

The Body of Merleau-Ponty's Work as a Developing Whole

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Final publication is available at *International Philosophical Quarterly* 49, No. 2 (2009)

It has been claimed that Merleau-Ponty's later works break significantly with his earlier publications, especially with regard to the relative importance accorded to perception and language, with the earlier work privileging perception and the later work privileging language.¹ The later works, it is argued, even leave perception behind for language and thus result in another inconsistency, a later philosophy of history that is inconsistent with an earlier one. James Schmidt's *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* puts forth these claims.² The present essay will argue that there is no such break in the body of Merleau-Ponty's work, that this case can be made simply by investigating this body's three major philosophical texts (*The Structure of Behavior*, *Phenomenology of Perception*, and *The Visible and the Invisible*³), but that it can especially be made by considering the relatively recent publication of Merleau-Ponty's late lectures, those compiled under the title of *Nature*.⁴ The first point to be confirmed below will be that the crisscrossing relationship (referred to variously as *Fundierung*, *Ineinander* and chiasm⁵) that Merleau-Ponty uses to understand fundamental relationships, including the relationship between perception and language, can be found in each of his major philosophical works. Perception and language are thus never treated as existing independently of one another; they must be seen as crossing into and as thus intimately connected with one another, and this is true not only in one period of Merleau-Ponty's professional life but throughout it.⁶ Yet it is *Nature*, and its return to themes first broached in Merleau-Ponty's earliest work, *The Structure of Behavior*, that will receive the greatest attention here, since the two texts treat the same issues in similar ways, and do so by developing a unique ontology of the human body, one that makes the *Fundierung* relationship possible. The essay will conclude with a brief consideration of the implication of this ontology for Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of politics and history. Of course, what is to be most gained by a consideration of these issues is not so much a demonstration of the continuity of Merleau-Ponty's thought but the outlining of an integrated

philosophy that refuses to reduce human experiences to any single aspect of it—either matter or mind, body or consciousness, perception or language, etc.

Let us first turn to a consideration of the argument that there is a break in Merleau-Ponty's thought. Schmidt points out that *Phenomenology of Perception* makes the claim that "if we consider what a word expresses emotionally, we can no longer consider the word as completely arbitrary, for its form appears to be internally connected to the meaning that it expresses." (The sentence is Schmidt's, DS 115, and references PhP 187) Schmidt proceeds to draw the following conclusion. "The *Phenomenology of Perception* thus contained an account of expression which differs markedly from Saussure's understanding of the [arbitrary] nature of the linguistic sign", which Merleau-Ponty embraces in his later studies. (DS 116) (My bracket addition) It is his differing views of language, Schmidt argues, that contribute to the problems Merleau-Ponty faces in his later philosophy of history, including the arbitrary movement of history, i.e., that it has no direction, no predicable future. In the earlier works, then, a word's meaning seems rooted in the subject's individual perceptual experience, while in the later works words appear to gather their sense from their linguistic/social context and are determined by convention.

This is a misunderstanding and subsequently a misrepresentation of Merleau-Ponty's thought, since it places language in an either/or context: either words are grounded in the individual's perceptual experience *or* they get their meaning from their linguistic/social context. At no time, either in his earlier or later works, does Merleau-Ponty claim that words get their meaning only through the body's perceptual encounter with the world, without reference to social context and history, *or* only from social/historical context, without reference to the body's perceptual encounter with the world. While it is true that his earlier works focus on perception and his later works on focus on language, neither focus ignores reference to the other. Both periods recognize the importance and contributions of both perception and language, and both periods claim that perception and language must be taken together, that they are intimately bound together and cross into one another. The now well known term "chiasm" is a word that Merleau-Ponty adopts in his later *The Visible and the Invisible* to

describe this crisscrossing, while in the earlier *Phenomenology of Perception* he uses the German term “*Fundierung*”, undoubtedly borrowed from Husserl. Let us first consider the earlier

Phenomenology of Perception.

