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FEMINIST REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE/CULTURE DISTINCTION IN

MERLEAU-PONTYAN PHILOSOPHY

A Dissertation in

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by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is twofold: first, I trace the concepts of “nature” and “culture” throughout Merleau-Ponty’s corpus, drawing from select texts that highlight significant moments in the development of his thought. I show how nature and culture function as a problematic dualism that Merleau-Ponty is unable to collapse until his third course on Nature given at the Collège de France. I demonstrate that throughout Merleau-Ponty’s works, the human-animal relation serves to both trouble, yet reiterate this distinction. It is only when Merleau-Ponty begins to understand culture as institution, and to theorize the expressivity inherent in nature via institution, that he finds the means of positing the animal and the human, and later, the natural and the cultural, within a new model of difference that does not suggest an ontological divide between them. This model is what Merleau-Ponty calls the “flesh.” Second, I show how understanding the evolution of these concepts provides us with new ways to use Merleau-Ponty to theorize sexual difference and a multiplicity of gendered identities. I argue that situating nature and culture in the flesh allows us to advance beyond Luce Irigaray’s critique that the flesh does not provide for genuine difference. Following the model of the human-animal Ineinander, I offer a new reading of the flesh as an origin that resists any one gendered signification. Understanding the concept of the flesh in its historical place and the significance of the nature/culture divide in its development within Merleau-Ponty’s corpus opens up new possibilities for feminist appropriations of this ontology. This project thus serves to contribute another dimension to the small, but growing literature that seeks to employ Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in order to account for sexual difference beyond the binary.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................vi

Chapter 1 Introduction ..................................................................................................1

  Project Outline ...........................................................................................................2
  Significance of Project for Feminist Philosophy .......................................................7
  “New” Feminisms: From Nature to Culture and Back Again .....................................7
  Feminist Engagements with Merleau-Ponty ...............................................................15
    Feminist Phenomenology ..........................................................................................16
  Critical Responses .......................................................................................................25
  New Appropriations of Merleau-Ponty in Feminist Philosophy .................................28
  Other Recent Scholarship ..........................................................................................33

Chapter 2 Radical Reflection and Merleau-Pontyan Phenomenology ........................38

  Reduction ...................................................................................................................40
  Essences .....................................................................................................................46
  Intentionality ..............................................................................................................49
  Rationality ..................................................................................................................53
  “A Violent Act”: Radical Reflection .........................................................................56

Chapter 3 Bodily Transcendence and the “Cultural World” in Phenomenology of
  Perception ..................................................................................................................62

  From Scientific Objectivism to “the Phenomenon of the Phenomenon” ...................65
  Theorizing Embodiment .............................................................................................77
  The Spatiality, Motricity, and Unity of the Body .......................................................81
  The Body in Its Sexual Being ......................................................................................97
  Expression and Speech ..............................................................................................105
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................123

Chapter 4 Nature, Culture, and Expression ................................................................131

  Two Worlds, Revisited .............................................................................................142
  “Cézanne’s Doubt”: A Phenomenology of Painting ..................................................153
  From Perception to Ontological Interrogation: “Indirect Language and the Voices of
    Silence” ....................................................................................................................160
  Toward an Institutional Model of Expression ...........................................................168
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................187

Chapter 5 Beyond Nature and Culture: Flesh and the Human-Animal Ineinander ......192

  Institution ..................................................................................................................195
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Overview</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution and Life</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Nature</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Substance: Cartesian Origins</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Return to Animality</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight Sketches of Nature</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6 Conclusion</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Findings</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flesh and the Impasses of Feminist Theory</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Chapter 1 Introduction

The purpose of this project is twofold: first, I trace the concepts of “nature” and “culture” throughout Merleau-Ponty’s corpus, drawing from select texts that highlight significant moments in the development of his thought. I show how nature and culture function as a problematic dualism that Merleau-Ponty is unable to collapse until his third course on Nature given at the Collège de France. I demonstrate that throughout Merleau-Ponty’s works, the human-animal relation serves to both trouble, yet reiterate this distinction. It is only when Merleau-Ponty begins to understand culture as institution, and to theorize the expressivity inherent in nature via institution, that he finds the means of positing the animal and the human, and later, the natural and the cultural, within a new model of difference that does not suggest an ontological divide between them. This model is what Merleau-Ponty calls the “flesh.” Second, I show how understanding the evolution of these concepts provides us with new ways to use Merleau-Ponty to theorize sexual difference and a multiplicity of gendered identities. I argue that situating nature and culture in the flesh allows us to advance beyond Luce Irigaray’s critique that the flesh does not provide for genuine difference. Following the model of the human-animal Ineinander, I offer a new reading of the flesh as an origin that resists any one gendered signification. Understanding the concept of the flesh in its historical place and the significance of the nature/culture divide in its development within Merleau-Ponty’s corpus opens up new possibilities for feminist appropriations of this ontology. This project thus serves to contribute another dimension to the small, but growing literature that seeks to employ Merleau-Pontyan philosophy in order to account for sexual difference beyond the binary.
Project Outline

In the following section of this introduction, I situate this project within recent feminist philosophy to demonstrate how the nature/culture distinction is problematic insofar as it has led to theoretical impasses as regards our understanding of sexual difference. I highlight three contemporary areas of feminist thought in which this is especially significant: first, as exemplified in the movement known as “material feminism,” second, in the debates surrounding American “third-wave” feminism, and finally, in the conflicting accounts of transgender and other non-normative gender identity that permeate both American cultural understandings of these phenomena, and the beginnings of transgender studies as an academic discipline. I argue that what is needed to overcome these impasses is a new metaphysical approach which does not posit either nature or culture as ontologically primary in the determination of sexual difference.

I then turn to feminist engagements with Merleau-Ponty in order to show how his work has been taken up in feminist phenomenology, as well as some prominent feminist critiques of his work. I show that, by and large, feminist philosophy has either focused on the positive contributions to understanding sexual difference as an embodied phenomenon, as per Phenomenology of Perception, or on the possible neutralization of sexual difference, following Luce Irigaray’s critique of The Visible and the Invisible. This section is not meant to give an exhaustive account of the works available, but rather, to show the general tendencies reflected in the English-speaking world of feminist academic engagements with Merleau-Ponty’s thought. With very little exception, feminist projects do not take up the work which intervenes between these two poles of Merleau-Pontyan philosophy, and therefore miss the crucial development of the concepts of nature and culture in his thought, which I track in the remainder of this dissertation. As I will show in Chapter Five, the concept of the flesh is modeled after the collapse of the nature/culture distinction, as exemplified in the animal-human Ineinander of the courses
given at the *Collège de France* under the title “The Concept of Nature.” Thus, I hope to show in this project that not only does investigating the nature/culture distinction within Merleau-Ponty’s corpus help us understand the development of his thought, but it also provides us with a new metaphysics, one which avoids the impasses brought on by the nature/culture divide in thinking sexual difference.

The vast majority of this dissertation is oriented towards the exegetical work necessary to track the concepts of nature and culture in major turning points in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. I have therefore limited myself to texts that are representative of those points: his early *Phenomenology of Perception*, several middle-period articles on aesthetics (“Cézanne’s Doubt” and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”), and the courses at the *Collège de France* dedicated to nature and culture (or, in Merleau-Ponty’s later usage, “institution”). Though I outline the primary findings of *The Visible and the Invisible*, I choose not to give a full reading of the text, as it dedicates little space to nature and culture – which, following Merleau-Ponty’s own working notes for that text, speaks not to their insignificance but rather the unfortunate fact of its being an incomplete manuscript.¹

Each chapter is dedicated to the analysis of nature and culture as they are found in these major turning points of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, with an extended treatment given to the problematics that emerge in *Phenomenology of Perception*, spanning from Chapter Two through the early sections of Chapter Four. I dedicate Chapter Two to describing the specifics of Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology, differentiating it from the Husserlian and Heideggerian traditions, and setting the stage for the conceptual revolution in which Merleau-Ponty redefines subjectivity as necessarily embodied. Beginning in Chapter Three, and correlatively, the beginning of Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of the body-subject in *Phenomenology*, I argue that nature and culture

¹ In the opening pages to Chapter Five, I examine some of Merleau-Ponty’s outlines for *The Visible and the Invisible* in order to show the centrality of the concepts of nature and institution in what would have been the complete manuscript.
function as an un-thematized dualism, lingering in the background of the phenomenological project until finally given their own place by virtue of the courses at the Collège de France. An ongoing theme in Merleau-Ponty’s writings leading to those courses is an almost tangible struggle to situate nature and culture with respect to human subjectivity. Thus, in Phenomenology of Perception, I focus especially on the distinction between the “natural self” and the “personal self,” showing how the personal self comes to be associated with the kinds of expressive acts that participate in and create culture. In Chapter Four, I discuss how these two “selves” are also mapped onto two “worlds” (the “natural world” and the “cultural world”), implying a possible ontological divide between the being that is être-au-monde naturelle or culturelle. But, as continues to be the case until the very end of the final course on Nature, Merleau-Ponty is also quick to challenge what might be rendered a metaphysical distinction. As early as Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty finds that animality disrupts the boundaries of nature and culture. For example, at the same time that linguistic expression is explicitly and only granted to humans as “the excess of our being over nature,” Merleau-Ponty grants that animals have intentional relationships to their surroundings such that their behavior can be understood as an expression and thus a projection of significative relations: the plants nearby come to have the meaning “food,” the cave means “shelter,” and so forth. There is thus a sense in which animals “transcend nature,” blurring the line between nature and culture, and man and animal, at the same time that this line is being drawn and reinforced.

The remainder of Chapter Four follows this nuanced problematic as it plays out in Merleau-Ponty’s “Cézanne’s Doubt” and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence.” I show that as Merleau-Ponty clarifies the role and power of expression, he continues to return to the concept of nature and begins to thematize its place as part of a new ontology. In “Indirect Language,” Merleau-Ponty reframes expression as “institution,” shifting the focus of art, language, and other use of “signs” away from nature and the body and toward a structuralist
model that grants a separate ontological existence to expression by virtue of its historical and intersubjective character. While Merleau-Ponty grants that there is a sense in which nature “expresses,” he nonetheless reiterates a distinction between nature and culture, this time played out between different forms of expression and thus different forms of “institution.” For example, Merleau-Ponty calls painting a kind of “animal ‘intelligence’” as opposed to the specifically human form of expression, language. In “Indirect Language,” Merleau-Ponty discovers that language is a “privileged form of expression” due to its special connection to history: animal expression can only replace one sense with another, whereas language can “speak about speech,” it can both preserve the past while overcoming it. Human expression also has a privileged access to truth; Merleau-Ponty writes that “the arts of language go much further toward true creation” in the way that “language is not just the replacement of one sense by another, but the substitution of equivalent sense. The new structure is given as already present in the old, the latter subsists in it, and the past is now understood.” In sum, in the development of Merleau-Ponty’s new theory of expression, as traced between “Cézanne’s Doubt” and “Indirect Language,” the nature/culture divide in Merleau-Ponty, and correlatively, the human/animal divide, re-emerges once again. Even as Merleau-Ponty grants a form of institution to nature, and thus animality, it is separate from human institution and its privileged access to history and truth.

Chapter Five of this dissertation takes up the point in Merleau-Ponty’s thought wherein he finally thematizes nature and culture (or rather, institution) as proper objects of philosophical study and seeks to clarify their relationship. I use two collections of notes for lecture courses that Merleau-Ponty taught at the Collège de France between 1954 and 1960, compiled in Institution and Passivity and Nature, to trace these concepts and their connection to the human/animal

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3 “Indirect Language,” 280/132.
divide. As in earlier works, the figure of the animal disrupts the difference between nature and culture, but Merleau-Ponty is finally able to put the dualism to rest in his last course on nature, where he establishes the relationship between animality and humanity as a lateral kinship, which he terms an *Ineinander*. I first trace the concept of animality as it emerges in the second course on Nature, wherein Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that there is animal culture and animal symbolism, and then turn to the third course, which clarifies the emergence of humanity within nature as “another corporeity.” Citing Chardin’s observation that “man came silently into the world,” Merleau-Ponty argues that the point of the traditional division between man and animal – that is, consciousness – is impossible to locate. Rather, the difference between human and non-human animals rests on “little morphological novelty” in the evolutionary process, such as the fact that being bipedal meant that the hands took over many of the functions of the jaw, thus relaxing the muscles of the head, allowing the brain to enlarge. In sum, there is “no rupture” with the emergence of man: “There is a ‘metamorphosis,’ not a beginning from zero.”⁴ I show that, from these findings, Merleau-Ponty argues that the relation between human and animal is not hierarchical, “but lateral, an overcoming that does not abolish kinship,” since the human body is “our *Ineinander* with Sensible Being and with other corporeities.”⁵ Thus, animal bodies are “not constituted by our thought, but lived as a variant of our corporeity, that is, as the appearance of behaviors in the field of our behavior.”⁶ So, too, does animal expression escape from a hierarchical model, now rendered as one variation of institution. Nature and institution become two “leaves of Being” which are irreducible to one another, yet bound by a structure of

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reversibility. Like the human and the animal, they are two variations of the expressivity inherent in wild Being, or what is later known as “flesh.”

In the conclusion to this dissertation, I discuss how tracing the concepts of nature and culture, and their eventual relation as part of an *Ineinander* structure, is not only significant for Merleau-Ponty scholarship in itself, but also insofar as it offers us a new means for thinking the “flesh.” As I argue in the next sections of this introduction, feminist philosophy can greatly benefit from an ontology that collapses the nature/culture distinction in theorizing sexual difference. I turn now to briefly discuss how this project is situated within feminist impasses as regards the nature/culture distinction, and the feminist appropriations of Merleau-Ponty that have yet to find this use of his ontology.

**Significance of Project for Feminist Philosophy**

**“New” Feminisms: From Nature to Culture and Back Again**

Feminist scholars have long debated how best to theoretically account for sexual difference. Simone de Beauvoir famously argued that, though ontologically free, women are reduced to (and reduced themselves to) mere factual existence; rather than transcend their bodies, Beauvoir wrote that women are perceived as nothing more than sexed bodies whose behaviors, traits, and general personhood is determined by being sexed as female. As is well known, Beauvoir made possible a line in thinking about gender which unraveled in myriad directions, ranging from Luce Irigaray’s claim that female subjectivity has yet to enter Western discourse to Judith Butler’s argument that sex and gender are ruses established by their repeated

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performance over time. Most recently, a collection of thinkers who call themselves “material feminists” have argued that contemporary feminist scholarship has not adequately taken up the body in its materiality. To put it succinctly, they want to make it such that “matter comes to matter” once again in feminist discourse.

As diagnosed by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, editors of the recent collection Material Feminisms, the “contemporary linguistic turn in feminist thought” – with which they broadly associate “postmodernism and poststructuralism” – has brought feminist theory to an impasse with respect to the body. Alaimo and Hekman claim that “postmoderns are very uncomfortable with the concept of the real or the material” and that “[postmoderns] argue that the real/material is entirely constituted by language; what we call the real is a product of language and has its reality only in language”. Thus, although there has been a “tremendous outpouring of scholarship on ‘the body,’” feminists have been restricted to the analysis of discourse about the body. What Alaimo and Hekman call a new “material turn” in feminist thought aims to deal directly with the body, viewed as a natural, agentic force which acts and reacts in material ways.

As Alaimo and Hekman’s collection reveals, the “material turn” is not easily summarized through the work of any single thinker. Perhaps unwittingly, Alaimo and Hekman’s vague language when speaking very generally about “postmoderns” in their introduction also suggests that material feminism may not have any single opponent against which it establishes itself. Moreover, there are considerable differences in how various material feminists conceive of “matter” and “materiality” itself. Despite these significant disparities within this newly

9 See, e.g., Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One (Ithaca: New York, 1985, trans. Catherine Porter) and Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999).
10 Karan Barad seems to have tagged this catch-phrase for material feminists. See her essay, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter” in the collection Material Feminisms (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009). This collection henceforth cited as Material Feminisms.
11 Material Feminisms, 1.
12 Ibid., 2.
13 Ibid., 2.
14 Ibid., 6-7.
established movement, there is one common thread amongst material feminists – namely, the attempt to give biology and other scientific practices a meaningful role in feminist discussions. “Postmodernism” is broadly blamed for the loss of the “real” body and for favoring language – through presumably immaterial accounts of embodiment. One of the first steps in addressing the “real” body is thus to use various scientific data to supplement or even replace entirely the subjective, descriptive accounts of embodiment that have dominated feminist discourse since the “linguistic turn.”

Although it is impossible here to recount the many different ways in which material feminists have begun to “make matter matter” in their accounts, it is clear, at least in Alaimo and Hekman’s account, that this collection of thinkers is reacting to what they see as an overemphasis on “cultural” accounts of identity that reduce the body to some variation of a sign (linguistic or otherwise), the product of cultural inscription. In response to Butler, Foucault, and other “postmodern” thinkers for whom the material is intertwined with discursivity, they respond in showing that “the discursive realm is nearly always constituted so as to foreclose attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices,” adding that material feminists believe “we need a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force.” Their attempts to redefine the materiality of the body as a “natural, agentic force” thus try to undo the nature/culture distinction insofar as nature is viewed “as a pliable resource for industrial production or social construction.” Rather, nature, in these projects, “is agentic – it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and the nonhuman world.”

Material feminism – at least in its portrayal by Alaimo and Hekman – attempts to actively challenge a version of the nature/culture distinction in which nature is figured as “the inert ground

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15 Ibid., 4.
16 Ibid., 5.
17 Ibid., 5.
for the exploits of Man,” and does so by virtue of “a deconstruction of the material/discursive
dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either.” Thus, material feminism does
not overcome this dichotomy; instead, it offers new possibilities for understanding both terms of
its division. In other words, for material feminism there is this thing we call “nature,” and this
thing we call “culture,” but we have inappropriately delineated these distinctions. Again, they
seek not to overturn such determinations, but to challenge their place in our understanding of
bodies, identities, and other issues crucial to feminist philosophy: “Material feminists explore the
interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology, and the ‘environment,’ without
privileging any one of these elements.” For example, in Elizabeth Wilson’s Psychosomatic, she
argues that feminist theory ought to “tolerate” biologically reductive accounts of the body, since
“some biologically reductionist demands have the potential to expand our theories of the body in
important, innovative, and sometimes exhilarating ways.” One case of such biological
reductionism is found in her reading of Freud’s account of neurasthenia, which reveals “a
sexualized nervous system” – in other words, a nervous system that is not sexual by virtue of
the fact that we discursively demarcate it as such, but because it actively serves to determine that
which we call “sexual.” As the title of her text suggests, Wilson uses this and other findings to
challenge traditional concepts of causality and the presumed separation between mind and body
which underly them in later psychoanalytic accounts.

Although there is much to be taken from the intentions of material feminism, and works
such as Wilson’s, I believe that this approach could be bolstered in two ways: first, it is
problematic that there is no attempt to overcome the nature/culture distinction and only to clarify
what is meant by “nature.” While we can certainly benefit from thinking of nature as something

18 Ibid., 6.
19 Ibid., 7.
21 Ibid., 19.
other than simply inert matter, this does not help feminist theorists interested in matters of identity as it pertains to sexual difference. In other words, if nature is agentic and participates in creating those categories which we tend to call “cultural” in light of the linguistic turn (e.g. race, gender, ethnicity), where do we now situate those identities, given that we are left with the same linguistic and metaphysical framework? Why not do the work to collapse the nature/culture distinction entirely? It strikes me as a possibility that, in the not so distant future, feminist theory might equally find itself worried that nature has taken precedent over culture, repeating the movement that set up the need for material feminism in the first place. My second suggestion is thus to find a way of overcoming the nature/culture divide by virtue of an ontology that supports the appropriate observation made by material feminists that nature impacts culture and vice-versa, but also is able to conceptually and linguistically find a way of understanding how these lines are blurred without recourse to reinstituting that dualism. As I will argue later in this dissertation, Merleau-Ponty’s own troubles in separating nature from culture lead to this solution, found in the ontology of the flesh.

The same shifting from one side of the nature/culture distinction to the other can also be found in the progression of “waves” that constitute the American feminist movement, which first found empowerment in biological, and then cultural similarity amongst women in their experiences, and has struggled since abandoning either model to find real political charge. Whereas the first wave sought basic rights for women, assuming a biologically-based difference between the sexes, and the second wave argued that women all shared something in common as women beyond biology (i.e., their gender identity and a set of experiences specific to that gender identity), third-wavers reject all universalizing and essentialist claims about women. But the deconstructive move accompanying this shift, by which the categories of sexual difference were put into question, was eventually met with much resistance, with critics claiming that feminist politics qua feminist politics were simply no longer possible. For them, a purely “negative”
feminism centered on critiquing how female subjectivity was produced through various institutional and societal mechanisms was not enough. They worried that by collapsing the category “woman,” we can no longer make important judgments about what is good or bad for women – and thus, in lieu of a positive feminist project, deconstruction was said to lead to relativism and subsequently, political inaction.\textsuperscript{22} R. Claire Snyder’s 2008 “New Directions” essay published in \textit{Signs} attempts to respond to such charges by identifying the politics of third-wave feminism as a “tactical response” to these theoretical challenges to the second wave.\textsuperscript{23} Snyder cites certain trends within the literature that fall under this rubric: an emphasis on personal narratives and multivocalism, as well as “an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach” which does not “police the boundaries” between what does and does not count as feminist action. Snyder continues, “third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a \textit{hermeneutics of critique} within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition.”\textsuperscript{24}

As Snyder also notes, however, third wave feminists tend to regress to essentialist claims about women in order to guide political action and to determine what societal and cultural practices should be deemed “bad for women.” When carefully examined, these essentialist claims rehearse the assumptions made by earlier waves – namely, that there are either biologically- or culturally-based properties that are definitive of a gender and that are shared by all members of that gender. Snyder explains that if third-wavers do not fall back into essentialism, then the only other option currently available is to “[be] all about choice with little examination of how chosen desires are constructed or recognition of how an aggregation of individual choices can have a negative impact on gender relations at large,” which thus “blunts the critical edge” upon which

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid.}, 176.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, 176, my emphasis.
the wave was founded. Third-wave feminist politics is therefore at a theoretical impasse with respect to grounding positive (as opposed to merely critical) feminist projects. Though Snyder does not go so far as to call this a metaphysical impasse, my charge is that this is so. What is needed, as with material feminism, is a metaphysical alternative that grounds our experience of being gendered in all its multiplicity, but which does not rehearse one side or the other of the nature/culture debate.

My belief is that feminist activism, and the feminist theory which informs it, has been stuck in what Hegel might call a “bad” dialectic – one which does not get resolved but simply moves from one side to the other in an interminable exchange. The nature/culture distinction, while rooted in the very foundation of theorizing sexual difference, is especially at play today in American culture with respect to the identities of non-normatively gendered persons. With the initial stirrings of political interest in securing the rights and safety of the transgender community comes, too, a wider discussion of the “origin” of such an identity. As has been documented amongst trans activists, filmmakers, zinesters, and other theorists on the margins, the legitimacy of transgender identity has too often fallen upon the standards of the DSM, a medicalized model that reduces a vast multiplicity of experiences of gender to a diagnostic checklist, reinforces a binary understanding of gender, and literally dictates who does and does not have access to the means necessary for some, but not all, to undo persistent feelings of gender dysphoria, the sense of otherness in one's own body that often leads to trauma in both emotional and physical forms.

Trans identity, in this model, is a biologically-based “disorder” which manifests itself as a “mental illness” for whom the proper “treatment” is also biological: hormones, surgeries, and other interventions. In the past several years, informed-consent models have been put in place in most LGBT health centers of major cities in the United States, such that patients need only a

25 Ibid, 189.
single appointment with a clinician in order to receive hormone treatment, both liberating transpersons to make medical decisions about their transition on their own, but nonetheless reinforcing the belief that gender identity disorder is something for which medical intervention is needed and is thus biologically-based.

But within the transgender community itself, the biological model is hardly accepted as standard, especially given that “transgender” itself is an umbrella term used to capture not only persons who choose to transition from male-to-female or female-to-male, but also a multitude of identities in between. Some, indeed, see their gender as a means of political action and a form of literally embodying what disrupts a binary definition of sex. Moreover, as Judith Butler aptly noted, the drag community, whose inclusion under the transgender umbrella is debated, nonetheless serves as a reminder that all forms of gender identity are performative and thus reflective of “culture” rather than “nature” in the form of biological determination. Interestingly, Butler has also been at the center of much debate amongst trans theorists because her use of the performative in Gender Trouble, and even Bodies that Matter, is believed to render gender purely a cultural construction and ignore the importance of the material aspect of sexed identity.27 Indeed, there is a growing trend in trans studies that “appeals to bodily materiality in order to secure a firm foundation for both the specificity and difference in trans subjectivity.”28 Trans theorist Jay Prosser goes so far as to offer a theory of subjectivity that is grounded in a wholly nondiscursive materiality “that aspires to be separate from, and uncontaminated by, the domain of language.”29

27 See for example Jay Prosser, “Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex.” Prosser argues that relegating gender to performativity overlooks the specificity of coming to be a material sex in transgender experiences. In The Transgender Studies Reader, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006).
29 Salamon, 41.
Given the centrality of these debates both within the LGBT community and more broadly amongst theorists of sexual difference, it seems we are once again in a position to wrestle with the nature/culture debate. In this dissertation, I raise the question of whether the metaphysical assumptions which underlie this dichotomy might be replaced with an alternative model which need not participate in this relic of modern thought. As I have noted above and will show in the pages which follow, this model can be found in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, a concept which is itself grounded in Merleau-Ponty’s own attempts to overcome the nature/culture dualism.

**Feminist Engagements with Merleau-Ponty**

Feminist work on Merleau-Ponty has, for the most part, fallen into two categories: first, and most commonly, feminist scholarship tends to adopt some part of Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology to inform a larger philosophical project. With little exception, these works employ the concept of the body-subject from *Phenomenology of Perception* as a means of enriching our understanding of gendered difference not only on the basis of bodily difference, but also as part of a generalized situation of being-in-the-world. The phenomenological method thus provides a means of both showing how bodily difference is experienced, but also explaining some of the reasons why such difference exists. In other words, by collapsing the distance between body and world, one is able to see human subjectivity as both passive and active, both in and of the world, engaged in projects as an “I can” but simultaneously limited by the possibilities of one’s situation. The significance of Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology for feminist philosophy is beautifully captured by Elizabeth Grosz as follows:

> What Merleau-Ponty seems to offer feminists… is not simply a common theoretical struggle, but, more positively, elements that may augment or enrich feminist theory itself. His emphasis on lived experience and perception, his focus on the body-subject, has resonances with what may arguably be regarded as feminism’s major contribution to the production and structure of knowledges – its
necessary reliance on lived experience, on experiential acquaintance as a touchstone or criterion of the validity of theoretical postulates.\textsuperscript{30}

As we will see shortly, it is this resonance between phenomenology and feminist theory which has most often defined feminist engagements with Merleau-Ponty’s work.

As one might suspect, the second form of feminist engagement with Merleau-Ponty is critical. Although feminist circles most often praise Merleau-Ponty for his acknowledgment of the constitutive role that the body plays in subjectivity, there are important critiques leveled by influential figures in feminist thought, and continental philosophy more broadly, including those by Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray. Interestingly, Irigaray is one of very few feminist thinkers who has engaged in some detail with Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy, from which she draws what many have considered a formidable critique.\textsuperscript{31} In what follows, I will highlight a number of scholars who have made a significant impact in navigating the possibilities for feminist engagement with Merleau-Ponty’s thought. My purpose here is not to chart every narrative which has emerged from Merleau-Pontyan philosophy, but to give a general sense of the terrain on which feminist engagements with his work tend to play out.

**Feminist Phenomenology**

Despite his influence on his contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, feminist philosophers paid relatively little attention to the work of Merleau-Ponty until Sandra Bartky and Iris Marion Young began to work on developing feminist phenomenology in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s.\textsuperscript{32} The other so-called “French feminists,” Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, constructed


feminist philosophies of a wholly different origin, focusing not on bodily experience but instead on the roles and significance of semiotic structures in establishing gender-based difference (or, for Irigaray, a lack of difference). Although both Kristeva and Irigaray share with phenomenology an interest in the origin and meaning of “signs,” neither figure takes the experience of the lived body as entry into their philosophical reflections. Simone de Beauvoir, on the other hand, dedicates the main chapters of *The Second Sex* to articulating the experiences of women at different stages of life, and within different historical contexts. For Beauvoir, a constant remains throughout: that, following the Sartrean model, women are restricted societally such that they occupy a strange space between “in-itself” and “for-itself”; as human subjectivity, they are always a transcendence, ontologically more than their objective being, but they are simultaneously limited by that being in a patriarchal society which objectifies women in myriad ways. According to Beauvoir, women’s liberation meant reclaiming the transcendent character of all human existence, and correlatively, reclaiming women’s bodies so as to redefine their significance as more than objects in the world. In this way, Beauvoir anticipates the gender-sex division, claiming that while there are “givens” of biology that differentiate sexed bodies, the meaning of those bodies is societally determined. Thus, she famously declared: “One is not born, but becomes a woman.”

Iris Marion Young’s 1980 piece, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” takes the basic insight that “one becomes a woman” from *The Second Sex* and seeks to show how this is played out through the structure of the body-subject elucidated by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. As indicated by the title, Young’s interest is in how women’s bodies are lived as unities, how they move, and how they experience space. Given that we will examine these categories from Merleau-Ponty in

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much greater detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation, I will here only briefly summarize Young’s findings. Her interest in these specific modes of embodied existence, however, is worth noting. She explains, “The kind of movement I am primarily concerned with is movement in which the body aims to accomplish a definite purpose or task… this limitation of subject is based on the conviction, derived primarily from Merleau-Ponty, that it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole toward things and its environment that initially defines the relation of a subject to its world.”

In other words, in order to understand whether and to what extent women’s embodiment constitutes a different mode of being-in-the-world, Young argues that it is necessary to examine those moments where the relationship between subject and world is established – which, according to Merleau-Ponty, is in “the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole towards things and its environment.” Thus, “throwing like a girl” is not only significant as an example of women’s embodied experience, but it also is part of the basic means by which women learn to live in their bodies as women. Following Merleau-Ponty, Young thus reinforces Beauvoir’s sense that not only are women’s bodies objectified (i.e., made into objects both for others and for women themselves), but women repeat that objectification in their engagement in the world. She writes, for example, of her own repetition of the feminine style of being she was taught to embody: “When I was about fifteen, I spent hours practicing the ‘feminine’ walk, which was stiff and closed, and rotated from side to side.”

As with Beauvoir, Young believes that the meaning given to women’s bodies – for example, as “weaker” than men’s bodies, less “resilient” than men’s bodies - ought to be differentiated from their biological determinations. Young, however, seeks to go further in understanding how it is that the societal and cultural forces which define women’s bodies in this way come to be “internalized” and in many cases confirmed by the actual experiences of women,

34 Young, 30.
35 Ibid., 44.
as in her own embodiment of the “feminine walk.” Famously, Young enters this discussion through the phenomenon of “throwing like a girl,” citing Erwin Straus’ *Phenomenological Psychology*, which described “the remarkable difference in the manner of throwing of the two sexes” as follows:

The girl of five does not make any use of lateral space. She does not stretch her arm sideward; she does not twist her trunk; she does not move her legs, which remain by the side. All she does in preparation for throwing is to lift her right arm forward to the horizontal and to bend the forearm backward in a pronate position… The ball is released without force, speed, or accurate aim… The boy of the same age, when preparing to throw, stretches his right arm sideward and backward; supinates the forearm; twists, turns, and bends his trunk; and moves his right foot backward. From this stance, he can support his throwing almost with the full strength of his total motorium… The ball leaves the hand with considerable acceleration; it moves toward its goal in a long flat curve.\(^{36}\)

Drawing from Straus and similar studies, Young argues first that, given a particular situation—historical, cultural, societal, and so forth—there do tend to be similarities in the modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality. Young does not make any essentialist claim that these modalities are universal by virtue of biology, nature, or any kind of “feminine essence.” But that does not mean these similarities do not actually present themselves, within very specific groups of women (and men—hence the use of “feminine” rather than “female” to describe these modalities). For Young’s own “situation,” which shares many of the same social, historical, and cultural features as those experienced by the girls in Straus’ study, she believes that Beauvoir is correct in identifying a tension in women’s subjectivity between transcendence and immanence, and that this tension is what underlies the ways that women as body-subjects engage with each other and their world.

Young articulates several specific characteristics of feminine bodily comportment, each of which is the product of women experiencing their bodies as both a thing and a capacity. For example, feminine motility exhibits an “ambiguous transcendence”: the girl who throws the ball keeps her legs still, does not twist her body around, and uses her arm only to a limited extent.

revealing a “project” that only partially comes to fruition. Young explains, “Only part of the body… moves toward a task, while the rest remains rooted in immanence.”37 This means, similarly, that she exhibits an “inhibited intentionality,” since feminine bodily existence “simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an ‘I can,’ and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed ‘I cannot.’”38 The same pattern emerges with respect to the body as a “discontinuous unity” that experiences its own spatiality as “enclosed,” since the body is experienced as both object and locus of action. None of these qualities, again, are attributable to any biological structure of the female body, nor can they be accounted for by virtue of a female “essence.” Instead, Young posits that these modalities of feminine bodily comportment “have their source in the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society.”39 In other words, women “learn to live out [their] existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to [them].”40 This means, however, that feminine embodied experience is not merely privative, but that it can be read as a “specific positive style” of bodily comportment and movement that is learned by the girl “when she comes to understand that she is a girl.”41

In the conclusion to her essay, Young explains that this work is really a “prolegomenon” to further study of women’s bodily experiences, the beginnings of a phenomenology. Young critiques Merleau-Ponty for not including a multiplicity of bodies in his works, but does not see any inherent limitations in pursuing projects (like “Throwing like a Girl”) in order to fill this gap. A complete account of the phenomenology of female experience would include, among other things, an examination of women’s bodies in their sexual being, and engaged in non-purposive

37 Young, 36.
38 Ibid., 36.
39 Ibid., 42.
40 Ibid., 42.
41 Ibid., 43.
activity, like in the expressive movement of dance. In later work, Young begins to fill in some of these phenomenological descriptions, focusing on experiences shared by many women, including being breasted, being pregnant, and experiencing menstruation. The importance of her work in these and related essays is clear, especially in the decade or so beginning in 1990 that constituted a revival of the phenomenological approach for feminist philosophy. Using the structures of embodied being-in-the-world articulated by Merleau-Ponty in Phenomenology of Perception, many feminist philosophers followed Young in using the phenomenological approach to articulate various elements of identity that have historically been ignored in philosophical discourse. For example, Gail Weiss’ 1998 Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality uses Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology and Paul Schilder’s work on the body image to explain how existence as embodied subjectivity entails “multiple, ambiguous dimensions” of body images whose “lack of definitive borders or boundaries” should be conceived as “rich and virtually unlimited sources of value and significance.” By looking at the phenomenology of the body image, Weiss demonstrates how the various elements of embodiment, including but not limited to race, sex, age, and ability, are complexly interwoven in the experience of one’s own body, often producing not one, but a multiplicity of images that inform how we experience our being-in-the-world, and the various categories of identity in which our bodies are situated. Thus, like Young, Weiss begins with the structural foundation of the body-subject in Phenomenology of Perception, but extends phenomenological description to different kinds of subjectivity, criticizing Merleau-Ponty for the small scope of bodies present in his texts (limited mostly to the famous figure of Schneider, and the observation of his own experiences). Recognizing that difference, and not

42 Ibid., 45.
44 See Lennon, “Feminist Approaches to the Body.”
similarity, of body images is foundational, and, moreover, that the very images we have of ourselves are the product of our engagement with the world and with others, Weiss is led to posit a phenomenological ethics, whereby the role of the body and our experience of it is at the center of our ethical decision-making. That is to say, Weiss shows how doing phenomenology that highlights differences in the experience of our bodies can illuminate much about our intersubjective being, and can be used to generate possibilities for fostering better relations with others.

Most recently, Gayle Salamon’s *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* uses the Merleau-Pontyan concept of body schema and the Freudian body ego “to challenge the notion that the materiality of the body is something to which we have unmediated access, something of which we can have epistemological certainty, and contend that such epistemological uncertainty can have great use, both ethically and politically, in the lives of the non-normatively gendered.”46 Salamon draws upon *Phenomenology of Perception* to show how the tension between one’s “felt body” and one’s “material body” is the norm, rather than the exception, to embodied subjectivity. Moreover, she finds this tension a more compelling account of trans experience than the predominant model of trans identity, which “treat[s] the materiality of the body as self-evident and given, aligning the body with substance and presence, thought in simple and stark opposition to that which is absent, immaterial, or ideal,” such that “materiality is thought to secure both identity and subjectivity.”47

As one of the ways in which the body is both “for me” and “for others,” Salamon focuses her analysis on Merleau-Ponty’s description of our sexual being, showing how this tension is especially ripe there insofar as the ambiguity inherent to the sexual schema can be read as a “purposeful confounding” of the categories of sexual difference. She writes, “There is something

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46 Salamon, 1.
47 Ibid., 3.
enabling in this philosophy of ambiguity; it is precisely the ambiguity attending sexuality that can become the means for understanding bodies, lives, and especially relationality outside the domains of male or female." In her reading, Salamon argues that sexuality, for Merleau-Ponty, is “not located in the genitals, nor even in one specific erotogenic zone, but in one’s intentionality toward the other and toward the world.” This renders not only sexuality, but the experience of one’s own body as sexual, including the felt dimension of desire, a wholly individual production. But just as it is individuating, the body in its sexual being is toward the other, constituting the “dissolution of the body as material ground, as phenomenological center of its own world.” Salamon uses these and other insights from Merleau-Ponty to provide a theoretical grounds for the evolving field of trans studies, dismissing the likes of Irigaray and Grosz along the way for their accounts of sexual difference “that rely on notions of the limit to secure that difference, where the limit is sometimes understood as a bodily fact, sometimes a categorical impossibility.” In either case, she argues, “transsexuality becomes the constitutive outside of sexual difference.” Thus, it is once again the ambiguity inherent in Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body – his resistance to all forms of dichotomous thinking – that makes his phenomenology especially productive for theorizing identity beyond the gender binary.

Though it is not possible to describe each project of this type which has emerged since Young’s landmark “Throwing Like a Girl,” I would nonetheless like to draw attention to what is generally missing in these projects. With little exception, those wishing to engage in a form of feminist phenomenology, and particularly those who do so by enlarging the scope of Merleau-Pontyian phenomenology to include bodies not represented in his works, treat *Phenomenology of

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48 Ibid., 44.
49 Ibid., 50.
50 Ibid., 54.
51 Ibid., 168.
52 Ibid., 168.
53 Other works include Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity*; Sara Heinamaa, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, and the collection *Feminist Interpretations of Merleau-Ponty*. (Full citations in bibliography).
Perception in isolation from his other texts, and thus from the development of his phenomenological thought. Alternatively, those who do include some account of his later works focus on the final and most famous chapter of The Visible and the Invisible, offering readings that neglect the work leading to it. As I will show throughout this dissertation, situating nature and culture and the ontology that it assumes is central to the movement of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, and has real repercussions for those who wish to use his thought for feminist projects. At face value, then, there is a limitation in scholarship that neglects to include the development of a philosopher’s corpus, especially when he has pursued further work in order to fix the problems that plague a text like Phenomenology of Perception.

Interestingly, Gayle Salamon very briefly takes up Merleau-Ponty’s later thought, suggesting that the concept of the flesh can serve as a possible model for transgender identity. At the end of her chapter on the sexual schema in Phenomenology of Perception, which is the only chapter dedicated to Merleau-Ponty in Assuming a Body, Salamon takes a standard reading of “flesh” and shows how it parallels the accounts given by many transpeople of their experiences of their identity. She explains,

Merleau-Ponty’s description of flesh sounds in several crucial aspects like a description of transgenderism or transsexuality: a region of being in which the subject is not quite unitary and not quite the combination of two different things. An identity that is not secured by the specificity of the materiality of the body, nor by a particular mental quality, but something involving both. It can be thought by itself, yet has been unnameable.

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54 By calling this a “standard” reading, I mean only that Salamon is not offering a new interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s concept. What is new here is how that concept parallels trans experience. Salamon describes Merleau-Ponty’s final project as follows: “His final, unfinished work, The Visible and the Invisible, can be read as an attempt to show the ways in which familiar philosophical distinctions – and even familiar experiential ones – between subject and object, between the hand that touches and the hand that is touched, between our visible, bodily being and those aspects of ourselves that are not visible, are undermined by the importance of the relations between those categories… A body becomes so by virtue of its interaction with what surrounds it, not because it is composed of a stuff that is radically foreign to its surroundings.” Salamon, 59.

55 Salamon,, 65.
I agree with Salamon that the flesh can serve as a model for rethinking gender, but I believe that she misses a crucial component of why this concept is so compelling for this purpose, which can only be seen once we understand how the nature/culture distinction is overcome by it. By focusing only on the structure of the flesh as indicated in *The Visible and the Invisible*, without seeing the emergence of that structure in the work leading to that text, Salamon misses the opportunity to show how Merleau-Ponty develops that concept specifically within the context of the relationship between nature and culture. To put this differently, this means that the relevance for trans identity is not only a structural relevance – that, for example, trans narratives speak, too, of “an identity that is not security by the specificity of the materiality of the body, nor by a particular mental quality, but… something involving both.” Rather, what I will show in this project is that this concept relies crucially on Merleau-Ponty’s investigations of the nature/culture distinction and is what ultimately is necessitated in order to collapse that distinction. Given that this divide permeates current debates regarding trans identity and that the narratives of trans experiences speak to the disruption of its borders, one can say that flesh is also relevant to this identity for the work that it does to ontologically support a sense of being which transcends this dichotomy.

**Critical Responses**

Like Iris Marion Young, Elizabeth Grosz’s 1994 *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* critiques Merleau-Ponty for the limited scope of his phenomenological descriptions in *Phenomenology of Perception*. And like Salamon, Grosz focuses on the body in its sexual being, but argues instead that “in discussing the question of sexuality and the body image, Merleau-Ponty leaves out – indeed, is unable to address – the question of sexual difference, the question of what kind of human body he is discussing, what kind of perceptual functions and what kind of
sexual desire result from the sexual morphology and particularity of the subject. Never once in his writings does he make any suggestion that his formulations may have been derived from the valorization and analysis of the experiences of only one kind of subject.”

But unlike Young, Weiss, and others, Grosz posits that the lack of sexual difference in Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology cannot be resolved simply by replicating the method of phenomenological descriptions for different kinds of bodies. For Grosz, sexual difference is an ontological fact, ultimately formulated by genital difference, which thus necessitates entirely other theoretical terms than the being-in-the-world which is given in the masculinist, phallocentric logic of phenomenology. Thus, for Grosz, the limitations of Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology in capturing sexual difference are ones that cannot be overcome.

Grosz also highlights that “generally, with the exception of Irigaray, most feminists have little to say about his last works and about his notion of the flesh.” Irigaray’s critique, presented in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, is so often cited within feminist commentary on Merleau-Ponty that it has become almost cliché. Her charge is that Merleau-Ponty’s final rendering of his project, as exemplified in the “Intertwining” chapter of The Visible and the Invisible, entails an ontology that does not acknowledge genuine sexual difference, while it relies at the same time on the imagery and signifier of the maternal as origin in order to support it. Irigaray famously fixates on one of Merleau-Ponty’s metaphors for the “flesh” as the primordial “tissue” from which being.

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56 Grosz, 110.
57 See also Judith Butler’s critique, wherein she demonstrates the heteronormative assumptions operative in Merleau-Ponty’s work on the body in its sexual being. Judith Butler, “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception.” In The Thinking Muse, eds. Jennifer Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), 85-100.
58 Salamon 151.
59 Grosz, 103.
emerges, the image of two lips touching.\textsuperscript{61} Although Merleau-Ponty renders the flesh as anonymous, pre-subjective, and (by implication) sexually neutral, imagery such as the two lips, combined with Merleau-Ponty’s own explanations of the flesh as “maternal,” suggest otherwise.

Irigaray argues that “one of the differences between men and women” in relation to the flesh is “that these lips do not re-join each other according to the same economy. Whereas one needs the mother or her substitute, the other suffices within herself to be two, being mother and woman.”\textsuperscript{62} The concept of the flesh as ontological origin both uses and ignores the specificity of women’s bodies as generative of being(s). The relationship between men and women as embodied subjects to the flesh is thus fundamentally different, and there is “a singularity of the body and the flesh of the feminine” that is unacknowledged in Merleau-Ponty’s writing.\textsuperscript{63} This difference, according to Irigaray, is founded “both from the fact that the lips are doubled there: those above and those below; and from the fact that the sensible which is the feminine touches the sensible from which he or she emerges. The woman being woman and potentially mother, the two lips of which Merleau-Ponty speaks can touch themselves in her, between women, without having recourse to seeing.”\textsuperscript{64} Thus, Merleau-Ponty perpetuates “a phallic economy in which the feminine figures as a lack or a blind spot,”\textsuperscript{65} placing him as another figure in a long tradition of excluding the feminine in the history of philosophy, and who is only able to support his ontology by virtue of this exclusion.

In addition to her critique of the unacknowledged maternal functioning in the “flesh,” Irigaray is perhaps even more concerned about the very structure of reversibility as ontologically primary. She argues that, by virtue of its mimetism, there is no possibility for genuine difference

\textsuperscript{61} In a translator’s note, Burke and Gill explain that Alphonso Lingis’ translation of The Visible and the Invisible mistakenly renders this as “laps” and not “lips,” “a typographical error that seems to mime what Irigaray calls the invisibility of the feminine.” Irigaray, 166fn.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 167.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 166.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 166.

\textsuperscript{65} Grosz, 104.
in the flesh: “everything is there and is unceasingly reversible.” This is especially troubling for Irigaray, who sees the solution to the logic of the Same in bringing the maternal-feminine into language. She writes,

There is no silence for Merleau-Ponty. The structure of a mute world is such that all the possibilities of language are already given there. Nothing therefore about the dereliction of the lack in language or about the creative virtualities that would inscribe themselves in this silence. Speech is or is not actualized, but its field and its means and their possible realizations are already there. Nothing new can be said.

If, as Irigaray claims, the flesh as a mirroring reversibility precludes new possible realizations of language, then it would be impossible to develop “a language which is sexuate and which encounters through speech and in the world a sex which is ‘irreducible’ to it, and with which it is impossible to have relations of reversibility without remainder.” In the conclusion to this project, I will argue that Irigaray’s critique of Merleau-Ponty is unfounded in that she posits the flesh as a strictly mimetic structure. By tracking the development of the nature-culture *Ineinander* as exemplified in the human-animal kinship of the Nature courses, I will show that, although reversible, the two sides of the Intertwining are not identical, thus allowing for difference.

**New Appropriations of Merleau-Ponty in Feminist Philosophy**

Only very recently have some feminists begun to take an interest in the works leading to *The Visible and the Invisible*. For example, in Lisa Guenther’s 2011 article, “Merleau-Ponty and the Sense of Sexual Difference,” she draws from Merleau-Ponty’s notes for the Institution and Nature courses in order to “reflect on the ontological field which gives sense to sexual difference, without locating this sense on the side of either nature or nurture, bodies or minds.”

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66 Irigaray, 180.
67 Ibid., 180.
68 Ibid., 171.
traces images of pregnancy in both the ontological account of the flesh and the embryological findings that Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the “institution of life,” showing that in his later works, we see Merleau-Ponty use pregnancy as one means of demonstrating “a mutual fecundation of self and other, a divergence from one common flesh, such that neither I nor the other can be designated as first or second, active or passive… both emerge from an anonymous, impersonal flesh that generates differences within itself by folding or coiling over itself.”\(^{70}\) As opposed to Irigaray’s reading, Guenther uses the courses that Merleau-Ponty teaches in the process of developing *The Visible and the Invisible* to show that the imagery that later becomes constitutive of the flesh gives us good reason to think that true “difference” is indeed produced in such an ontology. She writes, “Both sides emerge as mutual divergences within a flesh that is impersonal and anonymous, that is neither a self nor an other, but a matrix of possibilities.”\(^ {71}\)

Guenther recognizes the merits in Irigaray’s account insofar as the flesh is cast as both the “mother” or maternal and the neutral, impersonal, and unsexed seems to reiterate the logic of the Same and erase the specificity of women-as-mothers and the feminine. She writes, “This logic excludes the mother by including her in a closed circuit where she can only appear as the primordial condition for man’s self-relation, and never emerge on her own terms as a subject or an other.”\(^ {72}\) Guenther argues, however, that despite Merleau-Ponty’s ill choice in metaphor, the concept of flesh “nevertheless raises the possibility of an exciting account of sexual difference, and it does so precisely to the extent that it remains impersonal and anonymous.”\(^ {73}\) She draws, for example, from the ways in which Merleau-Ponty relies on the “logic of sexual difference” in working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible* to understand the relationship between self and other in his new ontology, citing his mention of “the intersexual relation, with its indefinite

\(^{70}\) Guenther, 21.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 24.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 23.
\(^{73}\) Ibid., 23.
substitutions.” Following the notes, this relation is constituted by two “complementary roles,” “one of which cannot be occupied without the other being also: masculinity implies femininity, etc.” Thus, the intersexual relation, Guenther reasons, is only understood as it emerges from the flesh or “polymorphic matrix” that gives rise to it. This means, too, that the masculine and the feminine are only determined in relation to one another, “mutually shaping one another.”

Guenther argues that this reading of the flesh provides us with an alternative to what she calls “ontological localism” about sexual difference which reduces the sense of masculinity or femininity to bodies or parts of bodies. She also cautions, however, that whereas self-other relations are reversible, the relation between masculine and feminine do not seem to be so. Moreover, this structure can clearly only function by presupposing the existence of two, and only two, forms of sexed identities, essentially othering all other forms of human sexuation, including but not limited to androgynous, intersexed, and transgender bodies. Further reading of the working notes reveals even more problematic commentary by Merleau-Ponty on his understanding of sexual difference; he writes, for example, that the male-female relation is like “two pieces of wood that children see fitting together of themselves, irresistibly, because each is the possible of the other.” For Guenther, this description is obviously rife with heteronormative imagery, suggesting not only a naturalization of heterosexuality but also the implication that only within this pairing does humanity complete itself.

Merleau-Ponty’s problematic heteronormative and cisnormative renderings of the flesh notwithstanding, Guenther looks to the notes de cours to offer a new reading that shows “how a polymorphous plurality – and not just a duality – may emerge through the mutual divergence of

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74 Ibid., 23.
75 Ibid., 24.
76 Ibid., 24.
77 Ibid., 25.
masculine and feminine.” She turns specifically to the discussions of embryology, where the development of an embryo is understood not as a simple transition from potential to actual, but “the institution of a sense… a spatio-temporal process of possibilization within a field.” To model embryology on institution grants a plasticity to development, but within certain restrictions, since there is a limitation to the possible manifestations of sense in any institution. Guenther then turns to Anne Fausto-Sterling’s work on intersexuality, whose findings on the variation of human sexual determination can easily be mapped onto the model of embryological “institution” found in Merleau-Ponty. She explains, “[T]he process of human sexuation regularly produces at least two, and by some counts five or more, ways of being sexed, each of which emerges in mutual divergence from the others, beginning from an ‘indifferent gonad’ with both proto-male and proto-female structures. The more determinate the sex of the embryo becomes, the more it must eliminate other directions for growth.”

Guenther stresses that this understanding of sexual development is one, but not the only, way of phenomenologically accounting for sexual difference by virtue of “articulating the relations of mutual divergence which distribute sexual difference across differently sexed bodies through a temporalizing and spatializing process.” Nonetheless, we can use the embryological model by which a process of negation further and further determines one’s sexual specificity in order to articulate our sexual being more broadly. Guenther writes,

I encounter the possibility of being sexed otherwise every day in my exchanges with parents, friends, sexual partners, colleagues, and even strangers who are sexed differently from me, and I also encounter it in those who have different ways of being the “same” sex. The possibility of being sexed otherwise, a possibility that was “mine” before I even had a sense of myself as consciousness, is not lost but rather encountered across a threshold of intersubjective difference, or alterity.

78 Ibid., 25.
79 I provide a thorough description of the meaning of “institution” for Merleau-Ponty in Chapter Five.
81 Guenther, 28.
82 Ibid., 29.
83 Ibid., 29.
In Guenther’s account, we can thus understand sexual difference apart from having or lacking body parts, and as a dynamic, intersubjective process that creates a multiplicity of sexual identities. Through our embryological development, we acquire a bodily form with certain limitations, but we also live this bodily form individually, through our “situation” and intersubjective relations. Guenther thus argues that, in the language of The Visible and the Invisible, “sexual difference forms a chiasm with intersubjectivity; the masculine-feminine relation not only mirrors the I-other relation, it forms a double relation of mutual implication with it.”

As I discuss in the conclusion to this project, I believe Guenther’s findings to be complementary to my own, insofar as we each use the works intervening between Phenomenology of Perception and The Visible and the Invisible to demonstrate a complexity in Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh that has been overlooked by a tendency to see only oneness or the logic of the Same in it, as per Irigaray’s reading. Both Guenther and I believe that there is a multiplicity inherent in the flesh that thus supports accounts of sexual difference that seek to overcome the gender binary and its normative implications. But where Guenther looks to challenge Irigaray’s claims about the maternal-feminine via Merleau-Ponty’s account of embryological institution, my work follows Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of nature and culture in order to recast his later ontology within this traditional terminology which continues to confound feminist philosophical reflection on gender, sex, and our bodies. I show that the model of the human-animal Ineinander – the means by which Merleau-Ponty eventually overcomes the nature/culture distinction – can also provide us with a model for understanding sexual difference as a multiplicity within the ontology of the flesh.

84 Ibid, 29.
**Other Recent Scholarship**

To date, only three full-length texts address in detail the courses taught by Merleau-Ponty at the Collège de France, all of which focus primarily on the Nature series. These are Ted Toadvine’s *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, William Hamrick and Jan van der Veken’s *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty’s Fundamental Thought*, and Véronique Föté’s forthcoming *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Biology and Ontology*. In addition, Renaud Barbaras’ *The Being of the Phenomenon* is widely credited for showing the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought as a whole, spanning the entire length of his career, including to some extent the effect of the courses on Institution and Nature on his overall project. Among these texts and the dozen or so articles in the English-speaking world that in some way address this material, there is very little, if any, reference to how it may affect earlier readings that use Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology in order to account for female, or non-normatively gendered experience, and correlative, how we understand sexual difference. Nonetheless, these texts are crucial to understanding the significance of the role of the concepts of nature, and to a lesser extent, institution, for the progression of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. I offer here a brief synopsis of their contributions.

