

NATURE AS A PHENOMENON

Nature appears in Merleau-Ponty's early texts more as a context for a phenomenology of embodied existence than as a topic of interest in its own right.¹ Since the philosopher became intensely interested in nature only from 1955 or 1956 on, one might think that an exploration of the earlier phenomenology of perception and behavior constitutes a digression from the later "new" ontology. Yet there are at least two reasons why this is not so.

First, although Merleau-Ponty deploys his phenomenology as a critical response to previous philosophies, principally Cartesianism and its progeny, it also serves as a groundwork for the "new" ontology to come. The latter preserves the early work because, as noted in the Introduction, although Merleau-Ponty significantly changes his conception of *method* for doing philosophy, he does not repudiate his earlier descriptive results. Merleau-Ponty's late work "remains passionately phenomenological" in some sense because it thinks "as closely as possible to phenomenality in order to better inhabit it" (Janicaud 1991, 15). However, the later writings will advance a new way to think phenomenality and, as we shall see, drive the earlier phenomenology beyond its limits.

Furthermore, the expression, "new" ontology, shows that Merleau-Ponty does not regard his later texts as replacing phenomenology with an ontology. Since he already considered his early work to be an ontology, the later writings consist of what he took to be a more adequate ontology. In the early works, nature appears as a phenomenon, a correlate of consciousness,

1. "The natural world is the horizon of all horizons . . . which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life. Its counterpart within me is the given, general and pre-personal existence of my sensory functions" (PhP 330/381). "Le monde naturel est l'horizon de tous les horizons . . . qui garantit à mes expériences une unité donnée et non voulue par dessous toutes les ruptures de ma vie personnelle et historique, et dont le corrélatif est en moi l'existence donnée, générale et prépersonnelle de mes fonctions sensorielles."

albeit a body-consciousness that he distinguished from a Cartesian *cogito* or a Kantian and Husserlian transcendental subjectivity. In *The Structure of Behavior*, nature is the complex of “indifferent” things, and the structure of behavior disengages the body from that complex and reinserts the body “as a totality to be understood in the perception of the spectator” (PC II, 17). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, perceptual consciousness is situated within nature rather than outside it, but in both works nature appears as a correlate of a body consciousness. By contrast, in the later writings, nature is no longer only what one can “show,” or “let appear” as phenomenon inasmuch as the visible is always doubled by an invisible that on principle cannot itself appear.²

Second, the earlier phenomenology provides necessary concrete details for the otherwise largely empty notions in the late texts, chiefly *The Visible and the Invisible*. As Rudolf Bernet rightly points out, revisiting the earlier texts prevents the central notions of *The Visible and the Invisible* from languishing as puzzles and remaining void of “phenomenological content” (1993, 55). One cannot go directly to the flesh for ontological understanding any more than, as Husserl never tired of stating, one can go directly to an essence. Therefore, in the current work we will approach Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology of nature as he himself did—through his earlier phenomenology.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF NATURE

In these earlier writings, Merleau-Ponty portrays nature from the perspective of the lived body—also called “the phenomenal body,” “the body proper” (*le corps propre*), “my own body,” and “incarnate *cogito*”—and its correlative life world. These topics, as well as his conception of phenomenology, have been the subjects of multiple lengthy commentaries, including our own, over at least the last forty years, and Lawrence Hass’s fine new study (2008) is only the latest addition. Therefore, it is not necessary or even desirable to resurvey the same ground in fine detail. Rather, our interest lies only in its major outcroppings that are most important for understanding Merleau-Ponty’s early view of nature.³

To begin with, the lived body is immersed in the world with others, and exists in perceptual-behavioral circuits with things. To express this

2. Merleau-Ponty insisted on this difference. As he told one of us (Van der Veken), the invisible is not like the hidden back side of a chest that could be seen if the back were exposed. It is also important to keep in mind that, as Janicaud notes, Merleau-Ponty defends, “ ‘not an absolute invisible . . . but the invisible of this world’ ” (1991, 22, citing VI 151/198).

3. For much more about the treatment of nature in *The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*, see Toadvine (2009), Chapters 1 and 2, respectively.

fundamental, inextricable involvement, Bernet states that Merleau-Ponty's sense of the phenomenological reduction consists of a "reduction to natural life" in place of a "reduction of natural life" (1993, 57). This is true, but only if we bear in mind that there are also certain senses of nature that Merleau-Ponty rejects. One of these, discussed by Bernet himself, is nature considered as scientific objects in the sense of wholes of isolable parts existing in external relations with each other—*partes extra partes*. Another is the conception of nature as an immutable substratum to which cultural meanings get added. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no fixed and abiding layer of human nature to which culture gets added. Everything about us is equally "fabricated" and "natural,"⁴ rooted in "simple biological being," but also what eludes "the simplicity of animal life" (PhP 189/221).⁵

For example, at times our existence is dominated by biological norms, as when our desire for self-preservation holds sway. At other times, however, those norms can be displaced by a "personal choice" (Ibid., 78/93) that places our continued existence in jeopardy, such as risking our lives to save others in danger of being killed. Because there are "many ways" for a body and consciousness to exist (Ibid., 124/144), the body supports "an indefinite number of symbolic systems" that surpass the meanings of " 'natural' gestures," but which also atrophy if not continually funded by our bodily involvement with other people and with things around us (RC 9/18).

Because there is no immutably natural substratum of our existence, Merleau-Ponty will later criticize Marx in a way to which we shall return with Sartre. He will argue that Marx's theory of history is grounded on a view of unexplained and "perhaps mythical" Nature⁶ that is supposed to be self-contained, "pure object, being in itself," but which is never present in our experience because the latter always "shapes and transforms it" (RC 64/93).⁷ Therefore, this pure Nature in itself is "everywhere and nowhere, like an obsessive fear" (Ibid).

In his early phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's positive characterization of Nature begins with this unity of the physical and the spiritual, the

4. Cf. VI 253–54/306–307, and for additional discussions of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of classical natural law theories, see Hamrick 1987, 187ff.