“The relation...of thought to language or of thought to perception is a two-way relationship that phenomenology has called *Fundierung*: the founding term, or originator—...the unreflective, the fact, language, perception—is primary in the sense that the originated is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from absorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.” (PhP 394)

“Visual contents are taken up, utilized and sublimated to the level of thought by a symbolical power which transcends them, but it is on the basis of sight that this power can be constituted. The relationship between matter and form is called in phenomenological terminology a relationship of *Fundierung*: the symbolical function rests on the visual as a ground” [—not as a cause but as a power to motivate]. (PhP 127) ⁷ (My bracket addition)

We clearly see here that perception and language cross into one another, with perception remaining the primary term. Perception is taken up by language, which folds back upon it in order to express it more precisely. Different linguistic interpretations of perception always remain possible, the author will proceed to maintain, and while he insists that there is no definitely correct interpretation, he does maintain that some are more clarifying than others. And while it is true that in this earlier

Phenomenology of Perception Merleau-Ponty claims that “the word’s meaning...is first and foremost the aspect taken on by the object in human experience” (PhP 403), that the word’s meaning has its roots in our embodied, perceptual, emotional encounter with the world, he also claims here that another important way that we “begin to understand the meaning of words [is] through their place in a context of action, and by taking part in a communal life...” (PhP 179) (My bracket addition) A word’s meaning, then, even here in the earlier work, is always connected to both the subject’s embodied perceptual encounter with the world *and* with the subject’s social context, since the later is a sublimation of the former, and since the subject’s experience always opens upon and intersects with both as they intersect with one another. Statements are regarded as true, then, if they more accurately describe the world than other statements and if they help human subjects adapt to the world together.

Moreover, if we recall that for Merleau-Ponty perceptual consciousness is *ek-stasis*, is a bodily openness upon and a relationship to a public world, and is not just an inner experience of an isolated subject, and that this is already expressed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, then we can understand the following statement drawn from this text.

“I must, therefore, in the most radical reflection, apprehend around my absolute individuality a kind of halo of generality or a kind of atmosphere of ‘sociality’.” “I must apprehend myself from the onset as centered in a way outside myself, and my individual existence must diffuse round itself, so to speak, an existence in quality. The For Themselves--me for myself and the other for himself--must stand out against a background of For Others--I for the other and the other for me. My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity; each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual [since no one knows exactly who I am or experiences my experience exactly as I do], and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general [since our experience opens upon the same public space]. Our being in the world is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity.” (PhP 448 (My bracket additions))

The earlier *Phenomenology of Perception* thus already fully embraces the idea that human experience is both subjective and intersubjective, both private and public, both individual and social (and, as social, also linguistic). It already embraces the idea that these aspects of experience are like the two sides of a coin, with each connected to and even defining the other as they cross into one another and hold together. Moreover, as we have just seen, it already embraces this relationship when discussing the connection between perception and language. Granted, Merleau-Ponty’s later works will *develop* this relationship and will expend much energy analyzing language, but it cannot be denied that it is already present in the earlier work. A careful reading of the *Prospectus of His Work*, submitted by Merleau-Ponty for his candidacy at the *Collège de France* in 1952, even reveals that this is a well conceived part of his research plans.⁸ His early works, he says, establish perception as an original order of meaning, and, by doing so, mark out the direction and method of his later studies, while, he hopes, the later studies of intersubjectivity, language and truth will help establish the full meaning of the earlier works. This plan certainly develops as it unfolds; it is not written in stone at this earlier 1952 date; but the plan states clearly enough an intention that did not change: to more thoroughly investigate how language is *connected* to perception, not to move on to language by leaving perception behind.

Let us now turn to Merleau-Ponty's later studies, for here as well we will observe that perception and language are intimately connected, and that there is no intention to abandon perception for language. First, the later studies of Saussure in *The Prose of the World*⁹ mention the sublation of perception in language. Merleau-Ponty expresses this eloquently. "Each vector of the perceived spectacle posits, beyond its aspect at the moment, the principle of certain equivalences in the possible variations of the spectacle. It inaugurates on its own account a *style* of the explication of objects and a *style* of our movements with respect to them. This mute or operative language of perception begins the process of knowledge which it cannot itself accomplish", and "here is the beginning of speech, the style of knowledge, the truth in the logician's sense." (PW 124, 125) Secondly, to cite a now well known passage from *The Prose of the World* that is repeated in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence",¹⁰ the author states that "signs do not simply evoke other signs for us and so on endlessly. Language is not like a prison into which we are locked or a guide whose directions we must follow blindly. For in their everyday use, what signs mean appears at the intersection of all [of them and refers beyond them]." Moreover, Merleau-Ponty continues here, the more integrated structures of language can already be found, in nascent form, and viewed retrospectively, in the simpler perceptual structures from which they emerge. The structures of language sublimate those from which they emerge, and by this act of integration allow the simpler structures to be more fully understood. (PW 102-103 and *Signs* 81) (My bracket addition) Thirdly, we observe in Merleau-Ponty's Saussure influenced discussion of the algorithm that even abstract formulas, which may well be used as shorthand means of creative expression, must at some point refer back to the world that we live perceptually. (PW 106-107) Fourthly, we witness *The Visible and the Invisible*, the author's last and thus latest work, stating in no uncertain terms that "philosophy is not a lexicon, it is not concerned with 'word meanings', it does not seek a verbal substitute for the world we see, it transforms it into something said...It is the things themselves, from the depths of their silence, that it wishes to bring to expression." (VI, 4) Moreover, "it is the error of the semantic philosophies to close up language as if it spoke only of itself: language lives only from [perceptual] silence; everything we cast to others has