Ted Toadvine’s *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature* seeks to demonstrate how Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology and ontology can provide a new means of framing debates in environmental ethics. He argues that “the 'environment,' as a reification that stands over against the human subject, implies an artificial division between nature and humans and encourages us to

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86 The obvious exception here is Guenther’s text, described in the previous section. Leonard Lawlor has also written on the implications of “polysexuality” as seen in the Institution course. See Lawlor, “‘Benign Sexual Variation’: An Essay on Sexuality in the Later Merleau-Ponty,” in *Chiasmi International: Trilingual Studies Concerning the Thought of Merleau-Ponty*, Anniversary issue, 2008: 47-58.

view nature as a collection of things rather than in terms of mutually constitutive relationships."88

For Toadvine, the proper object of “environmental philosophy” is, instead, nature – and the means of escaping the impasse that he finds in current environmental debates between the “environment” figured in either empiricist or constructivist terms is to articulate a philosophy of nature which does not fall into such dualistic thinking. He explains that “[a] renewed philosophy of nature would concern the being of nature, the being of humanity, and the relation between them.”89 Toadvine thus sets out to show how the concept of nature evolves in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, and ultimately that Merleau-Ponty’s own shift towards the method of “ontological interrogation” also “offers us a means to understand our own thinking as a continuation of nature's efforts at self-expression.”90 As opposed to the common discourse within environmental ethics that opposes the human against the “environment,” Toadvine argues that Merleau-Ponty allows us to see “the becoming-human of nature and the becoming-nature of humanity.”91

Toadvine’s text makes rich and fruitful contributions to Merleau-Ponty scholarship in itself and to the field of environmental philosophy for reframing the debate, down to its metaphysical assumptions, about our ethical responsibilities towards nature. There are some key similarities, but also large differences, between this project and his work. First, Toadvine and I both argue that nature is a primary concept throughout Merleau-Ponty’s corpus, and attempt to single out key moments in which one can see how Merleau-Ponty’s evolving understanding of nature affects his phenomenological project and vice-versa. I agree with Toadvine as well that one of the most productive aspects of nature for Merleau-Ponty, and his later ontological project in general, is its perpetual refutation of dualistic thinking, which gives a kind of structural similarity to our projects: Toadvine is concerned with the dualism in environmental philosophy

88 Toadvine, 6.
89 Ibid., 7.
90 Ibid, 20.
91 Ibid, 20.
that vascillates between empiricist and constructivist accounts of nature, and I am interested in the ways in which a dualism between nature and culture is reiterated through feminist philosophies of sexual difference. Both Toadvine and I see Merleau-Ponty’s later philosophy, and the ontology of the flesh, as the means out of this kind of dialectical repetition.

The primary difference between Toadvine’s text and my own is that I focus more broadly on both nature and its relationship to culture, rendered as “institution,” throughout Merleau-Ponty’s works. I argue that there is an unresolved division between nature and culture until they are rendered as an *Ineinander* and as two differentiations of the expressivity of wild Being. Toadvine, alternatively, is interested in showing how the human, and human reflection in thinking, is in fact a “continuation of nature’s own efforts at self-expression.”

Thus, although many of our observations overlap, our emphases lie in different places and in different texts, most notably demonstrated by Toadvine’s use of *Structure of Behavior* and my own interest in looking at the roles of nature and culture in Merleau-Ponty’s works in aesthetics.

William Hamrick and Jan van der Veken’s *Nature and Logos: A Whiteheadian Key to Merleau-Ponty’s Fundamental Thought* similarly concerns itself with showing how Merleau-Ponty’s investigations of nature are key to understanding the development of his thought. As the title suggests, Hamrick and van der Veken are especially interested in the influence of Alfred North Whitehead’s philosophy on Merleau-Ponty, as is evidenced by the emphasis that he places in his course notes on Whitehead’s notion of Nature as process as a viable alternative to models of Nature that rehash Cartesian metaphysics. Hamrick and van der Veken additionally show the similarities between Whitehead’s process metaphysics and Schelling’s philosophy of Nature, the role of Bergson in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking through Nature, as well as the influence of the Stoic

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94 I discuss this in detail in Chapter Five.
notions of *logos endiathetos*, the silent form of natural expression, and *logos proforikos*, the cultural form of expression.\textsuperscript{95} Their text is, on the whole, a means of understanding some of the important philosophical heritage to which Merleau-Ponty’s courses on Nature owe their due. In addition, they turn to other texts of Whitehead with which Merleau-Ponty was not familiar, in order to show how these texts may have served to fill in some of the lacunae left by Merleau-Ponty’s untimely death in the development of his final project.

The third and final major text in Merleau-Ponty scholarship that situates the role of nature in his greater philosophy is Véronique Fóti’s forthcoming *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Biology, and Ontology*.\textsuperscript{96} Although Fóti does not frame the development of the concept of nature as I do (that is, in a problematic dualism with culture), her interest in the relationship between nature and expression brings our projects together in important ways. Notably, Fóti is the first Merleau-Ponty scholar to carefully attend to the course notes on animality and reads these alongside the texts from which Merleau-Ponty works, providing a much-needed contribution to our ability to comprehend what otherwise seem obscure references and descriptions. Fóti skillfully traces the means by which Merleau-Ponty draws from contemporary biologists and animal behaviorists to show how Merleau-Ponty finds in these scientific works the means to grant expression, and even culture, to animality. I thus closely follow her observations in my own analyses of the course on animality in Chapter Five of this project.

My hope is that this work can positively contribute to the growing field of scholarship that seeks to understand the significance of Nature and Institution not only for the purpose of tracing Merleau-Ponty’s thought, but also for showing how these concepts can add to the already

\textsuperscript{95} I discuss these two forms of *logos* in Chapter Five, where Merleau-Ponty argues in the third course on Nature that there is a “a Logos of the natural esthetic world” and a Logos of language.

existing plethora of literature that demonstrates the richness of his philosophy for thinking through all forms of embodied difference. I thus situate my project within the literature as a means of connecting the work begun by Toadvine, Hamrick, van der Veken, and Fóti to the precedent set by feminist phenomenology to use Merleau-Ponty to meaningfully account for difference in the philosophical canon.
Chapter 2 Radical Reflection and Merleau-Pontyan Phenomenology

The development of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is, in many ways, an attempt to think phenomenology anew. At the heart of this new vision is, as one would expect, a reconsideration of the means by which we access phenomena – or rather, “the things themselves.” Broadly categorized as a work in perception, Merleau-Ponty extends far beyond the tropes that frame debates about our access to the “external world” in the history of philosophy: sense data, impressions, judgment – in short, the findings of “intellectualism” and empiricism, which, Merleau-Ponty argues, are products of the natural attitude. For Merleau-Ponty, overcoming the natural attitude is nothing short of operating under a new ontological framework. His work in *Phenomenology of Perception* entails challenging traditional ontological dualism as the result of a new way of attending to perceptual experience – namely, “radical reflection.” In his earlier work, *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty used descriptive psychology to identify a new kind of being in “sense,” which led to an ontological framework framed by three structural levels of Gestalts (physical, organic, and human). But ultimately, Merleau-Ponty's methodology fell short in that it was unable to thematically account for the starting point of its descriptions. Perhaps the most radical form of phenomenological description in *The Structure of Behavior*, attending to the genesis of sense through historical consciousness (a third alternative to “perceptual” and “intellectual consciousness”), still did not provide access to the nature of the subject who is perceiving. Thus, the starting point of *Phenomenology of Perception*: to more rigorously attend to the genesis of sense by accounting for our means of access to that sense, the body of the perceiving subject. One might say, then, that *Phenomenology of Perception* is also a work in

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origins\textsuperscript{99} – the revelation of which calls us once again to reformulate our ontological understanding of body, consciousness, and as becomes clear in the development of the text, nature.

In this chapter, I will follow the important and influential Preface to \textit{Phenomenology} as a means of articulating the new vision of phenomenology that Merleau-Ponty develops. This will also serve as an overview of the text and an introduction to the concept of “radical reflection,” which continues to be important and is the key to understanding the shift to Merleau-Ponty's later works. When Merleau-Ponty develops \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, this concept changes from an act of consciousness to an ontological fact, as reality takes on the structure of being literally implicated and folded back on itself, like a reflection.

This chapter will first address the four main concepts of the Preface, which Merleau-Ponty argues have been misunderstood in others’ attempts to define phenomenology. As we will see, in attending to these defining characteristics of phenomenology as it has been developed through Husserl, Heidegger, and to a lesser extent, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty also reveals his own apprehensions about the movement thus far. He is clear in his opening comments that phenomenology appears as “a doctrine that has said everything” but which “cannot define itself.”\textsuperscript{100} He explains, however, that phenomenology can be understood “as a manner or as a style” and “exists as a movement, prior to having reached a full philosophical consciousness.”\textsuperscript{101} Moreover, it is also evident that Merleau-Ponty intends to provide this awareness: he writes, “We will find the unity of phenomenology and its true sense \textit{sens} in ourselves.”\textsuperscript{102} In describing the concepts of reduction, essence, intentionality, and rationality, Merleau-Ponty draws from each of the foundational figures in the tradition to inscribe a unity and a path towards phenomenology as

\textsuperscript{99} Renaud Barbaras calls both \textit{The Structure of Behavior} and \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} “archeological” works. Barbaras, 41.
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Phenomenology}, lxxi/8.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., lxxi/8.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., lxxi/8.
no longer simply a method for grounding philosophy, but establishing this movement as a philosophy itself. At the end of the Preface, however, we will see that Merleau-Ponty also believes phenomenology must remain, by definition, an “unfinished” doctrine. This will come to light in the final part of this section, as we examine the concept of “radical reflection.”

Reduction

As indicated above, Merleau-Ponty's intention in the preface to *Phenomenology* is, in a way, Janus-faced: first, he wants to bring together the development of the main concepts of phenomenology into a more unified doctrine – but second, he also ultimately acknowledges the ways in which phenomenology will remain “a problem and a promise.”103 We might say, then, that although Merleau-Ponty opens the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* with a question (*What is phenomenology?*), it is doubtful whether or not he intends to answer it – or at least, answer it in an exhaustive sense. The most explicit formulation of the goal of the preface is to “try systematically to bring together the famous phenomenological themes as they are spontaneously tied together in life.”104 Our work in this chapter will thus be to follow Merleau-Ponty in this systematic reevaluation of the main concepts of phenomenology.

Complicating the preface is Merleau-Ponty's nuanced relationship to the Husserlian tradition. As Renaud Barbaras explains, “Merleau-Ponty does not read Husserl as if he were a historian of philosophy; what is at issue for him is not the faithful restoration of Husserl's path of reflection but rather finding there a guarantor and a stimulus for his own thought.”105 The preface therefore anticipates his later essay, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in which he attempts to go beyond some of the difficulties he finds in Husserl and, echoing Heidegger, tries to “evoke the

105 Barbaras, 69.
un-thought element” in Husserl's works. The preface is also characterized by Merleau-Ponty's trademark anti-dualistic thinking as he seeks, in an almost Hegelian fashion, to find a medium in which both Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology are challenged, but brought together so that they also survive this negation. We can see this movement as early as the opening sentences to Phenomenology: Merleau-Ponty famously explains,

Phenomenology is the study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences... And yet phenomenology is also a philosophy which places essences back within existence, and thinks that the only way to understand man and the world is by beginning from their 'facticity.'

At the heart of this passage we find a challenge to the traditional notion of phenomenological reduction. As a quick review, we can say that the reduction, for Husserl, is a cognitive act by which our experiences (“intuitions”) are stripped of all empirical and naturalistic elements (i.e., “bracketed”), which leads them to “reveal new contents which were not available to ordinary consciousness and even ordinary reflection.” The “epoché” and its resulting reduction, along with the validation from others of this same outcome from reducing a given intuition, are the means by which we can establish phenomenological knowledge. Thus, the function of the reduction is “to lead us back from the factual objective world of our everyday and scientific attitudes to the essential structure of a non-worldly or transcendental subjectivity. This transcendental ego is to be the ultimate and apodictic explanatory ground of the world.”

Husserlian phenomenological reduction is a science and practice of consciousness. In other words, it is a methodology relying entirely on cognitive acts and is restricted to the realm of consciousness. When we verify our intuition with others, this validation “is really based on each individual performing acts of reflection on the immanent contents of his or her own psychic

107 Phenomenology, lxx/7.
processes.” As we will see in the next section, the “essences” which phenomenology studies – hence the name, *eidetic* phenomenology - are necessarily *idealized* and non-verifiable as actually existing outside of the mind. Husserl believes, following Descartes, that there will never be apodictic evidence about the existence of transcendent objects (i.e., external to the *ego cogito*). He writes, “We must regard nothing as veridical except the pure immediacy and givenness in the field of the *ego cogito* which the *epochē* has opened up to us.”

Given this very brief review, we can see a play of contradictions in the above passage. Without access to the other – or, indeed, even some guarantee that we have access to the external world – how are we to reconcile this vision of phenomenology with the claim that “phenomenology... puts essences back into existence”? These two sides of phenomenology recall the idealism of Husserl's early works, Heidegger's phenomenological ontology of *Being and Time*, and Sartre's existential *Being and Nothingness*. On the one hand, we have a phenomenology which “seeks to give a direct description of our experience as it is,” which attends merely to that experience and denies validity to claims about the external world that are not, simultaneously, claims about what consciousness “constitutes.” On the other hand, we see a phenomenology which is “in-the-world” and argues that experience is always given through a series of “factual” conditions which are inseparable from it. But, as Merleau-Ponty explains, Husserl also turns to the “factual” element of existence in his later works, where he develops a genetic or “constructive” phenomenology that “examines the manner in which objects appear within the temporal flow of our experience, the temporal approach being crucial to our understanding of human beings and cultural objects.”

110 Moran, 131.
115 Moran, 168.
“already there” (in the form of cultural objects and historicity) and yet a product of consciousness (since these objects are still constituted). Let’s turn now to Merleau-Ponty’s own reflections on the reduction in order to see how he navigates this seeming contradiction in the phenomenological tradition.

If phenomenology attempts to access “the things themselves” through a method called the reduction, perhaps the easiest way of capturing how Merleau-Ponty challenges and moves the tradition forward is to ask what is given through the reduction. In other words, what does one reduce to? Merleau-Ponty explains that in early phenomenological works, “the reduction is presented as the return to a transcendental consciousness in front of which the world is spread out in an absolute transparency,” where “the world would be nothing other than the ’signification: world’” and “I,' and consequently the Other [l’Autre], have a value rather than an existence.” This is a clear reference to Husserl’s focus on how consciousness constitutes the world and others. It is important to note that this constitution is accomplished passively: we experience the world as given to us in a meaningful unity of interwoven intentional structures (in “passive synthesis”), or as meaningful through a unity of constitutive acts in a temporal structure (in “passive genesis,” as when we learn that the meaning of a given unity is the number four by counting the items which make up that unity). But the objects of these constitutions are not given in an existential situation so much as they are given as meanings whose validity we continuously assess against our other experiences. In other words, what is given to us in the reduction – namely, our access “to the things themselves” - is what consciousness has constituted, namely, the objects of experience considered purely as cogitata. For Husserl, there is nothing which is not constituted: “all objects experienced in consciousness... and the very nature of consciousness itself are always constituted,” which means, in sum, that the transcendental ego is “the source of all meaning.”

116 Phenomenology lxxiv-lxxv/11-12.
117 Moran, 168.
To put consciousness and its “essences” back into existence, one would have to rethink what Husserl means by “transcendental” in the transcendental ego – and this is precisely where Merleau-Ponty turns next.

One of Merleau-Ponty's favorite formulations of the reduction is Eugen Fink's characterization of it as “wonder before the world.” Merleau-Ponty interprets Fink as follows:

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical.\(^ {118}\)

This formulation gives us a new answer to our earlier question – namely, what does the reduction reduce to? Rather than giving us a transcendental ego with the world immanent to its contents, reduction reveals a situated consciousness. To be “transcendent” does not mean detached and withdrawn from the world, but, on the contrary, to be “transcendent” in Heidegger and Sartre's sense of being projected toward the world. But it is not only consciousness which is always “transcendent” - the world itself will be understood as “inexhaustible.” In other words, the meaning which is revealed to us in reflection will always be incomplete. We will see this in more detail as we discuss Merleau-Ponty’s new definition of “essences.” But it is important to note here that by giving consciousness and the world this inexhaustible character, we now are more attuned to the fact that it is impossible to have a complete reduction. This is, according to Merleau-Ponty, “the most important lesson that the reduction teaches us.”\(^ {119}\) Though we may “slacken the intentional threads which attach us to the world” in reflection, those threads are never cut.

By putting consciousness in the world, we are also forced to consider how we are in the world – in other words, if we are “through and through compounded of relationships with the world,” how are these relationships created and sustained? The answer for Merleau-Ponty, of course, is that consciousness is embodied: “my existence as subjectivity is identical with my

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\(^{118}\) *Phenomenology*, lxxvii/14.

existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and... ultimately, the subject that I am, understood concretely, is inseparable from this particular body and this particular world.”

Much of the work in *Phenomenology of Perception* is done to elucidate precisely what it means to be an embodied subject and how the world is given to us through our body; as such, I will leave much of this discussion to the following chapter, in which I explicitly address the character of this embodiment.

In anticipation of our later discussion of embodiment, we can say here that through the reduction, we are not given the body as an object among objects. Merleau-Ponty explains, “As a meditating Ego, I of course can distinguish the world and things from myself, since I certainly do not exist in the manner of things. I must even separate myself from my body insofar as it is understood as a thing among things, as a sum of physico-chemical processes.”

What is revealed, rather, is the “phenomenological body” which is *in, of, and towards* the world. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty's translation of *In-der-Welt-sein* is *être au monde*, which carries this triple significance. Rather than being given either a transcendental ego which constitutes the world (and the ego itself) or the world as a series of discrete empirical objects, the “things themselves” are given in an existential situation, and through the body as the “subject” of perception. Thus: “Far from being, as was believed, the formula for an idealist philosophy, the phenomenological reduction is in fact the formula for an existential philosophy: Heidegger's 'In-der-Welt-sein' [being-in-the-world] only appears against the background of the phenomenological

120 *Phenomenology*, 431/470.
121 *Phenomenology*, lxxvi/13.
122 In a translator's note, Donald Landes explains the philosophical and historical significance of this choice in translation – namely, that it highlights Heidegger's existential intentions with the phrase. “By presenting Heidegger's notion with the French proposition *à* rather than *dans*, Merleau-Ponty also introduces a rich collection of relational modalities, including “directed toward,” “in,” “into,” “with,” “at,” and “belonging to,” all of which should be heard in his *être au monde.*” *Phenomenology*, 493, note 22.
reduction.” This and other explicit rejections of idealist thought have led to a characterization of Merleau-Ponty's project in *Phenomenology of Perception* as a “transcendental realism.”

**Essences**

We have already seen some indication of how “essences” are to be thought of in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. They are, in a word, “existential” in character and no longer the products of a constituting consciousness. To help us further understand this seeming contradiction, Merleau-Ponty also asks us to reconsider what is meant by the *eidetic* method. As discussed in the previous section, Husserl thought that reduction leads to a transcendental field that is constituted by the ego. The contents of consciousness are thus “ideal” - they are non-verifiable as existents other than as products of the transcendental ego. This description of the eidetic reduction, Merleau-Ponty argues, ultimately falls short: essences are not the products of the reduction, but rather, we “pass through” them. In a rather straightforward phenomenological observation, Merleau-Ponty notes, “We cannot bring our perception of the world before the philosophical gaze without ceasing to be identical with that thesis about the world or with that interest for the world that defines us, without stepping back to this side of our commitment in order to make itself appear as a spectacle.” In other words, there must be some distance from our perception of the world for reflection on it to be possible. Our nature as *être au monde*, Merleau-Ponty explains, gives us that distance: “our existence is too tightly caught in the world in order to know itself as such at the moment when it is thrown into the world, and... our existence needs the field of ideality in order to know and to conquer its facticity.”

123 *Phenomenology*, lxxviii/15.
124 Barbaras, 103-110.
125 *Phenomenology*, lxxviii/15.
As with the nature of phenomenological reduction, Merleau-Ponty grounds essences in the world, and thus challenges the notion of the “field of ideality.” In contradistinction to the logical positivist movement (“the antithesis of Husserl's thought”)\(^\text{127}\), Husserlian phenomenology should not “separate essence from existence”: rather, “[his] essences must bring with them all of the living relations of experience, like the net that draws up both quivering fish and seaweed from the seabed.”\(^\text{128}\) If essences are said to be “idealized,” this is an ideality that is no longer separate from the world: it is, instead, what is revealed when attending to things “prior to every thematization.” Merleau-Ponty explains that “[t]he eidetic reduction is the commitment to make the world appear such as it is prior to every return to ourselves; it is the attempt to match reflection to the unreflective life of consciousness.”\(^\text{129}\) Later, we will see how attending our unreflective experience is the process of “radical reflection.” But here we might question what becomes of the “eidos” of eidetic reduction. If Merleau-Ponty is changing the meaning of essences such that we “pass through” them when we discover the unreflective life of consciousness, why does Merleau-Ponty still call this an *eidetic* process? In other words, what is left of the meaning of “essence” and its function in Husserlian phenomenology – as, for example, a thing stripped of all contingency and thus revealed in its “truth”?

Merleau-Ponty's concern here is to reorient phenomenology away from the epistemological projects of transcendental idealism, which make the world immanent to consciousness and cast doubt upon the “real.” His point is not that essences are truths which can be verified with adequality or apodictic certainty\(^\text{130}\) beyond that which is found in Husserlian

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\(^{128}\) *Phenomenology*, lxxx/16.

\(^{129}\) Husserl characterizes apodictic evidence as follows: “It is absolute indubitability in a quite definite and peculiar sense... it discloses itself, to a critical reflection, as having the single peculiarity of being at the same time the absolute unimaginableness (inconceivability) of their non-being, and thus excluding in advance every doubt as 'objectless,' empty.” Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 15-16. This kind of apodicticity is only given through the reduction.
cogitationes and their corresponding cogitata, but rather, that by understanding our existence as being-in-the-world, we see a different way that we have access to truth through perception. Here we see a direct confrontation with the Husserlian project, which, as articulated in the Cartesian Meditations, is to serve as an “absolute ground” for science – a project which can only succeed by, following Descartes, “the turn to the ego cogito as the ultimate and apodictically certain basis for judgments, the basis on which any radical philosophy must be grounded.” The ego cogito, for Merleau-Ponty, is not accessible as distinct from the body (the “subject” of perception), and its “judgments” about the world can never have the certainty they would otherwise possess when only weighed against the immanent contents of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty writes, “The world is not what I think, but what I live [ce que je vis]; I am open to the world, I unquestionably communicate with it, but I do not possess it, it is inexhaustible.” Merleau-Ponty is here combining a Heideggerian sense of truth as aletheia with the insight that it is through our own factical situation that we access that truth (i.e., being “open to the world”) to counter traditional epistemological concerns that run hand-in-hand with the modern sense of “transcendental” and “essences” that still operate in Husserlian phenomenology.

By putting consciousness in the world and denying the possibility of its separation from the world – even in the unreflective life of consciousness, “I aim at and perceive a world” - Merleau-Ponty forces us to reconsider the meaning not only of truth, but also the “real” and the “possible.” Rather than moving from the possible to the real in order to ascertain the truth of things, perception gives us the real, but as an “inexhaustible” reality whose truth(s) can and will never be fully captured. Recall, again, Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of phenomenological reduction as watching “the forms of transcendendence fly up like sparks from a fire.” The goal of phenomenology is not to capture essences understood as eidetic certainties established by

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131 In brief, the “acts” of consciousness and their correlates (i.e., objects of thought).
132 Cartesian Meditations 20 (quoted in Dillon, 27).
133 Phenomenology, lxxxi/17.
imaginative variation or intersubjective verification, but rather, to continue to attend to and articulate what is given to us in experience. “For Merleau-Ponty,” Barbaras explains, “the issue lies in developing a phenomenology freed from the eidetic presupposition, in developing a philosophy of sense which would not be a philosophy of essence.”\footnote{Barbaras, 78.} Merleau-Ponty's method of developing this philosophy of sense begins by attempting to “catch sense in the act, at its very birthplace,” through the process of “radical reflection.” By situating thought at this moment of sense and non-sense, phenomenology can move from the real to the possible; we are given presence with absence, and in this way perceive a world with depth and dimensions of meaning.

### Intentionality

We have perhaps already seen one way in which Merleau-Ponty acknowledges an intentional structure of existence: “I am at and perceive a world.” Here it appears that the traditional formulation of intentionality, that consciousness is always consciousness of something, has merely been expanded to incorporate the insight that our intentional bearing towards the world also always entails perception. That is to say, just as we are never not directed towards the world, we are also never without some perceptual experience of it. However, Merleau-Ponty goes much further to radicalize the concept of intentionality. It begins with the basic observation that we are perceptually bound to the world just as we are directed towards it. Merleau-Ponty finds a correlative notion in Husserl's “operative intentionality” [fungierende Intentionalität], which differs from “act intentionality” in that it is prior to reflection: it “establishes the natural and pre-predicative unity of the world and of our life.”\footnote{Phenomenology, lxxxii/18.} By allowing for a broader sense of “intentionality” that goes beyond a sense of conscious, voluntary directedness, phenomenology is
no longer bound to “knowledge” conceived as “intellection.” In the previous section, we saw how rethinking “essences” leads to a similar conclusion – that this new form of phenomenology will not look for the same kind of apodictic certainty granted in the *cognitiones* of Husserlian reduction.

Merleau-Ponty adds here that adopting *fungierende* intentionality as primary allows phenomenology to “become a phenomenology of genesis.” He explains, “Whether it is a question of a perceived thing, an historical event, or a doctrine, 'to understand' is to grasp the total intention – not merely what these things are for representation, namely, the 'properties' of the perceived thing, the myriad of 'historical events,' and the 'ideas' introduced by the doctrine – but rather, the unique manner of existing expressed in the properties of the pebble, the glass, or the piece of wax, in all of the events of a revolution, in all of the thoughts of a philosopher.”

There are two important concepts to clarify, here: first, Merleau-Ponty takes the “pre-predicative unity” revealed by operative intentionality and once again denies its immanence to consciousness. The unity is “of the world and of our life.” Second, by doing so, the structure of intentionality itself similarly extends beyond consciousness. Merleau-Ponty wavers, here, as he anticipates his later ontology but then pulls back to a more traditionally dichotomous structure. From the above passage, we see that with “the pebble, the glass, or the piece of wax... all of the events of a revolution... all of the thoughts of a philosopher,” each has a “unique manner of existing.” This suggests a broad ontological structure underlying intentionality as not only that which creates a unity by virtue of connecting conscious beings to the world through the meaning which they project onto it, but also that worldly entities project their own meaning and intentional structures. We might, for example, think in Aristotelian terms here and imagine that Merleau-Ponty is suggesting a kind of efficient cause to natural entities (i.e., that the acorn is directed towards the world as that which becomes an oak tree). In Merleau-Ponty's later works, we will see that this

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136 *Phenomenology*, lxxii/19.
broader intentional structure, understood as sense-generating, is extended beyond the human realm to the natural, though in a more radical way.

In the preface to *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty quickly withdraws from ontological implications that later direct him towards an ontology of the “flesh” and turns his focus to the human: “There is not a single word or human gesture – not even those habitual or distracted ones – that does not have a signification.” When we do phenomenology as a “phenomenology of genesis,” we look for a “genesis of sense” which situates our understanding in an existential structure, as, for example, by understanding a doctrine as a document with a history of intentional acts which contributed to its creation. The genesis of sense is understood as a human achievement, along with its underlying intentional structure, although this existential structure is, nonetheless, a challenge to the Husserlian tradition. M.C. Dillon explains, “Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the validity of Husserl's claim that it is an essential structure of consciousness to direct itself toward a central and unitary object or object-complex. At the same time, however, he regards it as equally essential to the structure of consciousness that the meaning of its intentional object be determined to some extent by the relation between that object and the horizon or context in which it appears.” Intentionality and its sense-bestowal is thus haunted by a horizon of meaning that is not of its own making – the consequences of which are not fully articulated until much later in Merleau-Ponty's corpus.

Although Merleau-Ponty hesitates to extend intentionality beyond the human realm in the preface, it will nonetheless be one way in which his later ontological project begins to unravel already within *Phenomenology of Perception*. Later, we will see Merleau-Ponty argue that the (human) body itself is intentional by virtue of its motricity. Following Husserl's then-unpublished works, Merleau-Ponty famously argues, “Consciousness is originarily not an 'I think that,' but

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137 *Phenomenology*, lxxxiii/19.
As I discuss this important concept in Chapter Three, I will argue that the “I can” as an embodied enactment of intentionality is a figure that straddles the fence dividing traditional mind-body dualism and an ontology of the flesh. The fence, as it were, is the complicated way in which Merleau-Ponty characterizes the body as a “natural self.” If the body is natural, then we have reason to extend intentionality beyond the human realm – but if the body as “natural self” is restricted to the human realm, then we simply move the line that draws the dichotomy between mind and body one step further to separate embodied, human consciousness from “body” in the sense of all other non-human, worldly matter – including, but not limited to, the natural world. The concepts of “nature” and “natural self” are thus keys to the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

It is of no small significance that at the heart of *Phenomenology* – and the early formulation of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology - lies an equivocation of the “natural” that is not worked out for nearly a decade, when he presents his three courses on Nature at the Collège de France. To briefly elucidate this here, we can say that in *Phenomenology*, “nature” is both operating as something determinable and fully (or at least potentially) transparent, in the way that we understand objects of scientific investigation, and as the locus of intentionality and meaning-bestowal, in the way that our bodies project sense onto the world before us in the ways they inhabit space. Renaud Barbaras characterizes this equivocation as follows:

The discovery of the body itself, irreducible to natural causality as to transcendental consciousness, will allow precisely the thinking of an insertion of consciousness into nature that would not exclude this nature’s appearing to consciousness under the form of a perceived world. It is nonetheless true that throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, there persists the horizon of a nature in itself, as totality of objective events governed by laws.

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139 *Phenomenology*, 139/171.

140 Barbaras notes, “The phenomenology of perception reveals the descriptive specificity of the perceptive layer but does not go so far as to inquire about the relationship of this perceptive layer to reality in itself: the sense of being of nature does not necessarily seem to be questioned by the discovery of the perceived world. It is therefore only on the occasion of a lecture series given at the Collège de France that nature becomes the object of a specific inquiry.” Renaud Barbaras, “Merleau-Ponty and Nature,” *Research in Phenomenology* 31 (2001): 22-38. Page 23.

Insofar as intentionality (and therefore “consciousness”) is attributed to the human realm, “nature” is also operating as both non-human and human, and thus at once both reifying and collapsing traditional dualisms. We will see this in more detail in Chapter Three.

**Rationality**

It is to be expected that the final concept thematized by Merleau-Ponty in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* is equally as significant in the history of philosophy as reduction, essences, and intentionality, if not more so. Merleau-Ponty directly addresses the important role that phenomenology plays in rethinking the meaning of rationality. He writes, “Phenomenology's *most important accomplishment* is, it would seem, to have joined an extreme subjectivism with an extreme objectivism through its concept of world or of rationality.”¹⁴² Whereas Merleau-Ponty puts essences in the world by means of a new reduction, and grants a certain worldliness to intentionality, reason *is* the world, understood as a unity of meaning. To be sure, Merleau-Ponty is not suggesting that the world is “rational” in the sense dictated by natural laws whose behavior we can understand and predict, as modern science understands the world – rather, he is speaking of the *phenomenological* world. He explains,

> The phenomenological world is not pure being, but rather the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other. The phenomenological world is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which establish their unity through the taking up [la reprise] of my past experiences into my present experiences, or of the other person's experience into my own.¹⁴³

Merleau-Ponty is certainly not far here from Husserlian phenomenology: he is saying that the world, as a meaningful unity, is the product of my own experiences and the “gearing into” of my experiences with others'. We might think, first, of the phenomenologist performing “imaginative

¹⁴² *Phenomenology*, lxxiv/20, my emphasis.
¹⁴³ *Phenomenology*, lxxiv/20.
free variation” on the essences revealed in phenomenological reduction in order to further eradicate any further empirical or naturalistic elements that have yet to be isolated as variant and thus obscuring the truth of those essences. Further, we can recall the methods by which the phenomenologist uses intersubjectivity as another means of verifying experiences and as establishing a basis for objectivity, though this intersubjectivity is always the product of the constituting ego: “It is from out of myself as the one constituting the meaning of being within the content of my own private ego that I attain the transcendental other as someone just like me; and in this way I attain the open and endless whole of transcendental intersubjectivity, precisely as that which, within its communalized transcendental life, first constitutes the world as an objective world, as a world that is identical for everyone.” In a translator's note, Donald Landes highlights the term “l'engrenage,” translated as “the gearing into,” to indicate the figurative sense that “the 'fit' is something that is to be accomplished in the act, not something pre-determined by the shape of the gears and teeth.” This way of reading “the intersection of my experiences with those of others” further supports the image of intersubjective verification of experiences (perhaps better, here: “meaning-intentions”) found in Husserl. It is through these and other methods that the transcendental ego is able to “grasp the eidos” of things – which, Husserl argues, is “at the heart of reason itself.” A rational world is, for Husserl, created and sustained by consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of Husserl on the concept of rationality (which, it must be said, is not an explicit critique within the text) is a natural extension of his other remarks on the main concepts of phenomenology in the preface. We have seen already that Merleau-Ponty thinks the reduction doesn't go far enough – rather than hold up essences as the product of phenomenological reflection, we have to “pass through them.” This means taking our reflection beyond the means of free variation, of the apperception of the other, and so on – in a word, to

144 Husserl, “Phenomenology and Anthropology,” page 498. Quoted in Moran, 179.
145 Phenomenology, 496, endnote 47.
146 Moran, 155.
move beyond phenomenology’s fixation on discovering the *eidos* of things. What, then, are we to make of the phenomenologist's return “to the things themselves”? Let us turn back to the above passage, where Merleau-Ponty argues that “the phenomenological world is not pure being.”

To quickly capture the hinge which links Merleau-Ponty to an entirely new sense of rationality, it is important to note that he emphasizes the intersection of *experiences* with one another as its foundation. The sense of the “experiencing subject” here is different from consciousness in Husserl's depiction of rationality. For Husserl, the “consciousness” that is able to understand the world as a rational unity and thematize it as such is the transcendental ego engaged in the reduction. Alternatively, Merleau-Ponty will investigate *pre-reflective* consciousness as revealed through perception. The goal is thus not to discover essences but, again, to “watch the sparks of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire.” Merleau-Ponty writes, “For the first time, the philosopher's meditation is lucid enough to avoid endowing its own products with a concrete reality in the world that is prior to that meditation...The phenomenological world is not the making explicit of a prior being, but rather the founding of being; philosophy is not the reflection of a prior truth, but rather, like art, the actualization of a truth.”\(^{147}\) In other words, rationality, and thus the world as a meaningful unity, is established through perception – and as phenomenology is one form of perceptual act, it, too, participates in this “founding of being.”

Merleau-Ponty explains in “The Primacy of Perception” that “[t]he perceived world is the foundation that is always presupposed by all rationality, all value, and all existence. This kind of conception destroys neither rationality nor the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth.”\(^{148}\) We can say, then, that the shift in focus from consciousness in the Husserlian tradition

\(^{147}\) *Phenomenology*, lxxiv/21.

to the pre-reflective, perceiving subject also leads to a new sense of the “rational” world whose unity we live but have yet to understand: “the perceived world involves relations and, in a general way, a type of organization which has not been recognized by classical psychology and philosophy.” How are we to practice phenomenology in a way that reveals this pre-reflective, perceptual world? The answer lies in Merleau-Ponty's “radicalization” of the phenomenological reduction.

“A Violent Act”: Radical Reflection

Finally we have reached the point where we can justify our earlier claim that although Merleau-Ponty begins *Phenomenology of Perception* by asking, “What is Phenomenology?”, we find that in his attempt to provide an answer, it becomes evident that any answer (in a traditional, exhaustive sense) is not possible. As we have just seen, phenomenology engages in “the founding of being” rather than the revelation of pure being. Merleau-Ponty adds that “[a]s the disclosure of the world, phenomenology rests upon itself, or rather, founds itself.”¹⁴⁹ The means of this disclosure is the methodology that Merleau-Ponty calls “radical reflection.” Later, in the Introduction, he describes it as follows:

The center of philosophy is no longer an autonomous transcendental subjectivity, situated everywhere and nowhere, but is rather found in the perpetual beginning of reflection at that point when an individual life begins to reflect upon itself. Reflection is only truly reflection if it does not carry itself outside of itself, if it knows itself as reflection-upon-unreflected, and consequently as a change in the structure of our existence.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ *Phenomenology*, lxxxv/21. Merleau-Ponty adds in a footnote, “'Rückbeziehung der Phänomenologie auf sich selbst,' declare [Husserl's] unpublished materials.” As Landes notes, Merleau-Ponty was familiar with this term from Husserl's 1929 Paris Lectures, which formed the basis for his *Cartesian Meditations*, where this phrase first appears (Section 63). Phenomenology 497, endnote 52.

¹⁵⁰ *Phenomenology*, 63/90.
What makes reflection “radical” is that it is a kind of second-order reflection\textsuperscript{151}, focused on “that point when an individual life begins to reflect upon itself.” To borrow a phrase from Kant, the object of radical reflection is the condition of the possibility of reflection. Reflection is only a complete and “total clarification of its object” when it takes into account its own origins as well as its results. But, importantly, what is revealed in this process is that there is always a \textit{remainder} that is fundamentally inaccessible to reflective consciousness. Recall Merleau-Ponty’s phrase that the world is “inexhaustible.” This, too, describes the limits of our own self-understanding, insofar as subjectivity is no longer fully present to itself through the reduction as a transcendental ego; what is revealed in radical reflection is the awareness of “its own radical dependency on conditions that exceed its thematization,” namely, “the co-natural bond between the anonymous body and the world.”\textsuperscript{152} The work of \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} is to articulate this co-natural bond, which we will turn to in the following chapter.

The understanding that radical reflection reaches in finding its own dependency on these conditions outside of its grasp is why philosophy becomes “an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning.” In trying to grasp the origin of reflection along with its objects, we find our knowledge perpetually incomplete and are thus forced to begin again. By calling this unreflective history that we seek a “past which has never been present,” Merleau-Ponty is emphasizing the incapacity of reflection to make its own origins fully transparent to itself. Moreover, revealing this non-coincidence at the heart of reflection is a practice in putting into question the very possibility of philosophy.\textsuperscript{153}

Following Merleau-Ponty, we are no longer able to use phenomenology as a means of guaranteeing access to some atemporal “truths” revealed in essences. This means, too, that we have to rethink the way in which phenomenology has traditionally served as a \textit{foundation} for

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Phenomenology}, 65/91.
\textsuperscript{152} Toadvine, 65.
\textsuperscript{153} \textit{Ibid.}, 66.
philosophy: “Conceived as a return to the Lebenswelt, phenomenology can no longer be considered preparatory for the philosophy in the strict sense that would provide us with the truth of phenomenology; phenomenology coincides with philosophy itself.”\textsuperscript{154} Are we thus left to conclude that phenomenology, as a form of philosophy, is an impossible task? Barbaras explains, “If the reduction to the 'life-world' really consists in taking note of a constitutive opacity of sense, whether this be at the level of perception or of language, necessarily there can be no turning back from this decision; it cannot be followed by the restoration of an absolute subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{155} In other words, once we reveal the pre-reflective realm of perception (Merleau-Ponty's version of the “life-world”) as the foundation of all further thought and reflection, with its necessary opacity and inexhaustibility, we forfeit all epistemological claims to any guarantee of “objective” - i.e., transcendent in the traditional sense – truths.

But this is not to foreswear phenomenology as a philosophical project altogether. Merleau-Ponty cautions, “The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoate style in which it proceeds are not the sign of failure; they were inevitable because phenomenology's task was to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason.”\textsuperscript{156} Indeed, Barbaras argues that the development of Merleau-Ponty's ontology is fueled by the challenge to think through the implications of revealing this “mystery”: “to overcome the transcendental formulation of the reduction that veils the world of experience just as much as it unveils it, to forge the concepts that suit this brute or wild world, to think adequately 'this back side of things that we have not constituted'”\textsuperscript{157} - these tasks lead Merleau-Ponty to his final works, in which he develops an ontology as the fulfillment of his phenomenological project. It is of no small significance, moreover, that he begins to explicitly elucidate this ontology in his famous essay on Husserl,

\textsuperscript{154} Barbaras, 77.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{156} Phenomenology, lxxxv/22.
\textsuperscript{157} Barbaras, 77. The quote here is from Signs, 227/180.
“The Philosopher and His Shadow.” It is, again, the attempt to “evoke the un-thought” in Husserl's works that moves Merleau-Ponty's project forward.

As a fundamental change in the object of philosophical knowledge and of the method by which it is attained, the project of radical reflection thus marks a final distinction from the Husserlian tradition that we find in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Some Merleau-Ponty scholars have argued recently that radical reflection has been given inadequate attention in comparison to other issues taken up in his work (e.g. overcoming Cartesian dualism, articulating a theory of embodiment, etc.). Keith Whitmoyer, for example, argues that the crux of the text is to articulate a philosophy of “ontological lateness” which is discovered through radical reflection.

“Ontological lateness” is a phrase used by Whitmoyer to capture the remainder in reflection that reorients philosophy's perspective on knowledge of the world from something to be obtained to something that is sought after, as “perpetually on the horizon.” This shift, in turn, entails an attempt “to begin to take the ambiguities, obscurities, fragilities, and incompleteness of human experience seriously.”

Whitmoyer's concept of “ontological lateness” closely parallels the way in which we have addressed the “remainder” of radical reflection as revealing an “inexhaustible” character both of the world and of ourselves. Whitmoyer argues similarly that there are two ways in which we are “ontologically late”: first, in the sense that we find ourselves in a situation of which we are not the authors, and second, that the “sense and significance” of the world “escape our attempts to put it in our grasp.” As we also discussed in our study of intentionality in the preface, Whitmoyer rightly emphasizes how ontological lateness disrupts idealist philosophies which reduce the world and others to the products of a *Sinngebung* of consciousness – for if there is this

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158 Barbaras calls this text “the genuine introduction to his ontology.” Barbaras, 76.
160 Whitmoyer, 347.
remainder, then we can no longer think of sense-bestowal as unidirectional, “from consciousness toward the world and not the reverse.”

Whitmoyer argues that by finding myself in a situation which I did not create, with its history and the others which came before me, I am forced to recognize that my “consciousness” is not merely constituting but also has a passive character – here understood as an openness to the world which transcends it, and famously characterized in Merleau-Ponty's working notes to The Visible and the Invisible as the “passivity of activity” to indicate how our être au monde is always situated. This differs from the “passive synthesis” found in Husserl's concept of fungierende Intentionalität insofar as the latter is still the product of a constituting consciousness, though achieved prior to reflection. The “passivity of activity,” alternatively, refers to the worldliness which escapes my grasp, both beyond and within my subjectivity, but which I am forever projected towards as a subject whose originary experience is perceptual. Perception and radical reflection thus go hand-in-hand; Merleau-Ponty writes, “Perception is not a science of the world, nor even an act or deliberate taking of a stand; it is the background against which all acts stand out and is presupposed by them.” When we engage in radical reflection and “return” to ourselves, we “do not find a source of intrinsic truth, but rather a subject destined to the world.”

The goals of the following chapter are to shed light on what is revealed through this new phenomenology, understood as “radical reflection,” and to reveal how a troubling dialectic between nature and culture emerges within Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of the body-subject. Our examination of the Preface has already shown us several key characteristics of the pre-reflective

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162 Ibid., 349.
163 Ibid., 350. The working note is found in Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 221.
164 Here I disagree with Whitmoyer, who argues in a note that the “passive synthesis” found in operative intentionality is the same as the passivity expressed in the embodied subject of Phenomenology of Perception. See Whitmoyer, 361, note 14.
165 Phenomenology, lxxiv/11.
166 Ibid., lxxiv/11.
realm which Merleau-Ponty seeks to describe: the subject of perception will have the character of être au monde (with all of its relational connotations) and will thus be situated in a way that cannot be fully accounted for, and the world will similarly appear within a horizon of meaning which escapes our grasp. In sum, what is given in the pre-reflective will be opaque rather than transparent, as would be the case for the transcendental ego. Or to echo both Heidegger and Derrida, we might say that the pre-reflective is characterized by both presence and absence. In the pages which follow, we will see how Merleau-Ponty develops a theory of embodied subjectivity in order to articulate how it is that pre-reflective, perceptual experience takes shape in these ways.\(^\text{167}\) We will be interested especially in clarifying what Merleau-Ponty means when he reveals that the body is a “natural self” [un moi naturel],\(^\text{168}\) with its corresponding “natural world.” The division instituted between the natural self and personal self, along with the natural and cultural worlds, suggest a nature/culture dualism which is both overcome and reaffirmed in the phenomena of human existence. As will be the case in the remainder of Merleau-Ponty’s corpus until his final course on Nature (addressed in Chapter Five), the nature/culture distinction is especially problematized by the figure of the animal. Beginning with *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty struggles to situate the human and the animal, granting both a transcendence of the human over nature and animality, while at the same time affirming that same transcendence – to a limited degree – to the animal. To see how this fits into and emerges from his larger project, I begin in Chapter Three by tracing the contours of the body-subject as it is developed in *Phenomenology*.

\(^{167}\) Nancy Holland argues that “it is precisely the role that the body plays in perception that creates the absence that Merleau-Ponty finds at the core of perceptual experience.” Nancy Holland, “Merleau-Ponty on Presence: A Derridean Reading.” *Research in Phenomenology*, 16 (1986), pp. 111-120. Page 113.

\(^{168}\) First mentioned in *Phenomenology* 174/209.
Chapter 3 Bodily Transcendence and the “Cultural World” in *Phenomenology of Perception*

In the previous chapter, we learned how Merleau-Ponty's method of “radical reflection” moves away from traditional Husserlian phenomenology and sets the stage for a turn to embodiment. This chapter takes up the Introduction and Part I of *Phenomenology of Perception* in order to demonstrate how the body unfolds in Merleau-Ponty's new phenomenology. This is its first goal – namely, to give a general sense of human embodiment according to Merleau-Ponty and as it appears through the process of “radical reflection.” Following this account of pre-reflective perceptual experience will allow us to see, in broad strokes, the development of an ontology that seeks to overturn modernism and specifically the mind-body dualism as product of an objectivising scientific world-view. As an alternative, Merleau-Ponty will show us how our most foundational experiences reveal an embodied existence that ontologically precedes the scientific and thus disrupts accounts not only of mind and body, but also subject and world as separate, causally related entities. What will emerge is a human subjectivity that is of the world and yet transcends that world, though never completely. Transcendent yet immanent, there is thus an ambiguity that marks the life of embodied consciousness.

The second and interrelated goal of this chapter is to show how the major conclusions of Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment are intertwined with a “meta-discourse” about nature and culture. In other words, although nature and culture are not the key concepts of the text, their presence contaminates the major claims that Merleau-Ponty makes about the constitution of human embodiment. Nature and culture themselves are not thematized – it is nearly a decade later that Merleau-Ponty focuses on the concept of nature and, as I will argue later, institution as a synonym for “culture” in his courses at the Collège de France. Instead, here we see the “natural world” and the “cultural world” as different webs of signification from which human experience
draws, and in the latter case, to which it contributes, as part of the “genesis of being.” As embodied, human existence thus partakes in (or perhaps better, is “of” \([au]\)) both worlds – and we might say that in the human body, the dualism is collapsed. Just as existence is both transcendent and immanent, it is also natural and cultural. Merleau-Ponty is unwavering on the fact of their irreducibility: “For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural.”

Beyond the collapse of the nature/culture dualism specific to embodied consciousness as human subjectivity, however, the division between these “worlds” gets confusingly tangled. This happens, I believe, as Merleau-Ponty begins to develop an account of expression. Expression is the driving force behind man's transcendence: it is how we move from the given to the new, how we go “beyond-nature” when we bring meaning into the world. At its most foundational, this power is grounded in our biological existence; Merleau-Ponty shows us how our bodies are responsible for expression, and how even speech is a form of “phonetic gesture” that is thus supported by our natural constitution as a bodily unity. Moreover, we see that human existence cannot help but be expressive, as it is always intentional and thus always projecting a meaning onto its surroundings. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty also posits that animals are capable of expression: “Already the mere appearance of a living being transforms the physical world, makes 'food' appear over here and a 'hiding place' over there, and gives to 'stimuli' a sense that they did not have.” But, animals themselves cannot speak – and this is, Merleau-Ponty claims, what is necessary to create a cultural world. So it seems that animals have some culture and transcend nature to some degree, but not in the same way that humans do. Merleau-Ponty both establishes a nature/culture distinction, while disrupting that divide with the introduction of animality into his discussion. As I will show in this and the following chapter, he is utterly inconclusive as to the

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169 Merleau-Ponty uses this language several times throughout the text when speaking about his overall project. See for example *Phenomenology*, 156/191.
170 *Phenomenology*, 195/230.
status of this divide, often positing, and then contradicting, a metaphysical distinction between nature and culture by way of comparison between humanity and animality.

These and other reflections lead me to the following questions: First, what constitutes nature for Merleau-Ponty? Expression, as we have noted, is the power for transcendence. If nature itself (e.g., the natural animal) is capable of expression, what becomes of the meaning of “transcendence” as it is related to nature? Correlatively, what is “natural” and/or “biological,” if the natural and biological are transcendent concepts? Finally, why is language alone capable of a cultural world? Merleau-Ponty explains, “Speech alone is capable of sedimenting and constituting an intersubjective acquisition... a certain structuring of my experience, a certain modulation of existence.” Why might not a bird's song, echoed and repeated between perches and nests, be capable of this movement?

As these questions suggest, there is much to be considered in the power of expression, which in many ways holds the keys to Merleau-Ponty's ontology in this early work: it is the grounds for transcendence, for collapsing mind/body, self/other, and consciousness/world dualisms, and within human subjectivity, for blurring the nature/culture divide. But, to summarize my above inquiries, what about nature and culture as concepts outside of the human realm? I will explore Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression more broadly in Chapter Four, where I take up his works in aesthetics to explore how this important concept develops in the years after *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the course of this chapter, I hope to demonstrate how and why expression, as revealed through human embodiment, is important for fueling Merleau-Ponty's later reflections on nature and culture.

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172 *Phenomenology*, 196/231.
From Scientific Objectivism to “the Phenomenon of the Phenomenon”

Following The Structure of Behavior, Merleau-Ponty sets out in Phenomenology of Perception to attend to the pre-reflective foundation of perceptual experience. The Introductory chapters of the text serve primarily to demonstrate how classical approaches to perception have missed the originary experience of phenomena by restricting the perceptual world to the scientific world. In other words, Merleau-Ponty seeks to demonstrate how science, as a kind of reflection, covers over another experience that is originally given to us in perception. Merleau-Ponty focuses first in these early chapters on discrediting the following concepts: “sensation,” “association,” “memory,” “attention,” and “judgment.” In so doing, he is able to open the way for a new understanding of perception: one that is founded in embodied existence.

Before turning to Merleau-Ponty's own analysis of perception, let us briefly address each of these concepts, as they will provide us with insight into the prejudices that Merleau-Ponty counters in the remainder of the text. As we will see, Merleau-Ponty's aim is to move away from these scientific accounts and, in traditional phenomenological language, return “to the things themselves,” - but in so doing, he will also construct a new transcendental phenomenology through the process of “radical reflection.” As we have seen in Chapter Two, this new kind of reflection seeks to take account of its own origins, but Merleau-Ponty argues that this does not yield the “absolute consciousness” of Husserl's transcendental ego. Rather, once we attempt “reflection-upon-an-unreflected,” we again encounter the remainder that prevents such an absolute coincidence: it is as if we are “late” to our presence to ourselves in reflection. Far from the orientation of the scientific worldview that has dominated theories of perception, the recognition of this non-presence to ourselves requires “a change in the structure of our existence.”

173 Phenomenology, 63/90.
reflection, we are able to see a different kind of transcendental which is bound up with
immanence, or we might say, “facticity.” Thus, what begins as a study in perception leads to an
ontology that recognizes the inescapable fact of being situated as a body. Let's turn now to see
how this transition happens.

Merleau-Ponty begins by reviewing classical theories of perception, looking first at
perhaps the most historically influential formulation – namely, theories that isolate “sensation” as
the locus of perception. Merleau-Ponty examines several ways in which psychologists have
attempted to define sensation, arguing in each case that this “confused notion” has caused these
analyses to miss the phenomenon of perception. Whether understood as an impression, a
quality, or a physiological phenomenon, sensation isolates a phenomenon – i.e, what we think of
as “the perceived” - from what Merleau-Ponty calls “the phenomenal field.” Following Gestalt
theory, he argues that “the most basic sensible given we can have” is “a figure against a
background”: “The perceptual 'something' is always in the middle of some other thing, it always
belongs to a 'field' [champ].” Moreover, this “perceptual 'something’” is, in experience, not
something objectively determinable, as the language of “quality” or “impression” suggests.
Instead, attending to the phenomenon reveals a “positive indeterminacy” whose ambiguity is
leveled down by “the unquestioned belief in the objective world.” As we have seen already in
the Preface, Merleau-Ponty's sense of “world” entails an inexhaustible character and thus resists
objectification. Science, however, requires phenomena to meet proscribed criteria in order to be
intelligible. Merleau-Ponty explains,

...[Science] introduces sensations, as things, precisely where experience shows there to already be
meaningful wholes; it imposes categories upon the phenomenal universe that only make sense
within the scientific universe. Science requires that two perceived lines, like two real lines, be
either equal or unequal, and that a perceived crystal have a determinate number of sides, without

174 Phenomenology, 3/25.
175 Ibid., 4/26.
176 Ibid., 7/28.
noticing that the nature of the perceived is to tolerate ambiguity, a certain “shifting” or “haziness” [bougé], and to allow itself to be shaped by the context.\textsuperscript{177}

In providing several phenomenological descriptions of issues of contemporary scientific interest such as the Müller-Lyer line illusion, Merleau-Ponty argues that perceptual experience does not fit any of the categories that reduce perception to a kind of “sensation.” This pattern – providing an alternative phenomenological description to an oft-cited perceptual “fact” in the scientific literature that demonstrates the inadequacies of scientific concepts in capturing that phenomenon – is repeated throughout the introductory chapters. In the Müller-Lyer case, the lines are said to appear “unequal” when they are really “equal,” but Merleau-Ponty explains that deciding between these alternatives is only essential in the objective world determined by science. By limiting our perceptual experience of the lines to these categories, science asks us to ignore the “haziness” or ambiguity that makes the illusion interesting in the first place. He writes, “The visual field is this strange milieu in which contradictory notions intertwine because the objects (the straight lines of Müller-Lyer’s illusion) are not here placed in the domain of being [le terrain de l’être] where a comparison would be possible, but are rather each grasped in its own private context, as if they did not belong to the same universe.”\textsuperscript{178} Science only sees determinate objects, while the visual field presents us with a context that shapes things into indeterminacies which are not without meaning, but which nonetheless exceed objectification.

By starting with “common sense” terms in the language of perception and showing how they fail to capture the phenomena, Merleau-Ponty is demonstrating the need for an alternative account that begins with experience. With respect to sensation, he argues that it “was the final term in the representation of the world, the furthest removed from the constitutive source, and thereby the least clear.”\textsuperscript{179} In order to clarify this concept and the others that Merleau-Ponty examines in the Introduction to *Phenomenology*, we must be “led back to the very experiences

\textsuperscript{177} Phenomenology 11/34.  
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 6/28.  
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 10/33.
that these words designate in order to define them anew.”

Experience, which is bound up with subjectivity, gives us “lacunae that are not merely non-perceptions” which cannot be seen through the objective lens of science. These lacunae are, in turn, part of a broader visual field that is given to us as a unity – or, as we saw above, a “universe.”

Drawing from *The Structure of Behavior*, Merleau-Ponty says that the *sine qua non* of the perceptual phenomenon is this embeddedness of the “perceptual something” in a “field.” He acknowledges that some psychologists outside of the Gestalt camp have attempted to explain perception as a kind of unity through the notion of “association,” but he disagrees with their conclusion that this unity is created through a cognitive act by which memories of earlier perceptions are connected in order to make sense of the present experience. Rather, he explains, “pure description” reveals that “we first perceive the whole as a thing” and that “the contiguity and the resemblance of stimuli are not prior to the constitution of the whole.”