5. Cf. PhP 160/186: "[B]iological existence gears into human existence and is never indifferent to its distinctive rhythm" (PhP 160/186). "[L]existence biologique est embrayée sur l'existence humaine et n'est jamais indifférente à son rythme propre."

6. From the 1957 course on "The Concept of Nature" onward, Merleau-Ponty usually, but not always, capitalizes "Nature." It is there that he discusses Schelling for the first time, which is perhaps related to this stylistic change. We will follow that practice when referring to Merleau-Ponty.

7. The view that experience "shapes and transforms" our view of Nature is decidedly untrue in the famous episode in Sartre's *La Nausée* when M. Roquentin encounters the dark, gnarled tree root, of which more below. It is more nearly he that is shaped and transformed than the tree root.

body and its cultural milieu, and develops with increasing specificity and sophistication to symbolic systems. At the first and most basic level, Nature presents itself to us as pre-predicative, anonymous, pre-personal bodily life out of which personal life develops by means of a “recovery [*reprise*]” (PhP 254/293). This pre-personal life is characterized by the “*on*,” i.e., “one perceives” rather than a *cogito* that intervenes with personal acts. It is a “silent” or “tacit *cogito*” (PhP 402/461), “another subject beneath me” that takes up a preexisting world and that designates my place in it. This “tacit *cogito*” is described as a “captive and natural spirit,” as opposed to “the momentary body” that is deployed in making “personal choices” (PhP 254/294).

For Merleau-Ponty, human existence consists of a continual interchange of the pre-personal and the personal (PhP 84/99), the natural aspects of the lived body, of material things, other people, and the world around us, and the body’s spiritual dimensions. However, the pre-personal and the personal are not joined together externally, an in-itself and a for-itself, as separable “parts.” Rather, they interpenetrate, so to say: personal life finds its anchorage in Nature because the pre-personal body is already animated by life. The “physiological” and the “psychic” “gear into each other” (*s’engrènent les uns sur les autres*) (Ibid., 77/91) because they are never separated to begin with.⁸ Moreover, just as the existential structure of Dasein for Heidegger consists of being-in-the-world-with-others, so also, for Merleau-Ponty, the lived body, other people, material things, and the world around us all form a unitary system. Thus, Merleau-Ponty writes, there is an “ontological world and body⁹ which we find at the core of the subject” (Ibid., 408/467).

In its continual oscillation with the personal, the pre-personal life of the body manifests itself most directly and primarily in perception, behavior, and expression. To describe this pre-personal life, Merleau-Ponty relies heavily on the experiential and experimental results of Gestalt psychologists. Indeed, in his 1946 address to the *Société française de Philosophie* in which he defended the principal theses of *Phenomenology of Perception*, his explanation of “perception as an original modality of consciousness” begins immediately by referring to “the unprejudiced study of perception by [Gestalt]psychologists” (Prim.Percep. 12/103).

It has proven convenient for some philosophers during and after Merleau-Ponty’s lifetime to indict his work as “merely psychology”—a charge

8. The early texts, mainly *Phenomenology of Perception*, employ a number of dyadic descriptions of this unity, which shift in meaning from one set of terms to another. As Hass compendiously lists them, they are “(1) the habit body and the personal body, (2) the impersonal and the personal, (3) the biological and the individual, (4) the sedimented and the spontaneous, [and] (5) the organic and the existential” (2008, 87).

9. The English translation conceals the fact that “ontological” modifies both “world” and “body”: “Le monde et le corps ontologiques. . . .”

that has been leveled more than once against phenomenology itself. In the 1946 address, he showed that he was aware of this criticism (Ibid., 13/404) and subsequent discussion indicated that he was correct to anticipate the objection. As we shall see, his struggle to demonstrate the ontological import of phenomenology formed one of his main reasons for developing a “new” ontology.

Merleau-Ponty takes both Gestalt psychology and phenomenology to have significant ontological import, although the Gestaltists themselves, he believed, did not grasp how their research results undermined their causal account of perception.¹⁰ Their traditionally mechanistic account of perception construed it to be the passive effect of prior and separable stimuli, whereas their research results revealed perception to be an active process of spontaneously organizing or structuring a given perceptual field. Perception is, thus, neither passive nor separate and distinct from the stimuli that purportedly determine it. Instead, in the way that perception selectively arranges and organizes stimuli according to certain bodily norms, to achieve equilibrium with its environment, perception helps constitute the stimuli as such. Therefore, objective properties and subjective intentions are not just intermixed, but in fact create a new type of unity.

This new type of unity comes about because, as opposed to supposedly atomistic sensations of pure color, sound, and the like—which are actually the objects of a very artificially framed consciousness, usually in laboratory situations¹¹—the simplest perceptual datum forms part of a perceptual field as a focal point against a background context, and is already “laden with a meaning” (PhP 4/10). A perceptual *field* opens itself to us and we to it. We inhabit this field not as spectators, but as active participants, and it is this participation that explains the fact that body and world are to be found “at the core of the subject.”

This participatory structuring of a perceptual field is evident in the description of a Gestalt structure. Negatively, Merleau-Ponty defines it as a whole that is irreducible to the sum of its “parts” (VI 204/258). The structure is neither a thing, a collection of things, nor opposed to them. Positively, a Gestalt is a whole in which each part is internally related to each other part. The whole is present in each part, the whole is more than the sum of

10. This was the first of many instances that Merleau-Ponty advanced this critique of science. Also, as we shall see, he understands the full ontological value of the Gestalt to be disclosed only in his “new” ontology in which he bluntly states, there is “no other meaning than carnal, figure and ground” (VI 265/319).

11. Cf. Heidegger’s observation that “[w]hat we ‘first’ hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking waggon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling. It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to ‘hear’ a ‘pure noise’ ” (1962, 207).

its parts, and a change in one part does not leave the others undisturbed. Hence, each part is interdependent rather than independent.

