424-425.
a mere reversal of idealism, but to “the romantic idea of a savage Nature,” to a “dialectic” (of the possible and the actual) in *the things themselves*.375

In the subsequent section, I deal with *PhP* as the beginning of Merleau-Ponty’s effort to think “being” neither as active nor as passive but, following F.W.J. Schelling, as a “barbaric” or “dark principle”: to think the “excess of Being over the consciousness of Being.”376 Like Schelling and the early G.W.F. Hegel, Merleau-Ponty seeks to articulate the “blind contact [which] is explicated by reflection,” that *real* contact with the world which “is sleep” or “a state of unconsciousness”: to articulate perception as “nothing,” not in the idealist sense of a void, but in the sense of a primordial “indivision” between perceiver and perceived.377 He departs from the “romantics,” however, in denying the existence of a “mystical” faculty of “intuition” in opposition to “perception” conceived of as merely empirical.378 Instead, pushing Husserl to the limits of his own phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty conceives of perception as the ground, the originary indivision, of both “things” and “ideas”: “There is a primary universality of sensation. The universal is not the concept but this perception in flesh and blood, foundation of my relation with others.”379 As Husserl puts it in *Ideas II*:

The Bodily [*Das Leibliche*] itself is {...} given as interwoven in the causal nexus of physical nature. Here the human being is a *human being in nature* and is in nature only because, first and foremost, the Body is a material thing in spatial nature. Psychic reality is constituted as reality only through psychophysical dependencies. It has its unity in itself, but here it is considered as a unity in a nexus. {...} The unity of the soul is a *real* unity in that, *as unity of psychic life, it is joined with the Body* as unity of the Bodily stream of being, which for its part is a member of nature. {...} {W}hat we have to oppose to material nature as a second kind of reality is not the “soul” but the *concrete unity* of Body and soul, the human (or animal) subject.380

375 Ibid., 35/58.
378 Ibid., 52/80.
379 Ibid., 78/112.
Whereas Körper designates a “body” in the abstract sense of a passive, “soulless, ‘merely’ material” or “physicalist” thing constituted at the level of “Objective” thought, the Leib (“Body”) of which Husserl speaks in this passage is a body that “display[s] a connection with a new stratum of being, the psychic stratum”: a living body that is lived as such prior to the constitution in terms of an intentional “subject” and “object.”

The Modern dichotomy of being-for-itself and being-in-itself, of consciousness and things, can only be reiterated so long as one situates oneself in the “subjective” position of consciousness or the “objective” position of things in themselves.

Rather, any philosophical thinking which hopes to overcome the opposition between “human freedom” and “natural necessity” must take as its site the living body as always already in the world, and the lived world as always already surrounding the body in a relation of mutual contact and interpenetration.

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381 Ibid., 89, 92.
1.A. Conclusions

I have, in the preceding section, sought to explicate the threefold movement of Descartes’s thought concerning truth, primarily in the *Meditations*, but also in *DM* and the *Passions*. I argue, in 1.A.i, that given that Descartes, by performing the act of self-reflection, truly does actualize an immediate coincidence of thought with its object (which is possible because thought is, in this case, its own object), his very being (qua pure reflective thought) is thereby rendered an existent point of absolutely indubitable knowledge upon which he can construct his entire edifice of knowledge. Because, as I show in 1.A.ii above, he has already achieved this originary certainty before he acquires knowledge of thinking and extended substance (and of their absolute conceptual incompatibility), the self-certainty of pure reflective thought is not dependent upon the truth of substance dualism, but rather, the former guarantees the veracity of the latter—and forecloses the possibility of any knowledge which would render an actual union of mind and body thinkable, since such knowledge would falsify the very criterion for truth, which is to say, contradict thought’s capacity for immediate self-coincidence. Descartes thus, as I show in 1.A.iii, secures the unconditioned freedom of the human will *insofar as* its objects are abstract ideas, while rendering it impossible to formulate a coherent conception of “practical” human freedom to make decisions relating to embodied existence in extended being.

Descartes’s absolute metaphysical distinction between (extended) beings-in-themselves and (thinking) being-for-itself liberates the natural sciences from anthropomorphic prejudices concerning nature, reducing Aristotle’s four senses of “cause” down to two—with “material” and “efficient” causes retained, and “formal” and “final” causes discarded.\(^{382}\) The “mind” of the scientist qua observer cannot enter into this world of beings-in-themselves, but remains the null

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point, the transparent being-for-which all else appears; as Merleau-Ponty argues, the sphere of pure thought thereby becomes separated, as a “zone of absolute [intellectual or conceptual] truth,” from the sphere of sensible phenomena which comprises “the zone of that which is not false”—the zone of all that is posited as “actual,” rather than as merely “logically valid.”

This divorce of conceptual truth from truths concerning actuality makes possible Modern logic as an autonomous discipline that deals solely with validity, as opposed to empirical questions of soundness.

By rendering the external world “meaningless” qua understood (grasped by the intellect), Descartes further liberates natural science from theology, rendering “God” a null hypothesis insofar as explanations of sensible phenomena are concerned; according to Descartes, God merely serves as the guarantee of the truth-discovering potential of our natural faculties, without entering into the explanations of phenomena that we then engage those faculties to produce. And yet, by reducing thinkable Nature qua comprehended to “the possible,” to contingent being-in-itself, Descartes thereby binds the concept of “matter” to the concept of “God” with the latter as the site of the former’s meaning, since “Nature as a system of laws renders the presence of forces interior to it superfluous [such that] the interiority is wholly within God”; thus, it would seem that scientific explanations of phenomena must ultimately appeal either to a divine choice or to blind chance when they are pushed to give reasons (an underlying “principle of necessity”) for their explanatory principles.

As we saw in 1.A.iv, Spinoza “solves” the problem of the gap between ultimate reasons and material nature by positing the identity of God and Nature (natura naturans and natura naturata), while Leibniz attempts to answer the question of “Why this possible world, and not

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384 Russell, History of Western Philosophy, 832.
385 Descartes, Meditations, VI:79-80.
others?” by positing a divine criterion (the optimal balance between minimization of means and maximization of output) which, nonetheless, still relies upon a notion of “reasons intrinsic to the World in question and not willed by God,” so that neither Descartes, nor Spinoza or Leibniz, “absolutely succeed[s] in separating God and matter.” In seeking a conception of Nature which “eliminates all predicates of value,” leaving only “[t]he naive idea of a primordial world, anterior to human fabrication” and “expressed by the Cartesians in the idea of an infinite productivity [or permanence] of Nature, which is all that can be,” Descartes and his descendants are aiming at a pure and total knowledge of the actual and the possible—an endeavor which demands the restriction of all thought concerning the actual to the register of the “not-false,” with “the irrationalism of life” serving “as the counterweight to rigorous rationalism” in the realm of abstract thought.

The British empiricists, meanwhile, attempt – in true Cartesian fashion, proceeding from the simple to the complex – to reconstruct a unified world, with coherent forms corresponding to our “universal concepts,” out of the simple building blocks of sensations, but are ultimately forced to reduce “truth” (in Hume’s case), and even the “world” itself (in Berkeley’s case), to these sensations. Not recognizing their starting point (i.e., “isolated sensations” as “contents” of “consciousness”) as itself an idealization, they inevitably slid into idealism. Kant and Darwin function as the culminations of these two Cartesian traditions, with the former seeking to articulate an ideal genesis of the real, and the latter, a real genesis of the ideal.

While there is today much talk of “anti-Cartesianism” or “post-Cartesianism,” I agree with Claire Colebrook’s general critique of what she calls “active vitalism”: the contemporary tendency assert an alienation of human thinking and practice from “life” (the creative force in which lies the original genesis of all thinking and practice), and then account for this alienation

387 Ibid., 11/28-29.
388 Ibid., 14-15/32-33, 20/39.
by vilifying either some institution (e.g., “capitalism, technology, Cartesianism, theory, language, logic, or images”) as a “life-denying force,” or some concept (e.g., “disembodied mind”) as a “life-denying false [turn].” If the culprit were a specific institution or concept, then the apparent crisis of alienation from could be ended either by simply discarding it (e.g., simply “rejecting Cartesianism”), or by restoring it to its proper position of “subordination” relative to the creative force, enabling a direct return to the “originating and meaningful origin”: life as unmediated self-production. Active vitalism thus tends toward a method of interpreting the history of philosophy in terms of the “correctness” or “accuracy” of a given thinker’s claims, dividing them up into categories of “right” and “wrong” relative to some chosen “space” for the overcoming of the rupture between thought and life, “either in the body itself […] or in other cultures […] or in other philosophies.” Colebrook rightly points out that many contemporary “returns to the phenomenological tradition” adhere to “this activist, vitalist, and anti-Cartesian imperative: as subjective and meaning-productive life falls into ready-made systems, the task is to regain the sense of the founding intuition, of humanity as a dynamic, self-productive and engaged organism oriented towards a world.” Active vitalism thereby treats phenomenology as a merely negative anti-scientism, whereas the urgent task of the present is to articulate an account of human existence encompassing both the “silence” of wild perception in its singularity, and the sense of the “universality” of scientific truths.

I bring up Colebrook’s notion of “active vitalism” because, ironically, it poses one of the two greatest risks for attempts to “naturalize” phenomenology, with the other being a naïve return to the traditional notions of “subjective” experience and “objective” truth. Evan Thompson, in Mind in Life, provisionally defines these efforts as gravitating around “[t]he basic idea […] that it

389 Colebrook, Deleuze and the Meaning of Life, 54-55.
390 Ibid., 23.
391 Ibid., 54.
392 Ibid., 23.
is not enough for phenomenology simply to describe and philosophically analyze lived experience; phenomenology needs to be able to understand and interpret its investigations in relation to those of biology and mind science.”

In other words, Thompson understands “naturalization” to mean, not merely interpreting scientific investigations in light of phenomenological discoveries, but also interpreting phenomenological investigations in light of scientific discoveries. So articulated, I am entirely sympathetic to such efforts, which have been an inseparable component of phenomenological from the beginning. For instance, in his “Vienna Lecture,” Husserl traces the roots of his own transcendental phenomenology back to the genesis of its possibility in Franz Brentano’s psychology, and, as Merleau-Ponty says, it is “necessary that philosophy direct toward itself the very same interrogation that it directs toward all forms of knowledge,” so that when he makes phenomenological discoveries through the interrogation of a particular scientific field of knowledge, he then proceeds to test them against another.

But the “naturalization” of phenomenology can also mean its subordination to naïve objectivism. Husserl warns that “it is a mistake for the humanistic disciplines to struggle with the natural sciences for equal rights,” because “[a]s soon as they concede to the latter their objectivity as self-sufficiency, they themselves fall prey to objectivism,” and are demoted to the rank of “less precise” sciences. Insofar as phenomenology forsakes inquiry into the sense and legitimacy of a given notion of “objectivity,” it becomes a mere method in the toolbox of the natural sciences. The writings of Hubert L. Dreyfus exemplify this tendency of “naturalistic” interpretations to subordinate phenomenology (and, indeed, philosophy in general) to natural science as a mere instrument of the latter; for Dreyfus, phenomenology functions as a method for analyzing and

393 Thompson, Mind in Life, 14.
394 Husserl, “Vienna Lecture,” in Crisis of the European Sciences, 298; Merleau-Ponty PhP, 21, 118.
constructing objectively falsifiable models of perception, thought, and behavior.\footnote{Dreyfus, “A Merleau-Pontyian Critique of Husserl’s and Searle’s Representationalist Accounts of Action,” 301-302.} This naïve form of “naturalization,” which takes the value (though not always the sense) of “objective truth” for granted, almost invariably seeks to “liberate” the descriptive methods of phenomenology from the supposedly accidental residue of transcendental philosophy. In practice, this means dismissing the phenomenological reduction as “mere speculation,” and consequently foregoing any philosophical inquiry into the sense and possibility of the “world” as such: a naïve regression to the traditional division of reality into the “subjective” and the “objective.” To reduce phenomenology to a useful means of testing the truth of scientific constructions is to forget that, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in \textit{IPP}, “[i]t is the preobjective Being, between the inert essence or \textit{quidditas} and the individual localized at a point of space-time, that is the proper theme of philosophy.”\footnote{Lawlor, \textit{Early Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy}, 75; Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IPP}, 178.}

Thompson, too, at least in his earlier work (e.g., \textit{The Embodied Mind}, co-written alongside Francisco J. Varela and Eleanor Rosch in 1991), tends to treat phenomenology merely as a useful tool for the expansion of the field of cognitive science, means to the aim of “enlarg[ing] the horizon of cognitive science to include the broader panorama of human, lived experience in a disciplined, transformative analysis.”\footnote{Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, \textit{The Embodied Mind}, 14.} Thompson, Varela, and Rosch seek to articulate an “enactive” model of mind, against the traditional alternatives of physicalism and idealism. The enactive model, in brief, holds that the notion of “cognition” should not be confined to intellectual judgment, but encompasses any and all “exercise of skillful know-how in situated and embodied action” (and is, thus, accomplished by even the simplest forms of life), and that “[c]ognitive structures and processes emerge from recurrent sensorimotor patterns of perception and action,” so that an organism’s cognitive field is both modulated by \textit{and} modulates
the “sensorimotor couplings” between it and its environment; the coupling of a cognitive being and its world is the simultaneous and reciprocal enaction of both terms of this coupling.399

But their naïve affirmation of, not “objectivism” itself, but the “pragmatic” structure (i.e., the “problem-solution” schema) which characterizes Modern objective thought, leads the authors of the Embodied Mind to an ahistorical method of interpretation, interested only in the “rightness” or “wrongness” of ideas, with the ultimate criterion being their usefulness for the enterprise of scientific discovery. Thus, they declare that Descartes was right to “infer that the ‘I’ was fundamentally a thinking thing, but here he went too far,” since “the only certainty that ‘I am’ carries is that of being a thought,” and not that of being a substance that thinks, so that “[i]f [he] had been fully rigorous, mindful, and attentive,” he would have stopped short before this unwarranted claim to the substantiality of the “I,” and would instead “have kept his attention on the very process of mind itself.”400 Varela, et al., then swing over into the realm of active vitalism, seeking in Merleau-Pontian and Buddhist writings a “cure” for the Cartesian “error” that has supposedly alienated contemporary Westerners from the dynamism of life, with which we were once, perhaps, more directly in contact.401 That is, if only Descartes had held to phenomenology’s future standards of rigorous description, and practiced Buddhist mindfulness meditation, which the authors identify as the means of “reconciling” human experience with cognitive science. It is difficult to imagine, though, how one might actually go about reconciling a mediated with (what is presumed to be) an immediate form of contact with existence. In fairness to Thompson, he radically revises his method of reading in Mind in Life (2007), clarifying the sense of phenomenological concepts through an engagement with their total traditional and historical

399 Thompson, Mind in Life, 13.
400 Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, The Embodied Mind, 62, xx.
401 Ibid., 251.
context, rather than simply appropriating them in the abstract manner of tools for the solution of problems explicitly pregiven within the field of cognitive science. As Colebrook writes, criticizing Varela:

It is assumed that once Cartesianism is diagnosed the mind can simply will itself to close, bridge or restore the dualist rift, and that it can do so by taking up Buddhism as though it were a convenient techne. But if the world really is the interconnected organism or web that it is claimed [to be], then would not Cartesianism and Buddhism have embedded themselves into bodies and their evolving and evolved potentials?

The genuinely interesting question is not how “Cartesianism” alienated human existence from the immediate creativity of primordial life, nor how to “restore” ourselves from our “post-lapsarian” state; the genuinely interesting question is, rather, what “life” must be like if it is simultaneously a power of “efficient and system-oriented extension,” and a power whose very extensions are capable of “tending towards detachment from the origin.” To pose the latter problem forces us to recognize “that life, precisely insofar as it is organic and embodied, possesses a tendency towards disorganization […] and disembodiment,” and it is just such a concept of “life” that Deleuze describes with his “concept of the machine”: “a life that is at one and the same time a capacity for connection, integration, system and meaning […] and a tendency towards connections that would open the territory to thresholds that de-form its original systems,” or, in Deleuzian terms, a tendency towards both, respectively, “territorialization” (integration and incorporation of potentialities into a system of actualization) and “detrertorialization” (liberation of forces as pure potentialities). When it comes to reading the history of philosophy, therefore, Colebrook advocates the Deleuzian, “passive” method of reading a work, “to attend less to its manifest statements, its opening programme and its concluding valuations, and more to the relations – enduring relations – that it opens,” reading each territorialization both as an extension

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403 Colebrook, *Deleuze and the Meaning of Life*, 51.
404 Ibid., 14.
of an actual organization of territorialized forces that closes off certain potentialities, and, simultaneously, as the advent of new possibilities for deterritorializations that, past a certain threshold, will “radically” deterritorialize forces, freeing them up for potentialities that had been closed off by the organization.406

It may appear strange that I am reflecting on my engagement with the early Moderns via Colebrook’s discussion of Deleuzian passive vitalism, both because active vitalists (e.g., Varela) have sought to lay claim to Merleau-Ponty of late, and because Merleau-Ponty is often interpreted as having gone no further than to trace all constituted phenomena back to their ground in organisms’ lived experiences, whereas Deleuze maintains that life’s “power of creativity as organization [...] relies essentially on disorder and death.”407 It seems that Merleau-Ponty is concerned with explaining the genesis of sense through reference to being as primordial integration, whereas Deleuze is concerned with explaining the potentiality for disintegration which haunts all integration as such. As Corry Shores puts it, in the course of comparing Merleau-Ponty’s and Deleuze’s theories of perception, it appears that “Merleau-Ponty’s [integrationist] theory better accounts for the ongoing constitution of phenomenal objects, the familiar things in the world around us” (molar organizations on the strata, in Deleuzian terms), whereas “Deleuze’s theory better explains the intensity of any given moment of phenomenal experience,” the singularity of its molecular composition.408

However, despite their differing emphases on, respectively, “integration” and “rupture,” Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze share a remarkably similar approach to textual interpretation. Just as Deleuze is more concerned with the possibilities that are opened up by a work than with its explicit content, Merleau-Ponty argues that the words in a work of philosophy or literature “must be understood through their lateral implications as much as through their manifest or frontal

408 Shores, 207.
significance,” because it is by attending to the function of words, rather than to their manifest meaning, that the interpreter can gain “access to an operant thought,” which, as an open process, is an “unthought” or “unfinished thought (impensé)”: not an “achievement” of the thinker in question, but “what until the very end he was struggling to bring to reflection,” the unreflected that resisted the thinker’s efforts at transparency.  

In order to understand the relationship between givenness and significance, historicity and ideality, “one has only to locate between the flow of events and the timeless realm of meaning a third dimension, which would be a subterranean history or the genesis of ideality,” the living structure of dimensionalization, of the advent of sense. This question of the relationship between the “horizontal” order of facts and the “vertical” order of meaning, between the order of events and the order of eternity, is taking up of the problem, already explicit for the early Moderns, of conceiving a relationship between the finite and infinite (or infinitesimal) without thereby effacing their heterogeneity.

The vertical order of operative sense intersects the horizontal order insofar as each event “contain[s] a certain surplus of meaning over and beyond [its] manifest or literal sense” whereby it “opens up a field” of possibilities which may be taken up “through a sort of second creation” which reverberates back, transforming the sense of the past, until, perhaps, a final threshold is reached at which “there intervenes a mutation in knowledge, often the result of a return to the sources or the side-paths neglected by the mainstream.” Merleau-Ponty may not, like Deleuze, describe the liberation of potentials in terms of a “disintegration” of, or “detachment” of forces from, the origin of a given process, but I am inclined to see this more as a difference of vocabulary and emphasis, given Merleau-Ponty’s account of present mutations of sense which

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retroactively transform the sense of their origins. Descartes’s separation of conceptual truth from lived meaning gives birth to the seemingly insoluble problems of how to conceive of the mind-body union and of the practical freedom of living human beings, rendering all questions of personal “responsibility” for one’s actions antinomic, so long as the traditional dichotomies remain.

Following Merleau-Ponty, I will argue that the biological conditions for free choice are not contingent limitations or imperfections of an absolute power, but rather, conditions which render freedom possible by limiting it. Any notion of “choice” which would attribute absolute responsibility for the patient’s actions to his “pure consciousness” is inapplicable to concrete experience, but the fact that free choices happen as the taking up of biological conditions (and a total situation) does not render it an “illusion,” as Harris would have it. Freedom is always activity in and through passivity. We do not choose our situations, nor even our feelings, but rather, we perceive and choose within the horizon of possibility offered by a given situation—a horizon that is, admittedly, highly limited in this example. The “self” who chooses is not a pure ego, but a system of possibilities for engagement, a system of styles for gearing into situations, sedimented and modified in and through histories of sensorimotor and personal life. “Freedom,” then, is not the absolute fiat of a sovereign subjectivity, but the process of the ontological “weight,” the “depth,” of the past intertwining with the horizon of the future—resulting, in this case, in both the patient’s abhorrent actions, as well as his resistance to the horizon sketched out by his desires, a resistance founded on the weight of his personal and cultural history.

The fact that the Cartesian gap between truth and meaning problematizes the possibility of thinking about the ethical value of intersubjective relations finds and even clearer metaphysical and epistemological expression in the problem of other minds. For example, I can, under various normative ethical systems (e.g., Kantian deontology or utilitarianism) achieve certain knowledge

413 Merleau-Ponty, IPP, 56-57/57-58.
of how I ought to relate to other people *in the abstract* (insofar as they are “rational beings,” for a deontologist, or “sentient beings,” for a utilitarian), but when it comes time for concrete action, I must either ignore others’ concrete singularity and relate to them as abstract variables, or else attempt to take account of their singularity and thereby render the certainty of my ethical knowledge “indefinite.” Thus, Kant states that “the proper object of respect” is not a concrete individual, nor even a personal consciousness, but “[o]ur own will insofar as it would act only under the condition of a possible giving of universal law through its maxims,” so that this is “respect for a mere idea,” and “the dignity of humanity consists just in this capacity to give universal law.”\(^{414}\) On the utilitarian side, living beings are reduced to bearers of “pleasure” and “pain,” with the former to maximized in quantity and quality, and the latter to be minimized: an aim which requires that they be conceived of as potentially (or at least ideally) measurable *things* or *states of things*, with a reality of their own, independent of the bodies that live them.\(^ {415}\) In either case, ethical thinking aims at a Cartesian ideal of objective certainty concerning the rightness and wrongness of particular acts which is conceivable only in the abstract, from a supposed god’s-eye-view situated on the “absolute outside” of lived experience.

1.B. Phenomenology of Perception: The Discovery of the “Body-Subject” and Its Conditioned Freedom

As we have seen above, the notion of “freedom” is, for the early Moderns, intimately bound up with the notion of “meaning”: freedom is, fundamentally, the capacity to unify experience through the bestowal of meaning upon it. For instance, Descartes’s thought experiments concerning the ball of wax and the passersby in the street support his claim that “perception” is really a mode of judgment, while “judgment” is a voluntary operation of the will upon presentations given in the intellect. The purest instances of freedom are thus, for Descartes, the freedom of the mind to direct its intellectual regard in acts of reflection, and its freedom to determine the meaning of its experiences. As a result, it is possible for him to rely upon his supposedly unlimited faculty of willing so as to avoid imparting any meaning upon what may be illusions generated by the “evil genius.” If meaning were not the effect of a voluntary act performed by a non-extended “mind,” then Descartes’s entire project of hyperbolic doubt would not be able to get off the ground, because the evil genius could then force him to judge (indeed, even to judge that he was making a judgment when he was not), and not merely to perceive.

I have argued, however, that this rupture between the freedom of the pure intellect and the freedom of the embodied subject leaves Descartes and his descendants, the Moderns and even the “post-Moderns,” incapable of explaining how freedom is actualized by living human beings. If human beings can only be conceived of either as pure spontaneity (thinking substance), or as pure passivity (extended substance), then the integration of these halves in action is, as Descartes acknowledges, unthinkable. While many among the early Moderns ultimately reject Descartes’s alternative, it nonetheless continues to restrict the horizons of their thought to various

417 Ibid., II:23.
forms of reductionism or compatibilism, which leave the fundamental dichotomy intact. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in the Nature lectures, for Descartes, “[u]nion and distinction are [...] both required, yet they are unthinkable both at the same time.”419

Formally, Merleau-Ponty’s project in PhP takes up the same constellation of concepts which I articulated in my investigation of Descartes: (radical) reflection reveals the nature of the ‘mind-body union’, which serves as the basis for a new notion of freedom. The content of each of these concepts, however, now becomes decidedly un-Cartesian, and to such a degree that the notion of freedom with which PhP culminates calls for a radical rethinking of “mind” and “body” at the ontological level, which he sketches out in the Nature lectures and the extant text of VI.

At the beginning of this section, in 1.B.i, I explicate Merleau-Ponty’s diagnosis of a necessary “oscillation” between the dichotomous poles of “objective thought” – in epistemological terms, “intellectualism” and “empiricism,” and, in metaphysical terms, “idealism” and “realism” – which can only be overcome by shifting the starting point of philosophical thinking to lived perception, the common spring of error and truth alike. Next, in 1.B.ii, I turn to Merleau-Ponty’s relocation of philosophical thought’s starting point to lived perception, the birthplace and the inescapable ground of all “meaning” and “truth” alike: the primordial site of the original simultaneity and indissociability of activity and passivity, “subject” and “object.” This new beginning gives rise to his method of “radical reflection,” the effort to think the non-thetic ground of thetic consciousness and its objects, with which I deal in 1.B.iii. Then I turn, in 1.B.iv, to his notion of the “ambiguity” of the Gestalt (figure-background) or Fundierung (founding-founded) structure that characterizes the world, the living body, and time, the explicit forms of which are always prepared in, and continuously supported by, the tacit ground of living perception.420 Finally, in 1.B.v, I explicate the essentially conditioned freedom

420 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 129, 159-160.
which arises in and through this structure of the continuous advent of sense: the freedom of the “body-subject” whose perceptual-motor projects animate the explicit, intellectual projects of thetic consciousness.
1.B.i. The Oscillation of Objective Thought

In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, “objective thought” is a search for truth which begins from uninterrogated presuppositions about the nature or reality of what is true. The “intellectualist” variant assumes that judgments themselves are what is true or false, whereas the “empiricist” variant assumes that truth lies in the objects about which judgments are made. Intellectualism tends to correlate with some form of metaphysical “idealism” (i.e., the identification of “reality” with the constitutive activity of a conscious subject) whereas empiricism tends to correlate with some form of metaphysical “realism”—the identification of “reality” with some class of objects supposed to be actual wholly “in themselves,” independent of any awareness of them on the part of an actual or possible consciousness. The problem with these methods of thought is that each one takes itself to have an absolute justificatory foundation, but, when it attempts to articulate it, simply reverses into the contrary position, setting up an interminable oscillation of equally ungrounded viewpoints.

Over the course of his investigation of the perceptual genesis of meaning in *PhP*, Merleau-Ponty attempts to think beyond the traditional dichotomy of “activity” and “passivity” by conceiving of the primordial “subject” as the communication between the world and “embodied existence,” so that here he ultimately conceives of “freedom” as the power of a “body-subject” to “reaffirm or transform” its “style”—its general way of existing in and toward the world.421 “Objective thought” in general encompasses all efforts to describe “mental” or “physical” events which take the phenomena of the “world” and “consciousness” for granted, as “ready-made”; Merleau-Ponty argues that such efforts are doomed to fail, because any description of what is experienced must be grounded in an explanation of the structure and

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genesis of experience itself, which is, most primordially, the co-emergence of the “world of perception” and the “subject of perception” below the level of thetic (positing) consciousness.422

The activity-passivity dichotomy is philosophically instantiated in an interminable oscillation between the two poles of “objective thought”: in epistemological terms, “intellectualism” and “empiricism”; in metaphysical terms, “idealism” and “realism.”423

Empiricism begins by treating some given (e.g., “sense-data” or “impressions”) as real – which means implicitly presupposing the reality of “absolute objects” (fully present things, which could ideally be given from everywhere and nowhere) – and then attempts to “recreate” the perceiving subject out of a manifold of “sensations,” understood as “genuinely mental things.”424

Intellectualism begins by inferring, from some given unity, the necessity of an originary source of unity – e.g., an “absolute subject” (a pure ego occupying a “place outside of the world” it constitutes) – and then attempts to “recreate” the world as a “system” of states of constituting consciousness.425

Whether objectivism takes the form of empiricism or intellectualism, it presupposes the existence of, and aims to elucidate, a necessary connection between things and meanings. The empiricist problem is to explain how the unity of experience can arise out of a disjointed manifold of “consciousness[es] of states,” whereas the intellectualist problem is to explain how the unity of “states of consciousness” can determine something external to consciousness in such a way that the attribution of “unity” to objects of experience can be justified.426 These extremes, while apparently contraries, actually presuppose one another: the absolute subject is empiricism’s implicit point of view, while the absolute object implicitly guarantees the reality of

422 Ibid., 251.
423 Ibid., 392, 394.
424 Ibid., 251.
425 Ibid., 252.
426 Ibid.
intellectualism’s “states of consciousness.” Only a worldless subject – e.g., a god – could perceive its object from everywhere and nowhere, while only a thing which possesses a unity in itself can justifiably have unity attributed to it by a constituting consciousness. The opposition between realism and idealism, meanwhile, results from their divergent starting points: respectively, existence “in itself” (object-being), and existence “for itself” (subject-being).

Existence in itself is passive, determined by external causality alone, whereas existence for itself is active, determined purely by its own internal causality. The realism-idealism dichotomy, therefore, consists in an opposition between mutually contradictory series: on the one hand, external causal relations between passive things, and, on the other, the internal constitutive activity of consciousness.

The metaphysical and epistemological dichotomies of objective thought are not necessarily correlates of one another, because there are many variants of each type. It is possible to hold, for instance, to an empiricist epistemology and an idealist metaphysics, as when Bishop Berkeley maintains, on the one hand, that all of our ideas have their source in impressions (epistemological empiricism), and, on the other, that there is no such thing as a “mind-independent quality” (this is “material idealism,” in Kant’s terms). It is likewise possible to hold to an intellectualist epistemology and to a realist metaphysics, as Kant does in his “Refutation of Idealism” in CPR: on the one hand, the a priori form of the unity of all possible experience is the unity of consciousness expressed in the categories of the understanding (transcendental idealism), and, on the other, the experience of self-consciousness necessarily presupposes “the existence of objects in space outside me” as the source of the manifold which is

427 Ibid., 284.
428 Ibid., 252.
429 Berkeley, Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Section I, §1, §14; Kant, CPR, B274.
synthesized in the imagination.\footnote{Kant, \textit{CPR}, A122, B143, B275, B279.} It is tempting to call Kant’s form of realism “material realism,” because he asserts the necessary existence of things external to consciousness; however, because he maintains that we can make no determinate judgments about these things in themselves beyond the fact that they are the causes of our intuitions, I think it more appropriate to refer to Kant’s realism as “causal realism” (i.e., our intuitions possess real, mind-independent causes).\footnote{Ibid., B279-B280.} I will now turn back to Descartes, and elucidate the oscillation of his epistemological thinking between intellectualism and empiricism.

In Meditation II, Descartes advances the intellectualist position that “neither our imagination nor our senses could ever assure us of anything without the intervention of our intellect.”\footnote{Descartes, \textit{DM}, IV:37.} He illustrates this point with twin analyses of perceiving the identity of a ball of wax over time, and of perceiving people in the street below. In the first case, he argues that the coherence and truth of the statement, “I perceive the same ball of wax,” cannot rest upon my faculty of sense perception, because all of the sensible properties of the wax are subject to change or effacement (as are the sensible properties of any extended body), so that what is “the same” (since knowledge of an external world remains in doubt at this point) is the judgment concerning a constant, though unperceived, “essence” of the wax, which is grasped by my intellect alone; the unity of sensible experience, therefore, is not itself sensible, but is an abstract idea of the intellect, the correspondence of which to external things is ultimately guaranteed by knowledge of God—not by knowledge of the intellect alone.\footnote{Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, II:31-31.} Likewise, the statement, “I see men crossing the square,” is not referred to my faculty of sense perception, but to my faculty of judgment, because “hats and coats” alone are visible to the senses, whereas “I judge that they are men”—judge that these hats and coats conceal human bodies, and that these human bodies are animated by non-

\footnote{Kant, \textit{CPR}, A122, B143, B275, B279.} \footnote{Ibid., B279-B280.} \footnote{Descartes, \textit{DM}, IV:37.} \footnote{Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, II:31-31.}
extended minds. Descartes’s epistemological intellectualism here, in Meditation II, requires a metaphysical idealism, insofar as he conceives of the unity of perceived objects, like that of the objects of physics, as produced by the activity of the mind, and therefore derivative of the unity of the cogito.

Descartes’s intellectualism easily reverses into empiricism, however. His aim is to establish an absolute ground for the certainty of human beings’ judgments about the “truth” of things, which requires that there actually is a truth in itself, independent of consciousness. The world which is determined must already be determinate in itself. Thus, Descartes is led to conceive of the body as a biological “machine” which the objective properties of extended objects affect in a consistent manner, thereby producing corresponding mental states as their effects. This empiricism requires a realism in regard to both extended things and thoughts, given that sensory impressions arise through a series of physical interactions that initiate a causal series of ideas, both of which series are composed entirely of relations of external causality, like motion transferring down two contiguous lines of billiard balls. As I argued in the first chapter, Descartes can disavow neither of the poles of objective thought, but nor can he render them simultaneously coherent. From an intellectualist-idealist perspective, perception is an activity of the mind, and yet, only an empiricist-realist perspective can explain how there is any “truth” to be perceived. From an empiricist-realist perspective, perception is the effect of a series of interactions between wholly passive objects—and yet, both the ultimate cause and the unity of this series could only come from an activity outside of it (God, in the first case, and the intellect, in the second).

Varieties of objective thought still hold sway over the bulk of contemporary neuroscience and philosophy of mind, resulting in a general failure to move beyond the so-called “mind-body problem”: the Cartesian alternative between, on the one hand, a spontaneous constituting

434 Ibid., II:32.
435 Ibid., VI:86-87.
consciousness and, on the other, the organism understood as a mechanism governed purely by relations of external causality. This is due, in large part, to the assumption that the paradoxes which confront attempts to explain the relationship between “mind” and “body” are the results of latent “Cartesian dualism,” whereas the fact of the matter is that Cartesian dualism is an attempt to describe real phenomena—a genuinely motivated description. Simply criticizing the description will not aid us in articulating the phenomena, so that what is needed is a return to the phenomena that originally motivate Descartes’s description, which will enable us to see what his assumptions lead him to overlook.

The “mind-body problem” is both a product of objective thought, and inescapable on the latter’s terms. Despite the apparent profusion of theories, there are only three basic options for explaining the mind-body union so long as one maintains a rigid, all-or-nothing metaphysical opposition between the for-itself and the in-itself as fundamental, and each of them is incoherent. Firstly, one may, in the realist manner, attempt to reduce everything to the passive, external causality of the in-itself (i.e. material reductionism or epiphenomenalism). Secondly, one may, in the idealist manner, attempt to reduce everything to the activity of the for-itself (i.e., Berkeley, and Leibniz on a phenomenalistic reading of the status of the body). Thirdly, one may oscillate between the former two approaches (i.e., Descartes and Kant). To avoid the explanatory insufficiency of this alternative requires a new starting point, a “middle ground” which is prior to, and reducible to neither of, the seemingly intractable terms of the opposition.
1.B.ii. A New Starting Point: Perception Is Primary

In this subsection, I turn to Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the starting points to which objective thought confines itself, and his call for a new point of departure—the “in-between” space of lived perception and motility, which alone can enable philosophy and science to move beyond the interminable oscillation of objective thought. I focus, in particular, on his critiques of Descartes’s and Sartre’s notions of freedom, which he sees as incapable of being conceived of concretely because they each begin from a variant of the objectivist dichotomy. These critiques provide an oblique avenue of approach to the starting point of Merleau-Ponty’s own investigation of the genesis of meaning: lived perception, which can be explained neither as the activity of a “subject” who bestows unity upon inherently meaningless perceptual data, nor as the passive interactions of “objects” existing purely in themselves.

Any attempt to analyze phenomena beginning from either side of an absolute dichotomy is doomed to endless oscillation, as can be seen in Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Descartes’s and Sartre’s accounts of “freedom.” Both of these accounts are, he argues, hopelessly abstract, insofar as each of them begins from an idealist account of “unconditional” freedom, and then attempts to explain how this freedom becomes actualized in concrete situations, in the midst of real conditions. For Descartes, human freedom consists in the absolute power (“will”) of immaterial, thinking substance to affirm, deny, or withhold judgment concerning an idea presented to it by the intellect, as well as to enact, refuse, or temporarily abstain from choice concerning an inclination to act (which is jointly given, in various ratios, by both the intellect and the affective dispositions of the body). Sartre, meanwhile, defines freedom, in Being and Nothingness, as the power of human consciousness – on account of its being “nothing” (not a thing) and therefore “always unconditioned” – to transcend “facticity,” to negate its present situation and its present

436 Descartes, Meditations, IV:57; Descartes, Passions, §211:487.
self-objectification ("essence") by conceiving of, or aiming at, a state of affairs that does not presently exist: “[t]he upsurge of freedom is effected by the double nihilation of the being which it is and of the being in the midst of which it is.” 437 While Descartes’s and Sartre’s, respectively, metaphysical and ontological notions of unconditional freedom differ on account of their divergent notions of “subjectivity,” they agree in locating freedom’s wellspring on the side of the for-itself. Both attempt to explain concrete freedom in the world by starting from the pure for-itself in opposition to the pure in-itself—absolute activity in opposition to absolute passivity.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger438 offers a critique of Descartes that profoundly influenced Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the phenomenon of perception. According to Heidegger, Descartes presupposes not just the existence of the world, but a certain conception of “existence” in general. The story goes that Descartes jumps immediately to the question of how knowledge (in the sense of scientific knowledge of “objects,” given to an intellectual “subject”) is possible – the question of the originary spring of objective certainty – without first asking the “ontological” question of how “ontic” beings exist: “what he leaves undetermined in this ‘radical’ beginning is the manner of being of the res cogitans, more precisely the meaning of the being of the ‘sum.’” 439 If Descartes presupposes that being (Sein) – the ontological structure of the occurrence of beings (Seienden) – is “presence” qua actuality in the “here” and “now,” then his entire investigation is founded upon a distorted interpretation of how beings phenomenalize themselves: how the world as such happens.

438 It is not my present aim to do complete justice to the differences between Merleau-Ponty’s and Heidegger’s thought, particularly because Merleau-Ponty does not raise the question of these differences in *PhP*. It is worth noting, however, that Heidegger explicitly avoids employing the language of “consciousness” in his investigation of existence in *Being and Time*, whereas Merleau-Ponty merely distinguishes between different levels of it in *PhP*, and thereby reveals himself as far more a Husserlian than a Heideggerian in this work, where he has a tendency to efface the differences between Husserl and Heidegger.
In particular, the concepts of “subject” and “object” conceal the meaning of the being of Dasein (literally, “being there”) which is the existential structure (the ontological “how”) of the happening of particular human lives (the ontic “what”). Dasein is not a being, and nor is it human; it is the total structure of fundamental possibilities and inevitabilities that can and must be fulfilled in particular human lives. The meaning, or unity, of the Sein of Dasein is “being-in-the-world” (In-der-Welt-sein): Dasein is the structure inevitably disclosed (either explicitly, or as “sketched out” in its hiddenness) in the advent of particular human beings in and toward the world, which is equiprimordially disclosed as a “relational totality of signification,” as the Da (“there”) of Dasein. The unity of being-in-the-world, meanwhile, is “care,” the inevitability of having to “take care of things” on account of the structure of “mortal temporality,” which is the meaning of care itself, and therefore the most fundamental meaning of the Sein of Dasein. Thus, Heidegger criticizes Descartes for beginning from the opposition between two supposed beings (Seienden) – “thinking substance” and “extended substance” – and thereby mistaking a possible way of existing of things unlike Dasein – the spatial and temporal presence of things to one another – for the Sein of Dasein itself.

Merleau-Ponty takes up Heidegger’s critique, while insisting far more explicitly than Heidegger upon the identity of the ontological structure of existence with the living body itself. Specifically, he charges Descartes with misinterpreting the kind of being of “consciousness,” which is not existentially independent of the body and the world. In fact, the Cartesian cogito, as a cultural artifact, is “a spoken Cogito, put into words and understood through words,” which means that its “transparency” is grounded in the irreducible opacity of the “speaking Cogito,”

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440 Ibid., §4:12.
441 Ibid., §18:87, §18:84.
443 Ibid., §21:95-97.
from which it is inseparable. Thus, while Merleau-Ponty affirms the anti-realist insight of the “Cartesian return” to the cogito, which rightly recognizes that “[t]he very experience of transcendent things is only possible if their project is borne and found within myself,” he also insists that starting from the pure for-itself, as Descartes does, renders the experience of the world where freedom occurs, within “finitude” and among “others,” impossible; any “constituting consciousness” that imparts sense upon the world from a position outside it “is, in principle, singular and universal.” In the Nature lectures, he argues that Descartes splits the world into two – into a world of pure consciousness, and a world of pure matter – such that the mind-body union, the Cartesian condition for the possibility of concrete human beings exercising their metaphysical freedom, must remain “only a conception,” or “else we would renounce the division [of the for-itself and the in-itself] posited at the start,” and thereby foreclose the ultimate project of the Meditations, to secure an absolute guarantee of the correspondence of clear and distinct knowledge to its objects. Here, Merleau-Ponty agrees with Gueroult that positing our evidence of the actual world as the “nonrational testimony” of “natural inclination” which can nonetheless “be recognized by reason,” the “natural light,” does not constitute a gap in Descartes’s order of reasons; he departs from Gueroult, however, by asserting that the mind-body union – and thus the unity of the perceived world in general – cannot be conceived as “real” without renouncing the complete self-coincidence of the pure cogito of the Meditations. In other words, Merleau-Ponty sees the oscillation of objective thought, between idealism and realism, enacted in the tension between the Meditations and the Passions.

Turning to Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, in VI, accuses him of locking human freedom into effectively the same dichotomy, such that it can only be conceived of abstractly: “[f]rom the

444 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 463.
445 Ibid., 427, 432.
447 Ibid., 17-18/35-37.
moment that I conceive of myself as negativity and the world as positivity, there is no longer any interaction.”\textsuperscript{448} Although Merleau-Ponty is not overtly critical of Sartre in \textit{PhP}, he does open the “Freedom” chapter with what is plainly a description of Sartrean ontological freedom (“a subject whose projects cut […] determinations out of the uniform mass of the in-itself”) which he criticizes, as in \textit{VI}, because “the idea of action disappears: nothing can pass from us to the world, since we are nothing determinate and since the non-being that constitutes us could not slip itself into the saturated world.”\textsuperscript{449} While it is true that Sartre undertakes a materialist, political account of freedom in his later works, it remains grounded upon his ontological account of the subject of choice as pure negativity, insofar as he defines “freedom” as a “choice” between possibilities – i.e., the enactment of a project which is “neither a will nor a need nor a passion” – and as “the irreducibility of the cultural order to the natural order.”\textsuperscript{450} Thus, even in his later writings Sartre still conceives of freedom as external to “nature” – with the latter understood to be a realm of pure necessity – and as a “choice” which cannot be “explained”: a choice which must, therefore, be ontologically grounded in the original “nothingness” of human subjectivity.\textsuperscript{451} Indeed, Robert Bernasconi argues that, “[f]or Sartre, it is only from the ontological claim that the human being is a freedom that one can proceed to a discussion of whether or not someone is concretely free.”\textsuperscript{452} If Sartre’s ontological account of freedom is abstract, then his political account is, as well. Because his political account is parasitic upon his ontological account, and because relative to Sartre Merleau-Ponty is, in \textit{PhP}, primarily responding to \textit{Being and Nothingness}, I will here restrict myself to a discussion of Sartre’s earlier, ontological account of freedom.

Sartre’s account of freedom is in no way assimilable to Descartes’s, because his notion of “consciousness” radically departs from the latter’s; whereas Descartes conceives of consciousness

\textsuperscript{448} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 52/78.
\textsuperscript{449} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{PhP}, 499-500.
\textsuperscript{451} Sartre, \textit{Search for a Method}, 151.
\textsuperscript{452} Bernasconi, \textit{How to Read Sartre}, 58.
as pure positivity (self-presence), Sartre conceives of it as pure negativity, thereby exempting himself from Heidegger’s critique of the “metaphysics of presence.” Sartre argues that, as awareness, consciousness cannot be immediately aware of itself, but must place itself at a distance from itself in order to take itself as an object; even when it does this, however, the consciousness that is aware cannot be identical to the one that it is aware of, so that “[t]he being of consciousness qua consciousness is to exist at a distance from itself as a presence to itself,” and, because what thereby separates consciousness from itself is nothing (not a thing), consciousness “must be its own nothingness.” If Heidegger were correct, in his “Letter on Humanism,” that Sartre maintains the Scholastic notion of “actuality” under the name of “existence,” then Sartrean consciousness would remain a kind of “presence.” Heidegger’s criticism misses its mark, however, because by “existence” Sartre means projectively acting into the future. But the fact remains that Being and Nothingness begins from the abstract opposition between an absolute for-itself and an absolute in-itself.

Sartre therefore remains vulnerable to Merleau-Ponty’s explicit critique in VI, where he argues that Sartre’s starting point dooms his notion of freedom to remain in the oscillation between the for-itself and the in-itself, “the alternation of rupture and coincidence” with the world, which is exemplified in the alternation of “bad faith” between transcendence and facticity. Insofar as Sartre rejects the “in-between” which is neither being nor nothingness, he dooms the human agent to bad faith. Although Sartrean consciousness is certainly not “worldless” – he states that it is impossible to think the for-itself without thinking that something is given for it (as Husserl discovered in his investigation of intentionality, consciousness is always “consciousness of something”) – he insists that “this does not mean that the given conditions

453 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 125.
455 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 594.
456 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 99/135; Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 98.
consciousness,” because consciousness is nothing but “a pure and simple negation of the given”: consciousness can only be consciousness of the given because it is not the given.\textsuperscript{457} According to Merleau-Ponty, beginning from this pure for-itself prevents Sartre from formulating an ontology that does justice to the genesis of sense, because “it is through openness that we will be able to understand being and nothingness, not through being and nothingness that we will be able to understand openness.”\textsuperscript{458}

In \textit{PhP}, Merleau-Ponty attempts to escape from the self-perpetuating dichotomy of activity and passivity by \textit{aiming} at a description of the phenomenon of freedom which is not beholden to the metaphysical or ontological presuppositions of the Cartesian tradition.\textsuperscript{459} His phenomenological analyses of concrete cases reveal that the “who” of concrete freedom cannot be a pure for-itself. Merleau-Ponty rejects the notions of a “pure for-itself” or a “pure in-itself” as empty, conceptually detached from the primordial genesis of sense out of the \textit{chiasm} of the living body and the world. A truly radical inquiry into the genesis of meaning must recognize the ontological foundation of this reflection itself as the primordial mediation between the living body and the world. The ultimate failure of \textit{PhP}, in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes, is precisely that his reflection in this work does not begin from mediation, but “from the ‘consciousness-object’ distinction,” thus necessitating its correction, and the grounding of his conception of freedom in an ontology of mediation, in \textit{VI}.\textsuperscript{460} \textit{VI} begins at the point where \textit{PhP} ends: with an awareness of the “freedom” of consciousness, including its freedom to engage in reflective thought, is founded upon a more fundamental “freedom,” in the originary openness or mediation whereby a “self”

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{457} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 615; Husserl, \textit{Ideas I}, §84, 168.
\textsuperscript{458} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 99/135.
\textsuperscript{459} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{PhP}, lxx. Merleau-Ponty’s method in \textit{PhP} is explicitly phenomenological, though he differs from Husserl by asserting that one cannot detach “essences” from embodied life. He undertakes a genuinely ontological account, concerned purely with “being,” as opposed to “consciousness,” in \textit{VI} (Barbaras, \textit{The Being of the Phenomenon}, 12-13).
\textsuperscript{460} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 200/253, 183/237.
\end{footnotesize}
and a “world” first advent: the perceptual faith that “[w]e see the things themselves, [that] the
world is what we see.”

Thus, the fundamental error of objective thought in general consists in its effort to
“import objective relations into perception that are not yet constituted at its level,” as when an
empiricist imports determinate “objects” into the pre-objective field of the perceived world, or an
intellectualist imports determinative “judgments.” This error is, in turn, the result of an implicit
assumption: that it is impossible to perceive that which cannot be conceived of by objective
thought, that “it is impossible to see what does not exist” as a measurable presence—e.g., that I
do not see my friend’s happiness when I see her smiling face, but only infer the former from the
latter. Thus, to give another example, empiricists deny that we can see “depth” because the
image “recorded” on each retina is two-dimensional, while intellectualists deny it because they
hold that spatial relations, in general, are produced by the active synthesis of a passively-received
manifold of sensory impressions.

And yet, Merleau-Ponty does not thereby conclude that the notions of “subject” and
“object” can or should be rejected entirely; rather, their primacy – and thereby their true
significance – must be challenged. Confronted with a dichotomy wherein neither term can be
wholly accepted, nor wholly rejected, Merleau-Ponty argues that “[o]ur only recourse is a reading
of the present which is as full and as faithful as possible, which does not prejudice its meaning,
which even recognizes chaos and non-sense where they exist, but which does not refuse to
discern a direction and an idea in events where they appear.” He proposes to begin his
interrogation of the origin of meaning neither from the position of the judging subject, nor from

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461 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 3/17. Thus, Merleau-Ponty explains that “I was able [in PhP] to appeal from the
world and the others to myself and take the route of reflection, only because first I was outside of myself, in
the world, among the others, and constantly this experience feeds my reflection. Such is the total situation
that philosophy must account for” (Merleau-Ponty, VI, 49/74).
462 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 306.
463 Ibid., 311.
464 Ibid., 303.
that of the objects of judgment, but from lived perception itself—a terrain prior to the positing of the dichotomies of objective thought.\textsuperscript{466}

It is not that philosophical thought can actually “[return] to immediate experience,” for that would mean its ceasing to be thought by actually \textit{becoming} perception, and thereby becoming pre-thematic; it is, rather, the task of a thorough philosophical reflection—of a reflection which refuses to leave the grounds of its own possibility and actuality uninterrogated—to attempt to “understand” and “express” perception as its own pre-reflective foundation.\textsuperscript{467}

Merleau-Ponty is, in a sense, taking up the starting point of Descartes’s investigations (which, in turn, articulated the general field of possibilities for the early Modern rationalists and empiricists alike), but only to show that what they took to be “pure reflection”—wherein I seem to “grasp myself not now as a perceiving subject, tied by its body to a system of things, but as a thinking subject, radically free with respect to things and with respect to the body”—is not absolutely originary, but is, rather, grounded in living perception, which it necessarily forgets insofar as it takes itself to be an act of pure “mental spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{468}

The return to perception means the articulation and acknowledgment of its fundamental paradox, or mystery, of transcendence in immanence, which objective thought can only grasp as a \textit{contradiction}. On the one hand, the subject of perception does not perceive a “representation” of a thing, but the thing itself, so that the subject of perception must be understood as existing in the world, among things and among others: “the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives.”\textsuperscript{469} The subject of perception and the perceived thing are immanent to the same perceptual field. On the other hand, a perception never coincides with what is perceived, which always exceeds it: the perceived object “always contains something more than what is actually

\textsuperscript{466} Merleau-Ponty, “Primacy of Perception,” in \textit{PP}, 12/33.
\textsuperscript{467} Ibid., 30/66, 20/47-48.
\textsuperscript{468} Ibid., 21/50.
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid., 16/40-41.
given,” a horizon of sense that exceeds any given presentation. The sense of the perceived is given as an indeterminate horizon of possibility (in the sense of “virtuality,” or actual possibility), transcending its actual temporal and spatial givenness. The phenomenon of living perception therefore teaches that there is absence in presence, transcendence in immanence. That which shows itself in perception does so only on condition of holding itself in reserve.

The paradox, the non-rationality, of perception underlies objective thought as its inescapable foundation, and cannot, therefore, be resolved by any of the latter’s attempts to secure for itself an absolute, transparent foundation: “as Kant himself said profoundly, we can only think the world because we have already experienced it; it is through this experience that we have the idea of being, and it is through this experience that the words ‘rational’ and ‘real’ receive a meaning simultaneously.” A reflection which attempts to think its own pre-reflective ground in lived perception will, ultimately, call for a new kind of scientific and ethical thinking which remains open to this irreducible ambiguity, rather than, in reactionary fashion, attempting to render its forgetting ineluctable.

470 Ibid., 16/40.
471 Ibid., 17/41.
1.B.iii. Styles of Investigation: Husserl’s Genetic Phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty’s Radical Reflection

Like the early Modern rationalists and their successors, Merleau-Ponty employs a method of reflection in an attempt to articulate the structure of human existence, upon which his account of freedom will then be founded. His method of “radical reflection,” however, seeks to uncover the “unreflected ground” of reflective thought itself and, in so doing, to overcome objective thought’s adherence to the classical dichotomies of the in-itself and the for-itself, the passive and the active. He employs the term “reflection” in the same sense as the early Moderns, to indicate introspection, which is traditionally idealism’s means of substituting a thought about the object for the object itself—the certainty of the “internal” for that of the “external.” Reflection is an act of consciousness whereby it takes itself as an object and, reciprocally, gives itself to itself as an object. With the term “radical reflection,” however, he designates a thinking that seeks its own irreducibly heterogeneous ground, attempting to give voice to the condition of its own existence; here, thought reflects upon the reflective act itself, as the taking up of a pre-reflective life which it does not negate, but remains immersed in, just as the figure stands out in and from its background in a “Gestalt formation.”

In this subsection, I begin by investigating the roots of Merleau-Ponty’s method of radical reflection in Edmund Husserl’s notion “genetic phenomenology.” Next, I explicate radical reflection itself in terms of the relations of Fundierung (“foundation” or “founding”) and the movement of Stiftung (“institution” or “instituting”) it traces, and clarify the sense in which Merleau-Ponty describes relations of Fundierung as “dialectical.” In the context of PhP, I generally emphasize the language of “founding” because, while Merleau-Ponty does not distinguish it from “institution” in this work, I will argue, in 2.A, that he implicitly acknowledges

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472 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 252.
473 Ibid., 246.
474 Ibid., 258.
a difference between them in his later works; whereas Fundierung comes to designate static relations of essential necessity, Stiftung ultimately refers an onto-genetic process. Finally, I introduce Merleau-Ponty’s notions of “style” and “schema,” which together characterize the general, pre-thetic “meanings” that are lived by the body-subject of freedom.

Merleau-Ponty’s “radical reflection” is his initial taking up of Husserl’s genetic phenomenology, which the latter developed in response to the inability of his own “constitutive phenomenology” (i.e., eidetic phenomenology) to address problems concerning the genesis of sense—the advent of new meanings in the world. Husserl’s corpus is, thus, commonly divided into “early” and “late” periods corresponding to his employment of, respectively, static and genetic phenomenology. Static phenomenological descriptions begin with a free attitudinal reorientation called the “epoché,” in which one brackets (suspends one’s participation in) all of one’s judgments – all “posittings” concerning “the already-given Objective world” – so that the world can appear as a pure field of phenomena, or experiences; the outcome of the epoché, which is the reduction of “reality” to a field of meanings, is known as the “phenomenological reduction,” or “phenomenological residuum.” What had been taken as “objects” in the everyday “natural attitude” are now given as “meanings.” Husserl describes the residuum of this fantasied “destruction of the world” as the dimension of what is purely “one’s own”—consciousness, its acts, and the contents which the latter produce, which is to say, “my pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them, purely as meant in them.”

The phenomenological reduction motivates and enables a second, “transcendental reduction,” which consists in bracketing everything outside of the sphere of consciousness, furnishing access to the dimension of the “one and only absolute ego,” the structure of

475 Ibid., 7.
476 Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, §8.60.
477 Ibid.
consciousness as such with, in each case, “its concrete monadic contents”—its “noetic” acts of synthesis, and their “noematic” correlates of sense.\(^{478}\) The transcendental reduction, finally, motivates a third, “eidetic reduction,” whereby all questions of the “being” of noetic acts and their noematic correlates (i.e., their reality qua objects of transcendental cognition) are bracketed, enabling, though “free variation,” the description of “all ideally possible perceptions,” i.e., the \(eidos\) of perception, the “universal type” of all perceptions “whose ‘ideal’ extension is made up of all ideally possible perceptions”—a relatively intellectualist precursor of what Merleau-Ponty will call “style.”\(^{479}\) Through this eidetic reduction, the acts and contents of consciousness are themselves reduced to their essential, general structures, revealing relations of necessary implication (\(Fundierung\)) between the latter.

Static phenomenology, however, merely investigates the production of meanings— their “active genesis”—accomplished by acts of a constituting consciousness which \(already\) exists in a world. Because static phenomenology, as a method of pure description, presupposes the “world” as something always already constituted, it cannot account for the “ultimate genesis” of sense: the “passive genesis” which precedes constituting consciousness, insofar as it accomplishes the constitution of the world as a field within which the activity of such a consciousness is possible.\(^{480}\) The primordial genesis of sense is the advent of a field of possibilities without which “acts of consciousness” are inconceivable, the advent of a “given” which must already be susceptible to determination when consciousness receives it. Genetic phenomenology, therefore, begins from the essential structures of experience revealed in a constitutive analysis, and inquires into the genesis of the unity of these forms of consciousness themselves, thereby advancing from

\(^{478}\) Ibid., §34:103-104.
\(^{479}\) Ibid., §34:104-106.
\(^{480}\) Ibid., §37-38:109-112.
pure “description” to “explanation”: i.e., explanation of the conditions for the possibility of intentional constitution itself, which is to say, of the primordial fact that there is a world.\footnote{Husserl, Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis, 339-340.}

Merleau-Ponty, in “Marxism and Philosophy,” describes this development of Husserl’s thought as follows:

[J]ust because he began by seeking absolute evidence, he arrived at the program of a philosophy which describes the subject thrown into a natural and historical world, the horizon of all his thoughts. Thus it was that, having started with a “static phenomenology,” he ended with a “genetic phenomenology.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism and Philosophy,” in SNS, 135/164.}

Reflective description calls for an explanatory “reflection on the unreflected,” the founding possibility of which Merleau-Ponty discovers in Husserl’s later works, especially The Crisis of the European Sciences, and in their uptake by Martin Heidegger.\footnote{Ibid., 134/163.} The attempt to describe an absolute foundation of thetic knowledge eventually leads the investigator below the level of thetic knowledge, into an explanation of its genesis that ultimately renders the very concept of an absolute foundation for knowledge incoherent by historicizing the “a priori.” After all, if one were to seek a thetic foundation for thetic consciousness, then the result could only be an infinite regress: the formal logical impossibility of a foundation. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in “The Metaphysical in Man” (1947), speaking of belief in the de jure possibility of reaching an agreement with others, “I have no other reason to affirm this principle than my experience of certain concordances, so that in the end whatever solidity there is in my belief in the absolute is nothing but my experience of agreement with myself and others.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, “The Metaphysical in Man,” in SNS, 95/116.} What are given to me (always in a specific time and place) as “truths” are neither “merely subjective,” nor trans-historically valid:

When I think of the Pythagorean theorem and recognize it as true, it is clear that this truth is not for this moment only. Nevertheless later progress in knowledge will show that it is not yet a final, unconditioned evidence and that, if the
Pythagorean and the Euclidian system once appeared as final, unconditioned evidences, that is itself the mark of a certain cultural epoch. The a priori is, in other words, sedimented or instituted through experiences, among others, in a shared world. The interrogation of its genesis is an “endless task,” not for reasons of formal logic, but because the world’s manner of being is its horizon-structure, so that it exceeds any attempts at a complete determination of its meaning by explicit consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty’s investigation in PhP is “phenomenological” insofar as it is a radicalization of Husserl’s genetic method, whereby he sets out to give voice to the passive genesis of sense “below” the level of thetic consciousness. Merleau-Ponty affirms the technique of the transcendental reduction precisely because, and insofar as, it motivates the turn toward a genetic phenomenology “for which the world is always ‘already there’ prior to reflection […] and whose entire effort is to rediscover this naïve contact with the world.” He portrays the genetic turn in Husserlian phenomenology as a turn away from the purely descriptive character of constitutive phenomenology, toward explanation – the explanation of the primordial “fact” of the world – and portrays Heidegger’s Being and Time as the taking up of Husserl’s call for “a making explicit […] of the Lebenswelt,” or “life-world.” Phenomenology is, therefore, less an intellectual “method” for Merleau-Ponty, than a “style,” a general form of behavior or comportment toward the world that opens up fields of meaning upon which, reciprocally, it itself is founded as a way of being in the world. Genetic phenomenology provides “a phenomenology

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486 It is all too common for interpreters of Merleau-Ponty to mistake his rejection of the possibility of a complete transcendental reduction for a disavowal of the method as such. Carman, for instance, claims that Merleau-Ponty “rejects the transcendental rejection as impossible, indeed incoherent” (Carman, “Merleau-Ponty and the Mystery of Perception,” 632). Depraz and Lawlor, however, both recognize the centrality of the reduction to Merleau-Ponty’s method, although Depraz calls into question Merleau-Ponty’s claim that Husserl can only affirm the possibility of a complete reduction upon the supposition of an “all-knowing mind,” whereas Lawlor interprets Merleau-Ponty’s taking up of the reduction as a means of access to “Being” as a sign of his failure to break phenomenology out of “subjectivism” (Depraz, “What about the praxis of Reduction?” 116; Lawlor, Thinking Through French Philosophy, 99, 95).
487 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 7.
488 Ibid., 7-8.
of phenomenology,” which is to say, a phenomenology of constitutive phenomenology—an explanation of how the description of experience itself (as the ground of all reflection) is possible.\textsuperscript{489} It is phenomenology’s radical reflection upon itself.