Merleau-Ponty builds upon his contention that the scientific worldview obscures our originary experience of perception as follows:

The supposed conditions of perception become anterior to perception itself only when, rather than describing the perceptual phenomenon as a primary opening up to an object, we presuppose around it a milieu in which all of the developments and all of the cross-checking that will be performed by analytical perception are already inscribed, and in which all of the norms of actual perception will be justified – a realm of truth, a *world*. By presupposing this realm we strip perception of its essential function, which is to establish [fonder] or to inaugurate knowledge, and we view perception through the lens of its results.

Though we see the thing as a whole, it is presented to us within a “horizon of sense” by which we experience the object as having various intentional threads attached to it. We might, for example, see a distant object enmeshed within its landscape, and after nearing it, see that it is a separate object, as Merleau-Ponty describes walking towards a grounded ship whose mast first appears to be a part of the forest that surrounds the dune and then suddenly reconnects with the boat. He

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180 *Phenomenology* 10/33.
explains, “As I approached, I did not perceive the resemblances or the proximities that were, in the end, about to reunite with the superstructure of the ship in an unbroken picture. I merely felt that the appearance of the object was about to change, that something was imminent in this tension, as the storm is imminent in the clouds.”183 Part of the “horizon of sense” presented in the original experience of the ship was the anticipation of new meaning - perhaps, we can say, in the “haziness” of the ship – which was then fulfilled when the mast rejoined the structure.

The reorganization of our perception into a new meaningful whole, as with the example above, is not a matter of associating previous sensations in order to make sense of the scene before us. It is, instead, part of the imminent meaning bound up with the scene as it is originally given to us. Rather than the projection of memory, this is a “felt” anticipation, as we are “open” to these possibilities in our perceptual experiences. Even under normal circumstances, we cannot use memory to explain the sense given to us in perception: “Prior to any contribution by memory, that which is seen must currently be organized in such a way as to offer me a scene in which I can recognize my previous experiences. Thus, the appeal to memory presupposes what it is meant to explain, namely, the articulation of the givens, the imposing of a sense onto the sensible chaos.”184 In other words, my ability to see the ship as a ship is only possible if it is organized in the proper way to begin with; it must, for example, appear in an appropriate context. That the mast can first be seen as part of the surrounding dune is similarly predicated upon the forest being organized in a way that I can understand it as such.

Knowing the history of modern philosophy, one might surmise that the scientific worldview and its “empiricist” theories of perception might be best countered with rationalist (or, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, “intellectualist”) thought. Theories of perception that employ the categories of attention and judgment, however, reveal that the same prejudice infects

183 Phenomenology 18/40.
184 Ibid., 20/43.
intellectualist theses from the ground up: “Both [attention and judgment] take the objective world as their object for analysis, which comes first neither in time nor according to its sense; both are incapable of expressing the particular manner in which perceptual consciousness constitutes its object.” The way in which the intellectualist concept of “attention” misses the experience of perception, and starts instead from the objective world, is by construing perception as a mental act that is capable of rendering the perceived world in absolute clarity. Merleau-Ponty reminds us of the “clearness and distinctness” that qualified for knowledge in Descartes' Meditations: “The wax is, from the beginning, a pliable and mutable fragment of extension; but I know this either clearly or confusedly, 'depending on how closely I pay attention to the things in which the wax consists.'” The clarity which gives us knowledge of the wax, however, is attained by consciousness' returning to itself: “Since I experience a clarification of the object through attention, the perceived object must already contain the intelligible structure that attention draws out.” In other words, in these accounts, consciousness is constituting with respect to the external world, and “attention” is the means by which we are able to make that world clear to ourselves. Merleau-Ponty explains, “If consciousness finds the geometrical circle in the circular physiognomy of a plate, this is because consciousness already put it there. In order to take possession of attentive knowledge, consciousness need only return to itself, in the sense intended when we say that a man who has fainted 'comes to.'” The only possibility of “distraction” is presented by the body – recall, for example, Descartes' methodological bracketing of bodily sensations in reaching the ego cogito, the most clear and distinct thing.

As with the empiricists' theories of “sensation,” the intellectualist approach to perception once again rids a phenomenon of the “haziness” and ambiguity that is not only experienced by the

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185 Ibid., 28/50.
186 Ibid., 29/51. The quote from Descartes is from the second meditation. Landes notes that the standard English translation does not use “attention” (from the French “attention”). See page 503, endnote 4.
187 Ibid., 29/51.
188 Ibid., 29/51.
perceiver – as Merleau-Ponty recalled *feeling* the mast of the ship disconnect from the dune and rejoin the vessel – but also part of the structure of the phenomenon itself. All of the shadows, the intentional threads whose meanings are anticipated or felt but not yet revealed – in sum, the “lacunae that are not merely non-perceptions” - are missing in theories that reduce perception to attention. In intellectualist theories, perception is either clear or unclear, but a lack of clarity does not signify a hidden plenitude of meaning; rather, it is the product of “half-asleep” inattention. Attention is thus “unconditioned”: “all objects are equally available to it.”\(^{189}\) In other words, according to the intellectualist, objects are bereft of the essential “haziness” of phenomena, and a lack of clarity is only due to lack of attention. Were an object to appear ambiguously, like the grounded ship on the beach, it would be the product of erred perception.

Since all objects are equally available to consciousness, Merleau-Ponty asks, how is it that one object becomes the locus of attention? There is no means of distinguishing figure (with its *horizons*) from background, which, as we have seen already, is how perception is revealed in experience. When “attentive,” consciousness has all of its objects available to itself, and therefore “perceptual consciousness is mistakenly identified with the precise forms of scientific consciousness, and the indeterminate is not allowed into the definition of the mind.”\(^{190}\) Ironically, the external world is fully accessible to consciousness and we can have “objective” knowledge of it by virtue of the fact that it is given its intelligible structure through consciousness. Objectivity is thus dependent upon consciousness’ ability to return to itself. But given that dependence, Merleau-Ponty argues that we must “ask ourselves how the very idea of the precise world or of precise truth is possible, and to seek out its first springing forth into consciousness...

Consciousness must be brought face to face with its unreflective life in things and must awaken to

\(^{189}\) *Ibid.*, 30/52.

\(^{190}\) *Phenomenology* 31/52.
its own, forgotten, history."\textsuperscript{191} What is revealed in the unreflective – i.e., experience before it is abstracted by the scientific worldview - is our inability to fully access perceptual consciousness, negating the primary foundation for the intellectualists’ reduction of perception to attention.

As one might expect, despite some shifts in emphasis, working from an intellectualist perspective to develop a theory of perception as judgment yields the same unacceptable results. Here, however, we become entangled in the language of the accuracy or “truth” of perception in a way that was not an issue before; when interpreting perception as a kind of attention, an unclear perception is merely the product of not properly “attending” to the object, in the way that someone must “come to” as they become fully conscious. But as we saw above, since consciousness is constituting with respect to the external world in these theories, perception is really consciousness returning to itself. Merleau-Ponty charges that this return is not properly thematized – and if it were, it would become clear that such an absolute coincidence of perceiving subject and consciousness is not possible.

Interestingly, when perception is thought of as a kind of judgment, there is an at least tacit acknowledgment of such non-coincidence. This comes about by virtue of the fact that judgment is focused on ascertaining the “truth” of perception, which is guaranteed by the existence of a divine subject that, again using Descartes as an example, can “rule out the threat of the evil genius.” In essence, switching from a theory of perception as attention to perception as judgment means that perception becomes linked to a more originary locus of meaning. In attention, we only ever understand perception as the revelation of what is already constituted by consciousness. But as judgment, perception becomes a way of acknowledging something like a divine being as creator, as providing the reality whose truth I perceive. Judgment reveals that we can never access pure thought as can “the subject who possesses, as fully realized, all of the

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 33-34/56.
knowledge of which our actual knowledge is merely the first approach.”\textsuperscript{192} There is thus revealed a non-coincidence in judgment: the inability to align ourselves with the Divine. Despite this possible saving grace for the intellectualist approach to perception, it does not alter Merleau-Ponty's main argument against such theories, as they still begin from an unquestioned acceptance of an objective world: “they assume that what exists for us only in intention is actually realized somewhere; namely, a system of absolutely true thoughts capable of coordinating all phenomena, a geometrical plan that makes sense of all perspectives, and a pure object onto which all subjectivities open.”\textsuperscript{193}

In this brief review, we've seen two problems play out for both empiricist and intellectualist theories of perception: first, that neither orientation accurately captures the phenomena of perception; and more foundationally, that this is due to their remaining in the natural attitude, with the consequence that perceptual phenomena are only explicable in the language and world-view of scientific objectivism. Merleau-Ponty believes that the descriptive psychology offered in Gestalt theory makes great strides in addressing the first problematic but does little to develop the philosophical consequences that inhabit the latter:

...Gestalt theory lacks the overhaul of its categories required to sufficiently express these perceptual relations: it acknowledged the principle [of returning to phenomena], and it applied the principle in some specific cases, but it did not notice that an entire reformulation of the understanding is necessary if one wants to accurately express phenomena, or that in order to reach this goal one must question logic and the objective thought of classical philosophy, suspend the categories of the world, put into doubt (in the Cartesian sense) the supposed facts of realism, and proceed to a genuine “phenomenological reduction.”\textsuperscript{194}

It is precisely this “overhaul of categories” that is undertaken in the remainder of \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} – using, as Merleau-Ponty notes here, a “genuine phenomenological reduction.” He will move from the ground up, as it were, using “radical reflection” to recast the terms of perception: first, by delineating “the phenomenal field,” then, in turning to experience,
demonstrating various means by which the body is the “subject of perception,” and finally, in
Parts II and III, drawing from this new theory of perception to challenge the traditional categories
that the neither the Gestaltists nor existential and phenomenological philosophers were able to
accurately capture, including space, temporality, the Cogito, and our relations with others. Given
the formidable breadth of Phenomenology of Perception, we will focus only on Part I in this
chapter, and select sections from Part II in Chapter Four, as these bear the greatest weight in our
later discussions. For now, let's turn to the final chapter of the Introduction, and see how “radical
reflection” allows Merleau-Ponty to revolutionize the concept of “the phenomenal field.”

Though approached from a different angle (a critique of historical accounts of
perception), Merleau-Ponty's work on the phenomenal field in Phenomenology of Perception
picks up directly from where The Structure of Behavior left off. In the final pages of Structure,
Merleau-Ponty writes the following:

All the sciences situate themselves in a “complete” and real world without realizing that perceptual
experience is constituting with respect to this world. Thus we find ourselves in the presence of a
field of lived perception which is prior to number, measure, space and causality and which is
nonetheless given only as a perspectival view of objects gifted with stable properties, a
perspectival view of an objective world and an objective space. The problem of perception
consists in trying to discover how the intersubjective world, the determinations of which science is
gradually making precise, is grasped through this field.195

Here we can see an anticipation of Merleau-Ponty's critique of intellectualist and empiricist
theories of perception; he is arguing first that the sciences fail to recognize their own foundation
in perception, and second, that signification (or “meaning”) is constituted, but not by
consciousness and instead by “perceptual experience.” This indicates that there is some origin of
signification that is outside of our individual, unique perspectives, but is not an objectively
determined unity as it is, instead, what grounds that unity. We “find ourselves” in a field which is
given to us from our point of view, but which is nonetheless a “field of lived perception.” This

195 The Structure of Behavior, 219.
phenomenal field “constitutes, alters, and reorganizes itself before us like a spectacle.” In *Structure*, the problem of perception, which Merleau-Ponty described as the attempt to capture the ways by which our original experience of the phenomenal field becomes concretized into the objective world of the natural attitude, goes unanswered.

Where Merleau-Ponty faltered in *Structure*, he begins anew in *Phenomenology* – this time, prepared with his Husserlian-inspired form of perceptual analysis: phenomenological reduction pushed to its limits as “reflection on the unreflected,” or rather, reflection on the “lived world [le monde vécu] beneath the objective world.” Merleau-Ponty explains, “If the essence of consciousness is to forget its own phenomena and to thus make possible the constitution of 'things,' then this forgetting is not a simple absence, it is the absence of something that consciousness could make present. In other words, consciousness can only forget phenomena because it can also recall them.” Without turning phenomena into the products of “a mysterious inner world,” radical reflection allows us to “recall” phenomena in “the making explicit or the bringing to light of the pre-scientific life of consciousness.” But, Merleau-Ponty cautions, we must not assume that it is possible to bring this pre-scientific life into absolute clarity; this would be to “achieve the adequation between the reflecting and the reflected upon,” as is attempted in Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. Instead, we must recognize that the phenomenal field “resists in principle being directly and completely made explicit.”

The kind of reflection that Merleau-Ponty proposes is one that functions from the fundamental opacity of pre-reflective experience. He writes, “...we must consider reflection to be a creative operation that itself participates in the facticity of the unreflected.... [reflection] only

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196 The Structure of Behavior, 224.
197 Phenomenology, 57/83.
198 Ibid., 59/85.
199 Ibid., 59/86.
200 Ibid., 61/87 and endnote 15, page 511.
201 Ibid., 61/87.
ever has a partial view and a limited power.”

To recall our earlier selection from The Structure of Behavior, the phenomenal field is given to us from a perspectival view. In other words, even my most originary, unreflective experiences of the world are structured by certain limitations: “Reflection can never make it the case that I cease to perceive the sun on a hazy day as hovering two hundred paces away, that I cease to see the sun ‘rise’ and ‘set,’ or that I cease to think with the cultural instruments that were provided by my upbringing, my previous efforts, and my history.”

Part of the structure of our original perceptual experience is thus passive, a way in which the phenomenal field is given to me and not of my making, and that can be called my “facticity.” Merleau-Ponty wants to use a kind of reflection on perceptual experience that both acknowledges and “participates” in this situatedness. The means by which this is accomplished is to “reflect upon this reflection, understand the natural situation it is aware of replacing and that thereby belongs to its definition.”

Phenomenological reduction has thus become “the perpetual beginning of reflection at that point when an individual life begins to reflect upon itself.” In this perpetual beginning, there is never an absolute coincidence of meditating and unreflective subjectivity (as Husserl failed to see), but we also realize that consciousness is neither fully one nor the other. Merleau-Ponty believes that this amounts to “a change in the structure of our existence” and, correlatively, a new sense of the transcendental: “A philosophy becomes transcendental, that is, radical, not by taking up a position within absolute consciousness while failing to mention the steps that carried it there, but rather by considering itself as a problem; not by assuming the total making-explicit of knowledge, but rather by recognizing this presumption of reason as the fundamental

202 Phenomenology, 62/88.
203 Ibid., 62/89.
204 Ibid., 63/89.
205 Ibid., 63/90.
206 This is, perhaps, Merleau-Ponty's answer to his earlier problematic of reconciling “intellectual” and “perceptual” consciousness in The Structure of Behavior.
philosophical problem.”

In sum, we might say that reflection upon the unreflected foundation of experience reveals a non-coincidence at the heart of subjectivity, and this renders all interconnected philosophical considerations – not only of perception, but also of truth, objectivity, and even the structure of our existence – open questions.

**Theorizing Embodiment**

As we have just seen, what separates Merleau-Ponty’s approach to perception from intellectualist, empiricist, Gestalt, and even Husserlian accounts is the notion that the origin of perceptual experience – that from which we derive meaning and “make sense” of the perceived world – can be made available to us in reflection, but never completely. There is a “remainder” when we try to reflect on ourselves as perceptual consciousness, and this is due to our own facticity. Thus, to begin to respond to the problem of perception, now understood as the fact of non-coincidence as we try to grasp ourselves as perceiving subjects in reflection, one must further delineate the boundaries of this perspectival gaze. To be more precise, we might say that there are two limiters, here: first, the perspective through which the world opens to us in our originary, unreflective perceptual experiences (in Sartrean terms, the problem of being an “in-itself”), and second, the perspective through which we reflect upon ourselves in our philosophical attempts to capture those experiences (the problem of being a “for-itself”). It is Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to understand the former, which, following Sartre, he calls “the gaze,” that leads him to revolutionize our philosophical understanding of embodiment.

Merleau-Ponty begins with the simple insight that “my body... is my point of view upon the world.” In our everyday attempts to make sense of the world, we forget this fundamental

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207 *Phenomenology* 63/90.
208 Merleau-Ponty first uses this terminology in the Introduction to Part I. See *Phenomenology* 69/95.
209 Ibid., 73/99.
fact, and thus lose sight of the origin of perceptual objects as meaningful entities in our gaze. Merleau-Ponty explains, “We must rediscover the origin of the object at the very core of our experience, and we must come to understand how, paradoxically, there is for-us an in-itself.”210 In other words, we must ask the basic question: How is an object within my gaze an object “for” me? Merleau-Ponty chooses to begin his “radical reflection” with the constitution of one's own body, which interestingly “evades the treatment” that science attempts to impose upon it. But further, as the body is our perspective on the world and thus its constitution is “but a moment in the constitution of the object, the body... will carry with it the intentional threads that unite it to its surroundings and that, in the end, will reveal to us the perceiving subject as well as the perceived world.”211 Understanding the constitution of the body will allow Merleau-Ponty to articulate how the “in-itself” is “for-us,” but with the added caveat that here the “in-itself” is our own body. As we will see, Merleau-Ponty's observations reveal that within our own embodiment, this distinction collapses. Since, moreover, it is from the body that our “intentional threads” connect us to the world, we will be led to challenge this dualism more broadly.

Part I of Phenomenology can be summarized as Merleau-Ponty's re-constitution of the body not as an object for scientific study, but as it is revealed in “radical reflection.” Echoing Heidegger's insight that we become aware of things in our daily usage that ordinarily go unnoticed when they become “unhandy” or unusable212, Merleau-Ponty begins his analysis of the body by looking first at psychological accounts of perception in various modes of being “broken down.” In another parallel to his contemporaries, Merleau-Ponty moves as Freud characteristically does from the pathological to the normal in each study,213 which entails the

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210 Ibid., 74/100.
211 Ibid., 74/100.
212 Heidegger, Being and Time Paragraph 16.
213 Though my comment is meant stylistically here, it's worth noting Merleau-Ponty's engagement in, and respect for, Freudian analysis; aside from the handful of references in passing to Freud's Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis and Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis, he also writes the following
following: First, Merleau-Ponty describes how various abnormal bodily phenomena are
accounted for in current psychological and physiological literature, though the references here are
by no means exhaustive – Merleau-Ponty most often refers to the collection of Gestalt theorists
he used in *The Structure of Behavior* and no more than a handful of other early 20th century
psychologists (most notably Gelb and Goldstein). Following a review of these other accounts,
Merleau-Ponty moves through his own phenomenological observations to provide an alternative
description of the phenomena as a disruption of the patient's existential situation. In Chapter Two
and our earlier depiction of the “phenomenal field,” we saw how Merleau-Ponty's reformulation
of the phenomenological project entails a methodology that reveals an unreflective perceiving
subject that is given in such a situation. Merleau-Ponty uses “radical reflection” to provide an
alternative reading of the bodily phenomena he introduces, challenging many of the
contemporary understandings of the body.

As M.C. Dillon writes, “Properly speaking… the injuries and diseases being considered
[in *Phenomenology of Perception*] have resulted in degeneration of the lived worlds of the
afflicted subjects.”214 To be embodied, for Merleau-Ponty, means to both have a world and to be
of the world. Part of the work in the following sections will be oriented towards understanding
this connection between body and world. More importantly, however, we will be interested in
clarifying what Merleau-Ponty means when he reveals that the body is a “natural self” [*un moi
regarding the relationship between psychoanalysis and phenomenology:

It would be a mistake to believe that psychoanalysis, even for Freud, excludes the description of
psychological motives and is opposed to the phenomenological method. Psychoanalysis has, on
the contrary (and unwittingly), contributed to developing the phenomenological movement by
claiming, as Freud puts it, that every human act 'has a sense,' and by seeking everywhere to
understand the event rather than to tie it to mechanical conditions (*Phenomenology* 160-161/195).

He also more directly discusses Freudian analysis in *The Structure of Behavior*. See Chapter Three,
Section Four, where Merleau-Ponty criticizes Freud for not recognizing the ontological implications of
his studies. More precisely, Merleau-Ponty argues that Freud wasn't able to go beyond causal
explanation, though the justification for such a move can be found within his work. See especially
*Structure* 176-177 and *Phenomenology* 160-163/195-198.

214 Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 139.
We will see that there are important distinctions made between the “natural world” and the “cultural world” that suggest a nature/culture dualism at the same time that it is overcome in the phenomenon of (human) embodied existence. I will argue, moreover, that Merleau-Ponty’s comments on animality further perpetuate, and complicate, a perceived dualism between nature and culture in this account. Before we reach these analyses, however, we must reconstruct Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment as it is developed in Part 1 of *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Famously, Merleau-Ponty most often refers to a patient from Gelb and Goldstein's studies in his phenomenological descriptions: Schneider, a war veteran suffering from various symptoms including “psychic blindness” (the inability to perform abstract movements when the patient is not observing himself performing them), a disinterest in sexual activity, and, in general, being “tied to actuality,” which renders him incapable of recognizing possibilities that extend beyond the literal and the present, as in the case of linguistic metaphors and double-meanings. Aside from Schneider, Merleau-Ponty reviews cases of patients suffering from anorexia\(^\text{216}\), aphasia\(^\text{217}\), anarthria\(^\text{218}\), and several other disorders which have been taken up and discussed at length in the works of Merleau-Ponty's contemporaries. In examining these pathologies, Merleau-Ponty is able to identify four characteristics of embodied existence: the body as spatial and mobile (Part 1, Chapter 4), the body as a unity (Part 1, Chapter 5), the body as sexual being (Part 1, Chapter 6), and finally, the body as expressive (Part 1, Chapter 7). In what follows, I will use Merleau-Ponty's discussion of each of these aspects of embodiment in order to articulate a general sense of his claim that the body is a “natural self.” Through this process, I will also define the following key terms and concepts: body schema, horizon, intentionality, sediment, situation, habit,

\(^{215}\) *Phenomenology*, 174/209.  
\(^{216}\) Ibid., 167/202.  
\(^{217}\) Ibid., 127/158, 180/214.  
\(^{218}\) Ibid., 180/214.
expression, and style. In the conclusion to this chapter, I will draw out some complications that are left unresolved with respect to the differences and similarities between “nature” and “culture” as they are related to embodiment. Though a distinction becomes more pronounced when we turn to Merleau-Ponty's later works, where these terms are recast as the difference between sense as “non-instituted” (in nature) and “instituted” (in culture), here one must pay close attention to textual nuances to see early formulations of such a division. Later, I will argue that although this conceptual division appears in Merleau-Ponty's nature courses and other works, it ultimately does not amount to a new metaphysical dualism, as there remains something ontologically “deeper” that is the foundation of each term — namely, what Merleau-Ponty calls the “flesh” as the precondition for all sense and expression. The theory of expression that begins in section five of this chapter and continues through Chapter Four thus signifies a turning point at which “nature” and “culture” come to exist more concretely in Merleau-Ponty's corpus.

The Spatiality, Motricity, and Unity of the Body

In his study of the spatiality of the body, Merleau-Ponty seeks, above all, to avoid thinking of the body as a discrete object among other objects (partes extra partes). He explains:

If my arm is resting on the table I should never think of saying that it is beside the ashtray in the way in which the ashtray is beside the telephone. The outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross. This is because its parts are inter-related in a peculiar way: they are not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other.219

Merleau-Ponty uses the condition called allocheiria, in which patients identify sensations with the wrong parts of the body, to argue that those parts form a kind of system: “The various points on the left hand are transferred to the right as relevant to a total organ, a hand without parts which

219 Phenomenology 100/127.
has been suddenly displaced.” We see again that the body as a whole is not given as an object among objects in the world. Rather, it is experienced as a system and a unity which includes each of its “parts.” Merleau-Ponty explains that contemporary psychologists attempt to describe this unity as a kind of “body image” which individuals develop through the accumulation of experiences. These supposedly lead to the association of tactile, visual, and kinaesthetic impressions which are grouped together to form a coherent whole. These accounts, Merleau-Ponty argues, still fail to move beyond an understanding of the spatiality of the body as a matter of position in the sensory world. The spatiality of the body is, instead, a situational spatiality.

The primary concept that Merleau-Ponty uses to elucidate how the body is “situationally” spatial is what, drawing from Husserl’s then-unpublished works, he calls the “I can” of consciousness. As we have just seen, Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid thinking of things in the world as discrete objects and as the body as one object among others. The first step to understanding bodily spatiality as “situational” is to understand how the body itself is intentional and how this collapses a rigid distinction not only between mind and body, since intentionality spans beyond consciousness, but also between the body-as-object and other things, since the body is connected to its environment through various “intentional threads.” Merleau-Ponty insists that this intentionality takes place in the “phenomenal” and not the objective realm; in other words, one will not find measurable “evidence” here to justify these observations. Instead, this is what we find beneath that level – what is reached when we “radically” reflect back on our pre-reflective experience.

In his radical reflection, Merleau-Ponty observes that what is originally given is that “my body appears to me as a posture toward a certain task, actual or possible.” I am, on the one hand, constantly aware of a “body schema,” which Merleau-Ponty redefines as a certain “posture

220 Ibid., 100/127.
221 Ibid., 102/129.
222 Ibid., 102/129.
in the inter-sensory world.” But emerging from this generalized posture is also always something towards which my body is more directly oriented. In Gestalt terminology, the body with its “intentional threads” is a “figure” against an “indifferent” background.223 Merleau-Ponty explains, “If my body can ultimately be a 'form,' and if there can be, in front of it, privileged figures against indifferent backgrounds, this is insofar as my body is polarized by its tasks, insofar as it exists toward them [il existe vers elles], insofar as it coils up upon itself in order to reach its goal, and the 'body schema' is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world [au monde].”224 When sitting at one's desk typing, for example, reflection might reveal the privileged “figure” of one's fingertips pressing on the keyboard to articulate a certain meaning, while there is nonetheless a general awareness of one's “posture” in the world, as being in the world in such a way that is “polarized” towards its completion: sitting at the desk in a way that facilitates typing, using one's vision to ensure that what is meant to be typed appears on the screen, and so forth. One's feet, legs, torso, and other regions of the body not directly involved in the act of typing blend into the “indifferent” background, along with the other non-privileged parts of the room: the walls, the ceiling, the trash receptacle, etc. This polarization of the body towards some task reveals “a lived relation... in the natural system of one's own body.”225 Again, this “does not pass through the objective world”; only another “who lends to the subject of movements his own objective representation of the living body, can believe... that the hand moves itself in objective space.” In other words, what we think of as fundamental – that the body and its parts can be measured and mapped onto an objective representation of space – is, in fact, derivative. We in fact project objective space onto our experience of the living body. To borrow a Heideggerian phrase, we find ourselves “always already” directed towards something. As the typist, I find my hands and fingers “already mobilized” on the keyboard at the very moment that

223 Ibid., 102-103/129-130.
224 Ibid., 103/130.
225 Ibid., 108/135.
I try to isolate them in perception; “they are the center-point of ‘intentional threads’” that link me to the keys and the screen. Merleau-Ponty thus argues that we “never move our objective body, we move our phenomenal body.”  

Merleau-Ponty uses these phenomenological reflections to respond to Gelb and Goldstein's analysis of their famous patient Schneider, who, among many other irregularities due to brain injury, is unable to engage in “abstract movements.” These are “movements that are not directed at any actual situation, such as moving his arms or legs upon command, or extending and flexing a finger.”  

Schneider is unable to accomplish these movements if his eyes are closed and he cannot see the parts of the body he is to move. Moreover, he must “execute preparatory movements involving his whole body” prior to engaging in the action, if he is to be successful. Interestingly, Schneider is capable of engaging in “concrete” movements on command, even with his eyes closed. Such “concrete” movements are “necessary for life” and are movements he is habituated to, like using a match to light a lamp, or blowing his nose into a handkerchief.  

Merleau-Ponty notes that “in this patient, as well as for patients with cerebellar injuries, a dissociation between the act of pointing and the reactions of taking or grasping can be observed: the same subject who is incapable of pointing to a part of his body on command quickly reaches with his hand for the point at which a mosquito is biting him.”  

With Schneider and other brain-injured patients, we can begin to discern a distinction between grasping, concrete movements, and pointing, abstract movements.  

Merleau-Ponty argues that the difference between grasping and pointing is derived from different ways that location can be “known.” More specifically, he argues that one can point to a

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225 Ibid., 108/136.
226 Ibid., 105/132.
227 Ibid., 105/133.
228 Ibid., 105/133.
229 Ibid., 105/133.
230 Ibid., 106/133.
231 Though this may sound reminiscent of Husserl's first Logical Investigation or Paragraphs 17-18 of Heidegger's Being and Time, Merleau-Ponty here cites Goldstein's “Über Zeigen und Greifen,” Nervenarzt 4 (1931), 453-66. The original French terms in this discussion are saisir and montrer.
location only when it is possible to carry out an *epistemic* intention, but this is not required in order to grasp or touch. Schneider's behavior illustrates that “his body is available as a means of insertion into his familiar surroundings, but not as a means of expression of a spontaneous and free spatial thought.”\textsuperscript{232} This “spontaneous and free spatial thought” is only possible when one has access to an *epistemic* relationship to space. Conversely, Schneider is only capable of carrying out movements on command by “placing himself into the spirit of the actual situation to which they correspond”: “The whole body can be seen collaborating here, and the patient never reduces it to the strictly indispensable traits as does the normal subject. Along with the military salute come other external marks of respect. Along with the gesture of the right hand that pretends to comb his hair comes the gesture of the left hand that pretends to hold the mirror.”\textsuperscript{233}

Whereas a normal subject engages in the military salute as part of an experimental situation – i.e., he only does what is required in order to complete the movement as it has been ordered -, Schneider must make the imaginary situation real. The normal subject can detach his body from the imaginary; Schneider must place himself “within the affective situation of the whole, and the movement flows from this whole, just as in life.”\textsuperscript{234}

Using these observations, Merleau-Ponty argues that we can see two different kinds of bodily spatiality and motricity play out: on the one hand, we have the body “as the power of determinate action,” and “my surroundings as a collection of possible points for this power to be applied,” and on the other hand, “my arm as a machine... and the world as a pure spectacle with which I do not merge but that I contemplate and that I point to.”\textsuperscript{235} Thus we see the distinction between a grasping intention, wherein a subject “knows” her bodily space via a *lived relation* to it, and an *epistemic* intention, where bodily space can be described, measured, and indicated – in

\textsuperscript{232} *Phenomenology*, 106/134.
\textsuperscript{233} *Ibid.*, 107/134.
\textsuperscript{234} *Ibid.*, 107/134.
a word, pointed to. What Schneider's incapacities reveal is an inability to access this epistemic relationship to space and, correlatively, an inability to engage in “objective space.” But importantly, this incapacity reveals that the epistemic relationship is derived from the more fundamental lived situation in which we move our “phenomenal bodies.” It is only in abstraction, as in the experimental situation where we play out an imagined role, that we engage an epistemic relation to space and use our bodies as machines rather than “powers” that are mobilized by the world around them.

To further clarify the distinction between concrete and abstract movement, Merleau-Ponty explains that the “background” (in the Gestaltian sense) of the former is “the given world [le monde donné],” while the background of the latter is constructed. As we have seen, when Schneider is directed to perform an abstract movement, he can only do so when he puts himself into the lived situation in which a given movement would arise – such as assuming the entire posture of a soldier in order to salute. Another way of describing this distinction is to say that Schneider can only engage in movement that takes place within being or within the actual, whereas abstract movement “sets up its own background” and takes place within the possible or non-being. Schneider has lost the function of “projection,” by which “the subject of movement organizes before himself a free space in which things that do not exist naturally can take on a semblance of existence.” Merleau-Ponty argues that this function is a fundamentally human capacity: “abstract movement hollows out a zone of reflection and of subjectivity, it superimposes a virtual or human space over physical space.” This means, in turn, that abstract movement necessitates an inversion of the “natural relation between [one's] body and the surroundings,” since one must be able to disconnect one's body from those concrete movements that are

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236 Ibid. 114/142.
237 Ibid., 114/142.
238 Ibid., 114/142.
239 Ibid., 115/143
“necessary for life.” In this way, “human productivity” appears “through the thickness of being.”

Further study of Schneider's condition reveals disturbances of his intellectual and perceptual capacities along with his motor abilities. Merleau-Ponty recounts, for example, Schneider's incapacity to recognize a fountain pen as such without addressing it scientifically—by observing and collecting various data and cross-checking hypotheses. Schneider reasons, “It's black, blue, and bright. There is a white patch, it is oblong... It could be some form of instrument... it must be a pencil or a fountain pen. (He touches his vest pocket). This is where it goes, for writing something down.” Schneider's situation here reveals “the spontaneous method of normal perception”: whereas Schneider must verbalize his observations and use language to connect possible significations to what he sees, the normal subject immediately connects a certain signification to the object: “the object is 'speaking' [parlant] and meaningful, the arrangement of colors immediately 'means' something.”

Just as Schneider does not immediately perceive signification from a given object, he in turn does not project his own intentions onto the world around him. The normal person's intentions are “immediately reflected in the perceptual field: they polarize it, put their stamp on it, or finally, effortlessly give birth there to a wave of significations.” In other words, Schneider is stuck in the literal: the perceptual world has lost its “plasticity.” “Nothing is present for the patient,” Merleau-Ponty explains, “other than what is given immediately.” Merleau-Ponty concludes from this that Schneider's disorder resides in “a personal core that is the patient's being and his power of existing,” namely, the “intentional arc” that underpins the life of consciousness and “projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our

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240 Ibid., 115/143.
241 Ibid., 132/164. Merleau-Ponty is quoting another study on Schneider from Psychologische Forschung 16 (1932), 49. Eds. Gelb and Goldstein. Full citation in Phenomenology 522, endnote 72.
242 Ibid., 133/164.
243 Ibid., 133/165.
244 Ibid., 134/166.
ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships.” Merleau-Ponty explains that the intentional arc – a concept borrowed from Hochheimer, a contemporary of Gelb and Goldstein - “creates the unity of the senses, the unity of the senses with intelligence, and the unity of sensitivity and motricity.” Schneider's disorder can be described as losing his “intentional arc” (or, more pointedly, Merleau-Ponty says that it “goes limp” [détend]).

Drawing from his analysis of Schneider, Merleau-Ponty argues that the normal patient, who demonstrates a “polarization” towards various tasks and significations through his intentional arc, reveals that the body is not simply “in” the world but rather, “inhabits it.” The real crux of Merleau-Ponty's analysis, however, is that this polarization happens in perception and it is what makes the way in which the body inhabits space situational: “[one] need not seek a situation and a space in which to deploy concrete movements, this space is itself given, it is the present world: the piece of leather 'to be cut' and the lining 'to be sewn.' The workbench, the scissors, and the pieces of leather are presented to the subject as poles of action; they define through their combined value, a particular situation that remains open, that calls for a certain mode of resolution, a certain labor.” Though I may reflect on my actions and consciously choose to engage in one act or another, I originally find myself in a situation which has certain possibilities available to me – and of those, some towards which I am more “polarized” than others.

What it means to perceive, then, is to be drawn in this manner towards the world, not just as consciousness but as a body that is “the power for a certain world,” or alternatively, as “the mediator of a world.” But prior to perception and more fundamentally, the capacity for being drawn in this way toward objects is found in the body's motricity, which Merleau-Ponty argues is

245 Ibid., 137/170.
246 Ibid., 137/170.
247 Ibid., 137/170.
249 Ibid., 109/137.
250 Ibid., 146/180.
“original intentionality.” This is why Merleau-Ponty follows Husserl’s later works in declaring that consciousness is originarily an “I can.” He writes that “the movement of existence” unites vision, movement, and other ways of relating to objects “by orienting them toward the inter-sensory unity of a ‘world.’” This, in turn, entails that for us to be able to move towards or otherwise engage with an object through our body, that intentional object must first exist for it – and hence, “our body must not belong to the region of the ‘in-itself.’” The body, as “mediator of a world,” is itself intentional and grounds all other possible relations.

Merleau-Ponty uses the phenomenon of acquiring habits as a means of demonstrating how the body “mediates” in this way. To return to an earlier example, recall that “the subject knows where the letters are on the keyboard just as we know where one of our limbs is – a knowledge or familiarity that does not provide us with a position in objective space.”251 The typing habit, Merleau-Ponty explains, is “a question of knowledge in our hands [un savoir qui est dans les mains].”252 Examining habit thus leads us to rework our concept of “understanding” as well as the body; Merleau-Ponty explains, “To understand [comprendre] is to experience [éprouver] the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization – and the body is our anchorage in a world.”253 For Husserl, “knowledge” was the meaning-fulfillment of an intentional act as a cognitive process; Merleau-Ponty's sense of “understanding,” however, is a correspondence between intention and givenness that is realized through the body.254

When we are unable to “anchor” ourselves in the world using our bodies, as when our bodily intentionality cannot be realized given our natural capacities, we can expand our bodily

251 Ibid., 145/179.
252 Ibid., 145/179.
253 Ibid., 146/180.
254 Perhaps Merleau-Ponty uses comprendre instead of entendre to emphasize this difference, as the root prendre connotes a physical relation to the thing. In his later works, Merleau-Ponty connects entendre to the German Verstand, which is the term Kant uses with respect to the faculty of the understanding. Comprendre, alternatively, corresponds to Verstehen, Heidegger's term for hermeneutical understanding.
schema to incorporate instruments into it. This is one way in which we acquire new habits: “The blind man's cane has ceased to be an object for him, it is no longer perceived for itself; rather, the cane's furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone, it increases the scope and the radius of the act of touching and has become analogous to a gaze.”

A blind man is able to understand his surroundings through his expanded body schema, “anchored” between intention and realization by the “sensitive zone” at the end of the cane. The body schema, Merleau-Ponty explains, is “not merely an experience of my body,” but rather, “an experience of my body in the world”; it is an “immediately given invariant by which different motor tasks are instantly transposable.”

To have various movements “instantly transposable” here means simply that the body does not have to use symbolic or objective representations in order to understand its world and realize its meaning-intentions. The body, through its “schema” as locus of possible movement, “reaches the world and the object” without having to measure or reflect. Looking closely at the phenomenon of habit further reveals to us how the body is intentional, whereby it projects signification and meaning onto its world. “Motricity,” or rather, the body's mobility, is “the primary sphere in which the sense of all significations is first given in the domain of represented space.”

In other words, for there to be “represented space” for us - as for example, the sense of space by which we measure distances between objects – we must first be embodied. Represented space is derivative from the sphere of motricity, where we first (in the sense of “originally”) project meaning onto the world around us. To return to the example above, when we assume new instruments into our body schemas, such as the blind man's cane, we add new “sensitive zones” through which we can project these originary meanings onto the world.

255 Ibid., 144/178.
256 Ibid., 142/176.
The acquisition of habit is not merely relegated to an expanded body schema; we often form new “motor habits” by which we can inhabit space differently using only our natural abilities. Merleau-Ponty argues again that habit is not a matter of analysis and cognition – in other words, it is not a matter of intellectual representation. Using the example of learning a new dance, he asks, “do we not find the formula of the movement through analysis and then recompose it, taking this ideal sketch as a guide and drawing upon already acquired movements (such as walking and running)? But in order for the new dance to integrate particular elements of general motricity, it must first have received, so to speak, a motor consecration.”258 We do not “understand” [comprendre] the movements of dance the way that we “understand” [entendre] mathematical operations.259 The body “grasps the motor signification” of the dance. This is accomplished in the same way that we are able to navigate our bodies through the world without (at least, in normal circumstances) crashing into other persons or objects, or, if we have acquired the habit of driving, we know how to safely maneuver a vehicle to reach a given destination. Merleau-Ponty explains, “Places in space are not defined as objective positions in relation to the objective position of our body, but rather they inscribe around us the variable reach of our intentions and our gestures... Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments.”260 Just as the typist possesses the knowledge of the placement of keys “in her hands,” our bodies learn and understand a dance. With these new habits, we have new possibilities for bodily intentionality – and thus, new sources of signification.

Merleau-Ponty notes that when we incorporate new objects into our body schema, such as the blind man's cane or the typist's keyboard, we “construct an instrument, and the body

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258 Phenomenology 144/178.
259 Ibid., 144/178.
260 Ibid., 145/179.
projects a *cultural world* around itself.”\textsuperscript{261} It is important to question here what role the sense of “culture” is playing, here, and Merleau-Ponty’s conclusions in his discussion of the habit body are telling. Above all, he argues that these observations reveal the body in its intentionality as “eminently an expressive space”: “it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes.”\textsuperscript{262} And as if to distinguish the human body from what it is not, he adds that “even if our body does not impose definite instincts upon us from birth, *as the animal’s body does*, then it at least gives the form of generality to our life and prolongs our personal acts into stable dispositions.”\textsuperscript{263} Whereas the animal body follows “definite instincts,” the human body is capable of using instruments, incorporating them into the body schema, and thus establishing a cultural world. There thus appears a distinction between the animal and its body schema which connects it only to its *natural* world, and the human whose expressive capacities extend beyond instinct to expand and evolve the body schema in its *cultural* world. We will return to this schema shortly – but only to trouble what seem to initially be clear divisions.

Merleau-Ponty outlines three ways in which the human body establishes meaning and inhabits a world:

Sometimes [the body] restricts itself to gestures necessary for the conservation of life, and correlatively it posits a biological world around us. Sometimes, playing upon these first gestures and passing from their literal to their figurative sense, it brings forth a new core of signification through them – this is the case of new motor habits, such as dance. And finally, sometimes the signification aimed at cannot be reached by the natural means of the body. We must, then, construct an instrument, and the body projects a cultural world around itself. At all levels, the body exercises the same function... Habit is but a mode of this fundamental power. The body, then, has understood [*compris*] and the habit has been acquired when the body allows itself to be penetrated by a new signification, when it has assimilated a new meaningful [*significatif*] core.\textsuperscript{264}

\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 148/182.
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid., 147/182.
\textsuperscript{263} Ibid., 147/182.
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., 147-148/182.
If our body is “our general means of having a world,” then by Merleau-Ponty’s description here, it is capable of having a biological, figurative, and cultural world. To “have a world” in this sense means to “inhabit” space in the way that we find ourselves already intentionally and thus meaningfully connected to things outside of our bodily schema in our most foundational perceptual experiences. Merleau-Ponty concludes that we are thus led to “a new sense [sens] of the word 'sense' [sens]... that does not come from a universal constituting consciousness, a sense that adheres to certain contents. My body is this meaningful core that behaves as a general function and that nevertheless exists and that is susceptible to illness.”265 Here we finally see how the body can be both “for-itself” and “in-itself” while irreducible to either; it is a living locus of signification. Embodiment reveals a “knotting together of essence and existence”266 that, Merleau-Ponty argues, will be found in perception more generally in the development of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Though he does not use the term here, we will later find that Merleau-Ponty calls the movement by which the body projects new meaning into the world and goes beyond its essence the fact of “transcendence.”267 To be clear, we now see that a transcendental philosophy that uses radical phenomenological reduction reveals a transcendental subject, itself “radical” insofar as its transcendence comes from, and falls back into, immanence.

Before turning to his next major element of embodied existence – the body in its sexual being – Merleau-Ponty pauses in the development of *Phenomenology of Perception* to return to the phenomenon of the body as a unity. We have already seen several iterations of this, as, for example, the allocheiric patient revealed that the body is experienced as a single “organ” rather

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267 Dillon cautions that we do not confuse this form of transcendence with the Kantian and Husserlian transcendental ego: “One must keep in mind that the body also has an interrogative function: it is a questioning of the world, and its motility is a response to the questions the world raises... The body does not synthesize the world *ex nihilo*; the body seeks understanding from the bodies with which it interacts.” Dillon, 146.
than a collection of discrete parts. But in this brief, transitional chapter, Merleau-Ponty is instead interested in a different iteration of the body's unity – namely, the “implication” of the visual, tactile, and motor aspects of the body. To understand why Merleau-Ponty is particularly focused on these capacities, one might say that studying their implication is a further means of seeing how the body's motricity and its situational spatiality are established, and discovered, through perception.

As usual, Merleau-Ponty provides some phenomenological observations to first establish that the visual, tactile, and motor aspects of the body are indeed experienced as a unity. He explains, “If I am seated at my desk and want to pick up the telephone, the movement of my hand toward the object, the straightening of my torso, and the contraction of my leg muscles envelop each other; I desire a certain result and the tasks divide themselves up among the segments in question, and the possible combinations of movements are given in advance as equivalent: I could remain leaning back in my chair provided that I extend my arm further, I could lean forward, or I could even partly stand up. All of these movements are available to us through their common signification.” To recall an earlier discussion, we are always in the world as intentionally oriented towards some “figure” against a “background”; here the “figure” is the telephone that I want to pick up. What Merleau-Ponty is describing is that we have certain possibilities that are capable of fulfilling my intention of answering the phone, using various modulations of our capacities for touch, vision, and movement. Each of these “parts” of our bodies has a “functional value” through which we know them. To put this slightly differently, at any given moment, I know my capacity for vision in its relation to my current project, and similarly, I coordinate my

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268 “The Synthesis of One's Own Body,” *Phenomenology* Part I, Chapter IV.
269 The French term here is *l'implication*. Literally, Merleau-Ponty means the ways in which these are implied, interwoven or entwined.
270 *Phenomenology* 150/185.
vision and other senses through these projects. This “coordination is not learned,” however, I find myself in a situation in which my various capacities are already united in achieving a certain goal. Merleau-Ponty writes that “the connection between the segments of our body, or between our visual and our tactile experience, is not produced gradually and through accumulation. I do not translate the ‘givens of touch’ into ‘the language of vision,’ nor vice-versa; I do not assemble the parts of my body one by one. Rather, this translation and this assemblage are completed once and for all in me, they are my body itself.”

Having established that we experience these different aspects of our body as united, Merleau-Ponty turns to the perennial question of the “location” of the seat of consciousness. One indeed may be tempted to accept Merleau-Ponty's contention that the phenomenon we call our “body” is this living unity of coordinated parts (both in the physical and functional sense) that are only divided in abstraction, but also think that consciousness “controls” or presides over this unity. Merleau-Ponty writes, “I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body... I do not simply contemplate the relations between the segments of my body and the correlations between my visual body and my tactile body; rather, I am myself the one who holds these arms and these legs together, the one who simultaneously sees them and touches them.”

Once again collapsing the divide between mental operation and physical enactment, Merleau-Ponty argues that what accomplishes the unity of my body – that, for example, I experience my visual and tactile perceptions of my hand as linked together in the same object – is the “style” with which my hand moves. In other words, my body as a whole has a certain manner of being, and this manner cannot be reduced to strictly mental or physical causes.

Since the body as a unity is thus best described as having a certain “fashion,” Merleau-Ponty reasons that we cannot draw comparisons between it and physical objects, but instead

271 Ibid., 150/185.
272 Ibid., 151/186. My emphasis.
273 Ibid., 151/186.
should examine it like a work of art. He explains, “In a painting or in a piece of music, the idea cannot be communicated other than through the arrangement of color or sounds.”

To understand what Merleau-Ponty means here, we might think about what is often said about great works of art: that you have to see them in person in order to grasp their significance. The ambiguity of the Mona Lisa's smile, for example, is only truly understood when you can look carefully at the various strokes of da Vinci's paintbrush that do not translate from the physical painting at the Louvre to prints and reproductions. Drawing from his preferred artist, Merleau-Ponty writes that “only the perception of his paintings will present me with the uniquely existing Cezanne.”

Similarly, we might think of the difference between hearing a composer conduct his own symphonic arrangement and another orchestra's rendition. There is something lost in every reproduction that, despite all attempts to stay true to the work of art, cannot be reconstructed.

What, then, do we draw from these examples that can resonate with what we have already said about the body? The body's “style,” it seems, has the same uniqueness as the Mona Lisa's smile:

A novel, a poem, a painting, and a piece of music are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression cannot be distinguished from the expressed, whose sense is only accessible through direct contact, and who send forth their signification without ever leaving their temporal and spatial place. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to the work of art. It is a knot of living significations and not the law of a certain number of covariant terms.

The body's expression, whether in its motricity, habit, gesture, or speech, is not a feat of the coordination of various parts, nor is it a physical enactment of mental commands: it is instead a performance of the body, accomplished via that body's individual style in a certain spatial and temporal place. As always, the body's transcendence is coupled with its immanence: it reaches toward the world as an answer to a question – one which is posed to it as a physical being whose capacities are created and limited by its biological existence. The miracle of expression happens

\[274 \text{Ibid.}, 152/187.\]
\[275 \text{Ibid.}, 152/187.\]
\[276 \text{Ibid.}, 152/188.\]
\[277 \text{Ibid.}, 153/188. The French here is font, from faire.\]
when the body is drawn into a “new knot of significations” that are added to its greater totality of significative possibilities: “our previous movements are integrated into a new motor entity, the first visual givens are integrated into a new sensorial entity, and our natural powers suddenly merge with a richer signification that was, up into that point, merely implied in our perceptual or practical field or that was merely anticipated in our experience through a certain lack, and whose advent suddenly reorganizes our equilibrium and fulfills our blind expectation.”

It is important to see that not only are transcendence and immanence intertwined from the outset, but that they also form a kind of circle: an act of transcendence brings a new signification, which then gets settled into an equilibrium. A new habit, for example, becomes part of the body's “knowledge.” We will see this circle of expression return again when we later discuss the phenomenon of speech.

The Body in Its Sexual Being

In what we have seen so far, Merleau-Ponty has diverged little from the philosophical canon in his selection of primary existential categories that demarcate the uniqueness of human experience – the difference, of course, being his emphasis on the ways in which each category is embodied. Space and time are not transcendental in the Kantian sense but lived: the body “takes up” space, moves through it, and inhabits it in certain ways; time, though not formally addressed in these sections of Part I, is nonetheless implicit in the body via the process of sedimentation, by which we can say that my body and its capacities are different now from how they were before and that its very functioning is thus a trace of a history. But in Chapter 5, Merleau-Ponty takes an unexpected turn towards the body as a sexual being. Why does Merleau-Ponty choose sexuality as one of the privileged realms which reveals embodied existence in perception? He explains his

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278 Phenomenology 155/190.
reason thusly: “if we wish to reveal the genesis of being for us, then we must ultimately consider
the sector of our experience that clearly has sense and reality only for us, namely, our affective
milieu.” The studies of spatiality, motricity, and unity have shown how space, the object, and
the instrument come to exist for us as embodied beings and how the body is the site of their
appropriation. But each of these, Merleau-Ponty argues, are part of a “natural world” [le monde
naturel] which is “given as existing in itself beyond its existence for me.” In other words, our
relationship to space, the object, and the instrument is such that we see “a nature [une nature] that
has no need of being perceived in order to exist.” However, in our affective milieu, we find
objects or beings that only come to being for us: the object of our desire. By focusing on how
affectivity reveals certain objects or beings in the world for me, we can have a better
understanding of the “genesis of being” more generally. Affective intentionality, Merleau-Ponty
believes, is less susceptible to the ways in which we transform our experience into an
epistemological division that covers over the original relationship between “subject” and
“object.” This blind move from the phenomenological to the epistemological has been the locus
of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of the empiricist and intellectualist traditions throughout
Phenomenology of Perception. Perhaps by focusing on this more resistant realm of experience, it
will become clearer “how objects and beings can exist in general.”

Affectivity, Merleau-Ponty argues, is neither “a mosaic of affective states” (i.e., mental
representations of bodily stimuli), nor a system of “self-contained pleasures and pains” that are
biological in nature and nothing more. Instead, he seeks to demonstrate that it is “an original

279 Ibid., 156/191.
280 Ibid., 156/191.
281 Ibid., 156/191. Though I choose not to draw out the implications here, it is interesting to consider the fact
that sexuality is situated outside of the natural world. This may, however, be due to the fact that the sexual
object – another person – is not purely “natural.”
282 Ibid., 156/191.
283 Ibid., 156/191.
284 Ibid., 157/191.
mode of consciousness,” and as such, a form of perception and a mode of intentionality. Schneider once again serves to represent the pathological version of this phenomenon, as one of the manifestations of his brain injury is an alteration in sexual behavior. By deducing what Schneider is missing in comparison to the “normal” patient, as was the method in his analyses of spatiality and motricity, Merleau-Ponty will be able to articulate where sexuality, and affectivity more broadly, fit into the perceptual and existential schema he has developed thus far.

To summarize Schneider's sexual condition, Merleau-Ponty explains that he “no longer seeks the sexual act of his own volition.” This manifests itself in various ways: Schneider does not respond sexually to provocative pictures or discussing sexual topics; he does not perceive bodies in a sexual manner; he does not place any sexual value on kissing, and, if interrupted, he does not seek to continue the sexual act beyond foreplay; his nocturnal emissions are rare and unaccompanied by sexual dreams, and so forth. Schneider has a “sexual inertia” such that “things happen at each moment as if [he] did not know what to do.” These deviations from “normal” sexual behavior escape explanation by virtue of a loss of mental representations provoked by physical stimuli, or the stimuli themselves as the missing locus of sexual affectivity, for they depict a generalized zone of possibilities gone awry: the disruption eludes reductive thinking.

Merleau-Ponty argues that, for Schneider, “it is the very structure of erotic perception or experience that is altered... [he] can no longer place himself in a sexual situation.” With respect

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285 Phenomenology, 157/191, 159/194. One of the emerging themes in Phenomenology of Perception is this connection between perception and intentionality: both active and passive, perception is a movement of projecting a certain meaning onto the world as a kind of question for which we await an answer.

286 These quotation marks are not meant to indicate Merleau-Ponty's own language, but rather, should draw the reader's attention to the presumption of an easily identified difference between normal and abnormal sexual behavior, which is here largely based on heteronormative, masculine cultural standards. Dorothea Olkowski convincingly argues in her essay, “Chiasm: The Interval of Sexual Difference between Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty” (in Rereading Merleau-Ponty, ed. Hass and Olkowski, Amherst:2000) that one result of Merleau-Ponty's inability to account for sexual difference is a description of sexuality in Phenomenology of Perception that seems much more like eros, sensuality, than libido.