germinated in this great mute land which we never leave.” (VI, 126) (My bracket addition) And finally, at a colloquium in 1960, shortly before his death, Merleau-Ponty reportedly states the following. “It makes me uneasy to see the category of language occupy the entire field.”—with “field” apparently referring to both the *field* of the unconscious and perception. According to one colloquium commentator’s report, “Merleau-Ponty recalls that in his view, the opening to being is not linguistic: it is in perception that he sees the birthplace of the word.”¹¹ This litany of citations leaves little doubt that the author’s later works do not abandon perception for language, that they seek to connect them.

Yet, to return momentarily to the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, we see that it deepens the two-way relationship between perception and language, and does so by attempting to make greater sense of the move from “perceptual ideality” to the “pure ideality” of language. This move continues the theme of the earlier works, that perception is sublimated in language, with the claim that “the ‘pure’ ideality [of language] already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things...” (VI 152) (My bracket addition) Moreover, since language does sublimate perceptual meaning, and since this meaning subsequently has some weight (as a less heavy expression of the weight of the perceptual world), then this “means that the system of objective relations, the acquired ideas, are themselves caught up in something like a second life and perception, which ...make the *operative* language...make use of a second visibility..., and make ideas be the other side of language...” (VI 153) The acquired ideas of language, then, can guide and animate future and further linguistic expression. Certain habitualized or even institutionalized modes of expression establish parameters of meaning and interpretation, and this means that certain habitualized modes of expression fold back upon perception to help further express it.

We have witnessed above that *The Prose of the World*, which may perhaps be regarded as a transition text between the earlier studies of perception and the later studies of language, does not abandon perception for language, but, contrarily, finds the basic structure of language already traced

out in perception. Language sublates perception while relating back to it (*Fundierung*). We have also just witnessed that the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, which supposedly leaves perception behind, states quite explicitly that it is not that perception is structured like language but, rather, that it is language that is more primarily structured like perception. Or, to state this more accurately, the structures of both perception and language influence, guide, and cross into one another, yet with perception as the more primary term. Thus, in neither the earlier nor the middle/late works are perception and language regarded as being completely independent of one another. They cross into one another, even more so in the later works, granted, but already in the early and middle ones as well. It is Schmidt's tendency to misinterpret the development of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, that Merleau-Ponty breaks with the earlier theory rather than refines it, that leads him to misinterpret Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of history—which we will observe further below. For now, however, we should turn, in some detail, to Merleau-Ponty's frequently and unfortunately ignored studies of the ontology of the human body, for it is these studies that allow us to grasp the emergence of human consciousness from a body to which it remains intimately connected, that allows us to understand how the *Fundierung* relationship is possible, including, and especially, the *Fundierung* relationship between perception and language.

The recent publication of Merleau-Ponty's *Nature* allows us to put to rest once and for all the claim that there is a break in the body of his work, a break resulting in two distinct periods of development or even in two distinct philosophies, one focused on perception, one focused on language. *Nature* puts this claim to rest because it is a late work that returns to themes already opened in early *The Structure of Behavior* in order to investigate and express them more fully. As Merleau-Ponty himself expresses it, the later study of nature, including biology and evolution, not only allows us to overcome the dualism of Western culture, but allows us to more thoroughly understand the emergence of the *human body* and *human experience*—issues already broached in the earlier studies. Merleau-Ponty's theory of human nature remains fundamentally the same, although considerably refined in his later work. And, again, it is this understanding of human nature that will allow us to

understand how the *Fundierung* relationship between body and mind, between perception and language, is possible, and, subsequently to more thoroughly understand the relationship between aware embodied agents and social institutions, i.e., history.