From Husserlian genetic phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty borrows the closely-related concepts of \textit{Fundierung} and \textit{Stiftung}, which he sees as offering an alternative to the causal realism which so stymies Descartes’s attempt to account for the actualization of “mental acts” in the body.\textsuperscript{490} Whereas Descartes conceives of practical freedom in terms of a series of effective causes initiated by an immaterial mind, Merleau-Ponty approaches freedom, in general, in terms of “motivation,” in the Husserlian sense of the relation whereby a new level of sense is grounded in and on an already established one—not as its sole, necessary product, but as the actualization of one among a range of possibilities immanent in it.\textsuperscript{491} As he puts it in \textit{PhP}:

\begin{quote}
The motive is an antecedent that only acts through its sense, and it must even be added that it is the decision that confirms this sense as valid and that gives it its force and its efficacy. Motive and decision are two elements of a situation: the first is the situation as a fact; the second is the situation as taken up.\textsuperscript{492}
\end{quote}

“Decisions,” then, are always responses to some solicitation by the given, the total situation, which, through the decision, becomes the motive. Merleau-Ponty does not conceive of a “decision” fundamentally or primordially as an act of thetic consciousness, but rather, as the gearing of the living body itself into a situation, which then becomes a field of possibilities available for explicit consciousness to take up thematically.

In “Cézanne’s Doubt,” Merleau-Ponty makes clear that all meaning originates in this pre-thetic “response” of the perceiving subject to a situation which offers it a field of “proposals,” and which, reciprocally, becomes a possible object for thetic consciousness through the perceiving subject’s response:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{489} Ibid., 424.
\textsuperscript{490} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IP}, 15/47.
\textsuperscript{492} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{PhP}, 308.
The very decisions which transform us are always made in reference to a factual situation; such a situation can [...] be accepted or refused, but it cannot fail to give us our impetus nor to be for us, as a situation “to be accepted” or “to be refused,” the incarnation for us of the value we give to it.\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in \textit{SNS}, 25/32.}

Before it can be explicitly thematized, value or meaning is “incarnated.” Freedom, then, must be understood as the power of assuming an attitude, a general style of existing in and toward the world, and the range of available attitudes as an acquisition of the process of “assimilating the situation”—the process which articulates the “dimensions” (“one’s birth and one’s past,” the articulation of being in the world in the fundamental mode of mortal temporality) of one’s life.\footnote{Ibid., 24/31-32.}

This conception of “freedom” arises precisely from Merleau-Ponty’s radical reflection upon the sense of phenomena, which consists in an articulation of the movement of founding. Thus, a formal clarification of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of freedom in \textit{PhP} presupposes a grasp of his employment of the notion of founding to reveal the manner in which the two “faces” of an essentially ambiguous structure can be internally connected as one another’s conditions of possibility, while simultaneously remaining irreducible to each other.

For Husserl, \textit{Fundierung} designates relations of dependency (or co-dependency) in the constitution of “sense,” the unity of experience: one term is founded upon another to the extent that the experience of the former would not be possible without the latter, so that the foundational term serves as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the possibility of the founded term.\footnote{Husserl, \textit{Logical Investigations II}, 25.}

Husserl uses \textit{Stiftung}, meanwhile, to designate both the genesis of a sense (through a primordial constitution) \textit{and} its subsequent availability as a sedimented given (a possible foundation for new acts): the original opening, and the persistence, of a new horizon of sense, of a “tradition.”\footnote{Husserl, “Origin of Geometry,” 256.}

Merleau-Ponty uses these terms almost interchangeably in \textit{PhP}, and together they describe the process by which new fields or “horizons” of sense – which are always founded upon prior ones –
are opened (*instituted*), become sedimented (as *institutions*), and can then be taken up as the
*founding* term of a new *founded* sense; founding, then, would be understood as the relation of
constitution which transforms or renews a previously instituted inheritance. This differentiation of
the terms is consonant with their origins in Husserl’s writings, since the concept of *Fundierung* is
first introduced in *Logical Investigations II*, and plays a central role in his earlier, static
phenomenological analyses, whereas *Stiftung* is introduced in *Cartesian Meditations*, and is
exclusively operative in Husserl’s genetic investigations.⁴⁹⁷

In *PhP*, insofar as he retains the language of philosophies of consciousness (e.g., levels of
“cogitos”), Merleau-Ponty places far more emphasis upon the static, constitutive relation of
*Fundierung* by which a field of sense is opened or renewed.⁴⁹⁸ This concept of founding provides
him with the means to articulate an a-causal relationship between perception and meaning:
“between the linguistic, perceptual, and motor contents and the form that they receive or the
symbolic function that animates them,” where the former are founding, the latter, founded.⁴⁹⁹ The
inseparable moments of founding are, on the one hand, “taking up” (i.e., reactivation of a
sedimented style), and, on the other, “projection” or “transcendence.” “Projection” is a term taken
over primarily from Heidegger, although Merleau-Ponty also explains it in reference to Freudian
psychoanalysis. In Heideggerian terms, “projection” (*Entwurfen*) is the relation between ground
and disclosure, such that “understanding” (in the sense of the non-conscious allowing of a thing
to “phenomenalize,” or “show itself from itself”) consists in ontic *Dasein* sketching out a
preliminary self-disclosure (of its own ontological possibilities) by “projecting itself upon the
possibilities into which it is thrown,” i.e., *Dasein* preliminarily discloses its own ontological
structure in and through its manners of caring for (and thereby disclosing the significance of)

⁴⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 159.
other beings amongst which it is thrown. Sigmund Freud, meanwhile, introduces his notion of projection in “The Unconscious” to explain how, in phobias, a repressed desire detaches itself from its original content, and enters consciousness in the form of anxiety attached to some substitute-content. This ultimately results in the projection of the source of anxiety outward, so that the ego does not perceive the affect as coming from a repressed instinct, but from an external “danger.” Through projection, Freud describes the genesis of a phobia as the “[replacement] of an internal, instinctual danger by an external, perceptual one”: an internal sense is externalized, and a new sense is thereby inaugurated in the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, the power of projection is the existential condition for the possibility of meaning in general, in line with Heidegger, and one that reveals, more radically than Freudian projection, that “[t]he interior and the exterior are inseparable.” In projection, one of the body’s possible styles of relating to beings – i.e., a latent sense of the body – is, in response to a certain style of givenness, “taken up” (actualized); the given, as such, becomes the ground of the living body’s projection of a horizon of sense (and vice-versa). In Husserlian terms, Merleau-Pontian projection is a more primordial and general instantiation of the passage from “inexact forms” to “exact forms,” which he describes as a process of “discovery-concealment” whereby what is “intuitively” (perceptually) given becomes “clothed” in an ideal sense. Projection “discovers” a figure, and this figure’s very standing out conceals the non-actualized possibilities

502 Ibid., 126-7.
503 Freud, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, 54.
504 While it is true that, as can be seen from its very title, PhP aims to be a work of phenomenology rather than ontology, and is thus more concerned with epistemology than VI, which is an explicitly ontological work, the “inhuman” status of projection, and Fundierung in general, locates it on an existential level which can therefore be characterized as close to ontology, despite Merleau-Ponty’s apparent confusion of these levels in PhP.
505 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 469.
506 Husserl, Crisis of the European Sciences, 52-3.
which remain latent in its foundation, so that the figure appears to explicit consciousness as if it were necessary.

Merleau-Ponty describes founding as a “dialectical” relation in which a form (the “sense”) is established through the actualization of a possibility latent in the content (the “given”), whereby the latter appears as “content.”

Founding thus provides an account of the relation between form and content which does not efface the contingency of the given, either by reducing it to something wholly subsumed under the form (intellectualism), or by reducing the form to an effect of the content (empiricism):

The founding term (time, the unreflected, fact, language) is primary in the sense that the founded term is presented as a determination or a making explicit of the founding term, which prevents the founded term from ever fully absorbing the founding term; and yet the founding term is not primary in the empirical sense and the founded is not merely derived from it, since it is only through the founded that the founding appears.

The dialectical relationship between the founding and founded terms is not an ideal “relation between contradictory yet inseparable thoughts,” but rather, the concrete “tension from one existence to another existence that negates it and without which it can nevertheless not be sustained.” Upon a contingent given, a sense is founded as one among an indefinite range of horizontal possibilities that were already “sketched” or “outlined” by it, and, once the founded sense has come to visibility, it then appears as though it were the necessary and inevitable determination of the given. Such is the manner in which any contingent “a priori” – whether biological, historical, or personal – advents. For Merleau-Ponty, therefore, the dimension of the a priori does not consist in suprahistorical principles, but, rather, in the continuation of the past in the present, the simultaneity of the past with the present: “the historical a priori is only consistent

507 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 454.
508 Ibid.
509 Ibid., 206.
510 Ibid., 266.
for a given phase and provided that the equilibrium of forces allows the same forms to remain."\textsuperscript{511}

The true \textit{a priori} is sedimented, operative truth.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “good dialectic” of founding is distinct from both Hegel’s dialectic of “sublation” (an immediate positivity brings about its own negation through its internal contradiction, with which it is then reconciled in a second, mediated positivity), and from Theodor Adorno’s “negative dialectics” (wherein the movement of sublation is performed for the purpose of “lend[ing] a voice” to the “nonidentical,” to the excess of the particular over the universal, which cannot be reconciled in a higher synthesis).\textsuperscript{512} Merleau-Ponty diverges from Alexandre Kojève, as Sonia Kruks points out, insofar as he does not consider Hegel a “true phenomenologist.” Whereas Kojève argues that the Hegelian dialectic is not a “method,” but merely a description of the movement of existence as Hegel observes it, Merleau-Ponty grants this of the “early Hegel” of the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, but argues that the “late Hegel” of the \textit{Encyclopedia} falls back into idealist thinking, setting the movement of thought over and against existence in an attempt to dominate and incorporate the latter into it.\textsuperscript{513}

Like his “early Hegel,” and unlike Adorno, Merleau-Ponty does not see dialectics as a method of thought imposed upon experience, but as the movement of being itself, with which thought attempts to coincide (though it can never definitively succeed, because the horizon of sense incessantly recedes before it) in order “to reveal the immanent logic of human experience in all its sectors.”\textsuperscript{514} Like Adorno, and unlike Hegel, Merleau-Ponty rejects the possibility of complete sublation, of an overcoming of the difference between form and content; in fact, Merleau-Ponty’s dialectic of perception eschews sublation altogether, because he does not begin

\textsuperscript{511} Ibid., 117.

\textsuperscript{512} Kojève, \textit{Introduction to the Reading of Hegel}, 208; Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 12, 18-19.


\textsuperscript{514} Merleau-Ponty, “Hegel’s Existentialism,” in \textit{SNS}, 65/81; Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 48. Here, Adorno does not deny a “substantial dialectics” of existence itself, but rather, denies that “dialectics as a method” can coincide with this movement so long as the “principle of dominion”—the drive to subsume the particular under the universal—remains inherent to philosophy.
from an apparently immediate positivity, but from an *immediate mediation* that precedes the possibility of determining the “positive” and the “negative,” and out of which positivity and negativity arise through a mutualistic process of differentiation.\(^{515}\) The movement of Merleau-Pontian dialectics is, therefore, formally similar to that of Adorno’s negative dialectics. Indeed, in “The Metaphysical in Man” (1947), Merleau-Ponty provides what might be called “formulas” for, respectively, philosophical and scientific thought engaged in radical reflection: on the one hand, “a metaphysics which rejects system as a matter of principle,” and, on the other, “a science which is forever becoming more exact in measuring how much its formulas diverge from the facts they are supposed to express.”\(^{516}\) Adorno, in a similar spirit, writes that, “[b]y means of logic, dialectics grasps the coercive character of logic, hoping that it may yield—for that coercion itself is the mythical delusion, the compulsory identity.”\(^{517}\) Adorno’s negative dialectics seeks to disclose the excess of the given relative to the concept, while Merleau-Ponty’s radical reflection attempts to return to the indeterminate horizons of possibility upon which actualities are founded. Merleau-Ponty is attempting to make explicit the rootedness, which has been forgotten following Descartes, of philosophical thought in the world of perception, whereas Adorno assumes the universal character of thought as an “act of negation,” and thus attempts to turn this conceptual “violence” back upon itself, away from the “nonidentical” upon which it has been imposed.\(^{518}\)

As can be seen in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the interplay of idealism and realism, his “good dialectic” begins from what is, for thetic consciousness, an oscillating opposition, which cannot be sublated into a higher unity; the phenomenologist then peers “below” this opposition, in order to find the common pre-thetic ground of the opposed terms: the background against which their articulation and differentiation is possible. The seemingly opposed terms are


\(^{517}\) Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 406.

\(^{518}\) Ibid., 19, 26, 48.
thereby revealed to be co-founded within a field that could serve as the foundation for an
indeterminate range of other determinations, none of which can lay claim to finality. In thus
regressing from a thetic opposition to the unity of its pre-thetic ground, Merleau-Ponty opens up
possibilities for founding new senses without the need for a thetic overcoming of the initial
opposition—which would, after all, be impossible, because each of the opposed terms takes itself
to be necessary, having forgotten the openness of the given, and because the fact that each
presupposes the other ensures their interminable oscillation.

I follow Bernhard Waldenfel, therefore, in terming Merleau-Ponty’s an “open
dialectics.” What I am here calling “open dialectics,” the “dialectical movement” of PhP, is the
precursor to what Merleau-Ponty comes to refer to, in VI, as “hyperdialectic,” a “dialectic without
synthesis” which recognizes that “Being” consists of ambiguous wholes – “bound wholes where
signification never is except in tendency” – rather than obscuring the “inertia” of the content (its
refusal to be subsumed) and the incompleteness of the form (its impotence to separate its own
necessity from the content’s contingency) beneath delusions of pure positivity and pure
negativity. Hyperdialectic is, in other words, the movement of institution, which becomes
“‘embalmed’” insofar as it is formulated in thetic terms, as a “statement.”

In a passage from the Nature lectures that exemplifies the explanatory centrality of the
open dialectic of founding, Merleau-Ponty locates the motivation for the Cartesian rupture
between naturata and naturans – not in the specifically Spinozistic sense of the terms, but in the
general sense of active, inherently meaningful nature, on the one hand, and passive, inherently
meaningless nature, on the other – in a “new element [. . .] the idea of infinity derived from the
Judeo-Christian tradition”; he adds, however, that “from the moment that we think the idea of

520 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 94-95/129-130.
521 Ibid., 175/229.
infinite creation, the scission becomes not obligatory, but enticing.” The idea of the infinity of the Judeo-Christian God opens a new horizon of meaning, but it does not necessitate the actualization of a bifurcated concept of “nature,” split between absolute negativity and absolute positivity, from among the possibilities sketched by that field. The historical a priori, the “form,” cannot efface the contingency of its founding, though it does necessitate its forgetting, which can only be overcome through a radical reflection which interrogates the form concerning its genesis. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in “The Primacy of Perception”:

The perceived happening can never be reabsorbed in the complex of transparent relations which the intellect constructs because of the happening. But if this is the case, philosophy is not only consciousness of these relations; it is also consciousness of the obscure element and of the “non-relational foundation” on which these relations are based. Otherwise it would shirk its task of universal clarification.

It is, therefore, radical reflection’s ambition not just to descriptively make an a priori, a “truth,” explicit, but also to explain the genesis of this form in the world of perception. Radical reflection aims to explicitly reintegrate thought into the field of perception in which it is always implicitly immersed. Eran Dorfman, in “Freedom, Perception and Radical Reflection,” arrives at the opposite formulation – that it is the task of radical reflection “[to remind] perception of that which it tends to forget, namely its own accomplishments” – due to his erroneous conception of the relation between thetic and pre-thetic sense in terms of “constitution” and “pre-constitution,” rather than “founded” and “founding.” Radical reflection is an operation, not of perception, as Dorfman claims, but of thought, and it consists in thought attempting to return to its own “silent” foundations, liberating perception from the fetters that thought itself places upon it. It is the task,

523 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 303.
525 Dorfman, “Freedom, Perception and Radical Reflection,” 141, 144.
not of philosophy, but of *painting* and *literature* to work upon and expand the horizon of perception directly.\textsuperscript{526}

By articulating the dialectical relation whereby forms are founded upon given contents, Merleau-Ponty reconciles the “contingency” of the given with the “necessity” of sense – the apparent necessity of the sense, in relation to the given, can be accounted for by the fact that it really was a possibility latent in the given, although the given itself remains “open” – so that the “reciprocal relation” of founding must properly be called the structure of “existence” itself, which is, in turn, conceived of as “the perpetual taking up of fact and chance by a reason that neither exists in advance of this taking up, nor without it.”\textsuperscript{527} Existence, as the becoming-explicit of a sense implicit in the given situation, “accomplishes itself” in the body, which, reciprocally, expresses it.\textsuperscript{528} The structure of existence, of the advent of being in and through beings, is, therefore, fundamentally characterized by a concrete dialectic of contingency and necessity; it “is the change of contingency into necessity through the act of taking up.”\textsuperscript{529} Given that Merleau-Ponty describes a genuine “decision” as the taking up of an open situation, it is now clear that he conceives of freedom as the very structure of existence, whereby a horizon of sense is opened through the dialectical relation of founding.\textsuperscript{530}

Because the concept of founding describes an “open” dialectic – one which does not move toward synthesis, but proceeds from an originary field of possibilities which are not effaced by the standing out of one of them as “figure” or “actuality” – it is inappropriate to speak of thetic “meaning” at the level of operative perception and motility where the genesis of sense is accomplished. Rather, Merleau-Ponty speaks of, on the one hand, “styles,” and, on the other, “schemata” or “physiognomies.” In general, a “style” is a “way” or a “how” of existence, and a

\textsuperscript{526} Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *SNS*, 19/25.
\textsuperscript{527} Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 160.
\textsuperscript{528} Ibid., 204.
\textsuperscript{529} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{530} Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *SNS*, 25/32.
“schema” is a field of sense, a “what” and a “where,” which is opened by a style and which sustains it.

If a style is a structure of behavior, a general way of being in the world – the “how,” as opposed to the “what,” of an existence – then the style of a living thing is the way in which it uses its body to respond to, and to solicit responses from, its environment. In perceiving a thing’s or a person’s style, we sympathetically experience an originary, pre-thetic “significance,” a living recognition or “first sketch of its sense” which cannot be articulated in propositions without thereby becoming deformed, petrified. As a manner of existence, style is not really or ideally separable from something actually existing:

A style is a certain way of handling situations that I identify or understand in an individual or for a writer by taking up the style for myself through a sort of mimicry, even if I am incapable of defining it; and the definition of a style, as accurate as it might be, never presents the exact equivalent and is only of interest to those who have already experienced the style.

Styles serve as the pre-thetic grounds for all thetic meaning. This concept of originary, pre-thetic sense overcomes both empiricist and intellectualist difficulties with explaining the genesis of explicit sense; thetic meaning is not, as empiricists presume, projected onto an originally meaningless given, and nor is it the case that, as intellectualists suppose, thetic meaning (judgment) goes “all the way down.” The empiricist position is exemplified in, for instance, Locke’s assertion that we have absolutely no knowledge “of the internal constitution, and true nature of things,” but only of our own “simple ideas,” and of the complex ideas we can produce by operating upon them. The intellectualist position, meanwhile, is articulated in Descartes’s familiar example of the ball of wax, wherein he shows that all “perceptions” are really

531 Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 179, 190.
532 Ibid., 219, 222.
533 Ibid., 384.
“judgments,” since otherwise I could not say that “I perceive the same ball of wax” despite changes in any or all of its primary (extensive) and secondary (intensive) qualities.535

Epistemologically, the notion of style avoids the empiricist starting-point of an inherently meaningless world, and the intellectualist starting-point of a world that is nothing but (thetic) meaning. On the side of the living body, at the pre-personal level, there are intertwined styles of both perception and movement, upon which the “personal” styles of individuals are founded.536 But things also have their styles—styles of affecting other things and living bodies, and styles of responding to affections.537 The dimensions in and through which the living body reciprocally unfolds its existence – time and the world – likewise have their styles, their manners of unfolding.538 Merleau-Ponty dedicates so much of his writing between PhP and IP to the interrogation of painting precisely because painting is unique in seeking to express, not a conceptual content, but a style of perceiving, a manner of the world’s unfolding; Cézanne wanted “to make visible how the world touches us,” to express the interweaving of a style of the body and a style of the world.539 To “recognize a style” is to “experience a unity” – not yet a unity of sense, but a unity of the manner in which the sense of the given unfolds.540 For Merleau-Ponty, the aim of philosophy, like painting, is to express certain styles of perceiving and behaving, which can then be taken up by others – although philosophy can only accomplish this task indirectly, whereas a painting is the embodiment of a style of perceiving.

Metaphysically, style overcomes the oscillation between the for-itself and the in-itself, the fantasies of the “absolute subject” and the “absolute object.” There is no longer the idealist problem of how a pure activity (consciousness) encounters the pure passivity of its object without

535 Descartes, Meditations, II:30-31.
536 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 179, 114.
537 Ibid., 324.
538 Ibid., 384, 484.
540 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 190.
thereby sacrificing its own purity, nor the realist problem of how to account for the appearance of subjectivity in a world of mere objects, because “[t]aken concretely, man is not a psyche joined to an organism, but rather this back-and-forth of existence that sometimes allows itself to exist as a body and sometimes carries itself into personal acts.”⁵⁴¹ Consciousness, then, does not constitute the world, and nor is it constituted by the world; it is one of the living body’s ways of being in the world, founded upon the more primordial, habitual styles of perception and motility.

A schema or physiognomy, meanwhile, is the “system” of correspondences between the parts of a living whole in relation to its environment, the body’s pre-thetic living of its horizon of possibilities; it is the always-tacit “experience” of the total relationship between the fields of the body and the world, “a totality of lived significations that moves toward its equilibrium” or a “system of powers,” both of affecting and of being affected.⁵⁴² Each “acquisition of a certain style” of perceiving or behaving, therefore, serves “to enrich and reorganize the body schema,” expanding and transforming the field of the “I can.”⁵⁴³ Unlike a phenomenal “image” or “representation,” a schema is a lived field of possibilities, so that the “corporeal schema,” or “pre-objective unity of the body,” is not the phenomenal, perceived body, but rather, “a system of equivalent gestures.”⁵⁴⁴ The corporeal schema is the pre-thetic totality of previously founded perceptual and motor styles organized in a system of equivalences: “As a system of motor powers or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an “I think”: it is a totality of lived significations that moves toward its equilibrium.”⁵⁴⁵ The world of perception, the Lebenswelt, is the correlate of the corporeal schema, such that the acquisition of a perceptual habit is simultaneously “an acquisition of a world,” the institution of a new field of perceptual sense.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 117.
⁵⁴² Ibid., 176, 190.
⁵⁴³ Ibid., 190.
⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 370.
⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 190.
The “subject” of founding – which is to say, of the genesis of sense – is not a thetic consciousness, but the living body, or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in *PhP*, the “body-subject” or “tacit cogito.”[^546] It is likely this association of “founding” with a “cogito,” however “tacit” it may be, that leads Merleau-Ponty to emphasize the language of “institution” in his later writings (e.g., *IP* and *VI*), when he seeks to overcome the ontological primacy of consciousness with his notion of the primacy of the *chiasm*, or intertwining. Radical reflection leads Merleau-Ponty, in *PhP*, to the pronouncement that, “I am a field, I am an experience,” so that it is already becoming possible to understand the “subject” of founding, not as a tacit consciousness, but as the corporeal schema itself, which is later elaborated as such in the ontology of the flesh.[^547]

Having laid out the methodologically central concepts of Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of perception, and sketched his discovery of the identity of freedom with the movement of existence, I will now, in the following subsection, render Merleau-Ponty’s new conception of freedom concrete through an explication of the irreducible “ambiguity” of existence as he articulates it in terms of the body, the world, and being-in-the-world. The notion of the “body-subject” of this freedom represents Merleau-Ponty’s initial attempt to overcome the oscillation of objective thought exemplified in the early Modern rationalists’ efforts to conceive of the relationship between mind and body, although the thinking of concrete freedom will ultimately demand a new ontology which goes beyond the philosophy of consciousness—the ontology Merleau-Ponty outlines in *VI*.

[^546]: Ibid., 465.
[^547]: Ibid., 468.
1.B.iv. The Ambiguous Dimensions of Existence

Through radical reflection, Merleau-Ponty conceives of “genuine freedom” as essentially “conditioned,” as the taking up of an implicit, potential sense of the past in order to open up a new field of possibilities: a horizon of the future.\textsuperscript{548} Freedom is the perpetual rupture and reintegration of the bond between the world and the embodied self, which always takes place upon the ground of a prior integration.\textsuperscript{549} As the power to give birth to new fields of meaning, freedom is not a “possession” or a “property” of the individual, but an “existential project” in which the world and the body-subject collaborate, which is exemplified in artistic expression, and which explicit “intellectual projects” merely “fulfill.”\textsuperscript{550} To verify and concretize this definition of “freedom” as the movement of founding, I turn to Merleau-Ponty’s account of the fundamental elements of existence, which he articulates as follows: “the ambiguity of being in the world is expressed by the ambiguity of our body, and this latter is understood through the ambiguity of time.”\textsuperscript{551}

In order to explicate the emergence of freedom within this structure, I work backwards in this subsection, considering, in turn and through the notion of Fundierung, the ambiguity of time, the ambiguity of the body, and the ambiguity of being in the world (l'être au monde). Then, in the proceeding subsection, I concretely articulate Merleau-Ponty’s notion of freedom as, fundamentally and indissociably, relations of founding accomplished by the living body, and, finally, return to the Cartesian and Sartrean conceptions of freedom in order to stress the radicality of his account in \textit{PhP}.

Merleau-Ponty identifies “good ambiguity” (as opposed to the bad “ambivalence” of the oscillation of objective thought between two contraries) in general with the structure of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[549] Ibid., 517.
\item[551] Merleau-Ponty, \textit{PhP}, 114.
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horizontality: the expression of the possible, of virtuality, in and through the actual. For instance, speaking of visual perception, he says that “[i]f symmetry, plenitude, and determination can be obtained in several ways, then the organization will not be stable, as is seen in ambiguous drawings.” Ambiguity is explicitly *thematized* when the horizon, or background, is not forgotten in the experience of the figure that stands out from it; it is, however, always *lived* in the “passage” or, in Husserlian terms, “transition synthesis,” whereby a form is founded in and upon the field of the given, which remains immeasurable and indefinite.

The ambiguity of time consists in the fact that, while each present expresses the total field of time from a unique perspective (it relates to all other presents through the horizons of its immediate past and future, which are not identical to those of any other), this means that the totality cannot be *definitively* expressed. Each present expresses the totality just as completely as any other, but in a singular way, so that no present can dominate the whole by justifiably asserting itself as its one “true” expression. The style of “generalized time” – the “absolute flow” upon which the time of each personal history is founded – is, therefore, an incessant rupturing and reintegration of the “temporal dimensions” of past, present, and future, each of which, in dynamic relations of founding with the others, “express[es] a single rupture or a single thrust that is subjectivity itself.” “Subjectivity” is, fundamentally, the movement whereby a new horizon of sense is instituted through the taking up of the given. This continual process of reintegration is the making explicit of the “movement of existence” which is “sketched out” by one’s body as “organism,” which is to say, as “a pre-personal adhesion to the general form of the world”; time is constituted by the “dialectic between the acquired and the future,” by the taking up of anonymous life in individual life which accomplishes “the sublimation of biological in

\[552\] Ibid., 312.
\[553\] Ibid., 315, 310.
\[554\] Ibid., 114.
\[555\] Ibid., 486.
\[556\] Ibid., 484, 516.
personal and natural in cultural.” But because this “taking up” must be continually repeated, and because it is “intermittent” and liable to gaps, the spoken *cogito* never transcends its body qua organism in the sense of separating its existence from it; the “congealed existence” or sedimentation of one’s “specific past” must be continually taken up, so that genuine “transcendence” is the passage of the body toward its own future, the opening of new horizons of the body and the world.

Time, therefore, “must be understood as a subject,” and the subject understood as time, which means that time cannot possibly coincide with itself in an actual “eternity,” a realized extensive infinity; it is only “complete” in the structure of its movement, as an “indivisible thrust” or “passage,” and it is precisely this “constant form [that] can [...] give the illusion of possessing the entirety of time at once.” *Fundierung* describes the movement of temporality, because perception acquires its “thickness,” its sense of “reality,” precisely by “preserv[ing] a past in its present depth” without “condens[ing] that past into the present”: the present is founded upon the past, and thereby calls for, “promises,” a future. For every taking up of the past as founding term, there is a corresponding, founded projection of a field of future possibilities. Thus, Merleau-Ponty articulates time’s ambiguity in terms of Husserl’s concepts of “retention” and “protention” – present moments that have passed are retained with gradations of the modification “just-past,” and future ones are expected with gradations of the modification “to come,” which together form the horizon within which the current present is able to appear – while recognizing that the taking up of the past and the projecting of a future constitute a feedback loop of perpetual re-integration, the continual rebirth of existence itself.

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557 Ibid., 113-114, 495.
558 Ibid., 114.
559 Ibid., 484-486.
560 Ibid., 287.
561 Ibid., 390.
Merleau-Ponty articulates the ambiguity of the body in terms of two layers or dimensions which seem to compose it: the “habitual body,” and the “actual body.” In the former sense, as the “subject of perception” and motor habits, my body is the tacit “pivot of the world,” the point around which the “physical world” is organized in such a way that it takes on a signification for me at each moment; in the latter sense, it is that by which I am explicitly conscious of the world in its “human” significations, my power of “abstract movement.” That these “layers” of the body are distinguishable is evident in conditions such as phantom limb syndrome, wherein a person who has lost an arm retains the “practical field” (the possible motor intentions) of a general “someone,” of an impersonal “habitual body” that still possesses the missing arm, even though they are no longer capable of fulfilling these motor intentions. Their “habitual” or “general” body has, in such cases, diverged from their “actual” or “personal” body.

The fact that one’s habitual body and one’s actual body can diverge reveals a more primordial functioning of the body, which, in the “normal” person, accomplishes the smooth integration of these two fields: the continual (re)integration of the corporeal schema, or “virtual” body. The body schema is a “system of equivalences,” among the body’s parts, relative to possible perceptual and motor projects: a “field of [sensorimotor] fields” in which “the subject actively integrates the parts according to their value for the organism’s projects.” This prethetic horizon structure of behavior not only systematizes the totality of ways in which the body can become “polarized by its tasks,” relating to the world by taking up possibilities offered by a

563 Merleau-Ponty, _PhP_, 111.
564 Ibid.
565 Ibid.
566 The “body schema” should not be confused with the psychoanalytic notion of the “body image” (see, for instance, Weiss, “Écart,” 212; at the time of Weiss’s writing, the only available English translation of _PhP_, by Smith, used the terms “schema” and “image” interchangeably, frequently translating “schéma” as “image”). The latter is a conscious representation or awareness of one’s body, whereas the former is “an integrated set of dynamic sensorimotor processes that organizing perception and action in a subpersonal and nonconscious manner” (Thompson, 249). The body schema is the virtual structure of the living body, and cannot be perceived directly.
567 Merleau-Ponty, _PhP_, 281-282, 129.
given situation, but also the totality of ways in which the habitual and actual “levels” of the body can relate to one another as, respectively, the foundation of a founded sense; it is the power both of instituting new styles of behavior, and taking up such sedimentations in “genuine action.”

Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of the body’s power of taking up the total field of the body schema by projecting itself into a situation and thereby organizing its parts in a “living connection” with one another, which is identical to their living connection with “[t]he thing and the world,” leads him to argue that “it is the definition of the human body to appropriate, in an indefinite series of continuous acts, meaningful cores that transcend and transfigure its natural powers”; this “act of transcendence” first arises, not in thetic consciousness, but “in the acquisition of a behavior” upon which is founded “the silent communication of the gesture,” the originary form of genuine action, which is to say, of “expressive,” or personal, behavior.

Putting together the ambiguities of time and the body, we can say that, in taking up a situation through a project, the body-subject “focuses” – causing certain possible senses of the bodily and worldly givens to appear as explicit figures, and others to fade into the background, as the fields of the body and the world are “polarized” in relation to the project – and it is precisely in this dialectical activity of focusing that “my body ties a present, a past, and a future together.”

Thus, the temporal and bodily origins of freedom are one and the same; they are both to be found in the body-subject’s taking up of a situation (a perceptual project) through a motor project, such that “[m]y body takes possession of time and makes a past and a future exist for a present,” literally “creating time” as its passage toward a new sense.

The ambiguity of the body, explicated through the ambiguity of the temporal structure of experience, enables us to grasp the ambiguity of being in the world as its correlate, because the
body is the “vehicle of being in the world.” In other words, the active-passive body is the “I” that is engaged in a world whose dual “levels” correspond to its own. The world, too, seems to be composed of a general “physical level” or “animal milieu” (the Umwelt), and of a historical “human level” (the Welt, or “world” proper) founded upon the latter. As with the body, these are (for thetic consciousness) seemingly independent levels even though, in relations of founding, the given cannot appear as such without a sense, and vice-versa; indeed, the manner in which the given and the sense require one another for their advents is the primordial “logic” or “necessity” of perception that objective thought takes up with its concept of formal-logical necessity, which conceals the form’s existential dependence upon an always contingent given.

Just as the corporeal schema, as a system of possible transpositions, unites the habitual body and the actual body, so the “total perceptual field” unites the Umwelt and the Welt; in fact, the schemata of the body and the world are co-founded upon one another, because the “notion of the body schema […] describes] not only the unity of the body […], but also, through it, the unity of the senses and the unity of the object.” The perceptual field forms the horizon of all of one’s possible perceptions, a total system of possible givens: “it is not merely colors, but also geometrical characteristics, all of the sensory givens, and the signification of objects, which form a system” whereby “our perception is entirely animated by a logic that assigns to each object all of its determinations in relation to those of the others.” Merleau-Ponty refers to this total field of virtual solicitations as the “natural world,” in the sense of the “world of perception,” which should not be confused with the abstract “nature” that is the correlate of the scientific attitude; the

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572 Ibid., 110.
573 Ibid., 110, 383.
574 Ibid., 282.
575 Ibid., 368.
world of perception is “the schema of inter-sensory relations,” the total field of possible ways in which the world can solicit the body by offering an implicit sense for it to take up.\(^{576}\)

As with the corporeal schema, “schema” is not here meant in the Kantian sense of “an invariable system of relations,” but rather, in the sense of the field outlined by an individual’s style, by the manner of existing through which they are recognizable prior to the possibility of explicitly positing a “formula of [their] character,” in the case of a person, or a formula of its “constancy,” in the case of the world; an embodied subject’s style encompasses its general ways of handling situations,” its “ways of using” the body in response to the world’s ways of soliciting its use, while the style or “atmosphere” of the world, correlativey, consists in the way that it arranges its elements in relation to bodies, to bring about the lived experience of “the reality of the spectacle,” which is to say, the constancy of the world.\(^{577}\) The total perceptual field, which I will call the “world schema,” is continually renewed in and through the same movement by which the body creates time, for “[t]he world, which is the nucleus of time, only subsists through this unique movement that simultaneously separates and brings together the appresented [which is to say, the past and the future,] and the present,” and “consciousness” is precisely the ambiguous site where the “natural world” exists by virtue of its incompleteness, its perpetual openness and calling for renewal.\(^{578}\) Thus, “[t]he world is an open and indefinite unity in which I am situated” by virtue of the correlate of the ambiguous relation in which thetic consciousness is founded upon the “tacit cogito,” human consciousness upon its “non-human ground.”\(^{579}\)

Integrating these elemental fields of existence, we can say that every new instituting of a horizon of sense is the taking up of a past – a “historical a priori,” or prior institution – so as to project possible futures. This opening of a future consists equiprimordially in the instituting of a

\(^{576}\) Ibid., 384.
\(^{577}\) Ibid., 384, 214, 367.
\(^{578}\) Ibid., 389.
\(^{579}\) Ibid., 358, 465, 469.
new style of behavior – a new way of using the body, of integrating its perceptual and motor possibilities – and of a new world toward which it is directed, with both elements of this movement accomplished through the taking up of an already-instituted style of behavior and world. What is thereby opened is a new field of possibilities for the body and the world to emerge as articulated from their mutual mediation, to be reborn in and through their intermingling, in and through the mutual “enrichment” and “reorganization” of the body schema and the world schema.\textsuperscript{580}

\textsuperscript{580} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{PhP}, 190.
1.B.v. Situated Freedom

Thus, the notion of “ambiguity” in *PhP* describes the relationship between the given and the form in relations of founding. “Ambiguity” designates the manner of interlocking – of the temporal fields of general and personal time, of the bodily fields of perception and motility which are integrated in the fields of the habit body and the active body, and of the worldly fields of the *Lebenswelt* and the *Welt* – which constitutes the ontological condition for the possibility of the event of founding, the process of institution. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in “Eye and Mind,” speaking of the “bond” or “depth” whereby visible things are related in a figure-background structure, “[t]heir exteriority is known in their envelopment and their mutual dependence in their autonomy.” In the same way, more generally speaking, the relation between the given and a founded sense is always the “crystallization” of a certain style within total, interlocking fields of virtual relations—within the schemata or “physiognomies” of time, the body, and the world.

Each projective taking up of a given which institutes a new horizon of sense rearticulates and reintegrates the total fields of human existence, so that the body’s power of projection is

> [t]he same power of marking out borders and directions in the given world, of establishing lines of force, of arranging perspectives, of organizing the given world according to the projects of the moment, and of constructing upon the geographical surrounding a milieu of behavior and a system of significations that express, on the outside, the internal activity of the subject.

Although Merleau-Ponty describes this integration as the intertwining of the “internal” and the “external,” he is not thereby invoking a Cartesian dualism that opposes a non-spatiotemporal consciousness to a spatiotemporal material world. Because every projection is an enrichment of the “body schema” – the field of the “I can,” which structures the depth of every “experience of my body in the world” – the interweaving of “self” and “world” is existentially prior to the terms

584 Ibid., 143.
whose relation it articulates.\textsuperscript{585} The living body, existing in and toward the world, is the power of instituting new habitual styles, and of taking up already-instituted habits to inaugurate new styles of “abstract movement.”\textsuperscript{586} This is why the aphasic patient, Schneider, cannot engage in abstract movements without treating them literally: the virtual, schematic relation between his world of habit and his world of thought is sundered, so that the dialectic between implicit (biological or sedimented) sense and explicit (intellectual) sense is broken.\textsuperscript{587}

In terms of the body’s fields of sensation and motility, projection is the power of taking up the “general space” of habit, and projecting onto it a virtual, individuated space which mediates between the latter and the “objective space” of thought.\textsuperscript{588} A new field, or “tradition,” of expressive behavior, is instituted through the taking up of a given habit and its field, inaugurating a new horizon of the world’s sense as the correlate of this style of behavior, and thereby “conjuring up” a historical, human world insofar as it makes “a human productivity […] appear through the thickness of being.”\textsuperscript{589} The “anonymity of our body” – its general existence as an “organism” destined to the “physical” world, in communication with which it institutes pre-personal “rhythms” of life, or “habits” – is the foundation of all “individual existence” in the human world; it “sketches out the movement of existence” that can become explicit in the founded sense of my “personal existence,” at the level of thetic consciousness.\textsuperscript{590}

Freedom is, therefore, the advent of relations of founding at the points of articulation, the “hinges,” between these fields: the taking up of the given whereby it becomes explicit as the founding term in a dialectical relationship to a new, or renewed, horizon of sense. Unlike a “faculty” which could be possessed and exercised by a “purely intellectual” subject, freedom

\textsuperscript{585} Ibid., 176.
\textsuperscript{586} Ibid., 171-172.
\textsuperscript{587} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{588} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{589} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{590} Ibid., 113-114.
“puts itself into play in its decision,” so that the only “genuine” decision consists in “the choice of our whole character and of our way of being in the world”; freedom means existing in and toward the world, the site of the advent of a new meaning, which is to say, freedom is actual as the enactment of a project that polarizes the given according to an explicit sense which was merely implicitly sketched out in and through it.\textsuperscript{591}

There is thus an ambiguity to freedom itself, instantiated in the ambiguity of the passage whereby time continuously institutes itself: a passage expressed in the interweaving of body and world, in their feedback loop of mutual solicitation and response. The ambiguity of freedom consists in the relation whereby the “intellectual projects” of thetic consciousness are founded upon, and thereby “fulfill,” given “existential projects” of implicit consciousness: an intellectual project takes up and makes explicit, for reflective thought, a way of being in the world that was first sketched out in the unreflective existential project of an “‘operative’ intentionality” which lies “beneath ‘act intentionality’” (thetic intentionality) as the latter’s foundation.\textsuperscript{592} The true “I” of free decisions is, in both cases, the ambiguous, “concrete subject”: the embodied consciousness which continually accomplishes the unity of anonymous existence and personal existence. The habitual body and the actual body, which Merleau-Ponty identifies with, respectively, implicit consciousness and personal consciousness, are not two distinct realms of being, but two “abstract moments” of the single, concrete subject – the singular body-subject – because “consciousness” in general “is being toward the thing through the intermediary of the body,” which is to say, an interrogative style of behavior.\textsuperscript{593}

Given that both the “absolute generality” of the habitual body in the \textit{Umwelt} and the “absolute individuality” of the actual body in the \textit{Welt} are but “abstract moments” of “a single structure that is the concrete subject,” the always-lived unity of the body-subject, that which

\textsuperscript{591} Ibid., 500, 502.
\textsuperscript{592} Ibid., 511, 480.
\textsuperscript{593} Ibid., 173, 514.
freely “gives sense,” is thus the “interweaving” of body and world itself. This originary mediation, once liberated from the notion of a “tacit cogito” or “pre-thetic consciousness,” forms the core of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology in VI, under the name of the la chair: “the thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity.” I therefore argue that, in VI, the role of the “subject” has been taken over, in the genesis of sense, by the “schemata” of the body and the world—the “lexicons” or “logics” through which they communicate.

Already, in PhP, there is no question of describing freedom as the “absolute spontaneity” of a subject, nor of describing the world as “determinate in itself,” because the originary, primordial “subject” is conceived of as the communication between body and world. Freedom happens as “a sort of shift or slippage” whereby a new style and, correlatively, a new sense, are projected through the taking up of a certain situation, and this style and sense, as founded terms, are simply “crystallization[s] of a certain [...] world.” In this way, Merleau-Ponty begins to clear a path beyond the oscillation between the pure in-itself and the pure for-itself upon which Cartesian freedom and, he argues, Sartrean freedom, founder; as the advent of sense in relations of Fundierung, freedom is the temporalizing integration of the body and the world through which the given and a sense appear as such, the continual (re)birth of existence. Freedom cannot be posited as a pre-existing potentiality which would then be actualized, because it is the movement through which possibilities as such advent. To “be free” is synonymous with living in and toward the world as an embodied subject.

Merleau-Ponty does not, therefore, conceive of freedom as the unconditioned choice of a pure, deliberative ego: “the classical schema of deliberation only applies to a freedom of bad faith
that secretly feeds antagonistic motives without wanting to take them up.”

Every taking up of a given reintegrates the total field within which that given is immersed and, because the fields of time, the body, and the world articulate themselves in continually renewed or transformed integrations, every taking up of a given is the **reintegration** of existence as a whole. Speaking of a painter’s taking up of one of the “problems of painting,” in *EM*, Merleau-Ponty says that, in so doing, “the true painter unknowingly upsets the givens of all the other problems,” such that “his quest is total even where it looks partial,” with the consequence that the painter cannot *possess* his work, and nor can his work once and for all *totalize* the field of painting itself: “[t]he idea of [...] a fully and definitively achieved painting is an idea bereft of sense.”

And yet, the fact that a particular activity of painting is necessarily the taking up of an entire tradition or style, of an “unhearing historicity, [...] does not imply that the painter does not know what he wants.” Rather, “[i]t does imply that what he wants is beyond the means and goals at hand and commands from afar all our *useful* activity.”

What the painter “wants” is to express a style of seeing—to act as a conduit for creation, letting the world give birth, through him, to a style, to a way of existing in and toward it. Generalizing this notion of artistic freedom, we can say that the site of the “subject of freedom” is neither “inside” nor “outside” of thetic consciousness. Rather, the genuine site of freedom is the temporal interweaving of body and world. Because consciousness is founded upon mutual engagements of the body and the world through certain styles of behavior, freedom, as the power to inaugurate and renew styles of embodied existence in the world, cannot be the volitional act of a pure existence-for-itself. Indeed, in *VI*, Merleau-Ponty states that the site of existence—of the dynamic integration which unites anonymous “living” and personal “knowing”—is the

599 Ibid., 501.
601 Ibid.
602 Ibid.
communication itself between a world and a body whose “coupl[ing is] more real than either of
them.” The mutual interrogation, the call-and-response, between the body and the world is the
movement of existence, which is to say, the movement of freedom.

What fundamentally differentiates Merleau-Ponty’s account of freedom from Descartes’s
metaphysical conception, and Sartre’s ontological conception, is the “level” that he unveils as the
proper starting point for its articulation. Rather than a metaphysical or ontological dichotomy at
the level of thetic consciousness, Merleau-Ponty’s investigation in PhP shows that a genuine
ontology of freedom must begin by situating itself within the living mediation which first enables
the articulation of horizons of sense, in order to ask how the sort of being that accomplishes
“freedom” happens, how meaning is instituted, before posing the question of what freedom “is.”

Descartes and Sartre, each in their own way, ask the question of how freedom arises in the lived
world, but each of them begins from the premise that freedom belongs, in some sense, to the for-
 itself, whereas Merleau-Ponty ultimately identifies “freedom” with the movement of existence, a
mediation prior to all oppositions. As a result, their understandings of the meaning, the lived
significance and reality, of “freedom” are radically different. Attempts to interpret PhP itself are
likewise crippled if one begins from the opposition between absolute activity and absolute
passivity, as Dorfman illustrates when he defines “freedom” as a “movement or oscillation
between actively constituting the world and passively accepting it as a given and as already
constituted.” Dorfman’s definition demonstrates a confusion of levels, insofar as he describes
freedom as identical to the oscillation of objective thought, whereas freedom is actually the
movement of existence upon which the terms of that oscillation are founded.

For Merleau-Ponty, the Cartesian problem of how unconditioned freedom becomes
conditioned, how the freedom of immaterial consciousness can manifest itself in the world – the

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603 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 139/183.
central problem of Descartes’s Passions— is poorly formulated. The existence of freedom is the advent of a sense in the world through relations of Fundierung; freedom exists as the embodied taking up of an already instituted field that projects a new horizon of the possible. Expanding on Sartre’s claim that freedom in dreams or imaginings is illusory, because there is no resistance of facticity to be taken up, Merleau-Ponty asserts, against Descartes, that “[c]hoice of an intellectual character is not only excluded because there is not time before time, but also because choice assumes a previous commitment […] a field to work with,” which is to say, a given situation to be taken up.

“Freedom itself” cannot be really or ideally separated from its ways of occurring, and its manner of existing is therefore prior to the possibility of all explicit distinctions between “activity” and “passivity,” or “transcendence” and “facticity.” Merleau-Ponty criticizes Sartre for denying himself the means of thinking freedom beyond, or prior to, the possible articulation of this traditional dichotomy, thereby denying himself the means of thinking it concretely: “[Sartre’s] thought is in revolt against [the] middle ground” between “consciousness” and “things,” such that his “radical freedom” can only manifest itself as praxis through the intervention of a “magic power” of the for-itself. Merleau-Ponty argues, in line with my own assessment, that, even as late as The Communists and Peace, Sartre continues to conceive of freedom in his original, ontological sense—as a potentially “absolute spontaneity” which can only achieve an imperfect actualization in the world due to the resistance of facticity.

If, as Merleau-Ponty argues, freedom is not originally the possession of an absolute subject, then it can

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605 Indeed, as Gueroult puts it, the task of Descartes’s Passions is “to install a morality that will be a substitute for science,” since in life, unlike in science, our will “is not allowed […] to suspend its judgment as long as the understanding is not able to perceive the true,” but must act on ideas that are, to some degree, obscure and confused (Gueroult, The Soul and God, 194-5).

606 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 650; Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 501. Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of the Cartesian cogito as incapable of actually exercising freedom on account of its atemporality seems to be in line with Gueroult’s claim that, for Descartes, “time is essentially foreign to [my thought’s] constitutive act” (Gueroult, The Soul and God, 62).


608 Ibid., 161/224.
be nothing other than the taking up of the given, in which case explicit, thetic consciousness can never fully coincide with it, and freedom remains always “behind us, or […] in front of us.”

I have argued that Merleau-Ponty lifts the concept of “freedom” out of the traditional antinomy of activity and passivity. He does this by recognizing the irreducible ambiguity of the interweaving of these terms at the pre-thetic level of embodied existence in the world, not as a flaw of human nature, but as the very condition for the advent of meaning. It might seem, however, that the “cost” is too high—that this is an impoverished conception of freedom. As Merleau-Ponty himself puts it, one might accuse him of calling “‘research’ or ‘quest’ what is only trudging in a circle,” insofar as conceiving of “‘Being’” as an interminable becoming seems to do away with grounds of truth and action altogether. And indeed, he conceives of originary freedom as the advent of an existential project: not the choice of a deliberative subject in the classical sense, but the movement whereby anonymous existence, of itself, accomplishes the renewal of “self” and “world” alike. I would respond that, on the contrary, Merleau-Ponty liberates the concept of freedom from the alternating domination of an absolute subject and an absolute object that rendered its concrete actuality incoherent, and thereby allows it to appear as itself, without the distortions wrought upon it by objective thought. If we take this as an affront to our “human dignity,” this is only because we have, ever since the invention of the “immaterial soul,” been so tempted to imagine the “self” in the image of a divinity, capable of choosing and creating value ex nihilo. As Glen Edwards McGee puts it in “Merleau-Pontyan Ethics?”, the fact that time is not a “thing,” but the movement of the articulation-through-interweaving of the subject and the world, implies “that my responsibility for my decisions is not universal, but itself temporal.” The “self” is neither pure activity nor pure passivity, neither absolutely responsible nor absolutely irresponsible. Rather, the self is a process of activity in passivity, transcendence in

609 Ibid., 161/225.
611 McGee, “Merleau-Pontyan Ethics?”, 203.
immanence: the taking up of a given which demands a response by offering a field of possibilities.
1.B. Conclusions

In the first part of this section, I explicated Merleau-Ponty’s claim that, without its transformation through radical reflection, objective thought – the attempt to describe experiences, to determine their meaning, without first attempting to explain the genesis of meaning itself – remains trapped in a fruitless oscillation between mutually contradictory, and yet mutually dependent, terms. On the one hand, intellectualism’s reduction of meaning to “judgment” can only avoid doing away with the notion of truth altogether, avoid rendering truth utterly arbitrary relative to the world, by tacitly presupposing that there “is” an absolute truth independent of consciousness—empiricism’s “absolute object.” On the other, empiricism can only posit an absolute object by tacitly adopting the standpoint of intellectualism’s “absolute subject,” surveying things from a position outside of time and space. On the one hand, idealism must betray itself by implicitly positing a pure “existence in itself,” or else consciousness, pure “existence for itself,” would be empty, without an object. On the other, realism must tacitly posit the synthetic activity of a pure existence for itself in order to account for the unity of that which exists in itself. The only way out of this “bad ambiguity,” this ambivalence, is a radical reflection through which thought seeks to return to its own heterogeneous ground in perception, thereby relinquishing its claim to unconditioned freedom.

In the second, third, and fourth subsections, I showed that Merleau-Ponty’s radical reflection upon the perceptual genesis of meaning leads him to explain meaning as the expression of the intertwining of the living body and its world, and to identify “subjectivity” as the very site and process of this intertwining. This leads, in the fifth subsection, to a new conception of “freedom” as the perpetual reintegration of the fields of the body and the world, which is accomplished at two levels, at both of which it is impossible to distinguish either pure activity or pure passivity. At the general, habitual level, fields of sense are opened through
“existential projects” in which the body-subject institutes a new style of behavior by taking up a sense sketched out in and through the given; at the personal, individual level, fields of sense are “fulfilled,” made explicit through “intellectual projects” in which thetic consciousness takes up an already-instituted a priori and either renews or transforms it. I therefore conclude that to become “freer,” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, cannot mean “liberating” oneself from conditions, which would mean neutralizing the very motivations which make freedom possible. If there are degrees of freedom for Merleau-Ponty, then these must be the result of a more or less astute perception. To become “freer” is to perceive a “deeper” and “broader” horizon of possibilities—to become more attuned to, respectively, the range of general and personal (habitual and intellectual) possibilities for articulating oneself as a living body in the world.

Radical philosophical reflection is thus one manner of embodying freedom, but so is painting and artistic expression in general, as well as engaging in scientific inquiry in a manner that refuses to take the ontological conditions for its own possibility for granted. As for the question of what transformations this new conception of freedom may require for our concept of ethical responsibility, however, the way to the answer cannot be found in PhP, because this text does not yet arrive at a genuine ontology of the “subject” of this freedom—the ontological structure (Sein) of the being (Seiendes) whose occurrence is freedom. To describe it as a “tacit cogito,” as Merleau-Ponty does in PhP, is merely kicking the can down the road, reiterating the duality of the in-itself and the for-itself at the pre-thetic level. If freedom is the movement of institution through which sense advents in the world, then it does not have a “subject” in the Modern sense at all; rather, it is simultaneously the self-disclosing of the body through the world, and of the world through the body. Freedom is, in other words, the interweaving of the corporeal schema and the world schema: the advent of the flesh.
1. Conclusions

It is not possible, nor even desirable, to return to some pre-Cartesian style of being in, and giving voice to, the world; any such attempt would be mere fantasy, nostalgia for supposedly “pure” or “more authentic,” pre-Modern ways of behaving and speaking, which we can really only take up as Moderns—or, perhaps, as post-Modern, although the inability of so-called “post-Modern philosophy” to overcome the dichotomies of Modernist thought, except by privileging one side or the other, leads me to doubt the accuracy of the label. As we saw in 1.A, the Modern notion of eternal, “objective truth” is founded upon the dichotomy of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, so that the detached standpoint of the Modern “scientific observer” would be lost without the implicit assumption of mind-body dualism. The assumption of a substantial difference between mind and body renders true intersubjectivity and concrete human freedom inconceivable, and this is the price of our supposedly absolute intellectual autonomy, of our access to supposedly timeless truth.

The necessity and wisdom of this trade-off is obvious to Descartes, for whom “human freedom of choice” is synonymous with “possession of objectively true knowledge.” Descartes’s successors, meanwhile (perhaps none more so than avowed “anti-Cartesians”), have almost universally remained trapped within the opposition between the absolute mechanism of the in-itself, and the absolute spontaneity of the for-itself, choosing either to favor one pole to the exclusion of the other, or to argue for their compatibility, with the latter approach generally taking the form of either mediation through a third term (e.g., Spinoza’s singular, absolute Substance, or Leibniz’s pre-established harmony), or an implicit reduction of one pole to the other (e.g., the reduction of the for-itself to the in-itself in “emergence” theories of consciousness). In any case, as Merleau-Ponty illustrates in *PhP*, thought inevitably oscillates between the poles of the for-itself and the in-itself (or between the terms of its corollary
oppositions, e.g., mind-body, self-other, freedom-necessity, meaning-truth) so long as one takes this dichotomy as one’s starting point.

As we saw in 1.B, Merleau-Ponty takes living perception, rather than “subjective” or “objective” being, as his new starting point, and begins to lay the groundwork for a transformation of epistemology and ontology, in *PhP* and in his subsequent investigations of phenomena of expression. Although his descriptions of a “tacit cogito” do not yet succeed in dissolving the mind-body dichotomy (and nor, therefore, do they yet dissolve the self-other dichotomy), his articulation of concrete freedom in terms of two-way relations of *Fundierung* outlines the path to a genuine ontologization of genetic phenomenology, because the question now becomes that of articulating the true “subject” of such a freedom—of articulating a “subject” whose activity is simultaneous with its passivity. Thus, in *IP*, he begins to describe an “instituted-instituting subject” which comes into proximity with itself in and through distancing from itself, and which becomes differentiated from others in and through its fundamental “kinship” with them as threads in the common fabric, the system of systems, of the world that continually (re)forms itself in dialogue with this active-passive body-subject.
Chapter 2

The Ontological Mutation of Phenomenology: From Ambivalent Contradictories to the Ambiguity of *la Chair*

My present effort began (in 1.A) with an investigation of the co-genesis of the fundamental antinomies of Modern thought: “mind-body,” “self-others,” and “freedom-necessity.” I then proceeded (in 1.B) to an account of Merleau-Ponty’s diagnosis, in *PhP*, of the conceptual oscillation animating these antinomies, and his initial effort to overcome them by taking up the notion of *Fundierung* to reconceive of the relationship between meaning and bodies, self and others, and freedom and conditionality. In each case, he here conceives of the traditionally “passive” term (e.g., bodies, others, conditions) as offering an implicit sense, which is taken up and rendered explicit in the advent of the traditionally “active” term (e.g., mind, self, choice). This mixture of activity and passivity, however, maintains a certain ambivalence, e.g., in the relation between the “tacit cogito” and the “explicit cogito,” which still seems to reproduce the Modernist rupture between the body as *unconsciousness* (i.e., ‘unconscious consciousness’), and the mind as *consciousness* (i.e., ‘conscious consciousness’).

Now, in Chapter 2, I turn to Merleau-Ponty’s true overcoming of the Modern antinomies through his ontology of the flesh. First (in 2.A), I explicate the development of his thought leading up to this new ontology by tracing the evolution of the concept of *Stiftung* over the course of his work. From *IP* on, Merleau-Ponty begins to undertake the explicit ontologization of his prior phenomenological analyses of the sensorimotor body and expression by tracing his development of the notion of *Stiftung* into a genetic-ontological explanation of phenomenal-ontic relations of *Fundierung*. *Stiftung* is the fundamental style of the dynamism of “nature,” now conceived of as *écart* (“divergence”) accomplished through the *chiasm* (“intertwining”) of the sensible-sensing flesh of living bodies and the sensible flesh of the world. This dynamism of
nature, when it is taken up in and through the “secondary” flesh of operative language, becomes the expression of “truth” as (like the nature it expresses) the continual process of reintegration through divergence. Thus, I argue that Stiftung ultimately mutates into an articulation of the fundamental style of beings as flesh: the co-individuation of sensible beings through contact, which is simultaneously the co-advent of their sense, the articulation of their fields of possible relations through the intertwining of their styles of interrogating and responding to one another.

Next (in 2.B), I explicitly articulate Merleau-Ponty’s overcoming, already sketched out by the evolution of the concept of Stiftung, of the three antinomies of Modern thought: “mind-body” (2.B.ii), “self-others” (2.B.iii), and “freedom-necessity” (2.B.iv). Merleau-Ponty dissolves the oppositions between these terms by reflecting upon the reflective thought crystallized in the concepts to discover the style of perceptual truth (i.e., “perceptual faith”) underlying each abstraction. His method of “interrogation” seeks to give voice to the “silent” operations, the “wild meaning,” which is a being’s manner of becoming-phenomenal, and to thereby articulate the flesh of beings, the dynamic “interior” horizon (comprised of its possibilities for relating to other beings) of which a being in its givenness is the phenomenal “surface.” What abstract thought calls “mind” is the linguistic expression of the movement of Stiftung of which the living body, intertwined with other living bodies and with a shared world, is the sensible surface. The intertwining of “self” and “others” is a coupling or a contact prior to the differentiation of these terms, both at the level of silent perception, and at the level of “thought” (which is simply the silent lining, the style, of spoken language, or the invisible lining of written words). “Freedom” is, therefore, the openness of sense, the horizon-structure sketched by the style which is crystallized in a given sensible being, a given present. The “subject” of freedom is “instituted-instituting,” the flesh of the body as the hinge of visible and invisible being. To concretize my exegesis by enacting Merleau-Ponty’s own indirect approach to ontology, I begin (2.B.i) and conclude section
2.A. Tracing Merleau-Ponty’s Passage to Ontology: An Interrogation of the Concepts of Fundierung and Stiftung

In Husserl’s writings, the divisions between analyses of relations of Fundierung (“foundation” or “founding”) and analyses of relations of Stiftung (“institution” or “instituting”) mirror the divisions between “static” phenomenological method – which describes essential relations of constitutional dependence between given acts and sense-contents in the field of intentional consciousness – and “genetic” phenomenological method, which attempts to explain the underlying unity of consciousness and of the world as an ongoing (re)integration of total fields through “passive” operations of the genesis, sedimentation, and reactivation of possibilities for sense. In the context of Heidegger’s ontologization of phenomenology – i.e., his efforts to rediscover the genuine question of the Sein (“being”) of Seienden (“beings”), of the way in which beings happen in the world – the gerund Stiften (“establishing”) designates the first moment of the structure of Grund (“ground”), the opening of the possibility for the advent of the sense (“significance”) of beings. It is therefore surprising, given the history of these concepts – i.e., the association of Fundierung with static phenomenology, and of Stiftung with both genetic phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology – that Merleau-Ponty’s commentators and Anglophone translators tend to implicitly assume, if not explicitly assert, that he treats Fundierung and Stiftung as synonyms.