Exactly how such experiences are “laden with meaning” depends on how values of space and motion and rest are distributed according to the focal point and background of the phenomenon. To consider only spatial values, there is the way that a change of the spatial significance of some part(s) within the whole changes its (their) experiential identity as, for example, in Edgar Rubin’s famous illustration of the “face or vases” (see, for instance, Gurwitsch 1964, 118–19), or in the equally familiar “duck/rabbit” example that Ludwig Wittgenstein discusses in *The Philosophical Investigations* (1968, 194). Such examples illustrate the first entry into Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the celebrated theme of ambiguity—that “what we live or think always has several meanings” (PhP 269/197). Here, as with bodily phenomena discussed below, the chief significance of ambiguity is to stress the active structuring of a perceptual field as opposed to deterministic causal accounts of perception and behavior. Ambiguity also permeates Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of social phenomena, as discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g., Hamrick 1989).

For the same reason, such phenomena also contradict the ontology of the object. They demonstrate that what is given in perception is not something purely objective to a spectator-like subject, but rather comes into being in the way that the lived body participates in the fact that and how it is given.

This is certainly the case with the well-known Müller-Lyer illusion (PhP 6/12) in which, when angled lines are attached to horizontal lines of equal length, the two horizontal lines appear unequal. What is particularly interesting about this example is that not only does the phenomenon not correspond to the stimulus, but also one can know theoretically that the two horizontal lines are parallel before, during, and after the addition of the auxiliary lines and yet the illusion appears anyway. For Merleau-Ponty, this is no mere psychological curiosity, but rather something with ontological weight. Therefore, he will argue against placing the Gestalt in the framework of consciousness and cognition (VI 205–206/258–59). Each “part” has a functional significance within the whole that is, in turn, “considered as the equilibrated and balanced coexistence of its functional parts in their thoroughgoing interdependence” (Gurwitsch 1964, 149).

The selective structuring of a perceptual field is also temporal. A melody, for instance, does not equal the sum of its notes because each note has only a functional significance within the whole, and Merleau-Ponty points out that this fact explains why the melody survives transpositions to a different key. Conversely, one change merely in the relationships between the notes will suffice to decisively change the melody (SNS 49/87). Similarly,

in films the perception of any given shot is contextualized by what precedes it, and this sequence of shots generates a new whole that does not add up to the mere sum of its individual shots (Ibid., 54/97).

The organization of a perceptual field likewise characterizes behavior, for different situational responses occur to the same bodily excitation. We react to stimuli holistically, and in different situations they will assume different meanings for the bodily organism. The reflex is not the product of preexisting stimuli because there is a reversibility between the two such that the reflex “turns back upon” the stimuli and gives them a meaning that derives from the entire situation (PhP 79/94). Therefore, subjective intentions and objective properties are thoroughly mixed up with each other and comprise “a new whole” (SC 13/11).

For Merleau-Ponty, this “mixed-upness” implies that perception and behavior are intelligible sense-giving activities that evidence a pre-reflective motor intentionality anterior to the intervention of conscious acts or reflective constitutions of meaning. It is usual to point out that intentionality, as Husserl conceives it, means that consciousness is always *of* something, but it is not as common to add that intentionality is much more than that. Motor intentionality for Merleau-Ponty is not just one feature of experience among others, but also their common pivot. It is the axial theme of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of incarnation because it is through our motor intentionality that, as opposed to the objective body, the lived body, also called “the knowing body” (PhP 390 n. 1/357, n.4), becomes a system of powers for exploring and making sense of its world. It becomes an “I can” in addition to an “I think,” a view that persists in Merleau-Ponty’s later works as well (OE 163/21). This “I can” or “I am able to,” which Merleau-Ponty borrows from Husserl’s unpublished papers (PhP 137/160)—possibly the manuscripts that became *Ideas II* (see §60, 277)—is the means by which perception can become “a nascent *logos*” (“un *logos* à l’état naissant”) (Prim. Percp. 25/133).

In the birth of this *logos*, consciousness and mobility are so intimately intertwined that either can be said to be the cause of the other (RC 8/17), though they are simply two “halves” of the same whole. Conscious awareness and movement measured in objective space amount only to two abstract aspects of one existence (Ibid.). Or, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it later in “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” motor intentionality “ties together the stages of my exploration, the aspects of the thing, and the two series to each other” (Ibid., 167/211).

Further, the motor intentionality through which we possess many holds on the world provides in the same movement both the unity of the senses and the more inclusive unity of bodily processes and systems. In our intentional directedness toward the world, the senses achieve a “never-finished integration into one knowing organism” (PhP 233/270). The senses have

a synergy in virtue of which they interpenetrate in corporeal synesthesias, and Merleau-Ponty interprets the unity of the body according to the same model. Like the senses, bodily processes and systems also have a Gestalt unity because in their functioning they are not a collection of independent parts, but overlapping parts of a whole existing in internal rather than external relations with each other.

In addition, spatial unity becomes visible “only in the interplay of the sensory realms” (PhP 222/257). That is, the unity of things that beckon to our intersensorial explorations comes about in the same movement as does the unity of the body in its intentional explorations. Motor intentionality does not produce the unity of things, nor does the unity of the thing bring into being the correlative unity of a body consciousness. Rather, it is the relationship that is primary, and the unity of the body consciousness and the thing are dual and inextricably linked aspects of it.¹² We will return to this relational primacy with regard to Merleau-Ponty’s debt to Paul Claudel.

Given the centrality of motor intentionality for understanding how we form part of a unitary system of bodies, material things, and the world around us, it follows that the lived body cannot be simply an object amidst other objects. It is both empirical object and inhabited by a subject. It is “our general medium for having a world” (PhP 146/171), a theme that *The Visible and the Invisible* reprises with its claim that all notions of objects presume our “perceptual life” as their necessary correlate, a life that brings about “the primary openness to the world” (37/60).

