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Embodied Existence in Language:

A Study of Experience through Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur

by

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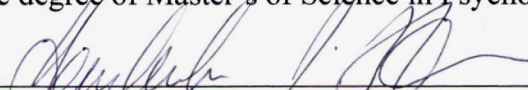
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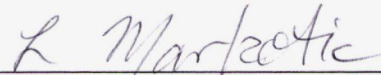
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Embodied Existence in Language: A Study of Experience through Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur" submitted by Basia Daria Ellis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of Science in Psychology.



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## ABSTRACT

The current study sought to develop an understanding of experience by examining the works of two prominent, contemporary philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur. Both of these thinkers offer phenomenological accounts of experience, each of which focuses on different existential dimensions: Merleau-Ponty focuses on pre-reflective, embodied processes, whereas Ricoeur describes reflective experience in language. After studying each account in turn, I examine how they can together contribute to a comprehensive theory. I conclude that a single theory cannot be constructed from both accounts; however, I contend that it is meaningful to read the two philosophies side by side, especially if precedence is given to Merleau-Ponty's framework. In my final discussion, I consider the implications of such a reading for the discipline of psychology.

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## DEDICATION

In memory of my grandmother, Babcia Kasia.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### Texts by Maurice Merleau-Ponty

- SB*            *The Structure of Behavior* (1942/1963)  
*PP*            *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962)  
*SNS*          *Sense and Non-Sense.* (1948/1964)  
*S*              *Signs* (1960/1964)  
*VI*            *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964/1968)

### Texts by Paul Ricoeur

- OA*            *Oneself as Another* (1990/1992)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### *Goal of the Project: General*

The purpose of my project was to develop an understanding of experience by examining the works of two prominent phenomenological philosophers, namely Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur. Both of these thinkers have made significant contributions to existing accounts of experience, and in this they merit consideration in any study concerned with this question. What is more, both philosophers share similar, contemporary phenomenological approaches, which makes their theories especially comparable. Specifically, they propose theories of experience that explain how we are at once rooted in a natural and cultural world; and on the other hand, how we can transcend our contexts in order to navigate our lives freely.

But while both thinkers share such an underlying understanding, each expands on a different dimension of experience, making it all the more meaningful to study their views concurrently. Merleau-Ponty develops an elaborate theory of perceptual experience, whose explication gives greatest attention to the pre-reflective role of the body in the unfolding of experience. Ricoeur, on the other hand, is particularly concerned with experience in language, which he explains through a detailed, hermeneutical analysis of the self. Taken together, these philosophers provide distinct theories of experience that despite their differences are comparable by virtue of their shared phenomenological approach. The goal of my project was to examine how the two thinkers could be understood in light of one another in order to then contribute to a broader account of what is involved in experience.

In what follows, I first explain why I decided to centre my studies on contemporary phenomenology and what motivated me to read Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur in particular. Based on these considerations I delineate my research question more specifically and provide a basic outline of my research project.

### *Why Phenomenology and not Psychology*

It is of note that my studies actually began within the psychological and not the philosophical literature, since my turn to the latter discloses critical shortfalls in the psychological field. Specifically, I began my research with an interest in the question of self, seeking to understand how contemporary thinkers explained what the self was and

what it was like to have a self. The psychological literature seemed to be a logical starting point, as the discipline is defined by its concern with human life precisely; however, I soon learned that psychologists were not interested in constructing comprehensive theories on the nature of self. Indeed, academics of the early 20th century had established the discipline with explicit intentions to *avoid* such inquiries, for such existential questions bring about metaphysical and ontological quandaries that are not readily answerable within scientific confines. Mary Calkins (1908) described this consensus perhaps most explicitly when she declared: “The psychologist as such accepts the self as object of introspection, raising no questions about its ultimate reality, whereas the philosopher must attempt to settle the question of the place of the self in the whole scheme of things” (p. 272).

In seeking to avoid greater ontological and metaphysical issues and to establish their discipline as a science, early psychologists deliberately adopted a functionalist language (see for instance, Hall’s [1898] espousal), which came to dominate the discipline through to the present. Stam (2006) explains that such a language allows for the maintenance of abstract variables without demanding that their ontological status be revealed. Notably, Stam refers to “functionalism in its broadest sense, namely the claim that functions are heuristically deployed with the promissory note that a reductive account will be available eventually, if only in the long run” (p.103). Within such a framework, countless mental terms and processes can be concocted so long as they are argued to functionally refer to sets of empirically measurable properties; in actuality, these abstract notions are supported either by an undeclared dualism or by the promise of a future reductive explanation. In this way, a functionalist psychology can focus on more limited questions and appear productive without having to ask how its research fits within a greater understanding of the nature of experience. (Stam, 2006)

Importantly, within a functionalist framework, the self in psychology has become a vague and diffused concept, employed as a mere predicate for self-related variables and not questioned about its place within a broader theory of experience (Stam, 2006).<sup>1</sup> With this

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<sup>1</sup> Consider such variables as self-esteem, self-confidence, or self-enhancement; these only gain meaning within particular research frameworks, which, for the most part, are incommensurable with one another.

being the case, I turned to philosophical phenomenology for a more comprehensive understanding of experience.

The phenomenological tradition has been generally attributed to the work of Edmund Husserl, as he founded the phenomenological method and provided it with its first and most extensive defense (Smith, 2009). Through time, his method has undergone a number of important revisions, but what remains fundamental to all phenomenological approaches is their basic interest in the study of *phenomena*, or the appearances of things as they disclose themselves in experience, as well as the related articulation of their meanings. This is made possible through the phenomenological reduction, which involves a deliberate bracketing of the ‘natural attitude’ that takes the common dualities of mind and body, (bodily) self and (bodily) others, or subject and object as ontologically primary, and examining all of experience as a single gestalt (i.e., wherein such dualities are allotted secondary status). (Smith, 2009)

Since the central goal of phenomenological inquiry is to understand the unfolding of experience, this approach—and not the approach of psychological science—fit directly with my research question. Thus I turned away from the psychological literature and began research in phenomenological philosophy. I chose to study Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur’s phenomenologies in particular for reasons that I outline below.<sup>2</sup>

### *Why Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur*

#### *Shared Phenomenological Understanding*

The first motivation for my concurrent study of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur stemmed from the fact that both philosophers provide prominent phenomenological theories of experience in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. The significance of this is not merely that their accounts have become influential in contemporary academic circles, but what is also important is that both view experience as necessarily embedded in natural and cultural contexts; accordingly, both philosophers explain how it is that experience

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas my studies of Ricoeur focus on his *Oneself as Another*, my studies of Merleau-Ponty spread across a number of his works, in particular *Phenomenology of Perception*, *Sense and Non-Sense*, *Signs*, and the posthumously published notes, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Since I have only read *Phenomenology of Perception* in French, to remain consistent I cite only the English version of this and all other works. Further, given the frequency of my referrals to both Merleau-Ponty’s and Ricoeur’s texts, I cite them according to the ‘List of Abbreviations’ provided above.

unfolds on the one hand according to the unique intentions of each subject, but how it is at the same time necessarily structured by a natural and cultural world. What is more, both Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur explain experience as unfolding through an ongoing act of *transcendence*, wherein a subject *of the world* (i.e., one who is constituted by structures that precede his or her existence) projects unique meanings onto the world and in this creates for him or herself a life; the projected meanings are in turn always *indebted to* and *made possible by* the lived contexts in which the subject is found. The basic aim for each philosopher is to describe how this process takes place.

#### *Different Focuses*

My second motive for the studying Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur was that each of the philosophers places special emphasis on a particular dimension of experience that is barely considered by the other. Merleau-Ponty focuses on *perception* and from this develops his theory through analyses of how perceptual phenomena appear uniquely for each of us without our conscious intervention. Ricoeur on the other hand is interested primarily in *language*, proposing an account of experience based on hermeneutical analyses of the self. Thus the two thinkers take up different starting points from which they each develop a distinct explanation for what is involved in experience: Merleau-Ponty argues that experience takes shape through the work of a *lived body* whose operations take place without any deliberate conscious control; whereas Ricoeur argues that experience takes shape with others in language.

These differences later become essential within my comparative analyses of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, as they contain each philosopher's special contributions. From here on, I discuss these unique focuses in terms of *pre-reflective* and *reflective* dimensions. Specifically, I consider Merleau-Ponty to be especially concerned with the *pre-reflective*, embodied dimensions of experience, which can be said to structure or configure the nature of conscious experience but in this do not directly engage consciousness. I regard Ricoeur as focused on the *reflective* dimensions of experience, which is to say, on conscious experience as it unfolds in language. Given each philosopher's unique focus but their comparable phenomenological approaches, I considered it meaningful to study their views concurrently in order to gain a broader understanding of experience.

In an important sense, the philosophers' distinct foci may be seen to mirror the general change in the French philosophical scene throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas Merleau-Ponty's works span from the 1930's to the early 1960's, Ricoeur's philosophy of self in *Oneself as Another* is written and translated into English in the 1990's. The major difference between these periods is that by the time Ricoeur writes his theory, philosophy has made its significant shift to language. That is, by the late 20th century, most philosophers acknowledge that language plays a fundamental role in shaping all aspects of human existence and therefore any theory of experience must take seriously this circumstance. Within such a linguistic context, the role of language must be given primacy, for no experience can escape its being structured by linguistic possibilities. Thus we see in Ricoeur a phenomenological response constructed in light of later philosophical concerns with language.

However, it remains unknown whether Merleau-Ponty would have in fact turned toward a philosophy of language had he lived a longer life. Even as he grows concerned with the constitutive role of language in experience, he does not abandon his focus on the pre-reflective processes, which occur *before* language as it were. Instead, having explicitly acknowledged that all experience occurs in language, Merleau-Ponty seeks to determine the nature of those embodied structures that allow for linguistic experience. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty spends most of his career writing within the circle of such thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, for whom the question of language poses no serious problem. Whether Merleau-Ponty would have himself turned to a philosophy of language had he lived longer thus remains unknown.

In light of these considerations, it is best to consider the distinct focuses of Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty to represent genuinely different concerns with regards to phenomenological existence. Whereas Merleau-Ponty maintains an ongoing concern with pre-reflective structures that allow for experience and that facilitate expression in language, Ricoeur, who responds more directly to the arguments of the linguistic turn, is interested in reflective existence as it occurs in language.

### *Reciprocal Acknowledgments*

What is perhaps the most interesting and compelling motivation for the mutual study of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur is that each can be seen to call on the other at the end of his analyses. Specifically, despite his chief concern with pre-reflective dimensions of experience, after recognizing more profoundly that all experience occurs in language, Merleau-Ponty plans to develop an account of such reflective experience; however, he never lives to complete it (Lefort, 1964/1968; Lingis, 1968). Ricoeur can in this sense be seen to respond to Merleau-Ponty directly, as he performs a hermeneutic analysis of the self as it unfolds in language, offering a phenomenological perspective on reflective existence that is, in addition to this, made relevant the linguistic turn. But at the end of his analyses, Ricoeur wishes to supplement his view with an ontology, and in fact concludes his philosophy in search of such an account. It is for this reason that I find it meaningful to return to Merleau-Ponty, for in his final writings he proposes an ontology that inquires phenomenologically into the pre-conditions that allow for experience in language.

Without a doubt, this shared acknowledgement of both reflective and pre-reflective dimensions of experience, exemplified by the reciprocal demands of two prominent phenomenologists, provides an especially strong motivation for the concurrent study of their theories. For while both philosophers deem these dimensions significant, neither gives equal attention to both of them within a single theory, making a concurrent reading of both philosophical accounts meaningful for a broader understanding of experience. The basic goal of my analyses was to determine how such a reading could be performed.

### *Shared Phenomenological Trust*

Finally, the important assumption that not only motivates but also allows for the comparison of Merleau-Ponty's and Ricoeur's accounts can be found in the shared *phenomenological trust* that underlies their perspectives. Specifically, both Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur assume—via a phenomenological trust—the ontological primacy of a pre-reflective phenomenological experience that precedes expression in language. This is what allows them to maintain even in the face of philosophy's linguistic turn that a comprehensive account of experience must account for both the reflective *and* pre-reflective dimensions of existence.

While I later explain the nature of this trust in more detail, each philosopher articulates a different version of it, as each responds to the unique philosophical challenges of his times. Thus Merleau-Ponty provides, in an important sense, a less sophisticated defense than Ricoeur, as the latter is required to make a more elaborate case against the developed arguments of the linguistic turn. These differences notwithstanding, both thinkers make room in their theories for a phenomenological experience that is to-be-articulated and in this they give a philosophical defense for the serious discussion of pre-reflective dimensions of experience as well as the reflective.

*Goal of the Project: Specific*

Given the above considerations, it seems clear that a concurrent study of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur was warranted: their unique perspectives appeared to inform one another in meaningful ways, suggesting thereby that the mutual consideration of these accounts could contribute to a broader understanding of the nature of experience. My study essentially sought to determine whether this was the case; that is, my goal was to examine how these accounts could be understood in light of one another.

*Overview of the Project*

The bulk of my analyses focuses on the work of Merleau-Ponty, since the majority of his oeuvre concentrates on the question of experience. Indeed, I turn to Ricoeur only once it becomes clear that Merleau-Ponty lacks an understanding of the reflective nature of existence, which I then seek in Ricoeur's work, *Oneself as Another*. But even in this single work Ricoeur's linguistic analyses bring forward a fresh set of considerations about experience that severely complicate Merleau-Ponty's assumptions, making the mutual consideration of their theories more difficult. Whence the goal of my final analyses is to determine how the two accounts ought to be understood in light of one another.

In the first part of my thesis, I trace the development of Merleau-Ponty's lifework from his early to late writings in order to reveal his embodied understanding of existence. I find it important to consider his lifework as a whole, since he undergoes a number of changes throughout his career, making it difficult to determine how much of his early philosophy ought to be preserved in his later writings (Lingis, 1968). Indeed, although his major works all take as central the intrinsic role of the body in perception, scholars have



questioned to what extent his later works, especially those written after his encounter with the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, *challenge* the former (Carman & Hansen, 2005; Flynn, 2008).

In discussing Merleau-Ponty's lifework, I claim that he remains committed to a pre-reflective, embodied understanding of experience that not only persists throughout his career but also grows in complexity. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty describes experience as unfolding through the pre-reflective work of a *lived body*, which meaningfully communicates with the structures of the world in order to provide itself a unique vision. While Merleau-Ponty continuously re-evaluates this position and re-defines those notions critical for its understanding, his argument, in my view, remains consistent: lived experience takes unique forms for each of us because we are neither material bodies nor transcendental consciousnesses, but lived bodies, intentionally intertwined with a world that also is neither only material or only conscious—neither only nature nor only idea—but an intertwining of the two in *flesh*. What does change throughout Merleau-Ponty's career, I contend, is his focus on the linguistic dimensions of experience. Specifically, whereas in his early accounts the pre-reflective dimensions of existence primarily consist of natural structures that become configured according to the meanings established by the cultural and historical world, in his later writings, which are influenced by his reading of Saussure's structural linguistics, Merleau-Ponty incorporates cultural and historical structures with the natural, all three configured as a single flesh.

While Merleau-Ponty gives an elaborate description of the pre-reflective dimensions of existence, he never supplements his view with an account of how experience consciously unfolds in language. That is, while his theory discloses the fundamental structures that allow for experience in language, in the end he does not explore how subjects freely navigate their linguistic worlds. Because this is the focus of Ricoeur's account in *Oneself as Another*, I turn to him to inform Merleau-Ponty's view. In contrast to Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur takes language as primary for understanding the nature of experience; accordingly, he founds his account on a hermeneutical analysis of the self, which he then complements with a phenomenological analysis in order to determine how the self unfolds in lived experience.