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612 See, for example: Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, §18:80-81, §27:95; Ricoeur, Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology, 37, 193-194.
614 For examples of the explicit equation of Fundierung and Stiftung, see: Barbaras, The Being of the Phenomenon, 58; Bergo, “Philosophy as Perspectiva Artificialis: Merleau-Ponty’s Critique of Husserlian Constructivism,” 162; Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, 264; Nordlander, “The Wonder of Immanence: Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Creation,” 112. I am indebted to Lawlor and Landes for outlining the possibility of my present investigation. Lawlor notes that Merleau-Ponty shifts from describing the “structure of experience” via Fundierung, to describing it via Stiftung and Verflechtung (“interweaving”), at the point when he begins to move explicitly toward “ontologizing phenomenology” (Lawlor, “The Legacy of Husserl’s ‘Urpsrung der Geometrie’: The Limits of Phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida,” 203-204). Landes provides a separate entry for each term in The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary, although not an explicit comparison (Landes, The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary, 86, 112).
I argue, on the contrary, that Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the concepts of Fundierung and Stiftung from the very beginning, and, further, that these concepts undergo transformations over the course of his work. Fundierung comes to function increasingly as a static description of the structure of actual experiences (i.e., of sense qua given), while Stiftung takes on the role of a simultaneously genetic and ontological concept. By tracing the development of Merleau-Ponty’s account and deployment of Stiftung, I hope to bring to light the originality of his ontologization of genetic Husserlian phenomenology, and thereby his status as not just as a regional thinker of “embodiment” – which is a dimension of being, no matter how fundamental, and not dimensionality itself – but also as a foundational thinker in his own right, for whom the concept of Stiftung functions as an articulation of the being of beings: of la chair (“flesh”) as the structure of the advent of sentient and sensible beings in and through their own, simultaneous operations of intertwining and individuation.615 This investigation has the further implication, which I will explore elsewhere, of clarifying the development of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “situated” or “concrete freedom,” which he describes in terms of Fundierung in PhP, but then begins, from IP onward, to articulate in terms of Stiftung.616

Given that Merleau-Ponty’s method of philosophical “interrogation” approaches the question of the meaning of being “obliquely” – always starting from certain beings, certain phenomena, rather than attempting a head-on (abstract) approach to being in itself – his writings lend themselves to oblique readings.617 For example, commentators have explicated Merleau-Ponty’s ontological notion of the flesh, by focusing on the phenomenon of other people, as “the identity of an identity and a difference”618, or as the identity of corporeal “reversibility” (the never realized, ever imminent identity of the sentient and the sensible, “the original incorporation of the

615 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 146/191-192.
616 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 501; Merleau-Ponty, IP, 30-31/66.
617 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 179/233.
618 Barbaras, The Being of the Phenomenon, 17, 282.
sensible and into the sensible”) and openness to “alterity” (“an original ‘depossession’”)619; by focusing on Merleau-Ponty’s interrogative style of philosophical interpretation (i.e., a style of reading which conceives itself as the simultaneous discovery and creation of sense), as a primordial “logic of expression”620, or by focusing on the embodied nature of “appearing as such” (silent, brute perception), as the “intertwining” of freedom (incorporation of the world) and determination by material causality (incorporation into the world).621 I, too, am undertaking a lateral approach to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the flesh by interrogating the phenomena of two words, *Fundierung* and *Stiftung*, as they appear in his writings. In so doing, I am, like Landes, taking up Merleau-Ponty’s style of reading philosophical language:

> We begin reading a philosopher by giving the words he makes use of their “common” meaning; and little by little, through what is at first an imperceptible reversal, his speech comes to dominate his language, and it is his use of words which ends up assigning them a new and characteristic signification. At this moment he has made himself understood and his signification has come to dwell in me.622

Thus, I begin by elucidating the “common” meanings of *Fundierung* and *Stiftung* by looking to their roles the sources from which Merleau-Ponty took them up.

In the first section of 2.A, I explicate Husserl’s development of the concept of *Fundierung* in the context of his static phenomenology of eidetic relations, and the concept of *Stiftung* alongside his genetic method. Next, I turn to the role of *Stiftung* in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, and *Stiften* in “On the Essence of Ground,” where the concept of “establishing” undergoes a first ontologization, becoming liberated from the assumption of the primacy of intentional consciousness. Finally, in the third section, I trace the trajectories of the concepts of *Fundierung* and *Stiftung* in Merleau-Ponty’s writings. It is true that Merleau-Ponty initially

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619 Lefort, “Flesh and Otherness,” 8 (my emphasis). Numerous other commentators have taken up Lefort’s conception of flesh as corporeal reversibility which is simultaneously openness to alterity: Dastur, “World, Flesh, Vision,” 35; Maldiney, “Flesh and Verb in the Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty,” 66.


621 Mensch, “The Intertwining as a Form of Our Motion of Existence,” 51, 56.

associates the terms quite closely, although I argue that already, in *PhP*, he employs *Stiftung* to designate, not the double relation of *Fundierung* (*le fondant-le fondé*, “founding-founded”), but the *operative ground* of relations of *Fundierung: la fondation* (“foundation” or, more accurately, “establishment” or “institution”) in the sense of fecundity, possibility of advent. Gradually – most explicitly, from *IP* onward – Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of *Stiftung* into the articulation of a *fourfold* relation wherein each term is simultaneously founding and founded in relation to the other, the methodological function of which is to explain the onto-genetic possibility of relations of *Fundierung*—i.e., to explain the phenomenalization of phenomena. The process of *Stiftung* is the mutual enfolding of beings whereby they function as hinges between visible and invisible being: the fundamental style of the ontological operations of interweaving-divergence through which sensible and sentient beings simultaneously accomplish their visibility and the advent of their sense. *Stiftung*, so understood, is the style of styles.

My reading of Merleau-Ponty’s work through the development of these concepts yields conclusions which are in certain respects at odds, both with those readings that divide it into more or less discontinuous “periods,” and with those that emphasize its continuity in terms of a single methodology of thought. Thus, in my concluding section, I address the relationship of my interpretation to an exemplar of each approach: respectively, Barbaras’s *The Being of the Phenomenon*, and Landes’s *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*. On the one hand, I argue that, read in terms of the mutations of *Fundierung* and *Stiftung*, Merleau-Ponty’s work is more continuous than Barbaras claims. In particular, I contest Barbaras’s reading of *PhP* as “merely negative” in its results. It is Merleau-Ponty’s (retrospectively) relatively abstract descriptions of freedom as a relation of *Fundierung* – his descriptions of the advent of sense in and through relations between expressive bodies and their world, particularly in the culminating

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623 *La fondation* is generally translated as “foundation,” despite Merleau-Ponty repeatedly and explicitly designating it as a rendering of *Stiftung*, so that in most cases “establishment” or “institution” is more accurate (Merleau-Ponty *PhP*, 521n66/160n1; Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language,” in *Signs*, 59/95).
chapter of *PhP* – that call for an onto-genetic investigation of the primordial ground of such relations, which Merleau-Ponty comes to conceive of as a fabric of being, continually woven of, and by, processes of *Stiftung*. On the other hand, although I agree with Landes that Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of phenomena of expression plays a vital role in the passage to his new ontology, I worry that the “logic of expression,” as Landes articulates it, may itself remain a relatively abstract description of the structure of being (which is to say, the continual genesis of sense): a description which presupposes the depth operations of *Stiftung*. I argue that it is in and through the concept of *Stiftung* that Merleau-Ponty ultimately evokes the living logic of beings as flesh.
2.A.i. Husserl on *Fundierung* and *Stiftung*

For Husserl, the concept of *Fundierung* describes the structure of intentional consciousness in the now: the reciprocal, two-way relation between synthetic acts and constituted senses, and between different levels of constitution. But static phenomenology in general, and relations of *Fundierung* in particular, cannot account for the unity of intentional consciousness as the perpetual (re)integration of a dynamic field of synthetic processes; it cannot account for the passive syntheses (i.e., syntheses which are not accomplishments of intentional consciousness) whereby the contents and levels of consciousness are always already bound together in a web of potential relations, a total system which acts of *Fundierung* simply presuppose. Husserl employs the concept of *Stiftung* to designate these passive, genetic processes of sedimentation and reactivation which form the ground of all static, founding-founded relations. *Stiftung* is the depth-process animating and uniting the relations of *Fundierung* which compose the “surface” (i.e., that which can be originally given to consciousness through immediate or reflective intuition) of intentional consciousness.

In *Logical Investigations II*, Husserl defines *Fundierung* as “a relationship of necessary connection” – between parts within a whole, or between a whole and its parts – whereby, “according to a law of essence,” the founded term is dependent upon the founding term for its possibility. *Fundierung* becomes methodologically central to “static,” eidetic analysis once Husserl overcomes the psychologistic prejudices of the *Logical Investigations*, and henceforth describes relations of dependence within constituting consciousness between what he comes to call “noetic” (sense-bestowing) acts of synthesis and their correlates, “noematic” contents.

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As Merleau-Ponty explains in *PhP*, the methodological value of the concept of *Fundierung* lies in its ability to describe necessity as grounded in contingency, and to do so without reducing one to the other; the “content” (founding) is the necessary condition for the possibility of the “form” (founded), but the form cannot be deduced from the content because the latter could have supported an indeterminate range of other forms.628

In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl explicitly describes *Fundierung* as a merely static relation, inadequate for explaining the unity of consciousness and the world over time:

[…] the whole of conscious life is unified synthetically. Conscious life is therefore an all-embracing “cogito,” synthetically comprising all particular conscious processes that ever become prominent, and having its all-embracing cogitatum, founded [fundiert] at different levels on the manifold particular cogitata. But this founding [*Fundierung*] does not signify a building up in the temporal sequence of a genesis, since […] any imaginable particular subjective process is only a prominence within a total consciousness always presupposed as unitary.629

Descriptions via relations of *Fundierung* cannot explain the unity of conscious life, because they presuppose that unity, and thus its “genesis” via “a building up in the temporal sequence”—a process of sedimentation. Husserl identifies “[t]he fundamental form of this universal [passive] synthesis” as “the all-embracing consciousness of internal time,” the correlate of which “is immanent temporality itself,” the “horizon” of all possible syntheses.630 He describes the genesis and dynamic permanence of this horizon of possible egoic syntheses, as well as of its meaning-correlate, the horizon of possible sense-fulfillments (i.e., the sub-intentional co-advent of possibilities for the unities of the ego and of its correlates), in terms of, not relations of *Fundierung*, but processes of *Stiftung* whereby “[e]very evidence ‘sets up’ or ‘institutes’ [stiftet] for me an abiding possession,” an instituted habituality or tradition of conscious life.631

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630 Ibid., §18:81.
631 Ibid., §27:95.
Husserl’s gradual articulation of the concept of Stiftung coincides with his turn toward a “genetic” (and then, perhaps, “generative”) phenomenology.632 In *Ideas II* and *Cartesian Meditations*, he employs of Urstiftung (“primal establishment”) and Stiftung (“establishment”) to describe the co-advent and development of general “styles” of the ongoing, passive synthesis of the ego and of experience.633 Then, in *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, he explicitly distinguishes between the three moments which comprise the total process of Stiftung: Urstiftung, Nachstiftung (“reestablishment”), and Endstiftung (“final establishment”): respectively, the birth of a tradition; the reactivation or re-accomplishment of the tradition as handed down, which is never a pure repetition of the initial institution, but always a transformative reactivation of the total past which it inaugurated; and the making-explicit of a dimension of truth which the inherited tradition implicitly sketched out on its horizon, the birth of a new tradition in and through which the inherited is both transcended and preserved.634 For Husserl, whereas Fundierung designates a static relation of essential necessity between abstractly isolated acts or senses, Stiftung designates a living event, indissociably the structural possibility and the progressive realization of the dynamic history of a sense. It is with the concept of Stiftung that he opens the horizon for an ontologization of his phenomenology, which Merleau-Ponty takes up and makes explicit.

632 Merleau-Ponty mentions the distinction between “genetic phenomenology” and “constructive [generative] phenomenology” in the Preface to *PhP*, though he does not explicitly employ it here (Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 7). In *HLP*, he refers to the “common source” or “third dimension between the series of events and intemporal sense” (between the sensible and the ideal, the visible and the invisible) as “depth history or the genesis of ideality,” seeming to equate genetic and generative phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, *HLP*, 6 / Merleau-Ponty, *RC*, 161). He ultimately seems to associate generative phenomenology with the ontologization called for by genetic phenomenology itself (Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in *Signs*, 179/291-292).


Heidegger’s turn to ontology, like Merleau-Ponty’s to follow, is an effort to overcome the “philosophy of consciousness” by recovering the question of the non-phenomenal ground of phenomena as such, which has been covered over by the traditional presupposition of the metaphysical primacy of subject-object relations: what Heidegger calls the “metaphysics of presence,” the tacit, inherited assumption that “what is […] must be […] present” to consciousness in the temporal “now,” whereas “what cannot be demonstrated as […] present just is not at all.”

Heidegger attempts to recover the genuine question of the being of beings— which, as the manner of being of beings, cannot itself be, is not a being—through an interrogation taking as its point of departure, not “subject-object” relations, but Dasein (literally “being there,” the being for whom its own being is a question): the ontological structure of possibilities and inevitabilities that discloses itself in the unfolding of a human life, which is not itself “human,” but the style of advent of human beings as such, and thus the condition for the possibility of all disclosure of beings, whether in ontic interpretations (e.g., as “subjects” or “objects”) or in their ontological truth (i.e., the total structure of their advent).

Dasein unfolds its inevitabilities and possibilities for being in the world as that being “for-the-sake-of” whose occurrence beings advent as “significant,” so that the disclosure of Dasein’s ontological structure is simultaneously the disclosure of things, others, and the world. Heidegger thus “destroys” or “deconstructs” philosophies of consciousness as a covering over of the meaning of the being of beings, which is the mortal temporality or “being-towards-death” of Dasein expressed in and through “care”: Dasein’s its inevitably finding itself absorbed in dealing with other beings.

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636 Ibid., §9:42, §12:56.
637 Ibid., §26:118, §18:87.
Heidegger makes limited use of the concept of *Stiftung* in *Being and Time*. It does, however, appear in his discussion of *Zeichenstiftung*, “establishing a sign,” where the latter designates “a useful thing at hand which, in its character of being a useful thing, takes over the ‘work’ of letting things at hand become *conspicuous*”; signs operate as an inconspicuous, transparent medium through which the being of beings (and, in particular, the being of *Dasein*) is able to disclose itself, so that language is the site where beings can be allowed to show themselves from themselves, rather than being covered over in use.\(^\text{639}\)

A year after the publication of *Being and Time*, in 1928, Heidegger expands on the notion of *Stiften* as a moment of the disclosure of being in “On the Essence of Ground.” Despite the striking similarity between Heidegger’s tripartite structure of *Grund* and Husserl’s *Urstiftung-Nachstiftung-Endstiftung* (genesis-reactivation-transformation) schematization of the “universal a priori of history,” Heidegger here makes exclusive use of the gerund, *Stiften*, designating “establishing” purely in the sense of an operation, in contrast to the ambiguous sense of *Stiftung* as a being and an operation in Husserl’s thought.\(^\text{640}\)

Heidegger employs *Stiften* to designate the first of three indissociable moments of the ontological structure of *Grund*: “(1) grounding as establishing [*Stiften*]; (2) grounding as taking up a basis [*Bodennehmen*]; (3) grounding as the grounding of something [*Begründen*].”\(^\text{641}\) *Stiften* is that “projection of the ‘for the sake of’” whereby *Dasein* establishes a world, a horizon of beings susceptible to disclosure; because *Dasein* inevitably projects the world-horizon from *within* the world, it simultaneously transcends this totality of beings (i.e., the projected horizon exceeds beings as such) *and* falls into absorption by beings (i.e., it projects a world only *in and through* the second moment, “taking up a basis,” which is attunement to beings, and occurs in

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\(^\text{639}\) Ibid., §16:80-81.
everydayness as forgetful “absorption”). The third moment, the “grounding of something,” is the “transcendental grounding” or “ontological truth” whose self-concealment enables “all becoming-manifest of beings (ontic truth)”; the being of beings (the structure of their transcendental grounding) is unveiled (as ontological truth) in every advent of beings, but remains concealed insofar as Dasein is absorbed in caring for merely ontic possibilities of beings other than itself. These three moments of grounding – respectively, “possibility, basis, account” – are “equioriginary [...] within the unity of transcendence,” which is to say, they irrupt together “from the finite freedom of Dasein,” so that Dasein’s “freedom for ground” is both the inevitability of its everyday self-forgetting, and the possibility for it to explicitly disclose its ownmost possibilities in authentic freedom. Here, as in Being and Time, Heidegger stresses the identity of the possibilities for the disclosure of significance and of Dasein’s authentic freedom: “Freedom is the origin of the principle of reason [ground]; for in freedom, in the unity of excess and withdrawal, the grounding of things that develops and forms itself as ontological truth is grounded.”

Merleau-Ponty was familiar with “On the Essence of Ground,” which he references in Notes de cours au collège de France: 1958-1961, immediately following a discussion of Husserl’s shift, from static constitutional analyses, to genetic analyses of relations of Stiftung. In these notes, Merleau-Ponty focuses primarily, however, on “The Principle of Reason” (1957), where Heidegger criticizes his own “On the Essence of Ground” for giving a merely negative account of the fact that ontic Grund (reason) “does not disclose Being as such, as a purely acausal principle,” without positively articulating the transcendental sense of Grund: being as Abgrund – which Merleau-Ponty renders as abîme (“abyss”) and fond abyssal (“abyssal ground”) – or

643 Ibid., 130-131.
644 Ibid., 131.
645 Ibid., 132.
“dimension,” defined as “measure in the sense of capacity to measure, i.e. standard of measure + space of possible measures,” as a style of being in the world, and the field of possibilities that it outlines. Merleau-Ponty’s ontologization of the Husserlian notion of Stiftung – simultaneously the what (“institution”) and the how (“instituting”) of the genesis of sense – is, at the same time, a taking up of Heidegger’s conception of the being of beings as dimensionalization: as the operation whereby beings are, which is not itself a being. Following Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty conceives of the structure of the advent of beings as a necessarily non-phenomenal process of phenomenalization:

To grasp language is to grasp that Geschichte [history], that enjambment, that deployment of the Stiftung, which is far beyond “lived states.” [This is] that which Heidegger calls Besinnung [mindfulness or consideration], i.e. “just the opposite” of the return to Erlebnisse [lived experiences].

Here, Merleau-Ponty traces Heidegger’s path beyond Husserl’s explicit thought, toward the horizontal impensé (“unthought”) of Husserlian phenomenology: the unlived (and, for Merleau-Ponty, living) ground of lived experiences as such. He conceives being as the style of unfolding of a temporality which, as a “historical “inscription” (as instituted), “inscribes itself” (institutes itself); being is “that inscription which embraces all and which adheres to that which has been gestiftet [instituted] at a point in time[,] once and for all, [which] cannot not have been: being is that which is not nothing.”

Despite, however, taking up the notion of the abyssal ground of beings from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty develops a divergent conception of the relationship between the ontic and the ontological—one already hinted at in the divergence between Husserl’s deployment of Stiftung and Heidegger’s deployment of Stiften, as well as in the above-quoted passage, where Merleau-Ponty states that being is “not nothing.” Heidegger conceives “ontological difference” – i.e., the

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647 Ibid., 109, 112 (my translation).
648 Ibid., 129 (my translation).
difference between beings and being, the difference between what exists (the “ontic”) and how existence happens (the “ontological”) – as a difference between “things” and “the nothing”: being is no-thing, and it is this very nothingness of being which allows beings to be. Merleau-Ponty, however, tends to place “ontological difference” in guillemets, because he conceives of being as beings insofar as they perform “ontological functions” (insofar as they originate, preserve, and transform their own styles of existing), so that “there is dimensionality of every fact and facticity of every dimension.” He thus places the concept of “the ontic” on the same, abstract plane as “the ‘Erlibnisse’ [experiences], ‘sensations,’ ‘judgments’ — (the objects, the ‘represented,’ in short all idealizations of the Psyche and of Nature) all the bric-a-brac of those positive psychic so-called ‘realities’,” which are “in reality abstractly carved out from the ontological tissue.” The concept of “ontic beings” is an idealization formed by intellectually separating beings, qua given, from the ontological functioning of those very same beings whereby they manifest themselves.

Thus, in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of visible and invisible being, “the visible” is not synonymous with “the ontic” – the visible could, abstractly, be described as “ontic” insofar as it is given, and thus non-operative, but this covers over its simultaneous ontological status qua living, “brute perception,” as a field of processes of co-individuation through interpenetration – and nor is “the invisible” synonymous with “the ontological.” The invisible in the broadest sense encompasses not only ontological operations (“the existentials of the visible, its dimensions, its non-figurative inner framework”), but also what is appresentively perceived (“what is not actually visible, but could be”), sensibles which cannot be seen, and “the spoken,” which is to say, sense crystallized in language, “the Cogito.” Insofar as these latter three types of invisible (appresentations, non-visible sensibles, and spoken speech) can “be seen as […] thing[s]” – i.e.,

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652 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 270/323-324.
653 Ibid., 253/307.
654 Ibid., 257/310-311.
can be perceived and, as such, can be idealized into “positive entities” through language – they are not ontological, not invisible in the *strict sense*, whereas, insofar as they function in the advent of sense, they cannot be given as actual, and are indeed ontological.\textsuperscript{655}

The body, things, and others can be said to advent as “ontic” beings insofar as they are actually given (i.e., actually experienced, capable of being experienced, or taken up in language), but they also weave the fabric of the ontological insofar as they are *fungierende* (“functioning” or “operative”): insofar as they transcend their actual givenness by *functioning* (in and through correlations with other givens) as their own *becoming-given* and *becoming-significant*, which is to say, insofar as they are “spatializing-temporalizing,” are operations of “integration-differentiation” (individuation through interpenetration) which continually reintegrate the total field of “wild Being” as a “universal diacritical system.”\textsuperscript{656} The “vertical order” of advent *is* the depth, the *de jure invisible* lining, of the “horizontal order” of actual (i.e., explicitly lived) beings and relations.\textsuperscript{657} As Merleau-Ponty puts it, while discussing operative speech in *HLP*: “We do not see the operation, since it operates. We see what would be missing without it; we circumscribe [the operation] as what makes speech be a ‘speaking of’… and not be the conscious having of the idealities in implied in speech.”\textsuperscript{658} Thus, the total sense of a being consists in the *field* of its immanent possibilities for relating to other beings (which is articulated through the intertwining of its style with those of other beings), and in the *horizon* of possibilities for its transcendence via the opening of new fields (which is opened through the intertwining of its field with those other beings).

\textsuperscript{655} Ibid., 257/310-311.
\textsuperscript{656} Ibid., 231/285, 244/297-298.
\textsuperscript{657} Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 183/ 239-240.
\textsuperscript{658} Merleau-Ponty, *HLP*, 44/53.
2.A.iii. Merleau-Ponty on Fundierung and Stiftung

Turning to the main body of my investigation, I will attempt to show that Merleau-Ponty comes to distinguish between Fundierung, as a static account of the structure of lived experience, and Stiftung, as the underlying, living movement of sedimentation and reactivation. Stiftung, in the sense of Husserl’s genesis-reactivation-transformation schema, is a properly genetic concept, which ultimately mutates into an ontological one in Merleau-Ponty’s thought: into an articulation of the invisible inter-operations – the processes of individuation through intertwining – of sensible and sentient beings whereby they simultaneously accomplish their own realization and the advent of their sense. Whereas Fundierung describes a sense as given, Stiftung explains sense in terms of its ontological possibility and structure of advent; Stiftung gives voice to the depth processes accomplished by beings qua flesh, of which relations of Fundierung comprise the surface.

Thus, I agree with Landes’s definition of Fundierung – as “a paradoxical ‘two-way’ relationship between terms” in which the founded “emerges from and articulates” the founding – as well as with his contention that the definition of “institution” shifts over the course of Merleau-Ponty’s work.\(^{659}\) In PhP, as Landes points out, Stiftung is synonymous with “the establishing of a tradition as an open trajectory of future actions,” but it subsequently takes on an expanded sense, in relation to (or perhaps, Landes concedes, replacing) the “logic of expression,” as “a coherent deformation of the past and the present that opens a field of future expression.”\(^{660}\) “Institution” comes to designate the rebirth and remaking of the past in the advent – on the basis of the past itself – of the present, which is simultaneously the opening of a horizon of the future.

And yet, it is easy to see how a reader of PhP, in particular, might take Fundierung and Stiftung for synonyms:

\(^{659}\) Landes, The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary, 86.
\(^{660}\) Ibid., 113 (bolding removed).
Phenomenology calls the relation between matter and form a relation of *Fundierung* [...]. Form absorbs content to the point that content ultimately appears as a mere mode of form [...]. But reciprocally, even in this intellectual sublimation, content remains radically contingent as the initial institution [*le premier établissement*] or founding [*la fondation*][661] of knowledge and action, as the first grasp of being or of value whose concrete richness will never be exhausted by knowledge or action, and whose spontaneous method they will everywhere renew.  

If Merleau-Ponty were simply equating *Fundierung* with *l’établissement*, this passage would display a striking insensitivity to Husserl’s distinction between the concepts—but that is not the case. Merleau-Ponty describes *Fundierung* as a two-way, constitutive relation between content and form (wherein the content sketches possibilities of form, and the form actualizes a possibility of the content), whereas *Stiftung* (which he translates as *la fondation*) designates the content in its fecundity, which is to say, in its (re)establishing *functionality*: as the activity of passivity, the functioning of the actual whereby it opens horizons of the possible. In other words, “institution” designates the existential depth or weight of a founded sense, the operative dimensionalization of the content which conceals itself in enabling the form to appear. 

From *PhP* on, Merleau-Ponty maintains a close and consistent association between *Fundierung* and the *figure-fond* (“figure-background”) *Gestalt* structure of perception and behavior qua expressive, so that *la figure* and *le fond* in their technical senses are associated with, respectively, *le fondé* and *le fondant*.  

He describes “freedom,” in the culminating chapter of *PhP*, as a movement of *Fundierung*, which is to say, as the taking up of a given (*le fondé*) to open a new field and project a new horizon (*le fondant*): “As Husserl said, there is a ‘field of freedom’ and a ‘conditioned freedom,’ not because freedom is absolute within the limits of this field and nothing outside of it […], but because I have immediate possibilities and more distant possibilities,” so that the body-subject is “solicited” by the given insofar as their styles together 

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[661] A footnote Merleau-Ponty appends to this word reads: “We are translating Husserl’s favorite term, *Stiftung*” (*Merleau-Ponty, PhP*, 521n66/n160).

[662] *Merleau-Ponty, PhP*, 159-160.

[663] Ibid., 87-88, 159-160.
articulate a certain field of possibilities, and is “open to an infinity of possibilities” insofar as the ultimate horizon of all fields is the total field of the world itself.664

Merleau-Ponty reiterates his convention of translating Stiftung by la fondation and l’établissement in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” but he also moves toward a clearer articulation of Stiftung as the creative efficacy of all – and particularly, cultural – enduring acquisitions:

Husserl has used the fine word Stiftung—foundation [fondation], institution [établissement]—to designate, first, the unlimited fecundity of each present which, precisely because it is singular and passes, can never stop having been and thus being universally; but above all to designate that fecundity of the products of a culture which continue to have value after their appearance and which open a field of investigations in which they perpetually come to life again. It is thus that the world as soon as he has seen it, his first attempts at painting, and the whole past of painting deliver up a tradition to the painter—that is, Husserl remarks, the power to forget origins and to give to the past not a survival, which is the hypocritical form of forgetfulness, but a new life, which is the noble form of memory.665

While Anglophone commentators often cite this passage as evidence that Merleau-Ponty defines Stiftung as “foundation” – in the sense of a synonym for Fundierung (a word which does not appear in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”) – fondation is, again, more accurately translated as “institution” because, like in PhP, Merleau-Ponty presents it as a translation of Stiftung. Indeed, he here defines Stiftung entirely in the language of genetic, rather than static, phenomenology. In general, Stiftung designates the manner in which each and every present opens an indeterminate horizon of “virtual” (actually possible) futures, but, particularly and “above all,” it designates the power of cultural institutions of sense – symbolic styles of coexistence and communication – to call for, and be reborn in, new fields of possibility.

Merleau-Ponty’s explicit ontologization of the concept of Stiftung gets under way in IP (1954-1955), where he provides an account commonly read in parallel with “The Philosopher and

664 Ibid., 518-519.
His Shadow” (1959). In both of these works, he defines Stiftung as a “double relation of Fundierung” (un double rapport de Fundierung) or “double-edged relationship of Fundierung” (un rapport de Fundierung à double sense), even though Fundierung is already a “two-way relation,” wherein “the founded term is presented as a determination or making explicit of the founding term […] and yet […] it is only through the founded that the founding appears.”

Although this new definition of Stiftung requires clarification, two aspects are immediately apparent. In the first place, whereas Fundierung is a double relation – a relation between two terms (the form and the content) and two vectors (the vector of “anticipation” whereby the founding term makes possible and calls for the founded term, and the vector of “fulfillment” whereby the founded term determines and makes explicit an implicit possibility of the founding term), Stiftung is a fourfold relation, composed of two vectors of anticipation and two vectors of fulfillment, although it is not yet clear how many terms it involves. In the second place, Stiftung is not a “horizontal” relation (i.e., a “frontal,” rectilinear relation of relative precedence between factual events or givens arranged in a causal series, which is always abstract, and which becomes “mythical” insofar as it is taken for a description of “reality in itself”), but rather, what Merleau-Ponty calls a “vertical,” “lateral,” or “oblique” relation: a movement articulated through the genesis, sedimentation, reactivation, and transformation of sense, and unfolding, not in the horizontal order of events, but in the vertical order of advent, which is the operative sense or “living depth” of the order of given events.

It seems, however, that Merleau-Ponty could be describing Stiftung as a “double relation of Fundierung” in either one of two senses, both of which involve four vectors, but which differ concerning the number of terms involved: either in the sense of what he calls a “chained

integration” (a three-term relation wherein the first term founds the second, and the second founds the third, so that the second term is founded in relation to the first, and founding in relation to the third), or in the sense of what I will call a “reciprocal integration” (a two-term relation wherein each of the terms is both founding and founded in relation to the other). 668

Although these two definitions of Stiftung initially appear at odds, Merleau-Ponty in fact articulates them alongside each other in *IP*, 669 and again in “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” 670 so that grasping this more developed conception of Stiftung entails bringing to light the relationship between the two definitions. I will therefore proceed by explicating the sense of Stiftung, first as a “chained integration,” and then as a “reciprocal integration,” before attempting to show that these seemingly divergent definitions actually complement and require one another: as the operative logic of the depth dimension of advent, Stiftung is simultaneously a relation of three terms, and a relation of two.

In *IP*, Merleau-Ponty provides numerous accounts of Stiftung as a “chained integration” (*intégration en chaîne*) – as a three-term relation wherein the first term founds the second, and the second founds the third – amongst which I will take as exemplary the relation between perception, language, and mathematics: “the something in general to which formalized mathematics refers gets its sense from spoken being, and the latter gets its sense from perceived being. Double relation of *Fundierung*.“ 671 Spoken being is founded upon perceived being, and mathematical being is founded upon spoken being. That is to say, the style of perceived being draws a field, and opens a horizon, of silent “symbolism,” certain immanent possibilities of which are taken up and articulated by spoken being as “significations” via processes of “idealization,” with the latter understood as a “sublimation” which renders a horizontal sense of perceived being

“more formalized,” and thus more general in its range of possible invocations. Spoken being is
the formalization of an implicit sense originally offered by perceived being, whereby the latter is
generalized and integrated into a new, total field of significatory possibilities; mathematical
being, in turn, is the further formalization of a horizontal sense offered by spoken being, whereby
the latter is generalized and integrated into a new, total field of mathematical possibilities.672 At
each stage of the process, the formalized sense (the “figure”) carries with it a wake or “halo of
sense,” an “umbilical cord” which is, ultimately, its bond “to the Lebenswelt and the past,” so that
spoken being is directly – and mathematical being through it – “supported […] by the perceived
world in general,” which is to say that all sense, no matter how formalized (and, thus, no matter
how forgetful of its origins), “remains in the field opened by the first idealizations,” by the silent
symbolism of perceived being.673

And yet, shortly after the above-quoted passage, Merleau-Ponty describes Stiftung as a
reciprocal integration (between two terms, rather than three) whereby “[e]very institution
involves this double aspect, end and beginning, Endstiftung at the same time as Urstiftung.”674 In
order for me to live the past, the present, and the future as dimensions of one total “history” – in
order for history to give its sense to me – “I have to remake it, but my interactions with history
form me” so that, in the order of advent, “to receive is to give, in effect, but to give is to
receive.”675 Thus, the articulation of the Urstiftung’s implicit sense is, simultaneously and
inseparably, the forgetting of its status as originary; with the advent of the Endstiftung (of a new
dimension of being) the Urstiftung is lived in this new dimension as if it were secondary to it, a
“mere semblance” of “true reality,” even though the Endstiftung was born in and through a

672 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 54-55/94-96.
673 Ibid., 53-55/92-95.
674 Ibid., 58-59/99-100.
675 Ibid., 60/101.
sublimation of the *Urstiftung*’s own, immanent possibilities for self-transcendence. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, in “The Philosopher and His Shadow”:

Logical objectivity derives from carnal intersubjectivity on the condition that it has been forgotten as carnal intersubjectivity, and it is carnal intersubjectivity itself which produces this forgetfulness by wending its way toward logical objectivity. Thus, the forces of the constitutive field do not move in one direction only; they turn back upon themselves. [...] These relationships are found again at each stage of constitution. The perceived thing rests upon the body proper. [...] We can just as well say that the entire functioning of the body proper hangs upon the perceived thing.676

At the primordial level of brute, lived-living perception, sensible being is both founding and founded in relation to sentient being, and vice-versa; this fourfold relation of integration-differentiation repeats itself at every hinge between dimensions of being. An immanent possibility of carnal intersubjectivity is fulfilled in the advent of logical objectivity *insofar as* carnal intersubjectivity is forgotten (or, equally, *forgets itself*) in the dimension of logical objectivity, becoming the latter’s retrospective horizon, a virtuality rather than a lived dimension; but the virtualization-forgetting of carnal intersubjectivity is equally the forgetting of the contingency of logical objectivity as only one among an indeterminate horizon of possible idealizations of carnal intersubjectivity, so that logical objectivity forgets the actual contingency of its own establishment, and gives itself to thought *as if* its truth were “eternally necessary,” as if it preceded its own (virtualized-forgotten) advent as a *historical a priori*: as a truth which became, is still becoming, and could potentially be replaced by another via the creation-discovery of its own immanent, but as yet unarticulated, sense. Merleau-Ponty describes this co-advent of ideality and the perceived world through reciprocal integration, again, in *HLP*: “Language is borne by our relation to the world and to others, and language also bears and makes our relation to the world and to others.”677

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677 Merleau-Ponty, *HLP*, 7 / Merleau-Ponty, *RC*, 164. I am drawing on a limited portion of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the concept of *Stiftung* in *HLP* in my explication of his account in *IP*: specifically, that
Thus, *Stiftung* as reciprocal integration can be schematized as a fourfold relation of [i.] prospective anticipation (of a possible future-present), [ii.] retrospective fulfillment (of the actual past), [iii.] retrospective “anticipation” (of a virtual past), and [iv.] prospective “fulfillment” (of the virtual necessity of the present):

[i.] The *Urstiftung*, as an actual (not-yet-past) present, is the opening of an implicit horizon in and through the advent of an explicit sense of its present. This horizon is the unarticulated “surplus of sense” whereby the *Urstiftung* always already calls for the *Endstiftung* as a contingent fulfillment of its sense, which is both prepared and transcended by the *Urstiftung*’s total horizon.\(^{678}\)

[ii.] The *Endstiftung*, as an actual present (in which the *Urstiftung* is a past present), responds to the appeal of the *Urstiftung*, opening a new field of sense in its own present through a contingent fulfillment of the *Urstiftung*’s horizon: contingent because it selects for a single possibility among an indeterminate range of others.\(^{679}\)

[iii.] The *Urstiftung*, as a sedimented past-present, becomes virtualized through its reactivation as the past-horizon of the *Endstiftung*. The actual *Urstiftung*’s horizon of sense is preserved *in and through* the forgetting of its openness, of the non-actualized possibilities outlined on it, so that it appears to have been the *necessity*, rather than the *possibility*, of the *Endstiftung*.\(^{680}\)

[iv.] The *Endstiftung*, insofar as itself becomes a sedimented past-present, becomes available for reactivation in subsequent *Nachstiftungen* or *Endstiftungen* insofar as its contingency is forgotten, so that it will be lived as an absolute, rather than historical, *a priori*; the virtualization of the *Urstiftung* into the “necessary cause” of the *Endstiftung* is simultaneously the virtualization of the *Endstiftung* into the “necessary effect” of the *Urstiftung*.\(^{681}\)

But then, the two accounts of *Stiftung* – as a chained or a reciprocal integration – are, in fact, equivalent. In a chained integration, the availability of the second term to become the foundation of the third is the forgetting of the second term’s status as founded upon the first. Returning to the example of the relation between perceived, spoken, and mathematical being, it is now clear that the fulfillment of the inarticulate, surplus sense of perceived being (the *Urstiftung*) is the
forgetting of its horizon in the advent of spoken being (the *Endstiftung*), and that this forgetting is simultaneously the becoming-available of spoken being as *Urstiftung* of a new *Endstiftung* (mathematical being).\textsuperscript{682} The *Endstiftung* is only realized as such, in reflective recollection, once it has ceased to function as such in the present, which is to say, once it has been taken up as the *Urstiftung* of a new *Endstiftung*: “We must lose in order to have, but this possession of the developed past never consoles itself for not having arrived before the moment of the loss, and is the presence that memory seeks.”\textsuperscript{683}

Although Merleau-Ponty, like Husserl, accomplishes his initial articulation of *Stiftung* through a doubling of *Fundierung*, his progressive development of the concept of *Stiftung* marks – again, as it did for Husserl – a passage in his style of thought, from analyses of intentional consciousness (however “tacit”), to truly radical genetic investigations of the primordial ground of lived experience in general.\textsuperscript{684} Whereas *Fundierung* articulates the explicit-implicit structure of a given, *Stiftung* articulates the ongoing co-genesis of the actual and the possible, explaining (in terms of their style of advent and primordial ground) the structures which founding-founded relations merely describe, articulating that “true history” which is “[I]ived and unrecognized like every dimension.”\textsuperscript{685} For Merleau-Ponty, however, the concept of *Stiftung* becomes, from *IP* onward, the means to an explicit ontologization of genetic phenomenology, the “solution to the difficulties found in the philosophy of consciousness” that dogged his efforts in *PhP*: most fundamentally, the difficulty of reconceiving of what are traditionally described as relations between “pure activity” and “pure passivity” (e.g., the relation, as he initially articulates it, between intentional acts of the “explicit cogito,” and “habits” or sedimented styles of the “tacit

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\textsuperscript{682} Ibid., 31/37.
\textsuperscript{683} Merleau-Ponty, *IP*, 198/258.
\textsuperscript{685} Merleau-Ponty, *IP*, 25/61.
cogito”). These problems dissipate if the “subject” is conceived as an “instituted and instituting subject, but inseparably, and not a constituting subject,” because it then becomes apparent “that the subject is not instantaneous and that the other person is not merely the negative of myself” insofar as “the instituted exists between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to one selfsame world.”

This means that “[t]he individual” – the instituted-instituting subject – “[is] the passage of a freedom” wherein “[w]e advance by recoiling, we do not choose directly, but obliquely, but we nevertheless do what we want”; “choice” is a “process,” the already-prepared reactivation of a sedimented, general style of engagement—not the fiat of some supposedly absolute, transparent subjectivity, but the life of “an operative intentionality,” the “Stiftung of a future.”

The ontologization of the concept Stiftung becomes even more explicit in Nature (1956-1960), where Merleau-Ponty again employs it to conceive the genesis of ideality in and through the functioning of perceived being itself, and employs the language of “founding,” by way of contrast, in his discussion of Husserl’s attempt, and failure, “to overcome the duality” between “the world of idealizations” and the “prereflective world,” where the latter functions as both “founding [un fondant] and founded [un fondé]” relative to the former, as both the possibility of reflective consciousness, and what is “revealed” (created-discovered) in reflection. He has come to recognize even the language of a “double relation of Fundierung,” inherited from Husserl’s eidetic method, as relatively abstract.

It is in HLP that Merleau-Ponty decisively goes beyond the static phenomenological vocabulary of “double relations of Fundierung,” instead defining relations of Stiftung as “simultaneity,” as the “existential eternity” of the relation between beings and sense – and,
equally, between their intertwining and their individuation – in their co-advent. Speaking of Husserl’s shift from constitutive to genetic phenomenology during his investigation of the relationship between “ideality” and “speech” in “The Origin of Geometry,” Merleau-Ponty states that “[t]he bi-directional Fundierung becomes ‘simultaneity’”: ideality and speech do not arise through a process of reciprocal intentional constitution (not even a “tacit” one), but through the reactivation of sedimented styles of perception and behavior, taken up in and through methods of reactivation which are themselves sedimented-reactivated styles of interrogation. Here he associates fonder with Fundierung, and both of them with static, “constitutional” phenomenology, as opposed to the phenomenology of “operative intentionality,” which, “if Husserl had recognized the full implications of the “mutation of [his] concepts,” would have led him to explicitly “make the passage to ontology”:

[In Husserl’s later works, particularly the Crisis of European Sciences] language stops being founded [être fondé]. Becomes the support of ideality. As the support, does it become founding [fondant]? Neither: the idea of Simultaneity (for example, the simultaneity of the originary present which is not between present and future). [I]deality-language, constituting consciousness-language becomes simultaneous.

Merleau-Ponty identifies “simultaneity” with Ineinander (intertwining or interpenetration), as well as with “the written” qua “Speech”—qua “sedimentation” and “‘passive’ thought” (i.e., the living sense of the in-between).

Although the words Fundierung and Stiftung do not appear in the drafted text of VI, Merleau-Ponty does make use of Stiftung, Urstiftung, Endstiftung, and urstiften in his

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690 Merleau-Ponty, HLP, 54/65, 63/77.
691 Ibid., 54/65, 65/79-80.
692 Ibid., 53/65.
693 Ibid., 58/70.
695 Ibid., 173/227, 209/262, 221/275, 224/277, 258/311, 259/312.
696 Ibid., 176/230.
697 Ibid., 219/273.
working notes. As in HLP, he once again defines Stiftung, without reference to Fundierung, as the simultaneous advent of intertwined terms, and the simultaneity of inscription and reinscription. Thus, “the simultaneous Urstiftung of time and space” is the co-genesis of an intertwined “historical landscape and a quasi-geographical inscription of history” whereby philosophy is confronted with the “[f]undamental problem” of “the sedimentation and the reactivation” (the Urstiftung and the Nachstiftung) of historical space and time.

The transcendental history articulated through movements of Stiftung is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in a working note, synonymous with “‘monumental life’” (la vie « monumentale ») or “initiation.” Husserl’s earlier method of “intentional analysis” can only describe sense as a fact within horizontal history, within a rectilinear series of intentional modifications wherein “every past sinngemäss [mutatis mutandis, analogously] has been present, i.e. its past being has been founded [a été fondé] in a presence,” whereas, in his later, genetic accounts, Husserl describes this horizontal Ablaufspänomen (“regression-phenomenon,” where Ablauen has the sense of both “initiation” and “receding”) of consciousness as concealing a “‘vertical’ past,” a fungierende or latent intentionality which is the intentionality within being.” Having, in HLP, explicitly recognized Fundierung as an incomplete reflection upon the structure of lived experiences, Merleau-Ponty here describes Stiftung as an activity of passivity, as a reference “from a ‘noema’ to a ‘noema’,” the being of beings as the co-functioning of beings whereby they simultaneously accomplish the advents of their visibility and their sense.

Fundierung has come to appear as an abstract description of the structure of a given, lived sense: a static description of an abstractly isolated moment of silent depth processes. Stiftung,

698 Although a working note appears to distinguish the “installation” of space from the “founding” of time, this is an inconsistency in Lingis’s translation, since “l’instauration” is rendered as “founding” (Merleau-Ponty, VI, 192/246).
699 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 259/312.
700 Ibid., 244/296.
701 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 244/296-297; Cairns, Guide for Translating Husserl, 2.
meanwhile, has taken on the role of an ontological concept, an articulation of the dynamic structure of living sense traced by “hyper-reflections” which strive to give voice to their own unthought ground in perception: by a “hyperdialectical” style of thinking which recognizes the abstract character of idealizations as such, because it recognizes that “Being is not made up of idealizations or of things said, [...] but of bound wholes where signification never is except in tendency,” where the “content” possesses a certain “ambiguity,” an “inertia” or weight whereby neither term is purely “positive” or “negative,” because each is positive (given) in and through the negativity (functioning) of the other, and vice-versa.\textsuperscript{702} Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of “Being” in \textit{VI} are descriptions of the fourfold process of \textit{Stiftung}, from which relations of \textit{Fundierung} are extracted by incomplete reflections, and wherein realization and virtualization flow in both directions simultaneously, wherein “the centripetal movement and the centrifugal movement are one sole movement.”\textsuperscript{703} In Merleau-Ponty’s outline of a new ontology, \textit{Stiftung} designates the life of the in-between, the genesis of sense accomplished in and through the folding of flesh: in and through the co-advent, via simultaneous intertwining-divergence, of the body, things, others, and their sense.\textsuperscript{704}

\textsuperscript{702} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 38/61, 94/129.
\textsuperscript{703} Ibid., 91/124-125.
\textsuperscript{704} Ibid., 173/227.
2.A. Conclusions

By way of concluding this section, I will compare my interpretation to two of the most comprehensive efforts to articulate the total development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought: Barbaras’s *Being of the Phenomenon*, and Landes’s *Paradoxes of Expression*. Whereas I wonder whether Barbaras may overstate the discontinuity between Merleau-Ponty’s earlier phenomenology and his later ontology, I am equally and conversely that Landes may overstate the continuity of Merleau-Ponty’s thought by portraying it as the progressive unfolding of a phenomenology and ontology of “expression.”

Contra Barbaras, I argue that, on account of Merleau-Ponty’s taking up of the Husserlian concept of *Fundierung* in *PhP*, the latter work contains, beyond a negative sketch of his subsequent ontology of “body” and “world,” a *positive* outline of his ontologization of phenomenology. Contra Landes, I argue that describing Merleau-Ponty’s thinking of the flesh as an “ontology of expression” (in the sense of an identification of the structure of being with the logic of expressive events) risks overemphasizing the continuity of his thought, and thereby obscuring the mutations undergone by the concept of *Stiftung*.

I agree with Barbaras that the total trajectory of Merleau-Ponty’s work can be productively articulated in terms of three major thematic periods: firstly, Merleau-Ponty undertakes phenomenological investigations of motility and perception which serve to critique, respectively, realist conceptions of behavior (as a mechanical-causal process), and intellectualist conceptions of consciousness (as an absolute spontaneity relative to a world of passive things); secondly, these phenomenologies are taken up in a “philosophy of expression” which conceives meaning as incarnate, and the body as expressive; finally, the philosophy of expression calls for a new ontology which uncovers the ground of expression (‘‘found[s] the phenomenon of

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705 The interpretation of the flesh as an ontology of expression was first put forward by Waldenfels (Waldenfels, “The Paradox of Expression,” 94); I agree with Landes’s critical assertion, that Waldenfels here accomplishes a merely eidetic analysis, but not a genuine interrogation (Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, 17).
expression”) by conceiving of the being of sensible and sensible-sensing beings as depth
operations of interweaving-individuation (“universal pregnancy and parturition”) whereby they
are not merely passive “bodies,” but living flesh.  

My hesitation concerns Barbaras’s dismissal of PhP as a “failure,” supposedly producing
only “negative” results:

[In PhP,] Merleau-Ponty never reaches the point of conceiving the identity and
the difference of consciousness and its body together; in other words, he never
reaches the point of describing positively the fact that the body belongs neither to
the domain of the object nor to that of the subject.  

Although Merleau-Ponty’s continuing captivation by the presupposition of “philosophies of
consciousness” – i.e., the tacit assumption of an ontologically primary opposition of “pure
activity” and “pure passivity” – in PhP renders him there incapable of explaining the relationship
between bodies and sense, I concur with Landes that Merleau-Ponty does positively describe the
functioning of the body, its “expressive power,” in this work, and thereby opens an immanent
horizon of investigations which transcends the merely negative aim of “mak[ing] us see clearly
the irreducibility of the body to the objective order.” After all, PhP culminates in a description
of essentially situated “freedom” as a relation of Fundierung between situated bodies and sense: a
positive description which motivates his subsequent interrogations of expression, which, in turn,
call for an ontology capable of explaining the ground of expression—the sense (i.e., the structure
of advent) of sense.  

Merleau-Ponty’s initial taking up of Fundierung, although it retroactively
appears abstract, positively describes the primordial expressivity of the body, which comes to
greater clarity in his subsequent investigations of phenomena of expression. PhP thus gives birth
to the implicit demand for an ontological explanation of expressivity, for an account of its

707 Ibid., 7-8.
708 Barbaras, The Being of the Phenomenon, 44; Landes, Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression,
79; Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 153.
709 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 518.
primordial ground, and this demand becomes explicit when Merleau-Ponty responds to it by reconceiving the relations between beings and sense as depth processes of Stiftung. The immanent horizon of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the expressivity of the body in *PhP* exceeds their explicit signification in the context of his work up to that point.

Turning to Landes, I find his account of Merleau-Pontian interrogation in terms of the “paradoxical logic of expression” both plausible and illuminating. Landes conceives events of expression as contingent and precarious, but also repeatable and transformable, stabilizations of ongoing processes: as “metastable equilibriums,” each of which constitutes an “enduring response to the weight of the past, the weight of the ideal, and the weight of the present situation,” so that a given expression simultaneously “inscribes” certain “actual” relations between beings, and “exscribes” a transcendent horizon of “virtual” or “potential” relations—respectively, individuating the related terms, and bringing about their (virtual, never “actual” or “existent”) intertwining. Landes describes the “logic of expression,” in other words, as a relation wherein an exscribed horizon is founded upon an inscription: a field of possible relations upon an actual relation. I agree that VI outlines an “ontology of expression” in the “weak” sense of an account of the primordial ground of phenomena of expression. I become hesitant, however, when Landes slides, from the latter claim, to an identification of the logic of expression with the being of beings—an ontology of expression in the “strong” sense. He argues that “[t]he paradoxical logic of expression is precisely the logic of the visible and the invisible,” so that “the fundamental metaphoricity” of experience—the horizon-structure of every present, of which metaphoric expressions are, on his reading, a “paradigm” case insofar as “[t]he metaphor inscribes relations, and excscribes all that would outstrip even the most thorough paraphrase”—“is sustained by the intertwinings brought about through expressions,” which leads him to

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710 Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, 38, 8, 13, 34.
“emphasize the phenomenon of expression itself and what I call the trajectory of sense as prior to the ontology of intertwining, which is indeed sustained by expressive bodies.”

There are passages in *HLP*, in particular, which can lend support to interpretations of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the flesh as an “ontology of expression” in the strong sense. Here, Merleau-Ponty identifies *Stiftung* with being (i.e., as the structure of ontological operativity itself, a “subterranean communication across time,” a “Vorhabe and taking up which re-creates”) and with expression: “[s]edimentation is expression” because “[r]eactivation is a property of man as a speaking being,” and, in particular, as a *writing* being, where writing is communication with an indeterminate horizon of others, “communication become virtual,” as Husserl puts it. For human beings, the sedimentation of sense in and through which the fabric of a specifically human world is woven happens through the written “as sublimation of speech beyond its empirical accomplishments” (as the realization of the possibility of speech to become the “preexistence of the ideal,” a “sedimentation which is remembering”), whereas a living being whose expressive behavior lacks the “human productivity of language and of the algorithm” temporalizes in a way which “only sediments within strict limits”; a being’s capacity to accomplish the sedimentation and reactivation of styles *is* its expressive capacity, insofar as the hyper-dialectic of genesis-sedimentation-reativation is *embodied* in and through events of expression.

And yet, even in the above-quoted passages, Merleau-Ponty seems to employ the language of “expression” to designate beings-sense qua *lived*, and the language of *Stiftung* to designate them qua *operative*: a pattern of usage particularly well exemplified by a Working Note in *VI*, where he describes “ontology” in the sense of hyper-reflection “as the expression of what is before expression and sustains it from behind.” I therefore remain hesitant to treat *Stiftung* as a

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714 Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 167/221.
mere synonym for, or elaboration of, the concept of expression, and wonder whether it may be
too hasty to say that Merleau-Ponty, in his articulation of the flesh of beings, simply transposes
his earlier account of the “expressive body” into the “ontological register.”\textsuperscript{715} As far as Landes’s
interpretation in particular is concerned, my doubts gravitate around two main points: on the one
hand, I am concerned about the manner in which Landes seeks to clarify Merleau-Ponty’s texts
via comparisons with those of other philosophers, often written after Merleau-Ponty’s death; on
the other, I worry that the “paradoxical” nature of expression, as Landes articulates it, verges on a
mixture of pure opposites, a “bad ambiguity,” as opposed to the “good ambiguity” of the relation
of simultaneity between an \textit{Urstiftung} and an \textit{Endstiftung}, and between intertwining and
individuation.\textsuperscript{716}

In the first place, Landes’s importation of Gilbert Simondon’s concepts of “metastability”
and “transductive logic” into his reading of Merleau-Ponty on the basis of “their shared
philosophical style” – which is “captured by the paradoxical logic of expression” – sometimes
seems to risk obscuring the originality of Merleau-Ponty’s thought.\textsuperscript{717} I am by no means
categorically opposed to clarifying Merleau-Ponty’s thought by way of comparisons with texts
that postdate his death. But if such comparisons are utilized as primary interpretive lenses,
without first explicating Merleau-Ponty’s thought on its own terms and in relation to his own
influences, I worry that it is difficult to guard against their becoming \textit{assimilations} of Merleau-
Ponty’s ideas to those which were supposed to illuminate them.

In the second place, and despite Landes’s explicit claims to the contrary, it often seems
that the “paradoxical” nature of the logic of expression consists in an abstract undecidability
between contradictory absolutes, as can be seen, for instance, in his statement that: “perception
[…] takes up the traces of sense in order to reperform them in a gesture between \textit{pure repetition}

\textsuperscript{715} Landes, \textit{Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression}, 179.
\textsuperscript{716} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 69/98, 182/235-236.
\textsuperscript{717} Landes, \textit{Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression}, 23.
and pure creation.” 718 “Ambiguity” in this sense sounds strikingly similar to “ambivalence” which Merleau-Ponty and Landes alike describe as “bad ambiguity”: “a ‘mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority’.” 719 I wonder, therefore, whether conceiving flesh as expressivity still yields a relatively abstract account of the becoming of beings. Rather than an “ontology of expression,” I maintain that what Merleau-Ponty outlines in his final works is better termed an “ontology of institution.” On the one hand, this terminology emphasizes the originality of Merleau-Ponty’s ontologization of genetic Husserlian phenomenology in a manner distinct from, although in dialogue with, Heideggerian ontology. On the other, it highlights the pivotal role played by Merleau-Ponty’s ultimate, ontologized conception of Stiftung, which enables him to overcome the ambivalence of his initial descriptions of the expressive body through an explicit, positive articulation of the fourfold movement of the co-genesis of beings and sense.

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718 Ibid., 151 (my italics).
719 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 69/98; Landes, Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression, 31.
2.B. Beyond the Cartesian Antinomies: Articulating the Flesh of Beings

In the preceding section, I provided an articulation of the total movement of Merleau-Ponty’s thought by tracing the development of the concept of *Stiftung*—which is to say, traced the evolution of the functioning of a word across Merleau-Ponty’s *corpus*. In the present section, I rearticulate this same evolution in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s grappling with the mind-body, self-others, and freedom-necessity antinomies. To remain entirely at the level of concepts, however, would yield a merely abstract account, one failing to enact precisely the indirect approach to ontology which I have thus far explicated. Thus, I open and close section 2.B by analyzing a concrete case from the neurological literature: the case of a patient referred to as “Michael,” who exhibited what has come to be called “acquired pedophilia” in conjunction with the growth of a brain tumor. My initial exposition of the case, in 2.B.i, provides a concrete articulation of the total field of “practice” and “thought” (i.e., behavior) in which Merleau-Ponty’s ontological mutation of *Stiftung* intervenes, and makes explicit the stakes: the very sense of “responsibility” and “morality.” After addressing each antinomy, in turn, in 2.B.ii-2.B.iv, I synthesize these accounts via a return to Michael’s case in my Conclusions.

As for my more “frontal” approach to the antinomies in 2.B.ii-2.B.iv, I here, for the sake of exegetical clarity, divide Merleau-Ponty’s thought into three fairly well-defined “stages.” As moments of a single process, however, each subsequent “stage” develops possibilities implicit in those prior, creating a new continuity of the whole by transforming the sense of the preceding efforts within which it is grounded, unfolding the instituted-instituting dialectic of a true history:

[A writer’s] expressive operation is renewed from *oeuvre* to *oeuvre*. Each work, as it has been said of the painter, is a step constructed by the writer himself upon which he installs himself in order to construct (with the same risk) another step and what is called the *oeuvre*—the sequence of these attempts—which is always broken off, whether it be by the end of life or through the exhaustion of his speaking power. […] Distinctions of figure and ground, sound and meaning, conception and execution are now blurred, as the limits of body and mind were previously. […] As Baudelaire already said, there are finished works which we
cannot say have ever been completed, and unfinished works which say what they meant. What is proper to expression is to never be more than approximate.\textsuperscript{720}

He begins, in \textit{SB} and \textit{PhP}, with a phenomenology of behavior and perception, foregrounding the interminable oscillation ("bad ambiguity") which results from attempting to understand these phenomena under the assumption that bodies are passively affected mechanisms, or that consciousness is pure spiritual activity. In either case, it is impossible to conceive of life – the existence of perceiving, motile, speaking beings in a single, shared world – as meaningful on account of the unbridgeable gap between, on the one hand, bodies and a world which are meaningless in themselves, and, on the other, the consciousnesses for which these bodies and this world “appear” as meaningful. His subsequent interrogation of phenomena of expression, from “Cézanne’s Doubt” to \textit{PW}, functions as an oblique approach to the question of the 	extit{being of meaning}, and reveals that meaning exists between – indeed, as the operative in-between of – what objectivist thought interprets as “positive entities.” Thus, from \textit{IP} to \textit{VI}, he gradually develops an ontology of the “being” (i.e., sense) of the sensible, articulating the dynamic connective tissue of beings which is realized in their expressivity. Flesh is the functioning of beings whereby their exteriority acquires an interiority, and their interiority realizes itself in exteriority. It is the movement of \textit{Stiftung} as the structure of being: the intertwining of styles of becoming-sensible and becoming-sensing, which is simultaneously the advent of beings, and the co-articulation of their living, “wild” sense as the fields of their possible relations, which remain operative in and beneath verbal idealizations.

The “mind-body, “self-others,” and “freedom-necessity” antinomies arise for Modern, objectivist thought – whether intellectualist or empiricist – because it takes for granted either the advent of beings (empiricism) or the advent of sense (intellectualism), and thereby falls into “mythical” idealizations. Merleau-Ponty describes “myths” in the pejorative sense as ontological

errors: operations upon verbal constructions whereby the words express a sense which cannot be incarnated by other beings, so that a dimension of pure verbal essences arises, and is then mistaken for a primordial reality. But a myth can also be grasped, via hyper-reflection, as “an operative imaginary” or virtual focus of behaviors; in this sense, “every usage of the symbolic function is a myth” because it operates in a dimension of idealizations, woven of general “formalizations” of styles originally operant in the world of perception. Operative speech and writing are processes of “signifying”: they institute or reactivate styles of certain beings (signs), which take on a “life” of their own insofar as they function in processes of dimensionalization. Any given myth is simultaneously an instance of both senses, depending upon the attitude with which it is approached: upon whether it is mistaken for a fact, or interrogated as an interpretation of facts, as an operation upon idealizations whose genesis must be investigated. I will refer to idealizations taken under the former attitude as “myths,” and under the latter attitude as “abstractions,” in order to emphasize that abstract idealizations of beings are only distortions of their sense insofar as they are mistaken for final or primordial articulations of it. A mathematical model of perceived nature is always an abstraction, but it only becomes a myth when the model itself is mistaken for the “true being” of nature.

