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THE FINITUDE OF MAN IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

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PREFACE

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is, without doubt, one of the leading modern phenomenologists. Although he has only recently been recognized and appreciated in the Anglo-Saxon world, he has nevertheless exercised a good deal of influence on his contemporaries in the Continent, especially in France.

This thesis is a modest attempt to expose the most salient points in his philosophy, with his emphasis on man's being-in-the-world, and consequently, his orientation toward finitude and contingency as man's ultimate position. Because of the innate difficulty of his style, its extreme conciseness and laborious constructions, the main lines of his thought are often obscured. Moreover, the penury of commentaries leaves the reader without resource to grapple with many complicated passages where Merleau-Ponty's thought seems still to be searching for a final expression. This difficulty is not lessened by the fact that he is in continuous dialogue with other philosophers, entering so completely into their thought, that a first reading could leave one with the impression of confusion.

The discussion in the following pages will have as its object the presentation of those problems which converge inevitably towards Merleau-Ponty's affirmation of finitude.

To assure the greatest possible clarity, all effort has been concentrated on Merleau-Ponty's own doctrine and his views of others without any criticism of his interpretation. It is therefore immaterial for this thesis whether his interpretation of other doctrines is exact or not, since we are studying Merleau-Ponty not as a historian of philosophy, but as a philosopher.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first deals with Merleau-Ponty's own evaluation of the contemporary cultural scene, and certain traditional trends of thought. There follows in the second chapter, an analysis of human experience at its different levels, such as perception, language, history and the Cogito. In the final chapter, an attempt is made to synthesize these analyses in order to bring out the ultimate meaning of human experience according to Merleau-Ponty.

I am greatly indebted to Father James Finnegan, for his valuable advice and encouragement, and for the time he spent reading this manuscript.

CHAPTER I

THE GENERAL BACKGROUND OF MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY'S

THOUGHT

Section I: Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the Contemporary Cultural Setting:

To be able to understand Merleau-Ponty's philosophical position, especially his emphasis on finitude, and, in consequence, contingency, he should be placed within the sphere of intellectual thought to which he was subjected and by which he was profoundly influenced. The origins of his thought can be found, as he himself says, within the contemporary world in which he is situated, as are so all of us, politically, historically, as well as intellectually.¹

Our generation is no exception to the general law of history that, however much opposed certain directions of thought are objectively, they are really interwoven because of the basic trend of thought and culture which has permeated our outlook.

The very men who (like Ingres and Delacroix) think themselves adversaries are reconciled in the eyes of a third person who witnesses them, because they are responding to a single cultural situation. We men who have lived as our problem the development

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In developing this section, I shall be using mostly Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the contemporary intellectual atmosphere as found in his essay " Man and Adversity " in Signs.

of Communism and the War and who have read Gide and Valéry and Proust and Heidegger and Freud are the same.¹

Because of these experiences, our epoch is one in which a new way of thinking has arisen. Gone are the diametrical oppositions between "materialism" on the one hand and "spiritualism" on the other. Gone are the antitheses of man as part of an evolutionary process or of supernatural causes beyond evolution. At the turn of the century, the emphasis was more on the Absolute, whether it be the State, Morality, Economy etc., and the link between value and reality was virtually ignored.

There were values and, on the other hand, realities; there was mind and, on the other hand, body; there was the interior and, on the other hand, the exterior ..."²

What has happened in our century is that we have gone beyond such antitheses, such Absolutes, and have developed, a great deal through the help of psychoanalysis, a train of thought in which the duality of mind and body as two separate entities has been erased. In other words, we have arrived at the point where there is a deepened realization of the intrinsic interrelationship between mind and body, in which we have realized and developed what Merleau-Ponty calls "the notion of flesh, that is, of animate body."³

¹ Merleau-Ponty, Signs, trans. R.C. McCleary (Northwestern University Press, 1964). p.225.

² Ibid., p.226.

³ Ibid., p.227.

This notion has been due greatly to the work of Freud and his disciples in which the concept of the body as merely instinctual, as merely mechanical in its responses to certain stimuli has been radically revised. Although Freud talks of "sexual instincts", his meaning of instinct is one in which the body is not an automatum reacting in a specific way but is invested through and through with consciousness. On the other hand, this consciousness which permeates the body is not separate from it. It does not direct it from above. It is involved with the body, it is the body. "With analysis mind passes into body as, inversely, body passes into mind".¹ But, this notion of mind is enlarged so that Freud, in order to distinguish his conception from the ordinary idea of mind had to introduce the "unconscious", i.e. that element in us which is intermediary between the body as matter and the person as a source of free choice and of objective knowledge.

It is the unconscious which chooses what aspect of us will be admitted to official existence, which avoids the thoughts or situation we are resisting, and which is therefore not un-knowing but rather an un-recognized and unformulated knowing that we do not want to assume.²

¹
Ibid., p.229

²
Ibid., p.229

Hence Freud brought into a clear light " the body's mental function " as well as the " mind's incarnation " ¹. From there on he developed his theory of the " sexual aggressive " relationship which, by its connotations, involves others. Aggression implies a relationship with a person, and sexuality is the way we live this relationship bodily. But since, in accordance with this theory, sexuality involves the person, the sexual relationship introduces a complex system of identification between people and myself through " projection and introjection." ² Therefore a whole new approach to the problem of communication has been opened.

Such is this idea of the individual incarnate and (through incarnation) given to himself but also to others - incomparable yet stripped of his congenital secret and faced with his fellows... ³

This psychological notion of Freud to a great extent explains what Merleau-Ponty calls the " eroticism " of contemporary writers, as well as, on parallel lines, the inseparability of language and the thoughts or intentions we are experiencing. In the first case, i.e. in literature, the excessive interest with the body, not as a matter but as something to be written about, something which expresses and holds meanings, is very apparent. This interest naturally develops into an immersion with others. The emphasis on the

¹ Ibid., p.230

² Ibid., p.230

³ Ibid., p.230

body as incarnate gives us that which is particular in every person. On the other hand, such a person in his very existence exists for others, he is one amongst them. This is what causes the stress on alienation, and the equal stress on communication in our century. Man cannot live alone - he must live with others, and yet he cannot be another, he is always himself, always unique. He swings on a pendulum between himself as a person amongst others, and himself as mind incarnate. To become conscious of his body is to become conscious of others, and yet one can never penetrate into another, nor live another's thought as one lives one's own. Body is a source of ambiguity insofar as it manifests and hides at the same time. Paul Valéry explains this feeling very well.

... As soon as glances meet, we are no longer wholly two and it is hard to remain alone. This exchange realizes in a very short time a transposition or metathesis - a chiasma of two "destinies", two points of view. Thereby, a sort of simultaneous reciprocal limitation occurs. You capture my image, my appearance; I capture yours. You are not me, since you see me and I so not see myself. What I lack is this me that you see. And what you lack is the you I see.¹

Again what is peculiarly contemporaneous is the relationship of language and thought. This relationship is built on the same lines as that between mind and body as explained above. No longer is language merely a matter of convention, an expression divorced from what it expresses, valued only as a matter of expediency. Language is inseparable from

¹
Ibid., p.232.

thought. The writer in using language to express himself makes it a part of himself. Language is not something transparently known to the writer. He invents it even as he receives it ready-made. He elivens it insofar as it is the embodiment of his living thought, yet, like his body, it must remain forever ambiguous, never wholly possessed as a thing.

As a professional of language, the writer is a professional of insecurity. His expressive operation is renewed from oeuvre to oeuvre. Each work ...is a step constructed by the writer himself upon which he installs himself in order to construct (with the same risk) another step and what is called the oeuvre - the sequence of these attempts - which is always broken off, whether it be by the end of life or through the exhaustion of his speaking powers.¹

What is important to note here as with the body above is that the word or gesture are not mere signs which have only a conventional meaning. Rather, as with the body so with language it is the lived experience which infuses meaning beyond the bare power of the matter or the sign.

As my body (which nevertheless is only a bit of matter) is gathered up into gestures which aim beyond it, so the words of language (which considered simply are only inert signs that only a vague or banal idea corresponds to) suddenly swell with a meaning which overflows into the other person when the act of speaking binds them up into a single whole." ²

We may thus summarize the contents of this Section as follows:

¹
Ibid., p.233.

²
Ibid., p.235.

Merleau-Ponty has pointed out so far one of the most important contributions to his own philosophic development in this investigation of the contemporary intellectual scene; he has shown that body and mind, language and meaning are not antithetical entities, that, in effect, body and mind permeate each other as does language and meaning. This gives rise to the second point, viz. that the other cannot be considered anymore as wholly apart from myself, and that I as a person cannot live alone. As an objective body insofar as his incarnation is not a complete expression of his existence, each person remains exterior to the other and therefore alone. We are all, thus, at the same time, transparent and opaque. Now, he leads us to a third and most important point especially noticeable in modern politics: the realization of the ambiguity of our existence which is in reality the basis of all contemporary thought. This is brought out most clearly in the ambiguity of power and value, or violence and idea in relations between governments, in their "oscillation" between one position and another, in the fear of taking a final ultimate position, because there is no possibility of such a clear-cut position anymore. This is so because man has come to the realization that there are no absolute natural laws to rely on, as conversely, there is no transcendent Being we can be sure of. Man, at the moment, in this century has realized the effect of contingency - that human life is not a metaphysical necessity nor does it

follows a necessary law. It is rather a conglomeration of chance events which make up a human life.

Mind and man never are, they show through in the movement by which the body becomes gesture, language an oeuvre, and co-existence truth.¹

Man in this century more than in any other because of the findings of psychology, because of the everchanging time, is more and more aware of the fortuitousness of his existence, of his mortality and his limitations and it is within this scope, within this world, which has to be accepted on its own terms and not on any transcendental necessity, that Merleau-Ponty builds up his philosophy of man. It is with the full acceptance of contingency, and, in consequence, ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty begins his own philosophical investigations.

¹
Ibid., p.240.

Section II: Merleau-Ponty's position with regard to
Husserl's phenomenology:

We have mentioned then, the general cultural setting which prompted Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on finitude and contingency. It is now time to study the direct philosophical background which directed his thought into these channels. Since, according to him, Husserl's phenomenological method is the most tenable position in an investigation of man in face of the world, we shall follow his analysis of the basic contentions of phenomenology,¹ and the definition of his own position with regard to Husserl.

Merleau-Ponty begins by pointing out four seeming contradictions involved in such a doctrine, and in accepting them, orients his thought towards the world of facticity, ambiguity and contingency which he has made his task to bring into the open. First, phenomenology, although it studies essences and considers that all problems can be reduced to the process of defining them, also puts these essences back into existence and, in effect, affirms that man and the world cannot be understood apart from their facticity, apart from their involvement in the factual. Second, it suspends the natural attitude of man, i.e. the movement of man towards the world, while at the same time affirming the world as "already there"² before any conscious awareness

¹In developing this section, I am mostly dependent on Merleau-Ponty's own concept of the Husserlian method as found in the Preface to the Phenomenology of Perception.