What I consider particularly valuable in Ricoeur's analysis in *Oneself as Another* is his demonstration of the profoundly ethical nature of the self: lived experience, he explains, unfolds as a dialectic between self and other, to which he refers to as the dialectic of *selfhood*. In my view, the significance of this dialectic is that it expands the basic act of transcendence that is central to experience and inscribes within it an explicit dimension of *the other*. Lived experience thus becomes the ongoing expression of a self always posed with an other, and as such, it becomes an ethical enterprise. The self comes to navigate its life course in certain directions and not others because it is held accountable by others to whom it promises to hold firm. What is more, the unfolding of the dialectic of selfhood is seen as an ethical enterprise, one that begins with a teleological aim directed at a good life with and for others.

Ricoeur demonstrates how in reflective experience the self is always oriented to others and in this way is at its foundation an ethical being: accountability is revealed as the fundamental motive for the self's reflective choices. But what is of issue at the end of Ricoeur's hermeneutical analyses is that they lack an ontological understanding. Indeed, at the end of his account of the self's ethical trajectory, Ricoeur recognizes that it only serves as one interpretation of the self. No analysis or set of analyses can exhaust the phenomenon under consideration, since the experience of the self is always more than its interpretation. Because of the potential for an endless re-interpretation of the self, at the end of his analyses, Ricoeur seeks an ontological theory that could ground the self with others in the world.

It is at this point that I consider it meaningful to return to Merleau-Ponty, given that his project is deeply concerned with ontological considerations. In my final chapter, I evaluate the two philosophical positions in order to determine how they could be viewed in light of one another. My thesis is that the differences between Merleau-Ponty's and Ricoeur's accounts are too significant to be considered as together contributive to a single, comprehensive understanding of experience. Specifically, the fact that each prioritizes different dimensions of experience makes it difficult to determine how their accounts could inform one another directly.

But despite these major differences, I argue that it is meaningful that the two views be read together: I claim that a joint reading of their accounts allows us to re-examine the insights of both philosophers in light of the one another, and in this recognize where the two theories require further development. To this I add that such a reading should give priority to Merleau-Ponty's account, since his account, I argue, provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding the unfolding of experience than the one offered by Ricoeur. My final chapter discusses this in more detail and concludes with a discussion of the implications of my study for psychological science.

## CHAPTER TWO: ON MERLEAU-PONTY

*Introduction*

Merleau-Ponty's major philosophical project is to understand how experience achieves its unique form in perception; indeed, most of his major contributions to philosophical thought (i.e., *The Structure of Behavior*, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *The Visible and the Invisible*) concern themselves with this particular question. His method of inquiry follows from the work of Husserl, from whom he borrows the phenomenological method, which brackets the 'natural attitude' (i.e., the view that assumes the world as already pre-determined) and observes how the world unfolds in lived experience. In lived experience, Merleau-Ponty contends, everything appears as if it were happening according to chance; but these happenings 'offset each other' and coalesce into events, which are always observed from a perspective (*PP*, xxi). The major goal of his philosophy is to understand this precise process: to understand how the existential world becomes spontaneously arranged into unique events for the organism.

What distinguishes Merleau-Ponty from his predecessors is his interest in the pre-reflective influences of embodied processes on the unfolding being. How, he asks, can we each experience a uniquely meaningful world without having to deliberately impose on it its distinct structures? His answer derives from a careful examination of the role of the body in the appearance of the lived world. In what is arguably his most celebrated work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty reveals how the nature of conscious experience is inherently dependent on the manner in which the body participates in the world. Consequently, already in his early writings Merleau-Ponty shows that the possibility of a complete phenomenological reduction, wherein the world is bracketed for a transcendental consciousness to see, is fundamentally impossible. But while the body remains central to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, its precise nature is continuously re-interpreted throughout his oeuvre and as a result it cannot be confined to any single definition; indeed, the term itself takes on a variety of names, including the lived body, the phenomenal body, the One, and flesh. Nevertheless, what is essential to all of its variants is that the body is a *conscious structure*, one that—while being *of the world*—is not determined by mechanistic laws, but instead communicates with the world *intentionally* in

order to provide itself unique visions. Thus for Merleau-Ponty it is not consciousness but the *lived body* that sees, and the world perceived takes shape according to the range of possibilities that one's embodiment permits.

Given its unique structure as neither purely material nor ideational, the body in Merleau-Ponty's thought invites a host of ontological questions that the philosopher resolves via an equally innovative ontological framework. While this too is continuously re-evaluated, Merleau-Ponty always presents the world as neither nature nor idea, but as a unique intertwining of the two. In his early works, the world is described as a *phenomenological field* wherein the things perceived are neither objects 'in themselves' nor ideas projected by a transcendental consciousness; instead, things in the world exist as *perspectival beings* whose natures are not constituted by us explicitly, but whose presences are nevertheless made available through the pre-conscious work of the lived body (*SB, PP*). Later in his career, Merleau-Ponty refines his original ideas and encompasses the world within a ubiquitous *flesh*, one which he deems "midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea" (*VI*, p. 139).

Because my goal in this study is not deliberately concerned with ontological questions, I discuss Merleau-Ponty's ontology to the extent necessary for making sense of his theory of lived experience, and thus I do not evaluate its legitimacy in my final discussion. However, even in this limited discussion, I take seriously the fact that recourse to ontological concerns is necessary for understanding his account, as it demonstrates precisely how questions of ontology must be addressed in any comprehensive account of experience.

My discussion of Merleau-Ponty examines his major philosophical works in order to disclose his basic understanding of lived experience as pre-reflectively configured through the work of a lived body. In this I trace the continuity in his thought and show how his initial accounts of embodied experience gain increasing complexity throughout his career. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's main theoretical transformations relate to his increasing emphasis on the linguistic constitution of embodied experience, which is itself most markedly motivated by his encounter with the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. But even in light of the important implications of Saussure's thought, Merleau-

Ponty maintains an ongoing commitment to the primacy of perceptual experience, preserving from the phenomenological stance a ‘perceptual faith’ that he deems necessary for any articulation of experience to be meaningful. Language, Merleau-Ponty maintains, only gains meaning when it is spoken, and the spoken word is always a meaningful expression of a lived—and therefore embodied—existence. I explain how this conjecture allows Merleau-Ponty to defend in his final work a phenomenological ontology and a refined account of lived experience as constituted via the pre-reflective work of a lived body.

*Phenomenology of Perception introduces Merleau-Ponty’s Basic Thought*

*Overview*

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty gives his most elaborate defense of the pre-reflective dimensions of existence through detailed analyses of the experiential accounts of neurological patients. His analyses aim to refute mainstream empirical and rational theories of perception, for these fail to explain the unfolding of experience from the perspective of the organism. This is because both begin their analyses from the ‘outside’ (i.e., from the third person’s perspective), taking for granted the ‘natural attitude’ that presupposes a single predetermined world. For empiricism, perception occurs when an independent world imprints itself on a passive body, whereas for rationalism, perception occurs when the mind judges a multiplicity of stimuli that bombard the organism. Merleau-Ponty opposes both theories, arguing for a return to the lived experience that unfolds prior to the objective world—in other words, a return to the phenomenal field.

From this standpoint, the early Merleau-Ponty defends an understanding of the world that is neither nature nor idea. “The world”, he claims, “is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears” (*PP*, p. xxii). In different words, Merleau-Ponty describes the world as a *rationality*, a blending of perspectives and perceptions from which meaning emerges. As it is the experience of such a world that he seeks to describe, his interest in perceptual experience from the beginning is meant in a significantly broader sense than what is usually considered ‘brute vision’ associated solely with the eyes.

What is at issue in the question of perception is the manner in which perceptual experience of the world unfolds uniquely for each subject without demanding from that subject any conscious intervention; how, in other words, can we each view the world differently without having to deliberately constitute our unique visions? Importantly, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, this question is framed within the philosophical distinctions of the ‘in itself’ and the ‘for itself’ and is discussed in terms of the objective body and transcendental consciousness. With these terms Merleau-Ponty directly addresses the assumptions of his contemporaries who regularly employ these distinctions to describe experience. However, in his later years Merleau-Ponty rejects these distinctions, continually seeking a different language in order to better capture the complexity of the perceived world. Nevertheless, this complexity is already apparent in this early work, as he notes that, while we each perceive a world that seems to rest ‘in itself’, as if its being were unrelated to our existence, the world can only appear *from a perspective*, always revealing itself according to our unique points of view. In this sense, the perceived world appears neither completely ‘in itself’ nor solely ‘for us’, but as a kind of intertwinement of the two. Merleau-Ponty’s major concern in *Phenomenology of Perception* is to determine how this is the case.

Anomalous neurological cases prove indispensable for answering this question, since they reveal most visibly how damage in the body (i.e., neurological lesions) can significantly alter the entire structure of a patient’s experience. From this Merleau-Ponty concludes that the body and consciousness are inseparably related at a pre-reflective level: although experience generally unfolds without our explicit awareness of the body, the cases of neurological patients demonstrate that such existence is only possible if our bodies are already engaged with the world. Given this intimate intertwinement between body and consciousness, Merleau-Ponty argues that we are neither material bodies nor pure consciousnesses, but *lived bodies* that share their structure with the world, and are at the same time capable of engaging with it intentionally. That is, on the one hand we are grounded within the makeup of the world, constituted by the laws that govern all physical structures; but on the other hand, as conscious bodies, we are capable of intentionally communicating with the world and through this provide ourselves unique visions.

Conscious life is said to reflect a deeper conversation between a lived body and the world, a conversation that is unintelligible to conceptual thought but all the while in rapport with conscious aims.

In what follows, I discuss several of the neurological cases examined by Merleau-Ponty in order to demonstrate this embodied understanding of experience. In this it will become increasingly apparent how lesions in the body can be seen to affect the entire structure of conscious life, implying thereby a pre-reflective intertwinement of the body and consciousness. I examine how Merleau-Ponty explains this intrinsic relation through the notion of the lived body and reveal how it plays a central role in constituting experience. Specifically, lived experience will be seen to unfold according to the possibilities of a lived body that is at once intertwined with the physical structures of the world and capable of transcending these to provide itself a unique vision. The uniqueness of each vision will further be configured by the body's *style*, which, I elaborate, unifies each lived body in a way that is characteristic to a given individual. In short, my discussion of Merleau-Ponty's first and most elaborate description of experience concentrates on the notion of the lived body as a stylized structure of the world, consciously directed at the world, and in this forming itself meaningful visions.

*Case I: Phantom Limb Patient introduces the Body as Conscious Structure*

The phantom limb case describes a relatively uncomplicated abnormality that nevertheless demonstrates the intricate intertwinement between body and consciousness. The oddity here is that despite having (physically) lost a limb, the patient continues to consciously experience its presence. This implies that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a bodily lesion and conscious experience and consequently, the standard understanding of perception must be broadened. According to Merleau-Ponty, what is affected in this case is the patient's existential stance in relation to the possibilities of the limb. That is, the problem is that the patient continues to direct himself toward the world as if all the actions that his limb was once capable of performing were still possible. But since his orientation is not something that he consciously controls, the patient cannot be said to consciously impose this meaning onto objects; instead, he is said to pre-reflectively deny his mutilation (*PP*, p. 94).



Merleau-Ponty clarifies this with the notions of the habitual body and repression.<sup>3</sup> He considers the body comprising two different layers as it were: the habitual body and the body at this moment. The first accounts for the subject's acquired bodily dispositions and the second reflects the body's orientation in the moment. For the phantom limb patient, the body in the moment has lost the manipulatory movements that belonged to the habitual body; however, the subject continues to perceive the world as if this were not the case. From the phenomenological stance, the pathology is sustained by the patient's refusal to perceive objects once 'manipulatable for me' as 'manipulatable in-themselves' (*PP*, p. 95).

The patient's refusal is understood as a repression. Repression itself is born when individuals encounter obstacles that they can neither surpass nor abandon attempting to overcome. The result is that they continue to maintain an orientation toward an impossible future, which they then generalize toward other experiences. In this sense, repression is a way of being that is characterized by a certain level of generality; it is a manner of existing that gives a relatively stable structure to changing contents of experience. This accounts for the patient's pathology, for in refusing to acknowledge the actuality of his impairment, the patient perpetuates the orientation of his past, habitual body, limiting his present view to an unyielding structure.

Despite its 'imprisoning' character in the pathological case, repression is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a 'universal phenomenon' (*PP*, p. 96) and specifically, one that both accounts for our nature as incarnate beings and reveals how the organism can pre-reflectively impose meaning onto the perceived world. Specifically, for most persons the habitual body and the body in the moment orient themselves together toward the world, and this shared orientation allows for an integrated experience, one wherein what is consciously experienced aligns with the possibilities of the body. For the phantom limb patient, the orientation of the habitual body and that of the body in the moment cease to coincide and as a result, the imagined limb appears as "a former present which cannot decide to recede into the past" (*PP*, p. 99). The phantom limb case thus already reveals how experience takes

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<sup>3</sup> Repression here is not meant in the psychoanalytic sense, as Merleau-Ponty employs this term for his own purposes. Indeed, it should be noted that Merleau-Ponty takes up a number of psychoanalytic concepts, including 'unconsciousness' and 'sexuality', all of which are redefined in light of his embodied phenomenology.

shape according to a bodily structure that is intentional *and* physical, and which operates at a level that is not directly accessed in conscious life.

*Case II: Patient Schneider exemplifies Embodied Experience*

A second neurological case, namely, patient Schneider, further elucidates the pre-reflective, embodied processes that configure lived experience; for in this case, a single injury in the visual cortex appears to affect an entire spectrum of existential difficulties.

*Motor and Cognitive Dimensions*

Merleau-Ponty explains that Schneider suffers from an impoverished ability to apprehend his own motility and space. For instance, he cannot point to a body part upon the experimenter's command, though he can grasp it in the event that a mosquito bites him. Further, when asked to make a particular motion with his arm, he first 'finds' the limb by invoking movement in his whole body; then, he uses the whole body to create movement in the limb; and finally, when his bodily movement fortuitously resembles that of the command, he stops moving.

Based on these observations, Merleau-Ponty conceives of two levels at which the body's movement can be perceived in space: first, there is a basic, bodily familiarity with the body itself as well as its surroundings, which is unavailable to symbolic conscious thought (i.e., a body's pre-reflective understanding of its own surroundings) and second, there is an abstract understanding of the body as located in an independent world (i.e., a conceptual understanding of the body in conscious thought). Schneider appears to have both a motor and intellectual understanding of movement, since detecting the mosquito bite demonstrates a basic bodily familiarity and stopping his movement after completing a given command reveals his apprehension of abstract motion. However, his inability to respond to the experimenter's command demonstrates that he is unable to sustain both at the same time. There thus appears to be something between thought (as a representation of movement) and movement (as viewed from the third person) that is missing in the patient—what Merleau-Ponty deems a 'motor intentionality' (*PP*, p. 127).

Merleau-Ponty explains that a functioning motor intentionality is what allows subjects to mark out unique projects in their immediate view and create free areas of reflection that do not exist naturally (i.e., in the immediate environment). The average

subject can conceive of movement abstractly against a ‘built up’ or imagined background, whereas Schneider remains imprisoned in the ‘realm of the actual’ since he can only experience movement against the background of the world as given. Because he cannot move and perceive movement abstractly at the same time, Schneider cannot go beyond the demands of the immediate environment and perceive the possible or the ‘non-existent’ in the way that the normal patient can (*PP*, p. 128).