Myths, in the more limited sense of misinterpreted abstractions, conceal the becoming of sense, tending to “explain” relations between beings either in terms of pure external causality, or in terms of the intervention of some absolutely transcendent agency, whereas the truth is that actual relationships between visible beings are simultaneously realizations and transformations of the invisible fields of possibility – the sense – which these beings themselves, qua invisible processes of becoming, co-articulate. For instance, Merleau-Ponty sees objective thought’s attempts to explain phenomena of animal mimicry as slipping into either an empiricist or an

721 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 83-85/115-118.
intellectualist myth: a “Darwinian ideology” which views mimicry as a purely utilitarian “adaptation,” arising as a necessary effect of environmental pressures; or a Schopenhauerian vitalism which explains mimicry by positing a “‘world of will’” whose unity underlies all apparent difference in the “‘world of representations.’”

For Merleau-Ponty, the very fact “that such myths could have been created and have a long life is precisely what makes the facts [they attempt to explain] interesting” insofar as they demonstrate the facts’ fecundity: “If these facts retain so much attention from scientists, it's because something is in question with the observer, or because the facts seem to realize a natural magic.”

“Magic” here denotes the expressivity of sensible beings, their power to affect other beings at a distance through virtual relations of sense: through “formal” resemblance, where “form” is taken in the sense of a being’s general style of articulation, whether of its visible “surface” or its invisible “interiority.” What objectivist myths attempt to explain, then, is the relationship between beings and sense, while taking the existence of both for granted. And Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh is an articulation of precisely what objectivism takes for granted: the co-advent of beings and their sense, the intertwining-divergence of the actual and the possible.

Because mythologization poses a risk for any investigation which deals solely with relations between words, I begin, in 2.B.i, with a provisional investigation of the particular event of Michael’s case. After presenting the recorded facts, I consider interpretations of it by contemporary neurologists—all of which display the “atomistic” tendency to abstractly divide actual processes and systems into isolated parts, which are then treated as positive entities and rearranged into various series and networks of mechanical causes and effects. Turning to the writings of Kurt Goldstein and Georges Canguilhem, I advance a “holistic” critique of atomism’s

725 Ibid., 185/242.
726 Ibid., 185-187/242-245.
727 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 151/198-199.
tendency to efface the “normative” character of life—i.e., the simultaneity of an organism’s sensible behavior, and the advent of “value” or “significance” in and through it. In closing, I show how Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to reconcile the truths of atomism and holism in SB opens the way for his subsequent engagement with the ambivalent relations between mind and body, self and others, and freedom and necessity.

In 2.B.ii, I show how Merleau-Ponty overcomes the mind-body antinomy by reconceiving of the “mind” as the total field of possible relations to other beings articulated by the body’s operative styles of perception and expressive behavior. What has traditionally been called “consciousness” is not a being distinct from the body, but the taking up of the body’s sensorimotor field in and through speech, which sublimates the silent symbolism of expression in the advent of a dimension of signification. The functioning of speech in the advent of “mind” illustrates the manner in which the mind-body and self-others antinomies are intertwined, and the intertwining of these abstract idealizations expresses a certain truth: that the divergence of sensorimotor being and speaking being happens through the intertwining of proto-individuals even as, simultaneously, the individuation of “self” and “others” happens through the intertwining of sensible-sentient bodies. Subsection 2.B.iii deals with this overcoming of the self-others antinomy, through the recognition that the “interiority” of the self is its field of possible relations with others; the “interior” of a body is the sense of the “exterior,” articulated through the primordial contact of the latter with the surfaces of other bodies. But this means that any doubt concerning the truth of “other minds” is entirely mythical; “I” only have an “interiority” through the primordial and mutual encroachment of bodies upon one another, so that I must live the truth of others’ existence before I can abstractly attempt to “prove” it.

In 2.B.iv, I turn to the freedom-necessity antinomy, approaching it via Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of his own account of “situated freedom” in PhP, which culminates in the articulation of a hyper-dialectic of “freedom” and “necessity” as the simultaneous intersection
and divergence of the horizontal order of events, and the vertical order of advent. The occurrence of an event is the becoming-necessity of freedom: the realization of possibility as actuality. The sense of an event is the becoming-freedom of necessity: the advent of a new field of possible relations in and through the realization of a given relation. Freedom is virtual necessity, and necessity is realized freedom. Merleau-Ponty’s account of the hyper-dialectic of freedom-necessity as a movement of Stiftung simultaneously articulates a certain form of “authenticity” of expressive behaviors, consisting in the operative recognition of the “ambiguity” of the sense of beings. I turn to this notion of an authentic relation to ambiguity in Chapter 3, arguing that it amounts to the outline of an onto-phenomenological account of ethical and political virtue.
2.B.i. Case Study: “Acquired Pedophilia”

In the year 2000, “Michael” – whom psychiatrists Jeffrey M. Burns and Russell H. Swerdlow would describe, in a 2003 case report, as “[a] 40-year-old, right-handed man in an otherwise normal state of health” – began acquiring vast quantities of print and digital pornography, much of it involving children.\footnote{Burns & Swerdlow, “Right Orbitofrontal Tumor,” 437.} While he avowed “a preexisting strong interest in pornography dating back to adolescence, […] he denied a previous attraction to children,” and, indeed, lacked any prior history of “social or marital problems.”\footnote{Ibid.} He later described having “felt that [his activities] were unacceptable,” and “went to great lengths to conceal” them even as “he continued to act on his sexual impulses,” claiming “that ‘the pleasure principle overrode’ his urge [to] restraint.”\footnote{Ibid.} Michael’s new behaviors were exposed when his “prepubescent stepdaughter” informed her mother he had been making, as Burns and Swerdlow put it, “subtle sexual advances” toward her.\footnote{Ibid.} Clinically, Michael was “diagnosed [with] pedophilia, and prescribed medroxyprogesterone” (a female hormone employed in “chemical castration”); legally, he was convicted of “child molestation,” and given the alternative between prison or a “12-step program for sexual addiction.”\footnote{Burns & Swerdlow, “Right Orbitofrontal Tumor,” 437; Edward A. Fitzgerald, “Chemical Castration: MPA Treatment of the Sexual Offender,” American Journal of Criminal Law, 18:1 (1990), 2-3.} Soon after being kicked out of the program – “[d]espite his strong desire to avoid prison, he could not restrain himself from soliciting sexual favors from staff and other clients at the rehabilitation center” – Michael entered an emergency room, “complaining of a headache,” the night before his scheduled resentencing; an MRI revealed a “right orbitofrontal” tumor.\footnote{Burns & Swerdlow, “Right Orbitofrontal Tumor,” 437-438.} Following its removal, his aggressive and pedophilic behaviors ceased; he “successfully participated” in a 12-step program and returned home, considered no longer a threat to his
His headaches and compulsive pornography collection resumed in October 2001, and an MRI revealed that the tumor had regrown; with its removal in February 2002, the headaches and behavior again ceased.

Numerous cases of “acquired pedophilia” in conjunction with brain lesions have been reported from the mid-20th century on. Judges tend to treat these correlations as mitigating, although not wholly ameliorating, factors. Although Michael certainly engaged in behaviors defined as “criminal” (actus reus), and apparently with “criminal intent” (mens rea), knowing what he was doing and that it would harm others (he did attempt to conceal his activities), the tumor’s discovery enabled an “affirmative defense,” i.e., a plea of “insanity.” Uri Maoz and Gideon Yaffe, writing on Michael’s case, argue that it is unclear whether his actions were truly “voluntary”: he claims he did not want to feel pedophilic urges, and wanted to “restrain” himself, but could not. While there is no legal definition of “voluntary action” at present, Maoz and Yaffe articulate the commonly operative standard as follows: “a bodily movement guided by a conscious mental representation of that bodily movement.”

This assimilation of the “sanity-insanity” to the “voluntary-involuntary” distinction is striking, given that the link between “sanity” and “responsibility” is traditionally framed in terms of personal identity. As John Locke writes: “it is past doubt the same man would at different times make different persons,” so that the law does “not [punish…] the sober man for what the

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734 Ibid., 438.
735 Ibid.
736 For a survey of cases likewise involving damage to the right orbitofrontal portion of the brain, see: Gilbert & Vranič, “Paedophilia, Invasive Brain Surgery, and Punishment,” 522. A 2016 episode the podcast Radiolab describes the case of “Kevin,” who likewise began suddenly to collect child pornography, and was likewise found to have a tumor, the appearance and removal of which likewise marked the beginning and the cessation of this behavior; Kevin received a diminished sentence, appealing to research on disinhibition of behavior associated with “Klüver-Bucy syndrome” (Jad Abumrad & Robert Krulwich, “Blame,” Radiolab).
737 Maoz & Yaffe, “What does recent neuroscience tell us about criminal responsibility?”, 122-123.
738 Burns & Swerdlow, “Right Orbitofrontal Tumor,” 437.
739 Maoz & Yaffe, “What does recent neuroscience tell us about criminal responsibility?”, 124.
madman did,” and we say that “such an one is not himself, or is besides [sic] himself.” But neurologists’ means of observing and manipulating processes in living organisms are greatly augmented in scope and subtlety since Locke’s time, so that his rejection of pleas based on “the ignorance of drunkenness or sleep” – “because the fact is proved against him, but want of consciousness cannot be proved for him” – no longer rings quite as true, and it seems that perhaps science, rather than the divine, will usher in “the great day, wherein the secrets of all hearts shall be laid open,” when “no one shall be made to answer for what he knows nothing of[,] but shall receive his doom.” Indeed, Maoz and Yaffe draw on contemporary neurological findings to argue that there is a “sense in which Michael’s criminal behavior […] is no different from anyone else’s: such behavior has its source in the person’s brain and his environment.” For instance, they cite a 2013 study which found that, on average, inmates who displayed low activity in “the anterior-cingulate cortex (ACC) […] a limbic region associated with impulse control,” had twice the recidivism rate of inmates who displayed “high ACC activity.” This seems to pose a dilemma, of which Maoz and Yaffe favor the second horn: either we must reject the notion of “criminal responsibility” entirely (insofar as all behavior can be “explained” as a necessary effect of physiological and environmental factors), or we must “accept that being fully responsible for bad behavior is consistent with that behavior being explicable in principle through appeal to facts about one’s brain and the environment in which one finds oneself.”

But this alternative – between fatalistic determinism, and determinism-voluntarism compatibilism – expresses a false dilemma, founded upon the questionable postulates of a now-dominant “atomistic” neurology, which tends to ignore the “holistic” or “integrative” tradition

741 Ibid., II.xxvii.22:146.
742 Maoz & Yaffe, “What does recent neuroscience tell us about criminal responsibility?”, 122.
744 Maoz & Yaffe, “What does recent neuroscience tell us about criminal responsibility?”, 122.
established by Kurt Goldstein, and taken up by both neurologists (e.g., Canguilhem and Oliver Sacks) and phenomenologists (e.g., Maurice Merleau-Ponty). Neurological atomism, according to Goldstein, rests upon three basic assumptions: that “the organism represents a bundle of isolable mechanisms”; that these mechanisms are “constant in structure”; and that these mechanisms “respond, in a constant way, to events in the environment (stimuli).”

The postulates of atomism presuppose a mechanistic metaphysics: only insofar as the “part processes” composing the organism are “governed by mechanistic laws” will their constant structure necessarily yield similar responses to similar stimuli, thereby – in an impressive feat of circular reasoning – allowing researchers to discover these laws by isolating processes and determining their “unambiguous, elementary reactions to definite stimuli.”

As Merleau-Ponty points out, atomism thereby presupposes an ontology of both “mental” and “physical realism”: a reification of the (abstractly) circumscribed mental and physical “things” into which it divides phenomena, and recombines into general models of “linear series of […] events.”

This reification of abstractly isolated “parts” brings with it a tendency toward dualism (of which “physical” or “mental monism” are variants, due to the implicit interdependence of their categories), a division of the human being into a collection of “physical things,” and a collection of “mental things,” connected via purely speculative “causal” relations.

If, as holists contend, the functions of a system’s “parts” cannot be explained in isolation from the whole, and, correlatively, the whole cannot be explained through external relations of isolated parts alone, then the “laws” of atomistic neurology merely describe tendencies of processes insofar as they have become relatively functionally isolated, i.e., in “border situations”: under artificial experimental conditions, or because of the actual “deterioration or imperfect

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745 Goldstein, *The Organism*, 69.
746 Ibid.
747 Merleau-Ponty, *SB*, 3-4/1-2, 9/7.
748 Goldstein, *The Organism*, 355..
adaptation of the organism” to its environment through disease or injury. The analysis-synthesis method of atomism “cannot yield other than isolated facts in the physical and psychological realm,” because understanding of the organism as a “whole” entails a certain, immanent ‘finalism’, an articulation of “[t]he end to which each process normally tends,” which “is determined by its significance for the essential tasks of the whole organism”—although the total organism, as well as the total environment in and toward which it acts, are not positive entities, but themselves mutually-articulating, open processes.

I will approach this field of knowledge by interrogating the significance of Michael’s pedophilic behavior and, in particular, the sense in which we can hold him “responsible” for it. I am in no position to conduct an original neurological case study, of course, but instead approach the question via a critique of contemporary neurologists’ interpretations of the facts, drawing on Goldstein’s analyses of similar cases of cortical lesioning during the first World War. To ask the question of Michael’s responsibility through the lens of the determinism-voluntarism opposition (often expressed in the “explicable-inexplicable,” or “mechanical-spiritual,” opposition) is to damn ourselves to purely abstract, and so interminable, speculation. Michael’s case reveals that, in general, questions concerning an individual’s responsibility must begin by investigating the “normal” or “abnormal” character of the relevant behavior; questions of its “voluntary” or “involuntary” character are secondary at best, since they presuppose the identity of the individual which the question of normality interrogates. The meaning of “normality” or “abnormality” can never be determined from a “superindividual” or transtemporal perspective, but must be articulated in reference to a given individual in the context of particular situations and their total history. Thus, “responsibility,” too, is not a purely objective concept—does not refer to an

749 Ibid., 140, 323.
750 Ibid., 107.
isolable, measurable “fact,” but rather, to a phenomenon which can only be grasped from the ‘bottom up’, by interrogating the lived experiences of individuals without preconceptions.

Burns and Swerdlow, reporting Michael’s case, assume a real distinction between “primary” and “secondary” symptoms (i.e., the latter as effects of the former), expressing the same atomistic-mechanical prejudice Goldstein criticized in the “classical” neurology of his time. They nominate “poor impulse regulation” the primary psychological symptom, “lead[ing],” in turn, “to bad judgment and sociopathic behavior” (under which they implicitly seem to group “pedophilia” in the following sentence, further reducing it to the side-effect of a side-effect, or a species under a broader genus). What actually seems to distinguish diminished impulse control from the other symptoms is not some sort of unverifiable “causal primacy,” but the fact that it is negative: a diminishment or vanishing of a previously operative process. As Sacks pointed out in 1970, in order for “mechanistic neurology” to restrict its descriptions to relations of external causality, it must abstract away the lived “meaning” (for the patient and other people, including the scientist) of phenomena, under the assumption that each “part” of the organism possesses fixed, circumscribed functions; and because a mechanical process can only succeed or fail to achieve its specified function, diseases of “excess” (hyper-functioning, “overworking,” of processes) have, historically, received less attention than ones of “deficiency” (hypo- or non-functioning).

Subordinating Michael’s pedophilic behavior to his diminished impulse control reduces the positive (and thereby more unsettling) phenomenon of new behavioral norms to the side-effect of a (negative) loss of prior behavioral norms—even though the latter could potentially be insignificant in the absence of the former. This move would only be legitimate if Michael had

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751 Ibid., 34-35.
always felt impulses to sociopathic and pedophilic behavior, and simply “regulated” them prior to the tumor growth, but Burns and Swerdlow state there is no evidence of preexisting pedophilic impulses. Unless we claim that *all* (or a significant proportion of) people possess “unconscious” pedophilic impulses which they continuously and “unconsciously” regulate (i.e., unless we posit a pedophilic “Id” and a repressive “superego”), we must acknowledge Michael’s new impulses as *original* phenomena in their own right.

Conceiving of illness as the deficient functioning of a mechanism (rather than the advent of a different style of existence) positions atomistic neurology as the correlate of “cognitivist” psychology, which conceives of the mind as an information processing system. Thus, Burns and Swerdlow cite R.J.R. Blair’s and L. Cipolotti’s characterization of “acquired sociopathy” as a “cognitive dysfunction”: the “impairment” of capacities for “recognizing” and “responding to” social “information,” leading to “a reduced ability to generate expectations of others’ negative emotional reactions,” with these expectations consisting in “representations” which, “[i]n healthy individuals, […] act to suppress behavior that is inappropriate in specific social contexts.”

When it comes to explaining “bad behavior,” cognitivism amounts to a realism with regards to knowledge, as if “perceptions,” “mental representations,” and “behaviors” were really distinct *things.* Atomistic-cognitive neurologists tend to conceive of volitional action according to some variant of the “serial decision making” model whereby “information” is first gathered through the senses, then processed so as to “[form] an intention to act in accordance with a decision on the basis of the percept,” resulting, lastly, in the carrying out of the intended action.


755 Maoz & Yaffe, “What does recent neuroscience tell us about criminal responsibility?”, 132.
Although cognitivism comes in numerous forms\textsuperscript{756}, they all agree in the assumption that the “mind” is, in some sense, a system of objective causal relations, which in some way “processes” “representations” of “information.”\textsuperscript{757} As a rationalistic conception of the mind, cognitivism tends toward the classical reduction—articulated, e.g., in Plato’s *Protagoras*—of “bad intentions” to “ignorance”: if all persons desire what they believe to be “good” and not what they believe to be “bad,” and all actions aim at some end, then the end of a given action is determined by what appears “good” to the agent performing it; therefore, people who do “bad things” cannot intend to do them, \textit{as such}, but only insofar as they are ignorant of their true value.\textsuperscript{758} The sticky problem of “moral evil” is thereby reduced to a question of epistemology and education. In order to explain how behavior like Michael’s results from a lack of certain “information,” even though his conscious “moral knowledge” remained intact, Blair and Cipolotti follow Antonio Damasio in positing the “impairment” of a “somatic marker system”: in healthy individuals, the mental representation of a possible course of action causes certain physiological responses (e.g., raised heart rate), which are translated into “emotions” in the brain, which, in turn, “force” the agent’s

\textsuperscript{756} “Classical” cognitivism reifies the “digital computer” metaphor of mind, whereas “connectionism” conceives of this computer as continually programming itself in interaction with its environment (Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 4). “Embodied dynamism” or “embodied cognition,” meanwhile, is a relatively new approach whose continuities with, and divergences from, traditional cognitive science still remain largely ambiguous; it expands the scope of the “self-organizing dynamic system” which connectionists limit to the individual “mind,” replacing this isolated account with “the nonlinear and circular causality of continuous sensorimotor interactions involving the brain, body, and environment” (Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 4). Embodied dynamicists tend to criticize the “objectivist conception of representation,” which conceives of “inputs” to the mind-mechanism as processes of “encoding” information, and conceives of “cognition” as “the processing of such information”; dynamicists, however, tend to retain these traditional concepts “for heuristic purposes,” and to oscillate between phenomenological holism and cognitivist atomism without, however, resolving the apparent contradiction between objective “explanations” in terms of external causes, and phenomenological explanations in terms of internal relations of “meaning” or “expression” (Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 52, 302, 267, 357-358). Heeding Lawrence Shapiro’s recommendation that embodied cognition is, at this point, “better considered a research program than a well-defined theory,” I will limit myself to this general description of its trajectory, and withhold any relatively final judgments at the present time (Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition*, 2).

\textsuperscript{757} Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 356.

\textsuperscript{758} Plato, *Protagoras*, 358b-d.
attention” onto certain desirable or undesirable potential outcomes. However, given that Michael did “feel” that his behavior was wrong, this hypothesis is irrelevant. Cognitivist psychology simply cannot explain this phenomenon of feeling “beside oneself” while nonetheless remaining fully conscious of one’s behavior. At least, not without renouncing its basic premise: that actions are caused by decisions, and decisions by information. This model is, in principle, incapable of explaining how Michael could simultaneously affirm two contradictory attitudes toward the same action, despite a telling proliferation of auxiliary hypotheses (e.g., “inability to access ‘social schema knowledge,’” “impairment […] of a social ‘editor,’” etc.).

Even when atomistic neurologists avoid the difficulties attendant to psychological explanation by focusing entirely on correlations between actual changes in physiology and behavior, their mechanistic prejudice to conceive of disease as deficiency renders them unable to explain the sense in which Michael’s pedophilia is “acquired.” Indeed, according to a recent review of neurological literature on pedophilia, “[i]n general, paedophilia has been seen as a lifelong individual trait,” so that supposedly “acquired” cases like Michael’s are frequently interpreted “as behavioural manifestations of pre-existent latent paedophilic urges due to general impulse inhibition.”

Frederic Gilbert and Andrej Vranič (cited by Burns and Swerdlow) define “acquired pedophilia” as “occurring in individuals who have been free of these behaviors prior to the onset of disruptive neurological changes”—limiting their discussion to the occurrence of actual behavior, rather than the presence of latent or explicit “impulses.” Except for the word “disruptive,” one could define all behaviors as “acquired” in this sense: originally manifesting at a certain point in time, and able to be correlated with certain physiological changes, which may

759 Burns & Swerdlow, “Right Orbitofrontal Tumor,” 440; Blair & Cipolotti, “Impaired social response reversal,” 1123; Damasio, Descartes’ Error, 173.
760 Blair & Cipolotti, “Impaired social response reversal,” 1124.
subjectively be classified as “disruptive,” “neutral,” or “productive” depending upon the value attributed to the associated behaviors.

The vagueness of the sense in which Michael’s pedophilia is “acquired” expresses an ambiguity in the concepts of “normality” and “pathology,” which Gilbert and Vranič gloss over with their characterization of an unspecified range of physiological changes as “disruptive.” Goldstein maintains that the content of the concepts of “normality” and “abnormality” cannot be determined from an “objective” criterion which would apply equally to all individuals, but must be discovered, in each case, by the unprejudiced description of a given organism as an irreducible whole embedded in a concrete situation, and a subsequent analysis which takes into account the “ambiguity,” the multi-valence and irreducible interconnectedness, of life processes.\textsuperscript{763} He defines the “basic biologic law” governing organisms (qua really irreducible wholes) with the purely formal concept of “a kind of coming to terms of the organism with its environment” whereby the organism tends to maintain a certain “identity” (i.e., a relatively stable organization of its life processes, in relation to its environment, over time), expressed by a relative “constancy” of responses to similar events, by responding to “each change of the organism caused by environmental stimuli” with an “equalizing” performance which enables it to “[regain] that ‘average’ state that corresponds to its nature, which is ‘adequate’ to it.”\textsuperscript{764}

“Normality” or “health” means maintaining a relatively stable “integration” of internal processes, and of the whole organism with its environment, expressed in “figure-ground” Gestalt structures.\textsuperscript{765} The function of a given process (the “figure,” that process in the organism which is “nearest,” spatially and temporally, to a given “point of stimulus application”) always involves the participation of “the whole system […] to some extent,” since it ultimately functions for the maintenance of the whole organism (the “ground”), although certain other relatively autonomous

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Goldstein, \textit{The Organism}, 326, 38-39.
\item Ibid., 101-102.
\item Ibid., 326.
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“ground processes” will be more significant than others in a given case.\textsuperscript{766} The “essence” or “identity” of the organism is not a static arrangement of really distinct “parts,” but the continual reintegration of processes into a total system (“internal milieu”) in and through an ongoing dialogue with its lived environment (“external milieu”).\textsuperscript{767} Thus, when a change renders an organism’s “preferred” styles of behavior ineffective for the maintenance of its identity, it “experiences a shock,” a felt disintegration both of its identity, and of its “surrounding world.”\textsuperscript{768} Shock is the “subjective” experience of a “catastrophic reaction,” whereby the organism’s ability to reestablish “ordered behavior” and an ordered external milieu “is likely to be impeded for a longer or shorter interval.”\textsuperscript{769}

Any situation which results in “[d]efective figure-ground formation” leads to “abnormal” behavior—but although “any disease is an abnormality,” not all abnormality is disease.\textsuperscript{770} As an example of non-pathological abnormality, what we call “reflexes” are certain processes \textit{insofar as} they take place under abnormal circumstances wherein the organism as a whole is prevented from participating, because “certain parts are isolated […] \textit{either} by the artificial (experimental) elimination of the rest of the organism that is not supposed to enter into the reaction \textit{or} by the pathological segregation of single sections through disease” (e.g., when being tested by a doctor); as a result, “[w]e feel that these events take place almost against our will,” but generally fail to notice these same processes when they are integrated into normal – and particularly “voluntary” – performances.\textsuperscript{771} Similarly, what we call “instincts” – i.e., “special, inborn, more or less functional potentialities, which become actualized only when the situation in the outer world makes that possible” – appear to be isolated determinants of an organism’s behavioral reactions to

\textsuperscript{766} Ibid., 96, 123-124.  
\textsuperscript{767} Ibid., 133-134.  
\textsuperscript{768} Ibid., 49, 286-287.  
\textsuperscript{769} Ibid., 49.  
\textsuperscript{770} Ibid., 129, 326.  
\textsuperscript{771} Ibid., 124, 134-135.
the degree that it lacks, or has lost, integration as a whole and with its situation, whether through immaturity, disease, or artificial experimental conditions.\textsuperscript{772} A “normal organism” in an “adequate environment” does not behave as if determined by isolated “instincts” because the functioning of “the hunger feeling or the sex urge” is here governed by its significance for the growth and maintenance of the whole, and these feelings can be “repressed” when required by the general biologic law “that those performances most important for the organism are always fulfilled”; only in “border situations” does the “drive toward self-actualization” (the only drive) cease to function “through the medium of intention, of thinking, decision, and motivation,” often here manifesting as a purely conservative drive toward “self-preservation.”\textsuperscript{773}

A relatively isolated “drive” operative in a catastrophic reaction differs in its functional significance, its “meaning,” from the ‘same’ process insofar as it is integrated into voluntary behavior under normal conditions. Because “disease proceeds with disintegration, one cannot say that it reduces the nervous system and leaves the sexual system intact, although to superficial observation the sexual system may have even assumed greater importance.”\textsuperscript{774} There is no such thing as “a disinhibition of a primitive mechanism” (e.g., Burns and Swerdlow’s “disinhibited impulses”), whether through disease or experimentation; the concept of “disinhibition” expresses an erroneous importation of “a kind of reaction that prevails in a damaged organism” – where certain processes have become relatively isolated from the ground of the total organism – into the healthy organism, where it is supposed to have been “latent.”\textsuperscript{775} In a case like Michael’s, the normal background of the sexual system, the “total attitude toward the world,” has become “more stimulus bound, less independent and less ego determined,” and likewise the “attitude toward the erotic sphere” has “become more passive, less discriminating, and more disconnected from the

\textsuperscript{772} Ibid., 158-160.
\textsuperscript{773} Ibid., 166, 163, 160.
\textsuperscript{774} Ibid., 370.
\textsuperscript{775} Ibid., 120.
ego,” resulting in something like “a degradation from erotics (love sentiment), which embraces not only ‘physical’ but also ‘mental’ and ‘spiritual’ contents, to bare sexuality that lacks the more spiritual and more subtle bodily qualities.”

Atomistic neurology cannot explain the sense in which certain changes are “disruptive,” because the concepts of “normality” and “pathology” can only be applied to organisms insofar as one encounters them as indecomposable wholes—which means recognizing “isolated functions” as descriptively useful abstractions which are, however, not realities, and insufficient for an understanding of the organism as a whole. As Canguilhem puts it, just as “[w]hat distinguishes food from excrement is not a physicochemical reality but a biological value” (i.e., a relation to a “norm” or “value” expressed by an organism, and which has no reality once abstracted from the organism’s concrete life), so “what distinguishes the normal from the pathological is not a physicochemical reality but a biological value.” The “healthy” or “normal” and the “diseased” or “pathological” are not “objective” categories (i.e., do not name “object[s which admit of] measurement and causal explanation”), because “[i]t is life itself, through its differentiation between its propulsive and repulsive behavior, which introduces the categories of health and disease into human consciousness,” and whereas scientific analysis must reduce phenomena to isolable (and thus quantifiable) parts, disease is “a problem posed by the entire organism” as an irreducible whole given in “lived human experience.” Insofar as neurology deals with phenomena of “health” and “disease,” it cannot in good faith take itself to be a purely objective science, because it works in the service of medicine, which itself works “in the service of life” and expresses “life’s dynamic polarity” – i.e., the irreducible fact that “[l]iving beings prefer

776 Ibid., 370.
778 Ibid., 222-223.
health to disease” – with its concepts of “health” and “disease,” which are therefore “subjective” values.\(^{779}\)

The question of a given behavior’s “normality” or “abnormality” – always for a given individual, and in certain situations – is, therefore, more fundamental than the question of its “voluntary” character, in efforts to determine the content of “responsibility.” Insofar as he was thrust into a “border situation” with the growth of the tumor, Michael was, as Locke would say, “not himself.” Goldstein would go further: to the degree that Michael’s tumor precipitated a dis-integration of total organization, resulting in increased isolation of processes, he became less of a “self” in the human sense, less an integrated system than a mere conjunction of apparently “automatic” processes. Insofar as Michael could not have avoided the sickness in the course of which his pathological behaviors arose, and insofar as he has now achieved a new state of organization with which his former pathological behaviors do not harmonize, he bears at most an extremely limited responsibility for those behaviors. It would be wildly speculative, to the point of paranoia, to assert that the “impulses” expressed in his pathological behaviors were latent in him prior to the event, or remain latent in him now, since they figure only against the background of a highly reduced organism, and not against that of his past or present state of normal integration.

Because the holistic approach to Michael’s case rules out purely mechanistic explanations, it cannot lead to a wholesale rejection of the notions of criminal or moral “responsibility.” Instead, I argue, it shows that the content of “responsibility” in given cases – like the content of “normality” and “pathology” – cannot be determined from a superindividual norm, but must be articulated with reference to the singular individual in question as a dynamic system of processes imbedded in a lived environment: with reference to “objective facts,” but also to facts’ meanings for the person(s) from whose lives they are abstracted. In general, concerning

\(^{779}\) Ibid., 222.
retrospective responsibility, if a behavior had the value of a “normal,” relatively “adequate”
reaction for an individual when it occurred, then they were more responsible for it than if it had
the value of a “catastrophic reaction”; the former expresses their identity, and the latter, the more
or less temporary disintegration of that identity, whether or not the behavior was “voluntary” in
the legal sense. Prospectively (e.g., in considering the likelihood of recidivism), we must combine
the question of the original behavior’s normality or abnormality with the question of whether or
not the individual’s organization has become significantly transformed in the present. As for the
secondary question of “voluntarism,” this, too, overflows the borders of purely objectivistic
thought, which presupposes universal mechanism, and therefore cannot prove the soundness of
this first principle, either universally, or in a particular case like Michael’s. To posit universal
necessitation by external causes is to quit the realm of scientific explanation for that of dogmatic
speculation.

As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[n]othing justifies postulating that the vital dialectic can be
intelligently translated in physico-chemical relations and reduced to the condition of an
anthropomorphic appearance,” because the legitimate “logical order of scientific thought” can
only proceed “prospectively,” from the perception of living beings to idealizations of certain of
their functions”—but biology cannot then turn around “regressively” deduce organisms behavior
from these idealizations.780 Even in a physical “form, the whole is not the sum of its parts,” but
rather the “immanent law” of a “field of forces” which the beings composing it in and through
their interrelations express, and which physicists extract and formalize.781 In a “living form,”
meanwhile, the unity is one of “signification,” i.e., “coordination by meaning,” because an actual
organism “does not admit of division in space and in time,” and therefore its behaviors “can be

781 Ibid., 150/163, 137-138/147-149.
foreseen only in terms of the whole.” In other words, “behavior” as such is expressive of sense: the sufficient “reason” for a given behavior lies, not in the state of affairs immediately preceding it in linear time, but in the total history of the organism as a coming-to-terms with the total history of its lifeworld.

Thus, even abstracting away from the “symbolic coordination” of specifically human behavior, and considering Michael’s case in purely biological terms, it is still insufficient to “explain” his pathological behavior by positing the tumor as its ultimate “cause,” because biology does not admit of “laws” in the same way as physics. The tumor precipitated the advent of a new organization of the total organism, and this (relatively diminished) whole expressed its horizon of possible relations with its environment in and through new styles of behavior. The constancy of names plays no small part in creating the illusion that the “self” is a constant, stable structure, concealing the reality of individuals as dynamically integrated systems interwoven with the systems of their environments; in this reality of living beings, the modification of any given process rebounds upon the significance of all others, and upon the whole.

Even the “simplest” behavior cannot be explained by causal relations between “real parts” of the organism and its environment. Even a bacterium’s behavior is directed, not towards a real, physical thing, but towards a certain “structure” of thing (i.e., a certain style of becoming-phenomenal, of spatiotemporal existence) which has taken on a value (e.g., “attractive” or “aversive,” “food” or “poison”) for one of the bacterium’s general styles of integrating itself into its environment (e.g., pursuit, consumption, avoidance, etc.). And Michael’s pathological behavior was not nearly so simple as the bacterium’s, for his was directed toward a certain “symbolic” structure in the specifically “human” dimension of the world: “children.” To illustrate the impossibility of sufficiently explaining Michael’s behavior through correlations of isolated

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782 Ibid., 155-156/168-169.
783 Ibid., 131/141-142, 147/159-160.
biological and psychological “facts,” consider the influence exercised by his milieu. It is doubtful that Michael’s behavior would have possessed the same form and content in a different situation. For instance, in Medieval Europe, the Modern concept of the “child” had not yet replaced that of “small adults,” so that there Michael’s pedophilic behavior would, to some degree, have a different sense; conversely, it is entirely possible that his illness would have expressed itself in behaviors of an entirely different form and content which had, in the Medieval world, a sense similar to that of pedophilic behavior in the present day. Really isolable parts exist only as abstract idealizations in scientific models; in a concrete situation, the meaning of any given fact consists in its actual and possible functions in relation to the dynamic whole.

But the question of if, and how, we can speak of “choice” and “constraint” in a case like Michael’s remains, because it remains unclear if and how we might overcome the gap between the atomistic and the holistic perspectives in general. To do so requires, firstly, conceiving of the relationship between the “mind” and the “body” non-mechanistically, but in a way which explains the possibility and true significance of mechanical descriptions. Secondly, it requires an articulation of the general structure of relationships between “persons” as wholes, rather than minds separated by the barriers of their body-machines. Lastly, these accounts must be integrated into a conception of “freedom” and “necessity” as elements of a single system, no longer divided into mutually exclusive “subjective” and “objective levels.”

784 Adams, “Medieval Mothers and Their Children,” 265-266.
2.B.ii. Body of the Mind, Mind of the Body

The extant text of VI begins by outlining a new method of articulating the silent, wild sense of living perception, and culminates in an articulation of invisible being in the “strong” sense: an ontology of the becoming-visible of beings, which is simultaneously the advent of their primordial sense. Here, Merleau-Ponty terms his radicalization of the phenomenological method “hyper-reflection” or “interrogation,” a style of thinking which attempts to give voice to its own unthought ground by tracing visible beings’ “hyperdialectical” processes of intertwining-divergence, which are simultaneously the intertwining-divergence visible and invisible being themselves, of sensible being and its sense.785 The invisible “sense” or “being” of the visible does not advent as fixed, positive meanings (abstract “verbal essences”), but rather in schematizations of styles of visibility: styles of becoming-sensed and becoming-sensing whose actualizations diverge in and through their primordial intertwining.786 The sense of beings happens as the chiasm – and thus, simultaneously, the écart, the co-differentiation – of visible beings in a single, invisible fabric of operative interrelations: the continual reintegration-transformation of a total “Visibility” itself.787 All sensible beings, and not only the sensible-sentient body are therefore “flesh,” “living” bodies, where “life” signifies the invisible, operative sense (i.e., style-schemata) of visible beings, instituted and re-instituted in and through their relationships with other sensible and sensible-sentient beings.788 Living and non-living bodies alike are flesh in the sense of expressing forms “reversibility,” which is, in general, the divergence of the actual and the possible, of sensible being and ideality, through the folding of the visible surface of the body around things, and the folding of the visible surface of things around the body, such that each acquires an “interiority,” and is thereby individuated, in and through its intertwining with the

785 Ibid., 38/61, 94/129.
786 Ibid., 107/145-146.
787 Ibid., 137-138/181.
788 Ibid., 136/179.
other. But whereas living bodies and non-living things are all “flesh” in the sense of possessing an interior “depth,” the reversibility of the living body is originary, consisting in its being both a “sensible” and a “sensing” thing, whereas the reversibility of non-living things comes about through their actual and possible relations to living bodies.

Traditionally, the “mind-body problem” consists in the impossibility of explaining how there can be causal relations between a “body” that is localized in space and time, and a “mind” that is not. Merleau-Ponty overcomes this antinomy by revealing the concepts of a purely physical body and a purely spiritual mind as myths motivated by a desire to explain the living body’s twofold character as both a visible and an invisible, as the “hinge” or “reversibility” between sensible and sensing being. Thus, Merleau-Ponty takes up the mind-body problem not in the insoluble formulation of objective thought, but as the problem of giving voice to the relation of reversibility between the “interior” and the “exterior” of a living body: between the invisible operations which articulate its fields of possible relations to others bodies, and the visible relations which both actualize and modulate these operations. The “exterior” or “surface” of a living body is its phenomenalization among other bodies in the “world” as the totality of actual relations between bodies, while its “interior” is its application to itself: its sensing of itself in and through its relations to other bodies, so that the functioning of its styles of relation simultaneously accomplish its advent as a sensible-sensing being, and reintegrate and transform its invisible sense, its field of possible sensing and motion, so that “[b]y this application [to itself], it has not only affective states closed on itself, but also correlations—the sensibles and the world.”

Merleau-Ponty’s initial analyses of the relationship between corporeality and consciousness, in *PhP*, display a certain ambivalence, oscillating between rejections of empiricist

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789 Ibid., 136-137/179-181.
790 Ibid., 138/182.
and intellectualist accounts without explicitly opening a path beyond this play of contradictories. Here, the body is *neither* a mere physico-chemical object, *nor* a mere content of consciousness; and the mind is *neither* the merely passive effect of physico-chemical processes, *nor* the pure activity of a constituting consciousness.\(^{792}\) But the concept of *Fundierung* does enable him to implicitly move in the direction of his future investigations of expression by conceiving of the body as more than a passive mechanism *insofar as* it is inherently expressive. For instance, he describes visual perception as thought’s taking up of “visual contents” by virtue of the latter’s having already “actively” sketched out a horizon of possible significations; since visual contents enable thought’s activity through a prior activity of their own, thought, reciprocally, must be conceived of, not as purely active, as bestowing form upon a previously formless content, but rather, as actualizing a formal possibility already tacitly given in and by its content.\(^{793}\) The concept of *Fundierung* also leads him to reconceptualize the terms involved in this relation more generally, and in a way that foreshadows his account of the invisible functioning of visible beings: what objective thought took for “positive entities” are not reconceived of, not as wholly passive physical mechanisms, nor as purely psychical acts or contents, but as expressive modulations of the “field” or “schema” of possibilities articulated by a certain “style”: a general way of being in the world.\(^{794}\) But Merleau-Ponty cannot explicitly move beyond the traditional active-passive dichotomy in *PhP*. Here, he still conceives of perception as a mixture of corporeal content and incorporeal thought, even though he reconceives of them as general styles of being, rather than as positive entities. He seems to *double* the problem by positing, beneath explicit subject-object relations, “tacit” or “non-thetic” subjects and objects of experience, with each term still defined as the correlate of the other.\(^{795}\)

\(^{792}\) Merleau-Ponty, *PhP*, 125, 152, 123-124.  
\(^{793}\) Ibid., 159-160.  
\(^{794}\) Ibid., 203-204.  
\(^{795}\) Ibid., 308-309.
In *IP*, Merleau-Ponty begins to overcome the ambivalence of his prior analyses by reconceiving of the primordial “subject” as an “operative,” rather than “tacit,” *cogito*: as “instituted-instituting,” rather than “constituting.” The “instituted-instituting subject” – i.e., the dynamic field which is realized and modulated as perceptions, movements, feelings, (instituting, “speaking”) speech, and dreams – does not *calculate* because, e.g., there is “[n]o actual speech in the dream, nor actual calculation, which presupposes subsumption and not coexistence.” This negative description of the operative subject of dreaming can be generalized to apply to the instituted-instituting subject in general, insofar as the “unconscious” is precisely “embodiment and the relation with others,” which is to say “[w]hat dreams in us is our existential field.”

What Merleau-Ponty describes as a “tacit cogito” (in the sense of a “second consciousness,” a paradoxical ‘unconscious consciousness’) in *PhP* is thus, in *IP*, replaced by “perception” itself, the ever-renewed interweaving of “the secret structure of the world” (the world schema) with a “corporeal” or “practical schema,” such that the (re)integration of these horizons enables them to “co-constitute,” respectively, “spatial dimensions” and “the dimensions of intersubjectivity”: the “originary sedimentation” of (sensorimotor) “fields” and the “secondary sedimentation” of “symbolic matrices.” Rather than “causality” between “things,” wild perception unfolds according to the logic of *Stiftung*: actual relations between beings are the occasion for, and realization of, operative intertwinings of their styles of becoming-sensed and becoming-sensing, whereby beings individuate themselves through the co-articulation of their fields of possible relations, and thereby continually co-articulate the total field of the “world.”

Freud and Sartre alike fail to grasp operative style as the true being of “consciousness” insofar as they remain at the level of objective thought, merely multiplying causal relations of activity-passivity. Freud is thinking in mythical terms when he “distinguishes a consciousness

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797 Ibid., 155/205, 150/198.
which is knowledge of a false version [of the object of desire] from an unconscious which is knowledge of the truth,” and is therefore only able to connect consciousness and the unconscious by positing a “deliberate falsification” in the form of the super-ego; Sartre displays the same mythologizing tendency in articulating his notion of “bad faith,” which likewise implies a double subject, split between the one who is passively deceived, and the one who knows the truth and actively accomplishes the deception, an “Evil genius who hides me from myself.””

Merleau-Ponty, instead, conceives of the unconscious as an operative institution, “the symbolic matrix left behind by the event,” which is to say, “existential eternity, the cohesion of a life, the fecundity of the event.” Thus, in IP Merleau-Ponty begins to move beyond the opposition between a “tacit cogito” and an “explicit cogito,” replacing them with, respectively, the “corporeal schema” and the “practical schema”: the operative field of “perceptual choices” (i.e., the system which modulates itself in every sensorimotor taking up of a bodily situation), and the operative field of “practical choices,” which is modulated in every taking up, through interpretive perception and symbolic behavior, of the symbolic or “human” dimensions of a situation.

What Modern thought calls “mind” or “consciousness” is, therefore, the symbolic behavior of a body within systems of primordial “symbols” (i.e., expressive corporeal forms and gestures) and of “signs” (i.e., non-living, sensible beings which function to extend the expressive powers of speaking beings): within a system of sensible beings whose horizons of possible sense exceed their actual relations with other beings (i.e., their given sense) insofar as they function as “icons” which invoke styles of being other than their own, as “ideas” in the true sense (i.e., ideas which have “bodies,” as opposed to mythical “pure concepts”). The living body (qua “animal of perceptions”) and the “mind” are not different kinds of beings, but rather, different ways of being—different modulations of one and the same body intertwined with different modulations of

799 Ibid., 168/220-221, 153/203.
800 Ibid., 169/223.
one and the same world. At both of these strata of behavior – perception, and symbolism – the “interior” of the organism is not a “theater of representations,” but a schema, a system of styles of bodily comportment, interlaced with those of other bodies, and with the schemas (i.e., “interiorities”) of the things toward which these bodies comports themselves.

In the *Nature* lectures, Merleau-Ponty articulates his new conceptions of “exteriority” and “interiority” as, respectively, “visible” and “invisible” being. The harmony between an organism and its environment can be explained neither in terms of pure “chance,” nor in terms of “magic”—the alternatives available to objective thought, which conceives of relations between “exterior” and “interior” in terms of cause and effect alone. Whereas relations of causality provide true descriptions of the phenomenon of life, analyses in terms of *Stiftung* serve to explain this phenomenalization itself:

The relations of causality remain efficacious; at the origin, magic is concentrated in the architecture of the body, then is extracted from the original trace of forms. But it always remains a power that in no way pulls the living beings away from the strict conditioning of events. On the one hand there is a frenzied freedom of life, and on the other, an economy of life.801

Beneath the visible surface of rectilinear events – which scientific idealizations articulate as “causes” and “effects” – lies their depth, their sense as expressions of the dynamic structure of institution: *Urstiftung*, an actual event, the sense of which is the institution of the body as a corporeal schema of possible responses to its solicitation by the world, and of the world as a schema of possible responses to the body’s interrogative behaviors; and *Nachstiftung*, the extraction and realization of new forms from the horizon opened by the original event. Institution “is” nothing other than causality; it is the sense of actual relations, the excess of the possible over the actual, and therefore the invisible lining of causality, the operation that hides itself in and as the phenomenalization of causal relations.

Thus, the “object” or “trigger” of “instinctual activity” is already an “image” rather than a ‘purely physical thing’, which means that it already constitutes a “reference to the non-actual,” as when animals engage in what appear (for empiricism) to be purely utilitarian styles of behavior, such as hunting motions, in the absence of the behavior’s actual object: e.g., a starling engaging in the motions of capturing and eating an insect which is not there. Symbolic behavior – i.e., “[a] term taken as representative of another” – can be instituted through the sublimation of instinctual behavior because the latter is already objektlos (objectless), already directed at a schema rather than at an actual object, and symbolic behavior arises precisely when “a distance is established between seeing and doing”: when the object of a behavior becomes the production of a horizon of sense which exceeds the behavior’s actuality, reverberating beyond the behavior’s sensible occurrence and consequences.

Merleau-Ponty explains this advent of symbolic behavior in terms of institution. Although “causal relations” are truthful descriptions of the order of actual events, they remain abstract on their own, unable to explain how these events express a certain sense, or any sense at all:

The phenomenon of ritualization could thus not be explained by a gradual causality, since, in certain cases, the effect would be the cause of what is normally its cause, but rather by a double variation on the same theme; it would be a phenomenon of reciprocal expression.

Instituted languages are simply fields of “conventional” signs (which are sensible beings) imbued with this same power of “action at a distance” insofar as they function to realize relations-at-a-distance between certain sensible-sentient bodies which achieve a sort of virtual contact with one another, and with other sensible bodies, in and through signs. Signs become living flesh when they are taken up to extend the life of speaking bodies into the dimension of language.

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802 Ibid., 192/250-251.
803 Ibid., 211/273, 197/257.
804 Ibid., 197/257.
The being of “mind,” therefore, is the invisible lining, the reflexivity, of a living body—whether a bacterium or a human being. The difference between “lower animals,” such as bacteria, and “higher animals,” the types to which we customarily ascribe “consciousness,” is not that the former act mechanistically whereas the latter do not. Rather, it is a difference of degree between bodies’ fields of expressive possibilities, actualized as a qualitative difference; whereas the expressive styles of “higher animals” tend to be realized as internal (i.e., invisible) articulation, those of “lower animals” tend to be realized as external (i.e., visible) articulation. Whereas a snail’s style of being in the world “is expressed in a clearer way in its exterior surface than in its interior organization” (i.e., expressed “‘in extension’”), a higher animal expresses its style intensively: “the appearance is more sober, but the expressive capacity is greater: the body is entirely a manner of expression.” A “human mind” differs from a “duck mind” insofar as the operative sense, the invisible structure, of human behavior—which is mind—can be expressed at greater distances across space and time; a duck’s “gestures” cease to express once the actual behavior has ceased, whereas human gestures can be prolonged in language (particularly written language), which is a more enduring “organ” than the body’s “natural” ones. Thus, “[t]he invisible, mind, is not another positivity: it is the inverse, or the other side of the visible,” the silent speech that, like perception, takes hold of us and expresses the world through us “in order to fill in the blanks of perception,” what lies between sensible events.

At the “narcissistic” level of wild perception, the “self” is a non-individuated unity of silent sense (i.e., a sensorimotor field), a “‘consciousness’ [...] that is sustained, subtended, by the prereflective and preobjective unity of my body”; the unity of the “sentient” body arises from the fact that each sensation is reversible, both a sensing of the world and a sensible in the world, and

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805 Ibid., 187/244.
806 Ibid.
807 Ibid.
808 Ibid., 212/274.
thereby “bound in such a way as to make up with [all the others] the experience of one sole body before one sole world, through a possibility for reversion, reconversion of its language into [that of the others…], and all together are a Sentient in general before a Sensible in general.”  

“Mind” remains a horizontal possibility in the dimension of the Sensible-Sentient, where other living bodies appear not as individuals, but as mirrors of the sentient body’s own flesh with which it becomes “fascinated,” so that in perceiving another sensible-sensing being, “the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside.”  

Sentience is only taken up in the institution of “mind” when the “silent labor of desire,” initiated by the mutual encounter of two sentient bodies, gives birth to the “paradox of expression,” to “gestures”: movements of the face, of the hands, and, in particular, “those strange movements of the throat and mouth that form my voice,” which “go nowhere” and thereby incarnate invisible being.  

The “paradox of expression” consists in the extension of the body’s own reversibility in and through gestures in general, and signs in particular, whereby these beings take on a “life” or “interiority” as embodiments of the invisible, as new “organs” of the expressive flesh of the body in and through which it “sublimates” itself into “thought”: a new relationship with itself, the world, and other expressive bodies.  

There can be no invisible “mind” – no individuation of a “self” – without the visible, sonorous body of operative language, of which “mind” is the schema. And because there can be no speech without others, Merleau-Ponty’s overcoming of the antinomy of “mind” and “body” is the other face of his overcoming of the antinomy of “self” and “others.”

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809 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 142/187.  
810 Ibid., 144/189.  
811 Ibid., 144/189-190.  
812 Ibid., 145/191.
2.B.iii. Perceiving “Other Minds”

The common Urstiftung of the Analytic tradition’s “problem of other minds” and the phenomenological tradition’s “problem of the alter ego” lies in Descartes’s thought. The problem of how to comprehend our experiences of other people as such (and not as pure physicalist exteriorities, or as gaps in the interiority of a constituting consciousness) did not trouble Descartes himself. It was, rather, a still silent possibility on the horizon of his thought: an unforeseen consequence of his discovery-invention of what came to be called “constituting consciousness” in order to guarantee the truth of mathematical models of the “material world.”

For Analytic philosophy and phenomenology alike, the problem consists in the impossibility of conceiving how it is possible for one “pure interiority” to experience – that is, to “represent within itself” – another interiority. What both formulations of the problem take for granted is the existence of “interiorities,” and the divergence between the “interior” and the “exterior” of bodies. We already saw, above (in 2.B.i), that Merleau-Ponty overcomes the “mind-body” antinomy by reconceiving of the “mind” or “interiority” of the body as its own functioning in a primordial “communication” with other bodies; this functioning is the “wild sense” of which all spoken sense is an idealization. Now, we will see that Merleau-Ponty overcomes the “self-others” antinomy by reconceiving of the individuation of bodies as the realization of their primordial intertwinning: the simultaneity of the écart and the chiasm of bodies.

In PhP, Merleau-Ponty argues that, while it is impossible for one “consciousness” (conceived of as pure existence for-itself) to encounter another as such, it is perfectly comprehensible that two body-subjects should reciprocally perceive one another as such. Body-subjects do not originally advent as “objects” (which would be dependent for their sense upon an idealized “consciousness” of which they were the ideal correlates), but as “behaviors” (which are
themselves always already expressive of sense). Indeed, “through reflection,” I find that I do not immediately coincide with myself in the manner of a pure constituting consciousness, because “I find in myself, along with the perceiving subject, a pre-personal subject given to itself”: a corporeal schema or tacit cogito which is given to itself as a horizon of possible relations to the world and to others, as the virtual self-transcendence of the body’s actuality. Thus, by perceiving a given state of another body as a modulation of a general style of behavior oriented toward the same world as the behavior in and through which my own corporeal schema actualizes itself, I perceive, not a physicalist mechanism, but “another living being” (who is not yet, however, experienced as a human being): “Henceforth, just as the parts of my body together form a system, the other’s body and my own form a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon, and the anonymous existence, of which my body is continuously the trace, henceforth inhabits these two bodies simultaneously.”

In the Welt, which is founded upon the Umwelt, I perceive myself and the other as persons insofar as we share, not only a world of “natural objects,” but also a world of “language” whereby “my thought and his form a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion and inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator.” There is no “problem of other minds” at the level of perception because the corporeal and language schemata of two body-subjects form a single system of interlocking horizons, a common horizon of possible sense, which articulates them as distinct processes of self-temporalization in and through their interweaving: “unlike two consciousnesses, two

813 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 410.
814 Ibid.
815 Ibid., 411.
816 Ibid., 412.
temporalities are not mutually incompatible, because each one knows itself by projecting itself in the present, and because they can intertwine there."\(^{817}\)

In *IP*, Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl in explicitly stating that I cannot “receive” nor “perceive” another person’s experience as they themselves live it (i.e., in original intuition), because that would only be possible if I were the other person; instead, I relate to “the other person as occupying the entire horizon of my life and not as a positive being."\(^{818}\) I relate to the other person as a style of being in the world, and since we are in the same world, our styles are lived as different modulations of one and the same total fabric. There is, therefore, a Vorhaben ("pre-possession") of (and by) others at the level of perception, what seems to be “a knowing that says neither yes nor no,” a perceptual faith in which “the non-knowing was already knowing."\(^{819}\) In reality, however, this Wahrnehmungsbereitschaft ("readiness to perceive") the other is not “a knowing prior to knowledge,” but “a me-others system” of encroachment at the level of brute perception whereby the other’s “perception of me becomes a component of my truth” in such a way that “[m]y truth is a function composed of what is attributable to the other and to myself in his views of me."\(^{820}\) As previously established in *PhP*, this is not a relation between positive beings, but between styles, so that the relation “is not me-others, but me-system of others,” where the “I” and “others” would be inserted into this system as “their relations, their differentiation”; the instituting-instituted subject is its insertion into the network of interlocking practical schemata (symbolic matrices), and this network is itself interwoven with the language schema.\(^{821}\)

In his 1960 Introduction to *Signs*, however, Merleau-Ponty diverges from Husserl’s conception – to which he held in *PhP* – of the Vorhaben of the other as a sort of “non-thetic” or “tacit” knowledge. Here, he criticizes Husserl’s analogical solution to the problem of the alter

\(^{817}\) Ibid., 496.
\(^{820}\) Ibid., 163/215.
\(^{821}\) Ibid., 184/240.
ego’s possibility, which I will briefly summarize. When he attempts, in *Cartesian Meditations*, to explain the constitution of a second consciousness (“alter ego”) within the field of intentional consciousness, Husserl describes the impossible experience of a second locus experience as a “necessary absence” from the field of what can be itself given, and as the transcendental condition for the constitution of an “objective world.” Because the alter ego introduces a second locus of perception into the field of the ego’s possibilities, external objects can now be apperceived as given from multiple perspectives simultaneously—and, ideally, from all perspectives simultaneously.

But the alter ego is necessarily given in the mode of “appresention” (the presentation of something *as* absent), and every appresention must be motivated by an “originary presentation,” by something itself given to the ego in the here and now. For instance, right now the appresention of my kitchen is motivated by the presentation of my office, *because* I have previously moved from one to the other; I appresentively experience my kitchen as being on the determinate “horizon” of my here and now (the office), which is to say, as something that can, potentially, become itself given to me, in a future now, through a particular series of movements from my present position. The appresention of another mind is more complicated, however, because it can *never* be given in an original presentation, and if the sense “alter ego” were not ultimately grounded in an original presentation, then it would be unmotivated, empty non-sense.

Husserl begins his reflection on the possibility of the alter ego from the position of the “solus ipse,” the ego within the “primordially reduced world” of its “peculiar ownness,” which includes only its psychical acts and their products—and excludes, therefore, all “transcendencies,” including all of the sedimented products of the intersubjective sphere, from

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823 Ibid., §55:152.
824 Ibid., §50:139.
“other consciousnesses” to the “objective world” itself. The solus ipse is conscious of its perceptions and its acts of perceiving, as well as of their “immanently transcendent” objects—“external” things corresponding to actual and possible perceptions which are given, not as things in an “objective world,” but purely in relation to the solus ipse via its “animate organism,” which is the point of their interaction. But then a body appears which is “similar” to the solus ipse’s own, so that the original presentation of this similarity “can serve as the motivational basis for the ‘analogizing’ apprehension of that body as another animate organism.” Since “animate organism” has the sense of a psychic life united with a body, this analogizing apprehension motivates the appresentation of the “other ego,” continually verified by the other’s “changing but incessantly harmonious ‘behavior’,” which has “a [present] physical side that indicates something psychic appresentively.” The sense “other consciousness” must be continually verified because the sense of a “primordially unfulfillable” transcendence is essentially open, so that what I took to be “another person” could always “[become] experienced as a pseudo-organism” – i.e., an automaton – “if there is something discordant about its behavior,” in the same way that what I take to be “my past” could always be revealed as a false memory if a discordance crops up in the “harmonious syntheses of recollection.”

Merleau-Ponty still affirms that it is impossible for a person to live someone else’s experiences directly, but he takes issue with the point of departure of Husserl’s account of the alter ego. In Cartesian Meditations, Husserl still takes the unity of the solus ipse – although not its “insertion” into (i.e., unity with) its body – for granted, and thereby fails to realize that the sense “I” cannot precede the sense “others.” To explain the co-advent of these senses, Merleau-Ponty articulates the intertwining of sensible-sentient bodies through their mutual immersion in a

825 Ibid., §50:140.
826 Ibid.
827 Ibid., §50:140 (Husserl’s emphasis).
828 Ibid., §52:144.
829 Ibid., §52:144-145.
single world, a living “flesh” of beings whose ontological functioning originally institutes the senses “I” and “other”:

Take others at the moment they appear in the world’s flesh. They would not exist for me, it is said, unless I recognized them, deciphering in them some sign of the presence to self whose sole model I hold within me. But though my thought is indeed only the other side of my times, of my passive and perceptible being, whenever I try to understand myself the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too, and with it come the others who are caught in it. Before others are or can be subjected to my conditions of possibility and reconstructed in my image, they must already exist as outlines, deviations, and variants of a single Vision in which I too participate.830

Before “I” can think about “others,” there must be a prior indivision of living bodies within the total fabric of the world of perception, a primordial “narcissism” of Vision, wherein “self” and “others” are inseparable dimensions of one total field, equivalencies within a single schema of Visibility.

This interrogation of Husserl’s account of the “analogical apperception” of the alter ego is carried through at greater length in “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” where, addressing the “riddle of Einfühlung [sympathy or co-feeling]” – the question of how it is possible that we do not just see that others see, but that we rather see them seeing – Merleau-Ponty argues negatively, as in PhP, that the “solution” lies neither in an intellectualist reduction of bodies to psychical contents, nor in an empiricist reduction of minds to mere effects of physical processes.831 Intellectualist “philosoph[ies] of mind” are inevitably trapped in an oscillation between subject-status and object-status, wherein one consciousness only achieves the status of active, constituting subjectivity on condition of reducing the other to the status of a passive, constituted object: in Hegelian terms, an insurmountable “master-slave” relation persisting in the manner of a “bad infinity,” an endless oscillation between contradictories without reconciliation.832 Materialist

approaches, meanwhile, might seem to bridge the gap between two minds by bringing them into external relation within a single world of material phenomena, but they do so only on condition of denying “mental realities” altogether, since, as Husserl puts it in Ideas III, “the material world is […] a self-contained and particular world which does not require the support of any other reality.”833 In neither case do others actually exist; for an intellectualist philosophy of consciousness, there can only ever be one constituting consciousness, while, for a materialist philosophy, there are only bodies without any consciousness whatsoever.