The early writings express in several ways the non-objectivity of the lived body, as opposed to the objectified body studied in the sciences. There is, for example, the argument from permanent presence. My body, unlike all other entities, cannot be arrayed before me because it is always on the margins of my perceptual field. In this way, it is always “with me” (PhP 90/106).¹³ Second, bodily motility entails that the body’s spatial existence differs in principle from that of a purely material thing. The latter can be described as “in” (*dans*) space (and time) in a contained-container relationship, but the lived body ex-ists, stands forth dynamically in its various projects. Rather than being “in” space and time, the body “inhabits” them (PhP 139/162; cf. UI 5/403). Instead of being “in the world” in the first sense, it is “*au monde*,” something like “at the world,” the meaning of which is caught in English

12. Hass nicely states that, for Merleau-Ponty, perception consists of “a ‘synergy’ between my living, embodied self and the transcendent, natural world. It is the site where other embodied selves emerge, where our perspectives meld, cross, or intertwine (2008, 24–25).”

13. Whitehead also views the body in this way, expressed in identical language (and even in italics), when he states that “the ‘withness’ of the body is an ever-present, though elusive, element in our perceptions” (PR 312).

expressions such as being “on the town,” “on top of the world,” and the like. Hence, to characterize this lived contact with the world, Merleau-Ponty’s early works typically use “spatiality” and “temporality” for the lived body and “space” and “time” for the objects of scientific measurement.¹⁴

Third, our bodies present themselves to us as a non-objective “corporeal or postural schema” (UI 5/403).¹⁵ This schema orients us spatially because in the “practical system” (Ibid., 102/119) of perceiver and perceived, our bodies consist of the “zero point of orientation,” as *Ideas II* terms it (1989, 61; cited at N 75/108) or, as the *Cartesian Meditations* states, “my animate organism . . . is inseparable from the absolute Here” (1960, 123). As such, it gives meaning to words such as “on” and “under,” “near” and “far,” “up” and “down,” “left” and “right,” and “here” and “there.” Since the “corporeal schema” is how we perceive our bodies with respect to horizontal, vertical, and other crucial environmental coordinates, the lived body cannot be a mere object existing “under the gaze of a separated spirit” because that body is already subjectivized, or in-spirited, so to speak. It consists of our permanent perspective on the world around us, other people, and perceptual objects. As such, it consists of “the place where the spirit takes on a certain physical and historical situation” (UI 5/403).

Finally, the lived body possesses the ability to integrate instruments, tools, and other objects into its spatiality—for example, the blind person’s cane, the pianist’s or typist’s keyboard (PhP 154/180). The “body image” is an openness to the world (Ibid., 143, n. 3/168, n. 1) and provides us with the “mental and practical space” required to establish a stable equilibrium between the body and its environment. This equilibrium comes about as a result of habitual patterns of behavior that obviate the need to think our way through each new situation (Ibid., 87/103).

14. Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between space as an object of reflection and objective measurement and the spatiality of the lived body owes much to Heidegger’s differentiation of space (*der Raum*) and spatiality (*die Räumlichkeit*). See, for example, *Being and Time*, ¶ 24 (1962, 145–48). Nevertheless, it appears that Merleau-Ponty considered the latter’s expression, *in-der-Welt-Sein*, insufficient to distinguish the spatiality of the lived body from that of a container-contained relationship. Hence the substitution of “*au*” for “*dans*.”

15. For Merleau-Ponty, a synonym for “corporeal schema,” or at least a very close cognate, is “body image.” This expression first appeared in Henry Head’s *Studies in Neurology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), and was taken up in the notion of the “corporeal schema” by Wallon, by certain German psychologists, and has finally been the subject of a study in its own right by Professor Lhermite in *l’Image de notre corps*. Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others” (PrP 117). This text was cited from the 1960 *Cours de Sorbonne* publication. See also the later publication of these lecture notes in the *Bulletin de psychologie*, 236 XVIII 3–6 (novembre 1964), 295–336, esp. 298–99. Likewise important in this regard is Paul Schilder’s classic work, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* (1950), which Merleau-Ponty certainly knew well before his 1960 course at the Sorbonne. Schilder had published a small study of the “*Körperschema*” in 1923, which Merleau-Ponty cites at PhP 77, n. 4/92, n. 2; and 99, n. 1/115, n. 1.

As a result, our knowledge of our body image as it gets expressed in habitual patterns of behavior is not primarily theoretical. A meaning is grasped in the development of a habit, but it consists of “the motor grasping of a motor significance” (PhP 143/167). For example, we may not be able to say where a certain key on a typewriter keyboard is located, but our fingers can find it (PhP 144/168). If asked the location, we will typically not answer with the keyboard coordinates, but rather hold up the appropriate finger. Conversely, we can know intellectually the location of a certain key on a foreign keyboard, but this cognition is ineffective against and “neutralized,” so to say, by bodily memory. This is because typing is “knowledge in the hands,” which is disclosed only as a result of the habitual employment of the hands (Ibid.). Something very like this also happens in speaking a foreign language. Without the speaking context, the speaker may have cognitive trouble finding a certain word or expression that comes to mind (and tongue) spontaneously *in situ*.

For Merleau-Ponty, the development of bodily habits generates sedimented meanings¹⁶ that, among other things, create the power of staying actively engaged with the world. The habitual body provides the spontaneity and energy of our motor projects with practical, patterned contexts in which they can successfully operate. We require stability “in durable institutions” in order to increase our freedom through which meanings are created (UI 4/403), and bodily habits comprise a key element of such institutions. In this way, inhabiting the world therefore literally becomes in-habiting.

In turn, our motor intentionality adds creatively to those sedimentations through seeking additional optimal solutions in changing circumstances. To paraphrase Kant, spontaneity without habit is empty of enduring commitment, while habit without spontaneity is blind—without orientation to new situations. However, as against Kant, for whom “Man is *antiphysis*” (*Freiheit*) (N 26/47), freedom and Nature are not antithetical for Merleau-Ponty. It is not a question of freedom versus Nature, but rather the incarnation of freedom in the lived body’s motor intentionality that unites bodily spatiality and the space of the external world in a “practical system.”

Further, although Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the habitual body takes place in a chapter ostensibly about spatiality, temporality is likewise implied by the depth of experience required for sedimentation. Later, in the Passivity lectures, he speaks to this explicitly in the course of comments on Proust, and concludes, “Time reads itself in the corporeal schema . . . time is incorporated and sedimented in it” (IP 255, 256).