The contrast between Schneider and the average subject demonstrates that consciousness can impose different meanings onto the world and in addition, that their variations depend on a more fundamental bodily structure. For the ability to separate oneself from the actual in the present moment is only possible if we “already at every moment in our life know where our body is without having to look for it” (*PP*, p. 142). Thus, consciousness can only take certain forms if the body already sustains its own pre-reflective knowledge of the world. What is more, “there are several ways for the body to be a body, several ways for consciousness to be consciousness” (*PP*, p. 143). Just as consciousness can take different forms, the body too can be differently attuned to its world; and it is together in their mutual unfolding that the perceived world achieves its unique appearance.

Merleau-Ponty contends that every individual “sustain[s] round about [his world] a system of meanings whose reciprocities, relationships and involvements do not require to be made explicit in order to be exploited” (*PP*, p. 149). In this sense the perceived world is sublimated with a kind of intellectualism that is unique to every existence and that is made possible with a more fundamental bodily structure. This sublimated intellectualism is not to be confused with intelligence, however; recall that Schneider is capable of understanding abstract concepts. In fact, further observations demonstrate that he experiences his world as a scientist, crosschecking facts and analyzing hypotheses in order to make decisions. Yet, Schneider cannot distinguish the author of a written letter by recognizing the handwriting, and must rely entirely on reading the signature. This in turn suggests that the patient cannot apprehend a kind of sublimated meaning in the world, one that is *lived* rather than known.

Although they are not articulated, these lived meanings provide the basis for our actions, conferring our experience its secondary meaning; but like the principal meaning,

they too are ‘carved’ out of the same primary world (*PP*, p. 149). As we sustain around ourselves a number of ‘acquired worlds’, the “essence of consciousness is to provide itself with one of several worlds, to bring into being its own thoughts before itself” (*PP*, p. 150). According to Merleau-Ponty, Schneider’s difficulties do not exemplify an intelligence disorder, but an existential inability to impose his own projects onto his world.

Schneider’s disorder makes apparent how lived experience takes form depending on the body’s unique possibilities. This is elucidated again by a discussion of habits. To acquire a habit, the body must apprehend the intention of the movement as well as the action that is required to perform it; “[w]e say that the body has understood and habit has been cultivated when it has absorbed a new meaning, and assimilated a fresh core of significance” (*PP*, p. 169). An acquired habit expresses that the body has comprehended the meaning of a given act and has reorganized itself to perceive the world accordingly. Objective space in turn reflects the body’s acquired abilities for movement; that is, the body orients itself according to its habits and the structure of perception expresses these particular orientations.

#### *Style as Unique Bodily Configuration*

As each body is unique, the world appears differently for each individual. What is more, each body is configured according to a distinct *style* that Merleau-Ponty explains unites each body in a characteristic manner:

What unites ‘tactile sensations’ in the hand and links them to visual perceptions of the same hand, and to perceptions of the other bodily areas, is a certain style informing my manual gestures and implying in turn a certain style of finger movements, and contributing, in the last resort, to a certain bodily bearing. (*PP*, p. 174)

Style is the body’s pre-reflective configuration: it presents the particular manner in which the body integrates itself and acts as a single whole. It is more than the mere arrangement of body parts; it is the lived synthesis that guides their mutual understanding and unity. As a pre-conscious, bodily knowledge, style is unintelligible to conscious thought. Nevertheless, it determines the range of possibilities available for consciousness, since its composition sublimates a unique structure into individual experience.

Style is not an abstract law explicitly re-enacted in or by consciousness, but the pre-conscious manner in which an existence ‘habituates itself’. Lived experience involves a continuous appropriation of new habits, and the organism integrates each of these in a characteristic way; each appropriation of a habit results in a renewed manner of experiencing the world. It is through this ongoing, embodied process that the existential world achieves its unique form for each organism. Style thus explains how the world can appear at once ‘in itself’ and ‘for us’; for it describes how each organism comes to experience a unique world without having to consciously impose on it its structures.

### *Sexual Dimensions*

As the configuration of the whole existential body, style organizes all dimensions of existence, and not merely those designated motor and cognitive. Accordingly, we find that Schneider exhibits an impoverished ability to relate to others, which Merleau-Ponty qualifies as impairment in his *sexuality*, or, in other words, his orientation to others in the world. For instance, Schneider chooses his friends based solely on abstract criteria and fails to maintain friendships for extended periods of time. Further, while he seems to abstractly understand the interpersonal rules followed in relationships, and is capable of physically performing during sexual intercourse, he is incapable of intentionally placing himself within an affective situation. Merleau-Ponty views these and other related difficulties as disclosing an impairment in the patient’s sexual intentionality; sexuality is in turn organically linked with all of motor and cognitive being, together forming a single structure wherein these dimensions relate to one another through reciprocal expression (*PP*, p. 182).

### *Case III: Young Girl elucidates Sexual Dimensions of Embodied Experience*

Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the sexual dimensions of experience with another abnormal case. This case involves a young girl who, after having been forbidden by her mother to see a boy, stops speaking and has difficulty swallowing. Merleau-Ponty considers her impairment as neither voluntary nor fixed: although she cannot willfully regain her abilities, they can be reclaimed (i.e., through hypnosis). The problem is that the patient’s difficulties exist on a deeper level than conscious thought, specifically, on a pre-reflective, embodied level.

Merleau-Ponty maintains that the patient's inability to speak is a direct expression of her more profound refusal to live with others. The pre-reflective operations that prolong her disorder are comparable to those sustaining the process of falling asleep: to fall asleep, one first mimics a sleeping body and only thereafter does the body transform itself into one that is asleep. This unique experience demonstrates how consciousness prepares the body for actions that the latter can then complete on its own terms. Merleau-Ponty contends, "the body's role is to ensure this metamorphosis. It transforms ideas into things" (*PP*, p. 190); for the same reasons, the body 'symbolizes existence and is its actuality'. The young girl's inability to swallow is the expression of an aversion to others that was already incipient at an earlier stage<sup>4</sup>; as a result, her voice can be recovered only by returning to this pre-conscious process and restoring in the lived body its ability to open itself to its past and to others.

The young girl's case illustrates lived experience as an ongoing process of signification, wherein what is expressed does not exist separately from the expression. What is more, her situation shows how a sexual atmosphere permeates this entire process. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality pervades all experience and consequently, our entire personal life is committed to it. It is impossible to discern the amount of sexual to other motives, as sexuality spreads across our entire existence, giving it a "general emotional physiognomy" (*PP*, p. 195). Sexuality is in this sense a way of life, an attitude, an 'ambiguous atmosphere' that gives our world its multiplicity of meanings without making itself conceptually available (*PP*, p. 196). Hence the young girl can persist in a world alienated from others without deliberately imposing this signification; and her condition can be altered only by addressing a deeper, unresolved conflict.

Merleau-Ponty contends, "the body expresses total existence, not because it is an external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence realizes itself in the body" (*PP*, p. 192). Here experience is portrayed as an ongoing expressive act, one that is achieved through the pre-reflective work of a conscious body. This is made all the more

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<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty notes that the patient underwent a dramatic experience in her childhood that, he contends, made her mouth a sensitive area for expressing her relations with others. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty relates her impairments to a type of 'oral fixation' wherein the mouth is not merely a symbol for sexual existence, but "more generally, those relations with others having the spoken word as their vehicle" (p. 186).

apparent in his description of language, for it is in language that humans succeed in communicating their embodied existence most precisely<sup>5</sup>. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty accounts for this process by examining another neurological case, namely, the aphasic patient.

*Case IV: Aphasic Patients reveal Merleau-Ponty's Early Theory of Language*

According to Merleau-Ponty, what distinguishes aphasic patients is that they are only capable of 'automatic speech', which itself can be performed only in particularly vital or emotional contexts. In addition, these patients demonstrate difficulty with categorical thought, which is to say, they appear incapable of subsuming objects under a given category. For instance, when asked to sort sets of colored ribbons, they are not only incapable of grouping them 'at a glance' (sorting them in a painstaking fashion instead), but they can only decide on the location of each ribbon by considering each individually (incorrectly matching pale blue with the pale green as a result).

From these and other observations, Merleau-Ponty contends that aphasic patients' disturbances in language reveal a more fundamental impairment in their lived experience, namely, an inability to express themselves freely. This is because the inability to speak necessarily accords with a more fundamental impairment in thought. For the early Merleau-Ponty, speech is the very completion of thought; without speech, thoughts recede into the unconscious and cannot become expressed. Thought itself is experienced as an internal or external speech that only becomes known through its expression; "[t]he denomination of objects [in speech] does not follow upon recognition: it is itself recognition" (*PP*, p. 206). In this sense, words are not separate signs for objects and meanings, but words inhabit objects and are the vehicles for meanings. What is more, in interacting with others through speech, it is thought that is communicated.

Most succinctly, Merleau-Ponty claims that "there is a thought in speech" (*PP*, p. 209). Spoken words are not separate from thought, as there is nothing that stands between

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<sup>5</sup> Here it should be noted that Merleau-Ponty's account of language in *Phenomenology of Perception* is not representative of his later views. Nevertheless, I consider it important here for two reasons. First, the early theory provides a useful starting point for understanding his later work. Second, and importantly with regards to the goal of this paper, the early account already exemplifies the basic understanding of embodied experience that I consider integral to Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre as a whole.

the two. The multiplicity of words that we know at any given time ‘persist’ with us as emotional essences that have been generalized and detached from their empirical origins. We do not remember words by recalling the context in which we learned them, nor by recalling their conceptual definitions; we know words by their unique essences or styles. Style presents the generalized structure of a word (including its articulatory and acoustic configurations) that is recognizable to the subject in a way that allows for the word’s re-employment in different contexts. Merleau-Ponty explains that saying a word (through phonetic gesticulation) is an expression of its essence in a novel context. Speech and thought are thus inseparable, as the meaning of the spoken word is determined through the subject’s unique gesticulation, and the word is the expression of what the subject means to say.

Most individuals can directly and spontaneously express themselves in language in a way that is unavailable to aphasic patients. While aphasic patients can both conceive of concepts abstractly as well as make verbal responses when the immediate circumstances demand them, they appear incapable of experiencing in words their lived meanings; that is, aphasic patients see words as empty concepts that can only be connected with one another through external associations. As such, they are incapable of “taking up a position in the world of meanings” (*PP*, p. 207) in the way that can most persons. The study of aphasia thus reveals how individuals are normally capable of freely expressing themselves through speech.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the task of the body’s verbal gesticulation is to communicate experience: “words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of ‘singing the world’” and further, “their function is to represent things...because they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence” (*PP*, p. 217). Accordingly, different languages necessarily portray varied ways of existing: anger is not an abstract idea expressed differently by individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds, nor is it a universal physiological configuration; rather, it is the manner in which a given consciousness expresses itself through the body and relates itself to the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that gestural expression is ubiquitous to human experience; and accordingly, lived experience involves an ongoing reappraisal of the world, one made possible by the pre-reflective



engagement of the lived body and expressed through its verbal gesticulation. As our embodied existences continuously transform the meaningless to meaning, sense from non-sense, the perceived world appears uniquely structured for each existence.

In my view, this early understanding of experience (i.e., wherein a conscious body engages with the world pre-reflectively and expresses its state through gesticulation) remains central to Merleau-Ponty's position through to his later years. For even in his later years, when he places greater emphasis on the extensive role of language in the constitution of experience, Merleau-Ponty remains committed to the primacy of perception, and as a result maintains that language always expresses an embodied experience that can never be exhausted by language itself—an experience that must be lived in order to be known.

Notably, given Merleau-Ponty's broad understanding of perception, giving primacy to perceptual experience does not imply a disregard for the cultural and historical influences that also structure its unfolding. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he argues that cultural habits become embodied as motor habits: “[j]ust as nature finds its way to the core of my personal life and becomes inextricably linked with it, so behavior patterns settle into that nature, being deposited in the form of a cultural world” (*PP*, p. 405). Further, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that the encounter with the other—and particularly the other's language—is critical for the formation of the individualized perspective: it is only through the language of culture that children come to develop a sense of an individualized ‘I’. And because we can only see the world from our own perspective, we only come to conceive of it as existing in itself when others confirm our unique perceptions with comparable experiences and, in so doing, leave us with the impression of a universal world detached from our individual lives.

Merleau-Ponty claims, “[l]ike the world's unity, that of the I is invoked rather than experienced each time I perform an act of perception, each time I reach a self-evident truth, and the universal I is the background against which these effulgent forms stand out” (*PP*, p. 473). What he means is that our existence runs deeper than what is available to us in conscious experience. Experience takes its shape according to the rules of a more profound, impenetrable, structure whose communication with the world we cannot actively control; conscious life is but the pellicle of this more profound conversation. Experience of the

world, as it will now be elaborated, involves the continual unfolding of unique meaning made possible by the transcendental action of the lived body.

*Merleau-Ponty's Early Ontological Understanding of Experience*

In his study of lived experience, Merleau-Ponty is especially concerned with the structures that underlie its unique unfolding; and in this sense, his analyses are chiefly ontological. Having uncovered with the phenomenological method a complex image of experience, Merleau-Ponty finds it impossible to frame it within any traditional materialist and dualist ontology. Thus he continually alludes to a new theory of the body and the world; and at the end of his analyses he begins to formulate an innovative understanding of their relations. While I will now elaborate on this, the reader should be reminded that Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of both the body and world are continually reappraised throughout his career; accordingly, his views in *Phenomenology of Perception* merely represent his early thought. Nevertheless, as these ideas comprise his most elaborated account of lived experience, they form an invaluable base for what follows in his later years. What is more, and what is my thesis with regards to his work, Merleau-Ponty's initial understanding of lived experience as unfolding through the work of a conscious body remains central to his oeuvre as a whole.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that we are not nuclear 'I's, but single, embodied experiences of the world, cohesive unities and temporalities that since their birth progressively make themselves explicit through the work of a lived body; hence he declares, "I am a field, an experience" (*PP*, p. 473). At the moment of our inception, at which point we become lived bodies, a new setting is born; there is a new 'possibility of situations' as well as a 'fresh layer of meaning' that seeks development in the world: "[m]y first perception, along with the horizons which surrounded it, is an ever-present event, an unforgettable tradition; even as a thinking subject, I still am that first perception, the continuation of that same life inaugurated by it" (*PP*, p. 473). In this sense, we are embodied views of the world developing in unique directions, according to particular styles. Our existence is never for itself or in itself alone, but an overlapping of the two experienced by a lived body. Accordingly, the world perceived is not out there and detached from our perspective, and we are not subjects whose natures lie beyond this

world; these assumptions are but faulty rationalizations of what is in actuality a deeper existence.

The world perceived takes form and achieves meaning through the work of a body that pre-reflectively communicates with the world and in this adumbrates a unique experience; and as each vision relays the uniquely configured aims of lived bodies, meaning is what there is. Merleau-Ponty explains that “[t]here is significance for us when one of our intentions is fulfilled, or conversely when a number of facts or signs lend themselves to our taking them up and grasping them inclusively, or, at all events, when one or more terms exists as ... representative or expressive of something other than themselves” (*PP*, p. 498). Through this process of signification—through the body’s ability to trace out novel meanings within the world—experience unfolds. This understanding is corroborated by the studies of neurological patients, which reveal beneath the intentionality of acts another, deeper intentionality that is seen to give rise to the former. Merleau-Ponty thus claims that there exists “an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgment, ... an ‘art hidden in the depths of the human soul’, one which, like any art, is known only in its results” (*PP*, p. 498). The world perceived is the project of a lived body, configured without our conscious intervention, and reflective of the body’s deep-seated aims.