In order to conceive of others as existing, it is necessary to reconceive of “body” and “mind,” “world” and “truth”: visible and invisible being.834 The perceiving, motile body must be understood as, not the object of some consciousness nor a material thing, but leib or “flesh”: experienced as an “I am able to,” the schema or “field within which my perceptive powers are located,” a sensing-sensible “subject-object” which advents as the becoming-sensible of the body’s ability to perceive.835 In conceiving of the perception of another “sensibility” – of another living, perceiving body in the process of perceiving – the intellectualist error lies in assuming “that the problem here is to constitute a different mind, whereas [the truth is that] the one who is constituting is as yet only animate flesh himself”; the one perceiving will only exist as a “mind” at “the stage when he will speak and listen,” and the experience of an “other mind” will be “the advent of another person who also speaks and listens.”836 Thus, whereas the traditional “problem of other minds” asks how it is possible for one pure interiority to encounter, experience, or know another pure interiority, Merleau-Ponty reconceives of the “self” that first encounters the “other,” not as a reflective consciousness, but as a “carnal subject,” a living body whose perceptual-motile

835 Ibid., 166-167/270-272.
behavior is a particular actualization of its general style of being in the world.\textsuperscript{837} Perceived things and the world, too, are “flesh” in the sense that their being is that of a field or horizon; what is actually perceived is never exhaustive of the present field of possible relations between sensible and sensing bodies, so that the actual is only a single modulation of the sense of the “world” as the total field of the possible.\textsuperscript{838}

Intellectualism is right in what it denies, though wrong in what it affirms. It is indeed impossible for one “mind” to “constitute” another, because I can neither live another’s life, nor think their thoughts, as such: “I can think \textit{that} he thinks; I can construct, behind this mannequin, a presence to self modeled on my own; but it is still myself that I put in it.”\textsuperscript{839} Thus, at the level of thought, everything is as Husserl describes it in his analysis of the phenomenon of the alter ego: on the basis a “comparison” between my body and that of another whereby I note their similarities, I draw a pre-thetic “analogy” to the effect that, since I experience \textit{my own} body as joined to a consciousness, this other must do the same; I thereby “project” a constructed psychical life into my perception of the other’s body, and, correlative, “introject” my own ego, along with all of the psychical acts and contents belonging to it, into \textit{my own} body (since it is only the appresentation of the other’s psychical life as localized “within” their body that motivates the \textit{solus ipse} to localize its own psychical life within its body).\textsuperscript{840}

The situation is different, however, in the world of perception, where \textit{Einfühlung} is first sketched out as a horizontal possibility. Whereas the statement “I think that he thinks” is a propositional judgment of thetic consciousness, the statement “I see that he sees” is the reversible pairing of two carnal subjects, “the mutual unfocusing of a ‘main’ and a ‘subordinate’ viewing” which is “based,” not upon a self-relation of consciousness, but “upon the animal of perceptions

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\item[837] Ibid., 167/272-273.
\item[838] Ibid., 167/272.
\item[839] Ibid., 169/275-276.
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and movements” upon which my “‘thought,’” too, is based, as a still higher articulation of the
reversibility of flesh which nonetheless remains “a modalization of my presence [to] the
world.”841 Husserl’s description of the constitution of the alter ego (i.e., of one ego by and for
another) “presupposes what is meant to be explained by it,” since this active synthesis must be
“motivated” and prepared by a prior, passive synthesis: “If the other person is to exist for me, he
must do so to begin with in an order beneath the order of thought.”842 It is in the “perceived
world” of “half-disclosed things” that others – “animalia” in general, and “persons” in particular
– can and must be initially encountered as such, because perceived beings, on account of their
horizontal structure, call for their fulfillment in and through perception in general, rather than in
and through my perception alone.843

Sensible things “have in their thickness what it takes to supply more than one sensible
subject with ‘states of consciousness’; they have the right to many other witnesses besides me.”844
As the enactment of styles of perception and motility, the sensible-sensing body is always already
prepared for a perceptual encounter with any and all beings who perceive and move in one and
the same world, rather than functioning as a “screen” or “mannequin” in such encounters; a
person’s body is their very “opening to the world,” which is simultaneously their potential
opening to all other living bodies as such.845 Another person’s behavior appears to me as the trace
of a style of being in the world, as an actualization of the potential depth of perceived things:
“When a comportment is sketched out in this world which already goes beyond me, this is only
one more dimension in primordial being, which comprises them all.”846

842 Ibid., 170/277.
843 Ibid., 170/277.
844 Ibid., 170/277.
845 Ibid., 170/277.
846 Ibid., 170/277.
Thus, whereas Husserl conceives of the alter ego as co-constituted only along with the “Objective world,” Merleau-Ponty locates the originary possibility and the actuality of other persons in the dimensions of, respectively, living perception (which is the ground of idealizations such as the “Objective world”) and operative speech (which is capable of instituting an indeterminate range of different fields of sense, in addition to fields of knowledge).\footnote{Husserl, \textit{Ideas II}, 168-169.}

\[\text{[F]rom the “solipsist” layer on, the other person is not impossible because the sensible thing is open. The other person becomes actual when a different comportment and a different gaze take possession of my things. And this articulation of a different corporeality in my world is itself effected without introjection; because my sensible existents […] were already bringing about the miracle of things which are things by the fact that they are offered to a body, and were already making my corporeality a proof of being. Man can create the alter ego which “thought” cannot create, because he is outside himself in the world and because one ek-stasis is compossible with other ek-stases.}\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 152/199.}

The solution to the “riddle of \textit{Einfühlung}” is, therefore, “telepathy,” as Merleau-Ponty terms it in \textit{IP}: “[p]erception of others and endopsychic perception” make it seem as though “we hear our unconscious in others” because “my” consciousness is the interweaving of certain general styles of bodily comportment with the styles operant in given situations, and therefore calls to be actualized as a plurality of behaviors in a plurality of living bodies.\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IP}, 203/263.}

Thought does not “create” other people because it is in and through expressive exchanges (i.e., gestures in general, and speech in particular) with others that an explicit “divergence” (\textit{écart}) arises between the visible and the invisible: between sensible and sensing beings, and their styles of becoming sensible and sentient.\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IP}, 203/263.} This divergence between the actually-sensible and the horizon of possibilities (i.e., the total sense) sketched by its general style of becoming-sensible – this expression of a being’s sense as the excess of its possibilities over its actuality – is the advent

\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IP}, 203/263.}
Operative language gives a new body—i.e., words, “another less heavy, more transparent body,” whereby the style of perceived being is “emancipated but not freed from every condition”—to the invisible of the visible, so that the Urstiftung of language gives voice to the silent world of perception.

The speech of another person thus functions as the call to this “sublimation” of the flesh into ideality whereby persons are individuated in and through responsive speech:

The others’ words make me speak and think because they create within me an other than myself, a divergence (écart) by relation to…what I see, and thus designate it to me myself. The other’s words form a grillwork through which I see my thought. Did I have it before this conversation? Yes, as a unique and fundamental tone, Weltthesis, not as thoughts, significations or statements— —
To be sure, it is necessary to think in order to speak, but to think in the sense of being in the world (être au monde) or in the vertical Being of Vorhabe. Thoughts are the coinage of this total being— —Delimitations—within it.

By sharing the single body of language, “I” and “an other” become differentiated as “ourselves,” transcending the primary “narcissism” of mute perception. “Individuality” or “subjectivity” is “transcendence” in the sense of “identity within difference”: through our “co-functioning” within the single fabric of language as “difference”—for language functions precisely by divergence—I and the other become “identical” to ourselves, incomparable in and through our very inseparability.

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851 Ibid., 152/199.
853 Ibid., 224/277-278.
2.B.iv. The Hyper-Dialectic of “Freedom” and “Necessity”

Merleau-Ponty overcomes the “mind-body” antinomy by showing that the “mind” is not a different kind of being than sensible-sensing bodies, but the functioning of their styles of being in the world. The “mind” is thus the unity (i.e., operative sense) of the ongoing integration, accomplished in and through the body, of beings into the total field of the world via their intertwining as processes of Stiftung. As for the “self-others” antinomy, he shows that minds, as the living functioning of bodies as flesh, are not isolated from each other behind the “screens” of passive physical mechanisms, but individuated in and through their intertwining in the dimensions of wild perception and speaking speech. Simultaneous with these revolutions in thought is his overcoming of the “freedom-necessity” antinomy: the Modern rupture between a conception of “freedom” as an absolutely unconditional power of choice, and “necessity” as the rigorous determination of the future by the past, and of entirely passive things by one another.

Overcoming the freedom-necessity antinomy is therefore a manner of reconceiving of the relationship between “activity” and “passivity”: of overcoming the Modern opposition between the “pure activity” of “intelligible beings,” and the “pure passivity” of “given” or “empirical beings.” Merleau-Ponty ultimately accomplishes this via an account of the double intersection of horizontal (given) and vertical (operative) being: on the one hand, the “passivity” of actually given beings is an expression of their “activity” (qua operative processes of becoming-given); on the other, beings become “active” (qua ontological processes) in and through the “passivity” of their actual relations. The activity of beings happens as their passivity, and it is the passivity of beings which renders them active.

But then “freedom,” too, happens as necessity, and “necessity” is the advent of freedom. “Freedom” is the advent of new possibilities for a certain being in a given situation, and “necessity” is a certain demand that a certain being respond to a given situation within a certain
field of possibilities. The idealist error is to believe that a being can unilaterally impose its own field of possibilities upon an actual situation from “outside” (thereby attributing “unconditional freedom” to that being), whereas the realist error is to believe that the actual situation unilaterally determines the reactions of all beings in it (thereby reducing “possibility” to “necessity”).

Merleau-Ponty goes beyond this alternative by reconceiving of the meaning of “necessity” as the sedimentation of historical a prioris, and of “freedom” as the advent of sense in and through the transformative reactivation of historical a prioris. A given “choice” in the present happens as a contingent response to the question posed by the actual past, and must respond within the indeterminate horizon of possibilities outlined by the past which it, simultaneously, renders virtually determinate: freedom happens as the becoming-necessary of a possible sense of the past. But the determination of the sense of the past is simultaneously the opening of the present to a horizon of possible futures in which its own sense will become determined: necessity happens as the becoming-free of the sense of the present. The actuality of freedom expresses the advent of necessity, and the actuality of necessity expresses the advent of freedom. In order to render this account of a hyper-dialectic of freedom and necessity concrete, and to show how the questioning of the meaning of freedom leads Merleau-Ponty to articulate the chiasm of ontology and ethics, I will retrace the course of his investigation of freedom.

In PhP, Merleau-Ponty describes “freedom” in a double sense. On the one hand, there is the founding “existential project” or “general intention,” which consists in the “spontaneous” advent or acquisition of a style of being in the world, and, on the other, there is the founded “intellectual project” or “explicit intention,” which consists in the “fulfillment” or actualization of one among the range of possible modulations of that style which it implicitly sketches on its horizon of possible responses to the world: “My decision takes up a spontaneous sense of my life
that it can confirm or deny, but that it cannot annul.”855 Thus, he initially conceives of “choice” as the founding of a new situated necessity – a new historical a priori – in and on a previously-founded field of sense, from the perspective of which the founded sense is contingent.856 Whereas an “implicit” existential choice is the advent of a general style of being, an “explicitly” conscious choice is the modulation of an available style, taking it up through the actualization of the possibilities which it sketched out in advance.

The “subject” of freedom in PhP is, therefore, always double – i.e., a “concrete subject” consisting of “two moments of a single structure,” both the “generality” of a schema of styles or horizon of sense, and the “individuality” of the way in which the styles are modulated in their actualization – as is choice itself, composed of both the “centripetal” moment wherein “the world chooses us,” and the “centrifugal” moment wherein “[w]e choose our world.”857 “Actual freedom,” then, inevitably advents in the form of “solicited freedom” – the taking up of an acquired style of existing, in response to one of the lived environment’s styles of solicitation – in contrast to the idealist myth of an “unconditional freedom” originating somewhere beyond one’s concrete situation.858 Freedom in PhP is, therefore, synonymous with Fundierung: the tacit possibilities outlined by the intersection of a person’s available styles of behavior and the manners in which they are solicited by a given situation serves as the ground for an activity which takes these possibilities up, opening a new field and projecting a horizon of the future via the “determination or a making explicit of the founding term.”859 The advent of freedom, synonymous with the advent of sense, is the gearing into each other of the situation and the body-

855 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 503, 510-511.
856 Ibid., 500-501.
857 Ibid., 514, 518.
858 Ibid., 512, 516, 506-507.
859 Ibid., 454.
subject: “Motive and decision are two elements of a situation: the first is the situation as a fact, the second is the situation as taken up.”

Here, Merleau-Ponty describes freedom as a “power of beginning something else” by taking up of a style of behavior which articulates a field of sense, and opens up a futural horizon, in and through communication with others and the world. But already, Merleau-Ponty’s conception of freedom does not lend itself to an “ethics of freedom” (e.g., Kantian ethics) which would take the latter’s actualization as an ultimate principle of value, because “[w]e are always in the plenum and in being, just as a face, even when at rest or even when dead, is always condemned to express something.” To live is to express meaning, and thus to realize concrete freedom, whereas the pursuit of a pure, unconditional freedom is a vain endeavor. Persons can, however, fail to realize freedom insofar as they live in abstractions: insofar as a given situation is conceived of either as an inherently meaningless collection of objective facts (realism), or as a purely internal content of a sovereign constituting consciousness, the meaning of which would therefore be a matter of unconditional fiat (idealism). Thus, concerning ethics, Merleau-Ponty’s explicit thought in PhP remains largely negative: “The only way I can fail to be free is if I attempt to transcend my natural and social situation by refusing to take it up at first, rather than meeting up with the natural and human world through it.” Beyond the negative injunction not to relate to one’s situation abstractly, Merleau-Ponty’s sole positive injunction echoes Sartre: “your freedom cannot will itself without emerging from its singularity and without willing freedom in general,” for all.

In Humanism and Terror, Merleau-Ponty renders more explicit the political and ethical dimensions of the phenomenology of “freedom” in PhP, continuing to rely on the structure of

860 Ibid., 308.
861 Ibid., 516.
862 Ibid.
863 Ibid., 520.
864 Ibid., 520-521.
Fundierung to describe the relationship between motivating situations (the founding), and the choices which take them up (the founded), so that “all freedom is a decision in a situation which is not chosen but [which is] assumed all the same.” But recognizing the primordial character of this situated freedom means rejecting any possibility of “guarantees” – whether of the actual consequences or the ultimate meaning of an action – in life. Thus, in a single stroke, Merleau-Ponty rejects both pure “political realism” (i.e., judging an action in terms of its consequences alone) and pure intellectualism, which Max Weber calls an “ethics of faith” (i.e., judging an action in terms of the actor’s intentions alone). Against intellectualist ethics, he argues that it is only by producing certain results that an action realizes one of its possible meanings; but, against realist ethics, he argues that the contribution of consequences to the meaning of an action would only imply that “the ends justify the means” if the actor could be absolutely certain of the consequences (and not just the actual consequences, but their sense for persons in the future), which would require that the future had already come to pass: “Since, in respect of the future, we have no other criterion than probability, the difference between a greater or lesser probability suffices as the basis of a political decision, but not to leave all the honor on one side and the dishonor on the other.” Neither intentions nor consequences can independently ground the value of a human endeavor.

Positively, therefore, Merleau-Ponty valorizes a sort of ethical ‘pluralism’ (“polytheism”) in Humanism and Terror: a recognition that the meaning of a given action arises at the intersection of intentions and consequences. Thus, the question of whether a given ethical or political principle truly gives voice to an operative style of behavior, or whether it is merely propaganda – and, thus, the question of the actual value of a given principle – can only be

865 Merleau-Ponty, Humanism and Terror, 167/180.
866 Ibid., xlii/xxxvii.
867 Ibid., xl/xxxvi.
868 Ibid., xl/xxxvi, xxxvii/xxxiv, 31/32-33.
answered relative to actual situations, although the answer itself is not relative within a given situation despite the inescapable risk of mistaken judgments.869 Truth and falsity alike are inevitably situated, but the distinction between them is not thereby abolished. Whether or not a given principle is still vital – i.e., capable of by being incarnated in the practices of everyday life – is determined (always with the possibility of error) by answering the question, in its most general form, of whether the style of coexistence which the principle evokes is still a real possibility, or recourse to violence has become inevitable.870 “Coexistence” means a shared striving for “truth,” a co-production of meaning: “[t]o seek harmony with ourselves and others […] not only in a priori reflection and solitary thought but through the experience of concrete situations and in a living dialogue with others.”871 When coexistence between certain groups becomes impossible, they have entered one of those “periods in which intellectuals are not tolerable and enlightenment is forbidden,” so that “[t]he whole question is to know whether if we take our conflicts and divisions seriously it cripples or cures us”: to know whether coexistence is still possible, or war is inevitable.872 To live ethically would then mean enacting a certain style of perception and behavior: perceiving the possibilities and limits of coexistence, and acting to preserve and augment the former, while recognizing the latter as the border beyond which ethical life becomes impossible, and the “games of violence” hold sway.

In IP, Merleau-Ponty shifts his account of freedom to an explicitly onto-genetic register, as Stiftung, which he now explicitly treats as synonymous with “schema.” What he now calls the “instituted-instituting subject” is the very functioning of the “corporeal schema” – individuated through interpenetration with “the norm of the perceived” (i.e., a thing-schema, the general style realized in and through a given “perception of [a] sensible thing”) – and, as a taking up of the

869 Ibid., xliii/xxxix.
870 Ibid., xlii/xxxvi, xlv/xli.
871 Ibid., 187/205.
872 Ibid., 185/202, 187/206.
corporeal schema, a “practical schema that produces the dimensions of intersubjectivity,” which is individuated through interpenetration with the style expressed in and through the perception of another person, a “drama” (e.g., the Oedipal crisis) in psychoanalytic terms. The true sense of the “unconscious” is therefore “the symbolic schema left behind by the event” of the co-advent of persons, taking up a prior integration of the corporeal schema and the schemata of things, and accomplishing an integration of the practical schema and the schema of another person.

Merleau-Ponty here describes three styles of « choix » as temporalization, although I take the guillemets to indicate that these are actually inauthentic instances of “choice”: in the first, “the past predominates and displaces the present (neurosis, withdrawal to the origins, lying play through which one replays them in the present)”; in the second, “the present predominates and succeeds in sweeping the past behind it” (i.e., the present is lived as if it were without depth, a clean break with history); in the third, the present “attempts to break with the past, but this is a new repression, and it is Sartrean choice,” i.e., choice which understands itself as an “unconditioned spontaneity.” Each inauthentic style of choice is lived as a partial (and therefore abstract) relation of Fundierung – one-sidedly emphasizing, respectively, the fulfillment of the past in the present, the founding of the present on the past, and the founding of the future on the past and present – and, as such, fails to authentically realize freedom because it enacts an inauthentic attitude toward the “explicit memory” of the virtual past (in the case of neurosis), the “sedimented” past (in the case of a shallow present), or the structure of “reactivation” itself (in the case of Sartrean choice).

Such choices are “inauthentic” insofar as they are founded upon an abstract understanding of the relationship between events and sense, and thereby an abstract

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874 Ibid., 169/223.
875 Ibid., 202/262.
876 Ibid., 201/261.
understanding of “choice” itself. A philosophy of consciousness such as static phenomenology, for instance, leads to this sort of distorted thinking insofar as it is mistaken for a complete reflection upon the lived meaning of experience. A merely static phenomenology describes relations of necessary implication, and it mistakes them for an articulation of the being of beings, rather than taking the additional step of seeking an ontological explanation of the unity of a given and its sense. When the sense of a given is assumed to be either a different kind of given, or a direct reference to another given, this insufficiently radical reflection fails to ask the question of the being of sense, and “pos[es] the problem [of the relation between beings and sense] in terms of representation.” 877 When it is a question of determining the sense of a given “choice,” representationalist thought can only conceive of its temporal sense by appealing to one of three incomplete accounts: the present as a representation of the past (i.e., the return of the repressed), the past as a representation of the present (i.e., the repression of the past by the present), or the past and present as representations of the future (i.e., the delusion of an escapable fate). 878

But such accounts forget the simultaneity of activity-passivity, so that “[t]he problem of memory is at a dead end as long as we hesitate between memory as preservation and memory as construction” (i.e., hesitate between partial descriptions of the founding of the present on the past, or the fulfillment of the past by the present), because “true memory is found at the intersection of the two” (i.e., at the chiasm of an Urstiftung and an Endstiftung), so that “[t]hese descriptions, this phenomenology, are always something of a disappointment, because they limit themselves to detecting the negative in the positive and the positive in the negative.” 879 Static phenomenology can describe the ambiguity of time – the manner in which the possibility of the present is already outlined in the past, and a sense of the past fulfilled in the present – but it cannot explain it,

877 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 208 / Merleau-Ponty, RC, 72.
878 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 206 / Merleau-Ponty, RC, 67.
879 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 208-9 / Merleau-Ponty, RC, 71-73.
because that would require an “ontology of the perceived world beyond sensible nature,” an ontology of the *chiasm* of the visible and the invisible.  

By critiquing the relatively static phenomenological method which he himself employed in *PhP*, Merleau-Ponty is not just emphasizing the expressive character of phenomena as such, but also opening the question of the ground of events of expression. *PhP* itself already describes the founded as expressive of the founding, and in *IP* it is precisely such relations of *Fundierung* which Merleau-Ponty finds to be insufficient for explaining the possibility and genesis of lived sense. Thus, the investigations in *IP* begin to shift toward an ontology of given meaning, the being of which he articulates as *Stiftung*, the (hyper)dialectic of intertwining-divergence:

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[T]o be conscious is to realize a certain divergence (*écart*), a certain variation in an already instituted (*institué*) existential field, which is always behind us and whose weight, like that of a flywheel, intervenes up into the actions by which we transform it. To live, for humans, is not merely to impose significations perpetually, but to continue a vortex of experience which is formed, with our birth, at the point of contact between the “outside” and the one who is called to live it.

As Lefort puts in his Foreword to *IP*, “when [Merleau-Ponty] takes up the theme of institution […] and thereby gives a new orientation to his investigations, he noticed that the attempt to extend the phenomenology of perception through a theory of expression […] left him still dependent on the philosophy of consciousness.”

Insofar as the mythical “constituting subject” is replaced by the true, “instituted-instituting subject,” the scope of this subject’s “freedom,” and thus of its “responsibility,” extends to both perceptual and practical “decisions,” although the freedom in question is an activity in and through passivity. “Perceptual decisions” are reactivations and rearticulations of the perceptual-motor schema (the “me-my body hinge”), whereas “practical” decisions are reactivations and rearticulations of the “symbolic matrix” of speech and culture (the “me-others hinge”), *and* of the
animal of perceptions and movement in and upon which the latter is grounded. As the taking up of a prior institution, a choice is double: an actual event (i.e., the realization of a certain relation between sensible beings) in the horizontal order of history, and the “reanimation” of a sedimented sense (i.e., of a system of possible relations) in the vertical order of advent. If we wish to speak of “responsibility” for a decision, then, it is necessary to speak of both a retroactive responsibility for the selection of one among a range of possibilities offered by the past, and a prospective responsibility for the selection of one among a range of possible horizons of the future. Or again, insofar as a decision operates as the Nachstiftung or the Endstiftung of a prior Urstiftung, there is a retroactive responsibility for the selection of one among the range of possibilities offered within a previously instituted horizon; insofar as a decision, simultaneously, transforms the reactivated tradition, or even operates as the Urstiftung of a new tradition, there is a prospective responsibility for the opening of a new field of the possible. But it is still necessary to clarify, now in terms of “its” freedom, what the “instituted-instituting subject” which would bear such responsibility is. I will approach this question via the problem of “activity” and “passivity.”

As Stiftung, “choice” or “freedom” is not pure activity, but passivity which functions (i.e., a reactivated Urstiftung), and activity which advents as passivity (i.e., a sedimented Urstiftung):

There is not the activity and the passivity, the choice and the non-choice (adversity), one clashing with the other, but choice that derives, for example, from the obviousness of the unacceptable (which does not mean that it accepts the alternative and bases affirmation on refusal) – There is passivity right there in activity. It is because such direction was given as “oblique” in the old level that by setting {myself} up in it as “normal” I modify the sense of all the rest and establish a new level. The new level would be nothing definite without what preceded it, without my history. [And there is] activity right there in passivity. Outside certain limit cases where the event is not assimilable, I could always maintain my old level through regression.

884 Ibid., 46-47/85-86.
885 Ibid., 192/250.
The actual past does not rigorously determine the manner in which it will be taken up in the present, although it does outline a certain horizon of the possible. This weight of the already-instituted (i.e., the articulation of the field of the present as a system of possible relations between the accumulated past and the open future) is simultaneously the possibility of choice and the limitation of what is presently possible. A being’s activity is its becoming-passivity (the crystallization of a process of institution in an actual relation), and its passivity is its becoming-activity (the realization of a possibility for functioning). In other words, freedom advents as its own becoming-necessity (sedimentation), and necessity advents as its own becoming-freedom (reactivation).

A given “choice” takes up of the total system of beings and sense as it has crystallized in a particular present, using the system’s own already-instituted resources to transform it by realizing a sense outlined in and through the co-articulation of the sense of beings as fields of possible relations. If freedom is thus the transformation of its own conditions upon the basis of those same conditions, then it is possible to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic choices:

It is above all the logic of things done which forces the abandonment of the other choices, and the grâce d’état of the commitment, i.e., choices are scarcely uttered. To choose is most often to put oneself in [a] situation such that one can no longer shrink back, and, in doing so, one always depends upon a previous situation which contained all because it was ambiguous. There is not a choice which is true in this sense, it is necessary to make the truth, without decisive reason, but it is because they are all true in some fashion, because of ambiguity, all prepared in previous ambiguity. And consequently there is, if not a true choice, at least false choices or chosen fakes, which are those which are presented as absolute choice, which renounce the ambiguity from which they speak […] instead of acknowledging that they are becoming toward the truth, i.e., elimination of the impossible and the chosen fake, not without sacrifice.  

“False choices” here mean – as in Beauvoir’s account of “merely abstract freedom” – ones which deny the ambiguity of their conditions so as to present themselves in the guise of external

886 Ibid., 186/243-244.
transcendence, absolute necessity. For Merleau-Ponty, however, the true meaning of the “power of choice” is not the “negativity of consciousness,” but the ambiguity of the total situation: the actuality of the present as a realization-restriction of the open horizon of the actual past, and the sense of the present as a total field wherein the sense of each actual relation is itself a field of possible relations constituting a unique modulation of the whole.

One cannot truly “make a choice” independent of a situation, from a fantasied position external to the intertwining-individuation of beings, whereby they articulate themselves as fields and project horizons of possibilities for transcending these fields. To “choose” is, rather, to function as a hinge of the situation’s meaning, transforming the world by transforming oneself, and vice-versa. Because a given “situation” is total, it includes the styles of perception and behavior – sensorimotor and symbolic alike – which are available to the people in it, so that whether or not a given person is capable of transcending a given situation depends upon the situation itself, upon whether or not it offers means of perceiving and realizing the possibilities on its own horizon. A person can become trapped in symbolic structures, whereby, for instance, the past remains operative in the present without thereby becoming transformed ("neurosis"), or the ambiguous relation between the present and the past is misinterpreted as the possibility of making an unconditioned thrust toward pure futurity ("Sartrean choice"):  

The neurosis can be defeated by reality, and the doctor cannot foresee. Thus, not fate of the neurosis nor of love, but {rather} the decision which creates one or the other depends on intersubjectivity, {depends} on what will succeed in persuading the partner. What possesses the malleable force over our life is not the decision, but the Gestaltung which surpasses the dialectical situation or not. Gestaltung [does not mean] process in the third person{:} others, {yes,} but not Sinngebung—The Freudian decision is the movement in the constellation where Dora is set up, is perceptual decision, i.e., not imposed by the givens of the situation, but effective only if she takes them and reorders them not as a system of objects, but as a system of tensions attached to certain beings-things.  

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The ‘subject’ or ‘agent’ of a decision – i.e., that which is operative in the taking up of a sense offered by the past – is neither an intellectualist “consciousness” that imposes its will upon things, nor a realist “thing” whose future states are rigorously determined by its present ones. Concrete freedom is not an ‘attribute’ belonging to some ‘positive entity’ but is, rather, the operativity of sense expressed in actual relations between beings: the divergence of beings through processes of intertwining whereby each articulates its own fields of possibility through the others, and all together continually rearticulate the “world” as a field of fields. The “figure” of the Gestalt structure of behavior and perception now consists in the necessitation of the present by the virtual past, and the openness of the present horizon of the future; the “background,” meanwhile, designates the openness of the horizon of the actual past, and the contingency of the present as a reactivation of that horizon. All true decisions are realizations of the same general process as “perceptual decisions,” which fulfill a horizontal sense of the situation and, simultaneously, a horizontal sense of the perceiver qua responding to it: the simultaneous individuation of a “self,” “others,” and “things” through their (re)integration into the world as a total system of possible becomings. Symbolic (i.e., “human”) decisions either sublimate a sense originally articulated in this dynamism of the world of perception, or else take up an already-sublimated sense, an available symbolization.

In AD – published concurrently with the delivery of the IP lectures – Merleau-Ponty speaks of les institutions (available institutions) and les révolutions (transformative reactivations of the latter) as elements within a total “structure of history,” which mirrors his descriptions of the movement of Stiftung in IP: the simultaneous articulation of a vertical order of advent through “sedimentation”889 or “inertia” (“a passage to generality”), and a horizontal order of events

889 Bien renders “sédimenter,” anomalously, as “to precipitate,” although he is otherwise consistent in rendering words from the Stiftung constellation in a manner that preserves their technical sense.
through “revolution” or “movement” (“the institution of relationships among persons”). He criticizes Sartre for maintaining, in The Communists and Peace, a strict dichotomy between activity and passivity – e.g., between the supposedly “pure authority” of institutions and the supposedly “pure obedience” of those subjected to them – and thereby foreclosing a true account of either “substantial action […] which, in its culmination, is called revolution,” or of “a coming-to-be of meaning in institutions.” “Substantial action” is always the Nachstiftung (i.e., reactivation) of an available Urstiftung (i.e., living tradition), while “revolution” is a substantial action that so thoroughly transforms the Urstiftung of which it is the Endstiftung, that it itself becomes the Urstiftung of a new tradition (the possibility of which was, however, sketched out on the horizon of the surpassed tradition). To articulate the “coming-to-be of meaning in institutions,” meanwhile, is to conceive of given institutions as realizations of the total movement of Stiftung itself: of history as a process of genesis-sedimentation-reactivation which continually accomplishes the total but provisional reintegration of fields into the fabric of a single world.

Sartre misses, on the one hand, the passive, vertical dimension of actions, the depth of the sedimented history of prior acquisitions of which a given action is the reactivation, and, on the other, the active functioning of “facticity” whereby institutions themselves call for certain styles of response, outlining horizons of transcendence:

Our concrete decisions do not aim at closed meanings. The Party has value for the militant only through the action to which it calls him, and this action is not completely definable in advance. It is, like everything which exists, like everything we live, something in the process of becoming an expression, a movement which calls for a continuation, a past in the process of giving itself a future—in short, a being we can know in a certain way.

Between facticity and human actions, “between being and doing, object and subject, body and consciousness,” between “men and things,” “there is also the interworld, which we call history,

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890 Merleau-Ponty, AD, 220-221/304-305.
891 Ibid., 124/174-175.
892 Ibid., 127/178-179.
symbolism, truth-to-be-made,” “[t]he in-between” as the total movement of institution: e.g., “the book taken according to the meaning ordinarily given to it, the changes of this reading which take place with time, and the way in which these layers of meaning accumulate, displace each other, or even complete each other.”

With this account of “action” as – like the “subject” whose movement of co-transformation in and with the world is genuine action – instituted-instituting, Merleau-Ponty negatively concludes that Sartre’s account of radical responsibility – that “[e]ach man, in literature as well as in politics, must assume all that happens instant by instant to all others,” which is to say, that “he must be immediately universal,” completely responsible and completely justified (or unjustified) in the instant of “choice” or commitment, completely responsible for the future before it has happened – amounts to being “imprisoned in words,” in spoken consciousness’s “pretension of being God.” Indeed, as Bernasconi points out, whereas the “accountability” of Ancient Greek thought is “primarily backward-looking, focusing on the rectification of past crimes or failings,” nouns signifying “responsibility” in the sense of future-oriented duty first appear in French, English, and German in the late 18th century; Bernasconi credits Sartre with intensifying this relatively recent acquisition into “hyperbolic responsibility,” not just for the consequences of one’s own actions, but “for everything,” for the meaning of (human) being itself.

Merleau-Ponty, however, argues that:

If, on the contrary, one admits that no action takes up all of what happens, and that no action attains the event itself, [if one admits] that every action, even war, is always a symbolic action, and anticipates the effect that it will have as a meaningful gesture and as the trace of an intention as much as the immediate results in the event – if one therefore renounces “pure action,” which is a myth,

893 Ibid., 140-141/195-196, 200/278.
894 Ibid., 200/278.
895 See, for example, Aristotle’s discussion of the types of actions for which we can, and those for which we cannot, be praised or blamed (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1109b30-1111b3).
896 Bernasconi, “Before Whom and for What?”, 131-133, 137.
Positively, therefore, Merleau-Ponty conceives of a “true choice” as the taking up of a “perspective” – i.e., an attitude toward the situation and itself – which recognizes the openness of the horizon of possibilities articulated by the situation to which it must “respond” in some way, and thereby recognizes that it does not “create” meaning ex nihilo; to “create” meaning is, equally, to “discover” a possibility already sketched out by the situation.

Human action is the taking up of some style of the perceived world rendered more formal and general through an idealizing reflection, or the taking up of a style extracted by reflection from some prior idealization. Action emanates from a perception of the horizon in and out of which it advents, and thereby operates – and, if it is authentic, lives itself as operating – in and out of the field of wild meaning where false dilemmas of “pure activity” and “pure passivity” can only appear as non-sense. Indeed, in EM, Merleau-Ponty accuses the theoreticians of Renaissance painting of “la mauvaise foi” (bad faith) insofar as they conceived of the new perspectival techniques as “[bringing] to an end painting’s quest and history,” as “[founding] once and for all an exact and infallible art of painting,” and therefore “wanted to forget” the techniques of the past.

Thus, the phenomenon of human “choice” advents through the taking up of pre-human “choice,” where the latter is “the establishment of an action of presence,” of an “instinct” – as Merleau-Ponty puts it in “Man and Adversity,” “[i]f the term instinct means anything, it means a mechanism within the organism which with a minimum of use ensures certain responses adapted to certain characteristic situations of the species” – which becomes proto-symbolic behavior when the “image” (the style of the situation) that it takes for an object becomes substitutable for other

898 Ibid., 117/166, 121-122/171-172.
899 Ibid., 122/172.
images, for other types of situations, so that “a distance is established between doing and seeing.” Human “choice” is the visibility of verbally expressible modulations of the thoroughgoing style of “institution” (in this case, sublimations of the diacritical movement of “instinct”), and human “freedom” is a primordial process of displacement taken up and embodied in the use of language; “the human” is a manner of reactiving styles of behavior at such a degree of divergence from the situation in response to which they were originally instituted that their original signification (function) is transformed. Human freedom is realized in and through behavior which responds and interrogates, not only within the horizon of an esthesiological world (Umwelt), but also within a world of symbolism (Welt) because “our body is symbolism” and “language […] is a second body, and an open body,” where “symbolism” does not here mean representation (“[a] term taken as representative of another”), but the functioning of the body as “a tacit language,” the sensibility of that “wild meaning” which is style as such; thus, in “[t]he perception of the other […] we have the grasp of a moral physiognomy (signature, gait, face), without knowledge of the categories that seem to subtend this comprehension.”

902 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 18-19/52-54.
2.B. Conclusions

In 2.B.ii-2.B.iv, I sought to articulate the unthought horizon of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh by taking the evolution of the notion of *Stiftung* as a guide. By tracing this development in his thought, I likewise traced his paths to overcoming the mind-body, self-others, and freedom-necessity antinomies. And yet, this approach is still relatively frontal and potentially abstract, dealing as it does with the lives of words, which can become detached from the ground of their original sense: the world of perception. After summarizing the results of 2.B.ii-2.B.iv, I revisit the study of “acquired pedophilia” with which this section began in 2.B.i, to synthesize these results via an articulation of my conclusions concerning Michael’s case.

I explicated Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with the problems posed in the form of the three Modern dichotomies by – roughly and provisionally – dividing the course of his thought into three stages. Firstly, there is a relatively static phenomenology of motility and perception, accomplished via descriptions of relations of *Fundierung* between given events (“contents”) and general structures (“forms”) of behavior and perception. Secondly, there is a properly genetic phenomenology of expression whereby he begins to explain the genesis of relations of *Fundierung* through the concept of *Stiftung*. And, finally, there is the onto-genetic articulation of *Stiftung* as the dynamic structure of beings qua flesh.

Regarding “mind” and “body,” he initially (in *PhP*) describes thetic consciousness as founded upon the esthesiological body as a “tacit cogito,” but subsequently (in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”) finds that this only redoubles the problem of grasping the relation between the “geographical or physical world” and the “order of culture or meaning”: that the body itself, and not an “anonymous thought” *in* it, must be expressive.904 This ambiguity of the body, which is simultaneously “given” and “sense” of the given, leads him (in *VI*) to an

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ontology of the flesh of the human body as living meaning, revealing the apparent separability of the “mind” as a mythical description of the manner in which operative language, as a prosthesis or “artificial organ,” becomes a second, more “transparent” (more fully operant in processes of idealization) flesh.\textsuperscript{905} “Tacit” consciousness was misinterpretation of the creativity of the body, founded upon a misinterpretation of the phenomena which Merleau-Ponty had called the “explicit” or “intellectual” consciousness; in reality, the latter is an extension of the body’s creativity into words, the taking up of a sense outlined by the flesh of the body in the flesh of language.

As for the self-others antinomy, he begins (in \textit{PhP}) by conceiving the “cogito” as always already open to others at the “pre-human” level of perceptual life where my own “living present” is open to an absent, though \textit{virtually} present, past and future, and thus open to virtuality as such, including the “social horizon” of a “collective history” which both distances me from, and connects me to, others with whom I share it.\textsuperscript{906} But again (in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”), he finds that this description of “self” and “others” as co-founding, and founded upon, a collective history does not \textit{explain} “why there is a history or a universe,” and discovers that the explanation of this unity in terms of its “genesis” requires conceiving of a dynamic, “vertical history” of “institution” which is both inscribed in, and transcends, the “horizontal” history of phenomenal events; phenomena of \textit{human} others must, therefore, be explained via an interrogation of expressive events, which occur \textit{at} and \textit{as} the “intersection” of the horizontal and vertical orders of being.\textsuperscript{907} Thus, in \textit{VI}, he explains the encounter with others beginning from the esthesiological \textit{Umwelt}, where the “encroachment” of each sensible-sensing body’s perception on that of others enables them to “differentiate” themselves from each other \textit{as} “integrated” within the fabric of a single world that both separates and unites them, and to differentiate themselves

\textsuperscript{905} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 235-236/288-289.
\textsuperscript{906} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{PhP}, 496.
(qua sensible-sensing flesh) from the flesh of the sensible world with which they are entwined in mutual interrogation; in the second place, he explains the encounter with human others arises with the advent of expressive flesh, and particularly speaking flesh, wherein each gives speech (and, thereby, gives the human Welt to the other while simultaneously receiving it from the other.908

Finally, concerning the antinomy of freedom and necessity, he initially (in PhP) conceives of “freedom” at two “levels”: the body as a “tacit cogito” gears into the horizons concrete situations, opening up a certain field of possibilities for “responding” to the Umwelt; the “explicit cogito” then takes up these sedimented corporeal possibilities by gearing into the horizons of human situations in the Welt.909 “Necessity,” then, no longer designates the influence of supposedly unconditional, ahistorical a prioris, but the possibilities and limitations articulated by situated a prioris, sedimented over time.910 Thus, in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” at the limits of his phenomenology of expression, he begins to describe the creation of, for instance, a work of art in terms of “Stiftung” as the “triple resumption” of a “tradition” by reactivating and reinstituting a total field formed by the intersection of the fields of the artist, of things, and of others.911 Finally, in VI, this leads him to conceive of freedom as the being of “possibility,” and of the ‘bearer’ of this freedom as the body, no longer described as a ‘tacit consciousness’, but rather, as a being which expresses its own invisible functioning (i.e., its sense) as its visibility; beings, as flesh, simultaneously become actual and articulate the sense of their actuality via the dialogical processes which they summon up in one another. Primordial freedom is “a power [….] an I can” which does not belong to the body as some sort of unconscious ‘subject’, but is the body as flesh, as a field of possible functions, articulated by the

908 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 233/286-287, 225/278.
910 Ibid., 505-506.
chiasm of its available styles with those of other bodies even as, simultaneously, this co-articulation of body-fields through mutual encroachment individuates them, opening an écart between each and every other it is precisely this co-articulation through mutual encroachment: “Transcendence is identity within difference.”

Returning now to the case study of “acquired pedophilia,” I again take the horizontal dimension of “events” as my point of departure. Goldstein’s holistic neurology already led to the conclusion that the “facts” – e.g., the medical diagnosis of the tumor, and the psychiatric diagnosis of pedophilia – are merely abstract (because isolated) descriptions of a single process in the total history of the organism, “Michael.” The meaning of such facts cannot, in principle, be discovered via attempts to arrange them in the “correct” causal order – i.e., by remaining purely in the horizontal dimension – because the true sense of any fact consists in the total system of possible relations of which it is but one, contingent expression.

Thus, in Michael’s case, we can explain nothing if we either conceive of the tumor as an “external cause,” or else “internalize” it into his “person” by reducing the latter to an “effect” or “property” of the physical mechanism which atomistic neurology supposes his body to be. Rather, “Michael,” or “his mind,” is the “hollow” – the “internal horizon” of sensorimotor possibilities, and the “external horizon” of their possible realizations in and through the possibilities of other bodies – of which his body is the enceinte (“enclosure”), expressed in and through real relations with other bodies whereby their horizons are continually (re)integrated into the world as the field of all horizons. “Vertical” being, ideality, is the horizon of the invisible functioning of visible beings, the “divergence” or transcendence of their internal and external horizons of possibility from the operative sense realized in the advent of “horizontal” being.

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912 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 225/278-279.
913 Ibid., 131/173, 9/24-25, 262-263/316.
914 Ibid., 271-272/325-326.
The unifying sense – i.e., the vertical dimension – of the history which Michael’s psychiatrists described in fragmentary form was a reorientation and constriction of his internal horizon toward a different and far more limited range of behavioral possibilities—and, conversely, a reordering and constriction of his external horizons. In particular, the field of the present became largely detached from any horizon of the past: a dis-integration of the continuity of personal history, so that the present ceased to be “his own,” which is to say, his actual behavior in the present diverged so radically from his established “symbolic matrix” (sedimented past) that its reintegration into that prior “identity” was impossible. He thus experienced ‘his own’ behavior as senseless and was, in this sense, “beside himself”—or, more precisely, the sense of the past was beside that of the present, in the way that one auditory tone is beside another in a disharmonious chord. Ceasing to be the imperceptible, operative ground upon which the present could project a horizon of the future, the sense of the past became explicit for Michael in a manner which he experienced –according to his own account, which seems plausible, given the number of similar cases – as a loss of freedom.

This was not just a loss of perceptual-motor freedom, but a loss of freedom in the dimension of the symbolic as well; Michael lost the freedom to relate to other people through his established schemas. His interpersonal relations became dominated by a relatively isolated, and thereby distorted, “sexual drive”: a reduced and perverse schema which, in his pathological state, took on functions (e.g., decision-making) formerly accomplished by his whole organism. Thus, Michael’s pathological “self” was something akin to a Cartesian body-machine which had severed its ties from the intellectual cogito, leaving the latter a really pure (because ineffectual) spectator. In less mythical terms, the “self” who “felt it was unacceptable” but could not alter his pathological behavior was his established symbolic matrix, which seems to have remained operative in reflective thought, but not in his other spheres of behavior.

915 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 19/54.
The pedophilic behavior and the thoughts concerning it were both behaviors of a single body in response to a total situation of which the tumor was a then-implicit thread. More specifically, these were behaviors of a body unable to integrate itself into a stable whole by successfully integrating itself into its environment—particularly because its environment was a physical and a symbolic one, which it shared with other beings (i.e., people) whose symbolic matrices continued to function as before, leading them to condemn and oppose Michael’s pathological behavior. “Freedom” is not a power or attribute of a “mind” conceived of in opposition to a mechanical body. It is the openness of a whole organism – i.e., a body qua flesh – to future possibilities for relating to other beings on the basis of the past. Freedom happens as the transformation of a possible sense of the past into a necessary condition for what is realized in the present.
2. Conclusions

The “mind” is the articulation of a speaking body’s symbolic fields through its *chiasm-écart* (“intertwining-divergence”) with other speaking bodies and with words, and this advent of a dimension of symbolism is itself a sublimation of the *chiasm-écart* of sensible and sensing bodies. Thus, the advent of the “mind” happens as a body responding to other beings in its environment, so that bodies acquire their “interiorities” through processes of mutual interrogation which are simultaneously the advent of the *Umwelt* and (for speaking bodies) the *Welt*. The *Umwelt* and the *Welt*, far from being contradictory “perspectives,” are transposable modulations of a single, total Temporality: an ongoing process of the advent of truth. In and through operative language, speaking bodies, too, advent as transposable modulations of a single, anonymous Speech that *in principle* exists only in and through persons *in general*, and thus *in actuality* exists only through persons as a *plurality*, whose individuation is but one realization of a kinship amongst all sensible beings.

The primordial interpenetration of sensing and sensible beings in the *Umwelt* forms the perpetual ground of all possible relations between “persons” in the *Welt*, which means that “subject-object” or “Master-Slave” relations (between a “pure activity” and a “pure passivity”) are not fundamental or necessary, but verbal abstractions founded upon the simultaneity of *chiasm-écart* in the world of perception. David Abram emphasizes this priority of primordial kinship in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, writing that Merleau-Ponty conceives of “perception” as “reciprocity,” in the sense of an “ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it”: “a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness.”916 Thus, in the life of “participatory and interactive”

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perception which animates “the modern discourse of subjects and objects” (despite being forgotten by it), the world itself is a sort of “interlocutor.”

The advent of ethical meaning is only possible, however, if the mute perceptual encounter between living bodies – where there is not yet a conceptual (i.e., verbal) divergence between “self” and “others” – is sublimated in the advent of a new dimension. Esthesiological bodies are the possibility, but not the realization, of “persons,” so that while I agree with Abram that “the valleys and the oaks do not speak in words […, and] neither do humans speak only in words,” he is also equivocating in this passage: yes, “the human” and “the animal” are intertwined, but it is still the case that the advent of “the human” is the advent of a new dimension of sensed through the sublimation of the gestural body. It is “not that the human does not have animal institution,” but it is also the case that the human makes a different “use” of that institution which “transforms institution genuinely”: firstly, “because the human codifies it, legalizes it, creates social symbols,” but more importantly because, secondly, this transformation of gestures into words enables the “displacement” of sense, “the utilization of the past or the utilization of an experience as a substitute, or even the creation of a register of substitution,” a symbolic matrix. As Toadvine puts it, in “Limits of the Flesh”:

The other human being is not only another body with which I may shake hands, since the other person is also a center of awareness that is not my own, since the other has an inside, a consciousness, that may be understood or deceived. […] In other words, the constitution of the full human other goes beyond the constitution of another living body, and this step beyond requires the advent of language, the symbolic level of communication that Abrams believes is reducible to gesture.

The primordial reversibility or “reciprocity” between my perception and that of an other is necessary, but not sufficient, for an exchange between “persons”; it is the Urstiftung of which “the human” is a Nachstiftung. Merleau-Ponty overcomes the antinomy of “freedom” and

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917 Abram, “Between the Body and the Breathing Earth,” 270.
918 Abram, “Between the Body and the Breathing Earth,” 289; Merleau-Ponty, IP, 19/53.
919 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 18-19/52-54.
920 Toadvine, “Limits of the Flesh,” 258-259.
“necessity” by reconceiving of the former as operations of institution, of the latter as the inertia of the instituted, and of both of them together as indissociable moments of the movement of history as the advent of sense: Stiftung. In the world of perception, the sensible-sensing body and sensible bodies individuate themselves by folding their “exterior” surfaces over one another through processes which thereby, simultaneously, become their operative “interiorities.” This simultaneity of passivity-activity repeats itself in the advent of self-others, and of every subsequent advent of a new dimension through processes of idealization.

If “the human moment par excellence” is, therefore, the one “in which a life woven out of chance events turns back upon, regrasps, and expresses itself,” we never are human, but must (or must fail to) continually become human in a “community” with others founded upon a more primordial “coexistence,” where the latter is the relation in and through which “I” and “you” begin to crystallize, to become available as Urstiftungen for new Nachstiftungen, moments within a total system of inter-dimensionalizations: “mind and man never are; they show through in the movement by which the body becomes gesture, language an oeuvre, and coexistence truth.” But the possibility of becoming-human through coexistence is simultaneously the possibility of violence—of seeking to negate the existence of others as esthesiological bodies or as persons (and thus simultaneously, though perhaps only implicitly, as esthesiological bodies). I now turn to the question of ethics, to the question of the ontic possibility and the actuality of “ethical value,” through the question of what it means to unfold an “authentic” existence given that the sense of this existence is inescapably – indeed, constitutively – “ambiguous.”

Chapter 3
The Dimension of the Ethical

This final chapter begins (in 3.A) with an explication of Merleau-Ponty’s account of “authentic freedom” via its differentiation from the accounts offered by Heidegger (3.A.i), and Sartre and Kant (3.A.ii), leading to the subsequent explication of Merleau-Ponty’s account of “ambiguity” via its differentiation from Beauvoir’s (3.A.iii). Whereas Heidegger conceives of “authenticity” as a certain comportment toward the inevitability of death, Merleau-Ponty describes it as a certain recognition of “freedom” as the operative capabilities of living bodies. Thus, Merleau-Ponty rejects the Sartrean and Kantian variants of “authenticity” as “being what one is” (with Sartre and Kant articulating, respectively, a positivist and a negativist ethics of the absolute value of “self-identity”), and instead conceives of it as an authentic relation to “ambiguity”; to “be ethical” is to enact a certain style of becoming. But Merleau-Ponty contrasts the “bad ambiguity” or “ambivalence” of a tension between opposites – such as Beauvoir puts forward in her conception of “ambiguity” as the tension between the pure negativity of “ontological freedom” and the absolute positivity of “concrete freedom” – with a “good ambiguity”: recognition of the perpetual openness of the hyperdialectical movement of Stiftung, the co-advent of beings and truth.

Having arrived at this account of Merleau-Pontian “authenticity” as an operative recognition of the ambiguity of sense, I next (in 3.B) render explicit the meta-ethical implications of the ontology of the flesh. I argue negatively, in 3.B.i, that the ontology of the flesh reveals the ethical danger of “abstractions” (idealizations of verbal styles, which are themselves already idealizations of styles operative in the world of perception) becoming “myths”: abstractions which are mistaken for a primordial reality. I therefore extend Merleau-Ponty’s critique of epistemological “objectivism” (the positing of a given truth as unconditionally universal) and
“relativism” (the denial of all universality of truth) to a critique of *ethical* objectivism and relativism, as dangerous mythologies.

I argue *positively*, in 3.B.ii, that the ontology of the flesh reveals the *chiasm* of the styles of “coexistence” and “violence” as the site of the co-genesis of persons, and of “human” meaning as such. Further, because Merleau-Ponty rejects the possibility of either a “pure politics” or a “pure morality,” his political writings always already articulate the political in and through its *chiasm* with the ethical. I therefore take seriously Merleau-Ponty’s statement, in “A Note on Machiavelli,” that “virtue,” understood as a certain “mastery” of, or “freedom” toward, the ambiguous relationship of intertwining between the dimensions of time (past, present, and future), and oneself and others, “could well be the rule for a true morality.” “Virtue” is a certain style of participating in the advent of sense whereby one avoids the twin dangers of objectivism (positing a given truth as “unconditionally necessary”) and relativism (falling into equivocation by failing to articulate the continuity of truth as a process of becoming).

In 3.C, I first (in 3.C.i) render my onto-phenomenological account of virtue concrete and normative by arguing – via an engagement with other efforts to articulate a “Merleau-Pontian ethics,” as well as with the criticisms of such efforts – that its *real possibility* consists in an openness to demands, made by transformations of the situation, for hyper-reflection. Although Merleau-Ponty rarely gestures toward an “explicit” account of the ethical, his thinking is consistently animated – from the earlier phenomenologies of behavior and perception, to the ontology of the flesh – by an effort to articulate the common source of “freedom” and “necessity,” and the “self” and “others.” I maintain, following Bernhard Waldenfels, that, as with the question of being, attempting a frontal approach to the “question of ethics” leads inevitably to an abstract comprehension, and Merleau-Ponty’s thought has the value of showing

that there can be no ontology which is not already a nascent ethics, and no ethics that is not already an implicit ontology; it is impossible to speak about one without silently invoking the other. It may be objected that conceiving of ethical meaning as a taking up of perceptual sense amounts to a “naturalization” of ethics (i.e., its subordination to a “pre-ethical” ontology, or even the total assimilation of the “ought” to the “is”), and that this would erase the “urgency” of ethical demands.

To respond to this criticism, in the final part of the section (3.C.ii), I bring my account into dialogue with Levinas’s ethics of respect for the otherness of “the Other.” Levinas’s ethics constitute an inversion of the Kantian ethics of “absolute identity” (the positing of “autonomy,” understood as immediate self-coincidence, as an absolute value) into an ethics of “absolute alterity” (the positing of “heteronomy,” the submission of the self before the absolute positivity of the “face of the Other,” as an absolute value). I argue that, as the inversion of an abstract account of the being of value, Levinas’s ethics remain equally as abstract as Kant’s. The interrogation of a given “ethical value” traces its genesis to the individuation of persons in and through their primordial intertwining, so that “becoming responsible” does not mean submitting oneself to an absolute source of value, but authentically perceiving and articulating, in deeds and in words, the silent processes of the advent of sense, embodying the becoming of truth rather than attempting to dictate it from a position of absolute authority (e.g., Kant), or subordinating it to an absolutely inaccessible transcendence (e.g., Levinas).

925 Waldenfels, “Responsivity of the Body,” 94.
3.A. Interrogating Value: “Authenticity” and “Ambiguity”

Merleau-Ponty is led to conceive of the being of beings as their own “flesh” as a consequence of his prior discovery that “freedom” happens as the movement of *Stiftung*: the simultaneous advent of beings and sense. This “living freedom” is the open process of the advent of sense, reflective thought’s forgetfulness of which is truth’s availability to thought. When the freedom of the flesh is articulated as an “explicit choice,” it is only on condition of petrification, ceasing to operate as such in its original dimension, so that the processes of operative choice necessarily escape efforts to treat them as positive entities, as *manipulanda* of objective thought. Spoken values, the *a prioris* of instituted moralities, are verbal articulations (“idealizations”) of meanings which first advent as “mute” (i.e., less articulate, unspoken), operative senses in the perceptual-motor behavior of sensible-sensing bodies responding to the “questions” posed to them by other sensible beings. Realizations, in and through expressive behaviors, of possibilities sketched out by the *chiasm* of sensible and sensing beings, open new fields of sense, and the taking up of these possibilities in the expressive behaviors of speech and writing open the dimension of the human *Welt*: “Doing knows that it is in the eyes of others, that it too is a symbolic activity: it is not therefore the positing of an end and choice, but an operation according to a style.”

The question of the true meaning of “ethical value” in Merleau-Ponty’s thought is, therefore, the question of how one *ought* to comport oneself toward the ambiguity of sense: to the horizon of possible functions sketched out by the intertwining of styles of behavior and speech with the schemas of given situations. Creatively taking up this ambiguity, in deeds and in speech, would be “authentic freedom”: the embodiment of styles of expressive behavior in way which neither conceals the ambiguity of sense, nor becomes paralyzed by it. I now, therefore, explicate

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927 Merleau-Ponty, *IP*, 7/35.
Merleau-Ponty’s conception of “authenticity” in relation to those of Heidegger, Sartre, and Kant. Merleau-Ponty criticizes Heidegger for conceiving of “authentic freedom” purely in terms of a relation to death, whereas he articulates it primarily as a recognition of the functioning of living bodies which accomplishes the primordial advent of sense. Sartre and Kant are addressed together, to elucidate Merleau-Ponty’s criticism that Sartre, in attempting to overcome the Kantian rupture between the “phenomenal” and the “supersensible” self, merely ups the stakes by reiterating the rupture, now as one between “being” as absolute positivity, and “consciousness” as absolute negativity. These engagements lead to my account of Merleau-Pontian authenticity as an authentic relation to “ambiguity,” so that I close 3.A with a comparison of the latter concept in the writings of Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, arguing that Beauvoir’s conception remains an “ambivalent” oscillation between beings and meaning. This interrogation of the senses of “authenticity” and “ambiguity” functions as an oblique approach to the question of the meta-ethical and normative sense of Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of the flesh of beings.

Descartes conceives of “freedom” – whether it is exercised theoretically (in the *Meditations*) or practically (in the *Passions*) – as consciousness’s ability to affirm, deny, or withhold judgment concerning an idea (theoretical freedom), or an inclination to act (practical freedom). In short, Cartesian freedom is, fundamentally, the power of consciousness to choose between possible beliefs or actions (i.e., the “will”). Heidegger’s conception of “authentic freedom” arises, negatively, from a critique of this Cartesian distortion of the being of “self” and “freedom,” which takes for granted the being (which, for Descartes, means “presence” qua givenness in the here and now) of the being he calls “consciousness” and thereby locates its supposed freedom outside of the “world” (defined as a sum of determinately quantifiable objects and relations). “Authentic” Heideggerian freedom is not a property or act of consciousness, but an existential possibility of *Dasein’s* existentiell occurrence as being-in-the-world, synonymous with “openness to one’s own possibilities”: freedom is always a freedom for, and to “be free for” an ontological possibility is to be capable of disclosing it in one’s ontic occurrence, phenomenalizing it. “Ontological freedom” is therefore the possibility of an ontic disclosure of the articulated whole of *Dasein’s* possibilities for phenomenalizing itself in the world.

*Dasein* always happens as the explicit disclosure of beings and the (at least) implicit disclosure of its own being, and this disclosedness of its being unites the existentials of “attunement,” “understanding,” “falling prey,” and “discourse.” “Attunement” refers to the inevitability of *Dasein’s* disclosing itself as “delivered over” to the “there” (to what it takes care of, and to those with whom it is concerned), and occurs ontically as “moods”—expressions of

929 Descartes, *Meditations*, 57.
931 Ibid., §18:84-85.
932 Ibid., §53:264.
933 Ibid., §54:269.
styles of relation.  “Understanding” refers to the inevitability of Dasein “projecting” itself upon its possibilities, either “inauthentically,” as primarily disclosing beings unlike itself, or “authentically,” as primarily disclosing its ownmost (proper) possibilities. Understanding is always attuned, because it is the way that Dasein and the world gear into each other as the advent of significance, and it becomes articulated as “discourse”: the way in which “[w]ords accrue to significations.” Always already existing in some form of attuned understanding, everyday Dasein inevitably “falls prey” to the things it takes care of, interpreting both them and itself through the generalized mode of “the they” (das Man): the impersonal public “self.” In this initial inauthenticity, a person lives “as one lives,” feel and acts “as one does.”

As a result, Dasein’s fundamental possibilities for being authentic or inauthentic are possibilities for authentic or inauthentic attuned understanding of its “self”; inauthentic understanding covers over Dasein’s existential possibilities, whereas authentic understanding advents as “being toward [a] possibility without fleeing it or covering it over.” Dasein’s ownmost possibility for being, and thus the ground of all possibilities for authentic or inauthentic existence in general, is the indeterminate inevitability of its own death, so that being-towards-death, or mortal temporality, is the meaning of “care” itself. Because one’s own death is “nonrelational” – meaning that it lays claim to Dasein, not in the inauthentic everyday mode of “the they,” but as Dasein’s “ownmost possibility” which cannot be represented or lived by anyone else, because Dasein cannot even live it for itself – dying “individualizes” Dasein; thus, Dasein’s possible authentic understanding of its own mortality is the “possibility of authentic existence.”