²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. VII. (In subsequent references to this work, I shall use the Abbreviation: Phen.P.)

of it, as the inalienable ground of such awareness. Third, it insists upon its prerogative as an exact science while maintaining all the while as most fundamental the lived quality of experience. And, fourth, its aim is that of the description of experience without falling back on causal explanations, although it does not exclude the possibility of genetic phenomenology. However, contradictory these four contentions may be, it should be noted that phenomenology existed as a way of thought long before it was consciously practised as a philosophy. In order, then, to understand phenomenology, more is needed than an enumeration of principles. Phenomenology is a descriptive method, a way of living, rather than an intellectual analysis or explanation. Through description of the " things themselves " we are, thus, rejecting science as an ultimate explanation towards the knowledge of man, since it is built on the "lived", on our primordial experience, and cannot replace it.

The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is a second-order expression.¹

Science explains the world after we have directly and existentially experienced it. On the other hand, the return to primordial experience has nothing in common with the idealist's absolute dependence on consciousness.

¹
Ibid., p.VIII.

Idealism forgets its origins, namely, that all reflection is reflection on an unreflected, an immediately lived experience. Consciousness must not ignore its antecedents. "The real has to be described, not constructed or formed"¹ as the idealists affirm. If we were to rely constantly on the syntheses of judgment for our vision and understanding of the world, we would be forever placing together and taking apart these syntheses in order to maintain what is considered as coherent in all that we perceive.

Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making, it is the natural setting of, and field ² for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.

When we return to ourselves after leaving the dogmatic attitude of science and common-sense, we do not find a spirit independent of everything, but rather a being always rooted in the world. This also allows us to understand the perplexing questions of the phenomenological reduction. Here, Merleau-Ponty diverges from Husserl, who, according to him, was led astray by the influence of an idealism which attempted to coincide with a Transcendental Ego completely transparent to itself. Once such a view is accepted, the existence

¹
Ibid., p.X.

²
Ibid., p.XI

of the other becomes problematic.¹ If our empirical reality is, as it were, absorbed in the pure experience of the Universal, so that individuals can no longer be distinguished since they are all pure spectators, the significance of communication, the grasp of the other, through the body's gestures and through language, is lost.

For the "other" to be more than an empty word, it is necessary that my existence should never be reduced to my bare awareness of existing but that it should take in also the awareness that one may have of it, and thus include my incarnation in some nature and the possibility, at least, of a historical situation. The Cogito must reveal me in a situation...²

For Merleau-Ponty, it is only because the Cogito is so situated that reduction can be meaningfully practised. Because we are able to so bracket the movement which necessarily attaches us to the world, to put it "out of play"³ can we become conscious of the solidarity, the inter-relationship between the self and its world. Here, it is not a question of leaving the world behind us, of rejoining another sphere of existence, but rather of breaking with our unquestioned familiarity with the world, and, in consequence, becoming aware only of "the unmotivated upsurge of the world"⁴. Hence,

¹ Merleau-Ponty continues, however, by stating that even for Husserl, the problem of intersubjectivity does exist, and, consequently, the above mentioned cannot be considered as his final position.

² Phen. of P., p.XIII.

³ Ibid., p.XIII.

⁴ Ibid., p.XIV.

we can realize that complete reduction is impossible because we are rooted in the world, and, in the final analysis, in the existential and yet unreflected experiences we live, which are forever sources of new discovery for the philosopher.¹

In leading from reduction to the discovery of essences as necessary, Husserl has once more been misunderstood by those who wish to interpret this doctrine as a form of idealism. This arose from Husserl's claim that every transcendental reduction supposes an eidetic reduction. In other words, we cannot reflect upon our experiences of the world without relaxing the ties which bind us to our original situation, our "living" of the world.

...We cannot subject our perception of the world to philosophical scrutiny without ceasing to be identified with that act of positing the world, without...passing from the fact of our existence to its nature, from the Dasein to the Wesen. But it is clear that the essence is here not the end, but a means, that our effective involvement in the world is precisely what has to be understood and made amenable to conceptualization, for it is what polarizes all our conceptual particularizations.²

It is impossible thus to break off all contact with the world, and grasp pure essences independently of our existence and world-rootedness. What is of importance here is that we must create a certain distance, a certain "objectivity"

1
Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Husserl's famous phenomenological reduction, is further referred to in essentially the same way in Signs, pp.161-166.

2
Phen. of P. XLV.

between ourselves and our experiences in order to understand the very notion of our facticity. Essences, in fact, make explicit the life of consciousness. The use of essences in phenomenology leads to a clearer understanding of the world and our perception of it. It cannot be an idealistic divorce from all facticity, for it is incomprehensible without the acceptance of such facticity. It is thus, once more, a reflection on the unreflective experiences which are the basis of our existence in the world. Perception does not offer us isolated essences. It points out our interwovenness with the world, as well as the inexhaustibility of the world for us and our dependence on it as facticity, just as, on the other hand, the facticity of the cogito signifies its inevitable incarnation. Since the meaning of things is in our first experience of the world, the world will thus always form the horizon of all truth. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he states: "The eidetic method is the method of a phenomenological positivism which bases the possible on the real."¹

It is this understanding of the doctrine of "essences" which leads Merleau-Ponty to discuss the real meaning of "intentionality." His contention is that this "consciousness of ..." is not something new in philosophy. What is new is the insistence on the necessary link between the subject and

¹
Ibid., p.XVII

his world, which it maintains. The world does not come "after" the subject as his construction, they are contemporaneous. Husserl's stress on "operative intentionality" is thus the assertion of the anteriority of this unreflective experience in contrast to which objective knowledge is never original, in that it cannot completely elucidate the bond that joins our life and the world. Objective knowledge can only recognize and note this fact. For example, when we first perceive or "live" a tree as part of our visual field, we are not consciously aware of our perception of that tree. It is just "there" for us, we see it, but we do not question or analyse its integral relationship to the other objects in the landscape we are viewing. It is only later, when we are consciously reflecting on our visual experience at the time, that we place the tree as being a necessary part of that particular perceptual experience.

Our relationship to the world as it is untiringly enunciated within us, is not a thing which can be any further clarified by analysis: philosophy can only place it once more before our eyes and present it for our ratification.¹

Hence, through this meaning of intentionality with its emphasis on our rootedness in the world and facticity, we are led to the concept of "comprehension". Comprehension cannot mean then the grasp of pure essence. Rather, it is an understanding of what Merleau-Ponty calls the

¹
Ibid., p.XVIII.

"total intention",¹ i.e. not only the objective grasp, but the "felt" penetration of the particular style of existence which is revealed either in history or in an individual event. We are not concerned with gathering numerically a sum of indices and then putting them together to form a whole which is thus explainable, nor do we seek for an absolute which would somehow or other reveal itself in history. What we are concerned with is grasping the significance which gives its meaning to the organic whole, and we grasp this "sens" necessarily, because we are interwoven with the world, because we live our experiences existentially in it, always within a spatio-temporal context. We are always oriented towards the world because we are irrevocably tied to it by our facticity, and the elements of finitude and contingency which are central to Merleau-Ponty's doctrine of man, are revealed in the carrying out of the phenomenological method described above. The method seems to have united subjectivism and objectivism in its concept of the Cogito on the one hand, and the world on the other. The Cogito is nothing without the original experiences which form it and to which it consequently gives meaning through reflection.

To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges. But it should not be set in a realm apart.²

¹
Ibid., p.XVIII.

²
Ibid., p.XIX.

It is only in and through finitude that the Cogito or consciousness can effectively operate. This is essential for the comprehension of the role of the Cogito in the world. On the other hand, the phenomenological world is not an objective world divorced from our consciousness. It is a world in which the physical and mental unite, in which they are interwoven and interrelated in order to form meaning together. The task of phenomenology in the final analysis, because it is description of the world, is to make these meanings accessible to all. This task is, of course, inexhaustible, since the world itself, of which we form so intimate a part, is inexhaustible in its richness of original experience, and we ourselves are limited by our finitude and our contingency in the face of such an undertaking. However, we can and must begin such a description, and it is Merleau-Ponty's philosophy which attempts it. In the following pages, we shall try to enumerate the steps of this description of our experiences, but before doing so, we must see how he puts aside the false dilemma between rationalism and empiricism. His own doctrine, as a matter of fact, becomes more cogent, and takes on a definite form under our eyes as we take into account his refutation of these two philosophic extremes, both of which ignore the essential aspects of facticity and finitude.

Section III: Merleau-Ponty's Rejection of Empiricism and Intellectualism:

Merleau-Ponty's objections against these two schools of thought follow the same trend as the general opposition of contemporary phenomenology and existentialism. The two fundamental points which are rejected by him are first, the false dilemma which arises from a belief either in a world in itself, or a world which is a product of pure consciousness, and second, the notion of sensation as an essential element in their explanation of our experience. They consider sensation as a mere impression without any innate or intrinsic meaningfulness, and, as a consequence, the body is reduced to the role of the machine which passively receives and accumulates these impressions. Each of these philosophies builds upon sensation in its own way. Empiricism sees the original of meaning in a mere physical process of association and organization through a causal relationship. (Gestalt psychology, although remaining fundamentally empiricist, because of its affirmation of a world in itself, however, admits that in nature there are wholes, which are immediately received as such). On the other hand, intellectualism accepting sensation as pure impression, consider it as the occasion for an interpretative activity which belongs to pure consciousness. In this theory then, all meaning is imposed upon experience which in itself contains no meaning (non-sens). Both theories present us with a fully determined world, and express this determination in terms of a law of

constancy. With such a conception of the world (Weltanschauung) error or illusion arise only from a lack of attention, and consequently, there is no room for ambiguity but merely a capacity for distraction in the subject. Merleau-Ponty's criticism of both positions is rooted in his fundamental affirmation of the solidarity between subject and object, body and world, individual and society. There is no world in itself, and there is no pure Subject. Man as a thinking being is inseparably interwoven with the biological, and it is through the biological that he "lives" his world.¹

The difficulties encountered by Merleau-Ponty in intellectualism and empiricism are not of the same order. Empiricism, with its reduction of lived experience to mere causality, is rejected from the very start by his analysis of perception. Intellectualism, on the other hand, must be dealt with in the analysis of each level of experience, because the privileges it grants the subject are quite real. Its principal error, however, is that it cuts the subject off from the body making it independent of all situations, for this reason its final refutation can also be attached to Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception.

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These assertions will be justified in the following pages.

CHAPTER II

MERLEAU-PONTY'S ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCE AT ITS
DIFFERENT LEVELS.

Section I: Pre-reflexive level of experience:

a) Perception, b) Language, c) History.

We have finally arrived at the point where Merleau-Ponty's own position can be clarified. In view of his criticisms against empiricism and intellectualism as two philosophic extremes, his method is one of strict description of man-in-the-world, man always operating within a determinate situation. Man, according to him therefore, cannot have recourse to an independent, objective, atomistic world, nor to a Transcendent and Infinite Consciousness.

In order to understand his position fully, we should study what he considers essential to his thought; the two themes of language and history, based on his theory of perception and his notion of body. It is through his theories of perception, language and history that he escapes the traditional dilemma between inner and outer, and evolves a doctrine which describes the fundamental place of man in the world, bound by time and space, and unable to get beyond his facticity, his actual existence.