Just as the subject is a project of the world, the world is a project of the subject; the two are inseparably related via a transcendental movement. Merleau-Ponty explains, “the subject is a being-in-the-world and the world remains ‘subjective’ since its texture and articulations are traced out by the subject’s movement of transcendence” (*PP*, p. 500). Hence the world is neither ideal nor real but instead exists as a rationality: on the one hand, the world reflects what is meaningful for us, and on the other hand, it appears in itself, not being constituted by our private intentions alone. Subject and object are in turn but “two abstract ‘moments’ of a unique structure which is presence” (*PP*, p. 500) or even more, temporality itself.

Lived experience *is* temporality not in the sense of a stream of consciousness unfolding in time but as an ongoing transformative movement of the for itself and in itself united by the phenomenal body. Indeed, it is only with the lived body that existence

simultaneously remains grounded in the world and gains the ability to transcend its present surroundings. As the neurological studies show, we succeed in delimiting our meaningful projects in the world only when the body is already well aware of its surroundings; without a functioning intentional body, the subject's ability to transcend the demands of the immediate environment becomes impaired. Hence Merleau-Ponty contends, "our open and personal existence rests on an initial foundation of acquired and stabilized existence" (*PP*, p. 502)

Underlying the thinking subject there is a natural self that is never separate from its terrestrial situation and that is continually adumbrating unique significations. Merleau-Ponty explains, "[i]n so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose" (*PP*, p. 511). These intentions are always general, first, because they constitute a universal system of relations for all objects apprehended at any given moment and second, because they are not our own. For instance, my sense of the mountains as large is neither something that I deliberately formulate nor something that I experience as mere conceptualization; instead, this initial sense is a spontaneous evaluation perceived by my body that pre-reflectively communicates with the world. Merleau-Ponty explains that the lived body 'runs ahead' of conscious deliberation in order to confirm upon things their form and establish for consciousness a field of possibilities. In this sense, any conscious deliberation is preceded by a more fundamental, incarnate choice.

He explains that "the intellectual project and the positing of ends are merely the bringing to completion of an existential project. It is I who give a direction, significance and future to my life, but that does not mean that these are concepts; they spring from my present and past and in particular from my mode of present and past coexistence" (*PP*, p. 519). The lived body lays an original coat of significance that is unique to each of us, but not constituted by us explicitly. It is through this very operation that our worlds become pre-reflectively stylized by cultural appropriations: in embodying cultural habits, we rearrange our perception according to new meanings that nevertheless remain loyal to our unique structure. In this sense, signification never occurs solipsistically, but is guided on the one hand by the generalized existence that we are—a structure of this world that

Merleau-Ponty calls ‘the One’—and on the other hand, by the cultural habits acquired from our interactions with others. Hence our subjective life is more accurately defined as *intersubjective*, for its appearance is established jointly with others and through the possibilities of physical structures. But all this is not to say that our lives are determined by our acquired, cultural habits and/or mechanical laws. Precisely because the lived body has the ability to transcend the immediate situation and give it new meaning, freedom is the basic mode of existence.

Our freedom does not consist in an active choosing of ourselves, but appears as the very world that we stylize through the lived body. Merleau-Ponty explains that we are both born of the world and born into the world; and on the other hand, the world is both established, but never completely established. Freedom in turn takes place in the simultaneity of being acted upon and being open to an indefinite series of possibilities (*PP*, p. 527). As we are intrinsically entangled with the natural and social world, it is impossible to resolve how much of our existence is determined by our situation and how much by our individual freedom. Just as much as we choose our world, the world chooses us.

Being in the world involves an incessant movement of transcendence, an ongoing reappraisal of the past within the present directed at a uniquely meaningful future. Thus Merleau-Ponty concludes,

I am a psychological and historical structure, and have received, with existence, a manner of existing, a style. All my actions and thoughts stand in relationship to this structure, and even a philosopher’s thought is merely a way of making explicit his hold on the world, and what he is. The fact remains that I am free, not in spite of, or on the hither side of, these motivations, but by means of them (*PP*, p. 529).

These final remarks elucidate how our lives unfold freely precisely because we have embodied pasts that structure our unique existences without determining them.

In sum, Merleau-Ponty’s analyses in *Phenomenology of Perception* reveal how our worlds achieve significance through the lived body’s ability to both intertwine with the structures of the world and at the same time to transcend them in order to confirm in the world novel meanings.

It is this freely unfolding, embodied existence that I view as essential to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole. As I show below, in preserving his phenomenological stance, Merleau-Ponty recurrently describes experience as a transcendental expression of a lived body that reappraises its past in the present by intentionally 'cutting out' novel meanings in its world. These meanings are unique to each existence, as they are always configured by the lived body's style, which accounts for both the structural unity of a given body as well as the unique manner in which a given consciousness comes to perceive its world.

The scope of what is 'stylized' becomes increasingly elaborated throughout Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre, as he places growing emphasis on language and culture in constituting experience. As already mentioned, this becomes especially the case after he encounters the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Nevertheless, even prior to this time, cultural influences play an important role in constituting experience. In my view, this is particularly evident in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the life of Paul Cézanne in *Sense and Non-Sense*. As I proceed to demonstrate, the analysis here exemplifies how an existence freely interprets itself according to its unique embodiment and cultural situation. *Paul Cézanne: His Lifework exemplifies Central Tenets in Merleau-Ponty's Early Thought*

Merleau-Ponty pays special attention to the life and work of Cézanne, as Merleau-Ponty considers the artist's approach to painting to be especially demonstrative of his own phenomenological understanding of experience. In his critical essay, *Cézanne's Doubt (SNS)*, Merleau-Ponty claims that the artist aimed to paint the world as it came into existence for the individual perceiving, seeking to reveal how the visible achieves its form gradually in perception. The artist resisted the common dualities of subject and world, sensation and judgment, nature and art, wanting instead to establish a 'logical vision' that could also capture the individual's implicit contribution to the visible world. Art for him was never imitation but a process of expression—a depiction of an emerging order configured with the body.

Notably, the unconventionality of his project was an ongoing source of stress for Cézanne, as his work was initially poorly received; unprecedented, his art appeared distorted and short of geometric conventions. What is more, because Cézanne suffered

from an abnormally nervous condition—one that Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to deem schizophrenic—critics regarded his art as having been caused by his disturbed state. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty explains that “[t]he meaning of his work cannot be determined from his life” (*SNS*, p. 11): Cézanne’s anxiety did not cause the distorted character of his paintings; rather, the givens in Cézanne’s life (i.e., his abnormal nervousness, the criticisms of his contemporaries, etc.) were only the ‘text’ that nature delivered him for him to decipher. Since Cézanne chose to live in isolation and to paint against conventions, Merleau-Ponty argues that the artist agreed to take unwanted criticisms and deal with recurring uncertainty. In other words, the givens of Cézanne’s life were but symbols for a life that in actuality ‘freely interpreted itself’ (*SNS*, p. 20).

Merleau-Ponty explains, ‘[t]he truth is that this work to be done called for this life’ (*SNS*, p. 20). The artist’s nervous temperament and his art stand in a metaphysical relation, wherein his illness gave rise to “a general possibility of human existence” (*SNS*, p. 20). His condition allowed for a unique perception of the world, which at the same time courted a certain kind of existence. Cézanne’s world called on him to paint it and his artwork was but his most faithful response. In this sense, he merely expressed what the world ‘wanted to say’ (*SNS*, p. 21).

Cézanne’s struggle marks the pivotal moment in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of style, for it is in the act of expression that both the generative and affective phases of style come to coalesce: “style emerges from and appears as an expressive gesture, which is an extension of the body’s basic capacities to intentionally intertwine with the world” (Singer, 1981, p. 157). Everything happens as if the movements were drawn from the artists by the vision that they wish to portray. Style thus qualifies the expressive gesture, as it is through it that the artist at once apprehends a vision and responds to it in a characteristic fashion.

Importantly, style does not merely pertain to the life of artists, for each of us perceives a uniquely structured world the experience of which we portray through our distinct gestures. Accordingly, while we may consider our decisions as freely chosen in light of external pressures, this is only because we are only conscious of ‘our exterior’; our world appears ‘unique to our perspective’ because we are this perspective. But that our lives appear free from external causes does not mean that they are free with respect to

themselves. Merleau-Ponty suggests that choice be “pushed back beyond life” (*SNS*, p. 21) so that we recognize a pre-reflective motivation for our choices, a field wherein the range of our possibilities percolates and wherein our options appear as the meanings adumbrated by our unique embodiments.

The visible world is the intertwining of our interior and exterior within a single lived experience; and thus it is impossible to distinguish how much of it is based in our own contribution and how much belongs to that of the world. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty claims, “[i]f there is a true liberty, it can only come about in the course of our life by our going beyond our original situation and yet not ceasing to be the same” (*SNS*, p. 21). We must, in other words, be able to transcend our situation without severing our ties with world. This is impossible if we consider ourselves our ‘whole exteriors’ or ‘pure consciousnesses’. It is precisely because we have an outside and an inside that we can make free decisions that are unbound by external causes, but that are nevertheless selected from a limited range of meanings made available by our stylized existences. Freedom unfolds as “a creative repetition of ourselves, always, in retrospect, faithful to ourselves” (*SNS*, p. 25). Cézanne’s life exemplifies this in that he was blind to his own significance; he merely lived it, questioning his pursuits all the while being drawn into them by the world that he perceived. It is indeed only in retrospect, upon reflection on the artist’s life, that we can interpret certain events as central for the creation of his oeuvre.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of Cézanne’s life demonstrates precisely how we cannot escape our lives. Our very perception is stylized by our unique incarnations, arranged according to the embodied values distinctively adopted through the course of our lives. We do not impose our meanings onto the world to make it uniquely significant. Our world presents its distinct meanings for us through pre-reflective *cultural and embodied* processes that are not subject to our conscious control.

Here we can already see how one’s given life situation and embodiment affects the unfolding of experience; however, the scope of cultural influence on experience becomes most significantly elaborated after Merleau-Ponty encounters Saussure and begins to seriously evaluate the role of language. As I now show, Merleau-Ponty’s unique reading of Saussure motivates an expansion of his earlier understanding of the pre-reflective sphere



constitutive of lived experience. Specifically, he begins to show how broader cultural and historical structures too are *embodied*.

*Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Saussure motivates an Expanded View of the Pre-reflective*

In the first chapter of *Signs*, namely, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty responds directly to Saussure. First, he commends Saussure for having demonstrated that “taken singly, signs do not signify anything, and that each one of them does not so much express a meaning as mark a divergence of meaning between itself and other signs” (*S*, p. 39). Since every sign is such a divergence, words must be recognized as carrying no meaning in themselves but only as achieving their meaning in reference to the whole linguistic system. But despite Merleau-Ponty’s appreciation for this knowledge, he regards it as extraneous to both the phenomenological constitution as well as the effectiveness of meaning. That is, while he agrees that words carry no meaning in themselves, he argues that meaning is only achieved through speech; and in the phenomenological experience of speech, it is the arrangement of the spoken words and not their relation to a greater system of language that determines their meaning.

It is the case, agrees Merleau-Ponty, that language operates as a unified system of relations between signs, as this is evinced in examinations of children’s earliest expressions. Children’s first phonetic oppositions demonstrate an initial grasp of the fundamental relation between sign and sign; and in this sense, children seem to apprehend language as a ‘whole’ (i.e., ‘the entirety of language as a style of expression’) before learning any of its ‘parts’ (i.e., singular definitions of words). Merleau-Ponty therefore contends, “[i]t is because the sign is diacritical from the outset, because it is composed and organized in terms of itself, that it has an interior and ends up laying claim to a meaning” (*S*, p. 41).

What Merleau-Ponty deems most important about Saussure’s linguistic account is that it reveals how the meanings of words never exist in the words themselves, but at the edge of them, in the excess that is released when they are spoken in lived experience; for the important implication here is that there can never be any “absolutely transparent signification” (*S*, p. 41). Merleau-Ponty explains, “[w]e always have to do only with sign structures whose meaning, being nothing other than the way in which the signs behave

toward one another and are distinguished from one another, cannot be set forth independently from them” (S, p. 42). From this it follows that we never grasp truth in itself, but what we call truth is always an interpretation made within a given symbolic context. This is not to say that there is relativism, since Merleau-Ponty explains, “each stage of our knowledge is indeed a truth and will be preserved in the more comprehensive truth or the future” (S, p. 42). Nevertheless, what Saussure demonstrates—and what Merleau-Ponty takes seriously—is that our lives take their unique shapes always with dependency on the rules of a greater symbolic system.

But Merleau-Ponty does not agree that our dependency on a linguistic context implies an imprisoning within its directives: although we are always rooted in a tradition on which we must depend on to express ourselves, we are never limited to the dictums of this tradition. From his enduring phenomenological stance, Merleau-Ponty shows how we continually transcend the structures of language whenever we speak. We are never imprisoned by language because language gains meaning from the unique arrangement of uttered words, and not by reference to an established symbolic system. Language in this sense operates as a being more so than a means, for words have meaning only when they are uniquely arranged within a spoken utterance. Moreover, even when language is spoken, the meaning still does not take place within the words themselves, but in the breaks between them, as it is the arrangement, and not the words alone, that determines the meaning of what is said.

This understanding of language is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty’s view in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as in both cases he defends a gestural theory of language, wherein an embodied existence expresses its world freely depending on its capabilities for speech. What is given more elaboration however, is the role of the symbolic context in supplying the possibilities for expression. Specifically, as Merleau-Ponty now examines the phenomenological unfolding of experience from a broader historical perspective, he argues that symbolic contexts operate at the pre-reflective, embodied level, and in this determine the possibilities for expression. Thus the lived body is understood as continually reappraising past traditions and reconfiguring its symbolic world through expressive gesture. But while cultural contexts limit the possibilities for expression, our existence

unfolds freely because we are able to transcend these contexts and *through* them express our unique perspectives. In short, Saussure's linguistics urge Merleau-Ponty to reconsider the influence of cultural structures on experience and in this motivate him to inscribe them into the pre-reflective sphere.

To show how these structures affect lived experience pre-reflectively, I first discuss Merleau-Ponty's elaborated understanding of painting, which then carries implications for the all cultural acts, including language. I discuss language separately in order to disclose its status as gestural expression, always performed by a lived body communicating its world.

*Painting Experience is reconsidered in light of Greater Historical Traditions*

In "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (*S*), Merleau-Ponty re-examines the experience of the artist from a broader historical perspective and in this demonstrates how the world perceived is inherently indebted to the traditions passed down by our ancestors; for their influence is never erased, but continually reappraised. When observed from the phenomenological stance, our entire cultural history must be seen as a single history of expression, meaningfully intertwined with all expressive acts, and not simply related through loose causal chains formulated upon reflection. Each of our gestures is a novel resurrection of a past that we did not constitute as well as an inauguration a future tradition whose significance remains to be determined. Merleau-Ponty shows how this is the case by reconsidering the nature of *style*.

Whether we consider the classic artists, who employed geometrical rules to portray most 'realistically' an objective world, or whether we speak of modern painters, who, having designated their forbearers' laws as subjectively imposed, seek to display the world without such restrictions, Merleau-Ponty contends that all artists partake in the same tradition of gestural expression; and in this sense, all artists seek to express their worlds through their unique style. But let the reader be reminded that style is not something imposed from the outside; according to Merleau-Ponty, style is not something that the artist is aware of during the creation of the art, but it is that *through which* he or she sees the world—that is, it is his or her fundamental orientation toward the visible. Hence Merleau-Ponty claims, "[i]t is in others that expression takes on its relief and really becomes

signification. For the writer or painter, there is only one's allusion to oneself in the familiarity of one's personal vibration" (*S*, p. 52).