The central theme of all of Merleau-Ponty's major works is the criticism of mind/matter dualism and the attempt to integrate mind and matter in the human body, especially in lived-through bodily experience. All of his works remain critical of various forms of reductionistic materialism and omniscient idealism. Turning to the early *The Structure of Behavior*, we first find Merleau-Ponty critically reviewing the attempt to reduce human behavior solely to material conditions, or, more specifically, reviewing the attempt that claims that behavior can be constructed from atomistic units of data that travel along linear neurological pathways.¹² Merleau-Ponty's arguments against the materialist thesis appeal to the research results that reveal that sensory receptors respond to perceptual form rather than discrete units of data, and that this is true even in non-human species but also and especially in humans. For instance, a variety of experiments reveal that animals respond to the form that stimuli take and do so with different responses. A cat's ear flattens or twitches depending upon the form of the stimulation, with additional responses elicited by further variations of sensory form. (SB 11) Or a hen can be conditioned to respond to the color gray, not a specific gray, but to the structure *lighter than*. In this case the hen does not respond to an absolute color, that is, to a specific color or shade, but to a variable relationship, to the *lighter gray* regardless of the specific shades of grays displayed. (SB 106) In each of these above cases, then, the animal is responding less to units of data and more to perceptual relations, forms or rhythms. In experiments using a stereoscope with human perception the general results are much the same. The data of visual perception tend to be associated not because isolated units display similar properties but because of how the data participate in the form of the perceptual field. (SB 77) Merleau-Ponty's first series of arguments are thus in general agreement with the well-known principle of Gestalt psychology: that perception always appears as a form.¹³

In human perception especially, even the simple perception of a white patch on a white background reveals the gestalt, structural nature of perception, and subsequently that this structure possesses a *meaning*. The edge of the patch tends to hold together and is perceived as belonging to the patch. The surface of the patch seems to be more intense and unified. The patch is perceived as resting on the white surface, etc. (PhP 3-4) Now, physical and neurological conditions are certainly present here and provide the necessary conditions for the perception. Yet these conditions alone are not sufficient to explain the perceived, which is present as a meaningful gestalt figure and not simply as units in external relations. Two general points should thus be summarily emphasized here: 1) perception involves a structure that cannot be understood as the mere association or sum of isolated data, and 2) perception has a meaning for the perceiver that cannot be constructed from the outside by a third-person observer associating units in external relations.

As already briefly mentioned, Merleau-Ponty claims that the neurological substrate is a necessary condition for perception, but it is not its sufficient condition. To perceive a gestalt figure like the vase that can also appear as two faces requires the presence of both physical conditions (the lines drawn on a surface, light reflected from the lines, this light striking the eye, etc.) *and* neurological conditions (receptors in the eye, neurological transmission, etc.). Yet these conditions are not sufficient, for they do not explain the capacity to experience the same lines as either a vase or as two faces. Even the empiricist's appeal to past memories to explain the meaning of the present perception fails, since, Merleau-Ponty reminds us, some meaning must be present in the current perception in order to identify the past memories to be recalled. To a certain extent, at least, Merleau-Ponty admits to a parallelism between mind and body (perceptual awareness cannot occur without a neurological substrate) but qualifies this with two additional claims. First, as we have seen, the physical/neurological substrate must be understood as a structure and not as a mere sum of discrete units and linear pathways. Secondly, the notion of form or structure is perceptual, which, as we have just observed above, cannot be fully accounted for merely by the physical, even though the physical is its necessary substrate.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, human beings always experience the world through the avenues of the human body and its gestalt perceptual organization. In this sense, then, there is no object in-itself. We have no access to an object as it appears in-itself apart from human perception. Yet, Merleau-Ponty certainly accepts the claim that the world exists independently of human experience. He even makes the claim that the world's independent existence is presented to us within the context of this experience. To use Grene's phrase, Being phenomenalizes.¹⁴ We only experience the world through perceptual phenomena, but part of what is revealed in the meaning of the phenomena is the independent existence of the world. Moreover, when we perceive the world, we find certain patterns that occur within it.¹⁵ When we perceive the world, we find three meaningful general forms or structures within it: *physical*, *vital*, and *human*.