A. Perception:

We shall now explain Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception which he considers as the central point of his doctrine, and from it point out through the succeeding levels of language, history, and thought, the same signposts in methodology and conclusion, attending to his adherence to finitude and facticity. Three points are of focal importance in his philosophy, and since they recur time and again in all his thought concerning finitude, we shall deal with them first in perception, and then through the other experiences we are describing. They are his notions of perspective, motivation, and the intimate connection between the body and the world - in other words, what he terms "lived" experience.¹

First of all then, let us consider the act of perception itself. When we perceive, we do not receive atomic impressions, nothing thus which might be reduced to the traditional concept of sensation. To perceive is to live the world, to come into contact with it, to be integrated with it. This "lived" experience, which is perception, is so primary, that we tend to forget it, to pass it by in favour of theories of the world which, however, presuppose

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Such themes are the common property of phenomenology, but Merleau-Ponty lays particular stress on them, in view of his own ultimate doctrine of finitude.

perception. Perception is an existential encounter so fundamental, that it requires a particular effort of reflection to bring it fully before us. As a matter of fact, we tend to analyse what we live through perception rather than describe this primordial contact with being which is the necessary foundation of our thought.¹ When we look at a table for example, we perceive an organic whole, which we immediately grasp as such upon our coming into contact with it. I seize the table as a totality which I touch, I feel--I live through my body². For "The body is our general medium for having a world."³

1

The term "foundation" is used in a phenomenological sense. In other words, it is applied neither as in a cause-effect relationship, nor as in a temporal relationship, but, rather, ontologically - i.e. as a level of experience.

2

Further references to the "living" of objects through perception are to be found in Phen., P., pp. 228-230, and p.317.

3

Merleau-Ponty is indebted to Gestalt psychology for his reference to perception as an essential grasp of wholes or forms. But, as the next quotation shows, he is not blind to its limitations. He thus opposes its empirical residue which consists in supposing that the "whole" is given in a casual relationship.

Let us examine these statements more closely. What does perception involve exactly? We have said it is an encounter, a lived experience, but an experience which is seen as patterned, as a whole.¹ There is no external identifiable law for this, it is the way the world appears to us.

It is not because the "form" produces a certain state of equilibrium, solving a problem of maximum coherence and, in the Kantian sense, making a world possible, that it enjoys a privileged place in our perception; it is the very appearance of the world and not the condition of its possibility; it is the birth of a norm and is not realized according to a norm; it is the identity of the external and the internal and not the projection of the internal in the external.²

We have hit upon an important point here, which Merleau-Ponty emphasizes constantly. We perceive meaningful "forms" through our bodies. Now, we cannot perceive any "forms", if our mind is merely a registering machine taking note of atomic sensations impinging themselves on it, nor can we perceive a meaningful form through our bodies if it is only our mind imposing a constituted order on all it receives from sensation. The active and passive minds as polar opposites are thus rejected. In perceiving meaningful "Forms", my body opens itself to the world, it inhabits

¹
Phen.P., p.146.

²
Ibid., p.61.

the world and "lives" the object it perceives. In other words, since body-object as the empiricists hold, is ineffectual, we find these patterns through our body-subject; i.e. through the body as incarnation, through the body perceiving meaningful wholes. We eliminate the body solely as object in this notion of the body as perceiving, as giving meaning which gives to it the properties of a subject.¹

Remarquons d'abord qu'en commençant par l'objet et non par le corps, en rebroussant du perçu au percevant, nous ne risquons pas d'être renvoyés de la chose dans le monde qui serait le corps-objet, tel que la psycho-physiologie l'observe du dehors et le connaît scientifiquement; ce corps-objet est encore lui-même un perçu. C'est bien le corps percevant que nous désimpliquons des caractères même du perçu. Et il est besoin de le désimpliquer par une démarche spéciale, car sa fonction de médiation fait précisément qu'il s'omet lui-même et s'abolit dans le terme perçu où viennent s'écraser en quelque sorte les opérations du parcours de l'objet.²

Since, I am embodied, I am always somewhere, in a certain historical situation, and from this situation I perceive, I live a world which is meaningful to me, but which would not have been, had it not been for the individual existence of my body, and, in consequence, been determined by my particular way of living it. We are all then body-subjects, two aspects in one whole, in which my body, as

¹ Reference to the body-subject can also be found in Phen.P., p.319-320, pp.91-93.

² Paul Ricoeur, Finitude et Culpabilité, Vol.I (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1960) - p.39-40.

my door, my opening to the world, cannot be purely objectified for me, because I look at it, I perceive it, not from the height of an all-constituting Consciousness, but from my relations with the world of which it is an integral part, not to be cut off and scrutinized in isolation.¹ I am necessarily bound to the world, and any judgment I pass on an object is the direct influence of my primary contact with it through perception.

Thus the permanence of one's own body, if only classical psychology had analysed it, might have led to the body no longer conceived as an object of the world, but as our means of communication with it, to the world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-² present and anterior to every determining thought.

In perception then, the body is always situated, it is always oriented towards something and through this orientation, it experiences meaning on a prereflective level. The body is, thus, a subject in perception, but not necessarily a consciously reflecting Cogito. It is a subject because it orients itself in a certain way, it exists, it is involved with the world. There is a mutual dependence between the inner and the outer, between the world and my way of perceiving it, which is essential to the understanding of perception. Hence, it is through the body-

¹ Further references may be found in the Phen., P., p.159, p.163-164.

² Phen., P., p.92.

subject act of perception that we can efface the notion of pure passivity which is what empiricism has given the subject, or pure activity the intellectualist converse. Perception is the fundamental living of sense. I give meaning to objects, not as a reflecting subject, but rather on the unreflective sphere, for I do not necessarily reflect on what I have seen, but it is an actualization of the potentialities offered me within my field of life or vision-- my horizon. But, I do not give sense arbitrarily, for perception is the lived experience of the relationship between object and subject, inner and outer.¹

The relation between my body's movements and the thing's "properties" which they reveal is that of the "I am able to" to the marvels it is within its power to give rise to. And yet my body must itself be meshed into the visible world; its powers depends precisely on the fact that it has a place from which it sees. Thus it is a thing, but a thing I dwell in. It is, if you wish, on the side of the subject; but it is not a stranger to the locality of things... There is a relation of my body to itself which makes it the vinculum of the self and things. When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a "physical thing". But at the same moment, if I wish an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right, es wird Leib, es empfindet. The physical thing becomes animate. Or, more precisely, it remains what it was (the event does not enrich it), but an exploratory power comes to rest upon or dwell in it. Thus, I

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References to motivation and solicitation, can be further found in the Phen.P., pp.213-215, 258-259 and 160-161.

touch myself touching; my body accomplishes "a sort of reflection". In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body- that the body is a "perceiving thing", a "subject-object".¹

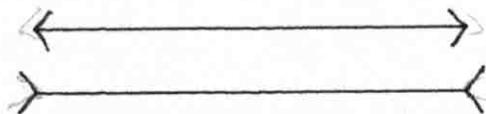
The outer suggests itself to me, it offers itself as a possibility, the grounds of motivation, a certain manner of being lived or oriented. The inner takes the invitation, and lives the object according to the motivation offered. I give meaning in living the suggestion or possibility that is the object, in the sense that, in so far as it is a potentiality to be structured or fitted in my world, I determine what possibility is to be realized in it. For example, a piece of wood offers itself to a carpenter as numerous possibilities. It is indeterminate, in the sense that, as a piece of wood it can motivate or justify the choice the carpenter makes, whether it be a table, a chair, a shelf, etc. On the other hand, it is determinate, in that it has qualities which definitely exclude certain forms or possibilities. For instance, it is not soft like plasticine; it is hard, and can only be moulded into a shape which takes into consideration the fact that it is not soft, easily pliable, and so forth. The carpenter thus, does not give sense arbitrarily; he can only give meaning according to the possibilities or motives latent in the piece of

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Signs., p.166

wood as such. There is, once more, a mutual dependence between inner and outer, subject and object, which is at the core of Merleau-Ponty's doctrine of motivation, and which, therefore, excludes a mere causal relationship or an arbitrariness of meaning.

"Objects interposed between me and the thing upon which I fix my eyes are not perceived for themselves; they are nevertheless perceived, and we have no reason for refusing to recognize that this marginal perception plays a part in seeing distance, since, when the intervening objects are hidden by a screen, the distance appears to shrink. The objects filling up the field do not act on the apparent distance in the relation of cause to effect. When the screen is removed, we see remoteness born of the intervening objects. This is the silent language whereby perception communicates with us: interposed object, in the natural context, 'means' a greater distance. It is not, however, a question of connection recognized by objective logic, the logic of constituted truth: for there is no reason why a steeple should appear to me to be smaller and further away when I am better able to see in detail the slopes and fields between me and it. There is no reason, but there is a motive.¹

To elucidate this theory of motivation in perception further, we should use Merleau-Ponty's own example of the Müller-Lyer experiment of optical illusion.²



For the empiricist and the intellectualist, in the reality of things, or in their set kind of objective criteria, I should see these lines as equal. That I do not see them

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Phen.P., p.49.

²
Ibid., p.6.

as such is due only to the fact that my attention is distracted by the arrows; whereas, if I concentrate on the pure lines themselves, I will necessarily see their equality. Merleau-Ponty's point is that these lines that I see as unequal are unequal for me, because in their concrete context, i.e. with the arrows (which is the only way I see them), they have this particular sense of inequality. The first line seems to go outward, while the second seems to shrink in comparison. My belief in their inequality is not a mere lack of attention; it goes deeper than that. The inequality which I perceive is motivated by the difference in the significance of the arrows. The context motivates or justifies my perception of the lines as unequal, and since perception is in essence a lived experience, or an act which grasps meaningful objects, I live (or perceive) the lines as unequal. The image suggested inclines me toward the idea of inequality; this is the motivation which justifies my experience when I say the lines are unequal and I see them as such. Through perception there is thus, a moment of solidarity in which I "inhabit" the object in a certain way in consequence of my orientation towards it. This is what allows him to say:

"Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them".¹

¹
Ibid., p.XI.

Two things should be brought out in relation to motivation in perception. It implies a certain manner of orientation or perspective, and, allied to this, the clarification of the body's anonymity on this prereflexive level of perception.¹

We have mentioned above that when we perceive an object, we perceive it in its totality. When I see a table, I see it as a whole, not at first consciously as seen from an angle.² On the other hand, we have also said that to give meaning necessitates some kind of communication between the inner and the outer in which the outer motivates my perception of it in a certain way.³ In other words, in order to perceive we must be situated, and, at the same time, or rather, arising from this situation, we must have a certain point of view which is limited to situation. Now, in perceiving the table, I grasp it in its totality, but I am in fact seeing it from one perspective, from one angle, and am simultaneously implicitly assuming or intending all the

1
There are more references to this section in the Phen.P., pp.215-217.

2
More is mentioned about this in the Phen.P., pp. 322-325

3
This is further clarified on pp.325-327 of the Phen.P.

other angles possible to the perception of this table.

To look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it.