287 Phenomenology, 157/192.

288 Ibid., 157/192.

289 Ibid., 158-159/193-194, my emphasis.
to his disinterest in continuing the sexual act when interrupted during foreplay, Schneider explains that close bodily contact generates a “vague feeling” or “knowledge of something indeterminate” - not, Merleau-Ponty argues, an experience that would “create a situation calling for a definite mode of resolution.”290 He continues, “Perception has lost it is erotic structure both spatially and temporally. The patient has lost the power of projecting before himself a sexual world, of putting himself in an erotic situation, or, once the situation is underway, of sustaining it or of following it through to satisfaction.”291 Since Schneider cannot “project before himself a sexual world,” he has thus lost access to a kind of intentionality. “Erotic perception” and its correlative “sexual intentionality” are not intellectual operations: they operate through the body and aim at another body. Furthermore, the “achievement” of the sexual intention happens in the world: “a scene does not have a sexual signification when I imagine, even confusedly, its possible relation to my sexual organs or to my states of pleasure, but rather when it exists for my body, for this always ready power of tying together the given stimuli into an erotic situation and for adapting sexual behavior to it.”292 Yet, sexual intentionality is also more than a physical response to stimuli in that it “follows the general movement of existence.”293

To begin demonstrating how sexuality is tied to existence more broadly, Merleau-Ponty notes that it is not only the sexual situation that Schneider lacks: he has no affective relationships to the world or others whatsoever. “The sun and the rain are neither joyful nor sad; his mood depends only upon elementary organic functions; the world is affectively neutral.”294 Merleau-Ponty explains that sexual intentionality and erotic perception as part of the human affective milieu are grounded in the “intentional arc,” and this is what Schneider is missing in his lived

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290 Ibid., 158/193.
291 Ibid., 159/193.
292 Ibid., 159/194.
293 Ibid., 159/194.
294 Ibid., 159-160/194.
experience.\textsuperscript{295} Although, as we have seen, sexuality is privileged in that it makes the genesis of being for us more readily comprehensible, the processes of perception, motricity, and representation in general derive their \textit{existential} import from the functioning of the intentional arc in “normal” subjects. What this means is that, like Schneider, one can very well perceive the world in terms of epistemological relations between subject and object, move oneself about, and engage in daily activities necessary for life without a “strong” intentional arc. But without this ability to, in general, put oneself in a situation, such subjects lack the “vitality and fecundity” that is otherwise present in experience.\textsuperscript{296}

Merleau-Ponty argues that sexuality is a privileged realm of experience\textsuperscript{297} beyond its capacity to reveal a “sector of experience that has... sense and reality only for us,” and even beyond its ability to illuminate the functioning of the intentional arc, as did spatiality. Following the psychoanalytic tradition, Merleau-Ponty explains, “If the sexual history of a man gives us the key to his life, this is because his manner of being toward the world – that is, toward time and toward others – is projected in his sexuality. There are sexual symptoms at the origin of all neuroses, but these symptoms, if interpreted properly, symbolize an entire attitude.”\textsuperscript{298} In the same way that speech accomplishes thought – a claim that we will see more fully supported in the next section –, sexuality reveals that “the body continuously expresses existence.” Merleau-Ponty delineates this process as follows:

As we shall see, prior to the conventional means of expression – which only manifest my thought to another person because, for both of us, significations are already given for each sign and which in this sense do not achieve a genuine communication – it is necessary to recognize a primordial operation of signification in which the expressed does not exist apart from the expression and in which the signs themselves internally induce their sense. The body expresses total existence in this way, not that it is an external accompaniment of it, but because existence accomplishes itself in the body.\textsuperscript{299}

\textsuperscript{295} More precisely, Merleau-Ponty says Schneider's intentional arc is “weakened.”
\textsuperscript{296} \textit{Phenomenology} 160/195.
\textsuperscript{297} “Sexuality is not simply a sign, but in fact a privileged one.” \textit{Phenomenology} 162/197.
\textsuperscript{298} \textit{Ibid.}, 161/196.
\textsuperscript{299} \textit{Ibid.}, 169/204.
In sexual behavior, the sign is not separate from the signification; there is no conventional form of sexual expression which can serve as a ready-made means of expressing desire through the body. Sexuality is part of the “primordial” operation by which the body expresses its existence in general: we are directed “toward the other person's body through sexuality, prior to reaching the life of human relations.”

One might protest here that we are engaging in a kind of reduction by which sexuality loses its biological significance. However, Merleau-Ponty is not denying our biological existence; rather, it is in a reciprocal relation with human existence whereby it (l'existence biologique) “gears into human existence [l'existence humaine] and is never indifferent to its particular rhythm.” What this means is that we might be able to conceptually separate biological, “anonymous” existence from our “personal” existence, but we can never do so at the level of perceptual experience – and sexuality is one of the realms in which this interplay is most evident. Even Schneider, who is “locked up” in the “anonymous life that underpins [his] personal life,” is not, and can never be, fully an object in the world. Merleau-Ponty explains, “even when it is cut off from the circuit of existence, the body never completely falls back on itself. Even if I am absorbed in the experience of my body and in the solitude of sensations, I do not achieve a complete suppression of every reference to the world that is included in my life; at each moment some new intention springs forth from me.” In this way, “I am condemned to being,” I cannot help but have intentional threads which run through my body and connect me to the world and others, and by which my possibilities outline a “world” that provides provisional answers to the open question that is my lived experience. Bodily existence, Merleau-Ponty explains, “is but

300 Ibid., 162/197.
301 Ibid., 162/197.
302 Ibid., 168/203.
303 Ibid., 169/204.
the sketch of a genuine presence in the world,” but is nonetheless the grounds for the possibility of that presence.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 168/204. “Elle en fonde du moins la possibilité, elle établi notre premier pacte avec lui.”}

Thus we see that investigating sexuality has led us to a greater sense of the “metaphysical drama” that characterizes embodied existence: sexuality is always a transcendence, a “beyond-nature” insofar as it is predicated on an opening toward an “other,” but it is always inescapably embedded in our biological, “natural” existence. Sexuality itself, like the body, cannot be transcended: “It is continuously present in human life as an atmosphere.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 171/206.}

This is not to say, however, that sexuality is always explicitly at the forefront of our conscious behavior – nor does it unconsciously motivate all of our actions. Merleau-Ponty explains, “There is osmosis between sexuality and existence, that is, if existence diffuses throughout sexuality, sexuality reciprocally diffuses throughout existence, such that it is impossible to identify the contribution of sexual motivation and the contribution of other motivations for a given decision or action, and it is impossible to characterize a decision or an action as 'sexual' or as 'nonsexual.'”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 172/207-208.}

Everything we do has multiple meanings; sexuality reveals to us that there is an ambiguity that is “essential to human existence.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 172/207.}

To recall our earlier comments with respect to the body as a unity and the intentional arc, we can see, too, that sexuality is interconnected with all other facets of embodied existence: “all 'functions' in man – from sexuality and motricity through to intelligence – are rigorously unified.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 174/209.}

All functions, then, are characterized by the same “transcendence” by which “existence takes up for itself and transforms a \textit{de facto} situation,”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 173/208.} making “man \[sic\]… an historical idea, not a natural species.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 174/209.} Moments later, however, Merleau-Ponty clarifies that
while “man is an historical idea,” the body is a “natural self, a given current of existence, such that we never know if the forces that carry us belong to us or to our body – or rather, such that they are never entirely our body’s nor entirely ours.” At the same time, then, that Merleau-Ponty uses sexuality to establish the inherent ambiguity in human existence, he nonetheless introduces language that seems to mark a divide between mind and body – or here, man as historical and cultural being and man as bodily (“natural”) being. Merleau-Ponty speaks of “us” and “our body” as separate identities here, aligning “us” with humanity, and “our body” with nature. While he attempts to show that all “functions’ in man… are rigorously unified,” it is still evident that he finds there to be some difference between the nature of humanity and its cultural existence.

As we saw above in examining the body in its spatiality and motricity, Merleau-Ponty seems to collapse, and then reify, a division between nature and culture. This wavering continues further, and most importantly for the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, in his philosophy of expression. As we will see, the question of animal expression becomes especially problematic for Merleau-Ponty, as he both intends to find a source of genuine difference that is definitive of the transcendence that characterizes human existence, yet cannot deny that the same mechanism of that transcendence is found in animality. This will continue to haunt Merleau-Ponty until the later courses on Nature, where he finally posits the animal-human relationship as a “strange kinship” based on degree rather than kind. Without this later understanding, however, Merleau-Ponty is left with a puzzling account of the relationship between nature and culture that continues through Phenomenology, and as I will show in the following chapter, his works in aesthetics. For now, let’s turn to the final chapter of Part I in of Phenomenology to see how expression becomes problematic in this way.

Whereas the body in its sexual being further exemplified the way in which the body is intentional and thus signifying even in what seems the most “natural” of behaviors, Merleau-Ponty turns to the phenomenon of speech to describe how the body functions in “deliberate act[s] of signification.” Of all bodily phenomena accounted for in *Phenomenology of Perception*, expression is perhaps the most philosophically important, as it allows Merleau-Ponty to “leave behind, once and for all, the classical subject-object dichotomy.” Overcoming this dualism motivates all of Merleau-Ponty's work from *Phenomenology of Perception* forward to the pinnacle of his later ontology, the concept of “flesh.”

Here as always, Merleau-Ponty dismisses empiricist and intellectualist attempts to describe the phenomena at hand – in this case, speech. Each are flawed first and foremost by understanding this form of expression under the rubric of “having” speech; for Merleau-Ponty, speech is an “original region” rather than something that is acquired and possessed. The empiricists argue that “having” language is a matter of hearing others and retaining “verbal images” of what they say in the physical brain, while intellectualists tend to posit these traces in the “unconscious psyche” of the mind. In either case, Merleau-Ponty has the same critique: there is no need for, or account of, a speaking subject. He explains that for each, “speech takes place in a circuit of third person phenomena. There is no one who speaks, there is but a flow of words that occurs without any intention to speak governing it.” Empiricists and intellectualists both lose the intentionality nascent in expression.

Correlatively, the sense of words is assumed to be given, quite literally, with either the physical or psychical stimuli like a simple system of cause and effect: some external phenomenon

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312 *Phenomenology* 179/213.
313 Ibid., 179/213.
314 Ibid., 179/213.
315 Ibid., 180/214.
triggers the verbalization of certain retained images, and we call this “speech.” Just as Merleau-Ponty is concerned that a sense of subjectivity, or at least basic intentionality, is lost in these accounts, he worries too that words do not have meaning. He explains that “the word does not bear its sense, it has no inner power, and is nothing more than a psychical, physiological, or even physical phenomenon juxtaposed with others and brought to light through the play of an objective causality.”

In sum, Merleau-Ponty argues that both the empiricist and intellectualist account reduces the phenomenon of speech to something mechanical and robotic that strips expression of its being as an action. In these theories, “Man can speak in the way an electric lamp can become incandescent.”

Another way in which Merleau-Ponty shows how such accounts over-simplify the phenomenon of speech is by turning again to his contemporaries, Gelb and Goldstein, whose patients demonstrate that certain disorders exist which attack one region of language but not another, as when one becomes incapable of spoken language but retains the capacity for writing. This suggests that the functioning and origin of the capacity for verbal and written expression is more complicated than a system of physical or psychical stimuli which generalizes the production of all linguistic iteration as a kind of reflex. Looking closely at variations of aphasia, however, demonstrates that one does not “have” or “lose” their capacity for language like one has or loses a set of keys. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty argues that these abnormalities attest to losing access to “a certain manner of relating to the world, and correlatively... a style or a configuration of experience.”

Some intellectualists have drawn the same conclusion that there must be a way of accounting for different kinds of linguistic expression and have thus distinguished between “automatic language” and “intentional language.” They argue that the loss of speech in “true

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316 Ibid., 182/216.
317 Ibid., 180/214.
318 Ibid., 197/232.
aphasia” for the majority of cases is “not a certain stock of words, but rather a certain manner of
using them.” They then posit that beyond a third-person “motor phenomenon” - “automatic”
language -, there is a spontaneous, intentional or authentic kind of expression that is a
“phenomenon of thought.” This language is conditioned by thought rather than the retention of
verbal images – and is said to be the pre-condition for “concrete” language. These theorists then
conclude that the theory of verbal images is lacking insofar as language is originally acquired by
authentic expression, and then retained and reused as inauthentic speech. In other words, our
“automatic” reflex-type language is just a repetition of an expression that was once an original
and authentic representation of thought (presumably one's own or an other's). Merleau-Ponty
agrees with the general sentiment here, that there is a kind of expression beyond the “concrete,”
automatic variety, but he also worries that this account can still reduce words to envelopes of
thought. He wants to demonstrate instead that words themselves “have” sense.

How is it that words themselves bear meaning? At issue here is not only the underlying
question of what role our bodies play in expression (which, as we will see, is taken up in a later
section on gesture), but more broadly, Merleau-Ponty's place in the history of philosophy as one
of a select group of thinkers who reject representational theories of language. By shifting the
locus of meaning away from our thoughts, or the external things that words indicate, Merleau-
Ponty is able to avoid several major impasses that have not only troubled contemporary theorists
of language (including but not limited to Frege, Quine, Searle, and Kripke), but which date back
to our Greek philosophical ancestors, Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, the earliest version of a
representational theory of language is found in Plato's *Cratylus*, where he explains that “names

319 Ibid., 180/214.
320 Ibid., 180/214.
321 Ibid., 182/216. “On dépasse donc aussi bien l'intellectualisme que l'empiricisme par cette simple remarque que le mot a un sens.”
and words, in their letters and syllables, must imitate the conceptual forms (eide) of things.”

This rudimentary version differs from later accounts insofar as names represent forms, rather than thoughts or things themselves, but the role played by language is no different than later interpretations. More directly pertinent to 20th century philosophers of language, Aristotle argues in *On Interpretation*: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words.” Moreover, “the mental experiences, which [speech sounds] directly symbolize, are the same for all.” Thus we see that for Aristotle, speech represents thought, writing represents speech, and using speech, we can conjure up the same mental experiences in others as those which our words are representing. Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and few others have challenged the basic assumptions that underlie these representational theories and which have carried through the history of philosophy by and large part until the 20th century.

The fundamental problems that arise in representational theories of language can be summarized as follows: first, the so-called problem of reference arises for representational theories when challenged to explain how words “map onto” or link up with what they are said to represent (thoughts or things in the external world, depending on the theory). As we have just seen, Plato believes that words “imitate” forms, while Aristotle argues that words, when spoken, “symbolize” mental experiences. Neither philosopher, however, provides an explanation of just what it means for words to work in this way. As Hass explains, the only explanations in these and later representational theories are question-begging; there is a kind of blind faith in the belief that words have to function in this way. The second and interrelated problem is what is called the “epistemological problem of decidability,” which arises when such theories are pressed to

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324 I'm closely following Hass throughout my discussion of representational theories of language – see especially Chapter 7 Part 2: “Beyond Language as Representation,” 173-183.
325 Hass, 175.
demonstrate how communication is possible. If words represent thoughts, and I seek to communicate my thoughts to others, how do I know that my words signal the same thoughts in their minds? When I say, “chair,” how do I know that my interlocutor understands the same meaning that I associate with this word? Similarly, if I believe that words indicate things in the world, how do I know that my indication has been interpreted correctly? Like the problem of reference, these variations of the problem of decidability have long troubled philosophers of language.

Following these brief observations, we see that there is great historical significance to Merleau-Ponty’s claim that words themselves have meaning. Merleau-Ponty supports this conclusion using his methodology of radical reflection: returning to how we actually experience language, he explains that if speech presupposed thought, “then we could not understand why thoughts tend toward expression as if towards its completion, why the most familiar object appears indeterminate so long as we have not remembered its name, and why the thinking subject himself is in a sort of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken or written them.”326 One can easily find countless commonplace examples to support these observations – such as the broadly-accepted method of “free-writing,” an inherently creative process whereby one discovers their thoughts through non-structured note taking and outlining. One might also hold up the whole history of talk therapy as a similar example of the means by which individuals discover what they think, even in the remotest depths of their unconscious, through the process of putting those thoughts into language. For Merleau-Ponty, these phenomenological reflections reveal that we do not think before we speak or write and then use our words as containers for our thoughts to be conveyed. The giving voice (literally or figuratively) to thought is the accomplishment of that thought.327 As these examples show,

326 *Phenomenology* 183/216.
327 Lawrence Hass argues that the connection between language, knowledge, and thought in Merleau-
without having the words available to us to express something, we remain in ignorance of it.\footnote{328}

Moreover, this demonstrates that our thoughts, and thus the meanings of our expressions, do not temporally or ontologically precede the words we use: they are bound up in the same phenomenon. Hass explains, “Merleau-Ponty's view isn't that thought just is language, but rather that prior to becoming acquired, thought and language, idea and word are reciprocally intertwined. They are separate, nascent idioms that mutually elaborate one another.”\footnote{329} Later, this relationship between idea and sign is a prime example of the sense of “reversibility” that underlies Merleau-Ponty's ontology in \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}.

Our observations so far in the chapter on expression and speech in \textit{Phenomenology} have revealed that speech accomplishes thought. But what of the important distinction that Merleau-Ponty embraces between “authentic” and “inauthentic” expression? Merleau-Ponty indicates that the accomplishment of thought is only achieved in \textit{authentic} expression.\footnote{330} In two important footnotes, he explains the difference as follows: authentic, originary speech is that which “formulates for the first time.”\footnote{331} It is “that of the child who utters his first word, of the lover who discovers his emotion, of the 'first man who spoke,’ or of the writer and the philosopher who

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\textit{Phenomenology} 530, endnote 6/217, footnote 2.
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\textit{Ibid.}, 530, endnote 6/217, footnote 2.
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awaken a primordial experience beneath traditions.” Secondary or inauthentic speech is instead “speech about speech that makes up the usual basis of empirical language.”

Given this salient division – one which, I should add, is only briefly addressed at this point in the text – it would serve us well here to pause and elicit some examples to help clarify the relationship between authentic and inauthentic speech. If speech is a modality of expression, what becomes of inauthentic speech and how do we distinguish between them? Again, “authentic” speech “formulates for the first time.” But Merleau-Ponty doesn't mean that the only time we express ourselves authentically is when we utter our first words as a child, or even learn to use a new word or a new language as an adult. Beyond these experiences, authentic expression takes place when we use the tools that we have – syntax, semantics, various phrases, sentence fragments, and so forth – differently. It is a “creative transformation of some previous data or experience so that it yields new knowledge or radiates a powerful, new sense without the original data disappearing or being covered up.”

It is a relatively straightforward matter to conjure up examples of what Merleau-Ponty calls “empirical,” or inauthentic language. Most of our day-to-day discourse consists in this habituated form of expression: we leave the house with a clichéd “Have a good day!,” exchange pleasantries with coworkers (“How are you?” “Fine, thank you”), and generally use our language in ways that do not expand its expressive capacities. But sometimes our commonplace words fail us, and this is where we must engage in the labor of expression. Examples abound in the history of philosophy, where thinkers often generate new terms, or use old ones differently, in order to

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332 Ibid., 530, endnote 7/218, footnote 1.
333 Ibid., 530, endnote 6/217, footnote 2.
334 Though Merleau-Ponty later abandons the language of authenticity, it bears noting the Heideggerian connotations here. One might draw parallels especially between 'Rede' ("speech") and 'Gerede' ("idle chatter") from *Being and Time*, and Merleau-Ponty's own authentic and inauthentic speech in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Whereas Merleau-Ponty places less significance on the division in his later works, Heidegger continues to give language – and specifically poetry - the highest priority in its ability to "unfold" Being.
335 Hass, 155.
signify new ideas (think, for example, of the new and very specific meaning that Hegel gives to the word “dialectic”). Merleau-Ponty does not want to reserve authenticity for the work of intellectuals, though. Though a laborious process for all, “being expressive starts from the overwhelming babble of the world.” The only criteria for authenticity is the bringing into being of new meaning which establishes “a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience.” Urban slang accomplishes this as easily as do theoretical reappropriations of words, as one might imagine all of the cultural repercussions that accompany shifts in language, ranging from the institution of new class demarcations to new means for lovers to express desire for one another. In each case we see some previously acquired data or experience transform into something novel. New forms of linguistic expression are “new sense organs” in the way that they expand our possibilities for engaging with others and the world. And, over time, these authentic expressions come to have a certain meaning or meanings associated with them, and their repeated usage in this limited way eventually denigrates them to the realm of the “inauthentic.” Here we see again the circle of expression, where transcendence falls back into immanence. The words we use “have” meaning, but they differ insofar as that meaning can either be sedimented and commonplace or new and authentic.

If authentic speech is the accomplishment of thought and the words we use bear significations, then what becomes of communication? As Lawrence Hass explains, “[Merleau-Ponty] is preeminently concerned, in all his writings on the subject, that an adequate theory of language must be able to explain how communication and understanding between people is in fact possible.” The intellectualist who theorizes that speech is a representation of thought sees communication as accomplished by the recognition of verbal cues that signal given meanings that the listener has available to her. As we have seen, however, this has generated great difficulties

336 Ibid., 177.
337 Phenomenology 188/233. This is also the definition that Merleau-Ponty later uses for “institution.”
338 Hass, 176.
insofar as it becomes quickly clear that such a theory has no means of explaining how one knows that their thoughts have been adequately understood. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty argues that “we have the power to understand beyond what we could have spontaneously thought.”³³³⁹ In other words, if communication is just a matter of recognizing verbal cues and associating these with what they represent in our own usage of them, then it seems that we lack the ability to explain how we learn from others. Merleau-Ponty reasons that although we can only communicate in a language we already know, and thus each word “awakens thoughts that belonged to us in advance,” it is nonetheless true that “these significations sometimes combine into a new thought that reworks them all.”³³⁴⁰ In other words, we can expand our definition of authentic expression to say that sometimes, when we speak with others, our expression “opens a new dimension” in them, or vice verse. Merleau-Ponty calls this the power of thinking according to others [penser d'après autrui],”³³⁴¹ from the German Nachdenken, which Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl's “The Origin of Geometry.” In the same way that “we give our thought to ourselves” when we speak, the person listening “receives the thought from the speech itself.”³³⁴² Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that even by using Nachdenken as an alternative to the representational model of communication, we still run the risk of misunderstanding. This is due to the fact that “I never have the exact thought and intention as you... there is no perfect fusion of minds.”³³⁴³ Rather than fault his theory for its inability demonstrate epistemic certainty in communication, Merleau-Ponty scholars insist that we instead praise it for capturing the experiences that we have when trying to communicate with others – i.e., sometimes we seem to understand each other well, while at other times, we feel frustrated and search for different words or symbols to have our meaning understood. To be sure, even with this broader understanding,

³³³⁹ *Phenomenology*, 184/218.
³³⁴³ Hass, 181.
Merleau-Ponty still *does* avoid the problem of decidability. As we saw above, representational theories of language are left with the task of describing how one might know that, in conversation with others, the listener forms the same image in their mind as the speaker, which words are said to represent – or alternatively, that both listener and speaker are aligned in what words indicate in the external world. If we cannot demonstrate whether and how this is the case, then by the representational theory's own definition, we cannot know how communication is possible. With Merleau-Ponty, however, we see a more complicated story which makes room for the many different shades of gray that we actually experience when trying to understand one another.

“Communication,” for Merleau-Ponty, does not signify the epistemological certainty that one person understands exactly what is intended by another in dialogue. Rather, communication is what happens when our thoughts are “enriched” by the other. By shifting the definition of communication as such, Merleau-Ponty does not have to answer to the same criticism as representational theories – he simply agrees that yes, sometimes there are miscommunications, and yes, part of what it means to speak with others is that we always run this risk and never have the certainty that our thoughts are exactly aligned.

One of the ways that Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the always-present risk of misunderstanding is in showing that, when we attend to the phenomenon of communication, we find that we always bring our own thoughts and experiences into a situation, and these inform how words can, and do, bear meaning for us. Thus, a native French-speaking Parisian might understand a different meaning than her American interlocutor when she refers to a certain “joie de vivre” in conversation. But with enough time abroad, the American begins to construct his own sense of the phrase: he can “begin to understand the sense of words by their place in a context of action and by participating in everyday life.”

"344 Phenomenology, 184/219."
one might say, a way of being-in-the-world with them – Merleau-Ponty again uses the term “style.” Capturing the style of an expression amounts to understanding “the first sketch of its sense.”\textsuperscript{345} Using the example of reading a new philosophical text, he explains, “I begin to understand... by slipping into this thought's particular manner of existing, by reproducing the tone or the accent of the philosopher in question.”\textsuperscript{346} Again, we might not, and perhaps often do not, understand the exact intention of the author, but accessing her “style” gives us a provisional sense of it. Here we are reminded that not only do expressions carry a “style” with them, as does “joie de vivre,” but individuals, too, have a style – or what Merleau-Ponty also describes as a “configuration of experience.”\textsuperscript{347}

We can gather already from these observations that elucidating the functioning of language, in either spoken or written form, leads us once again to collapse traditional divisions between self and world. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty will again use the body as the hinge upon which this thought turns: the conceptual signification of words, he argues, is derived from a broader \textit{gestural} signification.\textsuperscript{348} In other words, speech is one subset of a broader schema of signification that takes place through the body. We see Merleau-Ponty turn to gesture as part of his “radical reflection” on how we come to create meaning, as through speech; after arguing against the representational theory of language, which supports both empiricist and intellectualist accounts, Merleau-Ponty wants to return to the origin of expression. More directly, he wants to “rediscover the primordial silence beneath the noise of words... [and] describe the gesture that breaks this silence.”\textsuperscript{349} If thought is accomplished through speech, if we are given new “worlds” in communication – if, even, we already \textit{bring} a certain configuration of experience to every

\textsuperscript{345} \textit{Phenomenology} 184/219.  
\textsuperscript{346} \textit{Ibid.}, 184/219.  
\textsuperscript{347} \textit{Ibid.}, 197/232.  
\textsuperscript{348} \textit{Ibid.}, 184/219.  
\textsuperscript{349} \textit{Ibid.}, 190/224.
communicative exchange, what is it about our bodies and our existential situation that makes this possible? How do we, in the beginning, “break the silence”? To begin answering these questions, Merleau-Ponty turns to non-verbal communication that is effected through bodily gesture. Here, he argues that gesture is not understood by virtue of somehow replicating or recalling the meaning that these gestures “represent”; one does not conjure up the actual feelings that they would have when making an angry gesture in order to understand someone else who is doing so. Similarly, in the moment, we do not see the gesture as a representation of some “psychological fact” hidden behind it. Merleau-Ponty reasons, “The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is the anger itself.”350 There is, then, an obvious parallel to what we have said already about speech. Just as speech bears its meaning, gesture, too, carries its sense. Merleau-Ponty adds that understanding gestures is accomplished similarly to understanding in verbal communication. He explains, “The sense of the gesture is... taken up by an act of the spectator,” which is, above all, not an “epistemic operation.”351 Rather, “the understanding [la compréhension] of gestures is achieved through the reciprocity between my intentions and the other person's gestures, and between my gestures and the intentions which can be read in the other person's behavior.”352

Phenomenological observation confirms that there must be a kind of alignment between what is available to me as intentional object and what is being intended in the gesture of another. The child, for example, may see adults engaging in sexual behavior but not understand that behavior as such, until she is at a place where the possibility of being sexual is real for her. Merleau-Ponty reasons that “knowledge of other people often illuminates self-knowledge,”353 in that the child might uncover something about her own impulses in observing this behavior.

350 Ibid., 190/225.
351 Ibid., 190/225.
352 Ibid., 191/225.
353 Ibid., 190/225. Merleau-Ponty uses the term “connaissance” here, and differentiates between this kind of self-knowledge (an “opération de connaissance”) and how we understand gesture (“comprendre”): “Je ne comprends pas les gestes d'autrui par un acte d'interprétation intellectuelle.” Phenomenology 191/226.
without fully understanding it. “But,” he adds, “[t]he example would pass by unnoticed if it was not found among the child's internal possibilities.”

There are, for example, innumerable ways in which we fail to understand the gestures of animals and vice-versa. Where the child might begin to grasp the meaning of the sexual scene as it relates to her own future possibilities, we cannot even identify most animal behavior as having any significance at all, though we can sometimes see that they have communicated with others of their species. When another person gestures, it “sketches out the first signs of an intentional object... [it] is in front of me like a question, it indicates to me specific sensible points in the world and invites me to join it there.”

Without the “internal possibility” of meeting the other in this way, I have no chance of understanding her.

The sense in which Merleau-Ponty means that we must “adjust” and “fit” our body over the intentional object in order to understand a gesture is not that we replicate the gesture itself. Rather, the gesture's meaning is integrated into a certain “structure of the world” that I must take up for myself in order to understand it. Recall our earlier example of the American in Paris who does not fully comprehend “joie de vivre” before living in the world of a Parisian long enough to understand the style of that expression. Merleau-Ponty provides a similar example here with respect to gestural differences: “When angry, the Japanese person smiles, whereas the Westerner turns red and stamps his foot, or even turns pale and speaks with a shrill voice. Having the same organs and the same nervous system is not sufficient for the same emotions to take on the same signs in two different conscious subjects.”

If they are unaware of each others' cultural expressions of anger, a Japanese person would fail to understand a “Westerner” when she greets him with a smile. Although each has the same ability to smile, they cannot fully understand one

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354 Ibid., 190/225.
355 Ibid., 191/225.
356 Ibid., 195/230.
another without being a part of the same “world,” just as knowing the words “joie” and “vivre” are not sufficient to understand the expression “joie de vivre.”

One might protest here that there is something different about speech and the kinds of non-verbal gestures that we make with our body – that, perhaps, verbal expressions are not produced in the same way that, for example, a smile is produced. Indeed, one might insist that verbal expressions are not formed in the body the same way that a smile or a shrug is, and that there is a distinction between what the body is able to create and the structure of words themselves. What, for example, do we make of grammar? Certainly the body is not responsible for the meaning that is associated with this kind of structure and significance. Merleau-Ponty would counter that once you deny the body’s role in this way, you are left with no choice but to once again posit words as representations and to run into the same epistemological impasses as all other representational theories. He argues that despite the ways in which verbal expressions have a separate existence from my body – in the sense that they have their own “style” - my body relates to them just as it relates to all other instruments that my body can use. He expands upon this as follows:

[The words that I know] are behind me, like the objects behind my back or like the horizon of the village surrounding my house; I reckon with them or I count upon them, but I have no “verbal image” of them.

...I have no need of representing to myself the word in order to know it and to pronounce it. It is enough that I possess its articulatory and sonorous essence as one of the modulations or one of the possible uses of my body. I relate to the word just as my hand reaches for the place on my body being stung. The word has a certain place in my linguistic world, it is a part of my equipment.\(^357\)

In the same way that I use the muscles on my back and shoulders to shrug as one possibility that I have available to me (as a “Westerner”) to express apathy, but my body is itself not responsible for the cultural meaning that is attached to this movement, I form a “phonetic gesticulation” - i.e., I use my mouth, lungs, and vocal cords to iterate certain words – in order express a certain meaning. Just as my body does not create the grammar and sentence structure

\(^357\) Ibid., 186/220, my emphasis.
that I employ to express myself linguistically, I similarly need not invent the use of my back and shoulders to express apathy. But – and this is important – I nonetheless can do so. We can extend what we have said already about authentic and inauthentic speech to draw a general distinction between different ways of engaging with the world through our bodies (which is simply to say, engaging with the world):

If authentic, speech gives rise to a new sense, just as the gesture – if it is an initiating gesture – gives a human sense to the object for the first time. Moreover, significations now acquired must surely have been new significations. Thus, we must recognize as an ultimate fact this open and indefinite power of signifying – that is, of simultaneously grasping and communicating a sense – by which man transcends himself through his body and his speech toward a new behavior, toward others, or toward his own thought.358

Although I do not have to invent a grammar to communicate with another, or create a new gesture to articulate my feelings, I nonetheless possess this “power of signifying”; through my body, I am able to express a sense which is revealed to me and to others in the act of expression.

Drawing from these observations, Merleau-Ponty argues that language is not simply one form of gestural expression, but rather, that language emerges from, or is founded in, our capacity for non-verbal expression. He explains, we can find “the first hints of language in the emotional gesticulation by which man superimposes upon the given world the world according to man.”359 Moreover, Merleau-Ponty explains that gesture itself has its origins in behavior, but he does little to demarcate the differences between them. Merleau-Ponty writes, “...it is the definition of the human body to appropriate, in an indefinite series of discontinuous acts, meaningful cores that transcend and transfigure its natural powers. This act of transcendence is initially found in the acquisition of a behavior, and then in the silent communication of the gesture: the body opens itself to a new behavior and renders that behavior intelligible to external observers through the same power.”360

358 Ibid., 200/236.
359 Ibid., 194/229.
360 Ibid., 199/235.
It might seem at first that behavior is merely “natural” or “biological,” and does not create new forms of signification as gesture and speech do. Here one might imagine the difference between an animal developing a certain behavior in order to achieve a desired end and the way that certain cultures perceive furrowing eyebrows as an expression of confusion or concern. However, as we see in the following passage, Merleau-Ponty leaves open the possibility that even the most “natural” or purely “biological” behaviors are sense-generating, and thus expressive:

Already the mere appearance of a living being transforms the physical world, makes ‘food’ appear over here and a 'hiding place' over there, and gives to ‘stimuli’ a sense that they did not have. This is even more the case for the presence of man in the animal world. Behaviors create significations that are transcendent in relation to the anatomical structure and yet immanent to the behavior as such, since behavior can be taught and understood. We cannot do without this irrational power that creates and communicates significations, and of which speech is merely a particular case.³⁶¹

Thus we see that speech, gesture, and behavior are all derived from the power that Merleau-Ponty calls “transcendence” and which is defined as the ability to create meaning and bring into existence something more than what is given – including, but not restricted to, biological being. As a living being, we have various biological “equipment” available to us which we can use to generate new meaning. It seems, too, that by virtue of having a biological existence and various physical capacities, we can extend this power of signification to the animal world, as we intimated earlier and see more clearly in the passage above.³⁶²

For human existence in particular, Merleau-Ponty claims that “everything is constructed and everything is natural.”³⁶³ He explains, “there is no single word or behavior that does not owe something to mere biological being – and, at the same time, there is no word or behavior that does not break free from animal life, that does not deflect vital behaviors from their direction [sens]”

³⁶¹ Phenomenology 195/231.
³⁶³ Phenomenology 195/230.
through a sort of *escape* and a genius for ambiguity that might well serve to define man.” Here, as throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that one cannot deny the fact that the human body is a *living* body. Like other living beings, we are susceptible to ailments that prohibit our functioning, we are driven by natural impulses to engage in various behaviors, and we draw upon our environment to sustain our existence. And, like animals (as per the passage above), we project a meaning onto our surroundings and thus behaviorally “transcend” our biological existence. At the same time, however, we differ in that everything is “cultural” as well as “natural” for us - not just in those moments where we, like animals, project the meaning “food” onto parts of our environment through our behavior. Like Schneider, animals cannot reach beyond the “world” that is given them – they cannot create new significative possibilities. Their behavior, in other words, is restricted to those actions which are “necessary to life.”

How is it that human existence never escapes the “ambiguity” that Merleau-Ponty describes here? Why are we incapable of drawing the line between what is “natural” and “cultural” in our being? To answer these questions, we must first observe that that like many others before him, Merleau-Ponty turns to the fact that humankind is linguistic. Speech, Merleau-Ponty explains, is different from all other forms of expression in that “[i]t alone is capable of sedimenting and constituting an intersubjective acquisition.” By this, he does not mean a literal acquisition, though it is true that the ability to write speech down supports its cultural sedimentation; we can imagine, for example, the difference between our knowledge and use of the Greek philosophies that were recorded and passed down, as opposed to those that were carried in verbal tradition and over time, faded into obscurity. We might also note the fact that music or art is “recorded”; we can point to musical notation or a painting and argue for its existence as an “acquisition.” But there is something more to speech that is not true of these other forms of

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expression, which makes it, more than any other gesture, “the excess of our existence beyond natural being.”366 Indeed, we can say that although transcendence is built into the fabric of any living being which generates even the most basic sense onto itself and its environment, speech is the means by which we transcend nature and project ourselves toward a “cultural world.”

Merleau-Ponty writes, “For the speaking subject and for those who listen to him, the phonetic gesture produces a certain structuring of my experience, a certain modulation of existence, just as a behavior of my body invests – for me and for others – the objects that surround me with a certain signification.”367

Speech thus constitutes a “linguistic and cultural world” beyond the natural world of animals: “a common world between speaking subjects to which current and new speech refers.”368 As we learned in our discussion of authentic and inauthentic speech, we always take up and work from the sedimented speech acts of others (“spoken speech”). Merleau-Ponty describes the movement of “speaking speech” as follows: “Here existence is polarized into a certain 'sense' that cannot be defined by any natural object; existence seeks to meet up with itself beyond being, and this is why it creates speech as the empirical support of its own non-being.”369 Unlike the behavior of animals, there is an existential import in speech whereby we create new ways of being-in-the-world. These new “intersubjective acquisitions” are then sedimented into a “cultural and linguistic world” which then “fall back into being,” available for others to take up as their own. Merleau-Ponty calls this movement the “ever-recreated opening in the fullness of being.”370

This is the particularly human movement between transcendence and immanence which we have seen more generally in the circle of expression.

366 Ibid., 203/239.
367 Ibid., 199/235.
368 Ibid., 192/227.
369 Ibid., 202-203/238-239.
370 Ibid., 203/239.
With these observations in mind, the ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty points to here is that despite the ways in which speech allows us to modulate existence and transcend nature, speech is nonetheless grounded in our existence as biological beings: speech is a “phonetic gesture” produced through my body, and this fact is inseparable from it as a form of transcendence. Moreover, since my body is of the world, it already has an “immanent or nascent meaning.” Here we might point to the many cultural demarcations that classify bodies: race, gender, ability, and so forth. Merleau-Ponty extends this sense of ambiguity to capture human existence more generally: “[Embodied existence] is always something other than what it is: always sexuality at the same time as freedom, always rooted in nature at the very moment it is transformed by culture; it is never self-enclosed but never transcended.”\textsuperscript{371} Due to our ambiguous existence, Merleau-Ponty argues, we cannot treat it as simply mind or body, and cannot capture it in the kind of reflective thought that separates its “implicit and confused” unity into parts. Rather, “I have no other means of knowing the human body than by living it.”\textsuperscript{372} He concludes: “Thus, I am my body, at least to the extent that I have an acquisition, and reciprocally my body is something like a natural subject, or a provisional sketch of my total being.”\textsuperscript{373}

Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I would like to first summarize the significant findings in Part I of \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} as they relate to Merleau-Ponty's project for the text, and then turn to those issues most relevant to my overall thesis: namely, the roles of “nature” and “culture” in Merleau-Ponty's account of human embodiment.

\textsuperscript{371} Ibid., 205/240.
\textsuperscript{372} Ibid., 205/240.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid., 205/240.
If there is a climax, so to speak, in Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment in Part I of *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is the revelation that the human body is always intentional, always expressive, and thus always transcendent, while at the same time always grounded in an inescapable immanence. This marks human existence as “ambiguous”: as we have just seen, “it is always something other than what it is.”\(^{374}\) In a way, each section of this chapter – corresponding to each chapter of Part I – sets out to demonstrate this ambiguity. Through the spatiality, motricity, and unity of the body, we saw that the body has a lived relation to its surroundings whose meaning is established by an intentional arc. Both object and subject, the body is always “situated,” but never a pure “in-itself”; instead, it is a “mediator of a world.” We saw Merleau-Ponty revolutionize the concept of the “body schema” by showing how the body functions as an intentional unit. The acquisition of habit shows us how the body schema is not demarcated by the contours of the objective body but by its function as a “knot of living significations” with a particular *style* that moves and behaves not by measurement and calculation but through significative intention. When our “natural” capacities fail us, we incorporate instruments into our body schema, as the blind man's cane becomes a new “sensitive zone” with which he can see. The body becomes something capable of understanding [*comprendre*], displacing the notion that the body is something driven to act by consciousness. Correspondingly, we are driven to acknowledge “a new sense of the word 'sense’” that is projected through the body. Merleau-Ponty writes, “My body is this meaningful core that behaves as a general function and that nevertheless exists and that is susceptible to illness.”\(^{375}\) In-itself and for-itself, the body as spatial, mobile, and as a unity is marked by the ambiguity of human existence.

We followed Merleau-Ponty in turning to the affective milieu as a privileged realm in which certain objects only come into being *for* a subject, as in the case of desire. Here we found


that sexual intentionality is bound up with our being situated in general; Schneider's sexual
capacities were tied to his weakened intentional arc and inability to posit meaning beyond the
literal and affectively neutral. We saw, too, that the “sexual drama” is a “metaphysical drama”
insofar as sexuality revealed that the body itself “expresses existence.” Sexuality – an always-
present “atmosphere” in human life – is part of this unending bodily expression such that one can
never characterize an action or behavior as “sexual” or “nonsexual.” Human existence is again
marked by ambiguity, this time an indeterminacy of meaning.

Finally, we examined the body in its “deliberate acts of signification.” These revealed
that the power for speech is founded in the body's capacity for gesture. Again, the interplay
between transcendence and immanence was revealed in the “circle of expression,” as, for
example, we saw that “authentic speech” is premised on the sedimented, “immanent” speech acts
of others. Rather than a representation of thoughts or things in the world, speech (in its authentic
form) accomplishes thought, and genuine communication is possible when I “think according to”
[Nachdenken] the other, which thus “enriches” my thoughts. Like human subjectivity itself, acts
of expression take on their own style – words carry the history of their use, a work of art cannot
be recreated, a gesture may be comprehensible only in certain “worlds.” Expression, then, begins
to take on an ontological bearing that is further concretized when Merleau-Ponty establishes a
distance between speech and other forms of expression: speech alone can create an
“intersubjective acquisition” that is sedimented – that is, capable of being used again, while
retaining a history. It is for this reason that speech alone constructs a “cultural world” - and,
presumably, why man alone can transcend the natural while at the same time being rooted in our
biological existence.

This brief reconstruction of what we have learned in Part I of Phenomenology of
Perception is, I hope, sufficient to reveal the means by which Merleau-Ponty's “radical
reflection” on the nature of perception as fundamentally embodied has led to an ontological
overtaking of modern thought. These chapters alone challenge centuries-old dualisms that plague the history of philosophy: mind/body, self/other, consciousness/world. But yet, there remains another dualism which, I believe, infects the text as a kind of unthematized meta-discourse: the identities of, and relationship between, nature and culture. Here we can pause and deduce from the text some characteristics of “nature” and “culture” according to Merleau-Ponty - several of which we have indicated already.

Firstly, we rarely see Merleau-Ponty speak of nature and culture apart from the concepts of natural and cultural worlds. From the introductory chapters, Merleau-Ponty indicates that this is indeed an interest in the text; here we draw from an early passage in which Merleau-Ponty is describing why we must overcome the empiricist tradition: “...empiricism does not merely deform experience by turning the cultural world, which in fact nourishes our existence, into an illusion. The natural world in turn is also distorted, and for the same reasons... We will thus also have to rediscover the natural world and its mode of existence, which does not merge with the mode of existence of the scientific object...”

Thus, although nature and culture themselves are not explicitly thematized in the text, Merleau-Ponty does have an interest in clarifying the natural and cultural worlds. What, then, have we learned of these worlds?

The “cultural world” first appears in *Phenomenology of Perception* when we see that one of the modalities of habit is its ability to integrate an instrument into the body schema. Merleau-Ponty explains, “sometimes the signification aimed at cannot be reached by the natural means of the body. We must, then, construct an instrument, and the body projects a cultural world around itself.”

Worlds, for Merleau-Ponty, are webs of signification: to be of the world as human existence means that existence is intertwined with other loci of signification - objects, others,

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ideas - in sum, anything that has sense or meaning can be integrated into our world(s). What we see in the acquisition of habit is that the (human) body projects a cultural world around itself when the natural world is insufficient to fulfill a significative intention. Nature, then, is “transcended” since its signifying powers are limited. A similar story unfolds later in the text, where speech emerges as a unique form of gesture. Merleau-Ponty writes,

The verbal gesture... intends a mental landscape that is not straightaway given to everyone, and it is precisely its function to communicate this landscape. But culture here offers what nature does not provide. Available significations, namely, previous acts of expression, establish a common world between speaking subjects to which current and new speech refers, just as the gesture refers to the sensible world.

Merleau-Ponty argues that “speech alone is capable of sedimenting and constituting an intersubjective acquisition,” and it is the “common world” of intersubjective acquisitions that he is referring to in this passage. Speech, then, “is the excess of our existence beyond natural being,” and as such, is inseparable from the “cultural world” - from the start, we are always in a world where speech is “already instituted,” where the structure, functioning, and meaning of words is already established and only surpassed in acts of authentic expression. Again, we see that the distinction between the cultural world and the natural world is predicated on the transcendence of the natural. Where nature fails, culture thrives.

Importantly, we must consider whether Merleau-Ponty has reinstated an ontological dualism in these claims. One might object here and point to the fact that nature and culture are inseparable with respect to human embodiment. Merleau-Ponty always returns to the fact that, for human existence, transcendence is rooted in immanence – the body as biological being and as situated; the incorporation of a new instrument that “projects a cultural world” is “but a mode of

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378 The sense of “world” here is reminiscent of Saussurian linguistics, whereby signs derive their meaning from their relationships and references to other signs.
379 *Phenomenology* 192/227. My emphasis.
[the] fundamental power" that the body has to acquire new significations. The function of speech is one form of gesture, an inherently bodily process. Even when we use words as instituted significations, we demonstrate the inseparability of nature and culture in our embodied experience:

It is impossible to superimpose upon man both a primary layer of behaviors that could be called 'natural' and a constructed cultural or spiritual world. For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural, in the sense that there is no single word or behavior that does not owe something to mere biological being – and, at the same time, there is no word or behavior that does not break free from animal life, that does not deflect vital behaviors from their direction through a sort of escape and a genius for ambiguity that might well serve to define man.

Since “everything is constructed and everything is natural,” we have good reason to think that, when it comes to describing human experience, Merleau-Ponty has indeed collapsed another dualism carried over from the modernist tradition. But, as I have indicated already, there is also good reason to think the dualism remains: first, even within human experience, the language which Merleau-Ponty uses to speak of the relationship between nature and culture is clearly hierarchical: nature is lacking in its significative powers, culture transcends nature, and so forth. Secondly, we have seen very little discussion of nature and culture separate from human existence (granting that, of course, the focal point of Part I is indeed describing human embodiment) – but those moments where nature and culture are discussed separately are telling. I return here to a passage from “The Body as Expression, and Speech”:

Already the mere appearance of a living being transforms the physical world, makes 'food' appear over here and a 'hiding place' over there, and gives to 'stimuli' a sense that they did not have. This is even more the case for the presence of man in the animal world. Behaviors create significations that are transcendent in relation to the anatomical structure and yet immanent to the behavior as such, since behavior can be taught and understood. We cannot do without this irrational power that creates and communicates significations, and of which speech is merely a particular case.

What I would like to draw attention to here is that the ability to “transcend nature” is granted to other living beings. An animal, for example, has an intentional relationship to its surroundings.

383 Ibid., 148/183.
384 Ibid., 195/230.
385 Ibid., 195/231.
such that its behavior can be understood as an expression and thus a projection of significative relations: the plants nearby come to have the meaning “food,” the cave means “shelter,” and so forth. But at the same time, we have seen that speech is given special priority in that it creates a “cultural and linguistic world.” There is thus a difference between expression that is cultural and expression that is natural, and this difference seems to draw the line between humanity and other living beings, while reinforcing a kind of hierarchy of culture over nature in the same philosophy that is supposed to annul all such distinctions.

I return, then, to the questions with which I opened this chapter: First, what is nature for Merleau-Ponty? If nature itself (e.g., the natural animal) is capable of expression, what becomes of the meaning of “transcendence” as it is related to nature? Correlatively, what is “natural” and/or “biological,” if the natural and biological are transcendent? Finally, why is language itself capable of a cultural world? Why can’t animals have a culture? And if they can, where is the line drawn between nature and culture, if there is one?

Our inability to answer these questions at this point does not, I believe, function towards the detriment of Merleau-Ponty's overall project. It is, rather, due to the fact that Merleau-Ponty has yet to thematize nature and culture as focal points of study. In the chapter which follows, I will show that Merleau-Ponty’s later reflections on the function of expression lead him to reconsider what nature is, and eventually, to develop his courses at the Collège de France on Nature and Institution. Later, we will see that the collapse of the nature/culture dualism is expanded beyond human embodiment – there will be something more fundamental ontologically that grounds both and places them in a “lateral,” rather than hierarchical relation – namely, the flesh. In Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology, nature and culture are in an Ineinander relationship, modeled on the “strange kinship” between animality and humanity that is discovered in the Nature lectures. The early division that we see here between nature and culture becomes a differentiation between expression that is “instituted” and “non-instituted,” but that differentiation
is not an ontological dualism so much as a two “differentiations of wild Being.” Before Merleau-Ponty’s though undergoes such transformations, however, he continues to grapple with the roles of nature and culture with respect to expression in his middle-period works in aesthetics. It is to those works that we turn next.
Chapter 4 Nature, Culture, and Expression

The questions which remained at the end of the previous chapter were centered around the ambiguous roles of nature and culture within Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of expression. I suggested there that while Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology works to collapse several of the traditional dualisms carried over from modern philosophy – most pointedly, mind/body and self/world – he nonetheless seems to suggest, if not reify, an ontological distinction between nature and culture insofar as they are different “worlds.” In the first section of this chapter, we will turn briefly to Part II of *Phenomenology of Perception* and see this division further concretized in more broadly ontological terms. Although Merleau-Ponty's goal is to eliminate such dualisms, there is a clear sense in which a nature/culture distinction is operating not only as two separate “worlds,” but also within the definition of human subjectivity, dividing the animalistic body from the *human* subject, who asserts his freedom and breaks from nature in cultural expression.

Let us quickly review what we have established thus far: In the Introduction and Part I of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty develops a conception of human subjectivity as necessarily embodied, and in that embodiment, he claims that the influence, effects, and roles of nature and culture are irreducible: he writes, “For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural.” Yet, at the same time, there is a separate story unfolding, perhaps even unconsciously so, about nature and culture broadly construed. The discussion of the natural and cultural worlds in Part I connotes a hierarchical relationship between them: man's “transcendence,” understood as a going “beyond-nature,” is realized through expression, which creates and contributes to the “cultural world.” But it is still unclear in the text whether or not this constitutes an ontological difference between nature and culture, and on what basis that line

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386 *Phenomenology* 195/230.
would be drawn. We have seen already that language serves as a privileged form of expression in its connection to the cultural world. As we look further into the text, we will investigate this role of language and ask: is Merleau-Ponty rehashing a literally ancient claim that the capacity for language makes us human and not simply animals? Is language the place where the ontological division between nature and culture, if there is one, is carried over into Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment and human subjectivity?

This chapter’s primary goal is to look further into expression and its relationship to the concepts of nature and culture as they are developed in Merleau-Ponty's middle-period works on aesthetics at the Sorbonne and Collège de France. First, however, we will see how expression begins to take on a primary role even within the progression of Phenomenology of Perception, and how the later chapters set up a movement towards a primacy of expression, rather than perception, that is carried into Merleau-Ponty's later works. Interestingly, we will see that as Merleau-Ponty clarifies the role and power of expression, he continues to return to the concept of nature and begins to thematize its place as part of a new ontology.

Between the two focal pieces of this chapter, “Cézanne's Doubt” and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” we will see two different roles played by nature in its relationship to expression. In the latter work, it will unfold that although nature can serve as an origin of expression, there are nonetheless divisions separating natural and cultural expression, which will later translate into the difference between “non-instituted” and “instituted” expression. Nature will have the power to generate sense, but will be outside of history. Culture, however, will be both sense-generating and historically sense-carrying. As Merleau-Ponty begins to develop a philosophy of history that adopts the Hegelian theme of teleology, he will attribute value-laden language to nature and culture in their relationship to history: cultural expression – and specifically, language – will be “closer to true creation” and truth itself. But in his earlier reflections on Cézanne, the story is much simpler: without a historical dimension, cultural
expression is a product of nature and nothing more. Again, we run into the same dilemma as we saw in Chapter Three of this project: where and how is the line drawn between nature and culture? If there continues to be such a division, what effect does this have on Merleau-Ponty’s ontology – an ontology which is meant to collapse such dualisms? Merleau-Ponty's “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” reflects the narrative of nature and culture in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and sets the stage for their roles in his later ontology: nature, the non-instituted and non-human, is the locus of ahistorical expression, whereas culture, the instituted and the human, creates and carries history, understood as the intertwined and sedimented layers of meaning from which humanity projects a future.

Thus, as we explore “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” we will not only see a further divide between nature and culture, but this difference will play out more specifically on the terrain of history. More than anything, the role of historicity in cultural expression re-institutes a long held tradition within philosophical discourse that I intimated above: namely, the role of language as the privileged means by which humanity develops and employs a Logos or Reason that separates us from nature and other animals. Although we might still say with Merleau-Ponty's earlier reflections that “for man, everything is constructed and everything is natural,” we are nevertheless irrevocably other than nature by virtue of the presence of culture – translating, roughly, to our historical being. While our natural being provides the *grounds* for the cultural, it is our historicity, our facticity, and our *freedom* from nature that make us human. This, too, corresponds to the difference between humanity understood as taking part in an “anonymous” existence and as having a separate, “personal” existence. It is this distinction which we will turn to first, as it originally appears in the later chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception*.

To again summarize our findings from Part I of *Phenomenology of Perception*, the concept of expression, which plays a key role in collapsing the many dualisms carried over from modern thought, is also tied up with a meta-discourse about nature and culture. Expression has
been integrated into the body itself: as an intentional structure, the body is always projecting a sense onto its world. The human body, however, is also capable of transcending nature and establishing culture. The remainder of *Phenomenology of Perception* does the work of drawing out the ontological consequences of this theory of embodiment. It asks the question: If human embodiment is constructed in this way, what does this mean for a.) the perceived world, b.) space and time, c.) the problem of others (solipsism), d.) the *cogito*, e.) freedom, and, most pertinent to our investigation here, f.) the “natural world” and the “human world”? It is here, in these later chapters, that Merleau-Ponty attempts to fully explicate what he means by the human—roughly corresponding to the “cultural” - and the natural. But these are once again reached by virtue of the sense of “world.” Part of our work here will be to disentangle these terms and to seek a more concrete understanding of nature, culture, and world. Briefly, we will ask: what is a “world,” for Merleau-Ponty, and how are the natural and cultural worlds distinguished?

In the course of this conceptual work, I will demonstrate that the later chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception* lead to a generalization of expression, whereby we see that not only does the human body serve as a locus of expression and thus “sense,” but so does the “world.” As Merleau-Ponty elucidates the distinctions between the “natural” and “human” worlds, we again see expression play a key role in their differentiation. These reflections on, and expansion of, the place of expression in Merleau-Ponty's ontology is carried on from *Phenomenology of Perception* to his works on aesthetics, which we will examine in the remaining sections of this chapter. Interestingly, while expression serves as a means of conceptually uniting nature and culture – both the natural and cultural worlds are “expressive” - it will also serve to distinguish them. Starting in *Phenomenology of Perception* and culminating in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” culture comes to be separate from nature in its form of expression. Cultural expression is historical and institutional, whereas nature does not take part in a history. This divide, I will argue, sets the precedent for an ontological rift is not resolved until
Merleau-Ponty directly addresses the concepts of nature and culture in his courses at the Collège de France.

Let us begin, then, by using the later chapters of Phenomenology of Perception to further specify what Merleau-Ponty means by the natural and cultural worlds in this text. Merleau-Ponty begins Part II of Phenomenology with some indication of what role the natural world plays ontologically, in light of the discoveries he has made with respect to embodiment. He writes,

We have learned to again sense our bodies; we have discovered, beneath objective and detached knowledge of the body, this other knowledge that we have of it because it is always with us and because we are our bodies. It will be necessary to similarly awaken the experience of the world such as it appears to us insofar as we are in the world through our bodies, and insofar as we perceive the world with our bodies. But by reestablishing contact with the body and the world in this way, we will also rediscover ourselves, since, if one perceives with his body, then the body is a natural myself and, as it were, the body is the subject of perception.\(^\text{387}\)

Merleau-Ponty aims in Part II of Phenomenology to rediscover the world through the same “radical reflection” that led to his new theory of human embodiment in Part I. In the same way that reflection revealed an originary body in-the-world ontologically prior to the body and world we understand as “partes extra partes,” Merleau-Ponty will argue here that the world itself will have to be reconceptualized ontologically. At the heart of this “reawakening” of our experience of the world will again be the body as our “contact” with the world – and, as Merleau-Ponty says here, the body understood as the subject of perception, a “natural myself.” What then, is this world revealed in originary perception, and what makes the body a “natural” self? Whereas Part I of Phenomenology saw the emergence of the “natural” and “cultural” worlds via their appearance in and through the body schema, Part II will reveal “natural” and “cultural” selves – one anonymous, one personal – via their appearance in and through the natural and cultural worlds. Expression will once again serve as the means of distinction between these selves and worlds.