934 Ibid., §29:134.  
936 Ibid., §34:161.  
937 Ibid., §38:175.  
939 Ibid., §50:251.  
940 Ibid., §53:263.
Dasein’s initial, inauthentic understanding of being-towards-death renders death impersonal by expressing it generally in the discursive mode of “idle talk” with the acknowledgment of the “fact” that “one dies,” distorting the authentic meaning of death by interpreting it as belonging to the they “as a familiar event occurring within the world,” something “public.”941 This inauthentic self-understanding is a means of flight from the mood of “anxiety,” which is about, and for, being-in-the-world: about its indeterminacy (the indeterminate “when” of its inevitable becoming-impossible in death), and for it because it is the originary “for-the-sake-of-which” of all significance as such.942 By concealing from itself the singularity of its own death, Dasein “flee[s] in the face of uncanniness” – in the face of being always incomplete in the world, insofar as its existence always exceeds its existentiell happening – and attains a “supposed freedom”: a “freedom” from anxiety, rather than for its own possibilities.943

The authentic disclosure of being-toward-death is the primordial disclosure of Dasein’s possibility as such, so that the possibility of an authentic understanding of mortality is the possibility of authentic freedom, of Dasein’s ontically disclosing the unity of the totality of its ontological possibilities: “[b]ecoming free for one’s own death in anticipation liberates one from one’s lostness in chance possibilities urging themselves upon us,” and thereby lets “factual possibilities first be authentically understood and chosen.”944 To exist authentically is to be open to the awareness that inauthentic existence in the mode of the “they-self,” though inevitable, does not exhaust one’s possibilities for being; inauthenticity, so understood, is authentic inauthenticity, because it is not closed off to the ever-imminent possibility of anxious understanding of one’s own being-toward-death.945 Heidegger calls that which summons Dasein back to its ownmost

941 Ibid., §51:253.
942 Ibid., §40:188.
943 Ibid., §57:276.
944 Ibid., §53:262, §53:264.
945 Ibid., §26:117, §27:130.
possibilities – the ontological condition for the possibility of authentic existence – the “call of conscience,” understood as a mode of “discourse,” an ontological constituent of the being of Dasein, in contrast to all ontic phenomena of “good or bad conscience.”

The possibility of heeding the call of conscience, of being called back to one’s ownmost possibilities from lostness, is the existential condition for “that existentiell choosing of the choice of being-a-self” which Heidegger calls “resoluteness” (Entschlössenheit): literally, “removal of closure,” or “opening forth,” which is to say, becoming “responsible” for one’s own factual incompleteness, one’s own temporalization.

Resoluteness is “choosing to choose” because it is only in resoluteness that factual Dasein relates to beings through the understanding of its own existential possibilities. The significance “the they” recedes into the background of Dasein’s authentic disclosure of its mortal being, such that taking care and being concerned are “now defined in terms of [Dasein’s] ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self.”

Inevitably, as being-in-the-world, Dasein happens with beings and with others. Existing authentically, Dasein primarily discloses its own possibilities, and secondarily (though equiprimordially) discloses things and others. The “self” that Dasein relates to is the unity, or meaning, of its happening; the meaning of being-in-the-world is care, the meaning of which is mortal temporality, so that the “self” to which resolute ontic Dasein relates itself is its own “not yet.”

Merleau-Ponty takes up Heidegger’s notion of “understanding,” despite its not originally being formulated in explicitly corporeal terms, as the call for a return to “wild perception,” since Sein understood as “true nothingness” is “openness,” “[t]he height that opens a depth,” the return to which is not “coincidence with an unsayable,” but philosophy as “indirect language”: “the thematization of this speaking silence” of operative (expressive) speech in particular, and

946 Ibid., §54:269.
947 Ibid., §54:270, §58:283-284.
948 Ibid., §60:298.
operative phenomena (sense) in general. But whereas Heidegger equates an anonymous relation to death with inauthenticity, Merleau-Ponty argues that, insofar as actual perception is always “partial” (i.e., a contingent actualization of one possibility on a dynamic horizon of modulations of the total “depth” of the world), the primordial “subject” of perception and motility is “instituting-instituted” (i.e., a silent co-functioning with other beings whereby they articulate their sense, as opposed to the crystallized idealization of their sense as a spoken cogito), meaning that “anonymity” is the only possible manner of relating to one’s birth and death, which are events of the living body as flesh, not of the spoken consciousness rooted in it:

I can only grasp my birth and my death as pre-personal horizons: I know that one is born and that one dies, but I cannot know my birth or my death. Being at the extreme the first, last, and only one of its kind, every sensation is a birth and a death. The subject [of sensation] who experiences it begins and ends with it, and since he can neither precede himself nor survive himself, sensation necessarily appears to itself in a milieu of generality. It arrives from beneath myself, and it results from a sensitivity that preceded it and that will survive it, just as my birth and my death belongs to an anonymous natality or mortality.

What is required for an authentic choice of self is not genuine awareness of one’s perpetual possibility of dying, but of the actuality of one’s life: “The days of life are not the days of death. When we return to life, well or badly, we start to reason again, we choose our loyalties […]. We always forget death when we live.”

Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty traces this Modern inability to authentically conceive of the being of truth to its origin in the Cartesian assumption that “freedom” consists in the spontaneity of consciousness. But whereas Heidegger conceives of authentic freedom as comporting oneself toward beings in and through a singular recognition of the inevitably of “one’s own” death (as opposed to the inevitability of death “in general”), Merleau-Ponty’s initial investigations in PhP reveal “motricity unequivocally as original intentionality,” so that all  

949 Merleau-Ponty, HLP, 49/60.  
950 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 260-261.  
freedom happens, fundamentally, as the freedom of living bodies: “Consciousness is originarily not an ‘I think that,’ but rather an ‘I can.’”\(^{952}\) This new account of freedom ultimately leads him to reconceive of “consciousness” as the spoken expression of the functioning of the expressive body: “the flesh, the Leib, is not a sum of self-touchings (of ‘tactile sensations’), but not a sum of tactile sensations plus ‘kinestheses’ either, it is an ‘I can’,” i.e., a sense operating as the availability of a certain field, of which actual relations are the “realization,” and from which speech is an “extraction of the essence of the thing,” the sublimation of the sense through the further realization of a possibility on its own horizon.\(^{953}\)

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, authentic choice requires, not an understanding of being-toward-death, but of being-toward-truth. Heidegger interprets Western metaphysics as the history of the repression of awareness of death, but Merleau-Ponty is more inclined to interpret the fundamental “errors” of Modern Western thought as repressions of our awareness of the “ambiguity” (i.e., the constitutive incompleteness or openness) of truth, whereas:

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\text{[T]here is a fitting together of different perspectival views; there is no fitting together of all of them in an absolute knowledge which is completely decentered and final, i.e., an absolute knowledge without the implications of undeveloped sense. Perceptual naivete remains. The passage from the particular to the universal is never finished. […] The history of knowledge is contracted into itself while advancing, abridges its empirical process, but looks always towards the realized ways that things have fit together, does not see the “essences” face to face. And reciprocally we can say that the first demonstrative step would open a field to which what follows never stops belonging, would inaugurate an “infinite task.”}^{954}
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Descartes inaugurates an impossible effort to liberate knowledge from contingency, which means attempting to create a self-sufficient dimension of verbal essences grounded solely in other verbal essences, abstracted from the true ground of their certainty: perceptual faith. His initial effort spawned two seemingly divergent, but really mutually implicated, trajectories: the objectivist

\(^{952}\) Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 171.
\(^{953}\) Merleau-Ponty, VI, 255/309.
\(^{954}\) Merleau-Ponty, IP, 56-57/97
striving to access an “absolute knowledge” detached from its actual ground in history, and an
“absolute relativism” which denies the persistence of truth by affirming the situatedness of its
modulations, but not its being as a process. Absolute relativism still demands, in principle, that
truth be unconditional, even as it (correctly) denies the real possibility of such ahistorical truth.

What the Modern tradition thereby occludes, in its delusional flight from ambiguity, is
the authentic being of truth: truth happens as the hyperdialectic of genesis-sedimentation-
reactivation, as processes of continual (re)institution embodied in “the written” as “the support of
this passive-active, metapersonal thought” which is operative speech, or “Speech to the
singular.” Thus, “reactivation,” the actualization of the possible universality of the Urstiftung,
“is a property of man as a speaking being,” and “[s]edimentation is expression,” which is to say,
Stiftung is style of operative sense as such, the structure of the invisible “interiority” of actual
events of expression:

The invisible of ideality, the Vernunft [reason], is only ever the framework of
things and of Being, the intersection of our targets, the true relief of our
landscape. Language is sedimentation, the naturalization of the invisible surplus,
the circumscription of the invisible in the visible remains (a town, for whomever
shares the history of it, is full of meaning—or a figure—but for whomever does
not participate in it, it is meaningless—the chaos of Paris—“nor this well-liked
figure”). It is, however, this fragile façade that carries everything, this illegible
scrawl—outside of this, there is only the mind of God floating on the waters, a
world, a Being to be made.

The attempt to conceive of “truth” as “independent of history” inevitably plunges thought into an
ambivalent oscillation between the positing of an “absolute knowledge” (the attitude that “truth”
can only be a pure discovery) and an “absolute relativism” (the attitude that “truth” can only be a
pure creation). Absolute objectivism conceives of truth as akin to a “nature in itself” (in which
case it would be actually determinate, but inaccessible to historically situated beings unless they

955 Merleau-Ponty, HLP, 58-59/70-71.
956 Ibid., 59/72.
958 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 70-71/116-118.
could actually occupy the position of an “absolute spectator”), whereas absolute relativism conceives of it as akin to a “nature for (a given) culture” (in which case it would be entirely determined by the perspectives of historical beings, and thus knowable, but arbitrary).\textsuperscript{959}

There are, therefore, \textit{inauthentic societies}, ones which “do not play the mysterious game which consists in putting all humans in the balance,” which “are not faithful to the a priori of institution or to its spirit” insofar as they conceive of their efforts, not as “a recuperation of history by means of history” (a process of reactivation), but rather, as entirely independent of the influence of the past, or as entirely determined by it.\textsuperscript{960} Inauthentic \textit{persons}, then, would be those who conceive of the genesis of sense ahistorically: viewing the meaning of events as, e.g., bestowed upon them by some wholly unconditioned spontaneity (absolute relativism), or rigorously determined according to some absolutely universal law or principle (absolute objectivism). The latter two attitudes inevitably slide into one another, because an unconditioned spontaneity is only comprehensible in contrast to unconditional necessity, and a source of unconditional necessity could only be related to what it determines as an unconditional spontaneity.

\textsuperscript{959} Ibid., 70-71/116-118.
\textsuperscript{960} Ibid., 75/122.
3.A.ii. The Impossibility of Sartrean and Kantian “Authenticity”

This brings Merleau-Ponty’s conception of authenticity and inauthenticity into proximity with Sartre’s account of “sincerity” and “bad faith.” The latter consists in an oscillation between denying one’s transcendence (i.e., “freedom”) by positing oneself in the mode of the pure in-itself (as an externally determined “thing”), and denying one’s factual essence (i.e., “being”) by positing oneself in the mode of the pure for-itself (as a self-determining “nothing”). Sartre rarely addresses the nature and possibility of genuine sincerity or “authenticity,” which he only seems able to describe as an oscillation structurally identical to bad faith; “to be sincere” means “to be what one is,” but the moment that consciousness posits itself as something or other, it transcends that very essence because it relates to this “representation” in the manner of a “subject” to an “object,” an activity to a passivity. Thus, “[b]ad faith is possible only because sincerity is conscious of missing its goal inevitably,” of inevitably slipping into bad faith. Indeed, Bernasconi notes that it is “hard not to reach the conclusion that bad faith has been rendered possible only by sacrificing – or at least postponing to a world in which human relations are very different – the possibility of sincerity.”

As we saw above, however, Merleau-Ponty argues that Sartre’s notion of “bad faith” is founded upon an abstract account of “mind,” a philosophy of consciousness. Sartre’s attachment to the Cartesian cogito is, as Sartre himself avows, born of a desire for, and belief in the possibility of, “absolute truth.” Truth could only be, and be known as, “absolute” insofar as it existed, and could be accessed, immediately; otherwise, it would be truth that becomes, whereas “an absolute truth […] is simple, easy to attain, and within everyone’s reach: one need only seize

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961 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 98.
962 Ibid., 109, 105-106, 102-103.
963 Ibid., 111.
964 Bernasconi, How to Read Sartre, 41.
965 Merleau-Ponty, IP, 153/203.
966 Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” 40.
it directly.” Although Sartre explicitly denies that his *cogito* is a pure interiority – e.g., “the subjectivity that we thereby attain as a standard of truth is not strictly individual in nature, for we have demonstrated that it is not only oneself that one discovers in the *cogito*, but also the existence of others” – he nonetheless slips into that narcissism of constituting consciousness toward which all idealist variants of the subject-object ontology tend.68 Others are only included within the immediate self-certainty of pure intentional consciousness as an empty form of ‘otherness in general’, as “a universal human *condition*”: “the necessity for [man] to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and eventually to die in it.”69 By mistaking Heidegger’s *Sein* for “consciousness,” Sartre reiterates the Cartesian rupture between the *cogito* and the field of beings, and others can only be accorded equal priority with such a *cogito* insofar as they are reduced to its same, empty form; ‘otherness in general’ dissolves into the pure self-identity of a necessarily singular constituting consciousness, so that an other person becomes, as Descartes puts it, *un autre soy-mesme* (“another himself”).70

Because, for Merleau-Ponty, the “self” is an evolving (or devolving) field of possibilities articulated through the taking up of styles in response to a situation into which it is initiated through primordial contact with others, he understands “inauthentic freedom,” less as a style of “self-relation” (e.g., a relation of thought to its objects), but as a certain (i.e., abstract) style of relating to *other* beings (particularly, other people) and, through them, to the vertical order of “sense” or “dimensionality.”71 General principles – e.g., “freedom” or “justice” – can, in certain situations, be taken up in speech to express the lived-living sense of a common striving, but they can also devolve into empty words; any and all “principles applied in a suitable situation are instruments of oppression,” in which case they have become mere propaganda, meanings ossified

67 Ibid., 40.
68 Ibid., 41.
69 Ibid., 42.
71 Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 218/271.
into merely verbal constructions which conceal, rather than express, the sense of the behavior of those who profess them without actually embodying them.\(^{972}\) For Merleau-Ponty, then, determining whether or not a person is behaving “authentically” requires articulating that person as a certain field of possibilities articulated by their operative and available styles of expressive behavior, and then articulating the relations of this field to others, to the total field of the world, and to the fields of the past, present, and future.

For Sartre, on the contrary, making the \textit{conceptual} distinction between “bad faith” and “good faith” is a relatively straightforward matter, having nothing to do with concrete facts and intentions, but only with the formal relationship between them. Determining if a person is acting in bad faith is simply a question of whether they have denied their freedom by identifying themselves with their facticity, or have denied the significance of their factual being by identifying themselves wholly with their transcendence.\(^{973}\) \textit{Metaphysically}, however, Sartre runs up against difficulties that are, formally, nearly identical to those encountered by Kant in his attempt to conceive of the \textit{real possibility} of a relationship between the “unconditional free choice” of pure consciousness, and the “conditioned actions” of concrete persons.

For Kant, this difficulty manifests itself as a seemingly vicious circle between the two components that make up his concept of “autonomy,” the capacity of practical reason for self-legislation: on the one hand, he posits human beings as \textit{negatively free} relative to “efficient causes” (laws of phenomenal nature) in order to posit them as “intelligences” in the intelligible (noumenal) world, which \textit{can} therefore be subject to the law of reason; on the other, he attributes \textit{positive} “freedom of the will” to these intelligences in order to posit them as \textit{actually} subject to the moral law (insofar as they simultaneously legislate the law to themselves).\(^{974}\) But “freedom from efficient causes” and “self-legislation of the will” are both synonyms for “autonomy,” so

\(^{973}\) Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 98.
\(^{974}\) Kant, \textit{Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals}, 4:450.
that autonomy appears to be acting, in the first place, as the “ground” from which the idea of the moral draws its possible validity, and, in the second, as that from which its actual validity is “inferred” as a “consequence.”\(^\text{975}\) Kant attempts to break out of this circle – according to which we are capable of being bound by the moral law because we are autonomous, and we are autonomous because we are actually bound by the moral law – by distinguishing between two “perspectives” we can take toward human beings: as empirical beings belonging to the phenomenal world, and as noumenal beings belonging to the intelligible world. Under the former perspective, a person’s psychophysical states are “mere appearances” and, as such, rigorously determined by other appearances in chains of external causation; under the latter perspective, a person is free with respect to all appearances (since pure reason itself dictates the law to appearances in the form of the Categories of understanding, which are intuitable as “schemata”), and hence determined only by their own freedom, which means that they are an autonomous intelligence whose will, synonymous with “pure practical reason,” is the “efficient cause” of the only law governing me, just as pure theoretical reason is the efficient cause of the Categories of understanding governing the world of appearances.\(^\text{976}\) The empirical ego is, therefore, heteronomous (i.e., bound by the laws of appearances which it does not itself dictate), whereas the transcendental ego is autonomous (i.e., bound only by the moral law which it dictates to itself, and sovereign in the sense of dictating the law, not only to itself, but to all appearances).\(^\text{977}\)

The difficulty, which Kant claims (and fails) to overcome, is that it is still not comprehensible how a person’s phenomenal nature can bear any relation to their intelligible nature; Kant has, effectively, upped the ante on the Cartesian mind-body problem. Qua phenomenon, a person is governed by the laws of nature, dictated by pure theoretical reason; qua intelligence, they freely legislate the moral law to themselves; but in order to conceive of

\(^\text{975}\) Ibid., 4:450, 4:453.
themselves as actually “put under obligation” by the moral law, they must “regard [themselves] as belonging to the world of sense and yet at the same time to the world of understanding,” as an empirical ego which is governed, not only to the laws of nature dictated by pure theoretical reason, but also to the moral law dictated by pure practical reason. And yet it is impossible to think myself under both perspectives simultaneously, because each of them is all or nothing; one must either think oneself as a phenomenon strictly determined by relations of external causality, or as a merely intelligible being of pure freedom.

Kant acknowledges this doubling of the world by the phenomena-noumena distinction in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, arguing that, in order for our choices concerning whether or not to adopt given maxims to be free choices, “the first subjective ground [Grund] of the adoption of the maxims” – both the original “predisposition” to good that determines human nature, and the original “propensity” to evil – must itself be the result of a free, original choice to adopt an ultimate and universal maxim of all one’s particular free choices: we can only be “good human beings” or “evil human beings” insofar as we choose to dictate the moral law to ourselves (which is the same as saying, choose to possess a free power of choice), and choose to have the potential to corrupt this ultimate maxim by subordinating it to merely relative inclinations. That is, the ground of free choice, as well as the possibility of the straying from this ground, must be instituted through an original and fundamental choice, which is itself free, or else it would be incomprehensible for persons to be “good” or “evil,” and we would consequently have no right to judge any given person as such.

The original “disposition” of a human being’s intelligible character – whereby they are “predisposed” to “moral goodness,” to treating the “incentive” (motivating force) of the moral law as supreme, and all merely empirical incentives as subordinate to it – must itself be the freely

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978 Ibid., 4:453 (my italics).
adopted maxim of an original choice, because it is only through such a choice of one’s character that one can be responsible for what one is (and, as a corollary of this, for what one does).  

There must, likewise, be an original, free choice resulting in the “propensity” to moral evil, where a “propensity” is a “predisposition” to acquire an “inclination” on the occasion of certain empirical events – i.e., “the predisposition to desire an enjoyment which, when the subject has experienced it, arouses inclination to it” – because, as with moral goodness, it would be impossible to judge a person is “morally evil” if they had not freely chosen to adopt a maxim which rendered possible their becoming-evil. Based on his distinction between an unconditional “predisposition” to goodness and a conditional “propensity” to evil, Kant can legitimately argue that, in the absence of all sensible incentives, human beings would necessarily be morally good. It is impossible for a human being, no matter how vicious, to “repudiate the moral law” – that would amount to the absurdity of an “evil reason,” the contradictory choice to forfeit one’s power of free choice itself – but it is likewise impossible to rid oneself of the propensity to evil, since the choice to eradicate this propensity would have to consist in the adoption of particular “good maxims,” which “cannot take place if the subjective supreme ground of all maxims is presupposed to be corrupted.”

Kant thus distinguishes, concerning moral good and moral evil alike, between two senses of the word “deed”: between “an intelligible deed, cognizable through reason alone apart from any temporal condition,” and a “factum phenomenon,” a phenomenal deed which “is sensible, empirical, given in time.” The intelligible deed is the original, free choice of one’s character – i.e., “the use of freedom through which the supreme maxim (either in favor of, or against, the law) is adopted in the power of choice” – whereas the phenomenal deed is “the use by which the

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981 Ibid., 6:29.
982 Ibid., 6:36.
983 Ibid., 6:35-6:37.
984 Ibid., 6:31.
actions themselves (materially considered, i.e. as regards the objects of the power of choice) are performed in accordance with that maxim.\textsuperscript{985} Corresponding to the distinction between intelligible and phenomenal deeds – between free, non-temporal choices, and phenomenal actions determined according to the laws of nature within a temporal series of other phenomena – Kant further distinguishes between a person’s “empirical” and their “intelligible” character: between what they appear to be, and what they actually (by their own free, intelligible choice) are.\textsuperscript{986} Because the intelligible choice of one’s character is the “rational origin” (as opposed to the phenomenal, temporal origin) of a person’s phenomenal character, and of each and every one of their phenomenal actions, it is necessary to always consider them as making that intelligible choice of their character for the first time insofar as one judges the moral value of any given action on their part, since an action only possesses moral value insofar as it expresses a free choice.\textsuperscript{987} From a temporal perspective, the original choice of one’s character is “innate” (the choice was already made before one had acquired the use of reason), whereas, from the perspective of reason (and God), the choice is always already, and undividedly, being made for the first time.\textsuperscript{988}

As a result, there is a disconnect between “intellectual judgments” of a person’s moral worth (judgments concerning the “intelligible deed” whereby they choose their character), and “empirical judgments” of their “sensible deeds”; in the former case, the choice between good and evil is all-or-nothing (one either subordinates all empirical incentives to the moral law, or the moral law to empirical incentives), whereas, in the latter, there are two types of middle ground between good and evil, both “a negative mean of indifference prior to all education” and “a

\textsuperscript{985} Ibid., 6:31.
\textsuperscript{986} Ibid., 6:37.
\textsuperscript{987} Ibid., 6:41.
\textsuperscript{988} Ibid., 6:42-6:43.
positive mean, a mixture of being partly good and partly evil.”\textsuperscript{989} It is not that people can actually be indifferent to, or a mixture of, good and evil, but rather, that they inevitably appear so within time. Only God “penetrates to the intelligible ground of the heart” and definitively knows what a person actually is, whereas persons appear to “the judgment of human beings” as engaged in “an ever-continuing striving for the better” or sliding into the worse.\textsuperscript{990} Thus, a person cannot even determine the true moral value of their own intelligible character, since empirical character (i.e., the whole of a person’s intuitable acts, mental contents, and habits) bears no necessary relation, from the limited field of human judgment, to “the incentives that the power of choice needs for such actions,” and, further, the propensity to evil is a propensity to self-deception, a propensity of the “heart” whereby it is capable of “deceiving itself as regards its own good or evil disposition.”\textsuperscript{991} Here, we have the Kantian precursor to Sartrean bad faith, a “dishonesty” which, before it can take the form of “deception of others,” originally consists in the intelligible choice “by which we throw dust in our own eyes,” the actualization of “the radical evil of human nature which […] puts out of tune the moral ability to judge what to think of a human being, and renders any imputability entirely uncertain, whether internal or external.”\textsuperscript{992}

To put it differently, if the empirical ego is solely and entirely subject to the laws of nature, then its deeds are devoid of moral value; and indeed, the empirical ego cannot be subject to the moral law, since only a free being can be subject to the law which freedom dictates to itself. But this means that the transcendental ego’s intelligible choice, as a pure activity, cannot be a cause of the empirical ego’s choices, which are strictly determined effects of other appearances in a chain of external causation. Pure practical reason is, therefore, a null hypothesis from the perspective of living human beings: a closed circuit of choice and meaning which can bear no

\textsuperscript{989} Ibid., 6:39n.
\textsuperscript{990} Ibid., 6:48.
\textsuperscript{991} Ibid., 6:47, 6:38.
\textsuperscript{992} Ibid., 6:38.
comprehensible relation to the in-themselves meaningless phenomena of actual choices. Qua intelligence, a person is wholly responsible for their intelligible choice of good or evil, which has a determinate moral value, although only God could know what that intelligible choice was, and hence what that moral value is. Qua empirical ego, a person is determined by natural necessity and thus responsible for nothing, and their phenomenal “choices” are meaningless mechanical effects, so that although a person’s empirical “character” and “choices” can be known, they have as much moral significance as the sun’s ‘decision’ to rise.

In *VI*, Merleau-Ponty articulates this limit of philosophies of reflection such as Kant’s—whereby the *de jure* necessity of “absolute truth” is established only on condition of its remaining *de facto* inaccessible to human beings—as follows:

A philosophy of reflection, if it is not to be ignorant of itself, is led to question itself about what precedes itself, about our contact with being within ourselves and outside of ourselves, before all reflection. Yet by principle it can conceive of that contact with being only as a reflection before the reflection, because it develops under the dominance of concepts such as “subject,” “consciousness,” “self-consciousness,” “mind,” all of which, even if in refined form, involve the idea of a *res cogitans*, of a positive being of thought—whence there results the immanence in the unreflected of the results of reflection.993

Thus, if a Kantian wishes to know the true moral value of a given, phenomenal choice, the question is whether, from God’s perspective, the transcendental cause of that empirical choice is reason (the law of freedom, of human beings as intelligible), or inclination (the law of human beings as mere appearances). But this question could only be answered if one had knowledge of the intelligible choice (made by the transcendental ego) behind the empirical “choice” given in inner intuition, and for a human being to claim such knowledge would be straying into “mysticism”: basing the application of the moral law, not upon one’s *intelligible* intuition of “an invisible kingdom of God,” but upon an imagined *sensible* intuition of it by “stretching one’s

993 Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 73-74/104.
power of imagination all the way to suprasensible intuitions.” Kant, CPrR, 70-71.

995 Ibid., 72-73, 79.

996 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 74/104.

In denying to consciousness an essence – indeed, any form or content – of its own, Sartre indeed removes the distance between consciousness and being that Kantian thought fails to bridge. And yet, by positing consciousness and being in absolute proximity to one another, with nothing in between – because consciousness as absolute negativity “is” nothing other than its transcending of being, and reciprocally, being as absolute positivity is nothing other than its non-identity with
consciousness – Sartre can only conceive of each of these poles as the slide into its opposite, which means he can think *neither* being *nor* nothingness, which would require thinking their interpenetration, but only the oscillation between them:

This formula [that there is the In Itself as position, and that the For Itself inexists as negation.] is evidently abstract: taken literally, it would make the experience of vision impossible, for if being is wholly in itself, it is itself only in the night of identity, and my look, which draws it therefrom, destroys it as being; and if the For Itself were pure negation, it is not even For Itself, it is unaware of itself for want of *there being* something in it to be known.\(^\text{997}\)

In the dimension of ethical value, this means that authentic choice is impossible, or rather, is *identical* to bad faith: an interminable oscillation between being what one is not, and not being what one is.

Already, for Kant, the self-givenness (apperception) of the transcendental ego can only be posited as a lack, not-a-thing, relative to the phenomenal world; already, the “freedom” of this non-thing consists in the fact that, as what determines all positive being by virtue of its own non-positivity, the transcendental ego can only be determined by itself. But Sartre diverges from Kant in denying that “pure consciousness” possesses a universal, necessary form—or, indeed, any form at all. Because, following Husserl and Heidegger, he identifies “being” with “phenomenalization,” consciousness as a lack of being must be a pure nothing, lacking any and all properties in itself. This impossibility of determining an essence of the nothing renders Sartrean “existentialism” an *anguished* Kantianism, the Kantianism of a transcendental ego which must choose its essence in the absence of any and all criteria, which is “absurd in [the] sense […] that the choice is that by which all foundations and all reasons come into being, that by which the very notion of the absurd receives a meaning.”\(^\text{998}\) And yet, insofar as the choice must *actually* be made, it is “a choice in the world,” unlike a Kantian “choice of intelligible character,” which is,

\(^{997}\) Ibid., 76/106.  
\(^{998}\) Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 616.
again, “non-temporal” on account of its non-phenomenality. The choice is therefore made, not by a pure nothing, but by a determined nothing: “the very nothingness which I am is individual and concrete, as being this nihilation [of this individual and concrete being] and not any other,” because “[a] choice which would be a choice in terms of nothing, a choice against nothing, would be a choice of nothing and would be annihilated as choice.”

Sartre conceives of consciousness as an “absolute existent” (i.e., absolute nothingness, which, as wholly transparent and unconditioned, is pure activity) by virtue of the fact that it is the pure awareness of an “object” which is absolutely transcendent to it, and which it transcends absolutely: “being,” conceived of as pure positivity, which, as entirely “opaque” and conditioned, is pure passivity. The “ego” – empirical consciousness, all that one is (that is, all one can apprehend of oneself in reflection) at a given moment – is, therefore, “an object for consciousness,” a passive, “relative existent.” Despite his insistence that the Kantian or Husserlian transcendental ego is a null hypothesis – because the “unity of consciousness” is the unity of its transcendent intentional object – Sartre maintains the doubling of the “self” into “consciousness” as pure activity, and the “ego” (i.e., the transcendent unity of “actions” or experiences, insofar as they are recollectively taken as objects by a subsequent, reflecting consciousness) as pure passivity: transcendental and empirical consciousness, by other names.

Consciousness, insofar as it is absorbed in an action or an experience, is “unreflected,” a “non-thetic consciousness of itself” which “leaves a non-thetic memory that one can consult” by taking this memory as the object of a subsequent “reflecting consciousness.” In the act of reflection, the reflecting consciousness (which, as active, is itself unreflected) catches “sight” of a

999 Ibid., 617.
1000 Ibid., 764.
1001 Sartre, Transcendence of the Ego, 40.
1002 Ibid., 42.
1003 Ibid., 40, 60, 70.
1004 Ibid., 44.
“reflected consciousness,” not by directly taking it as an “object” (since consciousness taken as an object would no longer be consciousness) but “by drawing up an inventory of its content,” directing its recollective awareness to the intentional objects of which the unreflected consciousness is “a certain depth.”1005 Thus, the Sartrean ego is not genuine, spontaneous consciousness, but “a form of ideal connection” glimpsed, by reflecting consciousness, as the “transcendent unity” which forms the horizon of the “immanent unity” of the field of reflected consciousness: “[the ego] is a spontaneous consciousness, no doubt, but it remains synthetically tied to consciousnesses of states and actions,” so that “the [Cartesian] Cogito is impure,” an oblique relation of reflecting consciousness to reflected consciousness through the objects toward which the latter continues to be directed, and toward which the former directs itself in recollection.1006

Given that “consciousness” in the proper sense (i.e., consciousness as pure activity, as opposed to the ”ego” as an “impure glimpse” of consciousness given in reflection) is always unreflected, Sartre defines it as an “individuated and impersonal spontaneity.”1007 Consciousness is “individuated” insofar as it is the nihilation of a particular being, and “impersonal” insofar as it itself is pure nothingness, a total void of content and form. Such a consciousness can never coincide with itself, because the unity of an experience is the unity with which the object gives itself to consciousness (rather than being imposed upon the experience by consciousness, in the manner of a transcendental ego).1008 Thus, while it is given to itself in absolute transparency in an original non-thetic intuition, consciousness can only thematize itself as the “ego,” which is a

1005 Ibid., 44, 46.
1006 Ibid., 92, 60-61.
1007 Ibid., 98.
1008 Ibid., 57-58.
creation of the “unifying act of reflection” itself, on the horizon of the recollected states which are its actual intentional objects.\textsuperscript{1009}

Sartre is committed to the absolute transparency of consciousness, the absolute positivity of being, and to the Heideggerian insight that being inevitably happens as being in the world (in opposition to the Kantian distinction between an “empirical world” and an “intelligible world”). This forces him to conceive of “authenticity” and “bad faith” as both empirically indistinguishable (like Kant), and metaphysically identical (unlike Kant), because the gap between “pure freedom” and “pure necessity” has now been reduced to “nothingness.” “To be sincere […] is to be what one is,” and consciousness only lets being be by nihilating itself in relation to the being which is thereby given; in other words, to be authentic is to advent as what one really is, but a being can only advent for consciousness, and only insofar as consciousness itself is not that being, but an awareness of it.\textsuperscript{1010} But this means that “the essential structure of sincerity does not differ from that of bad faith since the sincere man constitutes himself as what he is in order not to be it” and, conversely, is not what he constitutes himself as so that this being (which he is not) can be (i.e., advent in its significance); Sartre claims that sincerity differs from bad faith only in terms of its “goal”\textsuperscript{1011}:

\begin{quote}
[W]e find at the base of sincerity a continual game of mirror and reflection, a perpetual passage from the being which is what it is to the being which is not what it is and inversely from the being which is not what it is to the being which is what it is. And what is the goal of bad faith? To cause me to be what I am, in the mode of “not being what one is,” or not to be what I am in the mode of “being what one is.” We find here the same game of mirrors.\textsuperscript{1012}
\end{quote}

Authenticity and inauthenticity are, for Sartre, structurally indistinguishable: in each case, a continual passage from being to nothingness, and from nothingness to being. And yet sincerity and bad faith cannot, as he claims, differ on account of their “goal” either, because the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[1009] Ibid., 88, 46, 77.
\item[1010] Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 105.
\item[1011] Ibid., 109.
\item[1012] Ibid., 110.
\end{footnotes}
consciousness whose choices animate this movement “has” no goals, goals being intentional states of the ego, on the side of being—unless there is also “activity” on the side of being, and passivity on the side of consciousness.

Sartre attempts to overcome the Kantian problem of explaining the relationship between intelligible and empirical choices by asserting that there “is” only the phenomenal choice, of which consciousness’s freedom is both the condition and the negation; but in that case, freedom either ceases to be freedom in order to be a given choice, or the given choice ceases to have meaning in order that freedom may affirm itself. Because consciousness and being are absolutely opposed, Sartre can only escape the conclusion that authenticity is impossible, and bad faith inevitable, by doubling the choice, precisely the crime for which he indicted Kant—or else by fixing his gaze on the messianic (and thus mythical) event of “the socialist revolution” which would create a society of mutual recognition without conflict through universal identity without opposition, “a society whose members feel mutual bonds of solidarity, because they are all engaged in the same enterprise.”

But in actual societies, where people have opposing interests, authenticity is impossible because the sociopolitical situation “forces” certain identities (essences) upon people, de facto conditioning their de jure unconditioned freedom.

For example, Sartre argues that the only “authentic” choice available to a Jewish citizen of post-WWII France is to “[make] himself a Jew,” to choose the identity imposed by anti-Semites, and to thereby transcend it (as the pure, undetermined nothingness from which the determining choice originates), although concretely this means either choosing “martyrdom” as a “French Jew,” or renouncing French identity. Such a “choice of authenticity” is, in imperfect (actual) societies, “a moral decision, bringing certainty to the Jew on the ethical level but in no

1013 Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew, 149-150.
1014 Ibid., 145, 137-140.
way serving as a solution on the social or political level.” Here we find a “doubling” of choice on the phenomenal level itself: barring utopia, the choice of authenticity or inauthenticity is purely “moral” and effectively null, whereas choices within the “social” and “political” spheres have practical efficacy, but are inevitably made in bad faith. One can choose authenticity, but only insofar as one does not act; one can act, but only insofar as one gives up the possibility of authenticity. Sartre doubles choice in an effort to conceive of the possibility of realized authenticity not, like Kant, by distinguishing an intelligible from a sensible world, but by distinguishing ineffectual (moral) from effectual (sociopolitical) decisions: one can choose authentically, but only on condition that the situation renders it impossible to fulfill the choice in a project.

Kantian and Sartrean “choice” present two modulations of the moral equivalent of what Merleau-Ponty calls “paranoid politics”: of “paranoid morality.” The paranoid style of politics is founded upon the positing of an “absolute enemy” – “Evil” in itself, the “absolute Other” – which, in order to be conceived as absolute, must be conceived of as an “eternal essence,” present everywhere and nowhere. Efforts to locate and combat this evil essence inevitably oscillate between “ultra-objective” and “ultra-subjective” thought. Ultra-objectivism locates the true political value of a person or an institution, not in their conscious intentions, nor in their visible life, but “[i]n depth history,” where – because every person and every institution are bound together in a single fabric of being – “the whole political world” can be judged complicit in the “realization” of the eternal essence of evil; thus, an ultra-objectivist misses their goal of absolute objectivity and slides into the opposite, “delivered up to fantasms” and “the height of

1015 Ibid., 141.
subjectivity.” An ultra-subjectivist claims the unconditional right to dictate the (“arbitrary”) meaning of their actions, so that there is only an imaginary contact between their “political will and the apparatus it is put to use in” and their intentions “oscillate between creative freedom and the force of” a given institution, between pure spontaneity and total subservience to external forces; this attitude slides into its opposite as well, because “[t]hrough complacency towards himself, he becomes a thing and a tool.”

This oscillation between ultra-objective thinking and ultra-subjective thinking is the same one expressed in the Kantian opposition between empirical and intelligible choice, and Sartre’s opposition between empirical actors as conditioned beings and the unconditioned freedom of consciousness as absolute negativity: between (potentially authentic) moral choices and (necessarily inauthentic) effective choices. What is necessary in order to think phenomena and truth (including the true value of a given event), the visible and the invisible rather than a merely abstract relation of mutual negation, is a certain positive recognition of ambiguity:

A philosophy of negativity, which lays down nothing qua nothing (and consequently being qua being) as the principle of its research, thinks these invisibles in their purity, and at the same time admits that the knowing of nothingness is a nothingness of knowing, that nothingness is accessible only in bastard forms, is incorporated into being.

Sartrean consciousness knows itself in utter transparency, but only on condition that it does not thematize itself: that it knows nothing. Sartre perpetuates Heidegger’s distortion of the meaning of being – i.e., identifying the meaning of life with what is not life – which, as the distortion characteristic of philosophies of the negative, inverts the distortion characteristic of positive philosophies of reflection such as Kant’s:

The principle of principles here is that one cannot judge the powers of life by those of death, nor define without arbitrariness life as the sum of the forces that resist death, as if it were the necessary and sufficient definition of Being to be the

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1018 Ibid., 251-252/405-406.
1019 Ibid., 252/406-407.
1020 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 85/118
suppression of non-being. The involvement of men in the world and of men in one another, even if it can be brought about only by means of perceptions and acts, is transversal with respect to the spatial and temporal multiplicity of the actual. But this must not lead us into the inverse error, which would be to treat this order of involvement as a transcendentental, intemporal order, as a system of a priori conditions: that would be to postulate once again that life is only death nullified, since one thinks oneself obliged to explain by an outside principle everything in it that exceeds the simple summation of its necessary conditions. The openness upon a natural world and historical world is not an illusion and is not an a priori; it is our involvement in Being.\textsuperscript{1021}

Hyper-reflection expresses being as a total process of becoming characterized by “good ambiguity”—a hyper-dialectical movement. If one recognizes that every possible starting point is always already an expression of total being – i.e., a crystallization of the movement of Stiftung, a field of ideal significations acquired through a generalizing articulation of a certain folding of sensing and sensible beings over one another, thereby primordially articulating the world itself as the field of fields – then there can be no contradiction between “truth” and “appearances”: truth is not nothing and sensible being is not meaningless, because the former is the dynamic structure of the latter’s becoming sensible. The role of ambiguity in his account of authenticity brings Merleau-Ponty here much closer to Beauvoir than to Heidegger or Sartre.
3.A.iii. Beauvoirian “Ambiguity”: An Ambivalent Attitude

Beauvoir’s account of “ambiguity” can be read as a response to the problem – which she takes up from Sartre, both transforming and concretizing it – of comprehending the relationship between unconditioned ontological freedom and conditioned phenomenal freedom. For Beauvoir, the notion of “ambiguity” articulates the relation between original human spontaneity and realized moral freedom, between ontological and actual freedom. She conceives of this fundamental ambiguity of the human condition as a tension between “existence” (i.e., “transcendence”) and “being” (i.e., “facticity”), expressed in the “subject-object” and “me-others” tensions.\(^{1022}\) The “subject-object” tension arises because, as Husserl discovered, reflecting consciousness can never coincide with reflected consciousness; by the very act of taking itself as an object, consciousness transcends the being of the object to which it has attempted to reduce itself.\(^{1023}\) On the one hand, consciousness can only be an awareness (i.e., nothingness) of the world insofar as it is in the world (as a being), while on the other hand, it can never become purely immanent to the world (as a being) because it inevitably transcends its own being: consciousness oscillates between the positions of “part of” and “awareness of” the world.\(^{1024}\) The “me-others” tension arises because consciousness can only “possess” a world by being in it: the world must simultaneously transcend consciousness’s possession of it (or else it would be immanent to consciousness, and thus not a world at all), which it does insofar as its meanings are disclosed not only through one’s own projects, but through others’ as well.\(^{1025}\) The openness of the world (and likewise of the future, where the meaning I produce can only persist after my death if others “extend” it through their own projects) before a consciousness, on account of which that consciousness is capable of realizing its freedom in the world, requires that this

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1025 Ibid., 71.
freedom be “limited,” particularized, by the projects of others within which my own freedom can appear as a factual being.\textsuperscript{1026} The freedom of others gives me a world insofar as it reduces my own freedom to passivity.

Attempting to overcome Sartre’s failure to conceive of a freedom as simultaneously authentic and actual, Beauvoir distinguishes between human beings’ abstract “original spontaneity” (i.e., ontological freedom, consisting in the universal truth that, because existence precedes essence, a choice of one’s own being and, correlatively, of one’s world, is inescapable), and their concrete “moral freedom.”\textsuperscript{1027} The latter can only be realized in and as a project of willing one’s own freedom, which is the same as willing that there be meaning, given that “freedom” is consciousness’s capacity to create meaning on account of the negativity which prevents it from coinciding with the contingent facticity it discloses.\textsuperscript{1028} To genuinely will one’s own freedom, however, requires that one simultaneously will that of others’, since it is only others in their freedom who can realize the self as “negativity” by fulfilling one’s original, ontological distance from oneself, without which there could be no “adhesion to the self,” no “morality” in the (Kantian) sense of “the synthesis of freedom and its content.”\textsuperscript{1029} It is precisely by affirmatively willing the freedom of others that one wills one’s own freedom as “the very wrench which separates [one] from the being of which [one] makes [oneself] a lack.”\textsuperscript{1030} For Beauvoir, therefore, inauthenticity consists in those “attitudes” – i.e., general manners of comportment toward beings – which take flight from the ambiguity of the “self” and, correlativey, from the ambiguity of the self’s relation to the world and others; this inauthentic, self-deceiving realization of freedom is possible through the same original spontaneity which

\begin{footnotes}
\item[1026] Ibid., 70-71.
\item[1027] Ibid., 32.
\item[1028] Ibid., 28-29.
\item[1029] Ibid., 33, 63.
\item[1030] Ibid., 66.
\end{footnotes}
makes possible the authentic fulfillment of freedom. Beauvoirian authenticity consists in the resolution to “fulfill” one’s human condition, whereby a person “assume[s] himself as a being who ‘makes himself a lack of being so that there might be being,’” willing to transcend their own being, and thereby lets being disclose itself in the advent of a “meaning” or “value” of facticity relative to human projects. By conceiving of “authentic” and “inauthentic” freedom as certain attitudes toward ambiguity – with the former taking up the ambiguity of the human condition, and the latter rejecting it – Beauvoir indicates the direction of a true overcoming of the Kantian-Sartrean failure to conceive of an actual freedom: to conceive of a phenomenal choice that is a choice in actuality rather than “mere appearance,” a given that is not reduced to a moment in a chain of external causality.

On account of Beauvoir’s positive account of ambiguity, Grosholz believes that her writings contain resources for “a revision of the existentialist approach,” already tacitly undertaken by Beauvoir, to correct Sartre’s overemphasis on transcendence: “the truth of mortality is balanced against the truth of natality, and the courage of launching oneself over nothingness […] is balanced against the courage of building a house and sheltering one’s children there.” I also agree with Grosholz, however, that Beauvoir explicitly puts forward “an impoverished account of human action” in The Ethics of Ambiguity, conceiving of history solely in terms of a continuity-revolution dichotomy that occludes the “crucial middle ground” of “gradual change” or “evolution” – i.e., “micro-change,” as opposed to revolutionary “macro-change” – and, further, conceals the institutive possibilities of “speech” by associating it solely with “ideology (the defense of frozen power structures),” while treating violent conflict as the fundamental exemplar of “action.” Because Beauvoir still takes the opposition between an

1031 Ibid., 33.
1032 Ibid., 34.
1033 Grosholz, “The House We Never Leave,” 178.
ideal, unconditioned freedom and a world of conditional phenomena as her starting point, she falls into the trap of reflective philosophy: reducing phenomenal choice to reflection – to intelligible choice – when she attempts to explain the possibility of its “true” fulfillment. This is because she conceives of the “ambiguity” of existence in terms of static relations of Fundierung, as in The Ethics of Ambiguity, where she argues, regarding human projects, that the means “defines” the end, and, conversely, that the “meaning” of the means is retroactively bestowed upon it by the end. And again, in The Second Sex, where she describes a gestalt relation of figure-ground between a given “perspective” and the facts it “explains” as follows:1035

For a figure to be perceived, it must stand out from its background, and how the figure is perceived brings out the ground behind it in positive delineation; thus if one is determined to describe a particular case from a Freudian perspective, one will find the Freudian schema as the background behind it.1036

In other words, following Sartre, she argues that it is only a “choice” which brings a “value” into being, so that “the individual chooses himself” and thereby, simultaneously, bestows value upon their “ways of being in the world” and their “experiences,” taking up what would otherwise be meaningless facts in a project wherein they become significant.1037 Thus, “the moment of decision springs out of generality and repetition” in the co-advent of freedom as concrete, and facticity as meaningful.1038

Although, as Merleau-Ponty discovers in PhP, descriptions of phenomena in terms of relations of Fundierung can serve to reveal an oscillation of passivity and activity which exceeds the explanatory capability of strictly causal accounts, to mistake such descriptions for explanations of the genesis of sense is to leave the underlying ontology of “absolute object” and “absolute subject” unchanged, so that Beauvoirian “ambiguity” is ultimately ambivalence:

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1035 Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, 146.
1036 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 54.
1037 Ibid., 55.
1038 Ibid., 56.
In fact, man is, like woman, a flesh, thus a passivity, the plaything of his hormones and the species, uneasy prey to his desire; and she, like him, in the heart of carnal fever, is consent, voluntary gift, and activity; each of them lives the strange ambiguity of existence made body in his or her own way. [...] The same drama of flesh and spirit, and of finitude and transcendence, plays itself out in both sexes.

“Flesh” here signifies the body as a mechanism in a mechanistic world, as pure passivity taken up by the pure activity of “spirit.” She thereby reestablishes an interminable oscillation between mutually exclusive terms, between absolute being and absolute nothingness, whereas Merleau-Pontian “ambiguity,” the movement of Stiftung, is the simultaneity and the identity in difference of finitude and transcendence: the latter as the style of the former, and the former as the visible crystallization of the latter. Thus, Beauvoir’s thought, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, ultimately oscillates between the “objective” moment of statistical truth (“in our private life as in our collective life, there is no other truth than a statistical one”), and the “subjective” moment of lived meaning, “genuine human interest [that] fills the abstract form which one proposes as the action’s end.”

To “choose” in the genuine sense of the word still means, as it does for Kant and Sartre, to create values *ex nihilo*:

It would be utopian to want to set up on the one hand the [“objective” moment of the] chances of success multiplied by the stake one is after, and on the other hand the [“subjective” moment of the] weight of the immediate sacrifice. One finds himself back at the anguish of free decision. And that is why political choice is an ethical choice: it is a wager as well as a decision; one bets on the chances and risks of the measure under consideration; but whether chances and risks must be assumed or not in the given circumstances must be decided without help, and in doing so one sets up values.

“Anguish” expresses the incompossibility of objective (statistical) truth and subjective (lived) interest: since authentic choice must (impossibly) account for both in a single, undivided movement, it cannot genuinely base itself on either. So Beauvoir is *right in what she rejects*: both ultra-objective thinking (the subordination of transcendence to facticity) and ultra-subjective

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1039 Ibid., 763.
1041 Ibid., 148-149.
thinking (the subordination of facticity to transcendence). But since the authenticity of a given choice can only be judged on the basis of this “neither-nor,” it seems that, like Kant and Sartre, Beauvoir must conceive of “inauthentic choice” as a passive effect of external causes (not a misuse of freedom, but a lack of it), and “authentic choice” as arbitrary and capricious relative to phenomena (and thus de jure incomprehensible). Since Beauvoir rejects ultra-objectivism and ultra-subjectivism by treating each as the negation of the other, rather than by inquiring into their shared ground, it seems that she also, and by the same stroke, affirms them both, and is not, therefore, right in what she affirms.

Beauvoir does claim that her method yields an “arbitrary” answer only when “the problem is abstract,” whereas problems should really be posed concretely, following “a long analysis” of the situation. Yet, her method of analysis itself consists in the oscillation between objective and subjective, “truth” and “finiteness”: “It is apparent that the method we are proposing, analogous in this respect to scientific or aesthetic methods, consists, in each case, of confronting the values realized with the values aimed at, and the meaning of the act with its content.” Like Sartre in Anti-Semite and Jew, she ends up affirming a principle of “difference for the sake of difference” in the imperfect present, and a principle of “universal recognition” in a perpetually deferred messianic future:

It is fitting that the negro fight for the negro, the Jew for the Jew, the proletarian for the proletarian, and the Spaniard in Spain. But the assertion of these particular solidarities must not contradict the will for universal solidarity and each finite undertaking must also be open on the totality of men.

Short of an authentic “revolution” which would be the advent of concrete universality in history, Beauvoir leaves historical actors trapped in an oscillation between particularity and universality, not an “open dialectic” but a bad infinity.

1042 Ibid., 144, 149.
1043 Ibid., 147, 152.
1044 Ibid., 144.
For Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, the “ambiguity” of a given truth consists in the ontological structure of its advent as the crystallization of an incessant process of becoming: the true sense of an effort or an event consists in an expressive body’s modulation of a certain style (i.e., a primordial “idea”) to articulate a field of possibilities, the horizons of which open onto the fields of the past and future, as well as onto the total network of other fields in the present, likewise instituted by modulations of styles accomplished by expressive bodies, and all of these fields are interwoven in perpetual, more or less accelerated, processes of mutation and selection. It is, on the surface, a Darwinian account of the movement of life: an alternation of variation and selection. But Merleau-Ponty departs from “Darwinian ideology” insofar as it reduces the law for the selection of forms down to an “organization for survival,” whereas the openness of the horizon sketched by the Urstiftung (the “prodigious flourishing of forms” in life) attests to a fundamental expressivity of life – “the utility of which is only rarely attested to and that sometimes even constitutes a danger for the animal” – intertwined with its “economy” of selection. In recognizing both the “economy” and the “freedom” of life, Merleau-Ponty is giving voice to an intertwining of dimensions underlying the insights of Darwin and Uexküll: “For Darwin, life is endlessly menaced by death; for Uexküll, there is a solidity of superstructures, a shuffling of life.” To say that life is the expression of a freedom (Urstiftung) is also to say that it will have been the expression of a necessity (Endstiftung).

To live authentically in the face of such ambiguity means avoiding “equivocation” by perceiving when the meaning of an inherited style (in the most general sense, encompassing all traditions of speech and behavior) has changed (i.e., when the formerly intertwined senses of certain styles of speaking and acting have diverged, or, conversely, when formerly divergent senses have converged, resulting in a new relation between “manifest” meanings and “latent”

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1046 Ibid., 171/224.
possibilities), and expressing the divergence between one’s present and prior stances in light of the divergence between the present and past situations.\textsuperscript{1047} This is because, for Merleau-Ponty, “ambiguity” does not arise from the divergence between an “absolute” and a “conditioned” choice, but rather, from the structure of temporalization: the process of sedimentation, reactivation, and transformation whereby time, the movement of \textit{Stiftung}, unfolds as “truth.” To “be at one with oneself” does not entail realizing an atemporal choice within time (Kant), and nor does it founder on an oscillation between “consciousness” as void and the passive “ego” (Sartre), or between “subjective” meaning and “objective” truth (Beauvoir). Rather, Merleau-Ponty’s “authentic” historical actor, e.g., Hervé, remains "faithful to himself" by perceiving, and giving expression to, mutations of sense in the shifting \textit{chiasm} of behaviors and situations.\textsuperscript{1048}


3.A. Conclusions

And yet, this conception of “freedom” as an authentic comportment toward the ambiguity of sense – i.e., taking up sedimented styles of behavior to open new fields of sense by taking up possibilities outlined in the intertwining of the horizons of bodies and sense, past and future, and self and others – remains abstract. Freedom is the style of the advent of historical necessity: the movement of the becoming of “truth.” But “freedom” and “authenticity” alike possess an ethical flavor, within the tradition Merleau-Ponty takes up. In order to become concrete, this account of “freedom,” as the structure of the advent of sense, must intersect with an account of “ethical value,” which must itself intersect with accounts of “historical value” and “political value.” As Merleau-Ponty puts it in “On Madagascar,” when asked whether he considers “the values of Western civilization superior to those of the underdeveloped countries”: “Certainly not in respect to their moral value, and even less to their superior beauty, but […] in respect to their historical value,” a value expressed in the growth of material and intellectual infrastructures which (assuming solutions to “problems of destitution” and “problems of development” are discovered and realized) “will one day enable all men on earth to eat,” and which have “already made [all men on earth] exist in one another’s eyes,” made the disparate fragments of humanity “encounter” one another. “Historical value” seems here to mean the relative success or failure of given institutions in establishing relationships of communication among the totality of human individuals and communities, whereas “political value” advents in relationships between given communities, and “moral value” advents in relationships between persons within a given community.

The senses of “morality” and “politics” are distinct only in and through their encroachment upon one another: “politics is not the contrary of morality, but it is never reduced

1050 Ibid., 336/540, 330-331/530-531.
to morality,” because whereas a “pure morality” without politics would be concerned only with abstract “principles” of “justification,” a pure politics without morality would be concerned only with concrete means of securing and keeping power.\textsuperscript{1051} A living morality must be intertwined with a living politics and vice-versa, or else each one, in isolation, devolves into an interminable, paranoid oscillation between ultra-subjectivism and ultra-objectivism. A living politics, such as the “revolutionary politics” of the French non-Communist Left had been until the facts began to invalidate the Marxist philosophy of history, is “a doing, a realism, the birth of a force” that can only remain vital so long as it draws its possibilities from the horizon sketched by a principle which is genuinely justified by (i.e., embodied in) events.\textsuperscript{1052} A living morality cannot demand the immediate and total implementation of certain universal principles – that would render it abstract – but must consider, in addition to abstract questions of principle, the real possibilities for enacting a given idea within a given situation, as when Merleau-Ponty says, of the use of torture by the French military in Algeria:

It is said, and it is true, that torture is the answer to terrorism. This does not justify torture. We ought to have acted in such a way that terrorism would not have arisen[.] […] But to me it seems impossible to deduce an Algerian policy from this judgment about torture. it does not suffice to know what one thinks of torture to know what one thinks of Algeria.\textsuperscript{1053}

One must avoid the twin traps of a “pure morality” (which, in the case of Algeria, leads to the conclusion that the only “right” action is immediate and total French withdrawal, no matter how destructive the consequences) and a “relative morality” (which would say that, insofar as it is the “only effective” response to terrorism, torture is therefore “right”): the traps of, respectively, subordinating means to ends, or ends to means.\textsuperscript{1054}

\textsuperscript{1051} Ibid., 328-329/526-528 (my italics).
\textsuperscript{1052} Ibid., 329/528-529.
\textsuperscript{1053} Ibid., 328/527.
We can be judged *neither* on principle alone, *nor* on the basis of observable consequences alone; rather, “[w] are judged by what we have and have not done.”\(^{1055}\) The value of an action lies, therefore, at the intersection of “visible,” actual consequences, and “invisible,” non-actualized possibilities: futural possibilities that are opened or closed, and past possibilities that could have led to a different present. An action is “morally justified” insofar as it opens new fields of common striving, but the justification cannot be absolute; the actor remains forever culpable for whatever violence they perpetrated in carrying it out, and those whose past actions laid the field for the present are themselves partially justified and partially culpable in and through it.

3.B. Meta-Ethics of the Flesh: Mythical Abstractions and Concrete Virtue

The ontology of the flesh cannot lend itself as the foundation of a normative system of absolute values from which universal rules of conduct might be derived, and this is itself a (negative) meta-ethical consequence of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the intertwining of beings and sense: the invalidation of certain styles of speaking and thinking about the ethical and political sense of events. But in addition to its negative meta-ethical consequences, the ontology of the flesh positively sketches out a general style or ethos of ethically virtuous behavior and speech. This is a style of behavior and speech which Merleau-Ponty explicitly thematizes in a handful of passages and, more significantly, which he performs and treats as a background element throughout his political writings.

Negatively, the ontology of the flesh forecloses any possibility of unconditional truth, and thus any possibility of unambiguously and finally determining the meaning of particular human deeds. This reveals both objectivistic and relativistic styles of ethical thought as mythical abstractions, which prevent their adherents from truly perceiving the questions posed to them by given situations. Objectivism and relativism become particularly dangerous in times of “crisis,” when the sense of certain styles of expressive behavior changes through a transformation of the situation.

Positively, it reveals a certain general style of “virtue,” consisting in an authentic (i.e., both operative and explicitly voiced) recognition of the ambiguity of the sense of efforts and events in the human world, insofar as this sense always crystallizes at intersections of the styles of “coexistence” and “violence.” Coexistence is the style of the advent of human meaning as “truth”; it is the “success” of human endeavors (i.e., the opening of fields of sense) which happens as “exchange” or “communication.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, “On De-Stalinization,” in Signs, 304-305/490-493.} Violence is the style of the destruction of human
meaning, the “failure” of human endeavors which happens as “war” and the crystallization of situations of pure “force” in which individuals do not strive together within a web of living meanings, but silently struggle against an obstacle whose only sense is that of an abstract, “anonymous adversity.”

Although Merleau-Ponty tends to employ the concepts of “virtue,” “coexistence,” and “violence” more overtly to articulate the political, rather than ethical, sense of phenomena, we saw in the previous section that ethical and political values are inextricably intertwined, and will now see that Merleau-Ponty utilizes the concepts of coexistence and violence in his discussions of perception itself as “wild sense,” so that they pervade all dimensions of human existence.

1057 Ibid., 304-305/490-493.
3.B.i. Negative Meta-Ethics of the Flesh: The Danger of Myths

The negative meta-ethical implications of the ontology of the flesh are far less controversial than its positive ethical dimensions. In his interrogations of phenomena of expression and his final effort to articulate the flesh of beings, Merleau-Ponty explicitly diagnoses both “objectivism” and “relativism” as founded upon a common, mythological conception of the being of “truth” (e.g., in the case of ethics, the truth of values): that if there is “universal truth,” it must be true unconditionally. Negatively, therefore, the ontology of the flesh reveals certain types of ethical thinking as universally invalid for living human beings, because a style of ethical thinking fit for living persons must overcome the traditional oscillation between objectivism and relativism in ethics. By ethical “objectivism,” he denotes a style of thinking and speaking which presumes that behaviors and relations possess determinate value (e.g., “right,” “wrong,” or “morally neutral”) either in themselves, or thanks to some timeless and unchanging value existing in itself, which leaves it unclear how living human beings can correctly identify and apply these universals in particular situations.\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, VI, 23-25/42/45.} By ethical “relativism” he denotes a style of thinking and speaking which presumes that behaviors and relationships possess value only for a given agent or observer, or relative to a given human belief or practice, in which case the distinction between “true” and “merely apparent” value is simply abolished.\footnote{Ibid., 186/239-240.} In short, objectivism considers “truth” to be something which exists independently of consciousness, whereas relativism considers “truth” to be something which depends entirely upon consciousness for its existence.

Contra objectivist ethical thought, which seeks universal accounts of the sufficient conditions for determining actions as either “good” or “evil,” Merleau-Ponty asserts that Hegel’s account of action is the only one appropriate for judging the value of an instituted-instituting...
subject’s actions, which are inextricably embedded within a concrete and open dialectic of genesis-sedimentation-reactivation:

Confronted with the folly of action, which assumes responsibility for the course of events, one may be tempted to conclude with equal justice that there are only the guilty—since to act or even to live is already to accept the risk of infamy along with the chance for glory—and that there are only the innocent—since nothing, not even crime, has been willed ex nihilo, no one having chosen to be born. But beyond these philosophies of the internal and the external before which all is equivalent, what Hegel suggests (since when all is said and done there is a difference between the valuable and the non-valuable, and between what we accept and what we refuse) is a judgment of the attempt, of the undertaking, or of the work. Not a judgment of the intention or the consequences only, but of the use which we have made of our good will, and of the way in which we have evaluated the factual situation. A man is judged by neither intention nor fact but by his success in making values become facts.

It is not that intentions or consequences are irrelevant to the evaluation of a person’s “work”—i.e., the effort they have made, in response to a given situation, by taking up an already-instituted possibility. Rather, intentions and consequences can be attributed concrete values only insofar as they are taken up in and through concrete human efforts in actual situations, whereas an abstract valuation treats possibility and actuality as equivalent, as if it were possible to talk about the value of “lying in general” or “any and all possible lies,” as opposed to the value of “this given lie.” Abstract concepts of intentions and consequences are meaningful only insofar as they themselves are available to be taken up and embodied in human efforts.