We find that *physical* objects move mechanically and blindly and do so in a way that tends to maintain a balance of forces within a physical system. (SB 137ff) The soap bubble (SB 146) and planetary orbits (SB 138) act as examples of physical structure, with the bubble's internal air pressure mechanically equalized with the surrounding atmospheric pressure and the planets in a balance of forces with the sun.

We also find in our perception of the world *vital* structures that are qualitatively different from physical structures. We find structures that carry norms of behavior within them, norms that are maintained by variable means and thus cannot be conceived as merely the result of blind physical forces. (SB 159)¹⁶ Animals can be observed as thus revealing forms of behavior that seek to maintain a certain favored global functioning that remains attached to its parts but that is nevertheless irreducible to them. Significantly, the appearance here in *The Structure of Behavior* of a form of behavior that integrates the parts from which it emerged by folding back upon them is one of Merleau-Ponty's first mentions of the type of relationship that will be labeled *Fundierung* and eventually chiasm. The studies in *Nature* help us grasp this significance retrospectively. Let us briefly consider them.

Merleau-Ponty's studies of biology and evolution in *Nature* return to these "vital structures" first mentioned in *The Structure of Behavior* and investigate them in greater depth. By briefly considering these later investigations of the global and original functioning of living organisms, we will see how these investigations are relevant to his understanding of the emergence of more integrated behavior from less organized physical structures, which, in turn, will allow us to see how the *Fundierung* relationship between them is possible. In *Nature* Merleau-Ponty states explicitly that he is interested in G. E. Coghill's work¹⁷ because it begins to move us beyond mind/body dualism and begins to allow us to more thoroughly integrate (*Fundierung*) mind and matter, thought and perception, etc. (Na 140) Merleau-Ponty believes that Coghill's famous study of the axolotl has shown that the organism develops not point-by-point but according to the needs of the functioning whole, and even according to the functional needs of the organism's mature future. For example, as the axolotl embryo develops, motor fibers are sketched out well before the development of the muscle that the fibers will eventually function within. This reveals, Coghill claims, that the future, mature functioning of the organism influences its neurological development. How can this be explained? Coghill attempts an answer by claiming that the embryo is integrated even before the complete development of its nervous system, and this is possible, he claims, because of *functional regions* or *polarities* within the organism. Within these regions, cells are defined less by their individual nature and more by how they function within the region and within the organism as a whole. Coghill supports this claim with the experimental evidence that demonstrates that cells placed in a polarity that is the reverse of the polarity of their normal functioning nevertheless act to fulfill the role required by the new orientation. (Na 142) This confirms that the organization of the cells is due less to the nature and function of each individual cell and more to the needs of the developing organism as a whole. "The first behavior of the animal is thus organized under preneural gradients [or polarities]: the nervous system emerges from a preneural dynamic." (Na 143) (My bracket addition)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to consider the work of E. S. Russell,¹⁸ and he does so because he believes Russell "shows that the relations among the cells of...an organ are assimilable to relations

of behavior...” (NA 178) Russell can thus be seen as extending the work of Coghill, in the sense that neurological functions are integrated into the organism’s global and now behavioral functioning. Russell, in fact, quite intentionally compares the physiological activity of tissue repair to the behavioral activity of the animal that repairs its dwelling. Even with various forms of simple larvae, we witness various cells oriented toward the regeneration of damaged cells and the functioning of the organism as a whole, and we witness that this regeneration occurs by variable means. In addition, if the sand that is the larva’s usual building material is not available, then other debris will be used or will be combined with the sand that is available. This indicates that neither the means of reconstruction nor the materials used are completely determined by the organism’s innate makeup. True, repairs are limited by the organism’s physicochemical conditions, yet they can be achieved by variable means, and thus the functioning of the organism as a whole cannot be reduced to physicochemical conditions alone. Again, it is not these conditions alone that bring about the repair, since the repair is guided by the favored equilibrium achieved by the organism as a gestalt whole and is achieved by variable means. Yet, on the other hand, nothing here indicates a transcendental cause, in the sense of some sort of external entelechy or vitalism, to guide the organism. These behavioral options and potentialities are not best understood as a movement toward a transcendent essence but as fluctuating around norms that can only be realized in the concrete events. Or, to restate this, we observe that behavior is constantly adjusting to concrete events by variable means in order to maintain certain favored equilibriums. We have here neither a machine that is wholly present, nor an idea that is wholly transcendent or absent. We have developing experiential dimensions. We have open and developing experiential fields that remain attached to specific situations and limited by the growing demands of specific organisms. (NA 179-183)