Style is an 'inner schema' with which the artist relates to the world and which define the continuity of his or her oeuvre; and "to the extent that the life emerges from its [the schema's] inherence, ceases to be in possession of itself and becomes a universal means of understanding and of making something understood" (*S*, p. 53), this schema is the artist's life itself. In short, style is a generalizable structure of being that guides the entirety of the artist's existence, a pre-reflective organizing principle that gives each vision its uniquely meaningful appearance without involving conscious intervention.

As style works at the level of perception, configuring all dimensions of existence, the perceived world reflects a stylized existence; everything happens as if all the elements of the world oriented toward revealing what is meaningful for the artist. And it is this unique concentration of all the elements at the level of perception that the artist wishes to translate onto the canvas. Merleau-Ponty explains, "[t]here is signification when we submit the data of the world to a 'coherent deformation'" (*S*, p. 54) and what is important is that this signification already takes place in perception.

The perceived world is always already configured according to an individual's structure of being, pre-reflectively organized according to what is meaningful for an existence. However, this does not mean to imply that artists paint their 'immediate selves'. They paint *the world*. Merleau-Ponty contends that the artist attempts to re-create the world in a manner that is most faithful to their vision, in a way that is 'truer' than the creations of previous painters. The goal is to more successfully re-capture that logic with which the given world makes its presence; for the significance of the image is only communicable in so far as the artist can articulate the allusive structure of the visible in a way that is comprehensible to others.

In this sense, the artwork is never closed to the life of the artist but remains an open expression, awaiting viewers to attend the artist's world; it is an expressive gesture made in anticipation of others' reception, and never a solipsist depiction of a private world. Merleau-Ponty contends that artistic expression always involves a unique response to the demands of the world, the past, and all previously completed works; further, he argues that

all artistic works take part in a greater tradition of expression that already began with the first cave paintings—and it is this tradition that is continually re-appraised in every cultural act.

Given these considerations, Merleau-Ponty contends that history ought to be seen as “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 find in us, and which it continues to lead in each painter who revives, recaptures, and renew the entire undertaking of painting in each new work” (*SNS*, p. 60). From this perspective, the artist’s work can be recognized by the style of its expression, by the structure of its ‘coherent deformation’, by its unique deviation or, in even different terms, by its unique language. Importantly, the artist’s expression is not considered closed in itself but is instead seen to connect with each gesture the tradition re-appraised with that which is found.

As a gesture of expression, the act of painting stands as a cultural act within a greater tradition to which we all adhere; the painter and non-painter exist in the same world of gestural expression, wherein each faces a tradition that he or she intends to transcend.

Merleau-Ponty explains:

If we take the painter’s point of view in order to be present at that decisive moment when what has been given to him to life as corporeal destiny, personal adventures or historical events crystallizes into ‘the motive,’ we will recognize that his work, which is never an effect, is always a response to these data, and that the body, the life, the landscapes, the schools, the mistresses, the creditors, the police, and the revolutions which might suffocate painting are also the bread the work consecrates. To live in painting is still to breathe the air of this world—above all for the man who sees something in the world to paint. And there is a little of him in every man. (*S*, p. 64)

The work of the artist teaches us that the worlds that we perceive are inherently structured by greater historical and cultural traditions which are not of our making, but which are nevertheless continually stylized by our unique existences. In this sense, we never replace the past, but reappraise it. Merleau-Ponty thus suggests that we think of cultural history as a single history of expression, meaningfully intertwined with all

expressive acts; each of our gestures appears as a novel resurrection of a past that we did not constitute and at the same time an inauguration a future tradition whose significance remains to be determined.

It is in such a way that Merleau-Ponty preserves his basic understanding of transcendence through expressive gesture and enriches its pre-reflective dimensions by inscribing within them broader historical structures. Our perception of the world is fundamentally constituted by the historical tradition that we reconfigure; that this can be demonstrated in painting is particularly significant, since it reveals a cultural configuration of the visible world. Merleau-Ponty extends these implications further however, to include all other expressive gesture.

*Cultural History defended as Circular Evolution of Expressive Gesture*

Merleau-Ponty claims, “[i]f it is characteristic of the human gesture to signify beyond its simple existence in fact, to inaugurate a meaning, it follows that every gesture is comparable to every other ... Each is both a beginning and a continuation ... Its value exceeds its simple presence, and in this respect it is allied or accompliced in advance to all other efforts of expression” (*S*, p. 68). The transformations in culture do not take place according to causal chains of events, but according to the ongoing communications of meaning. Each expressive moment (i.e., each moment in cultural history) signifies beyond itself, releasing meaning in excess of its factual circumstances; and this signification is never determined by its author alone, for it is always beyond the author what his or her gesture will come to mean for others in the future.

Merleau-Ponty argues that we ourselves guide our cultural history, even though we are not its sole creators. In the same way that the body gathers all of its expressive processes into a single gesture which for that moment permeates all that it does, the ‘unity of human style’ transcends spatio-temporal distances to bring all the gestures of artists into a shared effort to express (*S*, p. 68-69). The development of culture unfolds with humanity as a whole, as each individual partakes in the universal act of expression with all others. And because we are able to give meaning to what once was and at the same time inaugurate what will come, we determine the historical unfolding of our cultural world.

In this way, no human expression is meaningful in itself but is necessarily rooted in a past and remains open to all future inscriptions of meaning: each event is a “meaning in genesis” (p. 69). In each gestural act we unite ourselves with others and the world, and the world and others unite with us. Merleau-Ponty explains,

Through the action of culture, I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine. I confront them, I make one known to the other, I make them equally possible in an order of truth, I make myself responsible for all of them, and I create a universal life. Just as by the thick and living presence of my body, in one fell swoop I take up my dwelling in space. And like the functioning of the body, that of words or paintings remains obscure to me. The words, lines and colors which express me come out of me as gestures. (*S*, p. 75)

Nowhere is the pre-reflective inherence of culture more obvious than in the above passage, for in comparing cultural influences with the embodied, Merleau-Ponty locates both on a shared pre-reflective plane, together both structures anonymously guiding human expression. Perception, history, and expression are united within a single cultural gesture. Meaning is in turn achieved as all these dimensions unite in a distinctive act, one that configures an entire progression of antecedent expressions into ‘an always-to-be-made-again eternity’ (*S*, p. 75).

*Language as Distinctive Expressive Act*

Merleau-Ponty’s interest in language does not concern itself with language merely as a system of relations between signs. From the phenomenological stance, the nature of language is to be studied through the unfolding of speech. Speech is in turn treated as a particularly unique expressive gesture: what distinguishes it is that it claims to reveal the thing itself. Merleau-Ponty explains, “language goes beyond itself toward what it signifies ... at the moment it occurs the task of expressing is no longer differentiated and referred to other words—it is accomplished, and we understand something” (*S*, p. 81). With this contention he deliberately challenges Saussure’s central tenet, namely, that language achieves its meaning through the modulation of the entire system of differentiations. Arguing from the phenomenological stance, Merleau-Ponty claims that in lived experience we never grasp the meanings of words by first relating them to a relevant linguistic system;

instead, we become immediately aware of the meanings that words signify. In the same vein, speech does not ‘expend the accumulated power of language’; instead, speech confirms the power of the speaking subject that is capable of going beyond signs and immediately to their meaning.

Merleau-Ponty contends, “signs do not simply evoke other signs for us and so on without end, and language is not like a prison we are locked into or a guide we must blindly follow” (*S*, p. 81). In lived experience, the meanings of spoken words are neither confined nor defined by what is agreed upon within a shared lexicon, but achieve their sense from their arrangement during the act of speech. Words themselves do not have meaning; only when they are uttered in linguistic gesture does sense arise at the intersection of them all. Merleau-Ponty adds, “whatever clarity we can have is not at the beginning of language, like a golden age, but at the end of its effort” (*S*, p. 82). Thus while Merleau-Ponty agrees with Saussure that language displaces our world, demanding that we cross-check everything in relation to everything else, he nevertheless contends that language does not in itself designate meaning, for meaning is only achieved when words are arranged in utterance by a subject.

Of course in distinguishing language as an expressive form capable of taking us directly to the signified, Merleau-Ponty does not mean that language actually ‘delivers up the thing in itself’. Language is always both historical and cultural and therefore any linguistic expression, like all other expressions, is a meaning in genesis, understandable only through a given time and cultural setting. Nevertheless, language is unique in that it is most precise in accessing the things themselves. This is why it is so indispensable for our existence; we need language to discern things in the world that without it would remain obscure.

Merleau-Ponty considers language and meaning as intertwined in a way wherein neither is subordinate to the other. He explains,

What we mean is not before us, outside of speech, as sheer signification. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said. With our apparatus of expression we set ourselves up in a situation the apparatus is sensitive to; we



confront it with the situation, and our statements are only final balance of these exchanges. (*S*, p. 83)

Here we find the gestural expression as fundamental yet again, this time to the cultural act that is language. Merleau-Ponty reaffirms the inapprehensible depth of our lived existence, which takes its unique appearances in accordance with the rules of structures that are beyond our understanding. Our conscious existence discloses but the excess of ‘what has already been said’ in the obscure communication between the cultural body and its world. That is, while we are each embodied, cultural, and historical apparatuses, our reflective life expresses but the pellicle of our actual depth—it is the excess of what lies beneath. Lived experience thus takes its unique shape from structures that we do not constitute and which are shared by all; and yet, as embodied beings capable of navigating them, we transcend our natural and cultural contexts in order to *through them* express ourselves freely.

In his final years, Merleau-Ponty refines his embodied philosophy with further studies of the ontological structures that can be seen to found experience (*VI*). The most comprehensive account of his final views can be found in his posthumously published chapter, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” (*VI*), as it is here that he proposes an ontological framework deliberately intended to found existence ‘in language’.

The analyses in this chapter are premised upon the recognition that seeing, speaking, and thinking are universal means for reflection described in all languages; Merleau-Ponty’s goal is to examine how their living references come to express themselves in language. In contrast to his previous work, he no longer employs the traditional philosophical dualities of the ‘for itself’ and ‘in itself’, consciousness and body; but instead, now sensitive to the linguistic fragility of his account, he explores the ontological conditions that precede and allow for such linguistic expressions in the first place.

*Ontology of the Flesh discloses Refined Understanding of Pre-reflective Dimensions*

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology in “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” (*VI*) is grounded in a refined phenomenological description of tangible and visible experience. Based on his phenomenological observations he claims that we must be fundamentally entangled with the world in order to participate in its unfolding. Specifically, it is only if *we* are tangible

and visible that we can engage with things *tangible and visible*: to feel and see we must embody a location as well as a point of view. Our vision, he explains, is a palpation of the look from somewhere and as such it has to be inscribed in the same order of being that it reveals: “he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at” (VI, p. 134). With this claim, Merleau-Ponty retains his earlier ontological commitments, reminding us here again that we must always be of the world in order to participate in its unfolding.

From this it follows, he explains, that communication between the lived body and world can only occur if *both* are made up of the same kind of *thickness* or share the same type of *structure*; and this ubiquitous structure, Merleau-Ponty deems *flesh*. Composed of flesh, the body is a being among beings, capable of conversing with them directly and in this can participate in revealing the visible without our conscious engagement. The body “commands the visible for us, but it does not explain it, does not clarify it, it only concentrates the mystery of its scattered visibility” (VI, p. 136). In other words, the visible gains form in accordance with the body’s peculiar involvement with things, an involvement whose logic is unintelligible to conscious thought. In this sense, we are participators in an unfolding spectacle the depth of which must be lived in order to be known.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is at the pre-reflective level both subject and object: because it is capable of touching and being touched, the body “unites these two properties within itself” (VI, p. 137) and in this maintains a “double belongingness to the order of the ‘object’ and to the order of the ‘subject’” (VI, p. 137). The body is not just a thing among things, for it is capable of detaching itself from them (i.e., by touching them); at the same time, the body can never detach itself fully, for in order to touch and see it must remain visible and tangible in the same ways as other things. Given these observations, Merleau-Ponty claims that the primordial body can never be solely subject or object. At the pre-reflective, ontological level, the for itself and the in itself are inseparably intertwined.

But while it is the same flesh that experiences itself touching as well as touched, ‘touching’ and ‘being touched’ cannot be experienced at the same time. Hence the flesh of the body and that of the world are involved in a continual unveiling; as one vision is

exposed, the other remains implied. Visibility itself is formed when flesh coils over upon itself and in this closes the visible upon the visible.

To illustrate the experience of the lived body, Merleau-Ponty gives the metaphor of a circle, wherein “the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and reverse, or again, as two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases” (*VI*, p. 138). Thus the body is not an object intermittently appearing and disappearing in a perceiving consciousness, but an ontological thickness at once object and subject, variably experienced across time; it is one sole body experienced in two phases.

The visible world takes its form as the lived body “incorporates into itself the whole of the sensible and with the same movement incorporates itself into a Sensible in itself” (*VI*, p. 138). In other words, in communicating with the flesh of the world, the lived body creates a unique world for itself; and what is more, it provides itself a place in this world, either as subject or object. But whichever form it gives itself in experience, the lived body is implied at all times, for the spectacle is made possible only through the original intervolvement of the body as flesh against the flesh of the world.

As Visibility itself, flesh is the intertwinement of the seer and the seen, the thickness wherein they meet and within which their contours are lost into a single thing. For the flesh is not matter, nor mind, nor substance. Merleau-Ponty explains, “[t]o designate it, we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.” (*VI*, p. 139). In this critical passage, Merleau-Ponty defines flesh as a universal notion, a general thickness from which are composed both body and world.

Flesh is neither a sum of facts nor an abstract idea, but what provides the very possibility for facts and what is the incarnation of the idea. Moreover, it is what gives meaning to facts or conversely, what allows for facts to have meaning; for flesh “makes the fragmentary facts dispose themselves about ‘something’” (*VI*, p. 140). Appearing everywhere all the time, “this visibility by principle, prevails over every momentary

discordance” (VI, p. 140). Merleau-Ponty thus defines flesh as a continuous thickness, a fabric through which we communicate and which communicates through us. Each momentary vision reflects the unique intervolvement of body and world that reconfigures itself continually, and expresses a particular ‘style of being’ as a result. Style in turn reflects the unique configuration of lived body and world and expresses the lived meaning established by the work of flesh against flesh.

Importantly, flesh is not limited to the tangible and visible and likewise the body is not a mere corporeity. Phenomenological experience involves more than the visible tangible in different modes of existence. In speaking and hearing speech, a different kind of reversibility is found, one that is more agile, and which identifies the invisible dimension of the visible. Thus, following his account of the mute, visible and tangible world, Merleau-Ponty begins to inscribe within it *ideality*.

It should be emphasized that this move is supported by the assumption that thought (or ideality) is possible only “only in virtue of the uncontested evidence that one must see or feel in some way in order to think, that every thought known to us occurs in a flesh” (VI, p. 146). In this Merleau-Ponty defends his enduring faith in the primacy of perceptual experience; and in his late life, this is outlined by a flesh that thinks.