16. Sedimentation is a Husserlian concept, though the *habitus* that he has in mind “pertains not to the empirical, but to the pure Ego” (Husserl 1989, 118). See also 233, 324, and 344ff.

Merleau-Ponty seeks to illumine motor intentionality and the habitual body through various and, by now, familiar, cases of pathological behavior. One such case will suffice here to articulate the philosophical importance that he attaches to such cases. Schneider, a World War I soldier who suffered a brain lesion in the occipital region caused by a shell fragment, exhibits a “morbid mobility” (PhP 103/119). In part, this means that he is incapable of abstract movements, such as pointing to a certain place on his body, because, contrary to the normal bodily spatiality just described, “the order has [only] an *intellectual significance* for him and not a *motor* one” (Ibid., 110/128). He can move his body, and his thoughts can represent movements to him, but normal motor intentionality exists between movements seen from a third-person perspective and intellectual representations (Ibid.). This is because the world presents itself to Schneider “only as ready-made or congealed” (PhP 112/130). He does not lack any sensory data, but tactile impressions, for example, fail to call forth any sense of potential responses as they do in normal motility. Rather, they are “opaque and sealed up” (Ibid., 109/127).

For Merleau-Ponty, the difference between normal and pathological motility is not identical to that of completeness and incompleteness, because pathological motility is not normal motility with only one or two features missing. Rather, the patient, just as the child or someone with a “‘primitive’ mentality,” possesses a “complete form of existence” (PhP 107/125). Rather than lacking any sensory data, it is a question of what Schneider must do with them—intellectual calculations to make abstract movements and to interpret visual impressions—and what he cannot do with them through spontaneous, pre-reflective, meaningful bodily intentionality. Since he is not open to possibilities, he cannot selectively structure a perceptual field and articulate its intelligibility. Schneider lacks “the concrete liberty” (Ibid., 135/158) of being able to initiate situations; he has no “horizons of possibilities” (Ibid., 135, n. 3/157, n. 5).

Merleau-Ponty also briefly expresses Schneider’s “morbid motility” in terms of the concept of an “intentional arc” that he borrows from Franz Fischer (PhP 136/158). This “arc” is said to subtend “the life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life,” to project around us our temporal and “human” settings, “including our physical, ideological and moral situation” (Ibid.). Merleau-Ponty ascribes to this “intentional arc” an explanatory power for “the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility. And it is this which ‘goes limp’ in illness” (Ibid.).¹⁷

17. “qui fait l’unité des sens, celle des sens et de l’intelligence, celle de la sensibilité et de la motricité. C’est lui qui se ‘détend’ dans la maladie.”

However, as de Saint Aubert points out, despite the apparent importance of this concept for Merleau-Ponty, he uses the expression only three times (at PhP 136/158 and 157/184) and then, “without any explanation of its alleged explanatory power, forgets it purely and simply” (ESA II: 138). In the absence of any explanation, it seems appropriate to think of it as a tentative, incomplete attempt or as a restatement, quickly abandoned, of the living, motor-intentional connection between perceiver and perceived.

For Merleau-Ponty, Schneider also demonstrates the falsity of two interpretations of normal perception and behavior. The first one consists of the causal analysis mentioned above—by which he always means mechanistic causality—which cannot account for the ways that normal motility structures an environment and therefore also the “stimuli” that are supposed to be the cause of the perceptual, behavioral “response.”

The second mistaken interpretation is that the perceptual, behavioral significations that are crystallized in the body’s normal openness to the world result from cognitive acts imposed on meaningless sense data. Various forms of this interpretation pervaded and distorted modern philosophy, had decisive and destructive ontological consequences in terms of the separation of mind and body, and were rejected by Schelling and then by Hegel. This account of perception lasted well into the twentieth century in doctrines of phenomenalism, logical atomism, and in both the mechanistic and intellectualist accounts of perception with which Merleau-Ponty contended. Sometimes called a “form/matter” analysis of experience (PC II: 20), it holds that experience is made up of unintelligible sense data—the “matter”—that receive their meaning by the imposition of rational judgments—the “form.” In the Cartesian version, coupled with a mind/body dualism, the “form” becomes a mental representation of sensory data. Without this principle of intelligibility, experience would be incoherent: in William James’s famous expression, “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (1904, I: 488).

As opposed to these mistaken interpretations, for Merleau-Ponty normal bodily motility can only be correctly grasped by a different kind of thought, “that which grasps its object as it comes into being” for the percipient “with the atmosphere of meaning then surrounding it” (PhP 120/139–40), and which attempts to slip into that “atmosphere” in order to discern, beneath apparently disconnected “facts and symptoms, the subject’s whole being, when he is normal, or the basic disturbance, when he is a patient” (Ibid.).¹⁸

Nor is it the case that normal percipients use the same procedures much more rapidly because of continual use (Ibid., 108/125). Normal motility is such that we do not have to reason inductively to reach an interpreta-

18. “derrière les faits et les symptômes dispersés, l’être total du sujet, s’il s’agit d’un normal, le trouble fondamental, s’il s’agit d’un malade.”

tion of “opaque and sealed up” sensory data. In normal motor intentionality, as the Gestaltists showed, the incarnate *cogito* opens itself to a perceptual field and, in complicity with it, arrives at meanings that are already sketched “in outline” (“*en pointillé*”), as Merleau-Ponty often says, anterior to the imposition of acts of interpretive judgment. These meanings are open rather than “sealed up,” available for discernment rather than “opaque.”

Therefore, the potentiality that characterizes normal motility is really a double and symmetrical one inherent in the system of percipient and perceived. Both are open to each other, a conception that becomes radicalized in Merleau-Ponty’s last ontological writings about Nature. On the one hand, material things, other people, and the world around us are such that we can relate to them intelligibly; they are open to all the diverse ways that we engage them through our motor intentional projects. On the other hand, what it means to be a lived body is to be open to material things, other people, and the world at large. Our bodily projects fit them like, to use again one of Merleau-Ponty’s favorite images, engaging gears (PhP 160/186).