But in so far as I see these things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can "see"; the back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it "shows" to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each treats the others round it as spectators of its hidden aspects which guarantee the permanence of those aspects by their presence.¹

However, even though in perception I grasp the object as a whole, in its entirety, the element of perspective although I am not aware of it consciously is always present. To use a classic example, three people looking at a flower will see it in three different ways, from three different aspects, although it is the same object they are all looking at, because for each of them, his interest renders accessible certain motives which are not necessarily revealed to the others. The farmer will see the flower as either useful or useless. If it is poisonous, if it is growing amongst his crops, it should be eliminated. On the other hand, if, for example, this flower is an apple blossom, and he is waiting for the harvest, he will see the flower as a good omen of his success with the crop. The botanist, however, looking at the flower,

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Phen.P., p.68.

does not see it as part of the landscape, nor as a commercial commodity, but rather as a specimen to be studied under a microscope, in which any particular flaw or quality in the flower's botanical set-up is what interests him. If now, a painter is passing by the flower: will strike him completely through its visual aspect. He will either have a heightened perception of its beauty and channel his energy towards a vivid portrayal of it, or he will be repelled by it. In either case, he is not attracted to it because of its value as is the farmer, nor is he pushed to study it under a microscope. He sees it as an object of artistic creation, and invests it with his own particular sense of what is beautiful. (Hence, perspective is not only concerned with the plane of fact, but equally with the plane of value. Thus, it concerns our whole human experience). In other words, we are each limited by our situation either spatially or temporally. What we perceive finally, as a whole, is the interconnection of one perspective into another, one point of view to another which gives the sense of an enduring, permanent object. Our perspectives are the result of the orientation and definite situation of our bodies in relation to the world. We are open to the world through our bodies in perception, but, at every moment, we are limited by one point of view with which we encounter the world. Paul Ricoeur explains this notion of

The particularity, and in consequence, the limitation of our perspectives in view of our intentionality in perception.

Ce caractère de point de vue, inhérent à toute vue, je ne le remarque pas directement, mais réflexivement: c'est donc sur un aspect de l'apparition, en tant que corrélat intentionnel du recevoir, que je dois surprendre la finitude de mon point de vue. Cet aspect de l'apparaître qui renvoie à mon point de vue, c'est cette propriété, insurmontable, invincible, de l'objet perçu de se donner d'un certain côté, unilatéralement, je ne perçois jamais qu'une face et puis une autre; et l'objet n'est jamais que l'unité présumée du flux de ces silhouettes; c'est donc sur l'objet que j'aperçois le caractère perspectiviste de la perception: elle consiste dans l'inadéquation même du perçu, c'est-à-dire dans cette propriété fondamentale que le sens qui s'esquisse peut toujours être infirmé ou confirmé, qu'il peut se révéler autre que celui que je présumais.¹

It is true then that when I perceive a table or a tree, I "see" it as a whole, but it is nevertheless an assumption on my part. When I see the front of a tree, I "assume"² that it is not just made up of that, I "know" that there is a back to it even though I cannot see it from my own angle. I intend all the other angles that one can have of the tree, and from it "conclude" the tree as a constituted whole. This whole process is unconscious, because our perception even though perspectival, is also a lived experience of an

¹ Paul Ricoeur, Finitude et Culpabilité, Vol. I. L'Homme Faillible (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1960), p.39.

² Such words as assume, conclude, or know despite their intellectual connotations, must be grasped in the phenomenological context and not in the purely idealistic context.

object, and such an experience grasps wholes as its primordial contact with the world.¹ To distinguish is to immediately see wholes rather than fleeting impressions, because the element of distinction involves something that is durable, that has meaning, that is distinguished because it is lived by us as a meaning-laden object. But, we must acknowledge the fact that because my perception is a certain way of living the object, a particular point of view which is limited by its particularity, the object, although perceived as a meaningful whole is ambiguous², just because of the assumption of all other perspectives. In perceiving the same object from a different perspective, I would recognize it as the same though different. Thus, when I see a ten ton truck a long

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It is interesting to note that this general experience of perception does not exclude different levels of perception. The new-born baby, who is on another level or intensity of experience, sees only blurred and passing sensations; color, form etc. It does not have the power of synthesizing these sensations into patterns which we all have the moment we open our bodies to the world, the moment we encounter and live the world in a way peculiar to each of us. As soon as a child begins to distinguish between "sensations", he has left that realm, and has entered the domain of experience in which everything he perceives is meaningful.

2

Ambiguity is an essential aspect of Merleau-Ponty's doctrine, and by it he means that every perspective anticipates all other perspectives, and therefore, what is given in each perspective, can be broadened to include other dimensions of meaning which can even modify the first meaning given. Thus, when I perceive a table, I grasp it in its totality, but such that its totality can contain other forms, colors, etc. which are not accessible through my perspective, but which I anticipate. In no field of experience can a totality be grasped in a way which exhausts its possibility of new meaning, and each new meaning reveals greater depth in the original comprehension of this totality.

distance away, it appears small to me, and yet it is never confused with a five ton truck seen from a shorter distance, precisely because it is not the result of geometrical constructions as the intellectualists would have, but the "lived" experience of a particular object at a distance. In other words, distance is taken into account in our way of living the object, so that when I see the truck from close by, the apparent difference in size is explainable by the difference of signification of distance. The second perception does not annul the first, it merely presents a different way of living the truck in different situations.

Once more, my human gaze never posits more than one fact of the object, even though by means of horizons it is directed towards all the others. It can never come up against previous appearances or those presented to other people otherwise than through the intermediary of time and language...The synthesis of horizons is no more than a presumptive synthesis, operating with certainty and precision only in the immediate vicinity of the object. The remoter surrounding is no longer within my grasp; ...it is an anonymous horizon now incapable of bringing any precise testimony and leaving the object as incomplete and open as it is indeed, in perceptual experience. Through this opening, indeed, the substantiality of the object slips away. If it is to reach perfect density, in other words, if there is to be an absolute object, it will have to consist of an infinite number of different perspectives compressed into a strict co-existence, and to be presented as it were to a host of eyes all engaged in one concerted act of seeing.¹

But, we have seen that we are always oriented in only one direction, that our body is situated in only one way at a certain time in a particular situation, and that only in this

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Phen.P., p.70.

way can it "inhabit" objects. This is because my body is interwoven with the world, and only from within it can it have any perspective or give any meaning. This is the way we "live" experience, not by imposing an order on it from above, nor by receiving atomic impressions passively, but by joining the active and passive roles in a world in which we are emmeshed as incarnate beings, and which we cannot escape from because it is only through this relationship between body and world that we can perceive and attain "sens". These considerations open up the whole problem of "foi perceptive", which is intimately bound up with the essential ambiguity of our perceptual experience. Since there cannot be any world in itself, nor any Transcendental Ego which constructs its world with Eternal principles there is only the lived world of our perception. We can only live within this world as the unique domain of sense. It is at once grounded in perception as well as the ground of perception, and this reciprocal relationship is precisely what we call faith.

How can anything ever really and truly present itself to us, since its synthesis is never a completed process, and since I can always expect to see it break down and fall to the status of a mere illusion? Yet there is something and not nothing. There is a determinate reality, at least at a certain degree, of relativity. Even if in the last resort I have no absolute knowledge of this stone, and even if my knowledge regarding it takes me step by step along an infinite road and cannot ever be complete, the fact remains that the perceived is there, and that I recognize it, that I have named it and that we agree on a certain number of statements about it. Thus it seems that we

are led to a contradiction: belief in the thing and the world must entail the presumption of a completed synthesis and yet this completion is made impossible by the very nature of the perspectives which have to be inter-related, since each one of them, by virtue of its horizons, refers to other perspectives, and so on indefinitely. There is, indeed, a contradiction, as long as we operate within being, but the contradiction disappears, or rather is generalized, being linked up with the ultimate conditions of our experience and becoming one with the possibility of living and thinking, if we operate in time, and if we manage to understand time as the measure of being. The synthesis of horizons is essentially a temporal process, which means, not that it is subject to time, nor that it is passive in relation to time, nor that it has to prevail over time, but that it merges with the very movement whereby time passes.¹

B - Language: At this point, the question arises as to how this significance lived by perception through a limited perspective is communicable? In other words, how do we explain the fact that there is intercommunication, that there is a give and take between others and myself. Perception, as we have mentioned above, is primary, and it is also an unreflected experience -- i.e. our experience is there, we live it, it is a fact, it is real, but we accept it as such without the reflection of a Cogito. That perception is unreflective can be seen by the emphasis on our "lived" experience. When we "live" something, we do not usually objectively reflect upon it, we are immersed in it, we are so much one with it, that we do not distinguish the "living" from the perception. This is achieved as have said, by the body in its relation to the world, and an experience is lived "anonymously" by

¹
Ibid., p.330.

the body, in other words, it is unquestioningly experienced by us through the body. Now, this "anonymous" realm can be analysed on different levels. There is first, the biological level, in which what we experience takes place without any dependence on us. It is the universal participation of the biological and physiological structuration of which each of our bodies is constituted and which thus orients us all towards a definite sphere of space and time experienced by all, the common horizon of our world. I cannot will my body to fall up rather than down, just as I cannot will my body to be eternal. The second level of the anonymous arises from the body passing from the biological to the "human" situation, the common rootedness of human beings - the conditioning we have had since childhood, imbibed in the family and society. It is the ideals, the rules, the language which we absorb unconsciously and unquestioningly, without active decision or opinion.

This cultural "anonymous" is the horizon common to us all, through which communication is possible. It is the rule of collectivity versus the individual Ego. Each Ego has a particular perspective, a particular way of looking at things; but this individuality is grounded in the anonymous, the common denominator of all life and communication. For example, the word "table" has no meaning except within a spatio-temporal context where such a word is used and understood. The anonymous, whether it be biological or cultural,

is somehow equivalent to the use of the French word "on", giving the connotation of what we are not explicitly conscious of living, what is not specifically endorsed by us. It is especially through the role of language that Merleau-Ponty expresses this anonymous. Language is so much part of our daily life, it is so interwoven with it, that we do not normally dissociate ourselves from it and question it. We assume it as an integral part of ourselves and our relationship to the world. We do not arbitrarily invent new words or idioms in the anonymous realm. We accept our own native tongue with its possibilities of expression because it is the "natural" means of communication with others who share with us a common historical situation. Such language, although sedimented, although institutionalized, is the link which ties our cultural heritage, our responses to the world, most closely. As St. Exupéry says in order to explain the powers of language:

True distance is not the concern of the eye: it is granted only to the spirit. Its value is the value of language, for it is language which binds things together.

And now it seems to me that I begin to see what a civilization is. A civilization is a heritage of beliefs, customs and knowledge, slowly accumulated in the course of centuries, elements difficult at times to justify themselves as paths when they lead somewhere, since they open up for man his inner distance.¹

¹ Antoine St. Exupéry, Flight to Arras.
Translated by Lewis Galantière.
(England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961).

Two points are to be emphasized. Language is the expression of our experiences and as a consequence there is no conscious experience without language.