Merleau-Ponty regards his account of flesh as a novel contribution to philosophy. It is a horizon not in the sense of a collection of things or in the sense of a possibility for the being of things; instead, it is “a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality” (VI, p. 149). It is a thickness that subtends all varieties of visibility, a structure that guides the unfolding of all things in the world. Hence whoever exists to perceive it is necessarily made of it. There is, in other words, a thickness that constitutes all bodies and things in the world and by this allows for their mutual understanding and communication. And although we can only experience the pellicle of this exchange, and only from one side of the body in which we are grounded, we know from experience that there must be such thickness if our shared world is to take its particular form.

Given the ubiquity of flesh, ideas too must find a place within its structure. Proust’s notions of literature, music, light, etc. provide for Merleau-Ponty the first exposition of the idea as carnal, as his renowned accounts of these notions expose the invisible of the visible.

Merleau-Ponty claims that such notions cannot be removed from their sensible appearances and elevated to a secondary positivity, since they seem to operate according to their own carnal rules and reveal merely their outer appearances. We do not gain better understandings of literature, music, or light by defining them conceptually, for their natures must be apprehended via embodied processes.

Carnal experience is necessary for our understanding of Proustian ideas not because it provides the occasion for thinking of them but because the ideas “owe their authority, their fascinating, indestructible power, precisely to the fact that they are in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart” (*VI*, p. 150). Merleau-Ponty claims that the idea ‘doubles up’ the notion (i.e., music) from beneath, lining its contours and becoming its depth. More expressly, the idea “is a furrow that traces itself out magically under our eyes without a tracer, a certain hollow, a certain interior, a certain absence, a negativity that is not nothing, being limited precisely to these five notes between which it is instituted, to that family of sensible we call lights” (*VI*, p. 151). The idea contours the visible, entrenches itself within it, outlining its very depth; and remarkably, despite itself providing the manifestation of a carnal thing, the idea’s performance is completely invisible: “[w]e do not see, do not hear the ideas ... and yet, they are there” (*VI*, p. 151).

Merleau-Ponty extends these observations to include all ideality: even idealities of the second order (i.e., scientific concepts that seem to exist separately from their empirical origins) have a place in flesh, and this is because all words get their meanings not from their relations to an abstract system of language but from their unique arrangements within spoken utterances. For Merleau-Ponty, all words express the more primordial experience of a lived body that is speaking and language is essentially a second order ideality, a ‘facsimile’ arranged following a more fundamental experience.

It is the spoken word and not its language that expresses the variability of lived experience; and although speech necessarily relates to a given language, it never mirrors the structure of that linguistic system. The word maintains a coherent structure but it is not limited to an abstract set of rules. And when it is spoken an arrangement of sounds is uttered and a meaning is formed only because that meaning reflects back upon that very arrangement—just as the body sees only if it itself takes part in the visible toward which it

opened. Our words have meaning not because they correspond to the organization of an objective system, but because their lived organization relates back to itself.

Merleau-Ponty concludes, “as there is a reversibility of the seeing and the visible, and as at the point where the two metamorphoses cross what we call perception is born, so also there is a reversibility of the speech and what it signifies; the signification is what comes to seal, to close, to gather up the multiplicity of the physical, physiological, linguistic means of elocution, to contract them into one sole act” (*VI*, p. 154). If we return to the metaphor of the circle, we can understand that the relation between *speech* and *what is signified* is of the same kind as between the seeing and the visible, the touching and the tangible, wherein at any given moment, the flesh reveals itself in one of two modes, although both modes are implied in all expression. Signification is in turn what ‘there is’: it is the ‘spoken Word’ or that mode of being expressed through the dynamic multiplicity of means for elocution and united in one single act. Notably, it is neither of our own making, nor that of the world; it is what is revealed as “signification rebounds upon its own means” (*VI*, p. 154).

Speech reveals the primordial world as a structure ‘to be signified’. Merleau-Ponty explains, “in opening the horizon of the nameable and of the sayable, the speech acknowledged that it has its place in that horizon” (*VI*, p. 154). Thus, speech does not create the possibility for speech, but it reveals the world’s structure as lending itself to being named. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is prepared for speech, it is designed for speech, and it awaits its arrival. Speech in turn comes to name the world, disclose it, and designate its structure. In this way, the perceived world embodies the advent of speech.

Importantly, this ontology does not preclude the possibility for there to be ‘silence’ or, in other words, for there to be experiences not yet determined by speech. Merleau-Ponty wants neither to destroy nor conserve silence, for he recognizes that there are moments when ineffable visions ‘fall into speech’. It is in fact during these moments that speech first “opens the horizon of sayable and nameable and inscribes itself in that field”; and it is also during these moments that speech transforms the structures of the visible; gives the idea an almost carnal existence; and “makes itself a gaze of the mind” (*VI*, p. 155). Thus Merleau-Ponty admits of experiences during which we do not speak nor think, wherein we

participate with the world without employing language explicitly; however, even during these moments the world takes shape according to its implicit preparedness for speech, according to its structure of ‘to-be-spoken-about’.

We are always either speaking the world or perceiving a signified in silence, and both modes of being, as well as the possibility for the transition between them, are sustained by the principle of reversibility inherent in flesh. Both speech and mute perception are guided by the linguistic architectonics that constitute flesh, by the reversibility of the circle that relates the spoken word and the signified. Thus, at the ontological level the flesh of the world already maintains the necessary structures for there to be language. Coupled with our bodily natures as seers as well as sonorous beings for others, the collective flesh, this thickness that makes both body and world, is equipped with all that is necessary for there to be speech between ourselves and others and for this speech to be about the world. The entire visible spectacle is infested with words and in this sense exists as “a variant of speech before our eyes” (*VI*, p. 155).

In sum, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh intertwines the visible and invisible within a single thickness that preconditions all experience in the world. All lives unfold according to the spatiotemporal and ideal structure of the universal flesh: the visible tangible takes distinct shapes as the invisible idea outlines it and provides it with contours and depth. The reversibility of the flesh both facilitates the ongoing transformations of the perceived world and sustains them according to a shared principle. Capable of variable yet ordered being, the flesh re-arranges its thickness into the transient and diverse perspectives of the world without allowing them to dissipate into contingency or chaos. Hence, every lived moment reveals a distinct perspective unique to its perceiver but equally structured for all; and further, each of these moments presents but a surface-level expression of a deeper conversation between an intentional body and the flesh of the world. Such are the lived references that become expressed in language.

We thus find Merleau-Ponty at the end of his life once again re-defining the ontological pre-conditions of experience, only to reveal once again how our lives are made possible by the work of more profound, embodied structures whose rules escape conscious thought. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre can, in my view, be conceived as a progressive

development of his original ideas, an ongoing reappraisal of his stylized perception of the world, one wherein his initial claims about a world that is neither purely nature nor purely idea culminates in his philosophy of the flesh. His lifework can be seen to gain complexity through a scrupulous study of traditional dualities—subject and object, self and world, materialism and transcendentalism—which finally intertwine within a reversible flesh.

Having developed such a detailed account of the pre-reflective dimensions of experience, it is regrettable that Merleau-Ponty never complemented his philosophy with his intended analysis of experience in language. Without question, such a project would have proved invaluable for his philosophy, since it would be able to show how reflective experience ought to be understood in relation to his ontology. For while Merleau-Ponty proposes a comprehensive account of the structures that allow for freely unfolding, embodied experience, we never learn how embodied subjects actually come to make choices in experience. How, in other words, are we to understand how subjects navigate their existences in reflective experience in language?

It is because Ricoeur develops such a desired project in *Oneself as Another* that I discuss his philosophy in the following chapter. In my conclusive chapter, I show how his view can be read with that of Merleau-Ponty.



## CHAPTER THREE: RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICS OF THE SELF

*Introduction*

In this critical work, *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur performs a number of hermeneutical analyses on the self with the intent to examine how it unfolds in language. Thus, unlike Merleau-Ponty, he examines reflective experience rather than the ontological pre-conditions that allow for its unfolding. In this sense, Ricoeur seems to pick up where Merleau-Ponty leaves off, performing precisely the kind of study that Merleau-Ponty never managed to complete.<sup>6</sup>

Further, what makes Ricoeur's analyses particularly relevant to those of Merleau-Ponty is that Ricoeur too grounds them in a phenomenological trust, to which he refers to as *attestation*. Through attestation Ricoeur admits that the self must always be understood through interpretive language, but he claims that it can be *attested to* as being more than its interpretation. More precisely, the self cannot be exhausted by any interpretation since at the end of any analysis of the self we can always ask, "who performs the interpretation?" and at this point we can glimpse a self who *attests* that the interpretation refers to one *kind of being*. Ricoeur defines attestation as the "assurance of being oneself acting and suffering" (*OA*, p. 22) and considers it a certainty that can be claimed by hermeneutics in order to assure us that our reflections all relate to the same kind of being. Attestation thus provides a sophisticated defense of an experience that is more expansive than any interpretation, but which nevertheless is only accessible via interpretation. Given that Merleau-Ponty accepts a comparable trust through his 'perceptual faith', the two philosophical accounts can be readily compared.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Ricoeur started his career with an interest in existential phenomenology, but his focus shifted to questions of language in the midst of his career. In *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975/1977) he gives the following reasons for this conversion. First, after investigating the nature of symbol via a study of Freud, Ricoeur came to recognize that self-understanding must always proceed through a detour via indirect signs, as all self-knowledge "is a striving for truth by means of the inner contest between reductive and recollective interpretation" (p. 376). Second, with the emergence of structuralism, Ricoeur recognized that the primacy of subjectivity claimed by phenomenology could no longer be maintained. Third, Ricoeur became interested in questions concerning the connections between biblical and general hermeneutics. Finally, both in light of the above considerations as well as in terms of his growing appreciation for British and American philosophies of ordinary language, Ricoeur sought a new 'linguistic phenomenology' that would take as its task the "recapturing of the intentions of ordinary language experiences" (p. 380).

Nevertheless, Ricoeur's phenomenological approach differs from Merleau-Ponty in that Ricoeur takes language—and not perceptual experience—as principal for studying experience. Accordingly, he performs a chiefly hermeneutic analysis of the self as it is employed in language. Thus, despite sharing with Merleau-Ponty a phenomenological trust in an experience more expansive than any interpretation, by accepting language as primary for accessing experience, Ricoeur focuses on the *reflective* dimensions of existence *in language*, studying how the self is used in language in order to disclose the nature of its experience.

With this hermeneutic approach, Ricoeur demonstrates how lived experience is an ethical process through and through: not only does the self guide its course with explicit consideration of others, but its most intimate experience is disclosed as always shared with an other. Indeed, the central claim in Ricoeur's analyses is that 'there is no self without an other'. In my view, this ethical understanding of experience is also what comprises Ricoeur's most valuable contribution to the current study, since it provides a response to the critical shortfall in Merleau-Ponty's account. As Merleau-Ponty focuses on ontological concerns, he never discloses how we carry our lives with others in language. Thus in what follows, I discuss Ricoeur's philosophy of self with the more specific goal of revealing the ethical character of lived experience.

*Ricoeur's Study discloses the Ethical Nature of the Self*

Ricoeur's primary goal in *Oneself as Another* is to formulate a theory of self that stands between two opposing conceptions of self, that of the Cartesian tradition and that of Nietzsche. Whereas Descartes defends the notion of an individualized conscious observer whose nature can never be doubted, Nietzsche dissolves this introspective certainty by calling into question the very language that was used to defend it. Specifically, Nietzsche demonstrates that language is figurative in every way and because of this it can never mediate Truth, but only interpretations. Ricoeur attempts to formulate a theory of self that stands between Descartes' and Nietzsche's opposing views and thus one that could pay tribute to Nietzsche's insight into the historical and discursive contingency of the self without losing the individualized experience affirmed by Descartes.

Recognizing the irreversibility of Nietzsche's critique, Ricoeur argues that while the self can only be understood through interpretations, these interpretations are always meaningful to some self who trusts that the interpretations refer to the same kind of being. In other words, although interpretations are always subject to the figurative nature of language and by this are necessarily historical and cultural phenomena, at the end of any interpretation, we can always ask, 'who' performs the interpretation? And it is here that we discover an enduring 'who' who interprets and trusts that the interpretations refer to the self. From this Ricoeur argues that the self is a being who attests to its interpretations and to whom interpretations attest to, even though its existence is always subject to suspicion. He defines attestation as "the assurance of being oneself acting and suffering" (*OA*, p. 22) and defends it as a certainty that can be claimed by hermeneutics—a certainty that assures us our reflections on self all testify to the same kind of being.

Importantly, the certainty claimed by attestation belongs to a different order than truth and falsity. Attestation is linked with testimony, appearing as a kind of trust or belief-in self (as opposed to a belief-that self) that can never be proven false, but can only be suspected. Suspicion can never overcome attestation, however, as suspicion itself must be attested to. Attestation thus serves as "credence without any guarantee, but also as trust greater than any suspicion" (*OA*, p. 23) that can provide a unity underlying the hermeneutical interpretation of the self. Based on attestation, Ricoeur posits a self that stands between Nietzsche and Descartes: in opposition to Descartes' certainty, the self cannot be explained without the figurative use of language; yet, the self is not its interpretation, as Nietzsche may have supposed, for its interpretation is always meaningful to an experiencing self.

Ricoeur performs nine hermeneutic and phenomenological studies on the self, which illustrate how the self appears in the grammar of natural languages, in ordinary language usage, and in central philosophical questioning occurring in history. All nine studies are guided by the polysemy of the question, who? ('who is speaking?' 'who is acting?' 'who is recounting about himself or herself?' 'who is responsible?'). But while each analysis provides an increasingly complex understanding of self, no analysis or set of analyses can adequately account for the phenomenon under consideration—each study ends

with a new aporia that can only be accounted for with attestation. In other words, while the self gains credibility as a response to the question, 'who?' its reality is glimpsed only at the end of a hermeneutics of self, specifically, when a self attests to the analysis being relevant to the same kind of being.

In the first four studies, Ricoeur analyzes the self mainly within analytic philosophical traditions, aiming to answer the questions, 'who is speaking?' (linguistics) and 'who is acting?' (pragmatics). In philosophy of language, semantics reveals the self as a basic particular, whereas pragmatics interprets the self as capable of reflecting on itself. Ricoeur joins the traditions together by inscribing the self within the social realm of proper names. Here, the self appears as a body among bodies and as being capable of reflecting on itself.

To determine what kind of being can be both a basic particular and a reflecting subject, Ricoeur turns to philosophy of action. Here however the analytical tradition appears severely limited, since it defines action without ever considering the self: what constitutes an action is defined by why an action is performed and never by who performs it. More specifically, analytical traditions define actions exclusively as 'events that have been performed with intention' (hence, by the 'why' of action) without ever considering action as projected into the future, performed with the 'intention-to'. Only the latter approach reveals a teleological agent who is capable of projecting him or herself into the future, whereas the former inscribes the self within an agentless, Humean causal chain of events. An adequate account of self must consider all configurations of action and agent. Thus Ricoeur asks, what kind of being can stand between two causal crossroads: first, that of the beginning of the world (the Humean causal framework) and second, that of the beginning in the midst of the world (teleological cause)? He finds an answer to this question by way of narrative identity.

First, he asks what is meant by identity and specifies two philosophical meanings of the word *same*, namely, *ipse* (or selfhood) and *idem* (or sameness), both of which are central to his theory of lived experience and narrative. Selfhood is a temporal projection of self-constancy whereas sameness refers to the permanence in time of a 'substance' or an unchanging core. The former can be recognized when we keep a promise, as in this

situation we agree to hold firm despite changing circumstances; the latter is exemplified in uninterrupted continuity, which is the criterion upheld in aging and development.