Therefore, on his view, the meaningfulness of the world is neither fully formed, waiting to be discovered by consciousness, even a bodily one, nor produced within consciousness to be applied to an inherently meaningless world. Rather, through bodily motility, meaning is developed in a way that is analogous to how a photograph is created in the developing fluid.¹⁹ The paradox of the world, as of each perceptual object, is that it is “already there” (*déjà-là*) before we take it up in any given situation, but it is also a world that “only exists as lived by me or by subjects such as me” (PhP 333/384). A perceptual object is, therefore, a paradoxical “in-itself—for-the-percipient,” and Merleau-Ponty counts it as “probably the most important achievement of phenomenology” that it has found a way to unite “extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world or of rationality” (Ibid., xix/xv).

In this context, Schneider’s case contains a crucial epistemological significance concerning the second mistaken interpretation of normal perception and behavior, namely, that their intelligibility is imposed on meaningless sense data by cognitive acts. Since in a representational theory of perception, the intelligibility of sense data derives from an “act of understanding” (PhP 131/152), on this theory, “perceptual disturbances” could only be disorders on one side or the other of the experience. However, what patients such as Schneider show us is that the disturbance is situated *at the intersection* of both perception and meaning (Ibid.). As a result, Schneider,

19. The image of photographic development is too simple to express all the richness of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of sense making. We mention photographic development here only to underscore his view that sense is not imposed on unintelligible matter, but rather that meaning is already sketched out in advance. When we come to discuss the *logos proforikos* in Merleau-Ponty’s late writings, we will see that there are at least five intertwined images of sense making throughout his works, images that apply to perception, language, art, politics, and science.

“verifies mediately and clarifies his hypothesis by cross-checking facts, and makes his way blindly towards the one which co-ordinates them all” (Ibid., 131/152–53).²⁰ By contrast, in normal experience the perceived “speaks” and is inherently meaningful; the signification does not have to be imported from outside. As opposed to the form/matter analysis of experience, “matter” is already pregnant with its “form,” to use the Gestaltists’s language.²¹

Yet, Merleau-Ponty at this stage does not go far enough here. For philosophers such as Descartes, Hume, and Kant, although their accounts differ, the form/matter analysis is only that—an analysis. It is not a description of what anyone is said to experience, but rather a reflective “unpacking” of what had to occur in order for there to be coherent, intelligible experience. However, with Schneider, it is a description of what he lives.

The emergence of new meanings implies expression, and Merleau-Ponty’s writings about the body in its relation to nature and culture always emphasize creative expression,²² whether in connection with perception, the emotions, behavior, or cognitive life. In fact, “every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*” (S 67/84). So far, we have been concerned with perception, but emotions constitute another level of creative expression in the mutual openness of perceiver and perceived. Emotions such as love, anger, joy, and sorrow are not inner “psychic facts”—“confused ideas”—of which behavior is only a meaningless physical re-presentation. Rather, emotions exist and are expressed only in and through speech and gesture. They “exist on this face or in these gestures” (SNS 52/94). Rather than being concealed behind such gestures, an emotion is “a variation” in the ways that our “bodily attitudes” display how we relate to the world around us and to others within it” (Ibid., 53/95).²³ Emotional expression is one manner in

20. “vérifie médiatement et précise l’hypothèse par le recouplement des faits, il chemine aveuglément vers celle qui les coordonne tous.”

21. In the unpublished preparatory notes for the 1953 Collège de France course on “The Sensible World and the World of Expression,” Merleau-Ponty writes: “[T]here is no matter without form and inversely.” “[I]l n’y a pas de matière sans forme et inversement.” He then goes on to discuss “the *Gestalt* as opposed to matter or to form” (ESA III: 26).

22. One of the strengths of Hass’s overarching summary of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology consists of its emphasis on the centrality of creative expression throughout Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of perception, language, art, the construction of geometrical proofs, and in cognition generally. See particularly Chapters 6 and 7. However, what we discuss here and elsewhere in this work is, for the most part, missing from Hass’s text. This is especially true with regard to all the unpublished writings that de Saint Aubert has made available since 2004.

23. Cf. C 63/45, 46: “[T]his malice, this cruelty that I read in the looks of my adversary, I could not imagine them separated from his gestures, from his speech, from his body. . . . [F]inally anger inhabits it [his face].” “[C]ette méchanceté, cette cruauté que je lis dans les regards de mon adversaire, je ne puis les imaginer séparées de ses gestes, de ses paroles, de son corps. . . . Mais enfin la colère l’habite.”

which there is an interchange between the ways that the other sees me, and how “the image of the other can be immediately ‘interpreted’ by my corporeal schema” (PrP 118).²⁴ And just because we can see, all other visible bodies can participate in this schema. It thereby becomes, as he describes it toward the end of his third course on Nature, “a lexicon of corporeity in general” (RC 129/178).

It is part of this expressivity that motor intentionality constitutes our “impulse of being in the world” (PhP 75/92), and what puts “the patient’s being, his power of existing” (Ibid., 134/156) in question. Because reflexes are meaningful expressions of how we orient ourselves to our situations rather than passive, determined reactions to “stimuli,” in normal behavior they “adjust themselves to the ‘direction’ of the situation” (Ibid., 79/94), in the double senses of “*le sens*,” meaning and spatial orientation. For Merleau-Ponty, this orientation and the “impulse of being in the world” behind it lie primarily in emotional rather than cognitive life, anterior to the achievements of a Cartesian *cogitatio* or a transcendental, constituting consciousness. For a patient with a phantom limb, for example, the emotion involved amounts to being part of a situation that he cannot honestly accept, but from which also he does not want to flee. “The subject,” Merleau-Ponty says, “caught in this existential dilemma, breaks into pieces the objective world which stands in his way and seeks symbolical satisfaction in magic acts” (Ibid., 86/101–102).²⁵ One “existential attitude” solicits another and, in the case of the phantom limb, forms an indivisible unity with memory and emotion (Ibid., 86/102).