For the speaking subject to express is to become aware of: he does not express just for others, but also to know himself what he intends.¹

On the other hand, everybody is born into a definite social context in which experience has already found its expression in a definite language whether it be French, English, German etc. All language, however, sedimented, however institutionalized, is always significant precisely because it is an expression of experience. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty will not accept the notion of objective language which would be purely a system of syntactical or phonetic relationships separated from its significatory value. In such a case, communication would be impossible, because in objective language the meaning is divorced from the word - the significance is no longer lived in expression but is arbitrarily assigned. Now, sedimented language is the expression of deadened experiences in the sense that it is a habit, a means of communication which, once acquired, becomes unconscious. Consequently, such a language is closed in its expressiveness, and the motives which it offers as possible means of expression are limited.

¹
Signs, p.90

We live in a world where speech is an institution. For all these common-place utterances; we possess within ourselves ready-made meanings. They arouse in us only second-order thoughts; these, in turn, are translated into other words which demand from us no real effort of expression and will demand from our hearers no effort of comprehension.¹

To explain this further, let us take an example. An average Englishman whose native tongue is English has, because of his situation, because of his orientation, only a limited horizon of expressivity. He uses words such as beauty, justice, love...but only within the context of ordinary experience in which these words are more abstract than really lived expressions of reality. They are possible perspectives upon a rich totality but the average man will only vaguely suspect the wealth of meaning that lies hidden in them. On the other hand, a poet, because he is capable of grasping them in their fuller significations, finds in them the 'motives' of new experience. He restores to them their original burden of meaning and by this act breaks the crust of sedimented language and brings to light new possibilities of experience and expression..

I understand or think I understand the words and forms of French; I have a certain experience of the literary and philosophical modes of expression offered me by the given culture. I express when utilizing all these already-speaking instruments, I make them say something they have never said. We begin reading a philosopher by giving

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Primacy of Perception (Northwestern University Press) - 1964, p.184.

the words he makes use of their "common meaning"; and little by little, through what is first an imperceptible reversal, his speech comes to dominate his language, and it is his use of words which ends up assigning them a new and characteristic signification.¹

This transition from the spoken word or language to the speaking word or speech is paralleled in perception. Perception is the lived experience of objects and thus of the world through my body. Language is the lived expression of this experience, opening up a world of expressivity. Just as on the ordinary level of perception, a beggar sitting on the pavement will be a part of the common landscape and taken for granted as fitting into the common whole of things, then, suddenly in a moment of heightened perception, he becomes invested with a new significance, a world of meaning hitherto closed to us - a world from which he emerges as its central figure. He breaks down the world of ordinary perception to open up the doors to new horizons of latent meanings which were always there as potentialities unrecognized by us previously. In the same way, the ordinary man accepts the traditions of language and observes, its grammatical rules without really suspecting the hidden depths of meaning in each word, without consciously realizing that "the central phenomenon of language is the

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Signs., p.91

common act of the signifying and the signified."¹ Thus ignoring the expressiveness of speech in the acceptance of the dogmatic and seemingly objective rules of the language he knows.

"Expression is the re-organization of things said"² and it is the creative writer who discovers the latent wealth in his language, and by taking traditional language as his ground opens up wider avenues of significance.

Communication in literature is not the simple appeal on the part of the writer to meanings which would be part of an apriori of the mind; rather, communication arouses these meanings in the mind through enticement and a kind of oblique action. The writer is himself a kind of new idiom. Constructing itself, inventing ways of expression and diversifying itself according to its own meaning. Perhaps poetry is only that part of literature where this autonomy is ostentatiously displayed. All great prose is also a re-creation of the signifying instrument, henceforth manipulated according to a new syntax... Great prose is the art of capturing a meaning which, until then, had never been objectified, and of rendering it accessible to everyone who speaks the same language.³

Let us illustrate Merleau-Ponty's theory with a concrete example from T.S.Eliot's "The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock:

Let us go then you and I
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table-

1
Ibid., p.95

2
Ibid., p.19

3
Merleau-Ponty, Primacy of Perception, p.8.

We all know the meanings of these words. We have all used them often enough in our speech. It is here that Eliot's greatness lies. He takes these ordinary words, these ordinary images, and juxtaposes them in such a way as to give us a completely original expression, a new vision.

He has lived this experience, he has felt it in his own way and has brought it to life for us, revealing to us the potentialities of our own language in a living expression which is entirely new.

Speech, however creative, is always based on the "objectified" language we use in every day context - the sedimented language through which our contact with the world is expressed and communicated. Each expresses in his own way, but is limited by the explicitness of the language he knows, and unable to reach into its implicit meanings and significations which the creative writer can grasp and bring to life through his experiences. But, no expressive function can exist without the past from which it has developed, and as we mentioned above, nothing new in expression is ever new in complete isolation, but new only in relation to its situation and orientation within the context of the Sedimented language it takes its origins and validity from.

Truth is another name for sedimentation which is itself the presence of all presents in our own.¹

C. History: We are all historical subjects, in historical situations utilizing language developed in history, in a time span of becoming in which the past always permeates the present and the future is always a projection of the present. We have spoken of the subjective element contained in language. The creative streak which makes each person think his speech is perfectly autonomous, tied to nothing except to its expression, is always rooted in that cultural "anonymous" which is institutionalized language. Every "present", every "immediate" speech or expression is always indissolubly tied to the linguistic tradition from which such expression took root. Signification, "sens" can never come into being by an act of creation ex nihilo. It is always a signification which can be communicated because of the language, the signs which are accessible to all, and common to all in any given civilization, since the foundation of any language is the expression of the body oriented in different ways. There is no meaningful speech, however, original, which is not rooted in historical language, and this speech which at a certain moment is completely new is immersed in the tradition, and becomes itself part of the past from which a new signification can be once more developed.

¹
Signs., P.96.

La théorie du signe, telle que la linguistique l'élabore, implique peut-être une théorie du sens historique qui passe outre à l'alternative des choses et des consciences. Le langage vivant est cette concrétion de l'esprit et de la chose qui fait difficulté. Dans l'acte de parler, dans son ton et dans son style, le sujet atteste son autonomie, puisque rien ne lui est plus propre, et cependant il est au même moment et sans contradiction tourné vers la communauté linguistique et tributaire de la langue. La volonté de parler est une même chose avec la volonté d'être compris. La présence de l'individu à l'institution et de l'institution à l'individu est claire dans le cas du changement linguistique. Car c'est souvent l'usure d'une forme qui suggère aux sujets parlants d'employer selon un principe nouveau les moyens de discrimination qui subsistent à la date considérée dans la langue.¹

Through language, through our perception and finally because of our body's inherent interwovenness with the world, we are always within a measurable time-span, and this time-span is always one of becoming in which the past is enmeshed in the present. Consequently, at every moment we live history, and we can at the same time from our own historical situation give sense to past events or envisage the future as a more or less definite perspective developing out of our own - within the same totality.

C'est à ce titre, et comme autant de logiques de conduites, qu'existent les formes et les processus historiques, les classes, les époques dont nous demandions où elles étaient: elles sont dans un espace social, culturel ou symbolique qui n'est pas moins réel que l'espace physique et qui, d'ailleurs, prend appui sur lui. Car un sens traîne non seulement dans la langue, ou dans des institutions politiques ou religieuses, mais dans les modes de la parenté de l'outillage, de la production, en général dans tous les modes de l'échange humaine.²

¹Merleau-Ponty, Eloge de La Philosophie (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p.64.

²Ibid., p.66.

Man is a historical animal. He can never escape the experiences of his body which are motivated by the world with which he is one. He is always in existence and it is only through this existence in which he is situated at a certain time and in a certain place, that he can give sense to events. As the perceiver is in face of the totality of meaningful objects, so is the historian in face of the totality of meaningful events. Because of his own social background, as well as his personal attitude, he is "apt" to grasp certain motives and thus give a certain "sens" either to past events or to events which are happening at the time. History is not an objective process playing itself out according to purely causal external relations as Marx would imply, nor on the other hand do we impose on events a meaning from a Transcendent consciousness - it is a synthesis which is not a mere mixture of its elements but goes beyond them. It is man's existence in the world, and from this particular existence as well as the social, economic, intellectual factors pertinent at his time and instilled in him, he is in a position to give significance to events. The meanings we attribute to events either past or present can never be completely objectified, for they are always in the process of becoming, always in the process of change as is man, as is society. Our conceptions of the meaning of history change from one generation to another, as one ideology succeeds another.

The signification of events which brought on the French Revolution in 1789 are not objective, eternal truths. They are subject to each century's, each generation's, each society's way of viewing them and bringing them into evidence, and the different ways of interpreting them are due to the particular historical situation in which we are involved.

In this voluntary act of carrying forward, this passing from objective to subjective, it is impossible to say just where historical forces end and ours begins, and strictly speaking the question is meaningless, since there is history only for a subject who lives through it, and a subject only in so far as he is historically situated. There is no one meaning to history; what we do has always several meanings, and this is where an existential conception of history is distinguishable from materialism and spiritualism.¹

We have seen through the three levels of history, language and perception the threads which tie all three necessarily to the world, in a circumscribed spatio-temporal context. We have seen how man essentially through his body's openness to the world is always situated in the world and in history, and from this situation, even though unreflected and unconscious, is motivated and accepts its solitations, giving them meaning from his own perspective first through perception, then through the expressive operation of language and communication and finally through his living of

¹ Phen., p., p.173. (A similar position is to be found in Claude Lévi-Strauss', book La Pensée Sauvage (Paris: Librarie Plon, 1962), p.339 f.f.)

history. This allows us to affirm that Merleau-Ponty's doctrine is principally founded upon the analysis of our experience of perception, language and history. Through this analysis indeed, he has shown, among other things, that there exists an essential solidarity between man and his world, that the real is always a totality grasped from a perspective, and that there is not an absolute "en-soi" but at most a field of motives¹ which we live and express in acts which carry their own significations. Merleau-Ponty thus can state that we are "condemned to meaning"²

Section II: The Reflexive Level:
The Cogito.

There remains one final level of experience to be considered before we can proceed to a synthesis of Merleau-Ponty's doctrine, that of the Cogito. If he has already shown that our prereflexive experience is firmly rooted in the world through our body whatever conclusion he may draw concerning our finitude must still await this final analysis. Both idealists and empiricists, for different reasons, can use reflection as an arm against him. Since, however, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception has already allowed him to undermine the empiricist's assertions, he will

¹ Reoœur, Finitude et Culpabilite, p.77

² Phen.P., p.XIX.

concentrate his attention in this section almost exclusively on the idealists' position concerning the Cogito. Is it not true that the Cogito can attain eternal truths, that it can detach itself from its situation in the world and be an impartial spectator, completely transparent to itself? For example, we see that we have a concept of a triangle which is immutable, which does not change from century to century a pure thought which in its transparency is thus eternal.¹ Two points can be brought up immediately against such a position in the context of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. First, in speaking of a triangle or a geometrical figure occupying geometrical space, we are implicitly assuming our own lived space in which such words as "right", "left", "upper" and "lower" have significance, and are accessible to us all. In other words, geometric constructions are built up from our own actual situation in the world and the manner in which we perceive it, using words which presuppose our whole experience of space, distance and movement. Now, movement denotes a certain perspective or grasp of the world, and consequently, our geometrical constructions (for such they are), can never come into being were it not for our lived experience which always takes place within a defined situation. Thus, the triangle, rather than being a fixed and eternal concept seems to be a

¹
Ibid., pp. 385-388.