Again, this open field or milieu is not the introduction of some form of vitalism. It is not a new force, for in the formation of the milieu “the living being works only with physicochemical elements.” (NA 177) Yet, on the other hand, this milieu cannot simply be reduced to their physical and physiological forces, for “these subordinated forces join the unseen relations between them.” It is

here, Merleau-Ponty informs us, that we really witness the first emergence of the animal subject, for it is not totally dependent on the physicochemical as simply physicochemical processes, since the subject's behavior is variable and the regeneration of damaged or destroyed cells frequently follow the design and needs of the entire organism, including that of the organism's behavior. "[T]he organism is not a sum of instantaneous and punctual microscopic events; it is an enveloping phenomenon, with the macroscopic style of an ensemble in movement. In between the microscopic facts, global reality is delineated like a watermark, never graspable for objectivizing-particular thinking, never eliminable from or reducible to the microscopic..." (NA 207)

Like the appearance of a visual gestalt figure, then, the organism as a functioning whole is greater than the mere sum of its isolated parts. With a visual figure, as we have witnessed above, there is a qualitative appearance of a whole that cannot be understood as a mere collection of isolated units in external relationships, even though the figure would not appear apart from its specific content. It is the same with the global functioning of the organism. There is clearly a meaning that can be observed in the functioning organism as a whole that is not reducible to isolated units in external relations. In addition, we observe that at each moment in an animal's development certain possibilities are opened for the future, yet these possibilities are not fully determined before they occur. The animal's development, rather, creates certain tensions, certain imbalances that preclude remaining in previous states but that do not prescribe precise solutions for the future. The pubescent period of an adolescent's development, for example, precludes remaining at the pre-pubescent stage, yet does not prescribe exact solutions for the future. (Na 155) Future behavior, then, is not just pushed from behind. It is not already written in the DNA. The DNA requires a moving on and sketches a certain general future, but not specific solutions. These solutions must be improvised by individuals or groups within specific environmental context. Living organisms are natural wholes, wholes that are greater than a mere sum of their parts, wholes that exist in a gestalt relationship with their environment, which thus simultaneously influences them, and does so in ways that are not completely predictable. Or, to state this in a slightly different way, certain futures are predictable but

also open ended. (Merleau-Ponty will make similar claims about societies, that they function as gestalt social wholes, wholes that exist in a gestalt relationship with their environment, which simultaneously influences them, yet not in ways that are completely predictable. Or, to again state this in a slightly different way, certain social/historical futures are predicable but also open ended.)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to consider the work Jakob von Uexkull¹⁹ because he believes Uexkull also attempts to describe animal behavior and the animal's environment (*Umwelt*) in a way that once again escapes mind/body dualism. For Uexkull the animal's environment is neither the world purely in-itself nor purely for a consciousness for-itself. It rests between them. (NA 167) Uexkull believes that the unity of behavior cannot be explained by the nervous system alone, as a mechanistic interaction of parts, but, rather, is more readily understood as an integration of physiology and the behavior that is meaningful for the animal—behavior that is variable and meaningful for the animal's future. There must be a *living* plan, Merleau-Ponty says, commenting on Uexkull's work. (NA 176) Again, this does not mean that there is single plan that is completely determined, for these plans are variable. To cite just one example here, we know that the crab is able to use the same object for a variety of purposes. The crab will feed on an object, use it as camouflage, as a shield, or even as housing, depending upon its most pressing need, thus suggesting that the object has different “meanings” for the animal. In turn, these different meanings suggest the emergence of a sort of culture or pre-culture for the animal, of an environment other than the strictly physical, since the object has variable uses and meanings. The same thing can symbolize or carry or refer to different meanings for the animal. The animal, then, as a singular being, is able to relate to the environment in a meaningful way, relate to objects within it depending upon the use and meaning that the objects have or take on within various projects, and relate to these objects with a continuity over time. (NA 176-177)