Expressivity is also central to normal motility in more diverse ways, and Merleau-Ponty usually discusses it in terms of *styles* of actions. In our “being at the world” (*être-au-monde*), styles represent the *mélange* of matter and form, third-person physiological processes and first-person psychic acts. Styles thus become Merleau-Ponty’s version of Hegel’s notion of the *Inhalt*, or content, according to which, “Matter contains form locked up within it and is absolute susceptibility to form only because it has form absolutely within itself only because form is its implicit determination” (Hegel 1969,

24. The citation is from the 1960 publication of “The Child’s Relations with Others.” In the 1964 French publication, Merleau-Ponty states, “[T]he perception of my body can be transferred to the other and the image of the other can be immediately ‘interpreted’ by my corporeal schema” (298). “[L]a perception de mon corps peut être transférée à autrui et l’image d’autrui peut être immédiatement ‘interprétée’ par mon schéma corporel.”

25. “Plutôt que d’accepter l’échec ou de revenir sur ses pas, le sujet, dans cette impasse existentielle, fait voler en éclats le monde objectif qui lui barre la route et cherche dans les actes magiques une satisfaction symbolique.”

451–52).²⁶ For Merleau-Ponty, it is through styles of behavior that the body as a “lexicon of corporeity” can be read.

For example, walking embodies a certain manner of inhabiting and interpreting the world in robust health or when sick or injured, by means of types of clothing, lithe or stumbling movements, hesitations, and the like. In these and other cases, form and matter are united; the bodily intelligibility of each situation is not added by cognitive acts to a series of causes and effects whether construed mechanistically or not. Rather, the style is already incarnate in the movements. Just as emotions exist “on this face or in these gestures,” behavior is not a meaningless sign of the signified hidden behind it.²⁷

Merleau-Ponty elaborates this unity of matter and form in behavior in terms of two key concepts that retain their importance in the “new” ontology. The first concept is Paul Claudel’s notion of “co-naissance,” a term that he coins in *Art poétique*.²⁸ Claudel’s neologism is designed to stress the primacy of the perceptual, behavioral relationship over the relata, and Merleau-Ponty appeals to it in order to reinforce the view that perception and behavior have an inherent intelligibility. Claudel’s term is meant to describe sensory experience by joining together the concepts of birth (*naissance*) and knowledge (*connaissance*). As de Saint Aubert remarks, co-naissance expresses “a radical conception of the life of perception as experience [*épreuve*] of being, in the double passive-active sense of the verb ‘to experience’ [*éprouver*] (to feel and to put to the test, to perceive and interrogate)” (ESA I: 238).

In this situation of co-naissance, our experiences of our own bodies prefigure our experience of objectivity in a kind of “sensuous reflection”²⁹—a

26. J. N. Findlay observes that Hegel’s notion of Content (*Inhalt*) “can indifferently be taken to represent Materialized Form or Formed Matter. . . . The Content of a thing in the sense used by Hegel is inseparably one with its Form: *Romeo and Juliet* could not have had the same Content if produced in prose or some non-verbal medium” (1958, 196).

27. We noted earlier that the body’s motor intentionality is invested in symbolic functions of increasing complexity. Styles of behavior comprise a fairly minimal level of such functions, and we shall see later that in the Nature lectures, Merleau-Ponty elaborates on similar behavior for different animals as well. For human beings he details the upper reaches, so to speak, of these symbolic activities in terms of language, art, politics, law, and other dimensions of the social world. For a more detailed study of these subjects with reference to Merleau-Ponty and the lived body, see Hamrick, 1987, especially Chapters I–IV; and 2002, especially Chapters 1–4.

28. Further details of Claudel’s influence on Merleau-Ponty may be found in ESA I: 234–55. Among other things, we learn that, in Merleau-Ponty’s own library, “*Art poétique* is the most worked over and one of the most annotated volumes. . . . Merleau-Ponty discovers this text in October 1935, at a time in which his conception of philosophical knowledge [*connaissance*] was already forged against the idealism of Léon Brunschvicg” (Ibid., 236). See also the reference to Claudel at N 97/134.

29. Bernet (1993, 60). For Merleau-Ponty, the primary importance of co-naissance is that it reinforces the primacy of relationships over the relata. In “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” he also interprets Husserl in that way (S 177/223–24).

concept that derives from Husserl's descriptions of touching-touched relationships in *Ideas II* (§36), and of which Merleau-Ponty made much use in both his earlier and later writings. This type of reflection is exemplified in the familiar case of one hand touching the other. For the touching hand—or, more exactly, for the body consciousness following the hand—it is a question of the subjective body experiencing part of itself as object. However, when the touched hand changes into a hand touching the previously touching one, the relationships are reversed. The body becomes both subjectivized object and objectivized subject, which reflects exactly Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of Nature itself in his early writings.

Merleau-Ponty sometimes speaks of the symbolic functions of the body in terms of “pregnancy,” a pregnancy that precedes acts of expression (creation).³⁰ In this context, he appropriates a second concept to reject the bifurcation of form and matter, Ernst Cassirer's notion of “symbolic pregnancy”—a phrase coined to describe “the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain nonintuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely represents” (Cassirer 1957, III: 202). In Merleau-Pontian parlance, Cassirer uses the phrase to depict “the absolute simultaneity of matter and form” (PhP 127, n.2/148, n.2), the separation of which Cassirer describes as “untenable” (1957, III: 198).

For Cassirer, as for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology shows that “there is no more a ‘matter in itself’ than a ‘form in itself’; there are only total experiences” (Ibid., III: 199). “Pregnance” denotes the “interwovenness” of perception and meaning—the fact that perception, in its totality and fullness, “is a life ‘in’ meaning” (Ibid., III: 202). Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty also describes the inherent intelligibility of perception, its capacity to be a “nascent *logos*,” in terms of pregnancy. For example, in regard to synesthesia, he depicts sight and hearing as being “pregnant one with the other” (PhP 235/272), a conclusion based as much on Cassirer's symbolic forms as it is on Gestalt psychology. The latter goes on to say that, as part of this life, we anticipate the future in the present: “The now is filled and saturated with the future: *praegnans futuri*, as Leibniz called it” (1957, III: 202).³¹

30. In this relationship of pregnancy and creation, it is possible to hear an echo of Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*, especially when she says, “All of us are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul, and, as soon as we come to a certain age, we naturally desire to give birth” (206C) (1989, 53).

31. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges his debt to Cassirer at several places in *Phenomenology of Perception*. See especially 127 n.2/148 n.2, 235 and n. 2/272 and n. 1, and 291/337. Merleau-Ponty appropriates Cassirer's distinction between “phenomenon of expression (*Ausdruck*),” “verbal expression (*Darstellung*),” and “intellectual significance” (*Bedeutung*)” (PhP 235/272) to argue for the mutual pregnancy of “visual and auditory experiences.” He also uses Cassirer's distinction to maintain that expressive experiences are “anterior to ‘sense-giving acts’ . . . of theoretical and positing thought,” that “expressive significance” precedes “sign significance,” and finally that “the symbolical ‘pregnancy’ of form in content” is prior to “any subsuming of content under form” (Ibid., /291/337).

Merleau-Ponty notes approvingly that this sense of pregnancy, overlooked by psychologists, consists in the “power to break forth, productivity (*praegnans futuri*), fecundity” (VI 208/262).

At the same time, the body’s symbolic system is always a dedication to the world that counterbalances it by soliciting it to fulfill the body’s expressive possibilities. The Nature of the body’s surrounding world³² has what Husserl called “affective force” (*affektiver Kraft*) (Steinbock 2000, 66)³³ that draws us to make some features of our environment stand out as “figure” and relegate others to the “background.” When this happens, the figure becomes “prominent because it says something to us in a way that makes a difference, and does not achieve prominence in an indiscriminate manner” (Ibid., 68). For example, what we call “familiar terrain” consists of “an affectively optimal, orientated environing world” (Ibid., 69). It is part of Husserl’s notion of an “aesthetic logos” of the life world that helps create an intimate bond between the body and consciousness.

The fact that the natural life of the body is “the bearer of an indefinite number of symbolic systems” expressively adapted to the practical tasks of daily life has another important implication. Namely, it follows from the mutual openness of the experient and the experienced—*le sentant et le sensible*—that the Nature that beckons affectively must also be in some sense a symbolic system(s), or to some degree subjectivized. There are indeed suggestions of such a view of Nature in the *Phenomenology*, though, unlike his later ontology, the perspective adopted is still that of a philosophy of subjectivity.³⁴

The suggestions emerge in the way that the *Phenomenology* prefigures the later language of reversibility by describing things gazing at us and at each other, just as we gaze at them. For example, if we look at an object on a desk, we take it to have not only directly visible qualities, but also those that the wall behind it can “see.” The back of the object, say, a lamp, “is nothing but the face which it ‘shows’ to the chimney” (PhP 68/82). Therefore, “every object is the mirror of all others” (Ibid.), and our very ability to perceive an object presupposes that “objects form a system or a world” and that the permanence of any object is underwritten by this ability of other objects to be “spectators of its hidden aspects” (PhP 68/83).

32. Both symbolic systems as well as the notion of a “surrounding world” (*Umwelt*) are present in many forms of (other) animal life as well. See N 168/220 ff.

33. Steinbock also notes (2000, 66) that “this affective force of something prominent is linked to the discriminating experience of optima” in the sense described above for Merleau-Ponty. It “summons me” to a more complete perception of the object (Ibid., 65) and its context, and where “the affective force is strongest, it provides ‘favorable conditions’ and summons privileged comportment in relation to which it can become prominent and optimal” (Ibid., 67).

34. For a more complete discussion of this theme, see Bernet (1993, 64 ff.).

For Merleau-Ponty, things have an expressive power, an ability to “*display themselves*” (PhP 68/82), but within this philosophy of subjectivity, it is our gaze wandering among things that releases that expressive power and ability.

The upshot of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of Nature is a “naturalization of the subject [that] goes hand in hand with a subjectivization of Nature” (Bernet 1993, 65), an intertwining that effectively erases any sharp dividing line between the two. The body has “an all-embracing adherence to the world” anterior to any synthetic apperception of a given manifold of data or the conscious positing of objects. “Nothing here is thematized” (PhP 241/279).

MERLEAU-PONTY’S SPARRING PARTNER: DESCARTES

In the discussion following his 1946 address, Merleau-Ponty states that phenomenology could not have preceded all other philosophies, but rather that it emerges as a corrective to the “rationalist tradition” and “the construction of science” (Prim.Percp. 29/137). As noted in the Introduction, on his view phenomenology functions as a means of restoring or rehabilitating the sensible, which we have followed in the previous section to describe his early view of Nature. We have traced the ways that he positions phenomenology as an antidote to a cluster of closely related doctrines associated with “the rationalist tradition” and “the construction of science” that pervade modern philosophy from Galileo to Kant. These doctrines include mechanistic causal accounts of perception and behavior, intellectualist constructions of their meanings, the form/matter analysis of experience, representational theories of perception, a dualism of mind and body and, as described in the Introduction, the bifurcation of Nature and the ontology of the object.

Although a variety of thinkers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries subscribed to diverse versions of these doctrines, and despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty comments on almost all of them, Descartes has a special prominence in his criticisms. As we have seen, it is specifically Descartes against whom Merleau-Ponty sets himself at the beginning of his first course on Nature. Moreover, beyond the subject of Nature, Descartes is present in Merleau-Ponty’s writings from one end to the other. Indeed, the notes found on his desk the evening of the day he died dealt with Descartes (ESA II: 23), in all probability because the subject of Merleau-Ponty’s last course at the Collège de France was “Cartesian Ontology and Ontology Today” (January-April 1961).

How to explain this Cartesian preeminence in Merleau-Ponty’s thought? Almost all explanations focus on Merleau-Ponty’s many (justified) criticisms of Decartes. Hass, for example, is only the latest to express the view that