"creative" act produced by our grasp of the world and our definitely oriented situation at the time. Second, to state that our concept of the triangle as having angles equaling the sum of two right angles, is eternal, is to assume the position of Euclidean Geometry -- a certain point in the history of mathematics. Hence, to so do, we must accept a certain temporal situation as having been lived, and within that situation a certain comprehension of triangles as being accessible. This comprehension can and is changed with the development of another situation motivating another grasp of the essence of triangle, different from the Euclidean.

Real i.e. perceived triangles, do not necessarily have, for all eternity, angles the sum of which equals two right angles, if it is true that the space in which we live is no less amenable to non-Euclidean than to Euclidean geometry. Thus there is no fundamental difference between the various modes of expression, and no privileged position can be accorded to any of them on the alleged ground that it expresses a truth in itself.¹

Our concept of triangle is constituted in accordance with a certain experience of the world, which in turn, presupposes a certain mode of motivation or a certain set of motives which are offered us through perception in our spatio-temporal dimensions. It is interesting to note for example that the Egyptians constantly used the

¹
Ibid., p.423.

figure of the triangle. They knew what it was because they had a certain experience and orientation toward the world which allowed them to use the triangular shape. However, it was only with the advent of the Greeks that the triangle became a concept. The Egyptians used the figure practically, they drew it and built according to their drawings. The Greeks took this first-order experience of the Egyptians and constructed a universalized triangle which gradually became to them an "eternal" truth. What is important to point out here, is that such a construction was possible only after it had been grasped at a certain moment of history involving the subject's spatio-temporal dimensions, and due to a definite orientation towards the experiences lived within that situation. Eternity, eternal truths, are nothing but second-order experiences which always take their root in a situation, in lived time and space founded inevitably on the body's openness and immersion in the world; therefore, even in the fullest purity of their signification they are necessarily referred back to the actual situation in the world from which they arose.

The Cogito, the "I think" must take its root in a situation. It is not a Mind divorced from the body, but is rather incarnate. It cannot exist in a realm of its own outside time and space because it rests on the common

foundation of time and space. It is not transparent to itself because it is ambiguous, it is contingent because it is visible within a definite perspective which is only one of an infinite number of perspectives. It is limited by space, that is, it can only think about objects which it perceives and analyses from a certain point, a particular perspective which hides certain elements and brings to the foreground others. It is limited by time because it can only construct in historical time; it can only be consciousness in time, and time never stands still, it is always in the process of becoming - either past or future. There is never an eternal "now" in which Consciousness can reflect and analyse. There is only one situation, then another, then a third, and in each the perspective changes - some thoughts become clearer, others become obscured.

On the other hand, we do universalize, we do have essences. But, these universalizations, these essences are not divorced from time and situation - they arise from them, from our being-in-the-world. Hence, when I universalize, I seize the essence of "table" but I always seize it in time as it is grasped from a perceptual context. In other words, we can never grasp an essence in its pure totality because the totality is open to an indefinite number of perspectives and in universalizing I am merely abstracting from the fact that

all totality is an extrapolation, an anticipation of an indeterminate number of perspectives. Essences, as we have mentioned above,¹ are never divorced from the world in a realm of their own. They evolve from our own world, and since we are living in a spatio-temporal realm, these essences are universals only within this world. To speak of a universal table or triangle existing in a realm of its own is to ignore the fact that the only way we arrive at the universal was from the particular, which gives it its substance. The Cogito is then a consciousness of meaning or of essences in the above sense alone. It is an awareness of what was first a perceptual experience developed into universality. It is a certain way of liberating itself from a particular situation without, in effect, escaping all situation. Thus, the Cogito seizes essences, but it is a Cogito always, in time, and the essences are consequently never eternal, it is always a becoming, attached to the past and looking towards the future.

So far, Merleau-Ponty has been maintaining the position that the Cogito, the conscious subject is limited and motivated only by perceptual experiences, that it cannot arrive at Eternal Truths, or Concepts because it is in time and space, in a situation. But, it might be argued

¹
In Chapter I, Section II - on Husserl.

that the conscious subject has some experiences which belong to it alone, viz., the domain of feelings, of sentiments and emotions which are not grasped perceptually, and in which the Cogito is transparent to itself, where there is no perspective, and therefore, where the totality is grasped in itself. Are these experiences then not the Cogito's prerogative alone, in which pure interiority is reached? Merleau-Ponty's main point is to show that since there is a possibility of illusion and self-deception in our interpretation of our feelings we cannot attribute even to our inner experience pure lucidity or pure actualisation of our possible existence. We remain eternally within the framework of temporality; each actualisation opens up new horizons of totality but never allows us to grasp them except through a perspective.

This becomes clear through the analysis of the two examples which he proposes. In the first case, how are we to explain that we often attribute to superficial feelings of mere attraction the value of authentic love? If we understand by love an experience which touches the very core of our existence it is the gift of one's self to another precisely because the other merits this gift. We cannot possibly confuse this kind of love with, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's example of "late love"¹. This latter signifies an attraction

¹Phen. P. p.379.

felt by an older man, for example, in face of the youth and vigor of the girl. It is not a disinterested gift of one's self, but rather an egoistical desire to participate in the vitality which is no longer his.

The only way in which this confusion can take place is that the feelings which manifest each experience bear some superficial resemblance to one another. Because of this resemblance we attribute to the one a 'perspective-value' which only rightly belongs to the other. Thus the elderly man has built up from one definite perspective, a particular form of attraction, a totality which is not justified because he completes this perspective more or less arbitrarily, forgetful of its essential limitation. Since all feeling manifests the total sense of our existence, the error arises in his case by attributing more than its value to a feeling which only discloses a surface movement of our being towards another. In other words, the characteristics which we are so ready to confer upon the experience expressed through this sentiment are usurped. Yet we are not conscious of our error while in this state. The perspective which reveals us to ourselves can also hide us if we neglect its innate limitation.

True love ends when I change, or when the object of affection changes, misguided love is revealed as such when I return to my own self. The difference is intrinsic. But, as it concerns the place of feeling in my total being-in-the-world, and as mistaken love is bound up with the person

I am at the time I feel it, and also as, in order to discern its mistaken nature I require a knowledge of myself which I can only gain through disillusionment, ambiguity remains which is why illusion is possible.¹

What this means is that the possibility for us to conceive as love an experience which is inauthentic and superficial is the sign of the limits of our so-called interiority. We are moved to acknowledge it as love only by the standards of the society in which we live, our own circumstances etc., (e.g. adolescence...),. When we live authentic love, when we have really known what it means to give one's self to another as a person we have, as it were, the norm which will enable us to judge the rest. It is not, therefore, through reflection upon the present experience that we can reach a decision in this respect. (This would bring back the whole doctrine of attention, the supposition of a perfectly defined world, whether exterior or interior). We become conscious of an illusion when we have been freed from it either through contact with authentic experience, or because what should have been *eternal* love shows itself as a mere need of the moment - the dream of youth, the regrets of old age, etc.

This same inadequacy of reflection is brought out by his second example of a person who, becoming aware of his love for another sees the meaning of his past actions as

¹
Ibid., p.379.

significant of the existence of this love of which he was only implicitly aware at the time.

I make the discovery that I am in love. It may be that none of those facts, which I now recognize as proof of my love, passed unnoticed by me; neither the quickened drive of my present towards my future, nor that emotion which left me speechless, nor my impatience for the arrival of the day we were to meet. Nevertheless, I had not seen the thing as a whole or, if I had, I did not realize that it was a matter of so important a feeling, for I now discover that I can no longer conceive my life without this love. Going back over the preceding days and months, I am made aware that my thoughts and actions were polarized, I pick out the course of a process of organization, a synthesis in the making. Yet it is impossible to pretend that I always knew what I now know, and to see as existing, during the month which had elapsed, a self-knowledge which I have only just come about. The love which worked out its dialectic through me, and of which I have just become aware... I was not unaware of it since it was I who endured the hours of boredom preceding a meeting, and who felt elation when she approached; it was a matter of experience, not knowledge, from start to finish.¹

The person who experiences love or emotion of any kind does not do so through pure reflection or in a clear cut of defined manner. It has for him what Merleau-Ponty constantly refers to as an "existential significance", i.e. he lives the situation he is in. He can neither objectify it completely, nor can he understand it as a totality through pure reflection. Only in acting, in doing, does he give substance to his belief in the authenticity of his outer perception, his openness to the world, and his relationship to others -

¹
Ibid., p.380-381.

all of which are inseparably united in his situation as a man. The Cartesian "I think therefore I am" is reversed in such a way that the "I am" contains within it the "I think", the real, the fact that I am, precedes and contains the possible, and it is only through the former that the latter realizes itself. This containment is not syllogistic, it is existential, it is lived. "I can never coincide with my life which is forever fleeing from itself, in spite of which there are inner perceptions"¹, and these inner perceptions are retained as landmarks because of the actions of love, hate, will, etc., because of the existential doing, because of their place in the ineluctable fact of the "I am". The Cogito is the synthesis of existence and reflection in which existence, in other words, the situation and its motives, give to reflection its only possible content. There is then no evasion from situation and Merleau-Ponty's rejection of idealism is nothing more than the corollary of this demonstration. At this point then, one can consider that Merleau-Ponty, at least in his own eyes, has justified his rejection of idealism.

¹
Ibid., p.383.

CHAPTER III

SYNTHESIS: THE ULTIMATE MEANING OF
EXPERIENCE ACCORDING TO MERLEAU - PONTY.

Section I: Truth.

What Merleau-Ponty has offered us so far are certain facets of man's experience. We have seen in each step that there is a common orientation towards a final vision of existence, which we will now try to bring out. The first step towards this synthesis, is to unify the various aspects of truth as we have found it in all the experiences described in the preceding analysis.

Two positions are immediately rejected by Merleau-Ponty. Truth is never transcendental, as if it were in an absolute realm of its own; nor is it on the other hand, a matter of complete relativism. We exist in a spatio-temporal context accessible to all, and truth is not to be found outside this global situation. Conversely, we communicate, we can verify our perceptual experiences, we have values and sentiments which each society holds as true, so that truth is not reduced to complete relativism.¹ To

¹ Merleau-Ponty's point here, is that relativism is another form of idealism, where one refuses to give any privileges to this real in preference to a world of possibles, whereas Merleau-Ponty's theory of facticity is built on the sole ground of the real.

both viewpoints Merleau-Ponty's answer is essentially similar. We are all in the world, we are sure of its permanence in the sense that we cannot get beyond it. We accept it as our ultimate reality, and from it as our basis, we fit in all our experiences, all our knowledge in such a way as to leave us with that coherency which is immanent in the structure of the world as we know it - as we accept it ultimately by our "foi perceptive".