Judging human efforts in terms of their fecundity means articulating the actual through the possible, and the possible through the actual. It means articulating, on the one hand, the necessitation of the present by the (virtual) past, and the field of the possible open in the (actual) present; and, on the other, the contingency of the present relative to the unfulfilled and forgotten possibilities of the (actual) past, and the different fields of possibilities which might have been open in different (virtual) presents. Events must be judged, in other words, as crystallizations of

the movement of Stiftung, which continually weaves the fabric of “true history,” the vertical order of advent:

When this happens, the meaning of the action does not exhaust itself in the situation which has occasioned it, or in some vague judgment of value; the action remains as an exemplary type and will survive in other situations in another form. It opens a field. Sometimes it even institutes a world. In any case it outlines a future. History according to Hegel is this maturation of a future in the present, not the sacrifice of the present to an unknown future; and the rule of action for him is not to be efficient at any cost, but to be first of all fecund.1062

Because the true value of a human effort consists in its fecundity, there can be no absolute, eternal values—no truly ahistorical criteria of value, and no possibility of making a final evaluation of a given event. Indeed:

According to Hegel, as is endlessly repeated, all that is real is rational, and thus justified—but justified sometimes as a true acquisition, sometimes as a pause, and sometimes as an ebbing withdrawal for a new surge. In short, all is justified relatively as a moment in total history on condition that this history be made, and thus in the sense that our errors themselves are said to carry weight and that our progress is our mistakes understood—which does not erase the difference between growth and decline, birth and death, regression and progress.1063

If the true meaning of an event is its function within the total, living history of the order of advent, then it seems the only true, concrete values are “viability” and “non-viability”: the success or failure of a given effort to accomplish the (re)institution of a field of possibility. These values are expressed as the functioning or non-functioning of certain institutions in certain times and places: through their initial appearance and eventual failure; expansions and contractions of their fields of possibility; and expansions and contractions of the horizons linking them to the past and future.

As Merleau-Ponty puts it in AD, any given institution, whether it is a way of speaking or a way of organizing societies, is both “the expression of an epoch” and “fashions” the future to

1063 Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language”, in Signs, 71/115; Hegel, Philosophy of Right, xix.
come, so that institutions always point beyond themselves to their own end, in some sense. For instance, Bolshevism and Stalinism brought about events which “so completely shifted the perspectives of proletarian revolution that there is no longer much more reason to preserve these perspectives and to force the facts into them than there is to place them in the context of Plato’s Republic.” It seems, then, that while we can speak truthfully of institutions growing and declining, being born and dying, we cannot judge them to be “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong,” except relative to the fields of meaning which they themselves open or close. But to determine once and for all whether a given field should have opened or closed off is impossible, because we can only judge the fecundity of given efforts from a position within a history which, while it is total at every moment, also remains perpetually open.

There is a truth, then, to Carbone’s claim that flesh functions as the ground of all value schemata in general, but cannot justify a preference toward any one in particular: “flesh founds every possible ethics and every possible politics, that is, does not found any particular ethics or politics.” Ethical ideas and systems, as human institutions, are fields drawn by sedimented styles of expressive behavior originally instituted in certain past situations, in response to certain problems. Insofar as a style of behavior cannot respond to the style of a situation, it is not “true,” so that the ontology of the flesh reveals the false presumption of any ethical system’s claim to “universal validity.” As Merleau-Ponty puts it in “The Primacy of Perception”:

If we admit that our life is inherent to the perceived world and the human world, even while it re-creates it and contributes to its making, then morality cannot consist in the private adherence to a system of values. Principles are mystifications unless they are put into practice; it is necessary that they animate our relations with others.

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1064 Merleau-Ponty, AD, 93/133-134.
1065 Ibid.
1066 Carbone, “Flesh: Towards the History of a Misunderstanding,” 57.
All ideas of “values” and “meanings” are, as “verbal essences,” sublimations (generalized formalizations) of already operative styles of behavior; spoken meaning borrows its vitality from meaning which speaks, from lived-living sense.  

There can be no ahistorical values, because a value must be operatively incarnated in living bodies before it can be articulated, and its formalized articulations remain meaningful only as long as speaking (and, even more so, writing and reading) beings live in a world where it is possible to take up that sense, not just in spoken language, but in the silence of efforts (i.e., speaking speech, or any other expressive behavior) in and through which it again becomes operative. And the fact that a system of objective ethical “truths” can only be founded upon flesh as a mythical abstraction is itself a negative meta-ethical consequence of this ontology for reflective thought.

The situated character of the existence of “truth” (and thus of “values,” which are “true” insofar as they are lived) does not, however, exhaust the discoveries of Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of values. To stop here would mean adopting a form of relativism, albeit one in which the true meaning of an effort is relative to the given situation, not in isolation, but as an expression of an open and total history, wherein each new present takes up and transforms the entirety of the accumulated past: a fallible relativism, where present judgments remain forever open to the possibility that they will be cancelled and replaced in some future. But because ethical concepts are themselves institutions, their true meaning, too, consists in their fecundity, rather than a fantasied power of determining the value of a given action or event for all time. Thus, a judgment of and in the present can still be “false,” in the sense of inauthentic.

Objectivist ethical thought remains hopelessly abstract insofar as no particular style of ethical thought can authentically attribute to its results the value of unconditional, ahistorical truth. But ethical relativism is equally abstract, on account of the contingent power of particular styles of ethical interrogation to yield a “true” evaluation within certain styles of situation. All

notions of ahistorical ethical a prioris are myths, but there are situated ethical a prioris: i.e.,
styles of expressive behavior which can be taken up to respond to styles of situations, as answers
to ways in which the Welt questions human beings. The danger of these operative truths is that
they can become myths if they persist as ways of speaking in situations where their sense can
only be embodied in words.

All explicit (spoken) sense is the crystallization of an idealization (a speaking) of a silent,
operative sense, a style of being flesh; but an idealization is not necessarily an abstraction, and an
abstraction is not necessarily a myth. Abstractions are idealizations of verbal senses, adventing
through “reflection” as “an operation on significations” which are “themselves sedimented in acts
of expression.” Abstractions becomes myths when they are taken to be primordial: when
linguist significations are grounded upon other linguistic significations to construct a closed
world of spoken sense, cut off from the “non-language significations” (the wild, operative sense
of the Lebenswelt) of which it was originally an idealization.

It is in opposition to such purely verbal constructions that Merleau-Ponty argues against
Sartre’s (and, by extension, Levinas’s and Butler’s) strategy of founding a notion of moral
responsibility upon “the otherness of the other,” “alterity,” posited as an absolute value. In
“The Philosophy of Existence” (1959), he recalls Sartre articulating “an argument that seemed to
have a paradoxical air to it,” although “at bottom it really didn’t,” as follows:

“After all, there is not really any difference between a catastrophe in which 300
or 3000 people die. There is the difference in numbers, certainly, but for each
dying individual, it is a world and a meaning that dies, and whether there be 300
or 3000 that die, the scandal is no greater. The scandal is exactly the same.”

1069 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 175/229.
1070 Ibid., 170/224.
1071 Ibid., 171/225.
1072 Butler, Giving and Account of Oneself, 100.
1073 Merleau-Ponty, “Philosophy of Existence,” in TD, 134 / Merleau-Ponty, “La philosophie de
l’existence,” in Parcours Deux, 258.
l’existence,” in Parcours Deux, 258.
Sartre argued, in short, that each person is an “absolute value,” incomparable and irreplaceable insofar as their life produces and sustains a unique world of meaning, a singular taking up of facticity. This argument – which, Merleau-Ponty notes, Sartre “did not especially hold” to – reiterates the second version of Kant’s categorical imperative: if “things” (non-rational beings) can only possess “relative worth” for “subjective ends,” whereas “persons” (rational beings) inherently possess an “absolute worth” as “objective ends,” then the existence of a rational being as such is the only end in itself, relative to which all merely subjective ends are possible. But while Kant derives the absolute value of persons from their capacity (even when unfulfilled) to actualize the form of “universal reason,” Sartre derives it from their alterity, the absolute difference between one person’s existence (the world of which they are the advent) and that of every other. As a result, Kant simply asserts the absolute value of “freedom” (qua pure rational agency), whereas Sartre argues that one can only will one’s own “freedom” (qua power of creating meaning in the world) by willing the freedom of all, because the meaning one brings into existence only become fully actual insofar as they are recognized by other free agents.

Merleau-Ponty, however, is dissatisfied with this neo-Kantian ethical absolute, reflecting upon Sartre’s argument:

In retrospect, it struck me because I realized that such an idea reveals to what extent during the prewar years Sartre was removed from the political and historical point of view, from the perspective of heads of government. From the point of view of someone who has authority over other human beings, there is a great difference between an accident in which ten people die and an accident in which a thousand people die. From the statistical point of view, which is that of social and political life and history, there is an enormous difference. Only from the philosophical point of view, which considers each consciousness as a whole, [is there] no absolute difference between the death of one person and the death of a hundred people.1076

From a concrete political perspective, it is impossible to equate the death of one with the deaths of thousands, even for “reasons of principle,” because what is in question is the social whole, the dynamic fabric of interwoven institutions and individuals (with the latter conceived of as instituted-instituting processes of advent, not abstract “consciousnesses of…”).\textsuperscript{1077} For a human being to participate, via speech or writing, in the discovery-creation of a new field of sense, the advent of a style of common life, does not mean theorizing from a position of “survey,” from a “position” outside of events, but taking up sedimented styles of expression to bring the situation to a greater degree of articulation, operatively incarnating “a thought directly in contact with everyday events.”\textsuperscript{1078}

The “unconditioned freedom” of consciousness and “absolute positivity” of facticity are pure abstractions, arrangements of words functioning as emblems for styles of existence that can only be embodied in words, that are only certain ways of speaking: “The freedom of pure negativity is a signification, just as the verbalized cogito is derived from the tacit or instituted cogito.”\textsuperscript{1079} The “subject” who chooses is not pure consciousness (nor, therefore, absolute nothingness), but a “field of fields,” so that “[t]o choose is most often to put oneself in [a] situation such that one can no longer shrink back, and, in doing so, one always depends upon a previous situation which contained all because it was ambiguous.”\textsuperscript{1080} Authentic choice is a movement of (re)institution, taking up present possibilities of prior sedimentations to open a horizon of the future, thereby simultaneously transforming the field of the present and the horizon of the past. Even in those rare instances when an effort inaugurates a new tradition – i.e., when, not a Nachstiftung, but a new Urstiftung, is called for – the necessity of creating a new style of response does not arise from a decision made by the instituted-instituting “subject,” but is a

\textsuperscript{1077} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IP}, 15/47.
\textsuperscript{1079} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IP}, 15/48.
\textsuperscript{1080} Ibid., 6-7/34-36, 186/243.
demand of and by the situation. And this “creation” is also a “discovery,” since the possibilities for a new tradition are likewise offered by the situation, insofar as the historical actor is capable of setting aside the inapplicable schemata of the past and perceiving the situation in its novelty.

Indeed, while critiquing merely propagandistic “liberal values” in *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty states that “freedom” ceases to be an operative value as soon as it is posited as the sole and explicit principle of the ethical-political order of a group or society, because it then becomes petrified, “a liberty which is the insignia of a clan and already the slogan of a propaganda,” so that:

> There is already a warlike attitude involved in democratic liberties taken as the sole criterion of judgment upon societies, or in democracies absolved of all the violence they perpetrate here and there because they recognize and at least internally practice the principles of liberty—in short, in liberty which has paradoxically become a principle of separation and pharisaism.  

Setting up any principle as an absolute rules out in advance the possibility of coexistence with those whom you do not perceive as sharing it, and seems to guarantee one’s own “goodness” in advance, regardless of actual actions and consequences. Merleau-Ponty contrasts this petrified idea of “liberty” with “active liberty”:

> On the contrary, one will never extract a propaganda from an active liberty which seeks to understand other men and reunites all of us. Many writers are already living in a state of war. They see themselves already shot. […] The possibility that a system might condemn us does not prove its absolute evil nor exempt us from doing it justice when there is occasion. If we accustom ourselves to see in it nothing but a menace to our own life, we get into a struggle to the death to which all means are good—myth, propaganda, the game of violence. From such deadly perspectives one does not reason well. We have to understand once and for all that these things can happen—and think like living men.

The “living men” in question are historical actors who still perceive coexistence with others—which, if authentic, is not mere “toleration,” but common striving which produces the meaning of a common life—as an actual possibility in the present situation, and such persons are truly “free”

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1082 Ibid., xlv/xli.
in the sense of (re)instituting shared meanings through their individual and collective behaviors.

Insofar as one perceives the present situation as a “struggle to the death,” however, the avoidance of death becomes the absolute and negative value of all behavior, relative to which all other beings – visible and invisible, bodies and meaning alike – are reduced to mere means.
3.B.ii. Positive Meta-Ethics of the Flesh: Virtue as Authentic Openness to Ambiguity

The positive meta-ethical trajectory of Merleau-Ponty’s thought is not as explicit as the negative, but it is possible to trace its development through an interrogation of his writings on morality and politics. Merleau-Ponty articulates the genesis of “truth” – that is, the advent of sense – as the intersection of two fundamental styles of human relation, which derive from the structure of *Stiftung* itself: general styles of meaningful and meaningless existence invoked under the names of, respectively, “coexistence,” which advents as “communication,” and “violence,” which advents as mute “force.” The “success” of human endeavors (crystallized as “good”) is the institution of meaning in and through modulations of coexistence, while their “failure” (crystallized as “evil”) is the loss of meaning in and through modulations of violence. A “true morality,” then, consists in taking up present possibilities in and through modulations of a general style of “virtue”: an authentic engagement with the senses of the past, the present, and the future in their ambiguity, as dimensions of the perpetually open process of the advent of truth.

In “Man and Adversity” (1951), Merleau-Ponty argues, as a consequence of his developing articulation of truth as the incessant process of its own becoming, that the senses of “good” and “evil” are contingent. In the first place, “evil” is contingent in the sense that:

[…there is not a force at the beginning of human life which guides it towards its ruin or towards chaos. On the contrary, each gesture of our body or our language, each act of political life […], spontaneously takes account of the other person and goes beyond itself in its singular aspects toward a universal meaning. When our initiatives get bogged down in the paste of the body, of language, or of that world beyond measure which is given to us to finish, it is not that a malin génie [evil genius] sets his will against us; it is only a matter of a sort of inertia, a passive resistance, a dying fall of meaning—an anonymous adversity.]

It might appear that, in this passage, Merleau-Ponty is still beholden to the terms of a philosophy of consciousness, associating “evil” with the “passive resistance” of facticity to the “spontaneity” of human beings’ initiatives. But a reading more attentive to the manner in which the notions of

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“passivity” and “activity” are already beginning to intertwine as early as *PhP* finds in this passage an outline of the future ontological trajectory his thought. “Evil” here signifies the stubborn inertia of an already-instituted style of being which has, however, ceased to enable the advent of new meanings (which is the same as saying, ceased to enable human coexistence). A style of existence which has ceased to be embodied in the co-production of a meaningful human world, but which still persists in structuring the horizon of the possible, displays the fundamental structure of “evil”: having become an impediment to the advent or renewal of a “common life,” it is only capable of persisting through “pure force.” The failure of human initiatives arises, as does their success, from the accumulated weight of the sedimented past, and not from some mythical source external to the living history of advent.

Thus, “good” – the success of human initiatives, and the elimination of styles of engagement which have become “false” through transformations of the situation – is equally contingent:

We do not guide the body by repressing it, nor language by putting it in thought, nor history by dint of value judgments; we must always espouse each one of these situations, and when they go beyond themselves they do so spontaneously. Progress is not necessary with a metaphysical necessity; we can only say that experience will very likely end up by eliminating false solutions and working its way out of impasses. But at what price, by how many detours? We cannot even exclude in principle the possibility that humanity, like a sentence which does not succeed in drawing to a close, will suffer shipwreck along the way.\(^\text{1084}\)

The “good” of a particular, concretely situated person cannot be, as Kant conceives of it, the victory of an atemporal “pure reason” over and against the particularity of “inclinations,” just as “truth” is not the effect of a universal thought suppressing the particularity of spoken language or imposing a universal judgment upon the contingent facts of history. An effort transcends the contingency of the actual present, instituting or reinstituting a situated universal (i.e., a historical *a priori*), insofar as it responds to a possibility proposed by the field of the present itself as an

\(^{1084}\) Ibid., 239/390-391.
expression of the total past, and there is no guarantee that a given situation will offer such a possibility. Indeed, there is no guarantee of the “success” of human efforts in history as a whole, which is never “finished,” but continuously transformed and reintegrated through the advent of the present. A human effort, conceived of as instituted-instituting, is the taking up of an already-instituted technique in response to an actual situation, which simultaneously opens new fields of possibility for the technique and the situation alike.

In his introduction to *Signs* (1960), Merleau-Ponty repeats this critique of attempts to understand evil as either a *cause* or an *effect* of human actions. Instead, he locates its genesis in the fabric of relationships that make up the human *Welt*; “evil” happens as a failure of human coexistence, when a certain style of being in the world obstructs the advent of new fields of sense:

> There is equal weakness in blaming ourselves alone and in believing only in external causes. In one way or another we will always *miss the mark* if we do. Evil is not *created* by us or by others; it is born in the web that we have spun about us—and that is suffocating us. What sufficiently tough new men will be patient enough to really re-weave it?

As an operative sense, “evil” is neither a cause nor an effect of human activities – purely “causal” descriptions are abstract, taking for granted the advent of sense – but the idealization of a situated failure of coexistence. And yet, a morality which, striving to prevent evil, attributes an absolute value to coexistence thereby renders itself abstract.

Given that coexistence is the style of advent of sense, and violence the style of its suppression, it may be surprising that Merleau-Ponty does not treat coexistence and violence as “universal principles” of, respectively, “goodness” and “evil”: surprising that he is no pacifist. The difficulty of coming to grips with this seemingly unpalatable attitude is, perhaps, why it is so often asserted that there cannot be a specifically Merleau-Pontian ethics in keeping with the ontology of the flesh. But the ambiguity of Merleau-Ponty’s attitude toward violence can be

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understood by returning to his critique of alterity as an absolute value, exemplified in how he
recalls himself as responding to the question, “Do you posit the other as an absolute value?”:

I answered, “Yes, in so far as a man can do so.” But when I was in the army, I
had to call for an artillery barrage or an air attack, and at that moment I was not
recognizing an absolute value in the enemy soldiers who were the objects of
these attacks. I can in such a case promise to hold generous feelings toward the
enemy: I cannot promise not to harm him. When I say I love someone at this
moment, can I be sure that in this love I have reached the substance of the person,
a substance which will absolutely never change? Can I guarantee that what I
know of this person and what makes me love her, will be verified throughout her
whole life? Perception anticipates, goes ahead of itself. I would ask nothing
better than to see more clearly, but it seems to me that no one sees more clearly. I
can promise here and now to adopt a certain mode of behavior; I cannot promise
my future feelings. Thus it is necessary to confide in the generosity of life—
which enabled Montaigne to write in the last book of his Essais: “J’ai plus tenu
que promis ni dû” [“I gave more than I promised or owed”].

Again, it is impossible for living persons to authentically embody absolute moral principles—
with the implied corollary that, insofar as an ethics demands unconditional adherence to any
given principles, it is abstract, a verbal artifact which cannot authentically be taken up as an
operative style of behavior. Human beings cannot live absolute values because the horizon of the
future projected by their present choices is a horizon of the possible, dictating necessity only
negatively, in terms of what is not possible within the field of the present; truly reflective
deliberation therefore operates within a horizon of the probable. It is always possible that one will
be plunged into a game of violence in which all values of coexistence become non-sense, just as it
is always possible that the person one has become will, when called to keep a past promise, not be
someone in whom that promise persists as an operative sense. In such situations, true morality
does not consist in clinging to a dead, abstract sense, but in perceiving and rendering explicit the
transformation in sense which has come about.

“Coexistence” and “violence” are styles of behavior, rather than abstract principles, so
that the sense of their particular crystallizations in and through given situations is necessarily

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ambiguous and may even be, from an objectivist viewpoint, “contradictory”; for example, there are situations in which coexistence would likely lead to greater “evil” than would violence. This is because “everything counts in history,” so that a reflection aiming to be “the expression of reality” is only “philosophical, rigorous, and coherent” insofar as it “admits the plurality of causes in history, deciphers the same dialectic in all of them, and integrates ‘personal conceptions’ [or ‘operative imaginaries’] instead of excluding them.” Such a thought amounts, not to a “final judgment” of the sense of an event or an era, but to “the formulation of a movement of history which animates ideas, literature, morality, philosophy, and politics at the same time as relationships of production.”

This “movement of history” common to all dimensions of meaning in the human Welt is Stiftung, synonymous with “freedom”: the becoming of “truth,” understood as a field of the present through which the past remains operative, and the future open. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in “A Note on Machiavelli” (1949), a “true morality” can be conceived of as one that affirms the good ambiguity, the open dialectic, of the movement of Stiftung, and thereby affirms the continual becoming of the senses “good” and “evil.” Styles of behavior that would generally, in interactions between private persons, function as “kindness” or “consideration” can, when taken up by a leader in certain situations, function as “cruelty,” and conversely, what would ordinarily function merely as “cruelty” in private relations can, in political life, come to be judged as a “lesser cruelty” than what might initially appear to be “kindness”: “in historical action goodness is sometimes catastrophic and cruelty less cruel than the easygoing mood.” This is because “historical action” or “acts of authority” have the capacity to transform the life of a community as a whole:

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1088 Ibid., 275/443.
What sometimes transforms softness into cruelty and harshness into value, and overturns the precepts of private life, is that acts of authority intervene in a certain state of opinion which changes their meaning. They awake an echo which is at times immeasurable. They open or close hidden fissures in the block of general consent, and trigger a molecular process which may modify the whole course of events. Or as mirrors set around in a circle transform a slender frame into a fairyland, acts of authority reflected in the constellation of consciousness are transfigured, and the reflections of these reflections create an appearance which is the proper place—the truth, in short—of historical action. Power bears a halo about it, and its curse (like that of the people, by the way, who have no better understanding of themselves) is to fail to see the image of itself it shows to others. So it is a fundamental condition of politics to unfold in the realm of appearances.[1091]

Because the true meaning of a behavior or event – i.e., the total field of its actual and possible ontological functions – is never closed, those which prove to be (re)institutive of the common life of a community will be judged “good” when, and insofar as, the style of that common life becomes incarnate in actual relationships.

Thus, Machiavelli argues that an effective leader must cultivate a “reputation” for “good qualities” (e.g., “goodness, clemency, piety, loyalty, justice”), and ought to actually have those qualities, but “must remain free in respect to his [moral] virtues”:

Machiavelli says the prince should have the qualities he seems to have but, he concludes, “remain sufficiently master of himself to show their contraries when it is expedient to do so.” A political precept, but one which could well be the rule for a true morality as well. For public judgment in terms of appearances, which converts the prince’s goodness into weakness, is perhaps not so false. What is a goodness incapable of harshness? What is a goodness which wants to be goodness? A meek way of ignoring others and ultimately despising them.[1092]

The operant sense of “goodness” is determined by the current a prioris of common life, so that treating a given crystallization of “goodness” as an absolute principle of actions at least impedes a historical actor’s ability to institute new styles of common life, new fields of meaning.

Genuine political engagement is not a question of “being good,” but of exercising the “virtue” (which Machiavelli tends to distinguish, under the name of “prudence,” from moral

virtue) proper to the horizontal structure of futural possibilities, mastery of all possible means to
the institution of common strivings:

Machiavelli does not ask that one govern through vices—lies, terror, trickery; he
tries to define a political virtue, which for the prince is to speak to these mute
spectators gathered around him and caught up in the dizziness of communal life.
This is real spiritual strength, since it is a question of steering a way between the
will to please and defiance, between self-satisfied goodness and cruelty, and
conceiving of an historical undertaking all may adhere to. This virtue is not
exposed to the reversals known to moralizing politics, because from the start it
establishes a relationship to others which is unknown to the latter. It is this virtue
and not success which Machiavelli takes as a sign of political worth [...]. As
sometimes happens, tough politicians love men and freedom more truly than the
professed humanists: it is Machiavelli who praises Brutus, and Dante who damns
him. Through mastery of his relationships with others, the man in power clears
away obstacles between man and man and puts a little daylight in our
relationships—as if men could be close to one another only at a sort of
distance. 1093

“Political virtue” or “prudence” is, therefore, a certain way of schematizing (i.e., articulating the
fields of) the styles of coexistence and violence, and the dimensions of politics and morality, so
that the terms in each pair can advent only at their points of intersection, in co-articulation:
vioence advents as a divergence from coexistence, and vice-versa; political significance advents
as a divergence from moral significance, and vice-versa.

Virtue, as a style of being flesh, is a certain way of taking up (structuring, and being
structured by) the field of a situation, and, as such, its value (i.e., its potential and actual
fecundity) is independent of the success or failure of a given action. Virtue advents in and
through striving with and among others: in relations of mutual recognition, which advent as
dialogue, rather than dominating or being dominated. And in order for an effort to unfold in this
style, as true coexistence, it must be the taking up of a perception of possibilities for common
striving: of the horizon of a common situation. Common striving unites persons in a common life
by placing the “distance” of individuation between them, enabling the members of a community

1093 Merleau-Ponty, “A Note on Machiavelli,” in Signs, 217-218/353-354; Machiavelli, Discourses on Livy,
44-45.
to differentiate themselves insofar as it unites them in a single thrust toward the future. Whether or not a given effort ultimately succeeds, a person who engages in it virtuously has already thereby established a living relationship with others, not a relation of dominance and subordination, but a common movement whereby each brings the others’ silent possibilities to expression. Virtue means comporting oneself in a way that a common striving and common life are established and sustained, no matter the outcome of that striving itself.

Merleau-Ponty is takes up Machiavelli’s account of political virtue as his own, rather than merely explicating it as a historical fact, as can be seen in his description – in “On De-Stalinization,” written seven years after “A Note on Machiavelli” – of Pierre Hervé’s “rare dignity which keeps his policy [toward Stalinism] ambiguous,” ambiguous in the positive sense whereby the open horizon of Hervé’s comportment gears into the open horizon of the actual situation:

[Hervé’s break with Stalinism] is the mature fruit of an experience—the fact of a man lucid enough to anticipate the evolution of communism, courageous enough to speak in the general silence, master of his criticism as he was formerly of his adherence, in a word faithful to himself.1094

Merleau-Ponty names three aspects of Hervé’s “dignity” or “faithfulness to himself”: his ability to perceive the general movement of history beneath events; his willingness to attempt to give voice to the sense of the present, when others are swept up by it in silence; and his equal mastery of both his present opposition to, and his past support for, the institution of Stalinism. Each of these traits corresponds to an aspect of the political virtue enacted by Machiavelli’s Prince, so that they together furnish a general Merleau-Pontian account of political virtue.

The first aspect of virtue consists in an operative power of perceiving the movement of history, the general style of advent expressed in and through each situation: Hervé’s clarity of anticipation, and the Prince’s ability to conceive of a possibility for common striving among the

members of the community. The second consists in giving voice to the operative sense of the present situation, which encompasses the ways in which oneself and others are bound together in it, and which would otherwise remain silent: Hervé’s “courage” to speak in the context of others’ silence, and the Prince’s speaking “to these mute spectators gathered around him,” thereby “steering a way between the will to please and defiance,” refusing to rely on the force of authority when recognition is possible through dialogue. The third aspect consists in a sort of “mastery of oneself,” consisting in the recognition (in expressive behavior) of divergences between the sense of the past and the present, or the present and the future: Hervé’s freedom relative to both his past and present positions, and the difference between them, and the Prince’s recognition that what would appear “morally good” in the present will not necessarily serve to institute and preserve a common life. True virtue, then, consists in an authentic recognition of the ambiguity of sense, which must be simultaneously operative in three dimensions of history: perception of the horizon of the future; giving voice to the explicit and the implicit sense of the present; and articulating mutations of sense between the past and the present (in words), or between the present and the future (in efforts, the sense of which can only be retrospectively taken up in language).

The comparison of these passages reveals that Merleau-Ponty takes up (and maintains) Machiavelli’s account of political virtue as his own, and that he transforms it. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty broadens the scope of Machiavellian virtue into the articulation of a style which can be embodied, not just by leaders, but by “historical actors” – those whose works accomplish the advent of the possible as actual, and open new possibilities in and through the actual – in

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It remains to show that this articulation of a style of “political virtue” can be further generalized into a description of moral virtue. To do so is to go beyond the limit of Merleau-Ponty’s explicit thought, and attempt to give voice to his unthought concerning morality.

Recalling, from above, Merleau-Ponty’s statement that operative virtue – i.e., fruitfully taking up the schema of a given situation, outlined by the chiasm of the styles of recognition and force – “could well be the rule for a true morality as well,” the question now concerns the relationship between “morality” and “politics.” In the “Epilogue” to AD, Merleau-Ponty seems to distinguish “morality,” as a dimension of absolute values, from “politics,” as a dimension of true history in which given values are but temporary crystallizations of an incessant process of becoming. The passage in question comes at the conclusion of his explanations of his former position regarding communist theory and practice in Humanism and Terror, his new position in AD, and the movement between these positions. In Humanism and Terror, he argues that Marxist critique can retain an eternal, negative validity (i.e., true in what it rejects), even if Marxist action proves incapable of overcoming the oscillation between the “spontaneity” of the proletariat and the authority of the Party. “Success” would here mean sublating the potential for universality in the proletariat’s concrete particularity with the Party’s abstract claim to universality (i.e., overcoming the contradiction between the real historical contingency of the proletariat, and the Party’s still-empty proclamations of historical necessity)—and yet this style of success is impossible, insofar as the theory of history as a positive dialectical movement is a myth.

He explains, in AD, that his stance in Humanism and Terror was founded upon his perception of possibilities for both coexistence and war in the ambiguous international situation, but that, following the Korean War, he is now confronted with the facts that “the United States has rearmed and evolved toward fanaticism,” and the USSR is therefore likely to return “to a

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1099 Merleau-Ponty, Humanism and Terror, 155/167-168.
‘hard’ politics” if any of its allies deviate from its initiatives, no longer tolerating the existence of “neutral zones” where the politics of peace and war alike remain live possibilities; these facts express the crystallization of the global political field into “a situation of force” wherein the meaning of his former attitude of “sympathy” or “comprehension without adherence” becomes “an adherence in disguise,” since there is no way to avoid choosing a side (at least implicitly) in situations of force.\textsuperscript{1100} The sense of human affairs – whether they take the form of coexistence or violence – is always ambiguous, but any given event of violence is a suppression of sense in that present moment, so that it is only possible to articulate its ambiguity retrospectively; so long as the game of violence remains actual, one must either affirm it, and take a side within the game, or take a stand against the game itself, and so be viewed as an enemy by all parties involved.

With the descent of global politics into a situation of pure force, events “recalled to us the identity of practice and theory.”\textsuperscript{1101} Although one could abstractly separate theory and practice from a mythical position of absolute survey “outside history, and particularly outside Marxism,” the truth, which is manifest from a concrete position \textit{within} history and Marxism, is that “Marxist critique and Marxist action are a single movement,” which mean that “[t]here must be something in the critique itself that germinates the defects in the action.”\textsuperscript{1102} It is, specifically, the positing of a particular (i.e., proletarian) class as “a critique historically embodied,” as “the \textit{suppression of itself},” which results in the fantasy of its having attained the status of the concrete universal through itself alone, without the need for exchange, and this hubristic myth leads to an “unverifiable violence” which does not give reasons, but proceeds from a delusion of absolute autonomy.\textsuperscript{1103} Given that positive Marxist action has failed, it is now non-sense to assert that Marxist critique retains a negative truth:

\textsuperscript{1100} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{AD}, 229/317-318; Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Humanism and Terror}, 148/159.
\textsuperscript{1101} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{AD}, 230/319.
\textsuperscript{1102} Ibid., 231/320.
\textsuperscript{1103} Ibid., 231/320.
This in itself shows well enough that we were not on the terrain of history (and of Marxism) but on that of the *a priori* and of morality. We meant to say that all societies which tolerate the existence of a proletarian are unjustifiable. This does not mean that they are all of equal worth and worth nothing or that there is no meaning in the history which produces them one after the other. This Marxism which remains true whatever it does, which does without proofs and verifications, is not a philosophy of history—it is Kant in disguise, and it is Kant again that we ultimately find in the concept of revolution as absolute action. The events which obliged us to consider from outside, “objectively,” our wait-and-see Marxism estranged us in the end only from a Marxism of internal life.\footnote{Ibid., 232/321.}

The “morality” at issue in this passage is not “morality as such,” but Kantian morality, or at least a morality in the Kantian style: wherein the possibility of “moral agency” – of bringing *value* into the world – is identified with absolute autonomy, the mythical “universal in-and-for-itself.” The “morality” criticized in *AD* is not, therefore, a “true morality” in the style which is evoked in “A Note on Machiavelli.” Authentic morality is a fecund style, a “virtue,” modulated and embodied in efforts and in speech which functions as an explicitly ambiguous expression of the *chiasms* of coexistence and violence, and morality and politics.
3.B. Conclusions

In the preceding subsection, I have shown that Merleau-Ponty’s effort to articulate an ontology of the flesh outlines both negative and positive meta-ethical implications. Negatively, it reveals the falsehood of claims that the truth of a given expression of ethical value is either absolutely universal or absolutely particular. Absolute objectivism, which claims to articulate unconditional ethical truths, amounts to a mythologization of the world. And absolute relativism is equally mythical, for it rests on the same assumption: that “truth” as such must be unconditional. And yet, there is a truth to all ethical systems, insofar as all spoken or written accounts of “ethical value” are crystallized articulations of possibilities outlined by the chiasm of the styles of coexistence and violence. Truth – whether of scientific facts or ethical values – is not a positive, unchanging being, but a process of historical becoming: the advent of sense as integration through divergence. Positively, then, the ontology of the flesh reveals that a “true morality” must recognize – both functionally, in behavior, and explicitly, in language – the ambiguity of the sense of human efforts.

Adherence to an abstract ethical system can, depending upon the system and the situation in question, enable a person to engage in mutualistic processes of integration-individuation with others, thereby weaving the common life of a community. But adherence to an instituted morality is dangerous insofar as these abstractions become myths – insofar as their status as idealizations is forgotten, and they are mistaken for an ultimate reality – because mythical abstractions conceal the ambiguity of their own sense, the possibility that a change in the situation will transform the senses of certain words and deeds, and perhaps even bring about a divergence between them.

The danger of abstract ethical thought becomes explicit in, as Hannah Arendt puts it, “the rare moments when the chips are down,” the moments of crisis when, in quoting W.B. Yeats: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world […]” / The
best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”

In moments of crisis for the common life of a community, when the implicit sense (i.e., function) and the explicit sense (i.e., spoken meaning) of institutions diverge from one another, it becomes apparent that “[t]he faster men held to the old code, the more eager they will be to assimilate themselves to the new one” prescribed to them, even if it is a reversal of the old. The danger in such situations is that what insufficiently reflective adherents to a given code of conduct “get used to is not so much the content of the rules, […] as the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars. In other words, they get used to never making up their minds.”

A true morality (which, as such, could not cannot take itself to be the true morality for all times and places) consists, not in unconditionally universal principles for determining actions as “right” or “wrong,” but in modulations of the general style of virtue, whereby neither oneself nor others are posited in the abstract positions of “subject” or “object,” and a style which discloses real possibilities for the common production of meaning: a general style of “moral virtue.” The fundamental and originary “responsibility” of a true moral “agent” lies in the perceptual decisions which establish the styles of their relations with others and, thereby, the horizons of the past and the future. The most fundamental perceptual decisions, so far as ethics is concerned, sketch out possibilities for gearing into a situation through modulations of the dialogical style of coexistence, or the mute style of violence: respectively, the style whose functioning actualizes freedom as the (re)institution of sense, or the style whose functioning actualizes force as the suppression of new sense—although, again, in certain situations a present production of sense can lead to a greater restriction of possibilities for relating the present to the past and the future while, in others, a present suppression of certain possibilities can open greater depths and heights of sense: more profound horizons of the past and the future around the field of the present. “Moral

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107 Ibid., 178.
virtue” – indeed, “excellence” in any dimension of human existence – consists in an *authentic* relation to the *ambiguity* of the sense (i.e., the ontological function) of efforts within the human *Welt*. I will now attempt to articulate a *normative* ethics of flesh, which will lead to a consideration of the implications of this onto-phenomenological account of virtue for the relationship between ontology and ethics.
3.C. The Intertwining of Truth and Virtue

In the previous section, I argued that Merleau-Ponty’s account of virtue is inseparable from his indirect method of approaching the question of the meaning of being, so that his hyper-reflection upon truth is simultaneously a hyper-reflection upon value: simultaneously the expression of an ontology and a meta-ethics. Now, in 3.C, I consider the implications of this meta-ethics of the flesh at the normative level of concrete “prescriptions.” I agree with Waldenfels that an authentic articulation of the ethical – of the truth of values – must take the form of an “indirect” ethics. While this brings my approach into proximity with Levinas’s indirect articulation of an ethics of absolute alterity in and through a critique of its contrary (an ethics, such as Kant’s, of absolute identity), I argue that any ethics founded upon a notion of “absolute priority” (whether of “the self” or “the Other”) must be recognized as a mythical abstraction by an “ethics of intertwining”: of proximity in and through originary processes of distancing, and differentiation in and through originary processes of encroachment.

Merleau-Ponty treats neither self-identity nor otherness as a principle of absolute value. An ethics of the in-between foregoes absolute principles in favor of “schematic” concepts: articulations of the fields opened by certain styles of behavior, in response to certain styles of solicitation by the world, such as Merleau-Ponty discovers in Machiavelli’s notion of political virtue as “prudence.” Schematic concepts do not lend themselves to deductive or inductive proofs, but rather, sketch out horizons of the possible: outlining the “can” without determining the “must.” The ontology of the flesh cannot serve as the ground of a determinative ethical “system” in the traditional sense: an organized set of problem-solving heuristics, of objective rules for determining the values of persons and deeds. But as we saw in 3.B, this ontology outlines both a negative and a positive meta-ethics: negatively, a proscription against mythical abstractions in ethical thinking, and, positively, a prescription to enact a general style of ethical comportment,
which consists in both embodying and articulating an authentic recognition of the ambiguity of sense. In 3.C, I make explicit the relationship between ontology and ethics outlined in my account of Merleau-Pontian virtue. A “true morality,” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, is not oriented toward the necessary (e.g., the “objective necessity of the moral law”), but toward the possible: the cultivation of the expressive power of bodies in and as the operative intertwining of a common world.

In 3.C.i, I revisit the objections levelled against attempts to derive an ethics from the ontology of the flesh. Whereas prior attempts rightly fall prey to such criticisms insofar as they remain on the abstract level or, conversely, render concrete value judgments impossible, my onto-phenomenological account of virtue escapes abstraction via its generality and openness, while still prescribing a general structure of comportment: virtue is the operative recognition of the ambiguity of sense, and this recognition advents as openness and responsivity to situations’ demands for hyper-reflection upon the sense of actual efforts and institutions. Next, in 3.C.ii, I compare this Merleau-Pontian “ethics of the in-between,” as a recognition of the intertwining of ontology and ethics, with Levinas’s ethics of absolute alterity, as a subordination of ontology to the fundamental ethical relation of the “face-to-face” encounter with “the Other.” I worry that the concept of “absolute alterity,” as the purely formal correlate of the (equally purely formal) concept of “absolute identity,” remains a mythical abstraction which, as such, distorts the living relation between meaning and bodies just as surely as its contrary.
3.C.i. Oblique Ethics: The Advent of Virtue in and Through Hyper-Reflection

I will begin my approach to the question of the concrete actuality of a properly Merleau-Pontian style of speaking and acting ethically – as opposed to speaking and thinking about ethics, the topic of the previous section – by revisiting Carbone’s claim that, while the “strange kinship” of all beings renders every “stranger […] my brother,” nonetheless I or “my brother could well be Cain,” so that “[a]s a condition for all these possibilities […] flesh founds every possible ethics,” but founds no ethics in particular. Toadvine takes up Carbone’s position in warning against “the demand for quick applications” of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of nature by the “environmental” movement: “[t]o use either a scientific or an ontological description as the basis for norms of human behavior is fundamentally to misunderstand the kinds of questions posed by science, ontology, and ethics,” because “[i]f all things are flesh, and none more so than any other, how could this imply any standard of judgment for human behavior?” Given that all styles of behavior are themselves modulations of the style of flesh, it seems that, in general and in any given instance, “behaviors neither embrace nor reject the fleshiness of things, but in fact have no bearing on it.”

I agree with Toadvine that hyper-reflection “does not lend itself as one component of a ‘toolbox’ for solving environmental problems,” nor ethical problems, because it instead functions “to problematize the ontological assumptions driving this problem-oriented focus.” What Toadvine argues concerning philosophies of nature – that it is a “mistake” to “look to Merleau-Ponty’s account of the flesh as the basis for new ethical principles in our relation to nature,” taking “‘harmony’ and ‘interdependence’ as moral guides,” since making the ontological claim

1108 Carbone, “Flesh: Towards the History of a Misunderstanding,” 57.
1109 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature, 133.
1110 Ibid., 134.
1111 Ibid., 133.
that everything is interdependent means, not that things should be interdependent, but that “things cannot do otherwise” – is just as true concerning ethics.\textsuperscript{1112}

But if flesh is the style of styles, the manner whereby fields of sense are simultaneously opened and limited, then authentic hyper-reflection upon a given ethics, which traces its genesis back to this primordial level of existential simultaneity, discloses the mythical character of any ethics which conceives of the truth of values as either unconditionally universal (i.e., objectivism) or merely particular (i.e., relativism). “Virtue” thus designates the general style of expressive behavior which participates in the advent of a sense without distorting its truth by taking it to be either absolutely unlimited or absolutely limited. In revealing the insufficiently reflective character of a positivistic or negativistic ethics of absolute truth (i.e., objectivism or relativism, respectively), the ontology of the flesh reveals a tendency toward violence in these ways of thinking. Insofar as a style of being in the world cannot advent as authentic coexistence, in shared striving, it can advent only in and through force, the violent suppression of other styles. Given that abstract styles of ethical comportment reduce the horizon of the possible to “games of violence,” hyper-reflection, as the antidote to absolute principles, takes on an ethical value of its own as the condition for the possibility of successful coexistence, which is to say, the condition for the possibility of meaning. Virtue advents as openness to demands for hyper-reflection upon the sense of human efforts: demands which are originally articulated as transformations of the present situation, so that an authentic comportment toward ambiguity realizes this openness in words and deeds which articulate such becomings.

I am, therefore, in agreement with Waldenfels’s claim, in “Responsivity of the Body, that the only possibility for “morals and ethics [to] discover their own limits and origins,” the only means of articulating the true sense of the ethical, is via an “oblique and lateral” approach: an

\textsuperscript{1112} Ibid., 133.
“indirect” ethics.\textsuperscript{1113} Waldenfels argues that the advent of “philosophies of sense” – philosophies, such as Husserlian phenomenology, which inquire into the advent “of something as something,” of beings as meaningful – raises a dilemma concerning the philosophical treatment of morality: the question of whether phenomenology ought to simply explain morality, or attempt to create it.\textsuperscript{1114} On the one hand, a “phenomenology of morals” (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche’s or Michel Foucault’s descriptive genealogies) seeks the non-moral ground of moral values, whereas, on the other, a “moralizing phenomenology” (e.g., Levinas’s normative metaphysics) derives original moral prescriptions from its descriptions.\textsuperscript{1115} A phenomenology of morals thus takes up a standpoint external to morality, whereas a moralizing phenomenology cannot assume such a “neutral” perspective because it posits “always already existing morals.”\textsuperscript{1116}

A pure phenomenology of morals conceives of ontology as “prior” to ethics, insofar as moral phenomena are founded upon some conception of being as morally neutral, whereas a pure moralizing phenomenology conceives of ethics as “prior” to ontology, because moral responsibility can only have the status of “always already binding” if it functions as a primordial structuration in the advent of beings as such. Waldenfels portrays Merleau-Ponty as offering a middle course between the subordination of ethics to ontology or ontology to ethics, arguing that “the traces of the other inscribed into corporeality itself” indicate a simultaneity of phenomenalization and becoming-responsible, an intertwining of the ontological conditions for the appearance of another person (“a responsive looking at and listening to […] giving regard and respect”) and the condition for the possibility of an ethical comportment toward that other person (“the other’s interpellation claim”).\textsuperscript{1117} Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s indirect ontology contains “traces” of an “indirect […] ethics,” a structure of the phenomenon of ethical responsibility which

\textsuperscript{1113} Waldenfels, “Responsivity of the Body,” 94.
\textsuperscript{1114} Ibid., 92 (italics modified).
\textsuperscript{1115} Ibid., 92 (italics modified).
\textsuperscript{1116} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{1117} Ibid., 106.
is “invisible” or “silent” from the perspective of actual ethical responsibility; I argue that this ontological structure of responsibility must be conceived of not (as Diane Perpich interprets it in “Moral Blind Spots and Ethical Appeals,” her critical response to Waldenfels’s essay) as non-ethical, but rather, as the style of advent of ethical values, and therefore as those values’ “invisible” lining, which “is” nothing other than them.\footnote{1118} In other words, the sense of given ethical values is the field of ethical comportment itself, which is not itself an “ethical phenomenon” or “ethical being” because it \textit{is not} a phenomenon or a being at all, but the style of the becoming-true of ethical values.

Waldenfels and James Hatley (the latter, in his “Introduction” to the volume in which “Responsivity of the Body” appears) both seek the ground of ethical responsibility in “responsiveness”: the primordial “involvement” of “my” flesh with that others, as a result of which I have always already “invested” their flesh with significance by folding my own visibility over theirs, just as they fold theirs over mine, in the advent of our individualities.\footnote{1119} At the specifically human (i.e., verbalized-verbalizing) level of the \textit{Welt}, responsiveness advents as communication or “exchange,” so that responsiveness is another name for what I call the style of “coexistence”: the occurrence of expression through a movement of interpenetration-individuation. My effort to articulate an ethics of flesh therefore converges, on this point, with Waldenfels’s and Hatley’s conceptions of responsiveness as, respectively, the operative sense (i.e., the “blind spot”) of lived responsibility, and “the principle, if that is what it can be called, in which the goodness of flesh […] is given.”\footnote{1120} I wonder, however, whether it is really possible, as Waldenfels and Hatley attempt, to affirm both a metaphysics of absolute alterity, and an ontology of the in-between.

Hatley argues that the primordial and reciprocal interweaving of all flesh, the ferment of differentiation preceding all identity, serves as condition for the possibility and necessity of, negatively, one’s becoming “responsible” in the sense of refraining from “cruelty” (the ontically destructive but ontologically futile effort to treat others as non-living, and thereby deny one’s own openness, which is simultaneously vulnerability, to them) and, positively, one’s developing and affirming a sense of “gratitude” toward others for the investments whereby they render one’s own meanings possible. He concludes that “cofunctioning” (what I call “coexistence”), as “a good that is articulated socially and politically in a coming into tune with others,” serves as the “principle” of “goodness” which must be embodied in order to realize an ethics founded upon the ontology of the flesh. Hatley thus attempts to derive the ethical from the ontological, as “a categorical imperative”: insofar as I am necessarily “involve[d] in the other,” I necessarily, always already, “affirm his or her very birth, no matter what consequences occur in the wake of that birth,” so that “evil,” which consists in seeking to deny and undo my involvement with others, is both an inauthentic comportment, and (de jure) doomed to fail, despite the (de facto) harm it can bring about.

Recalling Carbone’s and Toadvine’s concerns, I worry, firstly, that any such attempt to derive an objective ethical principle from the flesh constitutes a “frontal” approach to the question of the ethical – i.e., an approach that remains at the level of (pre-given) concepts, rather than attempting to lend its voice to the silent functioning of beings – and, as such, prejudices the concept of “ethics” along the lines of intellectualist models of “detached” rational deliberation, which presuppose a philosophy of consciousness. Secondly, I worry that, in positing the supposed ontological impossibility (i.e., non-being, non-sense) of violence, thought blinds itself, via a myth, to the real possibilities for violence which are inextricably intertwined with possibilities for

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1123 Ibid., 16-17.
coexistence; after all, actual violence may even function as “goodness,” insofar as it opens or preserves possibilities for coexistence in a given situation. “Power” in the sense which Merleau-Ponty adopts from Machiavelli – i.e., taking up available styles of expressive behavior to shape and institute fields of the possible – “is not naked force, but neither is it the honest delegation of individual wills,” so that it “is of the order of the tacit”: “[n]either pure fact nor absolute right, power does not coerce or persuade; it thwarts,” restricting the common horizon of the possible in ways that can prove destructive or creative, although “pure violence can only be episodic,” or it will undo the fabric of “common life” altogether.1124 Thus, while “[t]here is a circuit between the self and others” whereby “[t]he evil that I do I do to myself, and in struggling against others I struggle equally against myself,” it is also necessary to recognize that there can be no common life, and thus no common striving or common history, without power, which functions as the ground of instituted-instituting “historical action” in common life by schematizing the fields coexistence, violence, and their intertwining in given situations.1125 The sense of actual power relations is thus fundamentally ambiguous as well, because its functioning articulates the very individuals upon which it operates by opening up “space” between them, (through the imposition of common institutions by consent, force, or some alloy of the two), a “distance” which unites them in the fabric of common life where their genuine individuation becomes possible.1126

Thus, Merleau-Ponty is a sort of hyper-reflective “humanist of the in-between,” recognizing both the universalizability (in the Welt) and the inhuman ground (in the Umwelt, of which the Welt is a sublimation) of human efforts:

There is no serious humanism except the one which looks for man’s effective recognition by his fellow man throughout the world. Consequently, it could not possibly precede the moment when humanity gives itself its means of communication and communion. […] If by humanism we mean a philosophy of the inner man which finds no difficulty in principle in his relationship with

1125 Ibid., 212/344.
1126 Ibid., 216/351.
others, no opacity whatsoever in the functioning of society, and which replaces political cultivation by moral exhortation, Machiavelli is not a humanist. But if by humanism we mean a philosophy which confronts the relationship of man to man and the constitution of a common situation and a common history between men as a problem, then we have to say that Machiavelli formulated some of the conditions of any serious humanism.1127

A politics without morality devolves into pure violence on account of its mythologized abstraction, but so does a morality without politics, if we take politics to be concerned with forging bonds between people in the common history of a society, and morality with forging bonds between people in the private histories of individuals. A morality detached from common history runs the risk of labelling any deviation from presently instituted moral values as absolute “evil,” whereas a morality intertwined with politics considers the total situation within which moral values operate, the ambiguity of “good” and “evil” on account of which it can sometimes be virtuous to judge others as embodying an “evil” and act against them, but it can never be virtuous to perceive them with “contempt or hatred,” because to do so is to enter into the abstract viewpoint of paranoid morality.1128

Waldenfels, by conceiving of the ontological structure of ethical responsibility as an operative style, remains true to this ambiguity of ethical value. He argues that “responsivity” is the structure of the very “joints of Being” – the “affordance-response” structure of perception whereby the flesh of the world solicits my body by offering it a possible sense, and the flesh of my body “responds” by taking on “the right attitude” – so that this response-structure of the chiasm functions only “indirectly” or “obliquely” as the ontological ground of given ethical “demands.”1129 In other words, the primordial style of responsivity is pre-ethical, and yet it finds its fulfillment solely in the ethos of responsibility; responsivity functions as the forgotten “origin”

1127 Ibid., 222-223/361-364.
or the “blind spot” of responsibility which the latter continues to bear silently, invisibly, at (and as) its heart.  

As Perpich puts it, in her critique of “Responsivity of the Body,” Waldenfels seems to be trying to articulate a convergence between Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, both of whom define “subjectivity” in terms of, not some primordial identity, but a primordial “openness” to the not-yet “outside”: an originary relationship between “self” and “other(s)” which precedes the related terms. But she notes that Waldenfels actually appears to “reverse” Levinas’s metaphysics – wherein “sensibility and sensible intuition are secondary significations or possibilities dependent upon the prior meaning of sensibility as vulnerability and responsibility” – by founding responsibility upon responsivity. She worries that the intertwining of ethics and ontology may actually be the assimilation of ethics to ontology, the reduction of alterity to the same, so that “the fundamental insight driving Levinas’s thought may be erased […] if responsibility is assimilated too closely to the notion of responsivity.” I concur with Perpich, in the sense that an ethics of flesh cannot posit responsibility as absolutely primary, because “responsibility” and “responsivity” are idealizations of simultaneous operations, inseparable dimensions of the advent of sense through the intertwining of expressive bodies. On my reading, Waldenfels’s essay does, indeed, outline a Merleau-Pontian critique of Levinasian ethics, particularly the formulation in *Totality and Infinity.*

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1130 Ibid. 104, 106.
1131 Perpich, “Moral Blind Spots and Ethical Appeals,” 128.
1132 Ibid., 128.
3.C.ii. Ethics of Absolute Alterity and Ethics of the In-Between

Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* is explicitly a “reversal” or “inversion” of the Hellenistic tradition which sought to *represent* infinity with a concept of the totality of being, either in a “philosophy of transcendence” where the “I” ascends out of being to attain totalizing knowledge of it, or in a “philosophy of immanence” awaiting a messianic “end of history” when “the same” will finally absorb “every ‘other.’”\(^\text{1133}\) In either case, Levinas concludes, “[t]he terms” (of this tradition wherein “the *conflicts* between the same and the other are resolved by theory whereby the other is reduced,” this tradition whose every formulation consists in “a movement within the same before obligation to the other”) “must be reversed.”\(^\text{1134}\) Levinas’s thought unfolds an effort to conceive of “the same” as founded upon “the irreducible Other,” “interiority” upon “absolute exteriority”—and consequently, “freedom” upon “justice,” “ontology” upon “ethics,” and “politics” upon “religion.”\(^\text{1135}\)

In revealing philosophies of transcendence and immanence as complementary expressions of the philosophy of the Same, Levinas articulates the oscillation between intellectualist ethics (of transcendence) and empiricist ethics (of immanence): e.g., respectively, deontology and utilitarianism, each of which recoils into its opposite. On the one hand, Kant acknowledges that all we can grasp of the “practical unconditional necessity of the moral imperative” (i.e., the force, the unconditionally motivating character, of the moral law) is “its *incomprehensibility*” (i.e., our inability to think it as a “concept,” which would have to refer to some intuition as its possible content, rather than a purely intelligible “idea”).\(^\text{1136}\) Thus, Kant resorts to *empirical* methods to “develop” the concept of a “good will,” to explain what it means to act out of respect for “duty,” under the purely intelligible necessity of the moral law; the heavy

\(^{1133}\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52.

\(^{1134}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{1135}\) Ibid., 47-48, 64.

\(^{1136}\) Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:462-463.
lifting of this “conceptual development” is accomplished through empirical examples of actions from which all empirical “inclination” appears to be absent, so that the content of Kant’s written morality is acquired by ‘negative empiricism’. Mill initially, and apparently on the contrary, claims that his utilitarianism is a purely consequentialist ethics, wherein an action’s “rightness” consists in its “[tendency] to promote happiness.” But he concedes, in a footnote in the second edition of Utilitarianism, that “[t]he morality of the action depends entirely upon the intention—that is, upon what the agent wills to do,” thereby recoiling, from an empiricist morality of actual consequences, to an intellectualist morality of pure intentions. Empirical benefits can only function as legitimate motivations insofar as true benefit coincides with apparent benefit—and the immediate coincidence of truth and appearance would only be possible for a pure intentional consciousness.

To avoid the dichotomy of (relative) immanence and (relative) transcendence, and thus the reduction of the other to the same, Levinas posits the “face of the Other” as an “absolute existent” which is simultaneously absolute immanence (to itself as speaking, as “a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses”) and “absolute transcendence” (of “being,” which he identifies with totalizing representation). The “revelation” of the “face of the Other” in a face-to-face encounter is thus a “pure experience,” “[t]he absolute experience” which is the “idea” of the positive infinite: an idea which is not a “concept” (a universal) but an absolute singularity, an infinite content that “at each instant undoes the form [which the Other] presents.” This “moral experience” of the revelation of the face of the Other as an existent which – qua absolute plenitude accomplished through pure self-reference – absolutely transcends existence is founded upon “a metaphysical asymmetry”: the authentic “community” of the I and the Other demands the

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1137 Ibid., 4:397.
1138 Mill, Utilitarianism, 7.
1139 Ibid., 18-19n2.
1140 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 53, 66.
1141 Ibid., 65-67.
absolute submission of the I, the “Desire” of the I for the Other in the form “of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself.” The “face of the Other” is “meaning” itself, the ultimate spring of all significance which absents itself from the world so that this meaning of which the self-expression of the other is the “creation ex nihilo” can exist.

The “recognition” which constitutes the I – prior to its own responsible for giving (or, as irresponsible, in “hypocrisy” and “disobedience,” failing to give) to the Other – is a recognition of the Other’s “separation” from existence as such, and functions as the condition for entering into authentic community, not by attempting to cancel this separation, but by refusing to attempt the objectification of the Other, giving to the other the only “gift” the I possesses: “the communicable, the thought, the universal.” The ethical subject, rather than attempting to dominate the Other by subsuming them under a concept (i.e., reduce them to “an other”), offers the empty universal for the Other to fill. Only in taking up the responsibility – for total submission before the other, total ignorance of the other, and total openness to instruction by the other – inherent in the relation of “society” with the other, which “permits the maintaining of a separated I,” can the I truly exist as more than figment of language, since it cannot affirm itself: “It is not I, it is the other that can say yes.”

At the close of “Responsivity of the Body,” Waldenfels articulates a critique which echoes Jacques Derrida’s engagement with Levinas, asking: “What would be the weight of the other’s interpellation claim (demand) without a responsive looking at and listening to […] giving regard and respect?” In “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida points out that insofar as Levinas attempts to reverse the traditional Hellenistic priority of ontology over ethics – founding

1142 Ibid., 53, 64.
1143 Ibid., 206, 104-105.
1144 Ibid., 76.
1145 Levinas, Time and the Other, 116-117; Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 68-69, 93.
1146 Waldenfels, “Responsivity of the body,” 106.
“the same” (the empty form of the universal) upon “difference” (the Other’s absolute self-immanence and absolute transcendence of the Same), so that, in Levinas’s words, “preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane” – he recoils back upon the traditional schema at the moment he seemed furthest from it, revealing “that the absolute of alterity is the same,” and, conversely, that the absolute of identity is alterity; perhaps, in attempting to approach what absolutely transcends philosophical discourse by means of philosophical discourse, Levinas again reduces the Other to the same. The Hellenistic dream of a totalizing thought “fulfills” itself in the disclosure of absolute alterity as the ground of identity, and, conversely, Judaism’s dream of an immediate intuition of God as absolute alterity “fulfills” itself in the Spinozistic revelation that every-thing must be immanent to what is absolutely transcendent; this undecidable “dialogue,” this “coupling of Judaism and Hellenism,” says Derrida, is “peace itself.” But “peace itself” (i.e., the way in which peace happens) is, simultaneously, the impossibility of absolute peace:

There is a transcendental and preethical violence, a (general) dissymmetry whose archia is the same, and which eventually permits the inverse dissymmetry, that is, the ethical nonviolence of which Levinas speaks. In effect, either there is only the same, which can no longer even appear and be said, nor even exercise violence (pure infinity or finitude); or indeed there is the same and the other, and then the other cannot be the other—of the same—except by being the same (as itself: ego), and the same cannot be the same (as itself: ego) except by being the other’s other: alter ego. That I am also essentially the other’s other, and that I know I am, is the evidence of a strange symmetry whose trace appears nowhere in Levinas’s descriptions. Without this evidence, I could not desire (or) respect the other in ethical dissymmetry. This transcendental violence, which does not spring from an ethical resolution or freedom, or from a certain way of encountering or exceeding the other, originally institutes the relationship between two finite ipseities.

Kant articulates a Hellenistic thought in which there is “only the same,” for the “subject” and the “object” of his ethics are identical: transcendental subjectivity, pure (practical) reason. And yet, if my authentic “self” is transcendental subjectivity, then I cannot be myself as a phenomenal being.

1149 Ibid., 128.
in the phenomenal world. Levinas articulates a Judaic thought in which there is ultimately “only the same” as well, because insofar as the Other is positive infinity, and the subjectivity before it is nothing, the I is the same as the other. The attempt to arrive at a notion of “responsibility” starting from absolute identity recoils onto absolute alterity, and vice-versa—an oscillation without the advent of authentic (living) sense. What both lack is the articulation of an in-between which is not nothing, a separation (écart) whereby the identical becomes itself by leaving itself, and the different differs only in and through unity; identity and difference, self and other, are never (i.e., cannot happen as) pure, so that an ontology or ethics attempting to think them as such remains abstract. Identity and difference are relations, and the interval and intertwining of the flesh whereby bodies individuate themselves in and through each other is simultaneously unity and separation, identity and difference: what Derrida calls “transcendental violence,” and Merleau-Ponty calls the chiasm of bodies and sense.