\(^{387}\) Phenomenology 213/249, my emphasis.
The first major lesson that we learn by turning to the world as it is understood through our bodies in originary perception is that the relation between sentient and sensible is a form of “synchronization.” Merleau-Ponty's method in the development of Part II is to move from the least to most complex aspects of perceptual experience, starting first with the sensation of individual “qualities,” such as a certain sensation of the color blue, then investigating how depth and space are integrated into perceptual experience in order to understand objects, and finally, how “things,” the natural world, others (i.e., other humans), and the cultural world are revealed to us. What we see in the section on sensation is that even the most simple of perceptions reveals a “communion” between self and world.

Merleau-Ponty argues that “the subject of sensation is a power that is born together with a certain existential milieu or that is synchronized with it. The relations between sentient and sensible are comparable to those between sleeper and sleep.” He explains how we “call forth” sleep: we breathe deeply, slowly, and relax our bodies, such that “a certain respiratory rhythm, desired by me just a moment ago, becomes my very being, and sleep, intended until then as a signification, turns itself into a situation.” In a similar manner, we “offer” our bodies as sensible powers in anticipation of a sensation, and “suddenly the sensible catches my ear or my gaze.” As these descriptions connote, the meeting of sentient and sensible is a form of “communion”: the sensible is a “manner of being in the world that is proposed to us from a point in space,” and my body, as sentient, takes this manner of being up and adopts it, if it is capable.

To help us understand this relationship, Merleau-Ponty speaks frequently of our bodies as being “geared into the world,” just as the teeth of machinery match into corresponding parts in order...
to generate forward movement. Importantly, our “teeth” are always engaged; as we saw in Part I, the body-subject is always an operative intentionality whereby it is never without a “project,” never in the world without being of it – that is, situated, as we might say, towards a privileged figure against the perceptual background. But what this image highlights is that the world itself must be “shaped” in the right way to engage this gear that is our body. This is, in brief, what Merleau-Ponty is trying to address in Part II: what does the body in perception teach us about its “world”? What makes this “synchronization” possible?

Although we have said much already about the operative intentionality of the body, we see already in the “gearing” of our bodies that this does not quite capture the phenomenon of sensation, or perception more broadly. There is, corresponding to the body, “the proposition of a certain existential rhythm” in the sensible, which the body either opens itself up to, or shuts itself off from. Merleau-Ponty explains that the sensing subject does not posit the qualities of sensation (e.g. the blue of the sky, the heat radiating from a lamp) as objects, but “sympathizes with them, makes them its own, and finds in them his momentary law.”394 In other words, the body does not relate to its world as two objects opposed to one another; there is instead an exchange, and if a synchronization is successful – that is, the body is capable of and takes up the existential rhythm of the thing – then we experience that sensation. Merleau-Ponty explains that “a sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that will provide it with the means to become determinate... I must find the response to a poorly formulated question. And yet, I only do this in response to its solicitation”; the sensible “thinks itself in me.”395 Here we might recall the ways in which we have already seen the body-subject acquire new habits and instruments in order to expand its perceptual capacities: “The blind man's cane has ceased to be an object for him, it is no longer perceived for itself; rather, the cane's

394 Ibid., 221/258.
395 Ibid., 222/259.
furthest point is transformed into a sensitive zone, it increases the scope and the radius of the act of touching and has become analogous to a gaze.”  

What we understand now is that the bodily intentionality that incorporated the cane into its bodily schema in order to “see” is actually a response to the world around it.

There is, then, a way in which the world itself is expressive. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty uses the familiar language of “style” to demonstrate how this is so: he writes,

In the natural attitude, I have no perceptions, I do not posit this object as next to that other one along with their objective relations. Rather, I have a flow of experiences... For me, Paris is not a thousand-sided object or a collection of perceptions, nor for that matter the law of all of these perceptions. Just as a human being manifests the same affective essence in his hand gestures, his gait, and the sound of his voice, each explicit perception in my journey through Paris – the cafés, the faces, the poplars along the quays, the bends of the Seine – is cut out of the total being of Paris, and only serves to confirm a certain style or a certain sense of Paris.

In the development of Part II, Merleau-Ponty explains how not only qualities like colors and sounds have a style, but so too do places, natural things (e.g. a landscape), cultural artifacts (e.g. a painting), other humans – in sum, all other “entities” that we perceive also accomplish the “miracle of expression.” Reflecting on everyday objects, Merleau-Ponty writes, “The thing's sense inhabits it as the soul inhabits the body: it is not behind appearances. The sense of the ashtray... is not a certain ideal of the ashtray... it animates the ashtray, and it is quite evidently embodied in it.” Like our own bodies, other things in the world have a style and a sense which we “gear in to” when we perceive them.

When we try to use reflection to further understand this phenomenon, we again only ever find ourselves already intentionally oriented towards these objects of perception – and thus, already answering the “confused problems” proposed to us by the world. Merleau-Ponty posits that there is a “deeper life of consciousness beneath 'perception,'” one that we, as reflective

396 Ibid., 144/178.
397 Ibid., y 293-4/332-3.
398 Merleau-Ponty uses this language, mirroring his description of expression accomplished through the body, at Phenomenology 333/375.
399 Ibid., 333/375.
400 “...since I am reflecting, I cannot recognize myself in this embodied I.” Phenomenology 221/258.
subjects, cannot fully access. He explains: “I am, as a sensing subject, full of natural powers of which I am the first to be filled with wonder. Thus I am not, to recall Hegel's phrase, a 'hole in being,' but rather a hollow or a fold that was made and that can be unmade.”401 One of the consequences of this realization for Merleau-Ponty is that “every perception takes places within an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us as anonymous.”402 But not only is the perception presented to us as “anonymous”: Merleau-Ponty further clarifies that subjectivity itself is “anonymous” at the level of perception. In other words, the “deeper life of consciousness” which we try to, but inevitably fail to reach completely in reflection, is an “anonymous self.” Let's recall an earlier passage: in the opening pages to Part II, Merleau-Ponty writes that “by reestablishing contact with the body and the world... we will also rediscover ourselves, since, if one perceives with his body, then the body is a natural myself and, as it were, the body is the subject of perception.”403 There are thus two senses of “subjectivity” operating in the text: one the “anonymous” self of perception, and the other the reflecting, “personal” self. As we look further into these subjectivities, we will find that the anonymous and personal selves are also distinguished by virtue of being “natural” or “cultural” - and further, “non-human” or “human.”

At the level of perception, then, subjectivity is impersonal, anonymous, and synonymous with the body – again, Merleau-Ponty claims that the body is the subject of perception. To underscore the anonymity of perception, Merleau-Ponty writes, “My perception, even seen from within, expresses a given situation: I see blue because I am sensitive to colors; whereas personal acts create a situation: I am a mathematician because I decided to be one. As a result, if I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision, I would have to say that one perceives in me, and

401 Ibid., 223/260. This is the same language that Merleau-Ponty later uses to describe the flesh. One might argue that the movement from Phenomenology to the later ontology is an extension of the metaphysics of embodied subjectivity (as illustrated here) to all Being.
402 Ibid., 223/260.
403 Ibid., 231/249.
not that I perceive.”

It is perhaps here more than anywhere that we finally see how and why reflection is a necessarily incomplete project; when we try to reach our own experiences at their foundation, we find this atmosphere of generality that escapes us — indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes that the “subject of perception” that is revealed in reflection is no more available to us than our own birth or death. He explains, “Neither my birth nor my death can appear to me as my personal experiences... I can only grasp myself as 'already born' and as 'still living,' - I can only grasp my birth and my death as pre-personal horizons.”

Similarly, when I try to reflect on myself in perception, I find that my perception “arrives from beneath myself” and exceeds myself, resulting from “a sensitivity that preceded it and that will survive it, just as my birth or my death belongs to an anonymous natality or mortality.”

Later in Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty uses these insights to argue that ontologically prior to the reflective cogito of modern thought, there is a “tacit cogito” - the “I can” of the anonymous self.

Merleau-Ponty highlights the difference between the operative intentionality of the “pre-personal self” that appears as a givenness or passivity to the reflecting self and “act” intentionality that occurs at the level of “personal” subjectivity. He explains, “Each time that I experience a sensation, I experience that it does not concern my own being – the one for which I am responsible and upon which I decide – but rather another self that has already sided with the world, that is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them.”

Whereas perception expresses a situation, personal acts create a situation. True to his word, Merleau-Ponty has shown us that attending to the world as it is revealed in perception will again turn us

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404 Ibid., 223/260.
405 Ibid., 224/261.
406 Ibid., 224/261.
407 “The ontological world and body that we uncover at the core of the subject are not the world and the body as ideas; rather, they are the world itself condensed into a comprehensive hold [une prise globale] and the body itself as a knowing-body [corps-connaissant].” Phenomenology 431/470.
408 Ibid., 224/261.
409 “I see blue because I am sensitive to colors... I am a mathematician because I decided to be one.” Phenomenology 223/260.
back to the self – and here, reveal finally the pre-personal that dwells at the foundation of perceptual experience. But again, this pre-personal self is fundamentally inaccessible in its entirety\textsuperscript{410} and thus requires that beyond mere “reflection,” we instead commit ourselves to \textit{radical} reflection: in recognizing “the thickness of an \textit{originary acquisition} that prevents my experience from being clear for itself,”\textsuperscript{411} we must continuously begin our reflection again. In other words, since every perception presents itself as only a horizon of, and not an unchanging truth of, a situation, then our reflection, too, only reveals this partial truth. Merleau-Ponty adds that “sensation can only be anonymous because it is partial. He who sees and touches is not exactly myself, because the visible world and the tangible world are not the world in its entirety. When I see an object, I always feel [\textit{éprouve}] that there is still some being beyond what I currently see... Correlatively, I am not fully within these operations.”\textsuperscript{412} The goal, then, of phenomenological reflection is not to make experience and subjectivity transparent to itself, but rather, to understand their opacity and how it is that we move from this realm of indeterminacy to the world of categories and concepts, of “subjects” and “objects” - in sum, from the perceptual to the scientific worldview. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, he writes that “we must discover, beneath the idea of the subject and the idea of the object, the fact of my subjectivity and the object in the nascent state, the primordial layer where ideas and things are born.”\textsuperscript{413} This layer is where we find an “atmosphere of generality” instead of objects with determinate meaning, and the pre-personal “One” instead of individual subjectivity.

Although the pre-personal self escapes us in reflection, as do our birth and death, Merleau-Ponty is nonetheless able to articulate some determinate characteristics of subjectivity in this nascent form. We have seen several already: pre-personal subjectivity is anonymous, it is

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\textsuperscript{410} “The primordial level is on the horizon of all of our perceptions, but this is an horizon that, in principle, can never be reached and thematized in an explicit perception.” \textit{Phenomenology} 264/302.
\textsuperscript{411} \textit{Ibid.}, 224/261.
\textsuperscript{412} \textit{Ibid.}, 224/261.
\textsuperscript{413} \textit{Ibid.}, 224/261.
\end{flushright}
ontologically prior to the level of subjectivity at which I make decisions and “create situations,” and pre-personal subjectivity is another way of saying “the body,” since the body, Merleau-Ponty argues, “is a natural myself.” I would like to explore this final observation further, first by turning to Merleau-Ponty's claim that “every perception presupposes a certain past of the subject, and the abstract function of perception – as the encounter with objects – implies a more secret act by which we elaborate our milieu.” As was already clear in Part I of *Phenomenology of Perception*, being embodied means being “situated,” and here we see that our “always already” being in a situation implies “a past that has never been present,” or in other words, an “original past.” In various instances, Merleau-Ponty refers to the body as having a “latent knowledge” prior to perception, from which we build our objective, thetic determinations. The “object,” as it were, of this latent knowledge is what Merleau-Ponty calls “the natural world”: He writes, “The natural world is the horizon of all horizons, and the style of all styles, which ensures my experiences have a given, not a willed, unity beneath all of the ruptures of my personal and historical life; the counterpart of the natural world is the given, general, and pre-personal existence in me of my sensory functions, which is where we discovered the definition of the body.”

**Two Worlds, Revisited**

Following Merleau-Ponty's observations here, we can say that corresponding to the two kinds of subjectivity present in the text, there are two kinds of “world”: the natural and what is later

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414 “There is, then, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am there, and who marks out my place in that world. This captive or natural mind is my body, not the momentary body that is the instrument of my personal choices and that focuses upon some world, but rather the system of anonymous 'functions' that wraps each particular focusing into a general project.” *Phenomenology*, 265/302.
416 Both quotes here are from *Phenomenology*, 252/289.
417 See for example *Phenomenology*, 247/285.
referred to as both the “cultural” and “human” world. It is Merleau-Ponty's investigation into space that leads him to finally concretize this distinction in *Phenomenology of Perception*. His interest turns to space by moving from the least to most complex “objects” of perception: his next logical step after discussing the most basic of sensations is to look at the nature of space itself, prior to understanding our experience of “things” in the world. As always, he seeks to collapse a traditional dichotomy carried over from modernism: that between space understood as the “milieu of things” and space as a construct of human consciousness that sustains relations, “traces them out and bears them,” - in sum, the difference between “spatialized” and “spatializing” space.\(^{419}\)

Merleau-Ponty argues that before we can even make such a conceptual distinction, experience reveals that we always find ourselves “anchored” to reference points, meaning that we are always in a perspectival situation.\(^ {420}\)

In a particularly telling footnote, Merleau-Ponty explains how aesthetic perception “opens a new spatiality” insofar as “the painting as a work of art is no longer in the space that it inhabits as a physical thing or as a colored canvas.” Similarly, “dance unfolds in a space without goals or directions... in the dance the subject and the world are no longer opposed, are no longer detached from each other.”\(^ {421}\) The painter and the dancer are thus “in” space differently due to his or her “anchorage,” which includes not only the body as something physically situated, but also the body as a trace of a past that orients one's place in the world and relations between things in the world.\(^ {422}\) Merleau-Ponty concludes, “[w]e have been led to uncover the subject's being firmly set within a milieu and, ultimately, his inherence in the world as the condition of spatiality.”\(^ {423}\) As these passages suggest, examining our experience of space and spatial relations leads Merleau-Ponty to finally take up and thematize the notion of “world,” which he does in two subsequent

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\(^ {419}\) *Phenomenology* 254/291.  
\(^ {420}\) See especially Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the relativity of movement, *Phenomenology* 290-293/329-332.  
\(^ {421}\) *Ibid.*, 546, note 86.  
\(^ {422}\) This is the “past that has never been present” to which we earlier referred. *Phenomenology* 252/289.  
chapters: “The Thing and the Natural World,” and “Others and the Human World.”

As the title to the chapter suggests, elucidating the “natural world” is bound up with another problem in the text, namely, how something comes to be an object for subjectivity. In other words, how are we given a “thing” rather than a collection of sensations in perceptual experience? Earlier, we saw that perception is successful when sentient and sensible are “synchronized,” or when the body is “geared into the world” as a response to a “poorly formulated question.” Here, Merleau-Ponty returns to the way in which perception is a collaborative achievement; he writes, “For each object, just as for each painting in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen—an orientation through which it presents more of itself—beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack.” This corresponds to our earlier comments that all “things” accomplish the “miracle of expression”; “the thing's sense inhabits it as the soul inhabits the body: it is not behind appearances.” When we perceive the thing, we take up for ourselves “the mode of existence that the observable signs sketch out before us.” Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty posits here that the thing has a kind of behavior, a “certain manner of dealing with the world”: if the thing is warm, for example, its heat is experienced as a “sort of vibration of the thing,” whereas its color is given as “the thing going outside of itself.” This means in turn that “the thing is the correlate of my body... [it] is constituted in the hold my body has upon it; it is not at first a signification for the understanding, but rather a structure available for inspection by the body.”

The way in which an object becomes an object for me—in other words, how experience reveals to me a “thing” rather than nothing—is the same method of synchronization by which I am able to experience any sensation. But here, Merleau-Ponty adds the following insight: “Given that

424 Ibid., 313/353.
425 Ibid., 316/355.
426 Ibid., 333/375.
427 Ibid., 333/375.
428 Ibid., 334/376.
relations among things or among the appearances of things are always mediated by our body, then the setting of our own life must in fact be all of nature; *nature must be our interlocutor* in a sort of dialogue."\(^{429}\) Why does Merleau-Ponty choose “nature” here specifically, and not “world” more broadly?

Only much later in the text does Merleau-Ponty illuminate the sense in which he uses the term “world” and its relationship to subjectivity. I quote him here at length:

> Universality and the world are at the core of individuality and of the subject. We will never understand this as long as we turn the world into an ob-ject; but we will understand it immediately if the world is the *field* of our experience, and if we are nothing but a perspective upon the world, for then the most secret vibration of our psycho-physical being already anticipates the world, quality is the sketch of a thing, and the thing is the initial sketch of the world. A world that is never, as Malebranche said, anything other than an ‘unfinished work’ or that, according to the phrase that Husserl applies to the to the body, is ‘never completely constituted’ does not require, and even excludes, a constituting subject.

To this initial outline of being that shines through in the concordances of my own experience and intersubjective experience, and whose possible completion I presume through indefinite horizons – from the simple fact that my phenomena solidify in a thing and follow a certain constant style in their unfolding – that is, to this open unity of the world, an open and indefinite unity of subjectivity must correspond.\(^{430}\)

To summarize this long and complicated passage, we can say that “world” is meant not as a collection of entities or things, and not even as a source of determinate meaning in perceptual experience; rather, “world” corresponds to the “field of our experience.” Elsewhere in the text, Merleau-Ponty refers to a world as a “totality where each element has relations of meanings with the others”;\(^{431}\) here, we see more clearly that these relations only have the meaning that they do because they are *for* a subject. Again, the “elements” of the world are always “synchronized” with the perceiving subject. As situated and embodied subjects who not only carry an “originary past” and latent knowledge, but are also perpetually gaining experience and are oriented towards various projects, our field of experience gains new dimensions (“layers of signification”)\(^{432}\) and expands its horizons, indicating further possibility that will always be open. Thus, we might say


that “world” is a term used to indicate my field of experience as oriented towards various
determinate meanings and meaning-possibilities whose horizons are ever-expanding.

But here we might return to Merleau-Ponty's conclusions about the world with respect to
nature: it is not the world as our field of perception that is “our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue,”
but nature. What purpose does this term serve and what is demarcated by it? We can first observe
that in the passage cited above, nature is directly correlated with embodiment: again, Merleau-
Ponty writes, “Given that relations among things or among the appearances of things are always
mediated by our body, then the setting of our own life must in fact be all of nature; nature must be
our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue.”433 This would indicate that, despite Merleau-Ponty’s efforts
to demonstrate how the body itself is “geared into” and thus changed and effected by its field of
experience, it nonetheless reduces to a “natural” entity. Does this mean, then, that there are
resonances of a purely material and organic “nature” that haunt the body-subject and re-invest it
in an ontological dualism?

In his text, “Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature,” Ted Toadvine argues that “in the
torsion of radical reflection, the moment of the body's dialogue with nature and the reflective
expression of this dialogue remain ontologically continuous yet distinct, like the topological
figure of the Möbius strip.”434 Radical reflection, he explains, yields the “anonymous self” of the
body synchronized with nature in a way that escapes us and presents us with a “hostile and alien
face of nature, 'no longer an interlocutor, but a resolutely silent Other.'”435 As Toadvine notes, this
posits nature as a source of expression that is separate from human consciousness, a concept that
environmental philosophers have found fruitful for developing a model that provides justification
for treating nature as having an ontological status other than an instrument to satisfy human

433 Phenomenology 334/376.
434 Toadvine 53.
435 Ibid., 53, quoting Phenomenology 372/276.
needs. But, he continues in saying that “it is at this point, the ontological basis for expression and reflection, that Merleau-Ponty's investigation of nature in *Phenomenology of Perception* falters. On the one hand, the logic of radical reflection suggests a new 'teleology' that would treat human reflection as a moment of nature's own self-expression... on the other hand, we often find Merleau-Ponty situating the motor of reflection in a 'teleology of consciousness' that owes more to the ontologies of Scheler and Sartre than to this own account of perceptual dialogue.” What Toadvine is referring to here is that human subjectivity is fully realized as reflective consciousness only by *negating* the givenness of the natural world: there is “an ontological fracture, an anti-*physis* that introduces freedom into the nonhuman world.”

The tension that Toadvine points to – the sense that human subjectivity is both a modality of nature's own expressive powers (as embodied), and, as reflective consciousness, also a break from nature - becomes increasingly evident in the chapter titled “Others and the Human World,” where Merleau-Ponty directly addresses the emergence of culture and others for consciousness. He writes, “Just as nature penetrates into the center of my personal life and intertwines with it, behaviors also descend into nature and are deposited there in the form of a cultural world. Not only do I have a physical world and live surrounded by soil, air, and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, a bell, utensils, a spoon, a pipe. Each of these objects bears as an imprint the mark of the human action it serves.” Despite the obvious distinction between organic, “natural,” and non-organic, “cultural” matter here, we can also point to the fact that cultural objects are the products of some kind of human intervention – a break

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436 “This attribution of expression to the thing, and ultimately to nature in its entirety, has attracted the most attention from scholars seeking the foundation for a new philosophy of nature in *Phenomenology of Perception*. David Abram, for example, has suggested Merleau-Ponty's new description of the body-world dialogue as the starting point for a phenomenological environmentalism.” Toadvine, 57. The Abram text he refers to is *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).
437 Toadvine, 54.
438 *Ibid*., 54.
439 *Phenomenology* 363/404-5.
with nature, one might say, and the intervention of human freedom.\textsuperscript{440} As Merleau-Ponty states elsewhere, “human objects and utensils appear as if placed in the world, whereas things are rooted in a background of non-human nature. For our existence, the thing is much less a pole of attraction than a pole of repulsion. We do not see ourselves in it, and that is precisely what makes it a thing.”\textsuperscript{441}

What I want to highlight here is that the disconnect in Merleau-Ponty's account, the sense in which we are of nature but also negate it, is also tied into a discourse about the human and the non-human. In other words, though our bodies insert us into the natural world and serve as the grounds by which the cultural world can be constructed, our bodies only ever make us animals and not yet human. It is only by virtue of negating nature and establishing culture that humanity emerges. We see this most clearly in Merleau-Ponty's description of encountering others. In the section titled “Coexistence of psycho-physical subjects in a natural world and of men in a cultural world,” Merleau-Ponty explains that “insofar as I have sensory functions – a visual, auditory, and tactile field – I already communicate with others, themselves taken as psycho-physical subjects.”\textsuperscript{442} When we perceive other living bodies engaging with the world through various behaviors and thus providing it with new layers of signification, we perceive that “my world is no longer merely mine, it is no longer present only to me, it is present to X, to this other behavior that begins to take shape in it. The other body is... a certain 'view' of the world.”\textsuperscript{443} We perceive the other's body as a “miraculous extension of [our] own intentions,” since we see that this body has a “familiar manner of handling the world.” Thus, our bodies form a kind of system: the “anonymous” existence that defines my body in fact inhabits both of our bodies simultaneously, like two sides of the same coin. There is a unity established in my perception of the other parallel

\textsuperscript{440} Toadvine argues that such a break is implied with the tacit cogito. See Toadvine, 54.
\textsuperscript{441} Phenomenology, 338/380.
\textsuperscript{442} Ibid., 369/411.
\textsuperscript{443} Ibid., 369/411.
to the unity of parts of my own body; the other living body reveals new significative intentions to me just as I use various parts of my perceptual apparatus to understand a new object and learn how I can relate to it not just with my hands, or my eyes, but through my entire body schema.

Importantly, this purely perceptual, or if you like, bodily encounter with the other, “only establishes another living being, and not yet another man.” 444 The humanity of the other is established – like mine – by virtue of its being an “open life”: “This other life annexes natural objects by diverting them from their immediate sense, constructs tools and instruments, and projects itself into the cultural objects of its milieu.” 445 We again find that the negation of nature and the insertion of human freedom establishes both culture and the cultural world, as well as the humanity of the subject.

Of the cultural objects that we find in the world, Merleau-Ponty argues that one is particularly important in our perception of other subjects as human beings: language. He explains, “In the experience of dialogue, a common ground is constituted between me and another; 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 are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. Here there is a being-shared-by-two, and the other person is no longer for me a simple behavior in my transcendental field, nor for that matter am I a simple behavior in his. We are, for each other, collaborators in perfect reciprocity: our perspectives slip into each other, we coexist through a single world.” 446 The “single world” to which Merleau-Ponty refers here is the cultural world, which only grants access to those who can insert their freedom into nature and transcend the “simple behavior” of the body.

Let's return to Toadvine's claim that “in the torsion of radical reflection, the moment of the body's dialogue with nature and the reflective expression of this dialogue remain ontologically

444 Ibid., 370/411.
445 Ibid., 370/411.
446 Ibid., 370/412.
continuous yet distinct, like the topological figure of the Möbius strip."\(^{447}\) The question which remains is whether the expressivity that is rooted in freedom, creates culture, and defines certain forms of subjectivity as human is founded in nature in such a way that we want to say it is “continuous, yet distinct,” as Toadvine suggests, or whether this constitutes a real ontological separation between culture and nature, and further, between human beings and other living beings. To explore this problematic further, I will turn to two essays on aesthetics that highlight the shift in Merleau-Ponty's ontology in his middle-period works: “Cezanne's Doubt” and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence.”

My charge in the following sections is that even as Merleau-Ponty revises his project from a phenomenology of perception to an ontology of expression, the original distinctions that he makes between nature and culture continue to infect his project. In the later ontology, we will see that the primacy of expression supposedly renders the earlier distinctions null and void, since nature and culture are expressive entities. However, Merleau-Ponty continues to place a greater value on the functioning of language in its expressive powers and in its historicity. This ultimately reinstates a distinction between human and non-human being, again reiterating the division between nature and culture, since animals and other entities are capable of some forms of expression but not language. Introducing the concept of “institution” widens the gap further, as not only does language divide man from animal, but also plays a privileged role in establishing the historical character of humanity. In the following sections, we will see that as Merleau-Ponty develops his concept of expression, he begins to make this division, which was more suggestive than fully realized in Phenomenology of Perception, more concrete.

In conclusion to our work with Phenomenology, however, I would like to highlight how historicity already demarcates an important element of human freedom. Merleau-Ponty explains that “our open and personal existence rests upon an initial foundation of acquired and congealed

\(^{447}\) Toadvine, 53.
existence.” In other words, personal existence – our projects, our “acts,” and the insertion of our freedom into the world – is supported by the “thickness of the pre-objective present.”

Merleau-Ponty cites Proust in saying that “we are... perched upon a pyramid of the past.” The “pyramid,” as it were, is the sedimented meaning that we find all around us. We always discover ourselves in a world with pre-established, though never closed, meanings: our words carry a tradition of usage and connotation, our tools and artifacts carry their past and culture in the ways we learn to use and understand them. The means by which this sedimentation happens is through a process of expression. Referring to the expressive operation of language, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> To express is not to substitute for the new thought a stable system of signs that can be connected to thoughts that are certain; rather, it is to ensure, through the use of already well-worn words, that the new intention takes up the heritage of the past; it is, in a single gesture, to incorporate the past into the present and to weld this present to a future, to open an entire cycle of time where the 'acquired' thought will remain present as a dimension without our needing to ever again summon it or reproduce it.450

We have already seen Merleau-Ponty speak of “authentic” expression as the means by which already acquired words come to have new meaning, but here, we begin to understand how such “sedimented” meaning can be instituted as a dimension or layer of the present, subsequently adding to the “pyramid of the past” upon which we find ourselves. Not only language, but painting, mathematics, and other forms of expression add to the “thickness” of the present: “After the construction, the geometrical relation is acquired; even if I forget the details, the mathematical gesture establishes a tradition. Van Gogh's painting is forever established in me, a step has been taken that I can never take back, and, even if I hold no precise memories of the paintings that I have seen, my entire aesthetic experience will from then on be that of someone who has known Van Gogh's paintings, just as a bourgeois who has become a worker remains forever in his very manner of being a worker, a bourgeois-become-worker, or just as an act defines us forever, even...

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448 *Phenomenology*, 456/498.
449 *Phenomenology*, 413/453.
if we have subsequently disavowed it and changed our beliefs."speech, painting, personal and political acts – each of these are capable of instituting a dimension of meaning, of building onto the pyramid that is our past. And this pyramid, Merleau-Ponty explains, is the pre-condition for our freedom:

I am a psychological and historical structure. Along with existence, I received a way of existing, or a style. All of my actions and my thoughts are related to this structure, and even a philosopher's thought is merely a way of making explicit his hold upon the world, which is all he is. And yet, I am free, not in spite of or beneath these motivations, but rather by their means. For that meaningful life, that particular signification of nature and history that I am, does not restrict my access to the world, it is rather my means of communication with it.

Thus, we see that the very possibility of our personal existence – that use of freedom by which we go “beyond-nature,” beyond behavior, and into the cultural world with others – is predicated upon a historicity of instituted expression that forms the foundation of meaning which we can take up as our own or choose to negate. Importantly, as we look further into the concept of expression as it unfolds in Merleau-Ponty's later ontology, we will see that only human beings are capable of such instituting expression. As in Phenomenology, things both organic and inorganic will have a “style” of existence, but only human existence sediments meaning, or “institutes.” But as has been the case throughout Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty also continues to be troubled by the figure of the animal, which seems to have some character of transcendence over nature, and perhaps some culture, but not the same capacities as the human. In Chapter Five, we will see this tension play out in the Nature lectures and finally be resolved through the concept of the flesh. Let's turn now to “Cézanne's Doubt” and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” where we see an expansion of the role of expression in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and correlatively, the further problematization of the meanings of nature and culture.

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451 Ibid., 413/454.
452 Ibid., 482/520.
“Cézanne's Doubt”: A Phenomenology of Painting

“Cézanne's Doubt,” Merleau-Ponty's first published work on painting, appeared contemporaneously with Phenomenology of Perception in 1945. It was featured originally in the French journal Fontaine and subsequently reprinted without changes in 1948 in Sense and Non-Sense. Reflecting on this work, Merleau-Ponty writes in the preface to Sense and Non-Sense that “Cézanne is an example of how precariously expression and communication are achieved.”

Perhaps drawing on his earlier distinction between authentic and inauthentic expression, Merleau-Ponty seeks to show in “Cézanne's Doubt” that what biographers and critics think of as Cézanne's “madness” was in fact a singular creative process that illuminates the labor of expression. More than any other artist, Merleau-Ponty thinks that Cézanne captures the “lived perspective, that of our perception.” But “Cézanne's Doubt” is as much about the process of expression and the relationship between the artist and his work as it is about the finished work itself.

Merleau-Ponty highlights the fact that painting, for Cézanne, is “less a work of the studio than a working from nature.” Usually classified as a post-impressionist, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes Cézanne's work from impressionism by virtue of the fact that impressionists sought to capture “the very way in which objects strike our eyes and attack our senses,” which required the use of various techniques such as separating and juxtaposing, rather than mixing, colors in order to elicit a certain tone from the viewer's perspective. Merleau-Ponty explains that these methods resulted in a canvas “which no longer corresponded point by point to nature... depicting the atmosphere and breaking up the tones submerged the object and caused it to lose its

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457 Ibid., 71/16.
proper weight."\[^{458}\] Cézanne, alternatively, returns to the object: it “is no longer covered by reflections and lost in its relationships to the air and other objects: it seems subtly illuminated from within.”\[^{459}\] Cézanne captures the object while “making the warm colors vibrate” as the impressionists do, but rather than separating the tones, he uses “graduated mixtures.” He thus carries on the impressionist tradition which takes nature as its model, but according to Merleau-Ponty, he more accurately captures our fundamental perceptual experiences insofar as he returns to the object - that is, he is able to capture the way in which perception always gives us a privileged figure against an indifferent background. Merleau-Ponty cites Cézanne, who explains in reflecting on his distinction from classical artists, “They created pictures: we are attempting a piece of nature.”\[^{460}\]

Merleau-Ponty writes that Cézanne's insistence that the artist must conform to nature, “this perfect work of art,” has led critics to see his work as paradoxical: it seeks to “investigate reality without departing from sensations, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following the contours, with no outline to enclose the color, with no perspectival or pictorial composition.”\[^{461}\] Cézanne sought to “paint matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization,”\[^{462}\] and as such, he denied himself the traditional means by which artists generate identifiable forms: the use of outlines, various compositional technique, and varying distribution of light. Instead, Cézanne generates form in the work as it appears in “natural vision,”\[^{463}\] as an emerging order. Rather than juxtapose colors, he mixes them; rather than outline an object, he creates a distortion - he “follows the swelling of the object in a colored modulation, and outlines several contours in blue lines.”\[^{464}\]

\[^{458}\] Ibid., 71/16.  
\[^{459}\] Ibid., 72/17.  
\[^{460}\] Ibid., 72/17.  
\[^{461}\] Ibid., 72/17.  
\[^{462}\] Ibid., 73/18.  
\[^{463}\] Ibid., 74/20; “la vision naturelle.”  
\[^{464}\] Ibid., 74/20.
Merleau-Ponty cites Émile Bernard, who says of this technique that it constituted “Cézanne's suicide: aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it.” Merleau-Ponty suggests that Cézanne can only be interpreted in this way if one is caught up in the ready-made alternatives and dichotomies that Cézanne was attempting to collapse: “the senses versus intelligence; the painter who sees versus the painter who thinks; nature versus composition; primitivism versus tradition.” Bernard, in other words, does not see the work of art as expression, but as imitation. Merleau-Ponty explains, “The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain closed up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.” Thus we see how Merleau-Ponty, in his later introduction to Sense and Non-Sense, describes this essay as a work on expression and communication: the painter who truly engages in the movement of expression “must not only create and express an idea, but must also awaken the experiences which will make the idea take root in the consciousness of others.” Let us look more closely at how this is accomplished in Cézanne's works.

It is important to note that, despite endeavoring to paint the primordial world, Cézanne says of his work that he “never wished to 'paint like a savage.'” Cézanne, like Merleau-Ponty, makes a “basic distinction not between 'the senses' and 'intelligence' but rather between the spontaneous order of perceived things and the human order of ideas and sciences.” Rather than “paint like a savage,” Cézanne wanted to put the human order “back in touch with the world of

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465 Ibid., 72/17.
466 “Rather than apply to his work dichotomies, which moreover belong more to the scholarly traditions, we would do better to let ourselves be persuaded to the proper sense of his painting, which is to challenge those dichotomies.” “Cézanne's Doubt,” 73/18.
467 Ibid., 73/18.
468 Ibid., 77/23.
469 Ibid., 79/25.
470 Ibid., 73/19: “peindre comme une brute.”
471 Ibid., 73/18. My emphasis. Another way of phrasing this is the distinction Merleau-Ponty makes in Phenomenology of Perception between the natural and cultural, or human, worlds.
nature which they were intended to comprehend.” Indeed, Merleau-Ponty says of Cézanne that he was “able to look at nature as only a human being knows how to do it.” Given the distinctions we have seen between the human and natural worlds in *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is important to pause here and consider what Merleau-Ponty means by this claim. What is it to look at nature as only a human being can?

We have already seen some indication of the singularity of Cézanne's painting, insofar as he uses various techniques to capture an emerging order in the work as it appears in perception. But Merleau-Ponty also notes that in this method, whereby Cézanne “freeze[s] these distortions in repainting them on the canvas” and “stop[s] the spontaneous movement in which they pile up in perception and tend towards geometric perception,” his work enacts a suspension of the natural attitude. In other words, Cézanne's work puts into question the world that is given us in our everyday engagements. Merleau-Ponty explains,

> We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakably. Cézanne's painting suspends these habits and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself. This is why Cézanne's people are strange, as if viewed by a creature of another species. Nature itself is stripped of the attributes which make it ready for animistic communions: there is no wind in the landscape, no movement on the Lac d'Annecy, the frozen objects hesitate as at the beginning of the world.

Merleau-Ponty believes that Cézanne's painting is able to capture what is revealed in radical reflection – namely, that the lived object and world are in an ever-evolving process of meaning-generation, and that each perception is but a frozen abstraction from that movement. “Expressing what *exists,*” Merleau-Ponty writes, “is an endless task.” The distorted figures, outlined not once but circumvented numerous times, the graduated mixtures of color, the obsessive placement of each brushstroke and days upon days' worth of work finally proclaimed “unfinished” - all serve

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472 “Cézanne's Doubt,” 73/19.
473 Ibid., 71/15. The verb here is “regarder,” also translated as “to gaze.”
474 Ibid., 74/19.
475 Ibid., 76/21-22.
476 Ibid., 75/21.
to generate the depth of the world in its “thickness” of possibilities upon the canvas.

It is this perspective that Merleau-Ponty thinks can only be attained by the human. He writes, “only a human being is capable of such a vision, which penetrates right to the root of things beneath constituted humanity. All indications are that animals cannot gaze at [regarder] things, cannot penetrate them in expectation of nothing but the truth.” Recall our earlier observations in *Phenomenology of Perception* that animals are expressive in the way that, through their own operative intentionality, they project a certain meaning onto their world: “Already the mere appearance of a living being transforms the physical world, makes 'food' appear over here and a 'hiding place' over there, and gives to 'stimuli' a sense that they did not have.” It seems that Merleau-Ponty is extending this claim here to say that animals are incapable of putting that meaning into question; they cannot “penetrate [things] in expectation of nothing but the truth.” We can thus draw a further line between man and animal by saying that there are certain kinds of expression that are limited to the human – these forms that suspend the natural attitude in the way that Cézanne exemplifies. As Olivier Mongin writes in his essay, “Since Lascaux,” for Merleau-Ponty, “the painting is, as it were, a supplementary outgrowth of perception, an excrescence of the human gaze.” According to Mongin, painting is intimately tied to the development of humanity; painting, like the role of authentic speech, marks an advent of meaning, a “figurative sense which did not exist before.” Mongin writes that Merleau-Ponty “sees in the painter's gesture the autofiguration of humanity, the structuring of the human. Indissociably the painter’s gesture marks an event and gives humanity form.”

As intimated above, Merleau-Ponty extends his reflections on authentic speech and expression to his understanding of painting, and to privileged figures like Cézanne in particular.

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478 *Phenomenology*, 195/231.
481 Mongin, 248.
Nearly quoting himself verbatim from *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes, “One can manufacture objects that are pleasurable by linking ready-made ideas in a different way and by presenting forms that have been seen before. This second painting or speaking is what is generally meant by culture. Cézanne's or Balzac's artist is not satisfied to be a cultured animal but takes up culture from its inception and founds it anew: he speaks as the first human spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before.”

Thus, we might say that “authentic” painting does not imitate or even directly build from the culture of painting that has been already established; Cézanne's work is not merely a *response* to the impressionists, or classical painting, but a something so unlike anything else that it founds that culture anew. However, recall Cézanne's reflection that he did not want to “paint like a savage.” How does one achieve this new form of expression – which creates “an unfamiliar world in which one is uncomfortable and which forbids all human effusiveness” – while remaining within the confines of a specifically human culture and not simply behaving like a “cultured animal”? Cézanne wrote of his work that “the landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness.”

Merleau-Ponty argues that although “Cézanne's difficulties are those of the first word,” he is still situated within a history of painting, just as authentic speech in *Phenomenology of Perception* always uses a pre-existing grammar and “second-order” speech in its expression. Cézanne was richly indebted to the tradition and “science” of painting, spending every day in Paris at the Louvre, studying the geometry of planes and forms, and even learning the geological structure of his landscapes. Cézanne, according to Merleau-Ponty, was able to revive the

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482 “Cézanne's Doubt,” 78/24.
classical definition of art: “man added to nature.” Cézanne's role as an artist was to capture “natural vision,” to render the primordial world a work of art in a way that recreates the emergence of form as it occurs in perception, but to do so in a “scientific” way. Merleau-Ponty explains, “What was at issue, all science forgotten, was to recapture through these sciences, the constitution of the landscape as an emerging organism.” Each brushstroke was extremely calculated, for “if the painter want[ed] to express the world, the arrangement of his colors must bear within this arrangement this indivisible Whole” that is the world in perception. Neither the scientific nor the natural rule in the construction of the work, but each inform it.

The way in which Cézanne both breaks from, but nonetheless is situated within, the tradition of painting, shows that the specifically human gaze and human culture that contribute to the work are part of a history. Thus, we might make the cursory conclusion here – which will be developed more fully in the following sections addressing “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” - that the distinction between these forms of human expression and the expressive powers of other living beings is also determined by their place in a historical situation. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argues that the work of art is “an acquisition for always.” Interestingly, although this text is contemporaneous with Phenomenology of Perception, we see here that not only do speech and language serve as a means of “transcending nature,” but so too can art – or at least, certain kinds of art – form culture anew. As we turn to “Indirect Language,” we will see that even as Merleau-Ponty integrates his theory of expression into a broader structure of signs, he still grants language a decisive privilege as a cultural, and (only) human, phenomenon.

486 “Cézanne's Doubt,” 76/22, my emphasis.
487 Ibid., 77/23.
488 Ibid., 75/20-21.
489 Ibid., 79/26.
From Perception to Ontological Interrogation: “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”

Just as Merleau-Ponty sought to challenge an interpretation of Cézanne that treats his work as the consequence of mental illness, his 1952 “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” challenges another extreme in interpreting the expressive process – namely, the notion that the work of art is the product of a purely subjective, free act. Through these two essays, then, we see Merleau-Ponty attempt to collapse another traditional dualism, that of free will and determinism. The third term, for Merleau-Ponty, will be what he calls “Institution,” which comes to replace the concept of “authentic expression.” It is in this capacity that history will play a central role in Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on art.

It is clear from the start that “Indirect Language” will take up the concepts of freedom and determinism: first appearing in Les Temps Modernes, the essay is dedicated to Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom Merleau-Ponty had served as an editor of the journal but whose philosophical and political differences culminated in a public and unresolved separation not long after the appearance of this text. Galen Johnson writes, “It is singularly important, in reading ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,’ to realize that it was Merleau-Ponty’s last essay for Les Temps Modernes, and its publication preceded his resignation from the journal and public break with Sartre by a scant five months.”

Merleau-Ponty had already critiqued Sartre’s existentialist concept of freedom in Phenomenology of Perception, if only indirectly. “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” reiterates his charges made there, but from a different angle: the “voices of silence” from the title indicate Merleau-Ponty’s other primary interlocutor in the text, André Malraux, whose three-volume history of art, appearing in the years between 1947 and

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491 See especially section I: “I do not choose myself starting from nothing.” Phenomenology of Perception, 478-480/516-518.
Merleau-Ponty aligns Sartre’s concept of the self-determining, free subject with Malraux’s claim that modern art is a “subjective” representation of the artist’s individual “style” that breaks from the representational, “objective” art of the classical period. For Merleau-Ponty, Malraux’s modern artist is the Sartrean subject applied to expression.

As a testament to the richness and complexity of the essay, Merleau-Ponty begins not with this major theme in the text, but instead with a section dedicated to Saussurian linguistics. It is important to note that this section is added to the essay for publication in Les Temps Modernes and was not originally included in an earlier version – which gives us the other half of the title, “The Indirect Language” - intended as chapter three of the posthumously published and unfinished work, The Prose of the World. The very composition and structure of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” then, marks a development and shift in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression; Johnson argues that it indicates that “during the middle period of his career, Merleau-Ponty was working on a general theory of expression that would elaborate a philosophy of art and language and extend it into a general philosophy of culture and history.”

Merleau-Ponty uses the introductory section on Saussure to set up a parallel between silences in speech and the “mute art” of painting. He begins, “What we have learned from Saussure is that, taken singly, signs do not signify anything, and that each one of them does not so

493 Malraux’s use of “style” is one of Merleau-Ponty’s primary critiques, which we will develop shortly.
494 Galen Johnson writes, “Jean-Paul Sartre is the principal philosopher addressed by Merleau-Ponty’s essay, with Malraux in the shadows, even though the essay’s explicit references are most often to Malraux. Merleau-Ponty found in Malraux’s philosophy of art a nearly perfect analogue for the views of Jean-Paul Sartre, the same swing from subjectivism to objectivism founded on dualistic splits between mind and body, subject and world, individual and collective history, freedom and fate, real and unreal, imagination and perception, prose and painting. Merleau-Ponty’s entire philosophical effort from Phenomenology of Perception forward had been to overcome dichotomies such as these and the philosophical impasses they had created in modern though. He continues this effort in ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence.’” Johnson page 23.
496 Johnson, 22.
much express a sense as mark a divergence of sense between itself and other signs. Since the
same can be said for all other signs, we may conclude that language is made of differences
without terms; or more exactly, that the terms of language are engendered only by the differences
which appear among them." Merleau-Ponty finds in Saussure an alternative to the
representational theories of language (as discussed in Chapter Three) that captures the importance
of the relationship between signs. For Saussure, signs only express via their differences from
other signs and thus only express a “sense” within a whole. The consequence of this structural
understanding of sense is that there is “an opacity of language. Nowhere does it stop and leave a
place for pure sense; it is always limited only by more language, and the sense appears within it
only set into the words.” The integration of a structuralist conception of language into Merleau-
Ponty's theory of expression further distinguishes it from any notion of expression whereby
language is understood as a sign for something else (e.g., a thought or a thing in the world).

Rather than argue that words “bear” meaning, or more generally, that signs carry their
sense, as was the case in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the structuralist view argues that sense
emerges in the differences between signs. This means that the responsibility (if we can call it that)
of projecting a sense in expression is no longer granted to the speaker or the painter; he or she
cannot intentionally control what meaning is established in their expression, nor can we say that
the meaning is “theirs,” even as a byproduct of their intended expression. Instead, meaning, or
sense, emerges like the silence in speech: indeterminately, ambiguously, and opaquely. One of
the primary differences, therefore, between this understanding and the gestural theory of
expression in *Phenomenology of Perception* is that Saussurian linguistics moves expression away
from the work of embodied consciousness and instead grants it an individual existence. In other

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498 “Indirect Language,” 244/68-69.
words, “sense” has an ontological weight separate from its relationship to a corporeal “style” of existing.

That Merleau-Ponty separates the embodied, gestural act of speech from the sense of language, now understood in the context of a system of signs, is further evidenced in his discussion of authentic and inauthentic language, now reiterated for a third time in his major works, but with significant difference. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty’s earlier works distinguished between speech that merely makes use of ready-made meanings and speech that expresses a new sense. Here, Merleau-Ponty uses Saussure to argue that all speech is expressive; “the genesis of sense is never completed [achevée].” With no pure link between sign and sense, there is no limit to the generation of meaning from any given expression. Thus, it is misleading to think that, even in our seemingly banal everyday speech, we are only expressing a pre-determined meaning. Merleau-Ponty explains, “if we rid our minds of the idea that our language is the translation or cipher of an original text, we shall see that the idea of complete expression is nonsensical, and that all language is indirect or allusive – that is, if you like, silence.” If all language is “indirect or allusive,” then the gap between the authentic and the inauthentic is less wide than we may think; no sign will cease to express or be fully captured within any of its determined usages. Or, more accurately, no language – with all of its gaps and silences – will cease to express new meaning. From this, we might even conclude that the authentic/inauthentic distinction is no longer applicable - but as we will see shortly, Merleau-Ponty still finds merit in its use.

One particularly salient example that Merleau-Ponty draws from Saussure to illuminate the allusive character of language is how the absence of a sign can still be expressive, but often goes unnoticed until we catch it in translation, as in the difference between “l’homme que j’aime”

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499 Ibid., 243/67.
500 Ibid., 245/70.
and “the man I love.” The two sentences express a similar meaning determined by the relations between the signs, even given an absence of an English equivalent to “que” in “the man I love.”

Merleau-Ponty explains, “The relation of sense to the spoken word can no longer be a point-for-point correspondence that we always have in view.”\textsuperscript{501} In other words, the “que” (or “that”) is not needed to express the meaning in “the man I love” as completely as “l'homme que j'aime.”

Merleau-Ponty notes that this absence is not merely an implied “que,” but rather, that “the absence of a sign can be a sign.”\textsuperscript{502} Thus, “expression is not the adjustment of an element of discourse to each element of the sense, but an operation of language upon language which suddenly decenters itself toward its sense.”\textsuperscript{503} Language, in this model, has an existence over and above the individual signs that we use and our thoughts, which “[crawl] along in language.”\textsuperscript{504}

“More than a means,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “language is something like a being,”\textsuperscript{505} it is “oblique and autonomous.”\textsuperscript{506}

Despite this new, structural emphasis on the relationship between signs and sense, Merleau-Ponty still finds it helpful to differentiate between authentic and inauthentic expression. He writes, “The empirical use of already established language should be distinguished from its creative use. Empirical language can only be the result of creative language.”\textsuperscript{507} Following the precedent set in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} and “Cézanne's Doubt,” the difference between the authentic and inauthentic is that “true speech” signifies, whereas the inauthentic functions as “the opportune recollection of a preestablished sign.”\textsuperscript{508} But Merleau-Ponty adds a further demarcation with respect to silence, writing that “true speech... is only silence in respect to

\textsuperscript{501} Ibid., 245/70.
\textsuperscript{502} Ibid., 245/71.
\textsuperscript{503} Ibid., 245/71.
\textsuperscript{504} Ibid., 244/69.
\textsuperscript{505} Ibid., 246/69.
\textsuperscript{506} Ibid., 246/72.
\textsuperscript{507} Ibid., 246/72.
\textsuperscript{508} Ibid., 246/72.
empirical usage, for it does not go so far as to become a common noun.” What Merleau-Ponty seems to be addressing here is similar to his earlier claim that authentic speech arises from the “babble of the world.” In other words, what seems to be “silence,” or just “babble,” is authentically expressive, though not easily comprehended as the speech which employs ready-made meanings. But interestingly, it is no longer the embodied subject who stumbles upon a new meaning – it is language itself that turns and folds back upon itself, making it a “spiritual power.” What we take to be the primary function of speech – to express a determinate meaning, to communicate our “thoughts” or point to something in the world – is really only a secondary accident: “if [language] sometimes signifies a thought or a thing directly, that is only a secondary power derived from its inner life.” Giving language a “life” and a separate existence here resonates with Merleau-Ponty's claim that language is “something like a being.” Merleau-Ponty seems to give an intentionality to language: “the expressive word does not simply choose a sign for an already defined meaning... It gropes around a significative intention which is not guided by any text, and which is precisely in the process of writing the text.”

It is with these reflections that Merleau-Ponty questions whether language can be understood as one of the “mute arts” of expression. He explains, “We usually say that the painter reaches us across the silent world of lines and colors, and that he addresses himself to an unformulated power of deciphering within us that we control only after we have blindly used it – only after we have enjoyed the work.” He asks, given that language can be thought of as silence, can we say the same of the writer or speaker? Merleau-Ponty explains that if we submit language to a kind of “reduction” and examine the silence from which speech emerges, which surrounds it, and without which it would not exist – and thus “gaze at it as deaf people look at

509 Ibid., 246/72.
510 Ibid., 245/70.
511 Ibid., 246/72.
512 Ibid., 247/74.
513 Ibid., 246/72.
those who are speaking,”

we should be able to understand language in the context of the other silent arts. But, importantly, he adds, “It is possible that the sense of language has a decisive privilege... it is by trying out the parallel that we will perceive what may in the end make that parallel impossible.”

The purpose of this work, then, is twofold: first, to see whether and to what extent language, as silence, is a “mute art” of expression; and secondly, to see what grants language a “decisive privilege,” if one ultimately cannot say that it is like those other forms of expression.

Renaud Barbaras argues that this shift with respect to language – from conceiving speech as a gestural act of the body to attempting to understand language like a “being” - is indicative of a larger development in Merleau-Ponty's philosophical methodology that begins with the early drafts of The Prose of the World, from which several sections of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” are taken. Barbaras explains that in Phenomenology of Perception, “Merleau-Ponty's way of proceeding was in the end progressive; once the return to the body and to being-in-the-world was carried out, it was a matter of reconceiving the different levels of expression as higher modalities of being-in-the-world.”

Barbaras is here referring to the several different modes of expression that we have indicated with respect to the body as behavioral (along with the bodies of animals), as projecting an Umwelt through their operative intentionality, as opposed to the act-intentionality by which human beings can go beyond-nature by employing their freedom to negate the givens of their situation – which, as we argued earlier, is bound up with the notion of “personal” existence and the continuation of culture. Barbaras, too, thinks that this approach carries with it the remains of an ontological dualism: “The order of ideality [in Phenomenology of Perception] appears... as a specific world being super imposed on the perceptual world with no possibility of genuine continuity between the two. This is why, beyond the still vague unity of the

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514 Ibid., 248/75.
515 Ibid., 248/75.
516 Barbaras, 59.
notion of expression, the subject-object duality reappears in the displaced form of an opposition between the natural world and the cultural world, despite the fact that the notion of expression was aiming to overcome such duality.”

Although Merleau-Ponty attempted to show that, from even our most basic perceptual experiences, we find an intentionality and thus expressivity uniting subject and world, he nonetheless reinstated a dualism by differentiating between the expression achieved at the level of the “natural” - the pre-personal body, or what we might even call the animal body, and expression that is cultural.

Barbaras therefore posits the same distinction that we have demonstrated in previous sections, and argues that it comes about by virtue of this flawed methodology: to start from the perceptual body and being-in-the-world, and to move progressively higher on a seeming hierarchy of expression. However, Barbaras explains that in The Prose of the World, and thus, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty reverses his methodology: “the philosophy of expression brings forth a regressive approach that, starting from culture and language, interrogates their originary soil.”

We can see this already in Merleau-Ponty's interest in looking at speech “before it is pronounced,” in the “background of silence,” and ultimately, as “an originating operation.” Merleau-Ponty will then move in this new methodology from the “originary soil” of expression to account for body and world, which was his intention in the unfinished Prose of the World. However, as Barbaras explains, we can get a sketch of Merleau-Ponty's project by examining his courses at the Collège de France, which we will turn to in the following chapter. Of these courses – especially those on Nature and Institution, which will be our focus - Barbaras writes, “Merleau-Ponty's ontology is born from this regressive movement:

\[\text{Ibid., 44, my emphasis.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 59.}\]
\[\text{“Indirect Language,” 248/75.}\]
the point is to find some way of understanding the nature in which this culture, whose meaning comes to be clarified, is rooted."520

In the early sketches of Merleau-Ponty's work post-*Phenomenology of Perception*, including “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty begins to use expression to inform perception, rather than vice-versa. Barbaras explains, “While in his first period the analysis of language is carried out according to a parallel with perception, the development of the analysis and the discovery of historicity which emerges from it leads Merleau-Ponty, little by little, to question the categories which formerly presided over the description of the perceived.”521 This movement fuels Merleau-Ponty's shift to his final philosophical methodology, “ontological interrogation.” We will see this development carried out within the present work as Merleau-Ponty comes to integrate the concept of “institution” into his understanding of expression – and within the context of “Indirect Language,” it will ultimately be the locus of that “decisive privilege” which language has over painting. What we will find in following the development of Merleau-Ponty's thought is that he eventually finds something more primary than nature, something from which both nature and culture are born: flesh. This move ultimately erases the hierarchical relationship between nature and culture that we see here in his earlier works, and instead places nature and culture on a lateral plane as two differentiations of wild Being.