The world remains the same world throughout my life, because it is that permanent being within which I make all corrections to my knowledge, a world which in its unity remains unaffected by those corrections, and the self-evidence of which attracts my activity towards the truth through appearance and error... I may be mistaken, and need to rearrange my certainties, and reject the being to which my illusions give rise, but I do not for a moment doubt that in themselves things have been compatible and compossible, because from the very start I am in communication with one being, and one only, a vast individual from which my experiences are taken, and which persists on the horizon of my life as the distant rear of a great city provides the background to everything we do in it...¹

Truth is the intelligence, the cogito, seizing reality as it is - a certain conformity between the inner and the outer, between what we affirm and what is, brought to evidence through the acts performed and their coherency in the structure which is our world. The place of truth comes to the fore in our conscious awareness of being which is implied in our judgments concerning things and our experiences of them. Truth is always and only to be

¹
Phen. of P., p. 328.

found in a situation, for it is our truth, (and we always inhabit a spatio-temporal dimension linked to past and future), communicable from one generation to another because it is the common denominator of all ages and is conveyable and understood through history. There is no a priori, no absolute truth, but there is a common horizon of being to which we all have access because we are, and it is within this horizon that each individual event is inserted, and finds its truth. If the event in question does not clash with any other event, if it can be placed within a coherent context and given meaning in this common horizon we all inherit, it is true. Since we are in a world, a situation of facticity and finitude, which has a certain structuration such as time, space, sensations, perceptions etc... we cannot get behind this situation in order to ascertain its absolute truth, for it is this structure which justifies the presentation of certain values, and these values are legitimate insofar as they are integrated into this coherent totality which is anticipated through our perspective. The structure itself is accepted by us as the manifestation of the "anonymous", the biological and social world in which we live unquestioningly as historical subjects in situation, since it is the only world we know of and are open to.

Since we are all hemmed in by history, it is up to us to understand that whatever truth we may have is to be gotten not in spite of but through our historical inherence. Superficially

considered, our inherence destroys all truth; considered radically, it founds a new idea of truth. As long as I cling to the ideal of an absolute spectator, of knowledge with no point of view, I can see my situation as nothing but a source of error. But if I have once recognized that through it I am grafted onto every action and all knowledge which can have a meaning for me, and that step by step it contains everything which can exist for me, then my contact with the social in the finitude of my situation is revealed to me as the point of origin of all truth...And since we have an idea of truth, since we are in truth and cannot escape it, the only thing left for me to do is to define a truth in the situation.¹

The global situation is the same for all, but each grasps it in a different way, according to the particular social upbringing and ideals in whose context we are born, the historical situation. Truth, then, is relative to the society one lives in, but it can be broadened with the broadening of that horizon. Error is only possible when one takes his own horizon, which is a grasp through a certain perspective, as the equivalent of all perspectives, and, consequently, all other horizons, all other cultures. The Cogito, as a result, is always attached to a certain social background, a certain temporal situation in which it is immersed. The evidence of truth depends, therefore, at any moment on the present situation. To present a priori self-evidence to back up eternal truths which are transparent to the Cogito alone cannot be legitimately done or

¹
Signs, p.109.

accepted. We are in a world, in a certain situation, at a certain time and place. These are facts, beyond them we can ascertain nothing. We fall back inevitably on our "foi perceptive". We cannot bring in eternity for we can only and always know temporality, a measurable time span composed of past, present and future, in which the present is always attached to the past and facing the future. There can be no absolutely detachable Cogito because it subsists in time, and arrives at truths through experiences in time which cannot be transcended. In fact, as Merleau-Ponty states: "Our only victory over time lies in expressing time"¹, through the realization that all our experiences, all our actions are bounded by time, and actualized in time. We are not eternal, but finite, not immutable, but contingent. Everything we do, everything we believe in as true, is also in time, and is therefore contingent, since it is dependent on time and is our particular way of grasping our situation in time, motivated in our actions only by one perspective amongst an indefinite number of perspectives of which we cannot possibly know all.

Section II: Freedom:

The living of truth is, therefore, temporal, and the recognition of its limits and its authenticity depends

¹
Ibid., p.31.

on the actions which bring about the events. Now, these actions are free, but not free in the sense of the absolute freedom which Sartre maintains, for to have absolute liberty is to assume once more the detachability of the Cogito and of truth from time, from space, from the perceptual world we are all rooted in. If we are to accept pure freedom divorced from any situation, we must deny any junction between the "pour-soi" and the "en-soi"; the consciousness of being, and being itself. In other words, we must accept a world in which only pure consciousness exists, in which freedom is not influenced by external factors. This philosophy of absolute freedom, which is completely gratuitous, since it is neither causally determined nor motivated by anything outside my consciousness, becomes, in effect, determination. My consciousness is attached to no situation necessarily, its acts are motivated by nothing in the world, and as it is always and ineluctably free, the problem of choice or action at a certain time and situation is of no great consequence, for, whether I choose or not, whether I act or not, my freedom is in no way affected. Freedom is no longer a decision of ours to act in a determinate way, but is rather imposed on us as a transcendental necessity.

As we can see, such a position is impossible for Merleau-Ponty, since our very existence implies action,

and action in its turn implies a particular situation in definite spatio-temporal dimensions, where such an action would be meaningful. Freedom is absolute, but never in a transcendent sense, never as detachable from the world, from things. It is a universal which can only exist in the particular, and yet remains universal. Similar to the idea of totality and perspective, freedom can never be conceived without the particular expression, but it is an inexhaustible possibility of action.

There is free choice only if freedom comes into play in its decision, and posits a situation chosen as a situation of freedom. A freedom which has no need to be exercised because it is already acquired could not commit itself in this way: it knows that the following instant will find it, come what may, just as free, and just as indeterminate. The very notion of freedom demands that our decision should plunge into the future, that something should have been done by it, and that the subsequent instant should benefit from its predecessors, and, though not necessitated, should be at least required by it.¹

We are always in a certain historical situation, and it is as existing within this situation that we act. There is no free act without a situation, because an action presupposes a time and a place in which to act, as well as a person to decide. Now, we do not exist in isolation; each one of us has a certain form of historical existence due to the situation he was born in, the social and cultural heritage he acquires, and it is only within the framework of his existential situation - either as an American capitalist or an Egyptian peasant - that he chooses.

¹ Phen.P., p.437.

His acts or decisions are inextricably bound up with his historical existence - since his perspective and, consequently, his choice from that perspective, is dominated by his existential status. Liberty requires a field, certain possibilities should have a privileged place in its horizon. In other words, each situation offers certain possible actions, while others are impossible - each situation solicits or motivates different actions and excludes others by the very determination of the subject's historical existence.

We are not asserting that history from end to end has only one meaning, any more than has an individual life. We mean simply that in any case freedom modifies it only by taking up the meaning which history was offering at the moment in question, and by a kind of unobtrusive assimilation. On the strength of this proposal made by the present, the adventure can be distinguished from the state man, historical imposture from the truth of an epoch... We therefore recognize around our initiatives and around that strictly individual project which is ourselves, a zone of generalized existence and of projects already formed, significances which trail between ourselves and things and which confer upon us the quality of man, bourgeois or worker. Already generality intervenes, already our presence to ourselves is mediated by it and we cease to be pure consciousness, as soon as the natural or social constellation ceases to be an unformulated this and crystallises into a situation, as soon as it has a meaning - in short as soon as we exist.¹

In other words, there is an ultimate background of being itself which is actualized in its manifestation through liberty and the world as such, and which is the foundation for subject and object. This is what Merleau-Ponty terms

¹
Phen.P. p.450.

"L'Invisible",¹ that generality of Being which is always manifested in the visible, in the real. From it, not through causal relationship, but rather as a second level, there arises the Anonymous, a second form of generality which is assumed and given a meaning. This second form concerns the horizon of each particular situation, in which each situation is imbedded and in which, as historical subjects, each action of ours is rooted in such a way that it receives its modality, its "sens" from its anonymous background. This anonymous is seen both in our way of living freedom through our bodies, and as historical subjects. In the first case, my liberty does not create the particular structures of the world but its general lines. For example, I can look upon a mountain as something to be scaled, in which case it will present obstacles and easy trails. But, it is by my body that the mountain has a definite meaning of grandeur which I do not impose on it. I can not "live" it except as large, high, steep etc., even though in my imagination, I can see it from Sirius as a mere crease in an infinitely insignificant portion of matter.² What this means in essence is that I

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Le Visible et l'Invisible. (Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p.440). I shall clarify the role of the Invisible in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy below.

² Phen.P., p.440.

am tied to the world through my body - I am interwoven with it, and the only meaning I can give objects is the one which they offer me because I am a body situated in a particular way capable only of accepting such a motivation.

In 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. These intentions are general in a double sense: firstly in the sense that they constitute a system in which all possible objects are simultaneously included...and furthermore in the sense that they are not of my own making, they originate from outside me, and I am not surprised to find them in all psycho-physical subjects organized as I am.¹

My liberty emerges through its assumption of the biological anonymous as necessary, but this anonymous although general, although determinate, can be directed freely in different ways - through "spontaneous evaluation"² by which things take meaning for us as coherent objects, with which we are interwoven.

Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself to it: as long as we are alive, our situation is open, which implies both that it calls up specially favored modes of resolution, and also that it is powerless to bring one into being by itself.³

¹
Ibid., p.440

²
Ibid., p.441

³
Ibid., p.442

As we have mentioned above, the same results occur if we consider history instead of the material world. In order to choose, to act, I must exist in a certain historical context, as a certain type of historical subject - either as bourgeois or proletariat, and it is from this particular perspective that I decide or act. The whole of Merleau-Ponty's notion of historical freedom is based on his concept of existentiality. Again he avoids objectivism and subjectivism, and is left with the middle path. I am aware of class struggle and I choose to join the revolution because I exist as a proletariat, because I exist in a certain historical situation where such a revolution is one of the motives offered by the situation.

What makes me a proletariat is not the economic system or society considered as systems of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them; nor is it an intellectual operation devoid of motive, but my way of being in the world within this institutional framework.¹

We do not choose the world or the time we live in, but we can choose between the different ways of accepting the solicitations our situation offers us. We are determined because we exist at a certain time and place, we are necessarily interwoven with the world, but we have certain choices open to us and we would not be men if we did not act. What is certain is that we can never be

¹
Ibid., p.443.

As we have mentioned above, the same results occur if we consider history instead of the material world. In order to choose, to act, I must exist in a certain historical context, as a certain type of historical subject - either as bourgeois or proletariat, and it is from this particular perspective that I decide or act. The whole of Merleau-Ponty's notion of historical freedom is based on his concept of existentiality. Again he avoids objectivism and subjectivism, and is left with the middle path. I am aware of class struggle and I choose to join the revolution because I exist as a proletariat, because I exist in a certain historical situation where such a revolution is one of the motives offered by the situation.