In ordinary language usage, sameness and selfhood map onto two models of identity: character and keeping one's word. In character, sameness and selfhood coincide. Character is defined by "the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized" (*OA*, p. 121) As a lasting set, character maintains a permanence in time in the sense of sameness; hence we meaningfully state that 'we are the same character as we were at an earlier time.' But as an as an acquired set, the temporal dimension of character is revealed as an overlapping of selfhood and sameness. Since we can also state that we have a character or that we can alter, ameliorate, or even dispose of our characters, we recognize even in our most enduring dispositions the fact that they must have been adopted at some earlier time. Ricoeur argues that acquiring traits involves internalizing values from the social world, and this occurs in a dialectic between a self and other. Thus, while selfhood and sameness overlap in character, the two do not reduce to one another. Selfhood merely poses as sameness when we say, 'I am my character.'

Recognizing this temporal dimension between self and other (be it as real other or as character), Ricoeur discusses a second way in which we come to speak of our identity and renders it equivalent to the dialectic of keeping one's word. Here selfhood and sameness not only cease to coincide but what is more, here the permanence of the self and the permanence of the same stand most distinct from one another, marking the irreducibility of one to the other. In keeping one's word, the identity making the vow promises to remain the same despite a changing character. Thus identity in this case comes to refer to a temporal projection of self-constancy—one wherein a self promises to remain accountable to an other—rather than the permanence in time of an unchanging core, which defined character. Given the two distinct modes of identity (i.e., character and keeping one's word), Ricoeur asks, how can we meaningfully state that we both change in time and yet remain the same? He resolves this question by mapping both kinds of identity onto a narrative identity.

Narrative identity articulates the kind of self that can be found between the dialectic of selfhood and sameness, mediating between the pole of character and the pole of self-

maintenance; for in narrative the self is both ascribed a character and given initiative to take on meaningful life projects irrespective of its character's leanings. In other words, the narrative framework allows the self to both stay the same and change in time.

Placed within a narrative, the self's actions become recognized as practices, which is to say, interactive activities whose meanings are established socially. Ricoeur argues that practices are further organized into hierarchies: basic actions constitute a profession or an art or a game, and professions, arts, and games make-up life plans or constitute vocations. The self is born into a world of practices from which it must choose projects and life plans that can then give its life narrative unity. In one sense then, the self is constructed by the world in which it is embedded, as its choices are inherently interwoven with its cultural and social surroundings; but in another sense, the self projects itself into the future by taking on chosen life plans. Narrative thus provides a version of self that stands at the crossroads of both temporal modes of being; what is more, it provides a version of self that is embedded in social relations, yet all the while capable of transcending them by taking individual initiative. But at the end of the narrative interpretation, Ricoeur asks, who tells their story? After all, the self is not reducible to its narrative, as narrative serves as one interpretative answer to the question of self – a self whose reality can only be glimpsed at the end of a hermeneutical analysis. Asking who tells the story relates directly to the question 'who is responsible (for the story)?' and carries the narrative toward ethics. It is at this point that Ricoeur reveals the unique ethical understanding of the self's unfolding.

Telling a life story involves the dialectic of self-constancy, which, it was earlier explained, involves the dialectic of keeping one's word. In keeping one's word, or in 'promising to remain constant', an *I* promises to remain the same despite changing circumstances or leanings of its character. Ricoeur demonstrates how this dialectic is fundamentally an ethical notion: an *I* is accountable for its actions in front of an other, as the other is counting on the *I* to perform them. Responsibility is entailed in both meanings of 'being accountable for' and 'counting on'. Accordingly, choosing a life plan, a vocation, or simply making a future commitment is necessarily an ethical decision whereby an *I* promises an other to stick to its aim. It is precisely this responsibility of oneself to another that prevents the self from dissolving into a mere 'Who shall I be today?' (Meech, 2006, p.

80). And it is in this explanation that Ricoeur exposes the ethical dimension that appears at the very heart of the self, in the gap between ‘oneself and another’ that shapes the dialectic of the lived self. Next, he turns to narrate the trajectory of the self’s ethical decision-making, offering an account for the manner in which the self chooses its course with and for others.

According to Ricoeur, the self begins its ethical course by positing a teleological aim, which is, “aiming at the ‘good life’, with and for others, in just institutions” (*OA*, p. 172). By institutions Ricoeur means “the structure of living together as this belongs to a historical community” (p. 194). In positing an ethical aim, the self esteems itself in relation to what it views as comprising a good life: the dreams and ideals that it regards as constituting a more or less fulfilled life. Notably, since its vision is necessarily born from a world already endowed with practices, the self never comes to choose its course solipsistically; further, the meanings of practices are organized by ‘standards of excellence’, which ascribe values to their immanent internal goods. In this sense, even the most intimate vision of the good life is founded on the self’s relations with others.

What is more, Ricoeur adds that the self desires to live well with and for others, as is evident from the fact that the self’s actions towards others are never guided entirely by moral norms. The self’s benevolent desire to live well with others is revealed in friendships at times when the moral norms that govern them are threatened or annihilated (Meech, 2006). Further, Ricoeur contends that in virtuous friendships, the self can be seen to care for the other as for oneself and by this perceives itself as an other among others; indeed, it is here that esteeming oneself as another is rendered equivalent to esteeming the other as a oneself. Finally, the mutuality of friendship necessarily extends beyond dyadic relations, as the self desires to live with and for others in just institutions. Without this latter desire, the self’s relationships would be limited to mere dyads and it would fail to esteem third parties. Moreover, according to Ricoeur, the desire for equality establishes the prior commitment necessary for the formation of political institutions.

While the self aims at fulfilling its ethical vision, it nevertheless confronts a reality that regularly challenges its goals. On the one hand, others place demands on the self to which the self must respond; and on the other hand, the self is always tempted to act

according to less virtuous inclinations. Ricoeur contends that we are always free to act out of duty for the law (which includes our ethical aim) or against the law (i.e., according to less virtuous inclinations). Given the possibility of choosing the less desirable course, the self deliberates its aim by submitting it to the test of universality, wherein it evaluates the aim in light of others' convictions, and attempts to choose those actions that it believes others in its tradition should follow. Notably, Ricoeur maintains that this deliberative process characterizes the formulation of moral laws in general and based on this defends the ethical aim as more fundamental than normative moral rules. But when there are no moral rules that guide unambiguously, the self must return to its ethical aim, albeit this time more critically, having already confronted the real dilemmas of its cultural world.

In short, the trajectory of the self's ethical deliberation involves a tripartite course: first, the self directs its actions toward the good by posing an ethical aim; faced with a reality that conflicts with its achieving this aim, the self evaluates its actions in light of the norms of its tradition; and finally, when there is no norm that guides unambiguously, the self critically returns to its ethical aim in order to choose its course of action. In this sense, Ricoeur's theory exemplifies a version of self that is thoroughly ethical even its private deliberations, yet at the same time capable of choosing its own path in a world of others.

*Ricoeur's Account responds to Merleau-Ponty's View*

As Ricoeur offers a detailed examination of the manner in which experience takes shape according to choices deliberated in language with others, he provides an account of the reflective dimensions of experience that I considered to be missing in Merleau-Ponty. As already explained, in focusing on the pre-reflective structures of lived experience, Merleau-Ponty does not elaborate on the nature of the deliberative processes that accompany our unique choices for existence. In my view, the closest explanation for our distinctive preferences is provided by the notion of style, which configures the basic structure of each existence and in this arranges what for it becomes uniquely meaningful. However, style itself does not explain how we reflectively decide to follow certain paths over others, or how we can purposely act against what we once considered meaningful. As a pre-reflective configuration, style is never recognized by the individual concerned, and can in fact be apperceived only from 'the outside' by other persons. In this sense, style



accounts for that generalized manner in which we come to perceive unique meanings in the world, but it does not explain how we reflectively choose from these one life course over another. Ricoeur's view is meaningful here, since, by examining the linguistic dimensions of experience, he provides an account of how we navigate our lives within the language of culture.

In my view, the most significant contribution of Ricoeur's account lies in his insightful unveiling of the ethical nature of lived experience; specifically, Ricoeur shows how choosing a life course is an ethical decision through and through: lived experience unfolds as a self projects its plans into the future through the intermediary of an other. The other is here inscribed in the very conception of the self, defining the dual nature of the self's experience: self *and* other constitute the experience 'of the self', and it is only together, in their dialectical relation that lived experience unfolds. What is more, the other provides the necessary impetus to hold the self in place and sustains its continuity: it is in promising an other to hold firm that the self becomes responsible for its actions and is held accountable for maintaining its plans. The self is in this sense ethical at its very foundation, responsibility is found in the very gap that separates the self's two poles of identity and that maintains their unfolding dialectic.

Further, Ricoeur elaborates on the self's dialectic with a study of its ethical trajectory, which results in a version of self that begins its course with a teleological aim directed at a good life. What is important here, in my opinion, is that Ricoeur shows how even the self's most private aims are not established in isolation, but are esteemed in light of others. In this sense, we do not project our plans 'straight away' at the world, for our goals necessarily pass *through* or *by* an other in their very formulation. I consider this orientation of the self *with the other* directed at the world to provide a meaningful addition to Merleau-Ponty's view, since the latter holds that we communicate with the world immediately, as embodied beings intertwined with the world directly through flesh; in this sense, Merleau-Ponty does not recognize that our orientation toward 'the world' always occurs with others. Even when he explains that our perception is permeated by a sexual atmosphere (i.e., in *Phenomenology of Perception*), which itself comprises an indispensable attitude toward others, this embodied, 'ethical' orientation is pre-reflectively constituted

and ineffable in the end. Ricoeur on the other hand shows how our experience is explicitly oriented toward others in language, introducing with this a dimension of the other that is not accounted for in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

But where Ricoeur seems to fall short is in providing an ontological grounding for his account. Indeed, at the end of his analyses of the self's ethical trajectory, Ricoeur recognizes that it only serves as one interpretation of the self. No analysis or set of analyses can exhaust the phenomenon under consideration, since each inevitably ends with a new aporia that can only be accounted for with attestation. Because of the potential for an endless re-interpretation of self, Ricoeur begins to seek an ontological view that could ground the self with others in the world.

In his final chapter, he begins to sketch an ontology under the aegis of attestation. First, he claims that attestation provides the certainty that the hermeneutic of self refers to the same being and consequently, that this being is more than its interpretation. Second, the dialectic of sameness and selfhood is attested to in the belief in our being acting and suffering selves; notably, at this point Ricoeur considers his fragmented studies as united not in a substantive unity, but in an analogical unity of *human action* to which we can each attest. Finally, Ricoeur shows that the dialectic of self-constancy is attested to in our experience of three kinds of *passivities*, that of the body (as flesh), other selves, and conscience. These three passivities are phenomenologically experienced prior to their being articulated, and thus demonstrate genuine otherness to which the self is held accountable. In short, Ricoeur's ontology reveals a self that cannot be deposited to mere interpretation, but is always glimpsed at the end of our analyses.

It should be noted that in his ontological sketch Ricoeur gives the body a special ontological status: as both alive and owned, the flesh of the body is the 'proper' otherness of selfhood; it is that "place of all the passive syntheses on which the active syntheses are constructed" (p. 324). Further, more than an intimacy to the self, the flesh constitutes our fundamental openness to the world, as it is only as bodies amongst bodies that we become part of the world. Finally, it is because of our embodiment in flesh that we find our selves already in the world, bequeathed with the existential task of having to-be (p. 327).

In an important sense, Ricoeur's ontological sketch in *Oneself as Another* may be seen as groundwork for a more elaborate ontological theory that he develops in later works (cf. *Memory, History, Forgetting* [2004]). However, as I have not studied his later texts, I leave their relevance to the current project undetermined. What is of import here is that Ricoeur begins to outline an ontology that he leaves uncompleted in *Oneself as Another*; and given the unquestionable similarity between this project and Merleau-Ponty's aim in "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" (VI), in my final chapter, I explore how Ricoeur's account can be given flesh if it is read with Merleau-Ponty.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION OF MERLEAU-PONTY AND RICOEUR

The goal of my project was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the nature of experience. I decided to do this through the works of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur since they have offered significant contributions to this precise question. What is more, I considered their views to be directly comparable, for both emerge from the French phenomenological tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in this they share important assumptions about the nature of experience. Most importantly, both accept that experience ought to be understood as on the one hand freely unfolding according to the intentions of a given subject, and at the same time as necessarily grounded in a natural and cultural world. Accordingly, both philosophers attempt to show how experience unfolds through an ongoing act of *transcendence* wherein a subject *of the world* (i.e., one who is constituted by structures that precede his or her existence) projects unique meanings onto the world, and wherein these meanings are always *indebted to* and even *made possible by* the lived context in which the subject is found.

As each philosopher aims to describe this process most comprehensively, each focuses on different dimensions of experience, and as a result offers a unique account of its unfolding. Importantly, the two thinkers' differences in focus initially provided me with a second motivation for mutually considering both of their accounts. My reasoning was that, if we accept their shared phenomenological approach as a foundation for a comprehensive account of experience, then each of their unique perspectives could be seen as distinctively contributive to such an account. Indeed, my study sought to determine how their distinct views could inform one another in meaningful ways.

### *Overview*

In the following discussion, I argue that the differences between Merleau-Ponty's and Ricoeur's accounts are too major to consider them as contributing together to a single, comprehensive account of experience. Because each espouses significantly different contentions on what is primary in the unfolding of experience, it is difficult to determine how the two views could inform one another directly. Merleau-Ponty grounds experience in perception, and from thereon locates the central motives of our lives in embodied structures; and as his analyses continuously lead back to the pre-reflective, he never

examines directly how reflective experience takes place in language. Ricoeur on the other hand claims that our lives unfold primarily through the possibilities of language. Thus in Ricoeur's framework the role of the body becomes allotted to secondary status, as its influence is determined by the powers we allot to it in language; whereas in Merleau-Ponty's theory, language is an act performed by a body whose structure in flesh is more fundamental than language. Given these markedly different priorities, I claim that the two accounts cannot be mapped within a single account of experience.

However, despite these critical differences, I still argue that it is meaningful to read these philosophers side by side, not because they together contribute to one broader theory of existence, but because each of their distinct insights can point to important shortcomings in the other's account, expanding by this what must be seriously considered in future theories of experience. I also suggest that in such a reading priority be given to Merleau-Ponty's view, since I believe his framework of the flesh offers a comprehensive foundation for understanding experience, and specifically, one that is more effective than the view offered by Ricoeur. In what follows, I show how all this is the case, after which I consider the implications of my study within the context of psychological science.

#### *Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur at Variance*

While I began my studies under the impression that Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur had enough in common to mutually account for a more comprehensive understanding of experience, my studies have shown that their direct comparison is rather difficult. The major issue here is that each philosopher begins their analysis from a different starting point, which is what leads each in turn to a distinct account of the unfolding of experience.

By prioritizing perception, Merleau-Ponty focuses on how experience takes its shape according to embodied processes. His analyses are founded on examinations of perceptual experience, from which are deduced pre-reflective structures capable of configuring its observed nature. The entire ontology defended in "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" (*VI*) takes as its starting point a detailed examination of the visible and tangible world. Accordingly, it is based on his original faith in the primacy of perception that Merleau-Ponty discloses lived experience as a pellicle of a more primordial conversation between the flesh of the body and that of the world. In a theory that prioritizes perception,

our basic ability to transcend the established structures in the world becomes explained via embodied terms: it is because we are each ‘coiled flesh’ made up of the same thickness as the world that we can *through* flesh project our unique intentions. From the primacy of perception, Merleau-Ponty claims lived experience takes its unique (perceptual) form because we are at once bodies *of the world*—constituted by the same structure as the world—and bodies *in the world*—conscious beings capable of transcending their immediate contexts.