**Toward an Institutional Model of Expression**

Merleau-Ponty turns in the second section of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” to examine how it is that “painting speaks in its own way.”522 It is here that he addresses Malraux' false distinction between the objective, representational painting of the classical era and

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520 Barbaras, 60.
522 “Indirect Language,” 248/75.
the subjective modern works which express the inner life of the painter and are an act of creative expression. Merleau-Ponty believes that this distinction is based on a deeper prejudice: that, since art in the classical era is said to be “a representation of a Nature that it can at best embellish... according to the formulas taught to it by Nature herself,” Malraux concludes that it is an *objective* art. Merleau-Ponty writes, “perhaps he was too quick to concede that the domain of the visible world is 'objective,'” suggesting that Malraux is prejudiced by a philosophically modern worldview, whereby everything “external” to consciousness can be objectively determined, and consciousness itself is a kind of secret, inner world. In making these distinctions, Malraux is blind to the fact that “the classical painters were painters and that no valuable painting has ever consisted in simply representing.” It has always been the case that, no matter the intention of the artist, the artwork always exceeds representation: painters are “unknowingly bringing about [a] *metamorphosis*” in the tradition of painting, which even they cannot comprehend. Merleau-Ponty argues further that classical painting cannot be understood as a representation of nature because perception “already depended upon their culture, and our culture can still give form to our perception of the visible... There is no choice to be made between the world and art, or between 'our senses' and absolute painting, for they pass into one another.”

Although this is written less than a decade after “Cézanne's Doubt” and *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty significantly alters the roles of “nature” and “culture” in expression. Recall that Cézanne's work was praised for its ability to capture the Gestaltist understanding of the emergence of form against an indifferent background, as Merleau-Ponty developed more generally in Part I of *Phenomenology*. Cézanne was said to paint “natural

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vision”: he says of his work that “the landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness.”\footnote{527} Drawing, like Merleau-Ponty, a line between, on the one hand, the human order of science and ideas, and on the other, the perceived world, Cézanne's painting “reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself.”\footnote{528} What we see in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” is that this division between humanity and “inhuman nature” is blurred, rather than clarified, by the work of expression. One cannot simply apply the science of painting to “natural vision” and “add man to nature,” since natural vision is already affected by the human as cultural being. In brief, there is no “natural vision.” Perception, and by extension, expression, is always already affected by culture. Thus we begin to see how Merleau-Ponty begins to unravel the hierarchy by which the fundamental mode of human “transcendence” is a going beyond-nature; nature and culture continue to be less clearly delineated as separate “worlds.” But, as we will soon see, Merleau-Ponty does retain a special place for language in the role that it plays in creating and sustaining culture. In other words, linguistic \textit{institution} has a privileged place in this new theory of expression.

What then becomes of the nature/culture distinction? Do these reflections on the influence of culture on perception render the division null and void? Let us look more closely at Merleau-Ponty's explanation as to why there is no purely “objective” art: he writes that the painters' perception “already depended upon their culture, and our culture can still give form to our perception of the visible... There is no choice to be made between the world and art, or between 'our senses' and absolute painting, for they pass into one another.”\footnote{529} It is imperative to note here that Merleau-Ponty is referring specifically to \textit{human} perception: culture gives form to \textit{our} perception of the visible, there is no choice between \textit{our} senses and “absolute” painting (where “absolute” means some form of pure, subjective expression). If Merleau-Ponty is

\footnote{527}{“Cézanne's Doubt,” 77/23.}  
\footnote{528}{\textit{Ibid.}, 76/22.}  
\footnote{529}{“Indirect Language,” 250/78.}
suggesting that *humanity* can never access nature, this does not necessarily signify the collapse of the divide between the natural and the cultural in his work – it means only that humanity is separate from nature. As we turn to the later sections of this essay, we will see that humanity continues to be aligned with the cultural via the concept of expression as “institution,” which in fact perpetuates the division between nature and culture in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This will only be resolved when Merleau-Ponty fully acknowledges that animality is also institutional – a development we will track in the following chapter.

Merleau-Ponty adds to his reflections on the inability to create an “objective” art that Malraux fails to see the classical period as only one perspective among many ways that “humanity has invented for projecting the perceived world before itself, and not the copy of that world.”

Classical paintings are just as much a “creation” as modern works, just as much an “invention of a world dominated and possessed through and through by an instantaneous synthesis, which is at best roughed out by our gaze when it vainly tries to hold together all these things seeking individually to monopolize it.” What Merleau-Ponty is referring to by an “instantaneous synthesis” is the means by which we impose upon our perceptual experience an order of things – we become “anchored” in our gaze, whereby a privileged figure in our perception becomes situated amongst the coexistence of other things in a perspectival horizon.

This is, at first, very similar to the process of perception outlined in *Phenomenology*, and resonates with Merleau-Ponty's claim that Cézanne “suspends” our habit of thinking that what we perceive “exists necessarily and unshakably,” presenting “frozen objects” caught at the

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532 “Now the inexhaustible being crystallizes into an ordered perspective within which backgrounds resign themselves to being only backgrounds (inaccessible and vague as is proper), and objects in the foreground abandon something of their aggressiveness, order their inner lines according to the common law of the spectacle, and already prepare themselves to become backgrounds as soon as it is necessary.” “Indirect Language,” 251/80-81.
emergence of form, which thus appear alien and “inhuman.” But crucially, Merleau-Ponty adds a new dimension to our establishment of perspective: that we are historical beings, and that how we see the world, literally, is a response to our historical situation. Let us turn now to see how this development emerges in the text from Merleau-Ponty's critique of Malraux's definition of modern art.

As previously indicated, Merleau-Ponty not only contests Malraux's claim that classical painting sought an objective representation of the world, but also that modern painting is a subjective form of freely-pursued individual expression. Malraux says of the modern genre that “[t]here is only one subject in today's painting... – the painter himself,” who “wants first of all to be original, and for him his power of expression is identical to his individual difference.” Merleau-Ponty posits that there are numerous examples of modern artists that do not easily fit this description – most notably, Cézanne and Klee, who each “present sketches as paintings” and exhibit a “tolerance for the incomplete.” In other words, Merleau-Ponty asks, if painting is a projection of the subject's inner life onto a canvas, why do Cézanne and Klee point elsewhere, to a sense of the artwork as necessarily unfinished? Merleau-Ponty offers two explanations: first, “it may be that they have given up the work, and no longer look for anything but the immediate, the sensed, the individual – 'brute expression,' as Malraux says.” It is possible that this is what Cézanne indicated when he said that he “never wished to paint like a savage.” Clearly, Merleau-Ponty favors the second possible interpretation of these unfinished works; he writes, “Or else, completion, the presentation that is objective and convincing for the senses, is no longer the means to or the sign of a work that is really done, because henceforth expression must go from person to person across the common world they live, without passing through the anonymous

533 All quotes here from “Cézanne's Doubt,” 76/22.
534 “Indirect Language,” 252/81-82.
535 Ibid., 252/82.
536 Ibid., 252/82.
537 “Cézanne's Doubt,” 73/19.
realm of the *senses* or of Nature.*538

It is certainly significant that Merleau-Ponty has chosen the term “anonymous” here, and has used it to distinguish one “realm” from the “world” of persons that is lived. These are clear references to the anonymous, pre-personal self, with its corresponding natural world, and the personal self of the cultural world in *Phenomenology of Perception*. But note the change in emphasis here: expression *does not pass* through Nature, but instead, the common world, the world that is lived by persons. This further indicates the radical revision of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression, and its repercussions on our understanding of the place of the human in the nature/culture distinction. He writes in a semi-mocking tone about the very position which he held in *Phenomenology* and “Cézanne's Doubt,” now rendered as a naïve understanding of classical painting:

It relies in principle upon the perceptual apparatus, considered as a natural, given means of communication between human beings. Don't we all have eyes which function more or less in the same way? And if the painter has succeeded in discovering the sufficient signs of depth or velvet, won't we all, in looking at the painting, see the same spectacle, which will rival that of nature?

The fact remains that the classical painters were painters and that no valuable painting has ever consisted in simply representing.539

There is a very different story here about the relationship between expression, nature, and culture, with the result that the human is placed even further on the side of culture. No longer do we see a body-subject equally invested in the anonymous world of nature as it is a personal self in culture. Whereas we saw two senses of the human in *Phenomenology of Perception* – the pre-personal, “natural” self and the personal, “cultural” self, Merleau-Ponty now places humanity firmly on the side of the cultural. Rather than *collapse* this dichotomy, Merleau-Ponty has widened the gap between nature and culture, with respect to expression and the place of the human in expression.

What, then, becomes of the fact that painting is an embodied form of expression? Is painting not a gesture, an enactment of the natural expression of the body? Merleau-Ponty writes,

538 “Indirect Language,” 252/82-83.
“The work that gets accomplished is... not the work which exists in itself like a thing, but the work which reaches the viewer and invites him to take up the gesture which created it and, leaping over the intermediaries, to rejoin, without any guide other than a movement of the invented line (an almost incorporeal trace), the silent world of the painter, henceforth uttered and accessible.”\(^{540}\) As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty's new vision of expression is that it is communicated across the “common world” that persons live, and not the natural, anonymous realm of our pre-personal “selves.” Even here as Merleau-Ponty explains how a work reaches the viewer, “invites him to take up the gesture which created it,” and to “rejoin... the silent world of the painter,” he writes that the “guide” for the viewer in this process is the “invented line (an almost incorporeal trace).” Thus, at once Merleau-Ponty is rehearsing his notion that painting is gestural, and in the same breath, rendering it “almost incorporeal.” Like the progression we have already seen with language, the sense of painting, too, takes on a kind of individual existence. Just as there is a difference in language between the physical ink on paper and the word as a sign, Merleau-Ponty here differentiates between the paint on the canvas and the “work.” The work is not the result of gestural expression but the “invented line.” It is therefore not the body which establishes this communication across the world of the painter and that of the viewer, but the trace of the painting, the expression itself.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty even says in his own words that embodiment – even human embodiment - is insufficient for the expression that is established in painting: “There is the improvisation of childlike painters who have not learned their own gesture and who believe, under the pretext that a painter is no more than a hand, that it suffices to have a hand in order to paint.”\(^{541}\) If having a hand – or more generally, being embodied – is insufficient for the ability to paint, what is missing? Can we not incorporate the paintbrush into our bodily schema, as does the

\(^{540}\) Ibid., 252/83, my emphasis: “un tracé presque incorporel.”
\(^{541}\) Ibid., 252/83.
blind man with his cane, and paint as a form of habit? Can we not learn, as Cézanne learned in daily his studies at the Louvre, the technē and “science” of painting? Merleau-Ponty writes instead that the “expression of the world... must be poetry; that is, it must completely awaken and recall our pure power of expressing beyond things already said or seen.” What Merleau-Ponty means here is not simply that expression is different from ready-made meaning, as in the authentic/inauthentic distinction – nor is it simply the application of the body to intentionally produce a sense – but instead, that expression is a response to the already-expressed. Whereas the “childlike painters” can put paintbrush to canvas, and even do so in a technically sophisticated way, they do not express unless their work is in dialogue with the already-expressed. This means that expression is now understood as primarily historical, and not bodily, in nature. The historical character of expression is even integrated into the new sense of “style” that Merleau-Ponty uses in this essay, which we will turn to now.

Merleau-Ponty takes issue with Malraux's rendering of style as a “stylistic means” of representation, “as if the style could be known and sought after outside all contact with the world, as if it were an end.” A painter cannot consciously develop a style, for he cannot even see his paintings insofar as what they express: “It is in others that expression takes on its relief and really becomes signification.” The painting as expression has a separate existence from the painter who creates it; and it is only across the “common world” that it generates sense. But how, then, do we explain the obvious consistency in the works of the great artists – what we are tempted to think of as their “stylistic means” of representing their world? Merleau-Ponty writes, “the language of [the painter's] maturity eminently contains the feeble accent of his first works. Without going back to them, and by the sole fact that they have fulfilled certain expressive operations, he finds himself endowed with new organs; and experiencing the excess of what is to

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542 Ibid., 253/83-84.
543 Ibid., 254-255/86-87.
544 Ibid., 253/84.
be said over and beyond their already verified power, he is capable... of going 'further' in the same direction.\textsuperscript{545}

The painter's style is like an accent which he develops, or a “new organ” that he can use to express. But importantly, this accent or organ is available “by the sole fact that [his first works] have fulfilled certain expressive operations” - which is only possible through being taken up across the common world and through others. Style, then, is not so much the product of an individual body as it is an access to an expressive dimension. Merleau-Ponty explains, “[w]hat makes 'a Vermeer' for us... is not the fact that this canvas was one day painted by Vermeer the human being. It is the fact that the painting observes the system of equivalences according to which each of its elements, like a hundred pointers on a hundred dials, marks the same deviation – the fact that it speaks the language of Vermeer.”\textsuperscript{546} The separation between the work and the painter (including, but not restricted to, the painter-as-embodied-subject) is so absolute for Merleau-Ponty that 'a Vermeer' need not be painted by the Vermeer the human being; if one were able to capture the style and process of Vermeer, “he would no longer be a counterfeiter; he would be one of those painters who painted for the old masters in their studios.”\textsuperscript{547} However, since style is bound up with historicity, this is perhaps the only case in which one could hope to replicate a Vermeer – since, otherwise, “centuries of other painting have gone by and the sense of the problem of painting itself has changed.”\textsuperscript{548} Regardless, in a given place and time, it suffices only that one “speak the language” of a painter in order to reproduce his style. Style is thus dependent not on the particularities of the body, but on the ability to connect to a tradition: “with a single gesture, [the painter] links the tradition that he carries on and the tradition that he founds.”\textsuperscript{549}

\textsuperscript{545} “Indirect Language,” 253-254/85. My emphasis. The way in which the painter is “endowed with new organs” is the same language that Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the multi-dimensionality of institution.
\textsuperscript{546} Ibid., 261/98.
\textsuperscript{547} Ibid., 261/98.
\textsuperscript{548} Ibid., 261/98-99.
\textsuperscript{549} Ibid., 263/101.
These reflections on “style” lead Merleau-Ponty to conclude that “[t]he fact is that the name of Vermeer and of each great painter comes to stand for something like an institution.”

What, then, does Merleau-Ponty mean by “institution”? I quote him here at length:

Husserl has used the fine word *Stiftung* – foundation or establishment – to designate first of all 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 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 all deliver up a *tradition* to the painter – *that is*, Husserl remarks, *the power to forget origins* and to give the past not a survival, which is the hypocritical form of forgetfulness, but a new life, which is the noble form of memory.

Thus, when we speak of a Vermeer having a certain “style,” what we mean is that it fits into the institution of Vermeers. The first Vermeer painting, as an institution, “opened a field of investigations in which [it] perpetually come[s] to life again.” Every subsequent Vermeer “give[s] the past... a new life.” When we see another Vermeer, we recognize it because it is a part of the tradition of Vermeers: it is the product of the fecundity of the original (the *Urstiftung*). Therefore, a particular kind of historicity is associated with Vermeers, and painting in general: a new “institution” - the appearance of the kind of painting we call a “Vermeer” - is both a response to a tradition, and opens a new field of investigations, the products of which give it a new life. We can no longer speak of the “style” of Vermeer as we did in *Phenomenology of Perception* – as associated with the gestural body, and thus the anonymous self and natural world. “Style” now means that an expression is part of the historical tradition of an “institution,” which, as per the above passage, refers to *products of culture* and not nature.

Here we see further why Merleau-Ponty objects to Malraux's individualistic, “subjective” sense of painting. One does not paint from nothing; rather, expressions of the past call for “the metamorphosis which we impose upon them.”

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these works are part of a larger tradition, that of painting itself, also understood as its own “institution.” To use Husserl's terminology, the Urstiftung of the first Vermeer was in fact also a Nachstiftung, a re-institution of the original painting. Merleau-Ponty writes, “The first sketches on the walls of caves set forth the world as 'to be painted' or 'to be sketched' and called for an indefinite future of painting, so that they speak to us and we answer them by metamorphoses in which they collaborate with us.”553 The sketches on the caves at Lascaux, where we find the first known paintings, opened up a trajectory – “a single task” - to which every painting is a response.

Of this new sense of historicity, Merleau-Ponty explains that it does not see “each age struggling against the others as against aliens by imposing its concerns and perspectives upon them,” which would be a history of forgetfulness – a history which negates its past rather than carries it forward.554 The historicity of expression, and of institution, “is constituted and reconstituted step-by-step by the interest which bears us toward that which is not us and by that life which the past, in a continuous exchange, brings to us and finds in us, and which it continues to lead in each painter who revives, recaptures, and renews the entire undertaking of painting in each new work.”555 Thus, for each new expression, there is a revival of the past that allows it to endure, but at the same time an opening of a new dimension, with its own trajectory (a Nachstiftung, re-institution). This latter element is what Merleau-Ponty calls “a new field” and “a new organ of human culture.”556 A transition from expression as gestural and bodily to historical and cultural is apparent again, and just as the painted line was “an almost incorporeal trace,” here Merleau-Ponty speaks of an almost incorporeal “organ” of expression that is cultural and not natural.

One might protest against my conclusions here and point to Merleau-Ponty's reflections

553 Ibid., 260/97.
554 Ibid., 260/97.
555 Ibid., 260–261/97.
556 Ibid., 260/97.
later in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” where he writes that “as soon as we know how move and gaze,” “[t]hese simple acts already enclose the secret of expressive action.”

Merleau-Ponty explains, “As the artist makes his style radiate into the very fibers of the material he is working on, I move my body without even knowing which muscles and nerve paths should intervene, nor where I must look for the instruments of that action.” Merleau-Ponty seems to be reiterating the view that we saw in *Phenomenology of Perception* – that the body itself is expressive. And this, too, would mean that expression is serving to collapse a nature/culture divide rather than reinforce it. In other words, one might charge that if the body is expressive as it was in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier works, there is still a “natural” element to expression, and not just the incorporeal, independent “sense” which we have been discussing thus far in this essay.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty indicates the body can still be one locus or origin of expression: he explains, “We must... recognize that what is designated by the terms 'gaze,' 'hand,' and in general 'body' is a system of systems destined for the inspection of a world and capable of leaping over distances, piercing the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations – a sense – in the inconceivable flatness of being.”

Stated more briefly, what Merleau-Ponty is saying here is that what he means by the term “body,” “gaze,” and “hand” is a system which outlines a sense. But here we must ask: does “piercing the perceptual future” and “outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations” count as expression in the full and complete sense that Klee or Cézanne's works constitute a *Nachstiftung* of the institution of painting? In other words, does this “system” take part in a history? I offer two passages here to illuminate these problems:

All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*. Not that derivative labor which substitutes for what is expressed signs which are given elsewhere with their sense and rule of usage, but the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs, makes that which is expressed dwell in them through the

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eloquence of their arrangement and configuration alone, implants a sense in that which did not have one, and thus – far from exhausting itself in the instant at which it occurs – inaugurates an order and founds an institution or tradition.\textsuperscript{560}

The first cave drawing founded a tradition only because it had received another one – that of perception. The quasi-eternity of art is of a piece with the quasi-eternity of incarnate existence; and in the use of our bodies and our senses, insofar as they involve us in the world, we have the means of understanding our cultural gesticulation insofar as it involves us in history.\textsuperscript{561}

I would like to first look closely at the end of this second passage, for it is perhaps most telling in the new distinctions that Merleau-Ponty is drawing with respect to the nature/culture divide. First, we can see that Merleau-Ponty grants that the use of the body and senses “involve us in the world” and allow us to understand expression, which Merleau-Ponty here calls “cultural gesticulation.” Second, our “cultural gesticulation,” or rather, our expression, “involves us in history,” as we have already seen in our investigation of “style.” What Merleau-Ponty is doing here is aligning the body, as perceptual, with the here-and-now, the phenomenal present: he points to the quasi-eternity of both art and incarnate existence. These are not true eternities; paintings fade, bodies die and decompose – but they give us access to eternity, “the indefinite future of painting,” and more broadly, institution. The physical body and the physical painting are part of a history of events but not advents, which is the history of expression and institution. In the language we have been using, this means there is a difference between natural and cultural historicity. Merleau-Ponty explains, “[w]e propose... to consider the order of culture or meaning an original order of advent, which should not be derived from the order, if it exists, of pure events, or treated as simply the effect of extraordinary encounters.”\textsuperscript{562} Moreover, this “order of culture” is, in fact, \textit{one sole history}: there is a unity of culture that “transcends spatial and temporal distances to gather up the gestures of all painters together into one sole expressive effort, and their works into a single cumulative history – into a single art.”\textsuperscript{563}

\textsuperscript{560} \textit{Ibid.}, 267/108.
\textsuperscript{561} \textit{Ibid.}, 269/112-113.
\textsuperscript{562} \textit{Ibid.}, 267/109.
\textsuperscript{563} \textit{Ibid.}, 268/111.
Now that we have identified these two different types of historicity – of events versus advents – what are we to say of this first passage which calls “every use of the human body... primordial expression”? It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty speaks here of the body's ability to “inaugurate an order” and “found an institution,” but not to carry a tradition or re-institute as a Nachstiftung an original sense. In other words, the body – or, as we will soon see, nature more broadly – is outside of history-as-advent: it is the non-instituted. But, nonetheless, it is the foundation of the instituted, the source of original expression, the Urstitfung of every tradition. Thus, we find ourselves on familiar grounds: we have to ask, is nature, as the source of expression, of a different ontological order than the instituted or expressed? To put this in different terms: can we generalize the separation between the bodily gesture and the “work,” which we have seen throughout “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” to say there continues to be an ontological divide between nature and culture in this middle-period text? It seems here that by calling the body a “system” that establishes a sense – a sense, which, moreover, has a temporality other than that of empirical events – that the body is separate from, but has access to an ideality of meaning, or even an incorporeality. Does this mean more generally that the body, and nature more broadly, is both corporeal and incorporeal? Or perhaps the concept of Nature, for Merleau-Ponty, precedes these distinctions? We will further investigate these questions in the following chapter, where we take up Merleau-Ponty's courses at the Collège de France on nature and institution. We will find that although Merleau-Ponty attempts to situate nature as a primordial ontological category (as suggested here via “primordial expression”), he eventually abandons this definition and instead situates both nature and culture within the “elemental” concept of the flesh.

Barbaras, “Merleau-Ponty and Nature,” 22. “It is this theory of institution that turns the analysis of the perceived in the direction of a reflection on nature: the perceived is no longer the originary in its difference from the derived but the natural in its difference from the instituted. Nature is the ‘non-constructed, non-instituted,’ and thereby, the source of expression: ‘nature is what has a sense without this sense having been posited by thought.’"
Before we turn to these courses, however, it is worth noting Merleau-Ponty's final assessment of the differences between painting and writing in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” as this begins a trend in his later works of valuing language over other forms of expression that is not unrelated to our investigations here. Earlier, we asked whether the capacity for language separates man from animal, and perhaps correspondingly, culture from nature, in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty wrote that speech alone was capable of constructing a cultural world. As we progress in our investigations, we must ask whether or not this bias is still evident, which would have the effect of continuing an ontological human/animal divide in Merleau-Ponty's later works. We have seen indications throughout the texts we have covered in this chapter that expression does not have a single origin or form. At this point, the *Ur*stiftung of sense is found in Nature, but of those things already instituted, expression takes on many different forms: the things of the world have their own “style,” as do places, persons, and animals. But it has been rare that Merleau-Ponty speaks of the differing forms of expression in a hierarchical manner. It is of no small significance, then, that his stated purpose in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” is to determine the “decisive privilege” that language has over painting.

To recall our introductory remarks to this essay, Merleau-Ponty sought to determine in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” how it is that speech may be understood as a “mute art” like painting, and whether or not in “trying out the parallel [between speech and painting]… we will perceive what may in the end make that parallel impossible.”

We have seen already how Merleau-Ponty turns to a structuralist understanding of language to show how “all language is indirect or allusive – that is, if you like, silence.” As Barbaras and Johnson have shown us,

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565 “Indirect Language,” 248/75.
Merleau-Ponty is clearly developing a new sense of “sense” and the role of expression in this middle-period work, especially evidenced by the differences between the emphasis on the corporeal expression-generating “style” of *Phenomenology of Perception* and the way in which expression bears its own separate ontological weight here as historical institution. In various ways, Merleau-Ponty struggles to differentiate the incarnate from the expressed throughout “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”: there is an “almost incorporeal trace” of the invented line; the expression goes across the world of *persons* and not the “anonymous realm… of Nature”; and Merleau-Ponty even goes so far as to call painters “childlike” who think that their “improvisations” on the canvas are actually *expressing* – for they assume that having a hand suffices to paint. The painter can express because “he finds himself endowed with new organs,” but these organs are not, apparently, of the corporeal variety. Grappling for the words to demarcate this new sense of expression, and language specifically, Merleau-Ponty writes that it is “something like a being.” We are a far cry, then, from our earlier renditions of authentic expression as purely bodily and gestural.

The “new organ” of the painter, the “being” of language – each of these points to the independent ontological status of expression, which, as we have seen, is bound up with its historical character. To be more precise, expression is now understood as *institution*, which means that it is a response to a tradition and its own *Ur-stiftung*; in the case of the Vermeers, Cézannes, and Klees of the world, they respond to the cave paintings at Lascaux, which “called for an indefinite future of painting,” but also open their own trajectories (e.g. the institution of Vermeers). But in the third and final section of “Indirect Language and The Voices of Silence,” we see finally how the relationship between every *Nachstiftung* of painting to its *Urstiftung* is different from the re-institution that takes place in language. Briefly, Merleau-Ponty writes that
“the arts of language go much further toward true creation.” The reason for this is deceptively simple: Merleau-Ponty explains, “Man does not paint painting, but he speaks about speech.” What Merleau-Ponty finds important in this simple fact is that this means that language has a different relationship to its past and its sedimented meanings (its institution) than painting. Speech must repeat itself in order to express: it “twists back upon itself, takes itself up, and gets possession of itself once more.” Painting, alternatively, adds to its tradition in a cumulative way: “the works which the new painter produces will be added to already created works.” The relationship between the new works and the old in the institution of painting is that “[they] do not make the old useless, nor do they expressly contain them; they rival them.” Thus, in the re-institution of painting, there is a negation of the past – not the act of breathing a new life into it, as Merleau-Ponty defined Stiftung. He explains, “Today’s painting denies the past too deliberately to be able truly to free itself from it… Painting fulfills a vow of the past. It has the power to act in the name of the past, but it does not contain it in its manifest state.” For Merleau-Ponty, the consequence of this inability to render the past present, to truly re-institute, is that painting has a different relationship to truth: “since without repeating it textually speech could not give us the past in its presence, it makes the past undergo a preparation which is what defines language – it offers us the truth of it… It is essential to truth to be integral, whereas no painting has ever pretended to be.” Painting “is subject much more than writing to the passage of time.” To capture the difference between the relationship between “true creation” and its past and the movement of negating it that is taken up in painting, Merleau-Ponty refers to the Hegelian dialectic: “a movement which itself creates its course and returns to itself, and thus a movement

567 Ibid., 278/128.
568 Ibid., 279/129.
569 Ibid., 279/129.
570 Ibid., 278/128. My emphasis.
571 Ibid., 278/128.
572 Ibid., 278/128.
573 Ibid., 278-279/129.
574 Ibid., 279/129.
which has no other guide but its own initiative and which nevertheless does not escape outside itself but intersects itself and confirms itself across great distances. By another name, this was what we call[ed] the phenomenon of expression, which gathers itself up and launches itself through a mystery of rationality.**575** Like the Hegelian dialectic, expression as institution both takes up its past and overcomes it; re-institution, we might say, is another word for *Aufhebung.*

In these passages, we see that Merleau-Ponty is developing a new understanding of truth as a truth-to-come, revealed rather than objectively determined, which goes hand-in-hand with the historical character of institution. But why, one might ask, does speech as self-referential more accurately capture this truth? Merleau-Ponty writes, “What we *mean* is not before us, outside all speech, as a pure meaning. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said.”**576** Although, as Saussure has shown us, “each word draws it sense from all the others,” expression breaks free, “signs do not simply evoke other signs for us,” and “language is not like a prison we are locked into or a guide we must blindly follow.”**577** This leads us to our final differentiation between painting and speech: I quote Merleau-Ponty here at length:

> Thus, when we compare language to the silent forms of expression such as gestures or painting, we must point out that unlike these forms language is not content to sketch out directions, vectors, a ‘coherent deformation,’ or a tacit sense on the surface of the world, exhausting itself as animal ‘intelligence’ does in kaleidoscopically producing a new landscape for action. Language is not just the replacement of one sense by another, but the substitution of equivalent sense. The new structure is given as already present in the old, the latter subsists in it, and the past is now understood.**578**

We see here that language and painting not only differ in their *historical* character – that language substitutes equivalent sense and thus allows us to understand the past – but also that this difference is paralleled in Merleau-Ponty’s description of expression that is natural and expression that is cultural. Natural expression is instituting but not instituted; in other words, while it may “inaugurate an order,” its expression is not a *response* to a tradition (recall, for

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example, that the body is “primordial expression.”) Here, Merleau-Ponty joins “animal intelligence” with gestures, painting, and other non-linguistic forms of expression. Just as we saw in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where animals were able to express by projecting a new meaning on their environment (they can make 'food' appear over here and a 'hiding place' over there), animal “intelligence” is similarly cast as an ability to produce “a new landscape for action.” Merleau-Ponty is going further than his earlier observations, however, in showing how this type of expression is the equivalent of “the replacement of one sense by another”: an animal takes a given landscape and projects onto it new meanings that replace their old sense (what may mean “poison” or “danger” to one animal can be “nourishment” to another). This means that animals do not express within a historical tradition or institution; their expression is the negation of the past rather than its Aufhebung. And, importantly, this animal expression parallels how Merleau-Ponty has described the character of painting, as “rivaling” its past rather than preserving it. Painting, we might say, is closer to animal expression than human expression. To recall a question we asked earlier in this project, we might again ponder whether a songbird might access the “cultural world” that Merleau-Ponty developed in his early works. With this new understanding of expression, we might say yes, but perhaps only as an animal and not yet a human. In other words, natural animals may have some “culture,” but this is not the “culture” that constitutes the human world.

From these observations, we can say that there continues not only a nature/culture divide in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of expression as institution, based on their different relationships to history, but also that this dichotomy reinforces a dualism between the human and the animal. Moreover, these dichotomies continue to carry a value-laden hierarchy with them: in the words of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” the specifically human form of culture, language, comes closer to true creation and the revelation of truth. There is thus a privileged access to truth in human existence that is not replicated in animal life.
Conclusion

Taking our cue from the opening parts of *Phenomenology of Perception*, this chapter has been oriented towards investigating the relationship between expression and the nature/culture distinction evident in Merleau-Ponty’s early to middle-period works. As we reconstructed Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment in Chapter Three of this project, we saw a division in human subjectivity between the “natural” and “cultural” self, which was also synonymously referred to as the anonymous and personal self. This dualism mapped on to a further differentiation between the natural – including the corporeal, bodily self – and the cultural, “human” self. Our investigations in the second and third sections of this chapter looked further into these divisions and their corresponding “natural” and “cultural” worlds. There we learned that the natural and cultural worlds (later, simply “nature” and “culture”) are expressive in their own right, and that human subjectivity always finds itself already “synchronized” into these worlds. But curiously, just as this fundamental fact of the expressivity of things suggests the collapse of one dualism – namely, that between self and world – it is suggests another. Nature and the natural self express differently from culture and the “human.” This early development is later reflected in Merleau-Ponty’s “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” where nature is identified with the non-instituted and culture with the instituted.

But before “Indirect Language,” Merleau-Ponty makes a first attempt at articulating a broader philosophy of expression in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” which functions as a kind of phenomenology of painting. In the fourth section of this chapter, we explored Merleau-Ponty’s assertion in that essay that Cézanne works from *nature* in order to capture the lived perspective in his works. However, as we noted, though Cézanne wanted to “create a work of nature,” he wrote that he never wished to “paint like a savage.” Instead, Merleau-Ponty says that Cézanne was able
to rehabilitate the classical definition of painting as man added to nature – and it is this capacity that makes his works special. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty says of Cézanne that he was “able to look at nature as only a human being knows how to do it.” Thus, in the work which was said most of all to capture “natural vision,” we identified a differentiation between nature and the human. And as we saw in *Phenomenology of Perception*, this nature/culture divide is also recast as an animal/human dualism: Merleau-Ponty writes that “only a human being is capable of such a vision, which penetrates right to the root of things beneath constituted humanity. All indications are that animals cannot *gaze at [regarder]* things, cannot penetrate them in expectation of nothing but the truth.” Here we see the continuation of a value-laden description of the nature/culture distinction and human/animal dualism, where the cultural human *gaze* has a privileged access to the truth. This hierarchy continues in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” which is where we turned next.

As noted by Renaud Barbaras, the early versions of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” along with the unfinished work from which it was developed, *The Prose of the World*, mark a reversal in Merleau-Ponty’s methodology: “the philosophy of expression brings forth a *regressive* approach that, starting from culture and language, interrogates their originary soil.” We saw this approach play out in the early sections of “Indirect Language,” as Merleau-Ponty begins with reflections from Saussurian linguistics and is eventually led to his new concept of institution. Following the precedent set in Part II of *Phenomenology of Perception*, we find in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” that signs of all kinds are expressive. But Merleau-Ponty asks here whether some forms have a privilege over others – namely, the signs of language over the signs of painting. He asks whether language can be understood as a “mute art” like painting, and if so, to what extent such a parallel can be made.

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579 “Cézanne's Doubt,” 76/22.
580 Barbaras, 59.
In his elucidation of this parallel, Merleau-Ponty begins to develop a new theory of expression and a new ontology that seeks to further the work of Phenomenology of Perception in collapsing the traditional dualisms of modern thought. This development recasts what was called “authentic” expression as institution, thus connecting expression to the history of sedimented sense that “calls for” its re-institution. As we saw, every expression as institution is both an Urstiftung, an originary institution of its own tradition, and a Nachstiftung, a re-institution of a broader tradition. To this end, we saw Merleau-Ponty show how a Vermeer is not a Vermeer because it was painted by the flesh-and-blood Vermeer, but because it fit into the tradition (the institution) of Vermeers. Moreover, each Vermeer is a re-institution of the original painting – according to Merleau-Ponty, the cave paintings at Lascaux, which serve as the Urstiftung of that form of expression.

As I noted in the last section of this chapter, in developing expression as institution, Merleau-Ponty begins to separate “sense” from its corporeal origins, and especially human expression from bodily gesture: for example, we saw the expression of painting represented as an “almost incorporeal trace,” and institution endow the painter with new, non-corporeal “organs” of expression. And even as Merleau-Ponty writes that the “every human use of the body is already primordial expression,” the body itself begins to sound immaterial: “We must... recognize that what is designated by the terms 'gaze,' 'hand,' and in general 'body' is a system of systems destined for the inspection of a world and capable of leaping over distances, piercing the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations – a sense – in the inconceivable flatness of being.”581 The cumulative effect of these shifts, I argued, was that expression comes to carry its own ontological “weight” in this shift towards the primacy of institution; we might even say that expression is correlated not with the real (the material) but with the ideal (the immaterial).

581 “Indirect Language,” 266/107-108.
But even as institution revolutionizes Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression, it carries with it the old nature/culture dualism that haunted his early works. Here, it shows up inconspicuously within the failed parallel between the “mute art” of painting and language. Painting, it is said, goes less towards “true creation” because it does not carry its past with it; works of art “rival” their past rather than substitute a new, equivalent sense for it, which allows us to understand the past. Since we can “speak about speech,” however, and we must use the sedimented meanings of language in every speech act, language expresses differently: it “twists back upon itself, takes itself up, and gets possession of itself once more.” Like the Hegelian dialectic, the historical movement of language is such that it preserves its past even in overcoming it – which leads Merleau-Ponty to argue that language brings us closer to truth.

In the final pages of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” we see that the same difference between painting and language is spelled out again as the difference between “primordial,” natural expression, and cultural expression. In brief, when nature expresses, it does so only as an inaugurating, or originary (Ur-) institution: it can begin a new trajectory, but it does not carry the past with it. In this way, nature is ahistorical, or outside of history. Merleau-Ponty speaks of painting as a kind of “animal ‘intelligence’” that produces “a new landscape for action”; like animal expression, the painting only replaces an old sense with a new one. The specifically human form of expression, language, has precedence over painting, and thus the animal, in its historicity. Finally, then, we see that the nature/culture divide in Merleau-Ponty, and correlatively, the human/animal divide, has re-emerged in his new philosophy of expression, once again in hierarchical and value-laden terms. In the next chapter, we will take up Merleau-Ponty’s courses on Institution and Nature, where we see his final articulation of these concepts prior to his unfinished, final text, The Visible and the Invisible. It is in these pages that we will be able to determine whether and to what extent these dualisms prevail in Merleau-Ponty’s last articulations.

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582 Ibid., 279/129.
of his philosophy. I will argue that it is only at the point where Merleau-Ponty identifies the human-animal relationship as an *Ineinander*, a term borrowed from Husserl and later developed into the criss-crossing structure of the flesh, that he is finally able to overcome this dualism. This movement begins within the institution courses, where we find that animality is granted a form of institution and history. Gradually, the lines between nature, as represented in animality, and culture, as represented in various human forms of institution, are blurred, such that eventually, we can no longer differentiate between them in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.
Chapter 5 Beyond Nature and Culture: Flesh and the Human-Animal Ineinander

Since the turn of the 21st century, the concepts of nature and animality have captured the interest of prominent scholars of Merleau-Ponty in both the American and European circles. This is certainly in some part due to the recent release of Merleau-Ponty's course notes from the Collège de France collectively titled La Nature, and consisting of three separate lecture series given between 1956 and 1960. But it is also important to note that American and French scholars engaged in “continental” thought were, around the same time as the release of La Nature, also finding similar themes in the works of other major thinkers: Derrida's Of Spirit and The Animal that therefore I Am, Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus, and Heidegger's The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, each of which make major contributions to the concepts of nature and animality, were all either originally written or translated into English near the millenium. Merleau-Ponty's La Nature is thus situated in a veritable revival of these literally ancient themes. We might recall, for example, that the systems of the earliest known pre-Socratic thinkers were quite literally metaphysical – that is, they theorized about the nature of nature.

Of the major scholarly contributions to understanding Merleau-Ponty's work on nature, there is one commonality in all interpretations: namely, that nature is a key element to Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, the primary concept of his last philosophical work, The Visible and the Invisible. Even prior to the release of La Nature, scholars knew this concept (and its corollary, the concept of animality) would prove vital to understanding late Merleau-Ponty, as nature

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appeared prominently in the Working Notes to this final text. Famously, Merleau-Ponty died before completing *The Visible and the Invisible*, but he left clues as to its projected structure and content in the handful of outlines we find in his notes. Between 1959 and 1960, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty intends to dedicate a substantial part of his final work to the concept of Nature. We see in his various outlines that he was undecided on the arrangement of his chapters, but not the content. For example, in an undated note that is estimated to have been written around November or December of 1960, we find:

I. The visible and nature.
   Philosophical interrogation:
   interrogation and reflection;
   interrogation and dialectic;
   interrogation and intuition (what I am doing at the moment).
   The visible.
   Nature.
   Classical ontology and modern ontology.
II. The invisible and *logos.*

The headings under I. and II. here clearly correspond to the title chosen by editors for the sections of the manuscript completed by Merleau-Ponty (*The Visible and the Invisible*), with what looks to be a section including introductory chapters (starting with “Philosophical Interrogation”). Nature, here, has its own chapter - separate from, but included with, “the visible.” The opposite side of this division, the “invisible,” is similarly paired up, with what Merleau-Ponty calls “*logos.*” Although my intention here is simply to show the significance of the role of nature in Merleau-Ponty's vision of his final project, it is worth noting these pairings: visible-nature and invisible-logos. At first glance, this division may renew suspicion of the separation between nature and culture that was evident in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” as played out through the difference between painting and speaking, where language was given a privilege due to its special connection to historicity (and thus, a special kind of institution). However, we

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see a possible clue to how Merleau-Ponty will integrate nature and institution into this final project in an earlier schema dated May 1960:

I. Being and World
   Part I. The vertical World or wild Being.
   Part II: Wild Being and classical ontology.
      Nature
      Man
      God.
   Conclusion: the fundamental thought – Passage to the differentiations of wild Being.
      Nature – logos history.
      Cultivated being.
      The Erzeugung.

In this earlier depiction, we do not yet see the distinction between the visible and the invisible, but an indication that the “differentiations of wild Being” are Nature, on the one hand, and logos, history, cultivated being, and “The Erzeugung” on the other. We might hypothesize, then, that Nature has a necessary counterpart in Merleau-Ponty's final project – and, indeed, we will soon see what this division consists of.

The final schema of Merleau-Ponty's project before his untimely death in 1961 reveals a simplified outline:

My plan: I. The visible
      II. Nature
      III. Logos

With the little space we have here to discuss Merleau-Ponty's own sketches of his planned work, and given the unfinished nature of the project itself, we can only roughly estimate what the text might have looked like. Schemas such as the above indicate especially how early the project truly was in its fruition, especially given the differentiation here between the visible and Nature. This could, perhaps, have been only a typographical differentiation – the kind of reminder that would indicate that Nature be developed as its own subject and not simply equated with the “visible.”

But it might also have signaled a real shift in focus, away from the pairings we see above (visible-

588 Ibid., xxxv.
589 Ibid., 274.
nature, invisible-logos), especially given Merleau-Ponty's theoretical and ontological aversion towards dichotomous thinking. Despite not being able to know the facts of this potential development, we can, nevertheless, conclude that the concept of nature played a major role in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of his own ontological project.

By placing these and other schematic notes into the broader situation of Merleau-Ponty's work in this period of his life, one sees also that his lecture courses at the Collège de France were places where he could work out the details of this final project. The schema from late 1960 especially highlights this fact: First, we can see that the first three chapters collected in The Visible and the Invisible correspond with the subheadings under “philosophical interrogation.” Next, the famous “Intertwining – The Chiasm” chapter can map on to the section labeled as “the visible.” And the final three subheadings can each be coupled with courses taught by Merleau-Ponty in the 1950's: the collection of courses in La Nature (1956-1960), the course on Institution in 1954, and his final course at the Collège de France on classical and modern ontology. Thus, regardless of the intended final structure of Merleau-Ponty's last project, the course notes that we have available give us a good starting point to make informed hypotheses about what might have been in the content of that work. In revisiting especially the course notes for the nature lectures, we will be interested to see how they are not simply an articulation of an independent philosophy of nature, but a critical component of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, as indicated here by his own Working Notes to The Visible and the Invisible.

Institution

Before we address in detail the courses in La Nature, it is important to once again note the distinction we saw above between nature and logos. In the May 1960 note, we saw grouped with logos: “history,” “cultivated being,” and “The Erzeugung.” These terms collectively refer to
a concept developed by Merleau-Ponty in the 1950's, *institution*. This concept appears as early as *Phenomenology of Perception*, but was not given its own study until the 1954 course, “Institution and Passivity.” As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty’s “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” led him to begin using the term as a means of capturing the historical character of various forms of expression. In the courses dedicated to Institution and Nature, however, he greatly expands its role and place within his evolving ontological project, specifying not one, but several forms of institution. We can get a glimpse of its significance by simply glancing at the opening pages to *La Nature*. Merleau-Ponty's first course in the series, “The Concept of Nature,” begins by asking, “Can we validly study the notion of nature? Isn't it something other than the product of a history, in the course of which it acquired a series of meanings that end by rendering it intelligible?” As is the case throughout Merleau-Ponty's corpus, he is here asking about the origin of *sense*. In other words, he is asking whether it is possible to understand the meaning, or sense, of nature, if it is true that the meaning of nature is different from meanings that are historically sedimented. To recall, we have seen examples of historically-sedimented meaning as early as *Phenomenology of Perception*, with “inauthentic speech.” To use the common conceptual meaning of language, as per Merleau-Ponty's description in this early text, is simply to rehearse a meaning that was established by an originary speech act and passed down historically in that particular usage. To locate the origin of the sense of that meaning is to do a kind of historical inquiry (perhaps even a form of “deconstruction”). Merleau-Ponty is suggesting here that nature has a different origin – that is, unlike language, its origin is outside of history. Thus, he is asking: if it is true that nature is outside of history, from what does it get its meaning, such that we can “validly study” it as an object of philosophical inquiry? Our first clue is that “[n]ature is what has a meaning, without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduct of a meaning.” Therefore, we must

draw a line between meaning that is historical – which will mean \textit{instituted} – and meaning that is ahistorical – or rather, \textit{noninstituted} or \textit{natural}. Understanding this differentiation in the origin of sense will be key to grasping this final variation of the nature/culture distinction in Merleau-Ponty’s works, which, following his Working Notes, can be understood as two “differentiations of wild Being.”

Shortly thereafter in the course notes to “The Concept of Nature,” Merleau-Ponty gives us further clues as to the relationship between nature and culture, understood as \textit{institution}:

Nature is the primordial – that is, the nonconstructed, the noninstituted; hence the idea of an eternity of nature (the eternal return), of a solidity. Nature is an enigmatic object, an object that is not an object at all; it is not really set out in front of us. It is our soil [sol] – not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us.\footnote{Ibid., 4/20.}

Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty gives us a primarily negative definition of nature: “something other than a product of history,” “an object that is not an object at all,” the \textit{non}constructed, the \textit{non}instituted. To say that nature is a kind of “eternal return” further exemplifies how nature is other than history – it is always present, and as such, cannot be dated as an event can. To those attending the \textit{Collège de France}, however, these negations may have proven helpful insofar as the course on Institution precedes the series of Nature by two years. Let us, then, turn to “Institution in Personal and Public History,” in an effort to recount the means by which Merleau-Ponty developed the concept of institution, keeping in mind that understanding what institution is \textit{not} can provide us a key to the later works on nature.

\textbf{General Overview}

In his 1954 lecture course, “Institution in Personal and Public History,” Merleau-Ponty explains that the concept of institution serves as a “solution to the difficulties found in the
The philosophers who use this framework include Sartre and Husserl, but more importantly, Merleau-Ponty in his earlier texts. The Institution lectures can thus serve as a key point which marks the transition to Merleau-Ponty’s later works. This transition can be characterized as phenomenology overcoming intentionality towards ontology.

The philosophical standpoint that Merleau-Ponty wants to surpass is one in which everything besides consciousness itself is “constituted” by consciousness. This reduces the world and the objects in it to a series of acts by consciousness, as in Husserl’s concept of intentionality. Within this framework, there is no real temporal duration of objects, and no sense of enduring history, since objects must be continuously re-constituted at each moment. For Merleau-Ponty, this is problematic on a variety of levels – in terms of our relationship to objects and others, as well as how we conceive human action and temporality. He introduces the *instituting subject* and *institution* to try to resolve these problems. By “institution,” Merleau-Ponty means “those

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594 See Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. Additionally, see Lawlor and Evans’ introduction to *Chiasms*, where they characterize the shift to Merleau-Ponty’s “mature” works as follows: “The primacy of institutions... replaces the primacy of perception.” *Chiasms*, 16.

595 Merleau-Ponty takes this concept from Husserl’s *The Origin of Geometry and Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (first available through the Husserl archives at Leuven). Though we see “institution” appear briefly in *Phenomenology of Perception*, it does not begin to take on the significance it is accorded in Merleau-Ponty’s middle and late periods until its first serious appearance in his 1952 “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” originally published in *Les Temps Modernes*. There, Merleau-Ponty writes of the experience of the painter:

Husserl has used the fine word *Stiftung* – foundation or establishment – to designate first of all 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 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 all 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. *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* 259/Signes 73.

For more on the differences between Husserl’s *Stiftung* and Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of the concept as *institution*, see Robert Vallier, “Institution: The Significance of Merleau-Ponty’s 1954 Course at the Collège de France,” *Chiasmi International*, Volume 7, pp. 281-302.

For more on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the development of Husserlian phenomenology, see “The Philosopher and His Shadow” in *Signs*. See also *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* for
events in an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or a history – or again the events which deposit a sense in me, not just as something surviving or as a residue, but as the call to follow, the demand of a future.” Institution not only has temporal duration, but also “calls for” its own sequel – that is to say, it opens up a trajectory, although its future is not specified. Rather, the “dimensions” that institution adds to an experience are like a hollowed-out mold that allows many things to fill it in. Moreover, unlike constitution, institution is “unconscious” and does not require the action of a subject to ensure its duration. The institution of a work of art, for example, does not require the artist’s presence for its meaning to endure and for it to call for a “sequel.” Merleau-Ponty writes in his course notes, “What defines human institution? A past which creates a question, puts it in reserve, makes a situation that is indefinitely open.” One can say that institution has “ontological potency” in a way that constituted objects do not; institution not only endures independently of subjects, but by adding dimensions to experience, like a “hollowed-out mold,” institution presents a question whose answer is never complete.

Before moving on, it might be useful here to pause and use an example to further elucidate this concept. Merleau-Ponty discusses four different forms of institution in his lecture course: first, two kinds of institution in “personal history”: institution and life, institution of a feeling, and then the institution of a work of art, which straddles the border between the personal and the public. Next, Merleau-Ponty discusses one form of “public history”: the institution of a domain of knowledge. I would like to begin by focusing briefly on the work of art, as Merleau-

Merleau-Ponty’s course notes on “The Origin of Geometry.”
596 Institution and Passivity, 77/124.
597 This use of imagery comes from Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published essay, “What is Philosophy?” Although this text does not appear in The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty’s notes indicate that it was originally intended to be a part of the book. See editors’ notes, p. 1. For the relationship between the “hollowed-out mold” and institution, see especially p. 15.
598 Institution and Passivity, 22/57.
Ponty's comments on painting can allow us to more easily understand how the concept of institution has grown from his earlier reflections on expression. Interestingly, we can see how nature, which was once fundamental to expression (as for example, in “Cézanne's Doubt”), is no longer cited as the origin of the work of art. We might say that nature was earlier associated with an intentional model of art, but then separated by virtue of the structuralist framework from “Indirect Language,” where Merleau-Ponty began to develop the concept of institution. In shifting to an institutional model of expression, which culminates in the lectures on “The Institution of the Work of Art,” nature gives way to institution as key to the artwork.

As briefly noted above, the institution of a work of art entails both public and the private forms of institution. Later, we will see how these distinctions apply to differentiate human institution from other forms (e.g. animal institution). For the time being, we will simply note that aesthetic institution, a form which has both public and private elements, is reserved as a form of human institution. Merleau-Ponty opens his reflections on the institution of a work of art in noting that “[t]he act of painting is usually a conscious, deliberate relation to public history. The task of the painter [is] inherited, [intends a] pictorial telos.” Here we might imagine the important artistic “conversations” that happen within an aesthetic movement, wherein artists echo and critique each other within their individual creations, pushing the “telos” of the aesthetic movement forward, as Picasso and Braque's early 20th century paintings collectively strove for the pictorial representation known as “cubism.” In each new work, Picasso and Braque thus engaged in “personal institution that resumes collective institution.” Merleau-Ponty adds that

...the insertion into collective institution here is the most personal wish. We see how [there is] no alternation. This is because the logic of the collective enterprise at once becomes valuable in [the] individual work which locates itself in the collective enterprise, and the collective enterprise is created by the individual work. Since, within the individual work, each attempt proceeds from the preceding ones and cannot be deduced from them, recreates the whole.
Since “insertion into collective institution is the most personal wish,” Merleau-Ponty argues that the institution of a work of art is “private institution, from oneself to oneself,” though it nonetheless also allows us to “catch a glimpse of the fact that public institution extends the relation of self to self.” Evans and Lawlor’s claim that Merleau-Ponty shifts from a primacy of perception to institution in his later works is particularly relevant, here: not only do we see a new origin of sense, but its effects ripple across the boundaries of self and world and intersubjectivity. In earlier texts, relations from self to self became salient in moments of communicative expression: the subject of *Phenomenology of Perception* took up the gestures and words of the other and thus thought “according to” them. Communication thus allowed the subject to take up the world of the other. In seeing that “public institution extends the relation of self to self” here, we see a different model from the intentional sense of expression in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and even “Cézanne's Doubt.” In brief, this model – which not only explains intersubjectivity absent of intentionality, but more concretely for the example here, how an artist relates to the history of previous works – is based on the differentiation between instituting and “constituting” consciousness. Let us look further into the institution of a work of art to clarify this distinction.

To begin with, Merleau-Ponty asks, “How do we know what we are making in painting?” In other words, is painting, and aesthetic expression more broadly, a spontaneous act? He answers: “We do not work by chance. And yet, the entire field of the art of painting, and, for each painter, the field of his painting, is not truly given.” To recall, we have already seen this distinction troubled in the movement away from expression as understood in Merleau-Ponty’s early works, to the structuralist-influenced model of “Indirect Language and the Voices of

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602 Ibid., 48/87.
603 See their introduction to *Chiasms*.
604 Of course, there always remains a form of solipsistic doubt in early Merleau-Pontian (and Husserlian) phenomenology.
605 *Institution and Passivity*, 41/78.
Silence.” Authentic speech, for example, “arose from the babble of the world”\(^606\) in *Phenomenology of Perception* – what one might call a “chance” event. Cézanne, similarly, “paint[ed] as if no one had ever painted before,”\(^607\) which could not be further from the “conscious, deliberate relation to public history” attributed to the artist as a “personal wish” in the course on institution. To be fair, Merleau-Ponty did show how Cézanne remained within his historical situation and drew from the “science” of painting, such that he did not “paint like a savage.” Thus, there is no real spontaneity or “chance” here, bereft of any external influence (which, one might say, would be the ideal of aesthetic expression for a truly constituting consciousness). But the distinction between chance and determination is further collapsed in “Indirect Language,” where “signs” - the new conceptual catch-all for words, gestures, and in sum, anything that has meaning – get their meaning through their relations to other signs. This means that all signs are both “inauthentic,” insofar as they do not arise from nothing (in the sense that, for example, you must have a grammar before you can have a phrase), but also “authentic” (since, to carry our example forward, common language never ceases to acquire new meaning in the “silences” between words). Therefore, looking at our earlier examinations of expression through Merleau-Ponty's philosophical development, we see the precedent set for the observation in the institution course that the painter works consciously and deliberately, yet engages in the history of painting in their creation to the extent that “they do not know what they are making.”\(^608\)

As part of this nuanced relationship between the personal and the public, Merleau-Ponty explains that the painter never merely imitates his predecessors, but his creation is nevertheless part of a tradition, or a common history of painting. The work of art is “called forth” from tradition, but never in a deterministic way. As we have seen, “the entire field of the art of

\(^{606}\) Hass, 177.
\(^{607}\) “Cézanne's Doubt,” 78.
\(^{608}\) *Institution and Passivity*, 41/78.
painting, and, for each painter, the field of his painting, is not truly given.” Merleau-Ponty explains that “certainly choices are made… but the painter does not produce the theory for it, does not know the reason for it. The ‘motive’ [is] a certain expressive divergence [écart] in relation to a certain ‘norm,’ but not a choice in the sense of positing an end.” Merleau-Ponty describes the history of the problem of perspective in painting to demonstrate this point. Each attempt at capturing perspective in painting is like a different way of answering the same question. The choices that painters make are “attempt[s] to surpass” which nevertheless preserve, since they inevitably respond to, and thus carry tradition within their work. The “rationality” of painting is thus not one of completion – which would be to “solve” the problem of perspective – but rather, a “rationality of investigation [‘recherche’].” Thus, “[There is an] emptiness in the writer or painter before beginning. It is by writing or painting that one discovers.”

Importantly, in this process of discovery, it is not only the sense of the painting that is changed – indeed, as a simultaneously public and private institution, the artist is also changed. Merleau-Ponty explains that institution has an “internal sense” and an “external sense.” Of the external sense, Merleau-Ponty explains that it exists “only because of this internal sense” which is “[b]adly understood, but understood.” Merleau-Ponty continues, “This internal sense precisely induces the external sense because it is open, because it is a divergence in relation to a norm of sense, difference. It is this sense by divergence, deformation, which is proper to institution.”