What makes me a proletariat is not the economic system or society considered as systems of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them; nor is it an intellectual operation devoid of motive, but my way of being in the world within this institutional framework.¹

We do not choose the world or the time we live in, but we can choose between the different ways of accepting the solicitations our situation offers us. We are determined because we exist at a certain time and place, we are necessarily interwoven with the world, but we have certain choices open to us and we would not be men if we did not act. What is certain is that we can never be

¹
Ibid., p.443.

pure "en-soi" or pure "pour-soi", we are a junction of both in one. Again we are never completely determined because we have choices open to us in our situation, and yet we are never completely free, because we are always immersed in being, and thus, in situation. What there is, then, is an intermingling, an inseparability of freedom and necessity in which both exist, but neither has priority since they are so attached, and as always we are unable to make clear statements about the role of freedom versus that of determinism, because of the fundamental ambiguity involved not only in our relationship to the world, through our bodies, but also the ambiguity involved in man as consciousness.

What then is freedom? To be born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities... We exist in both ways at once. There is, therefore, never determinism and never absolute choice. I am never a thing and never bare consciousness... The generality of the "rôle" and of the situation comes to the aid of decision, and in this exchange between the situation and the person who takes it up, it is impossible to determine precisely the 'share contributed by the situation' and the 'share contributed by freedom'.¹

Freedom is "detachment" from the world just because it has its roots in the world, as the cogito can detach itself from a particular situation without evading situation completely. We are interwoven with the world, we are always in spatio-temporal dimensions, a specific historical situation

¹
Phen. P., p.453

which motivates us to act in a particular way, and it is just because of our realization of this interwovenness, this inseparability from the world that we are free.

I can pass freedom by, only if I try to get over my natural and social situation by refusing in the first place, to take it up, instead of using it as a way into the natural and human world. Nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but, on the contrary, because I am from the start outside myself and open to the world.¹

Section III: Finitude & Contingency.

We can see now the constant aim of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, culminating in finitude, facticity and contingency. We have seen how all man's functions, whether biological or cultural, are all inevitably contained in the world, and take their existence from the world. We have seen how the Cogito can never escape time and situation, how truth can never be eternal, because it is founded on history; and, finally, how freedom can never be absolute because it is a freedom always in situation, always motivated by a particular way of existing. There is no necessary law for my birth at a certain time, but once I am born, I am determined within my historical situation to a certain time span. I am a fact in a world of facts

¹
Ibid., p.456

to which I am constantly open, and my whole character, my perspectives at different moments in my life, all stem from this primordial fact of my existence, which is neither my prerogative, nor my choice, but which just happens, thus determining my situation in the world. Our inevitable facticity is well explained by Ricoeur in his analysis of character:

Si je ne peux changer de caractère, si je ne peux élire ni renier sa perspective, il faut dire non seulement que le caractère est immuable, mais qu'il est indiscernable du fait de mon existence. Que veux-je dire quand j'appelle mon caractère un fait? Ceci: aussi loin que je me souviens, j'étais déjà cette ouverture finie sur l'universelle condition humaine. Il n'y a point de commencement à cette situation qui appartienne à la conscience et soit susceptible d'être reprise dans un choix de moi-même. Tous les points de vue sont à partir de cette origine non posée de toutes mes positions prises; mon caractère n'est pas issu d'une prise de position.

Or je ne dis rien d'autre quand je dis que je suis né. Ma naissance désigne ce fait premier que mon existence est elle-même un fait. Pour les autres ce fut un événement: pour moi, elle est la limite fuyante en deçà de tous mes souvenirs les plus lointains, le commencement toujours antérieur vers lequel s'enfonce la mémoire balbutiante de ma petite enfance; cet événement pour les autres me signale à moi-même mon état d'être déjà né. Ma naissance n'est donc pas autre chose que mon caractère; dire que je suis né, c'est seulement signaler mon caractère comme cela que je trouve...¹

What is man's position in the world then? We are born into the world, we accept it as it is because it is all

¹ Ricoeur, Finitude et Culpabilité, p. 79-80.

we can know. We can never really possess the world, or even any particular object in it, in its entirety, because we are limited by our situation and our perspective--our particular way of grasping reality, which, when perceived by us at one point, slips away from complete elucidation by hiding its other aspects from us.

Cette sorte de diaphragme de la vision qui, par compromis avec le tout à voir, donne mon point de vue sur le monde, il n'est certes pas fixe: rien ne nous empêche, par les mouvements du regard, de franchir les limites: mais cette liberté reste secrètement liée; nous ne pouvons que déplacer notre regard, c'est-à-dire transporter ailleurs ses limites. Mais il faut qu'il y ait toujours limité; ce qui est gagné d'un côté, il faut le perdre de l'autre. Une nécessité indirecte et sourde pèse sur ma vision.¹

Such is the ultimate of man's finitude. He is born, he always lives in a definite, determinate time span. He is in history which is always a becoming. His situation, the way he grasps the world from his point of view are the only things accessible to him. He is limited by the very fact that he exists, that there is no necessary reason for his existence, and that his existence itself is finite and temporal. He cannot imagine a world totally other than his own, because any other world would be a mere extension of the reality he does know. He is in a totality which is itself ambiguous, which never fully reveals itself to him because he always grasps it from a perspective.

¹ Merleau-Ponty, Le Visible et l'Invisible, p.136.

But even the totality of the world is contingent, because it cannot exist without the perspectives which view it, and, consequently, we are brought face to face with radical contingency. Not only are we contingent, but the world in which we live, the history we inhabit, the time and space we measure, the culture we acquire, all these are contingent. In other words, we grasp the "anonymous", the biological and social realms as totalities, but, upon reflection, just as in perception, we realize we are seeing everything through one perspective, and this perspective is itself limited and finite. The Anonymous is founded on a larger generality, the Invisible--the world of Being, in which we all partake, in which subject and object are the particulars. The Invisible is the totality of the world as the objective aspect of experience, and liberty as the subjective aspect. There is neither a world, nor a liberty, outside the union of the two in existence. The world does not exist except through its particularizations, as liberty is never anything but a liberty in a situation. This invisible, this universal Being is contingent, as our participation in it is contingent, as similarly, the anonymous is contingent upon our perspectives of it. Here, we distinguish between ontic contingency or the anonymous, and ontological contingency which concerns the Invisible. Since we are always a perspective which is the essence and definition

of our finitude, since we are always in a situation, and can never know anything fully because of the boundaries of this situation, we are always in a state of wonder, we are always questioners in face of the world, of the Real, which can never give us a complete answer, but only fragments which we take up and rephrase into different questions.

The contingency of the world must not be understood as a deficiency in being, a break in the stuff of necessary being, a threat to rationality, nor as a problem to be solved as soon as possible by the discovery of some deeper-laid necessity. That is ontic contingency, contingency within the bounds of the world. Ontological contingency, the contingency of the world itself, being radical, is, on the other hand, what forms the basis once and for all of all our ideas of truth. The world is that reality of which the necessary and the possible are merely provinces.¹

Our final position in the world is then to accept it as a totality of Being of which we partake; to accept the paradoxes which our finitude, our facticity impose on us, and to try and live with them, without searching for an ultimate answer. Such an answer does not exist. It would be futile to search for it, as have philosophers for centuries. The only way we can fulfill ourselves is to question within our limitations, to find significance in the world, not through reflection, not through the positing of an absolute Consciousness, but in our actions, in our living as completely as possible our situation, our finitude, our facticity. The

¹
Phen.P., p.398.

philosopher's task is not to isolate himself in an ivory tower of reflection which attempts to hide from itself its very contingency, but rather, to take up this contingency, accept it as a necessary fact of existence, and act upon it, i.e. live a life in which the elements of finitude and contingency - in other words, chance - are fully recognized as inescapable.

Au bout d'une réflexion qui le retranche d'abord, mais pour lui faire mieux éprouver les liens de vérité qui l'attachent au monde et à l'histoire, le philosophe trouve, non pas l'abîme du soi ou du savoir absolu, mais l'image renouvelée du monde, et lui-même planté en elle parmi les autres. Sa dialectique ou son ambiguïté n'est qu'une manière de mettre en mots ce que chaque homme sait bien: la valeur des moments où, en effet, sa vie se renouvelle en se continuant, se ressaisit et se comprend en passant outre, où son monde privé devient monde commun.¹

This is the sobering tone on which Merleau-Ponty builds his radical humanism. Man can no longer escape into ideologies which have no bearing on the world he lives in. There are so many contrasting ideologies in our century that communication becomes impossible. Man must accept the fact of his existence, the contingency and ambiguity of all that he sees, all that he does, and from then on, he has stopped screening himself behind transcendent beliefs which, in reality, paralyze him. Man cannot express himself except through action, and his

¹
Eloge de la Philosophie, p.73.

action is a form of groping, of eternal questioning which can never be answered, and yet action which makes of him an "authentic" man, because he has taken up the world as it is, with all its paradoxes and limitations. Instead of trying to get to an eternal answer, man must live, act, and communicate in a world which is, as he is, but a chance event, and which must be recognised and made meaningful within such a framework.

Nous avons non pas une conscience constituante des choses, comme le croit l'idéalisme, où préordination des choses à la conscience, comme le croit le réalisme (ils sont indiscernables ... parce qu'ils affirment tous deux l'adéquation de la chose et de l'esprit), nous avons avec notre corps, nos sens, notre regard, notre pouvoir de comprendre la parole et de parler, des mesurants pour l'Être, des dimensions où nous pouvons le reporter, mais non pas un rapport d'adéquation ou d'immanence. La perception du monde et de l'histoire est la pratique de cette mesure, le repérage de leur écart ou de leur différence à l'égard de nos normes.¹

What we are faced with then, is no explanation which will make us transparent to ourselves, but rather a series of paradoxes, a series of "junctions"², of which we are made up and which we accept as inevitably ours. There can be no clear cut distinctions between myself and the world, because I and the world are mutually dependent on each other for our being and truth. Nor can there be any separation between body and mind, because my body is openness

¹
Le Visible et l'Invisible, p.140.

²
Signs, p.241.

to the world, and it is mind's incarnation. I can assert nothing outside the world to which I am irradicably bound: I cannot visualize anything outside of time and space because I am of time and space. I cannot attest to the eternity of any truth because I am a historicalsubject, in situation, limited by a perspective, tied down by my contingency and the contingency of others and of our experiences in the world which the study of history points to. Merleau-Ponty's concluding remarks show all too clearly his attitude of contemporary Stoicism. The radical humanism he proclaims is one in which man is left alone, unsupported by high-sounding ideologies or eternal truths, in which man has to face up to his contingency, the fact that he is seemingly a plaything of fortune, and, once this is done, real communication can once more be established by men who are unafraid to face a world riddled with paradox and subject to chance.

The discussions of our time are so convulsive only because it is resisting a truth which is right at hand, and because in recognizing - without any intervening veil - the menace of adversity, it is closer perhaps than any other to recognizing the metamorphoses of Fortune.¹

Whether such a humanism can, in effect, be established without destroying man, is a question which Merleau-Ponty does not raise, but which is equally disquieting.

¹
Ibid., p.143.

Can man live from day to day, hoping for nothing, wishing for nothing, acting, in a sense, blindly, because of his limitedness and his rootedness in a world of which he is not sure and which he cannot depend on, as he conversely cannot depend on himself? This question is one which is brought to force with the emergence of a demand for a philosophy of radical humanism; a philosophy in which man is robbed of all faith and hope and is given in return the dubious consolation of a stoical acceptance of his mere radical contingency.

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