In contrast, Ricoeur assigns the foundation of experience to language and based on this offers an account of experience that is shaped primarily by our relations with others in culture. His central method for understanding experience is grounded in a hermeneutical analysis of the self, which he supplements with a phenomenological account only when it becomes clear that the former method alone fails to account for the self’s temporal unfolding. Further, given that his two accounts of identity (i.e., character and keeping’s one promise) derive from careful examinations of the self in language, their resolution within narrative identity offers an understanding of experience founded in cultural and historical traditions.

Thus, whereas Merleau-Ponty entrenches existence in flesh, Ricoeur emplots the self in narrative. For Ricoeur experience takes place primarily within linguistic traditions, themselves pre-configured by the history of culture. And by taking language as foundational for the unfolding of experience, he views the act of transcendence central to our phenomenological experience to take place in narrative: we always find always ourselves in an already pre-configured, narrated world, but as characters within a greater story, we can co-narrate our lives with others.

Ricoeur’s phenomenological analyses elucidate the ethical nature of the transcendental act, defining the very experience of the self as an experience of self *and* other. As I have argued above, the structure of this self-other dialectic of selfhood is configured by a responsibility that motivates the self to hold firm to its promises. From this central understanding, Ricoeur traces an entire account of the self’s phenomenological trajectory, one that is said to begin from a central ethical aim, to ‘live the good life *with and for others*’. Experience is in turn understood as an ethical enterprise, one that takes shape

by virtue of our ongoing re-appraisal of our relations with others. Indeed, for Ricoeur the very continuity of our lives is sustained by our responsibility toward others to whom we are hold ourselves accountable.

Thus we find that Ricoeur's account of linguistic experience unfolds according to markedly different considerations than the embodied view championed by Merleau-Ponty. For Ricoeur experience is guided primarily by ethical deliberations in language; for Merleau-Ponty, conscious life is guided by the nature of a primordial flesh. These differences can be understood given the different starting points from which each of the philosophers open up the question of experience. Because Merleau-Ponty begins his analyses seeking to comprehend perceptual experience, he is led directly to concerns with embodiment; and since Ricoeur accepts language as foundational for the unfolding of experience, he becomes deeply concerned with cultural encounters with others. In this way, although both thinkers seek from the phenomenological stance a theory that could explain our status as both of the world and capable of transcending worldly structures, in so doing, each responds to the question of experience in a distinct manner, presenting in this way markedly different views of its nature.

Given these important differences between both accounts, my initial intention to map them within a single theory of experience appears rather impossible. While it remains the case that both philosophers defend phenomenological theories of existence and that both of their views differ primarily in terms of their focuses on distinct dimensions of experience (i.e., embodied vs. linguistic), because each philosopher attributes different values to these dimensions, the two accounts cannot be regarded as complementary within a single theory.

But despite this inability, I contend that it is nevertheless meaningful to read these views side by side; for in studying them simultaneously, we can appreciate the distinct insights offered by the philosophers in light of one another, gaining from this not only a broader understanding of the complexity of phenomenological experience, but a starting point from which further theories could be developed. For reasons I now outline, I suggest that a mutual reading of the two philosophical accounts give precedence to Merleau-Ponty's framework.

*Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur: Mutual Reading*

In my view, the advantage gained from a synchronized reading of Merleau-Ponty's and Ricoeur's descriptions lies in the concurrent consideration of both embodied and ethical dimensions of experience. If we acknowledge each philosopher's position as delineating a critical theme within the unfolding of existence, then reading both views together provides a richer perspective of existence that cannot be achieved when either version is taken singly. In this sense, by considering the two philosophies concurrently, we can appreciate how experience is both embodied and linguistically constituted with others.

However, the aforementioned, fundamental differences between the basic assumptions of the two views further complicate the nature of such a reading. Already I have concluded that Merleau-Ponty's and Ricoeur's accounts cannot be merged into a single theory, and have by this implied that their views are too distinct to be given equal weight on a single plane of analysis. Thus, if we are to consider both accounts concurrently, it remains to be determined which of the them ought to be given priority within such a reading. If we decide to give precedence to Ricoeur's view, then it follows that Merleau-Ponty's body as flesh must be stripped of its foundational role within the unfolding of experience; in other words, the body in this case has to be understood primarily as a linguistic notion, one whose powers are determined through negotiations with others in language. On the other hand, if we choose to give precedence to Merleau-Ponty's account, then both Ricoeur's narrative framework and his ethical dialectic must step down from their guiding roles in the unfolding of experience, for the very maintenance of such linguistic relations has to be seen as grounded in a more primordial flesh.

My position is that we give precedence to Merleau-Ponty, for I consider his conception of flesh to provide an effective framework for understanding how embodied and linguistic existential dimensions can unfold simultaneously and within a single fabric of experience. With the notion of flesh, Merleau-Ponty synthesizes all means for elocution—embodied and cultural—so that they can together account for the unfolding of experience. With this notion Merleau-Ponty's view carries an important advantage over Ricoeur, for in intertwining linguistic and embodied dimensions within a single structure, Merleau-Ponty



does not demand that we treat either dimension as primary; the visible and invisible can be inseparably intertwined at the same primordial level.

Let us first return to Ricoeur's account. In his phenomenological theory, we find that embodied processes must necessarily come second to linguistic analysis and accordingly, his framework directs us away from examining embodied and linguistic dimensions side by side (i.e., as *jointly* structuring the unfolding of experience). For Ricoeur, embodiment ought to be addressed eventually, but it does not explicitly underlie all experience. Experience essentially takes place on the plane of language, as it is the vicissitudes of the self in discourse that constitute what experience entails.

As Ricoeur's theory focuses on the linguistic dimensions of experience, it does not answer how the body can be constitutive of these linguistic possibilities. As a result, Ricoeur does not consider a number of integral issues concerning the relation of language and embodiment. For instance, are all bodies equally capable of experiencing the dialectic of selfhood? Does the experience of a neurological patient (say, Schneider) not suggest that such an account may not be applicable to all? Without explicitly involving the body in the unfolding of experience in language, Ricoeur's framework cannot address such issues. Indeed, since Ricoeur's theory derives its conclusions from examinations of contemporary Western discourse, his analyses can at most describe what is a 'normative' Western existence; it remains to be determined whether different kinds of embodied existences—be they impaired or advanced, mature or premature, male or female—should not require unique frameworks for understanding their experience in language.

Notably, with this critique I do not mean to suggest that Ricoeur does not recognize or make theoretical space for a multiplicity of possibilities of experiences; after all, from his perspective we are free to transcend our surroundings and in this co-author uniquely chosen life narratives. What is at issue here is not the contents of the stories told, but the very foundations of the structure within which they are maintained. Because he begins his analyses from an examination of language, Ricoeur takes for granted the embodied structures within which this language is sustained. This is exemplified in his very treatment of attestation, for despite having demonstrated that linguistic interpretations always reflect a more primordial, allusive phenomenological experience, Ricoeur treats the reflective

interpretation of experience as a separate question, and one that is essentially determined by cultural practices. Without simultaneously involving linguistic interpretation with the allusive phenomenological experience that it is recognized to describe, the linguistic nature of experience receives a detailed elaboration at the cost of unexplored embodied dimensions.

I consider Merleau-Ponty to outperform Ricoeur in this regard, for his notion of flesh, I contend, provides a meaningful framework within which the intertwinement of embodied and linguistic dimensions can be perceived. As a ubiquitous thickness—neither matter, nor mind, nor substance—flesh is a primordial principle of reversibility that intertwines both the visible and invisible dimensions of the world. Its reversibility is essential here, since on the one hand it allows for the conscious experience of an ordered world (in language), and at the same time, it admits of deeper embodied structures whose expansive natures are not limited to how they are unveiled in consciousness.

Recall that the flesh of the body is neither subject nor object, but an intertwinement of the two within a reversible ‘circle’; the body as subject and the body as object exist as the obverse and reverse of a single circular course. It is only in conscious experience that we come to distinguish between the body sensed and the body sentient, and this is because neither can be experienced at the same moment in time. Thus the flesh reveals itself in discrete forms, all the while implying the obverse of the reverse it discloses.

Importantly, as a ubiquitous principle, flesh is not limited to the tangible and visible world and the body is not understood as mere corporeity. Merleau-Ponty adds that in speaking and hearing speech, another kind of reversibility is disclosed, one that discloses the invisible dimension of the visible. We first encounter it in Proustian ideas, as their natures cannot be fully apprehended without being actually experienced; further, their ability to influence the body directly discloses the idea’s definite carnality. Merleau-Ponty then expands this understanding to include all ideational structures: all concepts have a place in flesh and this is because they only gain their meanings when they are uttered by embodied subjects. That is, because words only become meaningful when they are spoken, linguistic expressions must be understood in terms of their relation not merely to a given linguistic context, but to an embodied subject who speaks his or her world.

From these observations, Merleau-Ponty is able to outline another kind of reversibility in the flesh: that of *speech* and *what is signified*. Specifically, he proposes that at any given moment, flesh reveals itself in one of these two modes—either as speech or what is signified—although both modes are implied at all times. The experienced world in turn unfolds as signification itself, as a mode of being expressed by all the means for elocution—both embodied and linguistic—all configured within a single act in flesh.

In my view, the ingenuity of Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh lies in its ability to intertwine both natural and ideational structures within a single experiential fabric; in combining these dimensions, Merleau-Ponty avoids having to designate either as primary. At the primordial level, the makeup of the world is not defined by natural laws nor linguistic constitution alone; the flesh of the world is a thickness whose basic nature is to be 'to-be-articulated'. Experience takes unique forms in language because the world is a general, reversible flesh that courts from embodied beings speech about its nature; accordingly, it is as seeing and sonorous bodies made of flesh that we can intentionally communicate through it and in this delineate its uniquely visible forms. In such a way, with the flesh of the body and that of the world, Merleau-Ponty proposes an original theory for understanding how experience achieves its form from the mutual work of linguistic and embodied structures.

Given the above considerations, I contend that a mutual reading of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur's theories of experience is most effective if we take Merleau-Ponty's embodied framework as primary, for in this way we can perceive the unfolding of experience as founded in both cultural and embodied structures. In this way, Ricoeur's theory can also be given a preliminary grounding embodied existence: specifically, we can consider the dialectic of self and other as a movement configured in flesh. Notably, here I do not mean to suggest that Ricoeur's account be mapped onto Merleau-Ponty's ontology, as I have already argued against all attempts at constructing such a view. Instead, the concurrent consideration of the two accounts can stand at most as a rough delineation of the critical processes involved in the unfolding of experience. Indeed, its status is in an important sense at odds, since, as we have seen, the ethical orientation of the self in Ricoeur's theory does not readily match the orientation of the body in Merleau-Ponty's

account. Nevertheless, in reading these accounts side by side, we can come to recognize not only the important contributions of each philosopher's account, but those areas in need of elaboration. This brings me to conclude that future inquiries into the nature of experience ought to consider how embodied experience in language can unfold with explicit consideration of others.

### *Implications for Psychology*

What does a mutual reading of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur contribute to the field of psychology? Perhaps most evidently, given that psychology lacks a comprehensive theory of experience, these authors offer a meaningful, contemporary response to this precise shortfall, and in this they contribute a cultural and embodied account of what it is like to be in the world. But more than offering a theory 'to be considered', in disclosing the complexity of issues involved in experience, the two philosophers severely challenge psychology's central research framework.

As I explained in my introduction, psychology was established with the explicit intention of becoming a science among sciences. To make this possible, it deliberately pushed aside all metaphysical problems related to questions of experience and adopted a functionalist approach to psychological questions (Stam, 2006). With a functionalist framework, researchers have become licensed to devise innumerable abstract mental terms and processes to 'explain' behavior, for all that is necessary for the maintenance of such variables is that they be operationally related to specific sets of measurable properties. And with all metaphysical quandaries ignored, psychologists have been able to regard themselves as solely concerned with what is 'objectively true' about human existence. But in this it remains unquestioned how such truths are framed within implicit dualist or reductionist ontologies.

Given both Merleau-Ponty's and Ricoeur's theories of experience, it is clear, in my view, that the functionalist approach is a flawed method for studying human existence: both philosophers teach us that experience is everything but a process directed by the causal interactions of abstract variables. Experience, both thinkers contend, takes its unique shape according to our ongoing, circularly unfolding, interpretations of meaningful phenomena. As embodied beings in a cultural world, we navigate our lives by continuously re-

appraising our existence in characteristic ways representative of our distinct styles. In this sense, experience unfolds in a circular fashion and according to what is considered meaningful to the experiencing subject. Causal explanations are in principle incapable of capturing this hermeneutic character of existence, as they propose predetermined, linear accounts of the movement of experience.

What is more, no explanation—causal or other—can be given ‘objective’ status (i.e., as if it could somehow determine *why* a process occurred), for no claim about experience can avoid its status as cultural and historical interpretation, itself deemed meaningful by virtue of its position amongst accepted sets of practices. Consequently, all scientific ‘truths’ gain their significance in terms of their particular research frameworks.

Most importantly, once we acknowledge that there is no pre-established way for being in the world, then the notion of a ‘universal fact’ about human behavior becomes necessarily incoherent. Even when we ascribe chosen psychological explanations validity—which is what I propose with the ideas of the two thinkers discussed—these claims must be understood to represent the truths of a given historical time.

It follows that the particular understanding of experience that results from Merleau-Ponty’s and Ricoeur’s analyses too presents a contemporary version of experience. But the significance of it here is that it discloses a complexity in experience that goes unnoticed in psychological science. We gain from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological analyses the idea of a structural world that is essentially undefined, a flesh continually unveiling itself in ways that are distinctly meaningful for each existence, and configured uniquely by each body. Ricoeur expands this by showing how what is meaningful to us is always mediated by others with whom we share our existence. Read together these accounts propose a rich understanding of how experience can unfold in both natural and social contexts. And from such a perspective, causal and/or ‘objective’ approaches appear limited methods for studying human existence.

Indeed, once we acknowledge the contextual nature of all human endeavors, psychological science itself can be evaluated as a set of established practices (including the functionalist approach) accepted as meaningful at a given time (namely, the past century). In other words, psychological research methods can be examined as particular ways of

approaching questions of human life—and not as objective methods progressively uncovering universal truths. Taking such a perspective can in turn provide the distance necessary to evaluate whether the discipline's widely accepted research methods are indeed appropriate for studying human existence.

In my view, this study demonstrates that the scientific method is not helpful for investigating the unfolding of psychological phenomena. The discipline of psychology, I contend, misses the point of studying human experience: while psychology may consider itself to reveal the 'true' nature of human existence, given its generally accepted functionalist approach, its claims can for the most part be seen as abstract concoctions founded in dualist or reductionist assumptions. And while the discipline may appear to grow progressively more precise, in actuality psychology continues to redefine itself, according to both its unique style of ('objectively') apprehending the world and to the demands it experiences from others (i.e., 'to become a science'). Of course it is not this 'redefining' process in itself that is at issue in psychological science, for, given the hermeneutic understandings proposed by Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, the ongoing act of reappraisal is characteristic of all human endeavors. The major problem, I contend, is that the discipline does not recognize itself as unfolding in this kind of way and accordingly, it fails to perceive itself as embedded within a flawed functionalist framework.

My study suggests that psychologists ought to re-examine their basic assumptions about the nature of experience in order to recognize the major problems prevalent in their research. The concurrent reading of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur can in turn facilitate such an enterprise, since, in my view, their shared contributions offer a meaningful starting point from which psychological theories could be evaluated and developed.

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