Merleau-Ponty notes that this is particularly clear in the task of writing, through which we can discern that “[t]he author is not reread or cannot be reread because there is precisely not this imposition of a ‘beyond’ of the signs which is realized with others. The ‘beyond’ of the signs, the

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609 Ibid., 41/78.
610 Ibid., 46/85.
611 Ibid., 47/85.
612 Ibid., 48/86.
613 Ibid., 10/40.
614 Ibid., 11/41.
615 Ibid., 11/41.
author has it already. The work does not have its relief in front of him. However, *to have written or painted this or that changes him.*  

From this rich passage, we can make several observations: first, although Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly state this in his notes, the example that he uses to elucidate the distinction between the internal and external sense of institution (the author who possesses the “beyond” of the signs), shows us that this distinction is another way of referencing what Merleau-Ponty has otherwise called “private” and “public” institution. By explaining that the external sense is only possible as a “badly understood” version of the internal sense of an institution, we once again see a shift in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the sign. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “there is precisely not this imposition of a ‘beyond’ of the signs which is realized with others” can be read as a revocation of his earlier, structuralist model of the sense of signs. But when Merleau-Ponty notes that the author himself has the “‘beyond’ of the signs,” this “internal sense” should not be understood as a meaning posited by consciousness (as “constituting” that sense). Instead, the internal sense is also *instituted* as a private institution.  

Merleau-Ponty explains, “This is where new polarization of the field and change come from. The repercussion is exercised according to the unknown equivalences of the painter, but equivalences which will be able to be recognized after the fact when the repercussion will be in its turn instituted.”  

Thus, our second conclusion to be drawn from the passage above is that, with the institution of the work of art, there are two forms of its being “deposited as a sense”: privately, or internally, for the painter, and publicly, for other subjects. Paintings carry tradition by “announcing those to follow,” but in the sense that they are cause for further investigation – as if the question they pose remains open. Within the institution of painting, “everything hangs together, and yet it would not be possible to say where it is

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616 Ibid., 1/1141.

617 “The book is instituted, established as (private) institution – insofar as to organize the signs in a way that results in a book of magic; this is to set up the difference, the personal divergence in the norm, to turn it into a new norm, in relation to which other divergences are possible.” *Institution and Passivity*, 11/141.

618 Ibid., 11/141.
Taken as a whole, the history of painting can be described as the sedimentation of attempts to answer a rhetorical question, which might be something like the following: “How does one paint?”, or “What is the sense of painting?” The nature of the rhetorical question, of course, is that it does not call for any specific answer, but can be answered in any number of ways. The “problems” that have arisen within the institution of painting (such as the problem of perspective) are really different manifestations of this fundamental “interrogation” of painting — and the different works of art which tackle these “problems” are new ways of filling the “hollowed-out mold” of painting or rather, responses to its rhetorical question. Again, we must recall that this process also functions on the “internal” level: the painting calls for a sequel within its private institution of the painter — not as a conscious act, nor as a determination of future actions, but as an open question whose answer links it to the past as chapters of a book continue a certain narrative, but one which could have also developed otherwise. Merleau-Ponty writes, “A book is a series of institutions and makes obvious that every institution tends toward being a series. This is where the impression comes from that the book produces itself.”

A final, key element to the concept of institution is what Merleau-Ponty calls “revolution.” Here, “revolution” describes the means by which institutions “genuinely develop”; for this to occur, “it is necessary that the new means become truly norms of the praxis, of the theoretico-practical landscape and that the new lived-experience is measured in relation to them.” In brief, the “revolution is reinstitution [reinstitution].” To reinstitute means to open up a new dimension, a new meaning of experience which is still an “openness” that calls for its own sequel. This establishes new “norms of praxis” within the institution. If we again think in terms of the artwork, the reinstitution of painting might entail a new way in which the perceptual

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619 Ibid., 78/125.
620 Ibid., 78/125.
621 Ibid., 11/42.
622 Ibid., 11/42.
623 Ibid., 11/42.
experience of perspective is captured on a canvas; this new “praxis” thus becomes the norm. Alternatively, one might reinstitute painting by shifting the focus of its “researches” entirely, away from the problem of perspective and towards the problem of capturing emotion in artwork (as in Romanticism). Merleau-Ponty stresses that to reinstitute does not mean to begin again from nothing. Rather, “a revolution is a return to the sources, [a] re-awakening of what surrounds the founding idealizations, of their context, future which has passed, which is a more profound understanding of the past, which is *gestiftet* by this past in an ambiguous way.” Revolution is never a product of “pure action”; it is a “return to the sources” of the institution. Merleau-Ponty thus describes it as a “relative revolution.”

In Merleau-Ponty’s *Adventures of the Dialectic*, he connects the concept of revolution to the idea of an “interworld,” which figures prominently in his later ontology. Through the notion of the interworld, Merleau-Ponty articulates how institutions are interwoven, like different layers of the fabric of history. As Leonard Lawlor and Fred Evans explain in their introduction to *Chiasms*, this means that institutions can affect the trajectories of one another, shifting the focus and meaning of their “recherche.” Here we might imagine the many ways in which this happens with considerable frequency in the arts, giving rise to whole movements that reach across institutions, like the German proto-Romantic *Sturm und Drang* style of music, literature, and the visual arts. But interestingly, Merleau-Ponty does not only apply institution to these historical productions of what we generally term “cultural” artifacts. Rather, he begins his lecture course with the institution of *life* and *animality*, explaining that “[we must] start from this usage in order to discover the true sense of human institution.”

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626 See especially *Adventures* 200-201.
628 *Institution and Passivity*, 16/49.
learned about the institution of painting to organic life forms? How does a “revolution” occur in this sense of institution? In what follows, we will turn to these questions, as well as attempt to differentiate what Merleau-Ponty means by the institution of life and animality from what we have already learned of nature as the “noninstituted.” Keeping in mind our preliminary observations about Merleau-Ponty’s final project, in which nature and institution sit on opposite sides of the “differentiation of Wild being,” we must ask: to what extent does the fact that organic life is instituted affect our understanding of the division between “nature” and “culture” for Merleau-Ponty?

Institution and Life

Merleau-Ponty divides his first study concerning institution and life into three separate foci: the organism, animality, and the human. As we noted above, Merleau-Ponty believes that it is through animal life, and the organism more broadly, that we will be able to understand human institution. He writes, “The activity of life or of ‘animality’ will really make an echo in humans. Not [that] human societies [are] termite nests, but inversely [there are] human behaviors in the animal.”

Contrary to traditional readings of the division between the human and the animal, which define the human as an animal with additional capacities (e.g. reason), Merleau-Ponty here is saying that there is something human about the animal in some of its behaviors. If this is the case, then it is imperative to distinguish between those behaviors that are human and distinctly human, and those behaviors which are shared (though Merleau-Ponty still calls them “human” behaviors). In general, what separates the human from the animal, given these observations?

Merleau-Ponty begins his exposition of the institution of life in noting that, with respect to all living things, institution needs to be understood “in opposition to the innate (as what is

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629 Institution and Passivity, 18/52.
acquired), in opposition to natural maturation ([as] learning), to the internal environment ([as] external environment), to the physiological ([as] psychological [and] social)."\textsuperscript{630} To put this into context, what Merleau-Ponty means is that were we to examine a certain behavior of a living thing in order to ascertain the sense or meaning of that behavior, we would be wrong reduce its “institution” to an innate drive, natural development, or other predetermined biological telos.

Merleau-Ponty adds, however, that it is just as wrong to reduce such institution to a product of the external environment. He indicates that there \textit{are} some internal features, but these are always in a dialectical exchange with the external environment: for all organic life, there is “plasticity” which is “limited by consideration of place.”\textsuperscript{631}

To explain this plasticity which is nonetheless limited by the environment, Merleau-Ponty notes that organic life has a kind of “destiny” which is “instituted in the sense that 1) it is not absolutely given with the internal innate structure; [and] 2) it is never independent from the givens (time and place).”\textsuperscript{632} As an example, Merleau-Ponty points to how the graft of a paw develops as a right paw or a left paw depending on “the territory in which it is inserted,” but once it has been determined as one or the other, cannot adapt itself further. He quotes Ruyer here, who characterizes this feature as follows: “There is… in the determination of the destiny of an organic outline a very fleeting moment of lability in which what the outline will become is irreversibly fixed by the place in which it is found.”\textsuperscript{633} There is thus both a freedom and determinacy in the institution of life, such that environmental factors can determine the progression of the “organic outline,” yet there are not infinite possibilities of development, and once determined, they cannot advance otherwise. This means, in brief, that animals cannot re-institute. Interestingly, Merleau-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{630} \textit{Ibid.}, 16/49.
\item \textsuperscript{631} \textit{Ibid.}, 16/50.
\item \textsuperscript{632} \textit{Ibid.}, 16/50.
\item \textsuperscript{633} \textit{Ibid.}, 16/49.
\end{itemize}
Ponty places this discussion of the development of organic life into the language of behavior, even at the embryonic state:

In general for the embryo: 1) the development is already a behavior, 2) the behavior develops by way of organic outlines.

1) the embryo is regulated by semicircular canals, respiratory movements (absorb and expel amniotic fluids). Function is not the simple effect of structure.

2) [the] behavior first follows the tracks of the organization. Gesell: twins picking up pills with the same postural attitude, position of the hand, etc.634

By employing this language all the way down to the development of the embryo, Merleau-Ponty is obviously recalling his earlier work in The Structure of Behavior, wherein he proposed a Gestaltian ontology that situated all meaning (that which is produced by “behavior”) within a context as part of a figure-ground structure. But in this later framework, the sense of the Gestalt is instituted; the “figure” is predisposed to a limited number of meaning-possibilities, and the “ground” determines which “track” of the organization the embryo will follow.

To capture the sense of the “organic outline” that becomes “irreversibly fixed” by environmental factors, Merleau-Ponty calls animal institution Prägung: “impregnation,” or “imprint.”635 He again turns to Ruyer for examples of this phenomenon. In an unpublished text, Ruyer cites experiments in which one finds behavioral changes in geese that are raised in captivity with human caretakers and adopt their human observer as their guardian or parent-figure, subsequently rejecting other geese and refusing to engage with them. Merleau-Ponty notes that this does not occur, however, without the “encounter” between the caretaker and the goose being of a certain character: “The imprint exists 'upon a foundation of general innate and expected themes.'”636 The human caretaker swims, approaches the geese in certain lowered posture, and so on – he conforms to certain expectations in order for the encounter to make an

634 Ibid., 17/50.
635 Ibid., 17/51.
636 Merleau-Ponty is quoting Lorenz, here. Institution and Passivity, 17/51.
“imprint” on the organic outline that is innate to the goose (namely, that it will behave in a certain way towards its parents as a gosling).

Merleau-Ponty cites other variations on this theme: geese who, raised with chickens, will only engage with them and reject other geese; a white peacock who is placed in the tortoise room in a Zoo and ignores other peacocks afterward; a starred heron who makes sexual advances towards its human guardian and chases the other herons away. In each case, there are certain requirements that must be met for the “imprint” to take (e.g. “No cathexis by means of a stuffed duck”). Merleau-Ponty concludes, “Therefore here [the] relation of the being and the event [is not] only contamination of the being by the ‘competence' of a place or by the mnemonic theme of the species. But Prägung by means of the encounter that is external and outside of the species.”

What Merleau-Ponty means by this is that the adoption of the human guardian by the geese, or any of these other variants, is not simply the redirection of geese-behavior from other geese to the guardian. This would simply be the repetition of a “mnemonic theme,” the playing out of a displaced instinct. Instead, Merleau-Ponty wants to show that the encounter – the relation between being and event, as he otherwise calls it – is such that it changes the sense of the behavior. The institution of goose- or heron-behavior has changed in its encounter with the human guardian. In other words, what it means to be this particular animal, with its various behaviors and relationship to its environment, is now different as a result of the new “imprint” on the organic outline that constitutes what we normally term its instincts. Yet, this is not to be confused with a trait that might be passed on to offspring; they would have to undergo a similar imprint in order to mirror this behavior. It is clearly the case, then, that unlike the institution of a work of art, animal institution is specifically an internal, “private” form.

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637 Ibid., 17/51.
638 Ibid., 17/51.
Merleau-Ponty segways in his notes to the third category of institution and life, human institution, by way of noting that it is not only an other that affects animal institution, but also “the world as the place of the encounter with the other: the 'territory.'” 639 He writes shortly thereafter: “Hometown and hometown girlfriend; sweet heart and sweet home.” 640 Though he does not expand on this thought, it is clearly implied that one’s “hometown girlfriend” is such because of the “territory” or environment – just like the tortoise is a potential mate for the goose because he has been living with only tortoises. “The human,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “is animal instinct ever ripe.” 641 However, he also notes that there is “immense difference” between human and animal institution: “not that the human does not have animal institution, but because of the use that he makes of it and that usage transforms institution genuinely.” 642 To briefly capture this difference, recall that the Prägung of animal institution was irreversible: the goose will no longer seek out the gander, just as the paw cannot change its directional orientation once it has been determined. There is no “future” of the institution for the animal, other than the repetition of behavior. This is not the case for humans, where “the past becom[es] a symbolic matrix.” 643

Merleau-Ponty offers no explanation for the symbolic matrix of human institution, but we can find one in another contemporaneous text, Adventures of the Dialectic, written and published in the same year as the Institution course. At the end of this text, Merleau-Ponty introduces his notion of the interworld; he writes, “The question is to know whether, as Sartre says, there are only men and things or whether there is also the interworld, which we call history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made.” 644 In this, one of many final attempts to collapse ontological dualisms, Merleau-Ponty uses the interworld to show how the divisions that we theorize between human beings among each other and things in the world are not as firmly established as we have

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639 Ibid., 18/52.
640 Ibid., 18/52.
641 Ibid., 18/52.
642 Ibid., 18/52.
643 Ibid., 19/54.
traditionally believed. Instead, there is a “mediation of personal relationships through the world of human symbols.”\textsuperscript{645} Further, since “all action is symbolic,”\textsuperscript{646} this interworld is perpetually expanding, providing new intersubjective and interworldly possibilities. As Merleau-Ponty explains, each of the symbols “have echoes, correspondences, and effects of induction in the other[s],”\textsuperscript{647} which makes the interworld a kind of matrix of meaning, wherein the symbols are interwoven such that they influence one another.

It is thus the interworld, the “symbolic matrix,” that animal institution does not create. And since action is required in order to establish symbolism, we can also say that both animals and humans \textit{behave}, but only humans can \textit{act}. This is not to say that there is no meaning or sense in animal institution, but only that the behavior of animals does not have a symbolic nature.

What, then, characterizes institution that is symbolic? Merleau-Ponty’s phrasing from \textit{Adventures of the Dialectic} is especially telling; he calls it “truth-to-be-made.” There is a temporal character of symbolism that pushes it toward a future. By this, Merleau-Ponty means a genuine future, one that is not simply repetition of the same. It is, moreover, always an “open future,” always \textit{to-be-made}. This is one way in which humans make a different “use” of institution: “Not simply reproduction, but the getting underway of an ‘investigation.’”\textsuperscript{648} We have seen this already in our brief examination of the institution of an artwork, as when the \textit{recherches} of the Romantic movement turned painting away from capturing perspective and toward portraying emotion on the canvas. As this example shows, the \textit{truth-to-be-made} of symbolic institution is also always an answer to a previous “investigation”: “Human institution always resumes a prior institution, which has posed a \textit{question}, i.e., a question which was its anticipation – and which has failed. It reactivates this problem and human institution reunites its givens in [a] totality that is centered

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\textsuperscript{645} \textit{Adventures of the Dialectic}, 201.
\textsuperscript{646} \textit{Ibid.}, 201.
\textsuperscript{647} \textit{Ibid.}, 201.
\textsuperscript{648} \textit{Institution and Passivity}, 19/53.
otherwise. Instituted [means] segment of a history.” Thus we see that another way of understanding the difference between human and animal institution is that human institution is historical. Now, too, we can see how the various descriptions of the “interworld” at the end of Adventures of the Dialectic work together – that it is “history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made.”

What Merleau-Ponty has named “interworld” is the not yet conscious existence of the “reactivated ‘past’” and the “‘anticipated’ future” of human action that establishes symbols which have an “open” sense and exist as questions to be answered by present and future subjects.

Despite having established that there is this “immense difference” that separates human and animal institution, Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid “conceiv[ing] the animal [as] machine and [the] human as consciousness, nor even [the] animal [as] instinct and [the] human [as] consciousness [plus] instincts.” In other words, Merleau-Ponty is trying to balance the difference between establishing separate forms of institution and establishing the foundation for ontological difference. Rather, he takes the foundation of the “immense difference,” the historical character of human institution, and says that it is already in the animal:

> We must conceive animal temporality as being already open to a future (domestic animals), therefore providing an image touching on the human, an image of the human who does not understand, weak human.

> …Thereby [think] not the animal-human, not the human-animal, but truly the one being the alter ego for the other, because we do not have the one inside time and the other outside of time. The surpassing preserves.

In saying that “the surpassing preserves,” Merleau-Ponty is setting up a difference in degree rather than kind between animal and human institution. Since animal temporality is “already open to a future,” this means that animal institution is not entirely ahistorical, but rather, that “the human [is] more connected to his past than the animal and is more open to the future.”

The past of animal Prägung does not, like the symbolism of human institution, establish an

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649 Ibid., 20/54.
650 Ibid., 20/54.
651 Ibid., 22/57.
investigation which calls for an answer. There is no “deepening of the past” by means of
continued recherches. However, by virtue of its organic outline, the animal is nonetheless
connected to its past and future. One might add, too, that the historical character of animal
institution is limited to the private ways in which the animal is changed in its behavior by virtue
of its “imprinting,” whereas the historicity of human institution establishes and perpetuates
intersubjective relations.

We are finally in a place to return to our original concern in this chapter – namely, to
understand how the division between nature and culture is either resolved or integrated into
Merleau-Ponty’s later works. As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, the concept of nature
plays a key role in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of his final, unfinished work, and is, moreover,
differentiated from the concept of institution. Nature, we saw, was defined as the “noninstituted.”

In order to better understand the meaning of this claim, we turned to Merleau-Ponty’s notes de
cours from his 1954 “Institution in Personal and Public History.” There we found the seemingly
contradictory claim that there is institution in all life (i.e., despite Merleau-Ponty’s later claim that
nature is the “noninstituted”). We are thus more broadly left to question what Merleau-Ponty
means by “nature” in light of these considerations. From the course notes, we also were once
again led to see how Merleau-Ponty takes up the division between the human and the animal. In
previous chapters, we saw how the division between nature and culture would play out on this
terrain – that, for example, animals cannot “express” in the way that humans can, meaning that
they are incapable of establishing culture. In the Institution course, we see that animals are
incapable of symbolic action and consequently do not participate in the human form of institution
that adds dimensions to the “interworld.” To put it differently, animals and all other non-human
life forms do not “re-institute,” do not carry out “revolutions.” Rather, animal imprint is the
determination of future behavioral characteristics of the animal that meet the environmental
requirements pre-established by an organic outline of “instincts.”
“Summary for Thursday’s Course,” Merleau-Ponty captures the difference between human and animal institution thusly:

There is something like an institution even in animality (there is an impregnation of the animal by the living beings which surround it at the beginning of its life) – and even in the human functions which used to be considered purely “biological” (puberty presents the rhythm of preservation – the resumption and the surpassing of earlier events – here the Oedipal conflict – which is characteristic of institution). However, in the human the past is able not only to orient the future or to furnish the terms of the problems of the adult person, but also to give way to investigation, in Kafka’s sense, or to an indefinite elaboration.

As we just saw, Merleau-Ponty shies away from thinking of these differences in institution as tantamount to establishing an ontological difference between humans and animals. Instead, he sees these differences as differences in degree rather than kind. The animal is not simply ahistorical and thus acultural, but rather, a weaker historical and cultural being; the animal is less connected to its past and future than the human. To this end, it appears that Merleau-Ponty has significantly weakened his earlier observations on the division between humans and animals. Does this, therefore, mean that the division between nature and culture is null and void? We are still left with the paradoxical formulation that nature is the “noninstituted.” What does “nature” mean for Merleau-Ponty, if it does not specify, among other things, the organic life forms which we have just seen as part of the “field” of institution? Let us turn now to the later notes Merleau-Ponty’s courses on Nature, dating from 1956-1960.

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652 Ibid., 77/124.
La Nature

Beyond Substance: Cartesian Origins

Merleau-Ponty delivered three courses at the Collège de France on the concept of Nature. The first course, under the same title, is divided into two parts: “Study of the Variations of the Concept of Nature,” and “Modern Science and Nature.” This “survey of the historical elements in our concept of Nature” isolates the Cartesian concept of Nature as “the institution of a philosophical of tradition of the concept of Nature, which forms a horizon within which Nature is thought and to which Merleau-Ponty will give his alternative.” Merleau-Ponty begins with models of Nature from Ancient thought, wherein Nature is defined by a kind of formalism. The Aristotelian model, for example, posits the whole of Nature as “the more or less successful realization of [the] qualitative destining of bodies,” or rather, understood as a composite of entities with a given telos. According to Merleau-Ponty, the concept of Nature is “narrowly construed in proportion to man” in following variations of the Aristotelian model until the Cartesian concept is adopted in the sixteenth century.

Merleau-Ponty isolates two “ideas of Nature” in Descartes, which set up a dichotomy that troubles not only philosophical thought to come, but also scientific engagements – that is, until the arrival of the several privileged thinkers of the “new sciences” that Merleau-Ponty explores in the second course on Nature, “Animality, The Human Body, and The Passage to Culture.” Since Merleau-Ponty is seeking an alternative to Descartes’ two senses of Nature in his later courses, it is worth noting here briefly what they consist in. As always, it is important to recognize that these

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653 Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I follow Merleau-Ponty’s own shift in using “Nature” as opposed to “nature” in these courses. My sense is that this is meaningful insofar as he is interested in clarifying it as a philosophical term, and not merely in its common conceptual usage.
655 Ibid., 7/23.
656 Ibid., 7/24.
course notes, taken by an anonymous student and later arranged for publication, are not without error and potential interpretive leeway of the author. The third and most schematic course is in Merleau-Ponty’s own hand, but consists only in “sketches” he wrote out to use as lecture notes, thus posing further hermeneutic challenges.657

In the course notes, we see that the first idea of Nature in Descartes arises from an understanding of Nature as both naturans and naturata,658 a division which has its foundation in the idea of the Judeo-Christian God as infinite creator. Nature is both an infinitely productive Whole, or even “beyond finality,” in God’s eyes, and, given humanity’s inability to see the infinite in the finite, Nature is also understood as a conglomerate of parts, or products. Merleau-Ponty explains, “In God, ends and means are indiscernible; their agreement is self-evident. God does not pursue ends, because in Him there is not an anteriority of the Whole to the parts, not a separation between ends and means (thesis of Fr. Gibieuf).”659 God is the source of all productivity, but is outside of time as it is experienced by humans, He is omnipresent. “Nature, in the image of God, is at least indefinite if not infinite.”660 Merleau-Ponty concludes from this Judeo-Christian notion that “all that could be interior to Nature takes refuge in God. Meaning finds its refuge in the naturans; naturata becomes product, pure exteriority.”661 The Godly sense of Nature is found through the pure understanding, it is “Nature such as lumen naturale conceives it.”662 Merleau-Ponty characterizes this as a “naïve idea of a primordial world, anterior to human fabrication… expressed by the Cartesians in the idea of an infinite productivity of Nature, which is all that can be, by the idea of a permanence of nature.”663

657 Nature, translator’s introduction.
660 Ibid., 10/27.
661 Ibid., 9/26.
662 Ibid., 15/33.
663 Ibid., 15/33.
However, as *naturans naturata*, Nature is not only pure productivity but *partes extra partes*, “the world such as it is known by the senses.” Unlike God, “the human cannot embrace the internal harmony of the World, because he can grasp only its parts, never the Whole. He cannot embrace the world taken collectively [*monde ‘collectivé’*].” Since Nature appears as a “machine” whose functioning is pre-determined by God, in whom finality and causality are the same thing, this means that Nature also *loses* its interiority: it is the “exterior realization of a rationality that is in God.”

It is through this understanding of Nature that Descartes establishes his “mechanistic materialism,” most notably in the three treatises of *The World* (only two of which survive), wherein he describes the visible universe “as a single physical system in which all its operations, from the formation of planets and the transmission of light from the sun, to the physiological processes of human and nonhuman animal bodies, can be explained through the mechanism of moving matter arranged into shapes and structures and moving according to three laws of motion.”

To put it simply, Nature is *naturans naturata* by virtue of the “*auto-functioning* of the laws,” which have their origin in an infinite creator, but whose manifestation is available to human intellect as *partes extra partes* bound together only by their machine-like functioning as parts of the Whole.

The alternative model of Nature that Merleau-Ponty isolates in Descartes’ thought is found most readily in the *Meditations*, wherein we find a “double nature of man”: “my nature in the large sense, as being pure understanding and all that it conceives; and my nature in the narrow sense, the sense of the soul-body composite.” Whereas humanity experiences the rest of the world as *partes extra partes* through the senses, the experience of one’s own body generates,

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664 *Nature*, 15/33.
668 *Fôti*, 60. Original citation in *Nature*, 10/27.
669 *Nature*, 16/34.
among other changes, a new sense of space and extension: “I am my body.” Merleau-Ponty explains, “Whatever exterior nature may be, at the level of the human we at least find a nature that does not present the character of an object that is for us.” Merleau-Ponty puzzles over the relationship between these two presentations of the nature of humanity, especially given that the justification for the second sense of the nature of man (the soul-body composite) is explicitly rejected by the first three “Meditations.” Since the later Meditations no longer use the *lumen naturale* as the “term of reference,” Descartes argues there that “natural inclination impels us to believe the existence of an exterior world, of my body.” The soul-body composite is “opaque to the intellect yet vividly attested to by experience or feeling.” This leads Merleau-Ponty to grapple with the possibility of “two zones of truth” and “two regions of the clear and distinct” for Descartes, noting that “[t]here is an extraordinary difficulty in thinking according to both the first and the second order at the same time.” How can the body and soul be both a union and dualism at the same time? Merleau-Ponty attempts to solve this contradiction in several ways: for example, by attempting to understand the body as an extension of the soul, by thinking of the body as “transspatial” (“that, while pertaining to the body, is not of the body”), and by positing the soul as the “form of the body,” where the body is simply the instrument of the soul. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty thinks that Descartes does not establish a “true union,” which would be “real, a mixture, a contamination.” Pointing towards a possible solution, Merleau-Ponty notes that “[i]t must allow for a new being that is neither spirit nor beast.” Descartes, instead, is forced to abandon the problem: “we cannot conceive the composite: hence the irrationalism of

672 *Ibid.*, 16/34.
673 Fóti, 60.
674 *Nature*, 17/36.
life as the counterweight to rigorous rationalism, which can only be analysis. In other words, Descartes cannot include “life” in his rationalist philosophy, leaving the problem of Nature intact and opening a field of investigation. In the remaining notes for Part I of Merleau-Ponty’s first course, he examines those who have most prominently attempted to “re-institute” the Cartesian concept of Nature, including Kant, Bergson, Husserl, and Sartre.

It is not until the final section of the first course on Nature, dedicated to Alfred North Whitehead, that Merleau-Ponty finds the beginnings of a remedy to the two ideas of Nature in Descartes. Like Merleau-Ponty, Whitehead demonstrates the intricate connection between metaphysical assumptions and theories of the workings of Nature; indeed, Merleau-Ponty believes that any theory of Nature is always a “privileged expression of an ontology.” For example, as we briefly saw above, Descartes' second idea of Nature is both explained and problematized by his metaphysical dualism, as he is incapable of positing a “true union,” a “mixture” or “contamination” of body and soul. What Merleau-Ponty sees Whitehead bringing to the equation is a challenge to the concepts of space and time that allow such divisions to seem feasible – namely, the idea of distinct spatiotemporal entities, or rather, “a spatial 'unique emplacement' of each instant... according to which each being occupies its place, without participation in other spatiotemporal existences.” Whitehead instead argues that “the edges of nature are always ragged.” The only way we “see” punctual existences is by the work of mental acrobatics, dividing what we actually experience – a duration – into “events.” As an example in Merleau-Ponty's notes, we are given the image of a barge passing in front of the Louvre for an observer. According to Whitehead, “What is given to us is the life of the barge and the life of the Louvre. We divide the duration, during which the Louvre and the barge are given to us, into

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679 Nature, translator’s introduction.
681 Ibid., 114/154.
parcels of 'events,' as distant as possible." Thus, what is primary is change, or Whitehead's preferred term, *process*, and it is only by abstraction that we are given not only events, but spatiotemporally distinct entities. Merleau-Ponty notes, “What Whitehead seeks is an element that is not a part but already a Whole. Hence the idea of an 'ether of events' which would be the ultimate substance of matter.” Later, we will see that the notion of an “elemental” substance from which “matter” emerges plays a strong role in Merleau-Ponty’s own concept of the flesh.

For Whitehead, the “ether of events” which constitutes the ultimate substance of matter, and thus Nature, cannot be understood as a Whole made up of spatiotemporally distinct parts. Nature is not a Whole in that sense, but is instead an activity, a becoming. But neither is it a series of “instants,” one arriving after the other. Just as the “ether” is not a conglomerate of things, it is also not to be aligned with a temporal “present.” The notes read, “Whitehead no longer wants to define matter and Nature by the present and by the instant; he denies that the past is no more and that the future is not yet. Nature is going to be conceived as spatiotemporal unfurling.”

The only sense of time that is given to Nature in this conception is time insofar as we participate in it. Although Merleau-Ponty does not mention it here, several scholars have noted how Whitehead reaches these conclusions from a starting point very close to the phenomenological method: Whitehead believes that “to be given is to be given in an experience” and thus that “all there is, is an experience of the subject.” It is from this affirmation of the phenomenon as primordial that Whitehead rejects “the 'bifurcation of Nature': the split introduced between a purely objective world and a purely subjective experience.”

688 Van der Veken, 327.
In describing Whitehead's notion of Nature as process, Merleau-Ponty returns to the language that he used to capture the shortfalls of the Cartesian concepts: “Nature is that in which we are, it is a mixture, and not what we contemplate at a distance... The consequence of this is to make a substantialist thinking impossible.” For Whitehead, it is impossible to either accord attributes to Nature as a single unique “Substance,” or to treat “the different phenomena as revealers of several substances.” To state this slightly differently, we cannot really say that Nature “is” anything, in Whitehead’s understanding of the term – which is why he chooses terms like “ether,” “element,” and “process” when describing it. The unity of Nature is not the unity of substantialist thinking, but rather, Nature is a unity because it is “concrescence,” a biological term used to denote growing together. Merleau-Ponty calls the Whiteheadian concept of Nature “an obscure principle,” summarizing it as follows:

It is this outside of which is nothing, that from which is taken all spatiality and temporality. It is what always appears as already containing all that appears. In it, creature and creator are inseparable. It is with this reservation in mind that we must call Nature an “operating presence.”

We might say that Nature is, for Whitehead, what is ontologically primordial. Whitehead thus avoids Nature understood as substance, and correlative to, something over and against other substances, whether “extension” or “spirit.” In sum, by making Nature a “spatiotemporal unfurling” in which the past and future of etherial “matter” inhabit the present, Whitehead avoids the modernist ontology instituted by Descartes.

In the concluding notes to this final section of the first course on Nature, Merleau-Ponty asks what the task of a philosophy of Nature would be for Whitehead. If Nature is an unfurling which is yet “this outside of which is nothing,” how does one thematize it as an object of philosophical inquiry? Merleau-Ponty notes, “The task of a philosophy of Nature would be to describe all the modes of process, without grouping them under certain headings borrowed from

689 Nature, 122/165.
690 Ibid., 121/165.
691 Ibid., 120/162-163.
substantialist thinking."\textsuperscript{692} Difference within Nature would be accounted for as distinctions between “modes,” though without resorting to mechanism (as in Descartes) or vitalism (which Merleau-Ponty earlier refuted in this same course). As an example of differentiation by mode, Merleau-Ponty writes, “The human is a mode just as much as are animal cells. There is not a limit to the abundance of categories, but there are types of ‘concrescence’ that pass by degradation of each other.”\textsuperscript{693} In other words, we might say that the process of “unfurling” differentiates human from animal and other beings. Again, it would be the task of a philosophy of Nature to articulate all of these modes of process.

Curiously, there is no commentary within Merleau-Ponty’s notes after the first course that directly take up Whitehead’s concept of Nature, nor is there much critical commentary within his explanation of Nature as process. It is clear, however, that of the figures studied in this first course, Whitehead’s concept is presented as an alternative to those theories which fall prey to the Cartesian legacy and its ontological presuppositions. The notes introduce Merleau-Ponty’s study of Whitehead as follows: “It remains to elaborate, starting from the critiques of the conception of causality, space, and time, a new vision of Nature. We will ask it of Whitehead.”\textsuperscript{694} But more thematically, we can see why Whitehead’s theory would appeal to Merleau-Ponty: as noted above, he gives a primacy to phenomena and experience over the modern abstractions that lead to positing substances (such as mind and body), articulating instead a metaphysics of process where “substance” is replaced by “ethereal” or “elemental” matter. Might it be the case, similarly, that Merleau-Ponty finds in the concept of Nature a pre-substantial matter? Given the lack of commentary at the end of this first course, we are left to read further in this collection of notes. What we will discover is that, although Merleau-Ponty initially finds merit in positing Nature as primordial, he ultimately classifies it as one differentiation of wild Being, which is what he later

\textsuperscript{692} \textit{Ibid.}, 122/165.  
\textsuperscript{693} \textit{Ibid.}, 122/165.  
\textsuperscript{694} \textit{Ibid.}, 112/152.
calls “flesh.” Let us turn now to “Animality, the Human Body, and the Passage to Culture,” taught between 1957 and 1958 at the Collège de France.

The Return to Animality

In Merleau-Ponty’s second course on Nature, he turns to recent theoretical biology in order to find additional clues for an alternative philosophy of Nature to those that assume, consciously or otherwise, the metaphysics of Cartesian thought. In certain figures, he finds an abandonment of the mechanistic model of Nature, and correlatively, support for an anti-substantialist ontology – all part of what he calls a veritable “mutation of biological concepts” in the 20th century. Rather than understand non-human animals and other living things as automatons, Merleau-Ponty sees these biologists define life in relational terms between the organism and its environment. In his introductory comments, Merleau-Ponty’s notes read, “Biology ceases to be substantialist in order to become dialectical. The whole problem is currently to know what the word ‘dialectical’ means.” What Merleau-Ponty finds is that it is through studies of animal behavior that this “dialogue” is conceived. By observing how animals appear in their environment and to others, with respect to both their morphological structure and their actions, these biologists see that there is an inherent relationality reflected in their appearance that disrupts the model of organisms as strictly determined machines – whether it be by instinct, telos, or any other means. Merleau-Ponty notes that “[t]he predominant question” of the second course, therefore, “is that of the phenomenality of animal being, and thus of life.” In the remainder of this section, we will turn to each of the main thinkers of the “new biology” that interest Merleau-Ponty in their refutations of Cartesian thought. It is with their scientific

695 Ibid., 140/188.
696 Ibid., 139/187.
697 Ibid., xix.
explorations that Merleau-Ponty finds the precedent for a new definition of life, and later, of phenomenology itself.

Like Heidegger in his *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Merleau-Ponty looks to the work of Jakob von Uexküll, whose writings explore the animal milieu [*Umwelt*] in order to understand the relationship between animal and environment. But whereas Heidegger uses the notion of *Umwelt* to justify ontological distinctions – i.e., between the human as world-forming and the animal as “poor in world” – Merleau-Ponty sees in the notion of *Umwelt* a means of collapsing dualisms. First, *Umwelt* is used as a non-substantialist concept that denotes how an organism and its environment are mutually determinative in a way that confounds causal thinking and the ontological borders necessary for such thinking to function. The notes read: “[*Umwelt*] is an intermediary reality between the world such as it exists for an absolute observer and a purely subjective domain. It is the aspect of the world in itself to which the animal addresses itself, which exists for the behavior of an animal, but not necessarily for its consciousness; it is the environment of behavior as ‘opposed to the geographical environment,’ to use Koffka’s words.”

As an “intermediary reality,” the *Umwelt* is neither subject nor object, but instead “a kind of self-organization at the level of life.” An organism is not “in” its *Umwelt* in the way that we understand something's physical presence in its “geographical environment.” Yet, the animal “addresses itself to it.” How does this “address” function within the broader sense of the *Umwelt* as “a self-organization at the level of life”? The answer lies in the behavioral relation between *Umwelt* and organism.

Uexküll posits that even the simplest life forms engage in behavior oriented towards an *Umwelt*: i.e., “as soon as we have stimulations that act, not by simple physical presence, but

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699 Toadvine, 88.
insofar as an organism is disposed to receive them and treat them as signals.”

Thus, the amoeba, which does not have defined organs, but continuously recreates its pseudopods (i.e., legs) and vacuoles (stomach), has an Umwelt. Merleau-Ponty suggests that the amoeba is perhaps more revealing of the structure of the Umwelt than the “higher” animals, since its unity as an organism is more clearly a product of a dialectical activity between organism and environment than an established Bauplan by virtue of physiological makeup. There is no clear developmental path for its life: “to function and to maintain itself are the same thing.”

Stated differently, for the amoeba, “the Bauplan is endlessly created.” Merleau-Ponty explains that the behavior of more complicated animals gives them “the air of being machines,” but that our mechanistic explanations have only “a descriptive meaning.” Citing Uexküll, Merleau-Ponty notes, “The structure [of higher animals] hides the construction of the structure.”

It is the “construction of the structure” which reveals how Umwelt, while retaining a substantialist language in differentiating terminologically between animals, other organisms, and their Umwelt, nonetheless implies a non-Cartesian ontology. Merleau-Ponty notes, “The notion of the Umwelt is destined to join what we usually separate: the activity that creates the organs and the activity of behavior... from animal-machines to animal-consciousness, there is everywhere an unfurling of an Umwelt. What is unfurled, and from what?” To answer this question, we must first understand how the Umwelt is differentiated by type of organism.

What, then, distinguishes the Umwelt of higher animals for Uexküll? The course notes read, “Lower animals had a unity in their functioning, but did not have within their organism a reply to the exterior world.” The Umwelt of higher animals is more appropriately termed a

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701 Ibid., 170/223.
702 Ibid., 170/223.
703 Ibid., 169/222.
704 Quoted on Nature, 169/223. No direct citation provided by Merleau-Ponty.
706 Ibid., 170/224.
Gegenwelt, a “world in counterpoise.” The reason for this distinction is that lower animals seem better adapted to their surroundings: they “let only what has an interest for their life penetrate them; they constitute a sort of cohesion with their world, a closed unity.” For higher animals, however, we still see a unity between organism and world, but one which is open rather than closed. But this does not imply that, for example, the exterior world is simply “opposed” [Gegen-] to the organism, as we might conceive of the relation between natural predators to their prey. Instead, Uexküll argues that the higher animal only responds to its environment because it is already structured in such a way as to respond to those stimuli – the higher animals are those that have some form of nervous system. And, moreover, this means that the animal plays a determinative role in what constitutes its Gegenwelt; the “world” that is for it is only that world that it has the possibility to experience as such. In other words, the Gegenwelt does not simply denote a new causal role of the external environment; instead, “the world is possessed by the animal.” The notes read: “The exterior world is 'distilled' by the animal who, differentiating sensorial givens, can respond to them by fine actions, and these differentiated reactions are possible only because the nervous system amounts to a rejoinder to the exterior world [Gegenwelt], as a 'rejoinder or retort,' a 'copy.'” To the extent, then, that we can denote an “exterior world,” we must say that it is a sign rather than a cause: “Between the exterior world and the living organism, there is the insertion of a whole that orders, coordinates, and interprets: the nervous system is a mirror of the world [Weltspiegel].”

From this all too brief examination of Merleau-Ponty’s notes on Uexküll, we can conclude that in this theory, all organisms are in a relationship with their Umwelt that is dialectical: the amoeba continuously recreates its own structure, developing and diminishing parts.
necessary for its function and survival given its Umwelt, and whose behavior is thus “oriented towards” that Umwelt, while more complex animals with nervous systems “distill” the external world, responding to a wider possibility of dialectical possibilities, but are no less engaged in the very production of them. Drawing from this, Merleau-Ponty's notes read: “We must understand life as the opening of a field of action. The animal is produced by the production of a milieu, that is, by the appearing in the physical world of a field radically different from the physical world with its specific temporality and spatiality.”712 When Merleau-Ponty asks what is unfurled and from what does it come in this schema, we must answer that both organism and “milieu” are produced, with the differentiation between type of organism dependent on whether it has an open or closed relationship with its possibilities for a broader “field of action” than what it is originally given.

To help us further understand the ontological implications that Merleau-Ponty draws out of Uexküll's writings, Ted Toadvine notes that the Umwelt is best understood via analogy to a melody, a theme which Merleau-Ponty uses as early as The Structure of Behavior, where he writes: “every organism... is a melody which sings itself.”713 Later in the Nature courses, Merleau-Ponty more broadly uses melody to include the “counterpoint” that the animal enters into with its milieu: “When we invent a melody, the melody sings in us much more than we sing it; it goes down the throat of the singer, as Proust says... It is in this way that things happen in the construction of a living being.”714 Like the melody which seems to take its own path in us, rendering it impossible to say who or what caused its creation, the “vital event” that produces a living being defies boundaries between subject and object, interior and exterior.715 Toadvine explains, “What the notion of melody elucidates is the ontological status of the animal's Umwelt,

712 Ibid., 173/227.
713 The Structure of Behavior 172/159. Quoted in Toadvine, 88.
715 “Each action of the milieu is conditioned by the action of the animal; the animal's behavior arouses responses from the milieu... In brief, the exterior and the interior, the situation and the movement are not in a simple relation of causality.” Nature, 175/229. Quoted in Toadvine, 89.
its milieu or environment, which, according to Uexküll, can be explained neither through physical processes alone nor through an explicit plan in the consciousness of the animal. In fact, the Umwelt must be evoked as an explanatory principle both for the animal’s physical development and for its behavior.”

Following from what we have observed in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Uexküll thus far, the second dualism that is challenged by the notion of Umwelt is that between human and non-human animals. In his opening comments regarding Uexküll, Merleau-Ponty notes that “This behavioral activity towards an Umwelt begins well before the invention of consciousness... Consciousness is only one of the varied forms of behavior.” Thus, we see in the concept of Umwelt as the environment of behavior (not unlike the Gestaltian framework of Phenomenology of Perception) the precedent to distinguish between human and animal by virtue of degree rather than kind. Merleau-Ponty continues, “Consciousness must appear as institution, as a type of behavior. Behavior includes elementary organization (embryology), and physiological, instinctive organization, or behavior properly called.” If consciousness is only one form of behavior, and behavior occurs even at the embryological level, then we can place humans and non-human animals – and even non-animal organisms – on a spectrum of behavioral activity (which we might call “life”).

However, despite another attempt to differentiate species by degree rather than kind, it is also important to note that the type of behavior Merleau-Ponty assigns to consciousness is “institution.” Does this therefore signal a break, or a branch off this spectrum of life, that is what emerges from “nature” but is not natural? Moreover, does this imply that the human and what makes us human is similarly differentiated from the rest of life? We see here, again, Merleau-Ponty struggling to both find a means of collapsing this traditional ontological divide, while

716 Toadvine, 88.
718 Ibid., 167/220.
holding on to a sense of consciousness as *institution* – as historical and cultural, and thus, non-
natural. Ted Toadvine aptly shows how this problematic, which we have been tracing since

*Phenomenology of Perception*, is symptomatic of Merleau-Ponty’s own phenomenological
method, and thus, points us to the revision of this method in the project we know as *The Visible
and the Invisible*: “The phenomenology of the nonhuman animal, if it wishes to come to terms
with the specter of human exceptionalism, therefore requires an interrogation of the method of
phenomenology itself, especially with regard to the relation between life and mind.”-seven And
indeed, throughout the Nature courses, one finds Merleau-Ponty indicate that a new
phenomenology is necessitated. For example, in the introduction to the second course, Merleau-
Ponty is “tempted to seek an organic totality behind the observable phenomena,” or rather, a
“primordial nature.”-eight But, he notes several pages later:

> All comes from our ideal of knowledge, what makes a *bloße Sache* of being (Husserl). ...The
model of Being... might be, for example, in a being of the order of Logos, and not of the 'pure
thing.' ...On the one hand, language [*langage*] needs to be clarified; on the other, language
[*langage*] is situated at a human level. *The difficulty is to be situated at the level of the axolotl.* If
life is in the establishment of the bases of history, and if this history is different from the history of
human being[s], then it's a natural history. It is not an individual history; it is the future of a type,
of a collective being.

In this passage, we see Merleau-Ponty struggle with the very foundation of the phenomenological
method and its models for truth and Being. Implicit in his commentary here is a challenge to the
traditional alignment of Logos with human language, and that identifying some overarching
Being with Logos thus excludes all non-human nature. In other words, if Merleau-Ponty seeks a
“primordial nature,” he is saying that access to such requires a rethinking of the ontological
model that guides traditional phenomenology, and with it, a new model of truth – with a
methodology to ensure such truth. How does one capture the phenomena that appear for “a
collective being”? As Merleau-Ponty says here, “The difficulty is to be situated at the level of the

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seven Toadvine, 82.
eight *Nature*, 152/203.
seven I*bid.*, 157/209, my emphasis.
axoltl.” Is it possible to know the situation of the non-human? If not, can phenomenology ever implicate any ontology beyond one which divides between human and Other?

In the final section of this chapter and the conclusion to this dissertation, I will further explore the implications of this discussion. For now, let us make one last observation from Merleau-Ponty regarding Uexküll – namely, that the concept of Umwelt provides for a means of accounting for “a beginning of culture”\textsuperscript{722} in animals. Even in the passage above, we see Merleau-Ponty speculate that there might be a non-human, “natural history” whose foundation is in life. How then, might the animal rise to the level of symbolism? The observations here can serve to clarify Merleau-Ponty’s earlier observations in the Institution course that the animal was not entirely ahistorical or acultural, but rather more like a “weak human” that is connected to its past and future in limited ways. Merleau-Ponty notes that “when we see a true Umwelt, there is a living plan... the sign of it is that identical exterior conditions bring along different possibilities of behavior.”\textsuperscript{723} As an example, Merleau-Ponty points to the behavior of the crab, which uses the sea anemone for different purposes: for protection, for food, for a replacement of its own shell, and so forth. Merleau-Ponty remarks that these different behaviors within identical exterior conditions are signs of the crab “interpreting” the symbols of its external environment. The very same sea anemone can, in other words, mean different things to the crab (“protection,” “food,” etc.).\textsuperscript{724} This “architecture of symbols,” Merleau-Ponty explains, “defines within Nature a species of preculture,” but it does not signal “a break between the planned animal, the animal that plans, and the animal without plan.”\textsuperscript{725} Clearly, Merleau-Ponty is again trying to neutralize any sense of

\textsuperscript{722} Ibid., 176/231.
\textsuperscript{723} Ibid., 176/231.
\textsuperscript{724} This discussion implies that Merleau-Ponty may escape the critique of Husserlian phenomenology developed by Derrida in Voice and Phenomenon. If the non-human animal does not have access to the environment “as such,” might this be the same for the human? If their difference is that of degree rather than kind, we might surmise that this is the case.
\textsuperscript{725} Nature, 176/231.
ontological difference between animality and humanity in his project, instead envisioning various
degrees of culture and historicity that they have access to.

Merleau-Ponty adds that “we also live in each other's Umwelt.”726 Although there is a
privileged milieu for each individual, the mutual “englobing” of Umwelten signals that there
might be ways in which we can access the symbolic life of animals and vice-versa. Yet, following
Uexküll, “our” - that is, human - “Umwelt englobes the Umwelt of animals, which allows us to
know them.”727 Is such knowledge reciprocal, or is the human Umwelt given privileged access to
animal symbolism? Merleau-Ponty puzzles over whether there is a hidden transcendental
principle operating in Uexküll's work, asking: “What is the Umwelt of Umwelten?... [Uexküll] is
altogether indifferent to the fact that we could consider the Umgebung as the Umwelt of a higher
being, and that we do not make it.”728

Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty does not provide us with an answer to these questions. It is
possible that there remains a Cartesian legacy implicit in the structure of Umwelten – that, rather
than substance, the Umwelt differentiates Being, and reinstates an epistemological and ontology
hierarchy within such differentiation. We can pause here and again note the curious line that
Merleau-Ponty is perpetually retracing: via Uexküll, Merleau-Ponty determines that Nature
presents us with preculture of animals, but not culture proper; there may be a “natural history”
separate from human history, but nonetheless a history; consciousness is an institution, yet simply
a variation of natural behavior. As we have seen in the works and chapters leading up to these
courses, it appears that the nature/culture distinction continues to play out on the terrain of the
human/animal divide. However, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty also finds merit in Uexküll's
account insofar as it furthers his attempt towards understanding Nature as “elemental”: he
explains, “The notion of Umwelt no longer allows us to consider the organism in its relation to the

726 Ibid., 177/231.
727 Ibid., 177/231-232.
728 Ibid., 177/232.
exterior world, as an effect of the exterior world, or as a cause.”729 The “unfurling” of the Umwelt is perhaps a conceptual possibility for capturing the origin of the sense or meaning of life in a way that avoids strict causal determination and a correlative division between interiority and exteriority: through it, “we no longer see where behavior begins and where mind ends.”730 Another way of framing this conceptual possibility is that it avoids both mechanism and finalism, two forms of determinative relationships that reinforce ontological distinctions between organisms, world, and mind. As we turn now to see where else Merleau-Ponty draws inspiration from the “new biology” of the 20th century, we will see a repetition of these themes, providing a foundation for Merleau-Ponty’s third course and his own new definition of Nature.

Following the development of Merleau-Ponty’s course, we next find notes on E.S. Russell’s observations of the “oriented character” of organic activities. According to Russell, we can see activity at the cellular level that is “assimilable to relations of behavior.”731 This “behavior,” moreover, is “a prolongation of the activity of an organism beyond its own body,”732 echoing Uexküll’s sense of the interconnection between organism and world. As an example of this interplay, Russell shows how the activity of tissue repair is comparable to an animal repairing its dwelling. Neither of these actions is strictly mechanistic; there is a kind of mutual regulation of the behavior of various cells engaged in reparation and generation of new tissue, just as one can observe within the various forms of reconstruction that an animal recreates its shelter differently according to various conditions. However, it is clear that “there is an orientation of a living being toward a goal, even for the most elementary activity.”733 Thus, we once again see an attempt to understand organic life as something other than the workings of Cartesian mechanism or Aristotelian finalism. Merleau-Ponty notes, “As Russell more or less says, an organism is not a

[729] Ibid., 178/233.
[730] Ibid., 178/233.
[731] Ibid., 178/233.
[732] Ibid., 179/234.
[733] Ibid., 181/237.
machine, whether or not this machine is governed by an entelechy. For the same reason, we cannot be more finalist than mechanist. Teleology is not a mix between a true teleology and mechanism considered as an obstacle. It is a vital activity of a third order.”

This “vital activity” is “a theme, a style, all these expressions seeking to express not a participation in a transcendental existence, but in a structure of the whole.” Again rehearsing literally ancient themes, Merleau-Ponty adds that “the reality of the organism supposes a non-Parmenian Being, a form that escapes from the dilemma of being and nonbeing.” Clearly, in adopting the language of style to describe the oriented activity of organic life, even at the cellular level, Merleau-Ponty is again indicating the rethinking of traditional ontological boundaries. Perhaps the non-Parmelian Being, even an “elemental Nature,” is itself expressive. As we will see in the third course on Nature, Merleau-Ponty is able to posit an expressivity inherent in nature and culture, insofar as each is a conduit for the unfolding of wild Being. That is to say, the “elemental” is ultimately flesh. Nonetheless, it is clear that Russell’s sense of the “non-Parmenian Being” is greatly influential in the development of that concept.

From Hardouin, Merleau-Ponty finds further cause to attribute a “style” to organic life, once again negotiating a third way beyond finalism and mechanism. Hardouin’s studies focus on animal “mimicry”: ways in which animals resemble their surroundings and each other. Hardouin examines both cases of “fixed” mimicry – where, for example, the animals of a given region blend in and match their surroundings in the coloration and texture of their outer appearance – as well as “changing” mimicries, as exemplified in the variable appearance of the chameleon or certain fish whose coloration changes tone according to the depth of water they are in. However, Hardouin also discovers that there are “flagrant examples of nonhomochrony: certain

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734 Ibid., 182/238.
735 Ibid., 183/238.
736 Ibid., 183/239.
737 Ibid., 184/240.
animals have ornamentation that not only are not useful, but even complicate their existence.”\footnote{Ibid., 184/240.} From this, Merleau-Ponty argues that “life is not uniquely submitted to the principle of utility,”\footnote{Ibid., 184/240.} since it seems that in cases where certain beings do not mimic their environment or other organisms, there is nonetheless an orientation to their design; it is not the product of chance that, for example, some insects at the North Pole are black, even though it makes them more visible and thus more susceptible to predators.

Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty uses Hardouin to directly challenge the theory of evolution, insofar as he sees it as a form of finalism whose “end” is survival. The notes read, “These facts... are the occasion to question Darwinian ideology. Life is not only an organization for survival; there is in life a prodigious flourishing of forms, the utility of which is only rarely attested to and that sometimes even constitutes a danger for the animal.”\footnote{Ibid., 186/243.} Merleau-Ponty's point here is that the organizing principle of life cannot be utility oriented towards survival due to the sheer “excess over any restricted economy”\footnote{Foti, 83.} of behavior and morphology. Yet Merleau-Ponty does not dismiss entirely the propositions of Darwinian evolution: adaptation “is not the canon of life, but only a particular realization in the tide of natural production.”\footnote{Quoted in Foti, 83.} Veronique Foti points out that Merleau-Ponty misses entirely the fact that mimicry is by no means restricted to animal life, and is found in many plant species. For example, she explains that some forms of orchids use the following “pollination 'strategem': their flowers attract flies as pollinators by presenting the appearance, and emitting the stench, of carrion.”\footnote{Ibid., 83.} Foti notes further that this example shows “that mimicry is not restricted to the visual dimension.”\footnote{Ibid., 83-84.} Hermeneutical problems notwithstanding (after all, we never know what lacunae are Merleau-Ponty's own or those of the
student responsible for these notes), one might highlight from such an oversight Merleau-Ponty's interest in specifically the animal-human dichotomy, especially given his later reflections on the possibility of animal consciousness. Regardless, Foti's point is well taken, in that an argument for a non-mechanistic, non-finalist organizing principle of Life would be better served with demonstrations beyond the animal kingdom to elucidate its pervasiveness. With respect to the limitation of examples to the visual dimension, one might speculate this emphasis as part and parcel of the phenomenological tradition's privileging of sight over other forms of sensory experience.

Like Hardouin, Portmann's studies begin from the proposition that understanding an organism ought to take into consideration its relationship to, and appearance in, the exterior world. Merleau-Ponty draws from Portmann's Die Tiergestalt, in which Portmann directly criticizes the field of biology for its “prejudice” to “privilege the inner and thus hidden processes of the organism and to dismiss outer appearance as an epiphenomenon devoid of scientific interest.” What Portmann finds is that, in brief, there is a noted “segregation of the organism's inner formation from its visible form,” as we might observe, simply, in comparing the asymmetry characteristic in the structure of the internal organs as compared with the highly symmetrical outer appearance of animals (e.g. zebras, tigers). Yet, Portmann argues, we must understand that the outer appearance is predicated upon a particular structuring of the interior, reflecting an “intrinsic value of the visible.” For example, “the iridescent black of a raven's plumage is built up entirely from the visible tips of feathers whose hidden parts are an inconspicuous grey.” In other words, the outer appearance of the raven is created by a

745 Foti, 85.
746 Ibid., 85.
747 Portmann, quoted on Foti, 85.
748 Foti, 85.
“convergence between the elements of design.” The morphological development of the raven is such that its design, prior to the actual appearance of its iridescent black feathers, is already oriented towards that appearance. Merleau-Ponty notes, “Just as the lungs are realized before the embryo has oxygen to breathe, so too does the ensemble of marks contain a reference to a possible eye, to a 'semantic ensemble,' to a 'critical ensemble' that allows the animal to be recognized by its fellow creatures.”