Bernasconi argues, however, that “Violence and Metaphysics” should be interpreted not as a critique of Levinas, but as a deconstruction, which is to say, a “double reading”: an engagement consisting in two stages, first tracing or reiterating the explicit intention of the text, and then, through this reiteration, revealing the aporias in it.\footnote{Bernasconi & Critchley, “Editors Introduction,” Re-Reading Levinas, xii; Bernasconi, “The Trace of Levinas in Derrida,” 16.} According to Bernasconi, Derrida’s double reading of Levinas “shows, on the one hand, the impossibility of escaping from logocentric conceptuality and, on the other, the necessity of such an escape arising from the impossibility of remaining wholly within the (Greek) logocentric tradition”; thus, given that these positions relate to one another as the poles of an antinomy, “Derrida’s essay displays the necessity of these two impossibilities and suspends the critical moment of deciding between them.”\footnote{Bernasconi & Critchley, “Editors Introduction,” Re-Reading Levinas, xii; Bernasconi, “The Trace of Levinas in Derrida,” 18-19.}
Metaphysics” is not to advance an argument against Levinas, but to articulate something implicit in Levinas’s writings: the necessity of passing beyond Western ontology in and through its own conceptual resources, of the “impossible” irruption of the Other within the Same.\footnote{Bernasconi, “The Trace of Levinas in Derrida,” 25-26.}

While Levinas’s \textit{Otherwise than Being} may be interpreted as reinterpretation of \textit{Totality and Infinity} in response to “Violence and Metaphysics,” it does not adequately respond to the moment of that essay which Waldenfels takes up in his critique.\footnote{Bernasconi \& Critchley, “Editors Introduction,” \textit{Re-Reading Levinas}, xiii.} Levinas’s account of the “absolute alterity” of the other presupposes the \textit{truth} of a transcendental idealism or an ontology of “the Same” – even while showing that this idealism or ontology, conversely, presupposes the absolute alterity of the other – because Levinas initially discovers the alterity of the other, not through the interrogation of lived phenomena, but \textit{within} the ontology of the Same, as the rupture which is simultaneously the condition for its possibility and the impossibility of its totalizing impulse. As Alphonso Lingis puts it in his Introduction to \textit{Otherwise than Being}:

\begin{quote}
Levinas’s attention here is not on the experiences in which an ethical essence of subjectivity could be intuited, or out of which it could be deduced. He does not seek this ethical and non-theoretical intention of subjectivity in special moral experiences, but finds it immediately in the theoretical intentions, the critical and rational intentions of cognition, and therefore in language and \textit{in philosophical language in particular}.\footnote{Lingis, “Translator’s Introduction,” xviii (my italics).}
\end{quote}

If, however, an ontology which (like Heidegger’s) attempts a frontal approach to the meaning of being inevitably remains in the dimension of pure abstraction, then a frontal approach to the preconceptual soil of that ontology (which starts from the ontology itself, and not from the phenomena taken up in it) is equally abstract. Levinas is right in his criticism of “truth” as it is conceived of according to the ontology of the Same: as the “\textit{determination}” of beings whereby they are rendered “intelligible,” and thus the “image” of “being” itself, identified with
This is indeed a mythical conception of truth, which relegates all that cannot be determined (i.e., that which is irreducible, wild perception) to a “false world,” in contrast to the “true” world (of idealizations).

But Levinas does not engage in a complete reflection (i.e., an authentic hyper-reflection) on this myth, because he mistakes the negation of the explicit sense of the “Western tradition” for its absolute outside, failing to recognize “absolute alterity” as the correlate of “absolute identity.” If “absolute alterity” can only be posited as the rejection of “absolute identity” and vice-versa, then this opposition is but another expression of Modern thought’s oscillation between the poles of the Cartesian antinomies—which does, in fact, appear to be the case. Indeed, Levinas’s work is devoted to proving – quite compellingly – that an ontology of the Same (which conceives of all beings as expressions of one and the same being) can only be articulated through a denial of the irreducible, what can never be determined as an intelligible “essence.”

One sees this positing of absolute identity via the rejection of absolute alterity in, for instance, Kant’s specification of the principle of all possible experience as “pure apperception, i.e., […] the thoroughgoing identity of oneself in all possible presentations,” so that any experience which would rupture the absolute self-identity of the “I” is a priori impossible: to be possible means the same as to be intelligible in a philosophy of the Same. Conversely, Levinas conceives of the radical transcendence of the Other as an “original exception” which renders actual immanence possible, while rendering absolute immanence impossible; the encounter with the face of the Other is “revelation,” the “pure” – i.e., irreducible, incomprehensible – “experience” relative to which all intelligibility is possible, on condition that the face of the Other is recognized as a “breach” in being, a gap in the intelligible.

1155 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 61, 78.
1156 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 52; Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 183.
1157 Kant, CPR, A116.
1158 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 66-67, 77; Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 182.
It therefore looks as if the ontology of the Same and the metaphysics of the Other function as each other’s repressed presuppositions; the former is the rejection of the concept of total unintelligibility, and the latter is the rejection of the concept of total intelligibility. Given that each term can only be defined by the rejection of the other, this means that each must either cease to posit itself, or else slide into positing its opposite in order to negate it, setting up a closed loop of positing-negation, an interminable oscillation. The manner in which Levinas arrives at his concept of radical alterity and its subsidiaries – i.e., by first engaging in a frontal attack on written ontologies, from which he derives his own concepts negatively, and then subsequently inserting these concepts (as gaps) into experience – leads me to worry that he may simply be projecting inversions of myths onto life, altering the distortion without actually arriving at anything more “concrete.”

In light of this, I wonder if there is an element of the disingenuous in Derrida’s portrayal, in “Violence and Metaphysics,” of Levinas’s thought as the “Jewish Other” of “Western Hellenism.” After all, the “Hellenism” of the West is not a pure Hellenism, but a (now secularized) Christian Hellenism, and Christian Hellenism was already an intertwining of Hellenism and Judaism: a taking up of “Hellenism” by Christianity, wherein the latter realized certain horizontal possibilities of – and, simultaneously, concealed – its own Jewish origin. Levinas himself partially disputes this interpretation of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. He argues that the sense of “[Jewish] monotheism must be sought in the Bible that is bathed by the sources in which, while being common to both Jewish and Christian tradition, it retains its specifically Jewish physiognomy.” If the Bible takes on different “physiognomies” (i.e., faces) in light of the Jewish and Christian traditions, then the Jewish path to God must indeed be understood as radically other to the Christian path. For Levinas, Christianity can indeed

1159 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 33; Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 3.
be “explained” as an integration of Jewish and Greek elements from the “reductive” standpoint of “objective science” (which here takes the form of the “history of ideas”), but Judaism remains radically other to Christianity in its “real contribution and significance.”

In its “real significance,” Levinas sees Judaism as an “autonomous” path to the same “Reason that the Greek philosophers revealed to the world”—which is not the “rationalism” of the “West,” but a “reason” and a “language” which “are external to violence” and which, as such “are the spiritual order,” the “vehicle” for that “ethical relation” with “the Other, my neighbor, [which] gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God.”

The concept of the “absolute alterity of the Other” is a mutation of the unrepresentable “God” of the Torah, as Levinas himself readily admits, stating that, “[c]ontrary to the philosophy that makes of itself the entry into the kingdom of the absolute […], Judaism teaches us a real transcendence, a relation with Him Whom the soul cannot concern and without Whom the soul cannot, in some sense, hold itself together.”

Levinas’s avowed theological inspiration raises questions concerning the motivations for his metaphysical claims, his relationship to the “Western” tradition, and the abstract – if not mythical – nature of his concepts.

In the first place, there is the question of the “legitimacy” of importing purely theological concepts into purportedly phenomenological investigations. On this point, I am inclined to agree with Dominique Janicaud that Levinas only accomplishes his ‘discovery’ of a non-phenomenal absolute in *Totality and Infinity* through “an artificial operation” whereby Husserlian “phenomenology” is reduced to the to the discovery of “eidetic” relations – i.e., “the intuition of essences” – and “intentionality” is reduced to a locus of active syntheses: “[a] sham intentionality, purely representative, has been fabricated to prepare the way for the advent of the

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1164 Levinas, “A Religion for Adults,” in *Difficult Freedom*, 16-17.
Indeed, Levinas defines “the essential teaching of Husserl” as the discovery that the presentations “held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought […] implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought,” and then goes on to claim that “in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects!” Janicaud, on the contrary, argues that “[t]he discovery of the transcendental a priori is the principle driving Husserl’s enterprise,” and that “[t]his discovery is not at all limited to isolating an eidos, but reveals the correlation between the world and intentional transcendence”: “[r]educing [the transcendental a priori] to a combination of representations is tantamount to returning to an associationist or reflexive point of view worthy of Condillac or Hamelin, but certainly not of Husserl.”

It may be true, as Levinas claims, that “the presentation and the development of the notions [he] employed owe everything to the phenomenological method,” but only in the sense that he employs a notion of “phenomenology” reduced to a merely descriptive method in order to make his theological concepts appear philosophically necessary.

In the second place, I concur with Mazis that Levinas’s account of the “face-to-face” – i.e., an encounter with absolute transcendence which demands the total submission of the “I” – aligns his conception of “ethics” closely with the Western “tradition of ethical prohibitions”: “Both are aimed at devaluing the perceptual and embodied level of existence, which must be put out of play, transcended, for one to be able to hear the ethical summons.” Levinas is eminently Western in his disparagement of the body and “perception, which is egocentric and ultimately egoist like animality.” This is unsurprising, given that the “absolute identity” of Kant’s “transcendental unity of apperception” is likewise a conceptual mutation of the God of the

1166 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 28.
1168 Mazis, Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World, 102.
1169 Levinas, “Being a Westerner,” in Difficult Freedom, 47.
Torah—at least, from the perspective of the “history of ideas,” which Levinas dismisses as merely “objective,” as “the godless theology that stirs the soul of unbelievers.”

In the third place, finally it seems that Levinasian and Kantian thought each slide into the other. If one begins by positing absolute alterity (e.g., “the Other”), and then attempts to explain the advent of identity, one ends up at absolute identity: the reduction of all particular others to the singular “Other.” If one begins by positing absolute identity (e.g., “transcendental subjectivity”), and then attempts to explain the advent of difference, one ends up at absolute alterity: the absolute non-identity between, on the one hand, any and all phenomenal persons, and, on the other, transcendental subjectivity. Any reflection which begins by positing an abstraction as “the Primordial” thereby ensures its own incompleteness, its insufficient radicality. It remains in the dimension of spoken being (i.e., verbal essences), without enquiring into the silent life of speaking (and, in general, expressive) being which underlies the latter.

Levinasian metaphysics articulate a hierarchical structure in which the being of beings is rendered subordinate to an Absolute beyond being, albeit one whose total absence is encountered as a gap within being. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, on the contrary, gives voice to a movement of being articulated in and through beings, below the mythical idealizations articulated in ontologies of both absolute identity and metaphysics of absolute alterity. In the chiasm of sensible and sensing bodies, the “seer” and the “seen” are always already outside of themselves, each finding in the other the fulfillment of its own pointing beyond itself, its own invisible “interiority.” The “narcissism” of perception is not that of a solus ipse before an opaque plenitude, nor an absolute negativity before an absolute alterity, but rather, an indivision prior to identity and difference alike. It is the interweaving of beings in a single fabric wherein alone they become differentiated, a fabric continually woven by (and of) those very processes of co-differentiation:

We understand then why we see the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being which is indeed more than their being-perceived—and why at the same time we are separated from them by all the thickness of the look and of the body; it is that this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.\textsuperscript{1171}

The styles of this primordial “communication” between things and the “animal of perceptions and movement,” whereby each acquires an “interior” in folding itself over the “exterior” of the other, initially become explicit (i.e., express themselves) when two sensible-sensing bodies encounter one another, and begin to make and perceive gestures that terminate in one another’s interiors, in the invisible depth of operative sense. Through speaking and writing – i.e., operative words, the flesh of human thought – the dimensions of being are “brought to appear directly in the infrastructure of vision.”\textsuperscript{1172} Operative ideas (i.e., living concepts) are not “violence” against the silent world of perception, the chiasm wherein unity is separation and separation is unity; they are the speech of the silence, whereas true “conceptual violence” consists in mythical absolutes (absolute identity or absolute difference), thought which forgets itself in striving to forget its own origin, to forget “the uncontested evidence that one must see or feel in some way in order to think, that every thought known to us occurs to a flesh.”\textsuperscript{1173}

I agree with Bernasconi that there is a certain convergence between Levinas’s and Merleau-Ponty’s approaches to the judgment of historical events and cultures, although I differ concerning the explanation for this convergence. Bernasconi interprets Merleau-Ponty’s realization (in AD) – which is a critical revision of his earlier “wait and see attitude” towards Marxism (in \textit{Humanism and Terror}) – that “it is necessary to question a philosophy of history that divorces itself from self-criticism” as a moment when, “[i]mplicitly, Merleau-Ponty

\textsuperscript{1171} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 135/178. \\
\textsuperscript{1172} Ibid., 145/191. \\
\textsuperscript{1173} Ibid.
acknowledges the superiority of a thinking that accuses itself,” where “[s]uch thinking is ethical, in Levinas’s sense.”\textsuperscript{1174} This indicates, to Levinas and Bernasconi, an unthought “ethical source” prior to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, an “access to the unreflected” (i.e., to the absolute alterity of the face of the other, “‘the abstract man in men’”) beyond all possible experience, “from which [Merleau-Ponty’s ethical ‘orientation’] arises, even if Merleau-Ponty is as ignorant of it as so-called wild perception is ignorant of itself.”\textsuperscript{1175}

I would, however, qualify this apparent convergence. Whereas Levinas’s valorization of “a thinking that accuses itself” is founded upon the supposed metaphysical primacy of absolute alterity ("the one-way direction of ethics in favor of the Other"), Merleau-Ponty valorizes a thinking open to self-criticism because it is what a writer “owes to the reader,” as well as the sign that “he has remained himself.”\textsuperscript{1176} In other words, Merleau-Ponty advocates and practices self-critical thinking out of concern for the in-between of socio-cultural becoming, the two-way interrogation of oneself through others, and of others through oneself, which propels the living history of operative truth. Merleau-Ponty’s orientation toward self-criticism is indeed ethical, but it does not require a pure experience of absolute alterity for its ground; it arises, rather, through his hyper-dialectical account of the becoming of truth as movement of \textit{Stiftung}, which is to say, through his articulation of the flesh of being.

As Mazis puts it in “Facing Levinas,” “Merleau-Ponty would certainly agree with Levinas that the face-to-face encounter comes to its significance as communication within language and that speech that makes distinctively human communication possible,” and it is true that both writers describe “expressive speech” as the “lining” of a body encountered as a “person.”\textsuperscript{1177} But for Merleau-Ponty, “this language” – i.e., speaking speech, which takes up a

\textsuperscript{1174} Bernasconi, “One-Way Traffic,” 79; Merleau-Ponty, \textit{AD}, 228/315-316.
\textsuperscript{1175} Bernasconi, “One-Way Traffic,” 78; Levinas, \textit{Humanism of the Other}, 37.
\textsuperscript{1176} Bernasconi, “One-Way Traffic,” 78; Merleau-Ponty, \textit{AD}, 228/315.
\textsuperscript{1177} Mazis, “Facing Levinas,” 200.
wild sense of the world of perception – “is not from ‘on high’ or a disruption of the world of perception, but rather emerges from within its inexhaustible depths of sense.”  Levinas articulates an ethics neither of pure transcendence, nor of pure immanence, but of “respect” for a singular existent whose irruption within immanence constitutes the latter as such by absolutely transcending it, an ethics of transcendence within immanence, or, as he puts it in Otherwise than Being, of the “other in the same.” An ethics of the flesh is likewise a recognition of transcendence within immanence (i.e., of the ineradicable openness of the sense of a given as such), but it is simultaneously the recognition of immanence in and through transcendence (i.e., of the ineradicable encroachment of beings upon one another by their functioning within and as the fabric of a single world-system). The ontological functioning whereby sense advents is not reserved for an “absolute Other” (and not even for “persons,” since the ontological functioning of sensing beings occurs only as intertwined with the ontological functioning of sensible beings) because the chiasm of transcendence and immanence is flesh. The dimension of vertical being, which precedes “otherness” and “identity,” is the silent articulation of a “polymorphic matrix” through processes of continual integration whereby individuals advent as always already encroaching upon one another; relations of “priority” and “submission,” such as those with which Levinas characterizes the face-to-face encounter, are mythical insofar as they are taken to be primordial.

Levinas and Merleau-Ponty diverge in their accounts of otherness, and thus of responsibility toward others, due to a more fundamental difference of method. Levinas’s phenomenological-hermeneutical method tends to move from regressive to progressive analysis

1178 Ibid.
1179 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 25.
1181 I leave open the question of the degree to which ethical consideration extends to non-human living beings on this model – though it surely does extend beyond the human – as well as the question of whether it extends to non-living beings in some sense.
1182 Merleau-Ponty, VI, 220-221/274.
in a manner akin to Kantian critique. In CPR, for instance, Kant starts from a certain “given” (i.e., mathematical and scientific knowledge, which must be founded on synthetic a priori cognitions, on relations between elements of intuitions according to rules, which cannot themselves be given in, nor derived from, intuitions) and determines, in a “regressive” moment, the necessary transcendental conditions for this given (the categories of the understanding), and then, in a “progressive” moment, uses these conditions to reconstruct the form of givenness in general.\(^{1183}\)

Levinas, similarly, begins from the “given” of the ipseity (self-identity) sought and posited by eidetic philosophies of the “Western tradition” (transcendental phenomenology and ontology), and, in a regressive movement, discovers an “illeity”: a double “detour,” firstly, “at a face” that escapes being, encountered in a simultaneously infinite and unthinkable experience; and secondly, in a “detour from this detour in the enigma of a trace,” a trace of the “immemorial” response to this encounter which is Levinasian responsibility, “as though the invisible that bypasses the present left a trace by the very fact of bypassing the present.”\(^{1184}\) Then, in a progressive moment, Levinas reconstructs the original given – the “self” that initially seemed to possess its identity immediately – in its truth, as “a passivity, wholly a supporting” of the other, rather than a pure activity.\(^{1185}\)

Merleau-Ponty, too, employs this reflective method, with its “centripetal” movement of “regressive analysis” and “centrifugal” movement of “progressive synthesis,” but he cautions that such reflection is never pure “discovery,” but equally “creation”: upon discovering the “pre-thetic condition” for a given “truth” in a centripetal movement of living perception, reflection takes that condition up in a centrifugal movement of language and thought, lifting the previously inarticulate sense into a new “order of idealization” wherein reflection thereby establishes itself; it is by attempting to pass this reconstruction off for the original that reflection avoids having to


\(^{1184}\) Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 10-12.

\(^{1185}\) Ibid., 180.
“acknowledge itself to be a retrospective construction.” A “complete” reflection requires a further “hyper-reflective” movement, an inquiry into the “genesis of the existent world and the genesis of the idealization,” since the idealized condition is itself merely the condition of an idealization of the world; authentic reflection therefore requires an “interrogation” of explicit, “crystallized” sense, which seeks to give voice to the silent process of the latter’s genesis (i.e., symbolization), to the advent of wild meaning (i.e., the *chiasm* of sensible and sentient bodies), and to the movement of reflection which takes it up in an idealization (i.e., self-referential symbolization). The interrogative moment of hyper-reflection sets Merleau-Ponty’s method apart from that of a traditional philosophy of reflection, because it is an attempt to articulate the invisible *in and through* the visible: the vertical order of transcendent being *in and through* the immanence of events in the horizontal order of phenomena. The primordial “condition” is thus revealed, not as an intelligible transcendent condition, nor as something “otherwise” than phenomenal being, but as the movement of becoming of which the actual is an effervescent crystallization. Because the movement of *Stiftung* – i.e., the self-structuring vertical, invisible being – is a process of differentiation *through* integration, the notions of “immediate identity” and “immediate difference” are equally abstract, distortions of the life of the flesh.

Mazis concludes that, whereas Levinas offers an “ethics of appeal to a higher authority” which “prohibit[s] the continued alienated manipulation of others as *mere alterities,* as alien objects in a setting of indifference” (an ethics that, in other words, centers around an absolute, and absolutely commanding, prohibition against violence toward “otherness”), Merleau-Ponty’s thought tends toward an ethics of “kinship, [...] more akin to the Buddhist sense of compassion,” an ethics which rules out “radical hate and violence toward others” as a negative corollary to its primary, positive focus on “an activity of community,” which is to say, a joint cultivation of

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1186 Merleau-Ponty, *VI,* 45/69.
1187 Ibid., 46/70, 100/136.
meaning. While I am sympathetic to Mazis’s proposal for a Merleau-Pontian ethics of “compassion,” I worry that, without an account of how this recognition of kinship becomes embodied, it retains a trace of messianism. The ethical comportment which Merleau-Ponty practices in his ethical-political interrogations of events, and at times (e.g., in “A Note on Machiavelli”) explicitly articulates, is an ethics of virtue: the embodiment of an authentic comportment toward the constitutive ambiguity with which the fundamental styles of coexistence and violence crystallize in concrete human (and pre-human) relations, and always at the intersection of morality and politics.

Given that I have drawn on Derrida’s writings in my engagement with Levinas, I must introduce one further line of criticism of Merleau-Ponty, this one from Derrida himself: that the ontology of the flesh, as a "monism," is itself a form of “metaphysical violence.” In On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida charges Merleau-Ponty with “violence” against “alterity,” claiming that, insofar as it upholds a covert “intuitionism,” Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh “runs the risk of reappropriating the alterity of the other more surely, more blindly, or even more violently” than the traditional egological approach of idealism. This “intuitionism” consists in a supposed privileging of touch, in keeping with the idealist “hegemony of eidetics” (the absolute privileging of relations of essential, conceptual necessity, of the logic of parts and wholes, antecedents and consequents) which finds its fulfillment – the fulfillment of its desire for an experience of absolute plenitude, of an immediate coincidence of subject and object, activity and passivity – in “a haptical intuitionism,” a liminal experience wherein vision “becomes contact.” The logic of the flesh would then consist in the alternation between a haptical intuitionism of “immediacy” and an optical intuitionism of “apartness”:

1188 Mazis, “Facing Levinas,” 203-204.
1189 Derrida, On Touching, 191.
1190 Ibid., 121, 123.
It is a formula that I may by all means reverse ad infinitum without harming any formal discursive logic: if I coincide with a noncoincidence, I do not coincide with my own coincidence, and so forth. Coincidence and noncoincidence coincide with each other in not coinciding; coincidence and noncoincidence coincide without coinciding, and so forth.\footnote{Ibid., 198.}

For example, Derrida’s Merleau-Ponty might firstly say: “Insofar as I coincide with the movement of perception, I do not coincide with either perceiver or perceived.” Secondly, he would treat this non-coincidence as a universal form of experience, saying: “I coincide with another person insofar as neither of our self-perceptions coincides with the self perceived.” The first moment asserts the necessary distance between perceiver and perceived as such, identifying the structure of perception with this dynamic spacing, while the second takes up this écart and transforms it into a supposedly immediate unity of myself, qua perceiver, with the others whom I perceive as perceiving, reducing all perceivers to One “transcendental perceiver,” akin to the purely formal “cogito” of Descartes or “transcendental subjectivity” of Kant.

While this carefully staged oscillation between absolute principles (i.e., immediacy and transcendence) is rigorous on the dualistic terms of Derrida’s own thinking, his critique misses its mark, for he ignores Merleau-Ponty’s movement from an eidetic (\textit{PhP}) to an ontological (\textit{VI}) register. As Leonard Lawlor points out in \textit{Thinking Through French Philosophy}, Merleau-Ponty does not employ the notion of “priority” in an eidetic sense: the “order of involvement” between “men” and “the world” is a question, not of causality, but of the vertical order of advent, the depth of operative sense “transversal with respect to the spatial and temporal multiplicity of the actual.”\footnote{Lawlor, \textit{Thinking Through French Philosophy}, 49; Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 85/117.} Recognizing that the simultaneity of actual events with the advent of their sense forecloses the positivist error of viewing sense (i.e., the “inextricable involvement” of all beings with one another) as “only the sum of the partial processes without which it does not exist,” Merleau-Ponty equally cautions against the negativist error of conceiving the \textit{a priori} as pure
Nothingness: “this must not lead us into the inverse error, which would be to treat this order of involvement as a transcendental, intemporal order, as a system of rigid a priori conditions,” because the a priori conditions are themselves instituted, not unconditionally universal.\textsuperscript{1193}

The fundamental insight guiding Derrida’s thinking, and taken up from Husserl, is the absolute inaccessibility (the radical alterity) of “the other” (the alter ego), so that Derrida’s thinking is driven by the same fundamental impulse as Levinas’s: the imperative to protect and safeguard alterity from the threat of appropriation by an identitarian thinking of the “self”; thus, in \textit{Specters of Marx}, Derrida speaks of “[a]n essentially blind submission to [the other’s] secret, to the secret of his origin,” which is a “first obedience to the injunction” delivered by the other, their demand for recognition.\textsuperscript{1194} This theological relation to the “absolute other” is founded upon Husserl’s claim that the alter ego is necessarily appresented, given as the presence of an absence, but never originally present. Derrida describes the presence of the other as non-presence in terms of the “visor effect”: a reference to the ghost of Hamlet’s father concealed within his suit of armor, designating the event of an encounter wherein “we do not see who looks at us.”\textsuperscript{1195}

Merleau-Ponty, too, takes up Husserl’s insight that I cannot live another person’s interior life, that “the other is in his body given originally as absent.”\textsuperscript{1196} And yet, as Lawlor points out, whereas Derrida conceives of the “negativity” of the experience of another person as “contentless form,” and thus as an experience of the impossible, Merleau-Ponty conceives of it as “formless content,” and thus as an experience of the possible.\textsuperscript{1197} The horizon of an encounter with another person is an outline of possibilities for what I could, through them, become, and vice-versa; against these horizons stand out the figures of the selves, the roles, that we actually take up, in and through one another. Thus, I become present to myself only in and through the other’s

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\textsuperscript{1193} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 84-85/117.
\textsuperscript{1194} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 7; Husserl, \textit{Ideas II}, 166-169.
\textsuperscript{1195} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 6.
\textsuperscript{1196} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 180/234.
\textsuperscript{1197} Lawlor, \textit{Thinking Through French Philosophy}, 72; Merleau-Ponty, \textit{VI}, 181/235.
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becoming absent; self-presence advents through the folding of what will become “myself” over the absence of what will become “another person,” so that the absence of another person’s interior life is not absolutely alien to my self-presence, but rather, the very heart of it. If “my self” and “another person” are verbal idealizations instituted upon and within mute perceptual life, then “radical alterity” is as much a myth as “immediate self-identity.”

Speaking of the institution of a feeling of love, for instance, Merleau-Ponty argues that conceiving of this relation in terms of pure positivity or pure negativity yields a static and partial description. From the “positivist” (i.e., objectivistic) direction, it is apparent that “[l]ove is created before anything else by imagining another being” than the beloved, an ideal which “does not exist” because it “is the Other, a generality.”\footnote{1198} However, this “illusion” of an “immediate” relation to the beloved qua “Other,” this fantasy of absolute possession, leads the lover, upon reflection, to doubt her very “capacity to love”: to “doubt about [herself],” since the generality of the imaginary Other can bear no necessary connection to the contingency of the actual beloved.\footnote{1199} Positivism recoils into idealist negativism, so that “[t]he trans-phenomenal reality of love would be, not that of a positive being who is without doubt, but that of a possession or an alienation by the other person: the other person in me, in the form of suffering, of privation—in a way that is ‘unrealizable.’”\footnote{1200} The experience of another person is the experience of an impossible presence, a present absence—a necessary absence which structures one’s very experience of the world:

Certainly, there is no reception of the other person, nor perception, which reaches the other; it would be necessary to be the other. But the relativist argumentation is false because there is another relation with the other person: the other person as occupying the entire horizon of my life and not as a positive being. Love is the same thing as privation or, if you like, non-love.\footnote{1201}

\footnote{1198} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IP}, 33/69. \footnote{1199} Ibid., 33/69. \footnote{1200} Ibid., 34/70. \footnote{1201} Ibid., 34/70.
Thus far Merleau-Ponty remains in Derridean territory, but he goes further, beyond the negativity of love as the impossibility of a final determination of its sense, beyond the undecidability between love and non-love. Speaking of Marcel Proust’s Narrator and Albertine, he says “It is true that they were playing out the separation, and by doing so love was realized only in the separation.”

It is true that the beginning of love is “imaginary” (i.e., the “object” of the initial feeling is a projection of the lover’s own expectations onto her beloved), and that love is “general” (i.e., any given love is a modulation of a general style of feeling instituted in and through previous loves, and directed toward a general style of “the Other”). But the imaginary beginning of love is an Urstiftung which “has not only revealed the love” (as an explicit projection of future expectations, the fantasied possession of an image of the beloved) “but also created it” (as the opening of an indeterminable horizon of possible relations between the lovers): “Even as egocentric as the point of departure of love is, it becomes something other than monologue,” engendering transformations of both lover and beloved, which could not have been expected, and nor, therefore, been intended. The sense of a given love is “realized” only in its becoming-general, as an Endstiftung of the beginning, which reinstitutes and transforms the lovers’ symbolic schemas, so that “love is not an illusion, but negative reality, actual alienation”: “Love entails a beyond oneself, the very beyond of the false desire of possession: we have made the other, we no longer know which one is absent,” and the only “error lies in believing that [love in its negative reality] is only an error.”

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1202 Ibid., 36/72.
1203 Ibid., 35/72
1204 Ibid., 35-36/72.
1205 Ibid., 36-37/72-74.
supposed irreality) of this relation to a beloved who can never be given in the mode of “‘true’ presence,” but only as an “absence” belying all dreams of “possession”:

One loves nothing but the absent. Love is a hollow in us, not the presence of the other. Love is “unrealizable,” “outside of the plane of life.” The remedy is identical to the illness. The presence of the other, which is always the experience her absence undergone or nothing. {…} But this very experience of the other is the product of a certain self-feeling. [He] does not feel loved because he does not believe that he is capable of loving: mirror that results in the fact that we fashion the other according to ourselves and ourselves according to this other who is so constructed. {…} But does not love (love that is not substantial, not immediately verifiable, not absolute since one would not always consent to give one’s life for the beloved) consist precisely in the establishment of the mirror relation? Isn’t love already there exactly when we seek to “verify” it?”

The lover (re)creates herself in response to her creation of the beloved, expressing – through the transition from fantasied possession to eventual loss, which is the “revelation that the essence of someone is non-essence, guilt and innocence, and both at once” – the “mystery” of “how one can be non-self with all of one’s strength”: that she is present to herself only in and through distance, just as her beloved is present to her only “at a distance.”

Precisely because, “[i]n exchange for what we had imagined, life gives us […] something else that was secretly willed, not fortuitous,” love is a dialogue wherein lover and beloved alike discover themselves by creating images of one another, and discover one another by creating images of themselves. Love happens neither in the mode of being-in-itself (as an opaque positivity), nor in the mode of being-for-itself (as an pure intentional act): it “is not created by circumstances, or by decision.” Rather:

[Love] consists in the way questions and answers are linked together—by means of an attraction, something more slips in, we discover not exactly what we were seeking, but something else that is interesting. The initial Sinngebung [is] confirmed, but in a different direction, and yet that is not without a relation with the initial donation of sense. Moreover, all contingency, even what is radically contingent, ends up being willed: evidence of the Thou as naked reality, i.e., as

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1206 Ibid., 37/73-74.
1207 Ibid., 38/74.
1208 Ibid., 38-39/75-76.
1209 Ibid., 39/76.
instituted, irrevocable, regardless of what it does. Jealousy, lies, domination are
transcended in a desire to die, a desire for truth, abnegation.\textsuperscript{1210}

The institution of a feeling of love is the becoming-universal of particularities in and through
their interrelations, the becoming-willed of contingencies which outline the possible
crystallizations (the wild sense) of a feeling. The willing that fulfills this horizon of sense does
not dominate contingencies from a position of absolute transcendence, but transforms them into
its own virtual necessity, and simultaneously preserves its actual contingency as forgotten.

Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of a phenomenon of love provides but one example of the
manner in which sense is instituted through coexistence, although even this is mixed with a sort
of “violence,” because there can be no circumventing – nor, since we are dealing with a
movement of institution, any final surpassing of – the positivistic moment, the illusion of
immediacy, the solipsistic substitution of an imaginary being for the dynamic becoming that the
beloved “is.” For consciousness, there can be no direct approach to the movement of institution,
as a way to live the living structure of the advent of sense. In \textit{IP}, foreshadowing his account of
“perceptual faith” in \textit{VI}, Merleau-Ponty traces the genesis of a sense, taking as his point of
departure its lived “truth” (e.g., a supposedly immediate access to the beloved-in-herself),
proceeding through the negativity of reflection which reveals that illusion as merely relative to
consciousness (e.g., as merely the beloved-for-the-lover), and overcomes this oscillation through
a hyper-reflection which reveals the \textit{real} absence of the ideal as the immanent condition at the
heart of the real (e.g., the real absence of the beloved-in-herself as the core of the lover’s “self”
insofar as it both grounds and limits the projection of the beloved-for-the-lover): proximity to self
as separation from self, identity as a process of becoming.oneself achieved in and through

\textsuperscript{1210} Ibid., 39/76-77.
another’s process of becoming-absent, so that “this alienation and fact are not illusions, they presuppose an absence of myself.”

Derrida’s charge of “metaphysical violence” only strikes home insofar as he drags the ontology of the flesh back into the dichotomies of the “Greek” tradition he claims to be concerned with opening to radical difference. Merleau-Pontian hyper-reflection, on the contrary, does not seek the impossible site of the advent of a radical alterity, but possibilities for mutation within the tradition itself, just as the Merleau-Pontian “self” cannot encounter a “radical Other,” because “selves” advent only in and through others. Where Derrida hopes to welcome the radically other by making explicit the sterility of the Western tradition – within the dichotomy of “the Same” and “radical alterity” there can be only violence to alterity, or muteness – Merleau-Ponty attempts to give voice to the tradition’s past and future horizons in their openness. Rather than the messianism of a mythical, absolute Other who is always “to come,” Merleau-Ponty seeks the possible on the horizon of the actual; in this way he – unlike Sartre and Derrida – remains true to the spirit of Husserl’s “methodological atheism,” opening the possibility for a genuinely secular ethics.

\[\text{References:}\]
3.C. Conclusions

A “serious humanist” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense interrogates given ethical values by attempting to articulate the total system operative beneath the apparent isolation of the “inner self” and the apparent opacity of the “external world” (or, for Levinas, the “absolute Other”) revealed by an incomplete reflection. Levinas is right in what he denies, engaging in an incomplete reflection which reveals the non-originality of “self-identity,” but wrong in then affirming the originality of “radical alterity.” A complete (hyper-)reflection expresses the simultaneity of the advent of identity and difference in the movement of wild perception (which Merleau-Ponty articulates through the concept of *Stiftung*), revealing the mythical character of any given “absolute” as such, including “*the Other*.”

For such a humanist, becoming “responsible” means enacting the general style of virtue outlined by (and as) the structure of the flesh itself: authentically perceiving and responding to the ambiguous sense of efforts and events in the *Welt*. Virtue advents as efforts of hyper-reflection, in which one takes responsibility for one’s explicit values by giving voice to their silent ground: to the perceptions of the possible and the impossible, the intertwinnings of bodies-things-institutions, whose functioning is their operative sense. Virtue means responding to the question posed by a situation, not just by taking it up in an effort, but also by lending it one’s voice, striving to embody, both in deeds and in words, an “evolution which […] beneath the permanence of forms or words gradually changes [a] system’s meaning, happen[ing] little by little without deliberate intention, from crisis to crisis and expedient to expedient,” so that “its social significance escapes its own creators” insofar as they fail to interrogate their own “truth” concerning its genesis.1213 Truth remains forever open, so that we cannot determine the meaning of efforts and events once and for all, and this is why responsibility advents as hyper-reflection, as (in a term Merleau-Ponty

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takes up from Georg Lukács) an authentic “autocriticism” which functions as the concrete affirmation that it is precisely by “being always exposed to error” that thought is “always open to truth.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{AD}, 69/98.}
3. Conclusions

In the preceding chapter, I argued that Merleau-Ponty both performs, and at times explicitly articulates, an ethical style of comportment in harmony with, and founded upon, his thinking of being as the dynamic system of the flesh. This ethical comportment is an exercise of perceptual-behavioral “virtue” which situates a person in an authentic relation to the ambiguity of the sense of beings – to the dynamic intertwining of the styles of coexistence and violence, and the dimensions of morality and politics – and which advents as openness to the demands of situations for a hyper-reflection upon one’s position and values. At the “human” level of interpersonal relations, virtuous behavior takes up (preserving qua virtuality, and forgetting qua actuality) the movement of simultaneous intertwining and divergence – of chiasm and écart – which sketches out possibilities for the co-individuation of expressive bodies in the silent world of perception.

The site of a “true morality” is this hinge between the styles coexistence and violence – between authentic freedom and the psychosis of abstract “domination,” institution and the death of meaning through the foreclosure of exchange with others – and between the fields of moral and political sense, each of which becomes abstract in isolation, since “pure politics” means the absolute subordination of meaning to power, and “pure morality” means the absolute subordination of power to meaning. Authentic freedom is not the possession or characteristic of a “subject,” but the freedom of meaning itself—or, to say the same thing, the sense of the present in its openness to the past and future, with its horizon structure, is the freedom of the present. Enacting “virtue” does not entail “coinciding” with the meaning the present, but embodying and rendering it available to others, functioning as a hinge in the actualization of the possible, and lending one’s voice to the process of the becoming of truth. An ethical comportment consists
firstly in living ambiguity by becoming the vehicle of an “ontological function,” and, secondly, in rendering that function explicit as a generalized sense, available to others.

To authentically live ambiguity does not, however, consist in giving oneself over to the world of silence—a sort of unconsciousness, effort without thought. Rather, it consists in simultaneously participating in the advent of sense while attempting to articulate the silent process of advent itself, which means avoiding “equivocation”: giving voice to the implicit openness of the past as well as its explicit closure, to the implicit contingency of the present as well as its explicit necessitation by the past, to the implicit limitation as well as the explicit openness of futural horizons, and to the processes of mutation-integration binding these together. Authentic human freedom advents as embodying (at the esthesiological level) and giving voice to (at the symbolic level) the becoming of truth (i.e., the functioning of styles whereby they sketch horizons of the possible). I have outlined an ethics which conceives of “responsibility” neither in terms of pure autonomy (e.g., Kant and Sartre) nor in terms of pure heteronomy (e.g., Levinas), but in terms of openness; one becomes responsible insofar as one makes explicit, with others, the movement of institution operative in and through the present, rather than attempting to close the horizon of the possible with a language of mythical abstractions.
Conclusions

I began my present interrogation of the ambivalent tension between concepts of “freedom” and “necessity” in contemporary discourse concerning ethics and the sciences, in 1.A, by explicating the genesis of this ambivalence in Descartes’s work. He takes as his starting point an act of self-reflection, which explicitly establishes the mind-body antinomy, and implicitly, the self-others antinomy. The metaphysical rupture between active intellect and passive spatiotemporal beings retroactively grounds the certainty of the reflective act’s results in the self-identity of the intellectual cogito. As pure self-activity, the cogito would have the right to adopt a position of absolute survey toward merely passive beings; relating to things as an absolute externality, the cogito could attain perfect knowledge of the purely external relations between those things. Thus, Descartes seizes the right to speak in the name of this mythical, unconditioned spectator via the establishment of the freedom-necessity antinomy in its initial Modern form: an opposition between the pure cogito’s absolute power of free choice, and the absolute causal determinism governing the “mechanism” of the body. He thereby inaugurates the metaphysical rupture between “subjective” and “objective” being—in the epistemological register, “lived meaning” and “universal truth.”

In 1.B, I turned to Merleau-Ponty’s initial articulation of the ambivalent oscillation simultaneously animating, and limiting, Cartesian thought. His analyses of behavior in SB, and of perception in PhP, make clear that the dichotomy of freedom and necessity cannot be overcome “directly”—through some “reconciliation” of the concepts as they have traditionally been articulated, whether this takes the form of a compatibilism or a reductionism. The “problem” of the relationship between freedom and necessity is founded upon the “problems” of the relationships between mind and body, and self and others, so that overcoming these antinomies requires reconceiving of each one’s terms, in and through a new articulation of “being” which
escapes the alternative between the “subjective” and the “objective.” Merleau-Ponty discovers his initial formulation of this account of being through creative deployments of the figure-ground structure of Gestalt psychology, and the Husserlian concept of Fundierung, whereby he articulates the founding of the explicit, “spoken cogito” upon what he then calls the “tacit cogito”—i.e., the symbolic schema and corporeal schema continually outlined in the body’s “commerce with the world.”

But, as I argue in 2.A, analyses of phenomena in terms of relations of Fundierung alone (i.e., descriptions of the co-implications of fields and horizons in given behaviors and experiences) prove explanatorily insufficient once Merleau-Ponty begins to investigate the “expressive” character of phenomena, where the given seems to point beyond itself in a manner more primordial than the “retention” and “protention” of “intentional consciousness.” With expression, it is a question of explaining, not conscious experience, but the manner in which sensible beings themselves, in and through their advent as such, point beyond the actual to articulate the possible: the “silent symbolism” of wild perception. This sets him definitively on the path to an ontologization of phenomenology, a definitive movement beyond the sphere of lived experience, which is necessary to explain the genesis of sense. This ontologization is accomplished in and through his development of the concept of Stiftung as an articulation of the meaning of being, the dialectical structure or movement of the sedimentation and reactivation of possibilities which characterizes life as such, and particularly life accomplished as symbolic behavior. To illustrate the pivotal status of Stiftung within Merleau-Ponty’s final ontology, I return, in 2.B, to the three fundamental antinomies of the Cartesian tradition—mind-body, self-others, and freedom-necessity—and explain Merleau-Ponty’s dissolution of each opposition in his ontology of the flesh: his reconceptualization of “selves,” “others,” and “things” as processes of Stiftung mutualistically articulating the total system of the “world.”

1215 Merleau-Ponty, PhP, 465.
Merleau-Ponty overcomes these antinomies by rearticulating the terms of each seemingly opposed power as dimensions of a single, dynamic structure of intertwining-divergence: *Stiftung*, the hyper-dialectical movement of *chiasm* and *écart*. A frontal approach to, in the first place, the “mind-body problem,” takes some form of this dichotomy compatible with the primacy of a measurable “objective world” as given, and then attempts to either establish causal relations between mental and physical “things,” or reduce one class of “things” to the other. By, instead, returning to the perceptual life underlying all such abstract idealizations, Merleau-Ponty shows that the visible body is neither a passive mechanism, nor a manifold of appearances awaiting intellectual synthesis, but a node in the flesh of visible being. The invisible ideality (i.e., “interior” or “mind”) of a body diverges from its visible existence in and through visible relations with other bodies, each of them an expressive realization of an always in process, always total network of relations. The “interiority” of the body is the schema of its possible relations to other bodies, and thereby, simultaneously, the schema of other bodies’ possible relations to it, so that a “mind” is the unique manner in which a certain living body expresses all others, each of them a dimension of one sole “Being as *dimensionality*.”

Bodies, qua flesh, are thus “monads,” in the sense that they are “in a relation of expression between themselves and with the world, [and] they differ from another and from it as perspectives,” although this expression of the totality in each individual “is certainly not the harmony between our monad and the others, […] but it is what we see in perception.”

The mind of the body is an expression of its own possibilities *in response* to the perception of other bodies’ possibilities.

Merleau-Ponty’s reconceptualization of the mind as the schema expressed by the body in its interrogations of, and responses to, other bodies, which are likewise interrogative and responsive flesh, leads him to take a similarly oblique approach to the “problem of other minds.”


\[1217\] Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, 223/276.
A frontal approach to this “problem” presupposes an initial situation wherein active interiorities must communicate across the passive exteriority of an objective world, and then attempts to construct some metaphysical or epistemological “bridge” between these interiorities. Merleau-Ponty, instead, articulates, “beneath the order of the thought,” a primordial “perception” of the other’s “body”: not in the abstract sense of a pure exteriority, but rather, as an expression of “a comportment […] in this world which already goes beyond me,” the silent articulation of a style which “is only one more dimension in primordial being, which comprises them all.” ¹²¹⁸ My “self,” qua human, advents as the symbolic articulation of a corporeal schema, which is the invisible ideality of “my” body qua visible flesh. The divergence between invisible ideality and visible flesh happens in and through a “co-perception,” since the “interior” of each body is its schema of possible relations to all others, a singular modulation of one and the same world of perception. ¹²¹⁹ Thus, “my” interiority, the corporeal schema continually operative in and through the symbolic matrix of my human “person,” is always already a fabric woven, not just of “my own” possibilities for interrogating and responding to things and others, but also of things’ and others’ styles of interrogating and responding to me. Before it is possible to “posit” an “I” and an “other,” before all “introjection” and “projection” of “interiors” and “exteriors,” we must already be one flesh.

Frontal approaches to the antinomy of freedom and necessity, finally, presuppose the metaphysical primacy of an “objective world” of observable events which can be sufficiently explained in terms of universal laws, and then try to find a way of fitting a class of inexplicable events (i.e., “free choices”) or a second (“rational”) type of causality into this picture, or to explain away the “seemingly” inexplicable character of “choices” as an illusion or confusion of concepts. Merleau-Ponty, however, rejects the “positivistic” assumption that there is a “timeless

¹²¹⁹ Ibid., 170/277-278.
truth” of any or of all events, because “the perceived happening can never be reabsorbed in the complex of transparent relations which the intellect constructs because of the happening.” This is not to say that there is no truth to the causal explanations constructed in the natural sciences. All spoken and written truths retain an “umbilical bond” to a primordial “truth” which they can never exhaust, never render transparent to the symbolism of the “intellect”: the “perceptual faith,” i.e., the expression of the total system of the world in and through each and every “perceptual given,” so that I “feel,” before all “knowing” and “certainty” and “doubt,” that each perception is embedded within a total system of possible perceptions.

For example, when I perceive the tree outside my window, there is a felt “necessity,” prior to any possibility of “thought” in the sense of “inference,” that this apparition expresses a horizon of other possible perspectives I could have upon the same tree. These felt possibilities come neither “from me,” nor “from the tree,” but rather, they express a connective tissue (“flesh”) binding us together, and thereby individuating us as distinct “beings” through the intertwining of our fields of possibilities. And even if I walk outside and discover that I was mistaken – that I was actually seeing a reflection of my poster of a tree upon the glass, rather than seeing a tree through the glass – this will not annihilate the “truth” of my original perception, but merely transform its sense by taking it up, as cancelled, in a new truth. This continual process of the becoming of truth is the movement of Stiftung: my initial perception institutes a certain field of virtual possibilities, a sense, within the horizon of which are included possibilities for the transformation of this sense in and through the advent of a new one; my subsequent perception realizes one of the possibilities outlined by the first and, simultaneously, retroactively transforms the sense of the first.

The perceptual faith is not a system of “objective necessities,” but the dynamic expression of a system of possible relations between all sensible and sentient bodies; it is a felt

120 Merleau-Ponty, “The Primacy of Perception,” in *PP*, 20/47.
expression of the *chiasm* of visible flesh. The fecundity of this living “system” of relations renders formalized articulations of “truth” and “necessity” possible, and, for the same reason, in principle eludes (exhaustive) “explanation.” Thus, the perceptual ground of abstract articulations of “causal necessity” is, simultaneously, expressive of the creative freedom of bodies qua flesh. Primordial “freedom” is not a power of “unconditioned choice,” but the body’s power of taking up and modulating styles of existence to interrogate, and respond to, other beings—a power that is not “its own,” but is just as much *given* to it by the beings it interrogates, and to which it responds. If we wish to call the perceptual faith a sort of proto-necessity, then it is the inevitable openness of a lived sense (whether or not it is taken up in a symbolic articulation) to transformation, the inescapable interweaving of all sensible beings—which is also, simultaneously, the “freedom” of the sensible-sentient body to take up a given situation. “Necessity” in this primordial sense evokes the *centripetal* movement whereby the styles of other beings bring to articulation the corporeal schema of my body, while “freedom” evokes the *centrifugal* movement whereby my body realizes its possibilities for functioning in response, but these movements are only abstractly separated dimensions of a single “respiration,” a single “inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.”

Again, this ontology of “freedom” (openness to divergence) and “necessity” (the continual co-integration of beings into a total system) does not entail a rejection of the truth of scientific descriptions. What I, following Merleau-Ponty, reject is the more or less covert metaphysics of “scientism,” which assumes that all relations can either be reduced to mechanical causality, or determined as illusions. Scientism (which Merleau-Ponty calls “physicism,” an “ontology of pure things” that only acknowledges the existence of wholly passive objects in

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relations of causal necessity) misses the fundamental and originary meaningfulness of the world of perception, the reflexivity of sensible beings which a living body folds itself over to actualize its own reflexivity. Behaviors of living beings are not merely mechanical – and, in particular, not oriented in a purely utilitarian manner toward the telos of self- or species-preservation, as “Darwinism” (though perhaps not the actual thought of Darwin) would have it – but always already expressive or proto-expressive insofar as styles of behavior are oriented toward virtual (rather than actually sensible) objects, toward styles of objects, so that “life” is not the conatus of a physical system to preserve its existence as such, but rather, “a power to invent the visible” which is the very movement of the invisible: Stiftung. As Toadvine puts it, for Merleau-Ponty, as early as SB, “life remains irreducible to its physical conditions” on account of the “orientation by self-determined norms” which “accords the living thing an individuality and freedom not present in physical structures.” While Merleau-Ponty at times oscillates between conceiving of consciousness either as immanent to the perceived world, which is its inescapable ground, or as teleologically oriented “toward rationality and objectivity,” Toadvine argues that he ultimately tends in the former direction, thereby calling for the “radical rethinking of the grounds of subjectivity as an effect of a deeper auto-affective or self-expressive relation within being as such” undertaken in the ontology of the flesh.

In Chapter 3, lastly, I sought to articulate an ethics of flesh by interrogating points of intersection between Merleau-Ponty’s explicit political thought and the more or less implicit ethical dimension of his writings. I firstly, in 3.A, explicated his conception of “authenticity”: an operative attitude of recognition concerning the ambiguity of sense. All expressive behavior, and thus all human meaning, is the articulation of a possibility outlined in the intertwining of flesh.

1224 Ibid., 188-190/246-248.
1225 Toadvine, Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature, 83-84.
1226 Ibid., 83-84, 86.
But, because the supplementary “organs” of spoken and written signs enable human bodies to extract and generalize styles from the world of perception into “idealities,” human beings live in a perceptual world always already taken up in symbolism. The relative freedom of idealizations – i.e., their greater generality, as opposed to styles of visible existence – enhances the expressive power of the human body, but it also opens possibilities for inauthenticity: treating signs as if they possessed fixed and univocal meanings, as if they provided us access to an order of “eternal truths,” as opposed to the truths-in-process of the world of perception, which would then be reduced to the status of “semblances” or “distortions.” To live in a mythical world of reified verbal essences is akin to sleepwalking. To live “authentically” requires a hyper-reflective attitude toward truths and values: an awareness that the true sense – i.e., the function – of a given style of behavior or a verbalized principle varies with the situation, as well as efforts to perceive and respond to such transformations of the functions of available styles of comportment. For example, the meaning of “providing honest criticism” can diverge, depending upon whether I am speaking, e.g., a writing workshop, in a conversation among friends, or from a position of authority in an organizational hierarchy. If I, in the latter situation, ignore the divergence of my behavior’s meaning relative to the first or second, then I may exercise coercive power under the guise (which might later take on the sense of having been a self-delusion) of “collegial frankness.”

Given the simultaneously “theoretical” and “practical” functions of hyper-reflection in, respectively, Merleau-Ponty’s ontological thought, and his account of “authentic choice,” I argue, in 3.B, that the ontology of the flesh simultaneously outlines a meta-ethics of the flesh: negatively, a rejection of unconditional moral principles or values, and, positively, the articulation of a general style of “virtue” most explicit in Merleau-Ponty’s writings on politics and literature. All meaning advents as a divergence from the primordial chiasm of flesh, so that “coexistence” is the style of the advent of meaning, and thus the style of the “success” of human endeavors—
whereas “violence” is the failure of meaning in efforts to sever relations, diminishing or destroying a being’s expressivity. And yet, coexistence is neither the “universal form” of goodness, nor necessarily good in each of its particular modulations, and violence is neither the “universal form” of evil, nor necessarily evil in each of its modulations, because styles of existence have no meaning – which is to say, no being – apart from their operative modulations in particular situations. Sometimes a form of coexistence, a certain field of possibilities, is maintained through – and thereby functions to conceal – background processes of violence; this is the sort of Gestalt generally operative when, for instance, political policies are justified in the name of protecting the “traditional family,” rendering implicit their function of repressing whatever styles of relationship are thereby treated as “threats.” And conversely, violence which brings to an end a certain form of coexistence – e.g., revolutionary action against a repressive organization – may come to be seen as having been necessary for the institution of a more profound communal life—or it may come to be seen as having been the catalyst for a new and more repressive regime of domination.

Coexistence is the ontological style operant in the advent of meaning: “a meaning […] is neither a thing nor an idea, […] but rather a modulation of our coexistence,” a relation between persons whereby they come to co-individuation, articulate their divergent fields of possibilities in and through their integration into the fabric of a common world.1227 While coexistence, and the truth-in-process in and through which it comes to expression, cannot be said to be the “goal” of life, this is because it is life, insofar as one is not living like a person already dead (i.e., in abstractions substituted for reality, a world of absolutes).1228 Human life is, in other words, a “will to speak and to be understood,” because “as participants in a system of symbols, we exist in the

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1227 Merleau-Ponty, IPP, 56/57.
1228 Ibid., 56/57.
eyes of one another, with one another.” Thus, “success” is the same as fecundity: the manner in which an endeavor opens new fields of sense, or reopens prior fields. But there are situations in which “equilibrium is destroyed” and a reintegration of the world of is needed, and in such times a true morality and a true politics are necessary—whereas, in more stable times, “each institution is a symbolic system that the subject takes over and incorporates as a style of functioning, […] without having any need to conceive it at all,” without the need for a hyper-reflective ethics, because then “to speak of action with depth and rigor is to say that one does not desire to act.”

The questions posed by crisis situations – when certain relationships of coexistence become impossible – are of a hyper-reflective order. The continual possibility of crises of meaning – situations which render available styles of co-integration ineffective or even destructive, transforming them into necessities of violence insofar as we maintain them in existence – demands, and bestows the value of “virtue” upon, a hyper-reflective attitude toward present truths. Whatever moral codes or systems I might employ, none of them can obviate my responsibility to give voice to the history of the truths I live: to continually interrogate the true sense of my behavior and the situated functions of my spoken values, never assuming that their meaning is sufficiently captured, once and for all, in any given verbal formulation. To embody virtue is to interrogate one’s own and others’ truths, as when Cornelius Tacitus wrote, of the Roman rule of Britain under Julius Agricola: “To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace.”

“True morality” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense – i.e., a comportment which keeps even the most idealized senses open to the possibility of living contact with others and the world, foregoing any absolutization of abstractions – consists in adopting an attitude toward the “morality” of human deeds beyond the traditional dichotomy between “objectivist” and

1229 Ibid.
1230 Ibid., 55-56/56-57, 59/60.
1231 Tacitus, Agricola, 221.
“relativist” conceptions of value. Thus, in 3.C I argue that hyper-reflective virtue is not merely a method of meta-ethical evaluation, but already the outline of a “normative ethics,” too: “the man [who acts] and the philosopher […] think the truth in the event,” and, as such, “are both opposed to the important one who thinks by principles, and against the roué who lives without truth.”\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, \textit{IPP}, 63/63.} It the responsibility of “the philosopher” to take the side which, \textit{in a given situation}, “carrie[s] the interests of truth”—indeed, it is the responsibility of all persons who take part in the continual becoming of “humanity,” since philosophical writings are but one human style of expressive behavior:\footnote{Ibid., 62/62.}

\[\text{The philosopher’s}’] dialectic, or his ambiguity, is only a way of putting into words what every man knows well—the value of those moments when life renews itself and continues on, when he gets hold of himself again, and understands himself by passing beyond, when his private world becomes the common world.\footnote{Ibid., 63/63.}

Siding with truth means lending one’s voice to the silent history of its becoming: taking up “the tacit symbolism of life” and “substitut[ing]” for it “a conscious symbolism” – substituting, “for a latent meaning, one that is manifest” – so that one “changes the situation by revealing it to itself and, therefore, by giving it the opportunity of entering into conversation with other times and other places where its truth appears.”\footnote{Ibid., 57/58.}

The next step in carrying this inquiry forward will consist in a genealogy of the notion of “virtue,” proceeding from Aristotle, through Machiavelli, to Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, with an explicit thematization of the intertwining of the ethical and the political. Contemporary political rhetoric seems to oscillate between “realist” appeals to “economic necessity,” and “idealist” appeals to some (more or less explicitly religious) “apolitical morality,” while contemporary ethical thinking continues to oscillate between relativism and objectivism—between,
respectively, positivism regarding the empirical, coupled with negativism regarding the ideal, on the one hand, and negativism regarding the empirical, coupled with positivism regarding the ideal, on the other. I contend that, in order to overcome these false dilemmas, it is necessary to reunite the ethical and the political through a hyper-reflective interrogation of phenomena of “virtue.”

While I have sought to articulate the ethics of flesh as one of virtue, rather than absolute principles, I would not characterize it as a direct taking up of Aristotle’s account of “virtue,” nor classify it alongside the various contemporary formulations of Aristotelian “virtue ethics,” because Aristotelian deliberation is no more exempt from the requirement for hyper-reflection upon its genesis than, e.g., Kantian deontology. Merleau-Ponty himself does not substantively engage with Aristotle’s work, tending to begin his genealogies of concepts in the early Modern period. He does, however, open the Nature lectures with a statement of his intention to “reintroduce” the Stoic “idea of a sympathy, of an action at a distance between the parts of the world, the idea of Destiny, of a liaison,” and acknowledges that this Stoic idea of a dynamic “nature” is “close” to Aristotle’s conception of “nature” as “the more or less successful realization of [the] qualitative destining of bodies” which arises as a relation of “kinship” between, on the one hand, “a type, an order, a destination” (a “formal” and a “final cause”) toward which a phenomenon is oriented and, on the other, a “region” of nature suited to the realization of this type.1236 But he goes on to say that “this course is not a study of these elements” – of a “sympathy,” a “destiny,” and a “kinship” of visible being – “because in order to reintroduce them, it is necessary to transform them,” so that “[t]he return to dynamism cannot be a return to Stoicism,” much less a return to Aristotelianism.1237 Merleau-Ponty does not, like Heidegger, seek to rediscover those “elements” of being which were forgotten in naïve

1237 Ibid.
objectivism by reviving some earlier epoch’s awareness of them. Instead, he attempts a “return” in the sense of giving voice to “a total history, a single tissue tying together all the enterprises of simultaneous and successive civilizations”: to the flesh of visible being as the “connection of meaning between each aspect of a culture and all the rest.” Thus, a comparison of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of moral virtue with the account in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* (for Aristotle, like Merleau-Ponty, conceives of ethics and politics as inseparably intertwined dimensions of human existence) offers a horizontal possibility for deepening and extending the sense of this investigation. Such a study will need to approach in depth, first, the relation between Machiavelli and Aristotle, as well as between Merleau-Ponty and Machiavelli, and only then attempt an articulation of the relation between Merleau-Ponty and Aristotle, between whom Machiavelli functions as a hinge.

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Bibliography


VITA
Sam Gault

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Ph.D. in Philosophy 2018
  Dissertation: “Dialectic of Institution: Merleau-Ponty’s Overcoming of the Antinomy of Freedom and Necessity”

Miami University, Oxford, OH
M.A. in Philosophy 2013
  Thesis: “Figurative Synthesis and Teleological Judgment In Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of the Categories”

Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA
B.A. in Philosophy 2009

PUBLICATIONS

JOURNAL ARTICLES


TRANSLATIONS


TEACHING EXPERIENCE (only full responsibility courses listed)

2018. Ethical Leadership (100-level)
2017. Intro to Social & Political Philosophy (Writing Intensive, 100-level)
2016. Intro to Ethics (Writing Intensive, 100-level)
2016. Philosophy of Love & Sex (Online, 00-level)
2016. Basic Problems of Philosophy (00-level)
2015. Existentialism & European Philosophy (100-level)
2015. Critical Thinking (Online, 00-level)
2015. Persons, Moral Values, & the Good Life (00-level)

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE (selected)

2018-2019. Editorial Assistant, Environmental Philosophy, Penn State
2017-2018. Editorial Assistant, Chiasmi International, Penn State
2012-2013. Editorial Assistant, philoSOPHIA, Miami University