These phenomena described by Portmann could easily be explained in finalist terms: that a given appearance is the “end” of the internal organization of animals. But this is, of course, short of Merleau-Ponty's intentions, for how would we then explain why this particular end is sought? In other words, although we can point to the interior structure of the animal to explain how its feathers have their distinct coloration, Merleau-Ponty is interested in understanding why this is so. “The study of the appearance of animals,” he notes, “takes on interest when we understand this appearance as a language. We must grasp the mystery of life in the way that animals show themselves to each other.”

Understanding the Tiergestalt as a language once again challenges the Darwinian notion of adaptation for survival, and gives the animal a “style” not unlike the human: animal appearance is an expressive function. It is not the byproduct of the survival of the species, but rather, a “perceptual relation” between an animal and its milieu. This is what is meant when Merleau-Ponty says that “the ensemble of marks contains a reference to a possible eye”: there is a dialectical movement literally built into the form of the animal. We see in the morphology of the

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749 Nature, 187/244.
750 Ibid., 187/244.
751 In Merleau-Ponty's words: “There are two ways to consider the animal, as there are two ways to consider an inscription on an old stone: we can wonder how this inscription was traced, but we can also seek to know what it means. Likewise we can either analyze the processes of the animal under a microscope, or see a totality in the animal.” Nature, 187/244.
752 Ibid., 188/245.
animal a “perceptual relation before perception properly so-called.”\textsuperscript{753} This means, too, that the expressive function of the Tiergestalt cannot be reduced to an intentional structure; the perceptual relation is in the form of the animal, prior to its full development.

These observations lead Merleau-Ponty to conclude that the appearance of animals has an “existential value of manifestation” rather than an adaptive or intentional value.\textsuperscript{754} He notes, “What the animal shows is not utility; rather, its appearance manifests something that resembles our oneiric life.”\textsuperscript{755} Like our oneiric life, our dreams, there is an inherent excess to the expressivity of animal forms that cannot be accounted for in terms of utility. Merleau-Ponty continues, “Just as we can say of every culture that it is both absurd and the cradle of meaning, so too does every structure rest on a gratuitous value, on a useless complication.”\textsuperscript{756} Thus, we might say that the phenomenon of animal appearance is a generation of meaning, where that meaning is the expression of the perceptual relation between animal and milieu. The perceptual relation, moreover, is indicative of the indivision between interiority and exteriority, or animal and world. In the final comments on Portmann, we see that “The identity of that which sees and that which it sees appears to be an ingredient of animality.”\textsuperscript{757} The study of animal appearance, therefore, reveals a reversibility inherent in animality between the visible and the invisible.\textsuperscript{758} Merleau-Ponty concludes that “Life is not 'the ensemble of functions that resist death,' to use Bichat's expression, but rather is a power [une puissance] to invent the visible.”\textsuperscript{759} As we saw in Merleau-Ponty’s work on Russell, he here again indicates that the work of the “new biologists” reveals an

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{753} \textit{Ibid.}, 189/247.
\item \textsuperscript{754} \textit{Ibid.}, 188/246.
\item \textsuperscript{755} \textit{Ibid.}, 188/246.
\item \textsuperscript{756} \textit{Ibid.}, 188/246.
\item \textsuperscript{757} \textit{Ibid.}, 190/248.
\item \textsuperscript{758} See Fóti, 84: “Merleau-Ponty speaks… of an ‘indivision’ (that is, nondivision) between an animal and its surroundings and notes once again that the same indivision also underlies the formation of a sense organ which is no less ‘miraculous’ than mimicry. Indivision pertains, of course, to the ontological structure of flesh that he elaborates in \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}; and his reflections on animal form and mimicry serve to concretize it.”
\item \textsuperscript{759} \textit{Nature}, 190/248.
\end{itemize}
inherent expressivity in Nature. Moreover, by understanding Nature (which is here posited as synonymous with “life”) as a power to invent the visible, it can inhabit the space between being and non-being as Merleau-Ponty earlier suggested. As we will see in the following section, this indeed becomes the defining character not of Nature, but “wild Being,” in Merleau-Ponty’s final course notes of this collection.

Before we turn to the third course on Nature, let us examine how Merleau-Ponty’s study of Konrad Lorenz leads him to similar conclusions as the previous theoretical biologists. Lorenz, a student of Uexküll, develops the notion of animal imprinting or Prägeung, by incorporating it into a broader theory of instinct. For Lorenz, it is necessary to differentiate between three variations of animal behavior: taxis, reflex, and instinct. The primary means of demarcating instinct is that, unlike the others, it is objektlos; Merleau-Ponty notes, “the ‘instinctive tendencies’ [les ‘tendances instinctives’] are not actions directed toward a goal, not even toward a distant goal of which the animal is aware.”

Taxis, alternatively, is an activity that is a kind of precursor to instinct; it is “an oriented activity directed toward placing the animal in a position and situation of optimal responsiveness to the factors that trigger instinctual behavior.” Merleau-Ponty explains, “Thus in the behavior of the eagle aiming at its prey, we must distinguish the variable taxis-component, the movement by which the animal seeks to place itself in the best way to fix on its prey, and the stereotyped ‘act of consummation.’” Taxis is therefore connected to instinct, but is not instinct itself, insofar as it has a clearly determined goal or object upon which it is fixed and serves to orient the animal towards further action. Finally, activity that falls into the category of reflex is triggered by a stimulus and “tends to continue for as long as the stimulus is present, so that a researcher who, for instance, keeps turning a beetle on its back is likely to exhaust himself.

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760 Ibid., 190/249.
761 Fóti, 89-90.
without the beetle’s lessening its efforts to right itself.” Reflex is therefore linked to a stimulus (e.g. the researcher turning the beetle on its back) and is clearly goal-oriented behavior (e.g. the beetle’s goal of turning itself over).

Characteristic of objektlos, instinctual activity is what Merleau-Ponty calls the “ceremony” which accompanies it. For example, the many different ways in which birds oil their feathers reveal an excess of behavior that cannot be explained by reference to a goal or object alone. The notes read, “Instinct is before all else a theme, a style [un thème, un style] that meets up with that which evokes it in the milieu, but which does not have goals: it is an activity for pleasure.” As a “style,” each species has their own “characteristic gesticulation[s]” – they have “patterns of specific behavior ‘exactly as they have teeth.’” Importantly, this instinctual behavior is originally without goal or object: although we can see clearly that the bird who uses its claws to collect oil from a gland in its beak, transfers the oil to its head, and then lowers its head to its body is clearly oiling its feathers, this complex of behaviors must be read as a tendency which has become fixed in its purpose by virtue of an “innate stimulus trigger.” This is where Uexküll’s notion of Prägung comes into play. These triggers are of three kinds, differentiated by specificity: First, they can be very precisely determined. In other words, there are some instincts for which only certain specific situations will bring the instinctive tendency to fruition. Secondly, there can be “a margin within which the choice of the object is free” such that the instinct has various possibilities for the situation in which it can be triggered. In this second category of “innate stimulus triggers,” although the trigger originally has a broad margin of possibilities, these are narrowed by virtue of the Prägung which specifies which situations will in fact cause

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763 Fóti, 90.
764 Nature, 193/251. Fóti appropriately criticizes the sense that instinct is oriented towards pleasure: “This characterization is somewhat questionable, given that instinctive behavior may expose an animal to pain, injury, or even death, as may happen in the defense of its young, or in the ritual ‘initiation’ fights (researched by Leyhausen) that enable a young tomcat to claim a place among its peers.” Fóti, 90.
766 Ibid., 192/251.
767 Ibid., 194/253.
the instinctual activity to occur. Merleau-Ponty explains, “A Prӓgung, an ‘imprint’ or ‘sensibilization,’ specifies the schema, fills it with a being not foreseen by Nature… The unity of animal conduct is no longer founded on the object, but on the Prӓgung.” Finally, there are instincts which are “empty,” or rather, are triggered by the “form” only of the stimulus. Merleau-Ponty is interested in this final sort of activity because, according to Lorenz, “instinct is going to be capable of being derailed or is going to pass from instinctive activity to symbolic activity [l’activité symbolique].” The passage from instinct to symbolism takes place when “[t]hese actions, instead of being effected for the good, are executed as a substitute for effective action, because one part of inactuality has been placed in the instinct.” Thus, the behavior that the duck engages in to take off in flight, “squatting and then projecting the head upward,” is instead executed in order to train the young. The instinct – here, the means necessary to fly – becomes a sign for the duckling. The “inactuality” here is that the duck is not actually flying; it is instead “outlining” an act, or rather, signifying.

In his own philosophical reflections on the importance of Lorenz’s studies, Merleau-Ponty argues that they show us how “we can speak in a valid way of an animal culture.” As we have just seen, the lacunae inherent in some forms of instinctual behavior make it possible for animals to engage in signifying action, and thus, instinct functions as “a matrix of symbolism.” With Lorenz, Merleau-Ponty is able to move significantly away from his earlier model of animal institution that was specifically bereft of symbolic activity. We might also add, in slightly different terms, that the “inactuality” placed on the instinct can also be rendered as an engagement of the animal with the virtual. As for the implications of animal engagement with the virtual, or an animal culture, Merleau-Ponty is clearly dissatisfied with the fact that Lorenz and

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768 Ibid., 194/253.
769 Ibid., 195/254.
770 Ibid., 195/254.
771 Ibid., 198/258.
772 Fóti, 91.
other ethologists do not consider the possibility of animal consciousness, stating that his own project will directly engage this issue. As Foti notes, “[t]he existence of culture does, of course, presuppose some degree and forms of consciousness,” indicating that Merleau-Ponty may indeed want to grant this to animality – the consequences of which would obviously serve as the final word in the human-animal divide as we have seen it in Merleau-Ponty’s work. However, both Foti and Toadvine see his work indicating otherwise: Toadvine writes, “Merleau-Ponty’s effort here is not to raise the animal to the level of symbolic behavior or reflective activity he had earlier reserved for human consciousness. His conclusions are, instead, ontological.”

For both of these scholars, the third course of the Nature series points to the ontology of the flesh, developed in *The Visible and the Invisible*. According to Toadvine, the key to the influence of the Nature courses on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh is the human-animal *Ineinander*, according to which each is a variant of the other. We have seen this theme emerge repeatedly – for example, in Merleau-Ponty’s reflection that consciousness is only one varied form of behavior, or in the recognition that both humans and animals have a “culture.” The human-animal intertwining, moreover, becomes the structural model for the concept of flesh, which denotes a self-reflexivity at the level of Being. Foti pushes this observation further; she argues that beyond the intertwining of human and animal, which signifies a means of escaping the traditional, hierarchical model of human exceptionalism, we see in the Nature courses “the thought of an intrinsic in/visibility that Merleau-Ponty thematizes in *The Visible and the Invisible* as crossing out determinations such as subject and object, or the Sartrean for-itself versus the in-itself.” That is to say, Foti believes that beyond ontic determinations, the study of Nature reveals the ontological repercussion that, as Merleau-Ponty says in a later working note,

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773 “Such will thus be our question: Is there an animal consciousness, and if so, to what extent?” *Nature*, 199/259.
774 Toadvine, 90.
775 Toadvine, 78.
776 Fóti, 89.
“‘visibles,’ in the last analysis, are themselves also centered only on a core of absence.”

In the human-animal *Ineinander*, there is a lacuna built into the structure such that, despite their reversibility, there is never coincidence. If Foti is right, the Nature courses constitute the transfer of ontological structure to a deeper level beyond the human and the animal – it signals a primordial Being that “crosses out” what are now merely ontic categories (i.e., human and animal). Following Portmann especially, she argues that Merleau-Ponty is starting to work towards a “primary visibility” interlaced with “an equally primary invisibility that is not ontic in nature.” As Foti explains, “non-positivity is no longer limited to any sort of entities, such as animal life, but is thought as the very core of manifestation… the emptiness at the core of manifestation continues to call for and sustain the creative and expressive magic (mimetic or not) of appearances.” The non-coincidence between human and animal built into the structure of their intertwining thus becomes the model for the origin of phenomena, and thus sense, in Being.

In the following section, we will look briefly to the third Nature course in order to see the development of this concept of the Intertwining. Let us segway to that material by observing Merleau-Ponty’s final comments in the second course: “We have seen the physical, physis, and we have just seen animality. It remains for us to study the human body as the root of symbolism, as the junction of physis and logos, because our goal is the series physis – logos – History.”

Interestingly, we find in these last sentences the only reference in the entire second course to “logos.” Although Merleau-Ponty has discovered animal symbolism and “culture,” along with a “style” of organic life that is without *telos* or mechanistic structure, he only cites “logos” with reference to the human body. Thus, we are reminded of the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible* with which we began this chapter, and specifically the conclusion to the project outline

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777 Cited in Fóti, 93.
780 *Nature*, 199/259.
dated May, 1960, which shows us that “the fundamental thought” of the project is the “[p]assage to the differentiations of wild Being. Nature – logos history.” 781 We once again return to our overall problematic: how do the “differentiations of wild Being” relate to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology? Does logos as institution or culture separate the human from the animal? As we will see shortly, Merleau-Ponty will continue to puzzle over these distinctions in his final notes on Nature.

**Eight Sketches of Nature**

Merleau-Ponty’s stated purpose of the third course is to use theories of genesis, embryology, and evolution in order to understand the emergence of the human body in Nature. 782 Despite his critical treatment of Darwinian evolution in the second course – related more to his hesitance to use evolutionary theory as the explanation of all behavior than to the science of adaptation –, Merleau-Ponty is explicitly interested in how “the human issues from [evolution],” since “humanity is another corporeity.” 783 Using evolutionary theory will allow Merleau-Ponty to explore humanity “not as another substance, but as interbeing [interêtre], and not as an imposition of a for-itself on a body in-itself.” 784

Merleau-Ponty’s introductory comments for the third course more fully explicate what the study of Nature serves in his greater philosophical project than what we have seen previously in the course notes. Here, he notes that the purpose is to study “Nature as a leaf or layer of total Being – the ontology of Nature as the way toward ontology – the way that we prefer because the evolution of the concept of Nature is a more convincing propadeutic, [since it] more clearly

781 Ibid, xxxv.
782 Ibid., 207-208/269.
783 Ibid., 208/269.
784 Ibid., 208/269-270.
shows the necessity of the ontological mutation.” Merleau-Ponty does not specify the mutation ontologique of which he speaks here, but given that this final course was taught at the same time as he developed many of the working notes to The Visible and the Invisible, one can accurately guess he means the transition to an ontology of the flesh. The study of Nature as “the expression of an ontology” is differentiated here from the study of Nature as a transcendental principle (“a science that would discover a reality beneath the appearances”) and the study of the relationship between science and Nature as an epistemological problem (“Our concern is not for a theory of the knowledge of Nature”). Instead, Merleau-Ponty explains that the scientific findings that he references throughout the courses are meant to be understood as evocative of a pre-scientific Nature, a “brute or savage being,” a “sub-being” that is “architectonic.”

The notes summarize these distinctions as follows: “We have said that it is not a matter of a ‘theory of knowledge’ postulating an exhaustion of Being by the Being of science, nor a metascience or secret science, but rather a reading of science itself as a certain (reduced) ontology in the broader context of the relation with the most primordial Being.” Thus, the difference between physiochemistry and life, Merleau-Ponty notes, is that “between the ontic and the ontological,” “between the Ursprüngung of ‘foundations,’ which, as in mythical thinking, are always before the everyday and the empirical.”

Given our discussion of Toadvine and Foti above, it is important to note here just what is being demarcated by the ontic and ontological: in these introductory comments, the “ontic” refers to the everyday, experiential dimension, whereas the ontological refers to a pre-scientific,

785 Ibid., 204/265.
786 Ibid., 204/264 and 203/263.
787 Ibid., 206-207/268-269. There is a slight translation error on 207/269: The text reads in French, “Cet être pré-empirique architectonique…” and is rendered as “This pre-empirical architectonic,” where Merleau-Ponty is clearly referring to the “brute” or “savage” being of earlier passages, and thus should read: “This pre-empirical, architectonic being.”
788 Ibid., 206/267.
789 Ibid., 207/268.
primordial Being, which is here synonymous with life. It appears that, at least at this point in the third course, Nature is at the level of ontological primacy. In order to assess Foti’s observation that in the concept of Nature we find “the thought of an intrinsic in/visibility” that is definitive of the ontology of the flesh, it will be important to closely examine the role of Nature as Merleau-Ponty further clarifies the series “Physis-Logos-History.” We will ask: does Nature remain synonymous with primordial Being, or might Nature and Logos be two possible “leaves” of Being?

In what follows, we will examine several of the major themes presented in Merleau-Ponty’s “eight sketches” that comprise his notes for the third course on Nature. Due to their schematic nature, it is necessary to do some reorganizing and restructuring: there are considerable repetitions, incomplete thoughts, tangential moments, and in general, a clear sense that these notes are a work in progress. Nonetheless, we can determine a handful of thematic moments that are clearly significant in the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. We will thus explore the following: the human body as corporeity, the relationship between the human body and symbolism, “natural” Logos and “linguistic” Logos, and finally, the connection between Nature and Culture as an *Ineinander*. Each of these contributes to the broader sense, indicated by Foti and Toadvine, that the study of Nature strongly influences Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh.

As indicated above, Merleau-Ponty intends to explore the emergence of the human body in Nature in much of the same manner as he studied animality – i.e., by drawing philosophical insight from various scientific findings. Many of Merleau-Ponty’s comments thus serve to integrate the human body as “another corporeity” within the schema he has already developed for animality – namely, the relational intertwining between organism and world that defies the modern ontological boundaries inherited from Cartesian thought. Using evolutionary theory

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790 Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty notes that the everyday [Alltäglichkeit] “is always in the Interworld,” suggesting a further differentiation of the ontic and the ontological as the interworld, on the one hand, and life, on the other. Vallier’s translation incorrectly renders *L'Entremonde* as “the in-between world.”
allows Merleau-Ponty to further argue for a human-animal *kinship* rather than divide; in several “sketches” Merleau-Ponty cites the same passage from Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man*: “Man came silently into the world [*L’homme est entré sans bruit*].”\(^{791}\) In the seventh sketch, Merleau-Ponty uses three evolutionary findings from Chardin to justify this claim. First, he points to the impossibility of demarcating the moment at which the human with consciousness appeared, noting that “[w]e do not see him any more than we see the moment when consciousness appears in ontogenesis.”\(^{792}\) In other words, we are just as little capable of pointing to the first human form that had consciousness as we are capable of determining when consciousness appears in the development of any individual human child. Secondly, evidence suggests that there were few “transitional forms,” or early “attempts” at human beings that did not survive (i.e., did not evolve into *homo sapiens*), which means it is impossible to determine which form among them did or did not have consciousness. Finally, the morphological distinction between humans and other beings that approximate *homo sapiens* is “miniscule”: “It is a perfectly strict arrangement, but which ends up morphologically with only a few things that are new.”\(^{793}\) The difference between human and non-human animals rests on “little morphological novel[ies]”\(^{794}\) such as the fact that being bipedal meant that the hands took over many of the functions of the jaw, thus relaxing the muscles of the head, allowing the brain to enlarge. In sum, then, there is “no rupture” with the emergence of man: “There is a ‘metamorphosis,’ not a beginning from zero.”\(^{795}\)

From these findings, Merleau-Ponty argues that the relation between human and animal is not hierarchical, “but lateral, an overcoming that does not abolish kinship,” since the human body is “our *Ineinander* with Sensible Being and with other corporeities.”\(^{796}\) With animal corporeity, we have a specifically “strange kinship” in that they have “hidden ‘sides’” that do not denote

\(^{791}\) See for example *Nature*, 267/334.
consciousness, but Umwelt that we cannot access.\textsuperscript{797} Animal bodies are “not constituted by our thought, but lived as a variant of our corporeity, that is, as the appearance of behaviors in the field of our behavior.”\textsuperscript{798} In a sense, then, the appearance of animality as sensible Being differs from the traditional schema of horizonal knowledge that defines all phenomena – instead, it presents us with a version of the problem of other minds. The animal participates in both visible and invisible Being, which puts the distinction between nature, on the one hand, and logos, on the other, into question. Given this “strange kinship,” Merleau-Ponty notes, we can thus correct the notion of the “ascent” of humanity: “Animality and human being are given only together, within a whole of Being that would have been visible ahead of time in the first animal had there been someone to read it.”\textsuperscript{799}

Although Merleau-Ponty finally gives a definitive answer to the problem of animal consciousness here, many of these findings are simply extensions of the phenomena we have already seen in the second course. For example, the observation that animals participate in invisible Being – that they have an other “side” which we cannot access – has already been elaborated in some detail by virtue of Portmann’s description of instinctual behavior that becomes symbolic when some form of “inactuality has been placed in the instinct.”\textsuperscript{800} In other words, we have seen how the animal’s body can function as the root of symbolism. In the third course, however, Merleau-Ponty delves further into the relationship between corporeity and symbolism by differentiating between “a Logos of the natural esthetic world” and the Logos of language.\textsuperscript{801} In other words, we see two kinds of symbolism, one “natural” and one “conventional.” Merleau-Ponty explains in the third sketch that “[t]he first is a sort of natural teleology (our senses

\textsuperscript{797} Ibid., 271/339. This is an interesting development from Merleau-Ponty’s observations in the second course that our Umwelt “englobe” the animal Umwelt, which connotes a privileged access of the human to the animal but not vice-versa.
\textsuperscript{798} Ibid., 271/339.
\textsuperscript{799} Ibid., 271/339.
\textsuperscript{800} Ibid., 195/254.
\textsuperscript{801} Ibid., 212/274.
function by the institution of Nature); the second is truly instituted by us, manifest meaning.\(^{802}\)

To put this differently, there is symbolism as “instituted” by nature, and symbolism instituted by “us” – presumably, human institution.

But just as there might appear to be a revival of the nature/culture distinction, Merleau-Ponty also specifies that conventional symbolism is only possible due to our corporeity insofar as we are perceiving beings. He writes, “The origin of language is mythic; that is, there is always a language before language, which is perception.”\(^{803}\) As we have seen as early as *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body as perceptual is oriented in the world as to project a meaning onto it.

Merleau-Ponty explains this capacity in the course notes as follows: “An organ of the mobile senses (the eye, the hand) is already a language because it is an interrogation (movement) and a response (perception as *Erfühlung* of a project), speaking and understanding. It is a tacit language.”\(^{804}\) But rather than describe the emergence of language, and more broadly, “conventional” symbolism, in the language of intentionality, Merleau-Ponty here incorporates it into his new ontological vision. I quote him here at length:

> Thus, the ‘exact,’ ‘conventional’ symbolism, never reducible to the other, is nevertheless introduced into it by a hollow or a fold in Being which is not demanded by natural symbolism, but which recommences an investment of the same type. Here again, there is the introduction of a new dimensionality: that is, not facet contra facet, but in the milieu of natural Being, the hollowing out of a singular point where language appears and develops of itself if nothing is opposed to it, with its own productivity.\(^{805}\)

Importantly, we see here that the evolution of “conventional symbolism,” including but not restricted to language, is therefore not an “evolution” at all. Rather, like the “little morphological novelties” that differentiate human being from other natural being, conventional symbolism is a “new dimensionality” in Being, a productivity that results from a hollow or fold in Being that is “not demanded” by Nature. It is simply one of many possible manifestations of

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difference that is grounded in the structure of Being as non-coincidence. “Natural” logos and “conventional” logos are thus not in a hierarchical relation of origin-product, but a lateral Ineinander. Merleau-Ponty notes: “Language as a resumption of the logos of the sensible world in an other architectonic. And all historicity as well.”\footnote{Ibid., 219/282.} We can thus see, finally, what Merleau-Ponty meant by positing Nature and Logos as two “differentiations of wild Being” in his outline to The Visible and the Invisible, and even note that Nature and Logos might also be framed as Nature and Institution, or even Nature and Culture. To use this very traditional language, Nature and Culture can be thought of as two “leaves of Being” in Merleau-Ponty’s later work, which are irreducible to one another, yet bound by a structure of reversibility as Ineinander. Like the human and the animal, Nature and Culture are two variations of the expressivity inherent in wild Being, or what is later known as “flesh.”

Conclusion

The overarching purpose of this chapter has been to trace the concepts of Nature and Institution through Merleau-Ponty’s notes on courses given under the same name at the Collège de France between 1954 and 1960. In previous chapters, I have argued that the nature/culture distinction, now rendered as nature/institution, has been an underlying problematic for Merleau-Ponty insofar as it has contributed to reinforcing the very ontological structures that his phenomenology has sought to collapse. More specifically, in Merleau-Ponty’s early works, we have seen the division between nature and culture take place at a point of diversion between the human and the animal. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, although Merleau-Ponty identifies both a “natural” and “cultural” part of subjectivity, the human is perpetually aligned with culture, including but not limited to history, language, and privileged forms of expression (i.e., those
which “institute”). Aside from the ontological difference which arises from such a division between humanity and animality, there is also an implicit hierarchical relation – that, built upon our “animal” nature is our specifically human culture, which, given its privileged forms of expression, has an equally privileged access to Being (or, as Barbaras might say, “the being of the phenomenon”). In the introduction to this dissertation, I discussed how Merleau-Ponty’s early phenomenalological project thus poses a problem for feminist philosophers who are interested in his work for the recognition it gives to the material body as constitutive of personal identity. Briefly stated, the nature/culture distinction in Merleau-Ponty’s early accounts of subjectivity renders it such that identity is reduced to either biology or what has been called “social construction.” As I explained earlier, this problematic has not been taken up in any of the feminist literature on Merleau-Ponty, despite the real threat it poses to feminist phenomenological projects.

With these concerns in mind, this chapter has served to follow Merleau-Ponty’s own development with respect to the concepts of nature and institution, with special interest being paid to the relationship between the human and the animal. We thus began chronologically with the Institution course, and in the second section of this chapter, I described how institution comes to serve as a stand-in term for culture for the remainder of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical writings. Moreover, I underscored the significance of the distinction that Merleau-Ponty himself draws in the opening pages to his notes de cours on the concept of Nature – namely, that nature is defined as the “non-instituted.” As in earlier chapters, I carefully recounted Merleau-Ponty’s investigations in order to assess the kind of distinction that exists between nature and institution – in other words, it was necessary to once again question whether an ontological dualism continues to haunt Merleau-Ponty’s project.

In the institution course, I specifically highlighted the sense in which nature is further separated from culture in the way that artistic expression becomes a function of institution. This is
a radical change from the role that nature played in the production of art in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” which was already anticipated by virtue of the structuralist model of signs, as represented in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” as we saw in Chapter Four. But we also saw that “life” and “animality” participate in institution – indeed, that studying animal institution is necessary “in order to discover the true sense of human institution.”

We determined that animal institution was rooted in behavioral activity that cannot be reducible to biological composition, or external influence. Rather, animal institution occurs by virtue of a Prägung: an “imprint” that “fixes” the behavioral possibilities of the animal by determining the path that an animal’s given “organic outline” will take. Thus, given the biological features of the goose, it is possible for it to adopt its human caretaker as a potential mate, if it has been raised in absolute captivity and has experienced the Prägung which fixes its innate drive to sexually reproduce onto its human guardian. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the process of imprinting has situational and biological requirements necessary for it to “take.” For example, the human guardian must engage in some kind of goose-behavior (e.g. swimming, taken on a lowered posture, etc.).

Merleau-Ponty draws directly from the process of animal Prägung to develop human institution, explaining that “the human is animal instinct every ripe.” Using the institution of a feeling, Merleau-Ponty cites the correlation between “territory” and the successful institution of love, as in the oft-observed phenomenon of the “hometown girlfriend.” However, Merleau-Ponty also posits an “immense difference” between animal and human institution – namely, that the human makes a different use of institution which transforms it. Human institution creates a “symbolic matrix,” which, as developed in Adventures in the Dialectic, constitutes the “mediation of personal relationships” that Merleau-Ponty calls the “interworld.”

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807 *Institution and Passivity*, 16/49.
808 Ibid., 18/52.
809 Ibid., 18/52.
that creates a symbolic matrix is, as we have seen in the institution of a work of art, a “truth-to-be-made,” a fundamental openness and call for re-institution which makes it historical. Yet, as soon as Merleau-Ponty posits this difference, he insists that animal institution is “already open to a future,” but simply not “connected” to it. Thus, the animal is a kind of “weak human.” In concluding our investigation of the Institution course, I argued that Merleau-Ponty’s notes suggest a difference in degree rather than kind between the human and the animal. Moreover, collapsing this distinction has obvious repercussions for our understanding of the difference between nature and culture, since animality participates in institution, and has at least a “weak” connection to the symbolic matrix known as the “interworld.”

In the third section of this chapter, we turned finally to Merleau-Ponty’s notes from his course on Nature taught at the Collège de France between 1956 and 1960. Following a historical introduction to the problem of the concept of Nature for modern thought, Merleau-Ponty’s methodology in the second and third courses is to use recent theoretical biology to understand the phenomena of Nature and to draw philosophical conclusions from it. In the second course, dedicated specifically to the concept of animality, we saw the development and expansion of Merleau-Ponty’s initial observations that animal behavior can become symbolic activity, setting the precedent for “a beginning of culture” in animals. And, as we discussed at length, the biological models developed with respect to animality are extended to the human body as “another corporeity” in the third course. There, Merleau-Ponty also specifically turns to evolutionary theory to argue that “man came silently into the world,” without rupture. Instead, the human-animal difference is predicated upon “tiny morphological novelties,” such that it is impossible to say when and how the human with consciousness appeared. Finally, we saw Merleau-Ponty specifically address the question of human-animal difference by calling their relationship an Ineinander, which, as discussed by Foti and Toadvine, is a model for the ontology

of the “flesh” in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Humanity and animality have a “strange kinship” such that they are irreducible to one another, yet bound by a structure of reversibility. They are reversible, moreover, because they are two variations of the emergence of Being. In other words, humanity and animality are “two leaves of Being.”

As we have already seen in Foti’s comments, the implications of the Nature courses for Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology are significant. As Foti noted, in the concept of Nature we find “the thought of an intrinsic in/visibility” which is not *ontic* but *ontological*. In other words, the *Ineinander* of humanity and animality – and we might further observe, nature and culture – signals a deepening of ontological structure to a more primordial Being, beneath the level of appearances. To state this differently, the dichotomy with which we have been concerned throughout this project (nature/culture) becomes a matter of ontic, rather than ontological determinations. In the following and final chapter to this dissertation, I will discuss the repercussions of such an ontological shift, not only within Merleau-Ponty’s broader philosophical project (as seen especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*), but for philosophical interests beyond the chiasm. I will return, in brief, to discuss how feminist theories of sexual difference might benefit from employing a Merleau-Pontyan ontology, as developed in these final works, to imagine embodiment as restricted to neither cultural nor natural determinations. If all of life is synonymous with the self-reflexivity of Being, then we have an ontological model that is able to account for the variability of embodied identities without having to reduce that variability to a form of substantialist thinking.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

To conclude this project, I will first briefly recount its major findings, showing the evolution of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in regards to nature and culture, and how this influences the development of his final ontological project. Capturing this evolution will then allow me to make some broad comments about the place of Merleau-Ponty’s later thought in feminist philosophy, and to finally return to the critique proposed by Luce Irigaray that posits the flesh as a mimetic structure which relies on the maternal but does not allow for sexual difference. I will argue that the flesh, understood in its historical situation as a product of Merleau-Ponty’s investigations of nature and institution, provides a rich and fruitful model for understanding both sexual difference in Irigaray’s sense, and non-normatively gendered bodies, as suggested by Gayle Salamon and Lisa Guenther. Following the human-animal *Ineinander*, I offer a new reading of sexual difference that allows for multiplicity as the product of a “differentiation of wild Being” based on degree rather than kind.

Project Findings

I began my investigation of nature and culture in Merleau-Ponty’s corpus by first defining the specifics of his phenomenology and its method of “radical reflection,” which served as the foundation for his revolutionary discovery that subjectivity is necessarily an embodied “I can.” I then tracked the development of this theory of embodied subjectivity throughout the first two parts of *Phenomenology of Perception*, highlighting especially how a division between nature and culture emerges from the earliest stages of this project, and sets the precedent for a pattern that continues throughout the texts that I examined – namely, that Merleau-Ponty tends to both
establish a difference between nature and culture, reflected in a difference between animality and humanity, but attempts to collapse this distinction in nearly the same breath. The figure of the animal both establishes and disrupts the nature/culture divide throughout these texts. Thus we see one dichotomy in Merleau-Ponty’s work that continues to trouble him; whereas he is outspoken against the other inherited dualisms of modern thought, nature and culture function as an unthematized division that is both established and troubled at nearly every mention of their existence in his project. In *Phenomenology of Perception* I showed how Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the natural and cultural worlds, similarly dividing between two different forms of “self” in humanity (the natural and personal selves). In that text, human subjectivity was specifically defined by its ability to *transcend* nature and establish culture through privileged forms of expression, making “man [sic]… an historical idea, not a natural species.” But at the same time, Merleau-Ponty hesitatingly acknowledges the fact that animals seem to “express” in that they project meanings onto their environments that are not originally given. There is thus a sense in which animals “transcend nature,” blurring the line between nature and culture, and man and animal, at the same time that this line is being drawn and reinforced – only speech, as a privileged form of expression, is capable of establishing a “cultural world.”

As I showed in Chapter Four, this nuanced problematic continues to trouble Merleau-Ponty as he further develops his theory of expression, as shown in the essays “Cézanne’s Doubt” and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence.” Following the progression of his thought in these two essays allowed us to see that as Merleau-Ponty clarifies the role and power of expression, he continues to return to the concept of nature and begins to thematize its place as part of a new ontology. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty begins to use expression to inform perception, rather than vice-versa. Barbaras explains, “While in his first period the analysis of language is carried out according to a parallel with perception, the development of the analysis

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812 *Phenomenology* 174/209.
and the discovery of historicity which emerges from it leads Merleau-Ponty, little by little, to question the categories which formerly presided over the description of the perceived.” This movement fuels Merleau-Ponty's shift to his final philosophical methodology, “ontological interrogation.” As part of this new methodology, Merleau-Ponty reframes expression as “institution,” shifting the focus of art, language, and other use of “signs” away from nature and the body and toward a structuralist model that grants a separate ontological existence to expression by virtue of its historical and intersubjective character. Thus, whereas Cézanne was said to paint from nature, much like the description of embodied expression as found in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the production of the artwork from “Indirect Language” is a primarily historical act that answers the call, the open question, of the *Urstiftung* of painting.

To this end, we saw Merleau-Ponty show how a Vermeer is not a Vermeer because it was painted by the flesh-and-blood Vermeer, but because it fit into the tradition (the institution) of Vermeers.

Interestingly, within this development, Merleau-Ponty once again differentiates between speech as a privileged form of institution from other kinds of expression: just as speech was the only way of creating a cultural world in *Phenomenology of Perception*, here speech is the only form of institution that “twists back upon itself, takes itself up, and gets possession of itself once more,” since we can speak about speech. Painting, on the other hand, goes less towards “true creation” because it does not carry its past with it; works of art “rival” their past rather than substitute a new, equivalent sense for it, which allows us to understand the past. Like the Hegelian dialectic, the historical movement of language is such that it preserves its past even in overcoming it – which leads Merleau-Ponty to argue that language brings us closer to truth. In the final pages of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” we saw that the same difference between painting and language was spelled out again as the difference between “primordial,”

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813 Barbaras, 60.
814 “Indirect Language,” 279.
natural expression, and cultural expression. In brief, when nature expresses, it does so only as an inauguring, or originary (Ur-) institution: it can begin a new trajectory, but it does not carry the past with it. In this way, nature is outside of history. Merleau-Ponty speaks of painting as a kind of “animal ‘intelligence’” that produces “a new landscape for action”; like animal expression, the painting only replaces an old sense with a new one. The specifically human form of expression, language, has precedence over painting, and thus the animal, in its historicity. In sum, we saw that in the development of Merleau-Ponty’s new theory of expression, as traced between “Cézanne’s Doubt” and “Indirect Language,” the nature/culture divide in Merleau-Ponty, and correlatively, the human/animal divide, re-emerged once again, this time in more clearly hierarchical and value-laden terms. Even as Merleau-Ponty grants a form of institution to nature, and thus animality, it is separate from human institution with its privileged access to history and truth.

Chapter Five of this dissertation takes up the point in Merleau-Ponty’s thought wherein he finally thematizes nature and culture (or rather, institution) as proper objects of study and seeks to clarify their relationship. Through the notes from his lecture courses on these subjects, I continued to trace these concepts and their connection to the human/animal divide. As in earlier works, the figure of the animal disrupts the difference between nature and culture, but Merleau-Ponty finally is able to put the dualism to rest in his last course on nature, where he establishes the relationship between animality and humanity as a lateral kinship, which he terms an Ineinander. The beginnings of this development occur by virtue of Merleau-Ponty granting animality, and life more generally, a form of institution, which is where I turned first. Using institution, Merleau-Ponty makes animality historical, negating his earlier claims that separated humanity from animality by virtue of its access to history.\footnote{Recall, for example, the claim in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} that “man [sic] is a historical idea… and not a natural species.” \textit{Phenomenology} 174/209.} In other words, animal institution shows us that the historical is not strictly differentiated from the natural. Moreover, we saw
Merleau-Ponty begin to emphasize the similarities, rather than the differences, between human and animal institution, as exemplified by the sense in which the “territory” similarly affects whether an institution can be established for both humans and animals. “The human,” Merleau-Ponty writes, “is animal instinct ever ripe.”

However, Merleau-Ponty also repeats his old pattern of both collapsing, and then re-establishing a division between the human and the animal, explaining that there is still an “immense difference” between human and animal institution: “not that the human does not have animal institution, but because of the use that he makes of it and that usage transforms institution genuinely.” Animal institution as Prägung is irreversible: the goose will no longer seek out the gander, just as the paw cannot change its directional orientation once it has been determined. There is no “future” of the institution for the animal, other than the repetition of behavior. This is not the case for humans, where “the past becom[es] a symbolic matrix.”

Even as Merleau-Ponty gives animality a form of institution and a connection to historicity – the two primary differentiating factors between the animal and the human from his early works – he still denies animality a place in the “interworld” of symbolism. Animal institution is “already open to a future,” but simply not “connected” to it. This makes the animal “an image of the human who does not understand, [a] weak human.” Despite the “immense difference” between animal and human institution, then, we see here that Merleau-Ponty is beginning to think of the human-animal divide as a difference in degree, rather than kind. This pattern continues throughout the courses on nature, where I turned next.

In the remainder of Chapter Five, I focused specifically on the second and third nature courses, where Merleau-Ponty draws from recent biological findings, varying from embryology,

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816 *Institution and Passivity*, 18/52.
to evolutionary theory, to theoretical accounts of animal behavior, to further understand the phenomena of Nature. The second course, dedicated specifically to animality, resumes many of the themes developed in the course on Institution. It especially highlights the concept of animal Prägung as developed by Jakob von Uexküll, and then integrated into a broader theory of instinct by Konrad Lorenz, whose observation that animal instinct can pass into symbolic action leads Merleau-Ponty to conclude that “we can speak in a valid way of an animal culture.”

Throughout Merleau-Ponty’s investigations in this course, he is interested in the relationship between an animal and its “world” – or, using Uexküll’s term, Umwelt. His interest is in finding an alternative to the models of Nature inherited from the legacy of Cartesuan thought, which tend to either adopt a mechanistic or finalistic understanding of the functioning of Nature as a whole, and its individual “products.” From E.S. Russell's observations of the “oriented character” of organic activities, Merleau-Ponty sees a “vital activity of a third order” which guides the behavior of the animal down to the cellular level. He describes it as “a theme, a style, all these expressions seeking to express not a participation in a transcendental existence, but in a structure of the whole.” Anticipating the ontology of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty argues that “the reality of the organism supposes a non- Parmenidian Being, a form that escapes from the dilemma of being and nonbeing.”

From Hardouin, Merleau-Ponty finds further cause to attribute a “style” to organic life, once again negotiating a third way beyond finalism and mechanism. Hardouin's studies focus on animal “mimicry”: ways in which animals resemble their surroundings and each other. Following Hardouin, Merleau-Ponty argues that “life is not uniquely submitted to the principle of utility,” since it seems that in cases where certain beings do not mimic their environment or other

821 Ibid., 182/238.
822 Ibid., 183/239.
823 Ibid., 183/239.
824 Ibid., 184/240.
organisms, there is nonetheless an orientation to their design. Similarly, Portmann’s Die Tiergestalt posits an inherent expressivity in Nature insofar as he demonstrates that animal appearance cannot be reduced to an intentional structure, but rather that the perceptual relation is in the form of the animal, prior to its full development. In the morphology of the animal, there is a “perceptual relation before perception properly so-called.” Merleau-Ponty says accordingly that “the ensemble of marks contains a reference to a possible eye”; animal appearance reveals a reversibility inherent in animality between the visible and the invisible. Merleau-Ponty concludes that “Life is not 'the ensemble of functions that resist death,' to use Bichat's expression, but rather is a power [une puissance] to invent the visible.” As exemplified in this comment, we saw Merleau-Ponty consider whether Nature itself is a primordial ontological category underlying the expressivity of life throughout the second course on nature. The study of animality, one might say, was not an end in itself, but used to clarify the concept of Nature. As we turned to the third course, I showed how Merleau-Ponty abandons the sense of Nature as primordial, and instead posits it as one “leaf of Being,” along with institution. What we find in following the development of Merleau-Ponty's thought is that he eventually locates something more primary than nature, something from which both nature and culture are born: flesh. This move ultimately erases the hierarchical relationship between nature and culture that we saw in his earlier works, and instead places nature and culture on a lateral plane as two differentiations of wild Being.

Leading to this final shift in Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the concepts of nature and institution, I turned to the third course of the nature series, where Merleau-Ponty seeks to clarify


826 See Fóti, 84: “Merleau-Ponty speaks... of an ‘indivision’ (that is, nondivision) between an animal and its surroundings and notes once again that the same indivision also underlies the formation of a sense organ which is no less ‘miraculous’ than mimicry. Indivision pertains, of course, to the ontological structure of flesh that he elaborates in The Visible and the Invisible; and his reflections on animal form and mimicry serve to concretize it.”

the emergence of humanity within Nature as “another corporeity.” Citing Chardin’s observation that “man came silently into the world,” Merleau-Ponty argues that the point of the traditional division between man and animal – that is, consciousness – is impossible to locate. Rather, the difference between human and non-human animals rests on “little morphological novelties” of evolution, such as the fact that being bipedal meant that the hands took over many of the functions of the jaw, thus relaxing the muscles of the head, allowing the brain to enlarge. In sum, then, there is “no rupture” with the emergence of man: “There is a ‘metamorphosis,’ not a beginning from zero.”

From these findings, Merleau-Ponty argues that the relation between human and animal is not hierarchical, “but lateral, an overcoming that does not abolish kinship,” since the human body is “our Ineinander with Sensible Being and with other corporeities.”

With animal corporeity, we have a specifically “strange kinship” in that they have “hidden ‘sides’” that do not denote consciousness, but Umwelten that we cannot access. Animal bodies are “not constituted by our thought, but lived as a variant of our corporeity, that is, as the appearance of behaviors in the field of our behavior.”

We also saw in the third course that Merleau-Ponty returned again to the problem of expression as possibly ontologically separating humanity and animality. There, too, we found that the evolution of “conventional symbolism,” including but not restricted to language, did not emerge as a break from natural symbolism. Rather, like the “little morphological novelties” that differentiate human being from other animal being, conventional symbolism is a “new dimensionality” in Being, a productivity that results from a hollow or fold in Being that is “not demanded” by Nature. It is simply one of many possible manifestations of difference that is

828 Ibid., 272/339.
829 Ibid., 267-268/334-335.
830 Ibid., 271/339.
831 Ibid., 271/339. This is an interesting development from Merleau-Ponty’s observations in the second course that our Umwelten “englobe” the animal Umwelten, which connotes a privileged access of the human to the animal but not vice-versa.
832 Ibid., 271/339.
grounded in the structure of Being as non-coincidence. “Natural” logos and “conventional” logos are thus not in a hierarchical relation of origin-product, but a lateral *Ineinander*. Merleau-Ponty notes: “Language as a resumption of the logos of the sensible world in an other architectonic. And all historicity as well.” Thus, when Merleau-Ponty posits Nature and Logos as two “differentiations of wild Being” in his outline to *The Visible and the Invisible*, this means they are two “leaves of Being” which are irreducible to one another, yet bound by a structure of reversibility as *Ineinander*. Like the human and the animal, they are two variations of the expressivity inherent in wild Being, or what is later known as “flesh.”

**Flesh and the Impasses of Feminist Theory**

I would like to now finally return to the concern with which I initially framed this project – namely, that the nature/culture distinction has proven an impasse, a “bad dialectic” in the Hegelian sense, that has brought feminist theorization of sexual difference to a standstill. In the Introduction to this dissertation, I highlighted three areas in which this has proven especially problematic: first, in feminist attempts to rethink the material; second, in the lack of coherency in the political projects and theoretical underpinnings for third-wave feminism; and finally, in the debates which frame cultural and theoretical understandings of transgender and other non-normative gender identity. I argued that each of these iterations of the nature/culture dialectic could benefit from a metaphysical model that posited something more originary than both, from which each emerge, and which precludes the possibility of reducing one to the other. I then sought to show throughout this project that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh offers one such alternative.

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I also discussed some of the limitations that can be found in how Merleau-Ponty has historically been appropriated for feminist projects, which arise primarily due to the fact that these works tend to only focus on *Phenomenology of Perception*’s positive contribution of bringing the body into subjectivity, or on the potential exclusion of sexual difference in *The Visible and the Invisible*, as famously articulated by Irigaray. Based on the findings of this project, we can now state these limitations more clearly: Feminist projects which only use *Phenomenology of Perception* are adopting a model of embodiment that carries within it a division between nature and culture such that, if pressed to look deeper into the metaphysics underlying their accounts, they would have to arbitrarily divide aspects of identity and sexual difference into regions of the "pre-personal," "natural" body and the "personal," cultural self - the very problematic that many seek to avoid. As Shannon Sullivan has argued, the pre-personal natural self of this early text is in fact bereft of any particularity “such as that provided by gender, sexuality, class, race, age, culture, nationality, individual experiences and upbringing, and more,” making the “intersubjective dialogue” of *Phenomenology* “a solipsistic subject’s monologue that includes an elimination of others in its very ‘communication’ with them.”

834 The model of intentionality built into the natural self is thus coded by domination; Merleau-Ponty writes that our bodies give us intersubjectivity because they can “grasp the corporeal intentions of another,” but, as Sullivan argues, I often only see my own intentions in another’s behavior.

835 Using Merleau-Ponty’s early characterization of the body-subject’s two “selves” – one natural, and one personal/cultural – thus poses significant problems for feminist projects. Broadly, we can ask: if the anonymous, natural self is without particularity, from where does meaningful difference come? Alternatively, if difference and sexual difference are cultural, then Merleau-Ponty’s work

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835 Sullivan, 5.
fails to account for what feminists tend to praise it for – namely, the multiplicity of experiences of one’s lived body at the root of human subjectivity.

However, even for those who think the anonymous subject is not entirely neutral and that there is space for some difference in the natural self, there is still an issue in that one must reckon with understanding what realm various categories of identity fall into, leading again to the familiar impasse of the relationship between nature, culture, and sexual difference. It seems that one is left attributing all difference to culture and ignoring the materiality of the bodily difference, or reaffirming a "natural" foundation of sexual difference, as figures such as Grosz and, ironically, Irigaray suggest in other works. But this is to exclude the multiplicity of lived genders that exist in the world, and, following Gayle Salamon’s observations, to set up sexual difference against the transgender "Other," reiterating not only a metaphysical violence but also supporting the literal violence that is done to those who live out this othering in their daily experiences.

Thus, my belief is that if Merleau-Ponty is to help us understand sexual difference, where sexual difference is rendered as a multiplicity and not a binary, we must turn to the point at which he gives us a way of overcoming the nature/culture distinction by showing their mutual inherence in a more primary ontological category. This project has served to trace this distinction and has demonstrated that Merleau-Ponty is finally able to resolve this often-neglected dualism in his philosophy when he reconfigures the dualism as an Ineinander within the ontological structure of the flesh. Nature and culture become necessarily intertwined, just as the human and the animal are in the notes de cours. Flesh is therefore the precondition not just for self and world, but for all the variations of dichotomous thinking, including nature and culture – and, as I will argue shortly, differentiations of gender identity. If the human-animal Ineinander serves as inspiration for this concept – and is one “product” of it – then we know too that these “differentiations of wild Being” are transposable, but not strictly mimetic.
Understanding flesh in its historical situation and as an extension of Merleau-Ponty’s working through the nature/culture distinction allows us to understand this ontology as one that does not exclude alterity, but in fact produces it. To begin with, in the folding of the flesh back on itself, there is a non-coincidence, and thus difference emerges by the very structuring of the “leaves” of Being. As I have shown via Merleau-Ponty’s Nature courses, this is a “lateral” difference, a “strange kinship,” not only between human and animal, but all other categories subject to dichotomous thinking – interiority and exteriority, self and other, mind and body. Neither side of the criss-crossing has ontological privilege as “foundational,” nor can we simply deduce one from the other. Rather, they are given, and must be thought, together. Just as in the touching-touched relationship, it is impossible to say which hand is taking up the subject position and which the object, which hand is touching and which is touched, or in the criss-crossing of vision, where seeing ends and being seen begins; we similarly cannot ontologically distinguish between nature and culture. And just as seeing is only possible as bound up with the visible (that is to say, a being that sees is embodied and therefore visible), the condition for the possibility of nature requires its correlate in the structure of reversibility, and vice-versa.

Some may say that, despite these observations, the flesh is still limited in its possibilities by virtue of difference that is produced by the structure of reversibility, a kind of autoproduction of the Same. This, I believe, is where the nature/culture distinction makes the most fruitful and important contribution to understanding the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. As we saw in the third course on Nature, Merleau-Ponty argues for the human-animal **Ineinander** due to their shared and inherent expressivity, culture, historicity, and embodiment. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty reasons that we cannot demarcate the point at which consciousness emerges, or where culture begins, or any of the means by which we have historically drawn divisions between humanity and animality. Nature and Logos, in the end, are two leaves of Being. But importantly, Merleau-Ponty never figures them as strictly reciprocal, as mirror images which perfectly map onto one another –
which would be what Irigaray calls a “sameness” that “has been assimilated before any perception of difference.” Rather, we see that the human and animal are both historical, but that historicity is manifest in various ways – as with their cultural character, their embodiment, their communication, and so forth. Merleau-Ponty extends the same unfolding of Being to each “leaf” of its expression, but recognizes difference therein. Nature and culture, the visible and the invisible, must be thought together, but cannot be substituted for one another.

We can now take this model as the basis for a new understanding of sexual difference. Like the human and the animal, we can think of the masculine and the feminine as two “differentiations of wild Being,” or to use Guenther’s reading, “mutual divergences” of the flesh. Sexual difference can be thought as a relation of “lateral kinship” whose expression is manifest as variations across the realm of possible iterations of gender. This distribution of sexuation can thus negate concerns about the ontological origin being determinatively gendered. Flesh is, instead, the condition for the possibility of a multiplicity of sexual difference. One conceptual schema which can be helpful in envisioning this new sense of sexual difference can be found in the Kinsey scale, derived from the famous “Kinsey reports” that were published in two separate volumes, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Kinsey’s findings reported that sexuality tends to fall somewhere between two extremes of strictly heterosexual or homosexual desire. Similarly, we might envision sexual difference modeled on a scale ranging from “absolute” masculinity and “absolute” femininity, where any one iteration falls in between these two extremes – demonstrating, like the human-animal *Ineinander*, the fabrication inherent in any line that serves to separate them. Instead, we would see that some iterations of sexuate identity fall close to the center of androgyny, where others more clearly identify with the masculine or the feminine. This model has the benefit of preserving

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836 Irigaray, 88.
difference without positing an ontological dualism in doing so. Moreover, it does not require that we refer to the origin of this difference as either “natural” or “cultural,” since these, too, can be placed on a scale of differentiation, as Merleau-Ponty has shown in understanding the relation between the human and the animal: some animals, like the ape, closely approximate human être-au-monde, while others, like the axoltl, fall closer to the other extreme.

My sense is that this new model for sexual difference resonates with, rather than challenges, the beginnings of feminist engagements with Merleau-Ponty that specifically concern themselves with returning to his work for a new means of understanding sexual difference beyond the gender binary. The main differences between this work and that of Lisa Guenther, or even Gayle Salamon, lie in the fact that we each have a different entry point into this discussion. Where Salamon suggests the structure of flesh resonates with transgender narratives, and Guenther demonstrates the possibility of a multiplicity of sexual difference via the materialization of bodies that “become meaningful in mutual divergence from one another,” my approach has been to chart Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of nature and culture in order to locate the moment in his work at which this distinction begins to be productive, rather than problematic, for understanding sexual difference.

Therefore, we find here a means of alleviating the concerns raised by Irigaray regarding the reversibility of the flesh. Indeed, once we open the door to a model of sexual difference that transcends the binary of male and female, we see, too, that the lives of non-normatively gendered persons already challenge the very foundations of Irigaray’s critique, as the maternal-feminin is only one possibility for coding an “origin.” We see now that the maternal can equally be the paternal, as with the post-transition FTM who chooses to be the birth parent of his child, or the MTF who “fathers” her children, along with many, many variations in between. Just as Merleau-Ponty insists to the very end on a return to experience and a continued “radical reflection” on the phenomena of being-in-the-world, feminist philosophy similarly has an obligation to legitimize
and theorize these real and incarnate variations of sexual difference which are currently “othered” by the canon. My hope is that this project has provided one means of doing so.
Bibliography


**VITA**

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**Education**

- The Pennsylvania State University: PhD, Philosophy, August 2013  
- University of Memphis: MA, Philosophy, August 2008  
- Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg: Fulbright Full Research Grant, 2005-2006  
- Mount Holyoke College: BA, Philosophy, *summa cum laude*, May 2005

**Areas of Specialization**

- 19th and 20th Century Continental Philosophy  
- Feminist Philosophy

**Areas of Competence**

- Social and Political Philosophy  
- Moral Philosophy  
- Environmental Ethics

**Selected Publications and Presentations**


**Teaching Experience**

**Full Responsibility**

- PHIL 103W: Introduction to Ethics, Fall 2012 (Online)  
- PHIL 012: Symbolic Logic, Summer 2011  
- PHIL 013: Philosophy, Nature and the Environment (Environmental Ethics), Spring 2011  
- PHIL 014: Philosophy of Love and Sex, Fall 2010 and Spring 2012 (Online)  
- PHIL 001: Basic Problems of Philosophy, Spring 2010

**Courses Assisted**

- Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute (PIKSI), Summer 2011  
- PHIL 108: Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy, Fall 2009  
- PHIL 1102: Values and the Modern World (Introduction to Ethics), Spring 2007, Fall 2006