Proceeding to Adolf Portmann's study of animals,²⁰ what Merleau-Ponty finds of such great value in Portmann's work is that it helps us understand the development and use of symbols by animals, and does so by recognizing the ontological value of *display* behavior. Since an animal *sees*

that it is being seen, it is *aware* of being seen. The animal *exists in a world with others*, and, moreover, this existence with others is lived-through and is not yet achieved as an explicit act of reflection. (NA 188) However, since animal displays reveal that animals are aware that they are being perceived, behavior associated with symbolism, such as the elaborate mating behavior, takes on a social and not merely a mechanical value. (Na 197) Furthermore, Konrad Lorenz claims that animal instinct is able to develop into a symbolic function, and he confirms this claim with a variety of empirical examples.²¹ To offer one such example here, it has been observed that the duck's instinctual squatting and forward movement as it takes flight become means for teaching its young how to fly. Here instinctual behavior becomes symbolic behavior. (NA 195) Research has also shown that instinctual reactions themselves are at least sometimes "objectless." (Na 197) The starling, for example, performs instinctual movements such as flying at insects, striking at them, and even acting to ingest them, even though they are *not actually present*. (NA 192) This indicates at least the beginnings of some sort of imaginative function in the animal, and it is the imaginative function that helps pave the way to a symbolic function.

The general conclusions that Merleau-Ponty draws from the preceding studies of animals are that animals act according to certain endogenous initiatives, that these initiatives trace out the organism's milieu and future behavior, but also that this milieu must be regarded as experiential or perceptual, and that, subsequently, both the animal's milieu and future must be regarded as involving open ended and variable possibilities. Thus, even with animals we observe the emergence of perceptually aware behavior, experiential environments, open ended futures, and even the emergence of a more open symbolic expression from instinct. Moreover, if all of this is true, then an emergent materialism must be regarded as more plausible than an eliminative one, and we must begin to regard various forms of eliminative or reductionistic materialism with some suspicion. In addition, if this is true, we begin to understand how the *Fundierung* relationship is possible, for we begin to see how more integrated forms of behavior emerge from less integrated forms, how they remain attached to them while nevertheless transforming them by bringing them together as a functioning whole.

Returning to *The Structure of Behavior*, we find that Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between three types of animal behavior, syncratic (SB 104-105), amoveable (SB 105ff), and symbolic (SB 120ff). *Syncratic* behavior is understood as the behavior that it is strictly determined by the structural demands of the species. A spider, for example, will not react to a dead fly that is placed in its web but will move immediately to attack, kill, and ingest the fly moving within and vibrating its web. *Amoveable* behavior, though, begins to reveal a behavior that is free from strictly pre-programmed responses. A chimpanzee, for example, is able to see a stick that is placed suggestively between the bars of its enclosure as a device to retrieve food placed just out of its reach. Yet the chimpanzee is incapable of this perspective if the stick is not placed in a suggestive position, if it is not placed between the bars pointing at the food. The shifting of perspectives is difficult for the animal and remains rather strictly aligned with its immediate practical needs. (SB 113-114) And finally *humans*, who represent *symbolic* behavior, the third general form that Merleau-Ponty finds in our perceptual world, are able to freely vary different interpretations of an object and different perspectives of the world. This is undoubtedly related to the ability of human beings not only to experience an object but also to “take hold” of the object, to grasp its meaning. Humans thus display the ability to experience particulars, to be aware of them and their meaning, to compare these meanings, and to be able to subsequently form general concepts. Within this context, then, symbols are able to refer to general meanings, and not just act as signs that trigger pre-determined behavior, which is their primary role in the animal kingdom. Even though we have just witnessed the emergence of the rudimentary use of symbols in some animal species, this use is not present in all animals, and it remains present only in rudimentary forms in others. It is only human beings that experience the full range of symbolic expression, including the use of symbols that refer to abstract and general meanings. Yet, clearly, part of Merleau-Ponty’s intent here is to trace out the development and evolution of the symbolic function along with that of the human species. Human behavior, including symbolic behavior, has evolved with the species and from less developed, less integrated forms. It is by understanding the development of the human species that we will be able to better understand human abilities and how

they differ from the abilities of other species. Moreover, this developmental and evolutionary study will help us understand that these abilities have indeed evolved with the human body and do not need to be introduced by something outside of it, that a more integrated form emerges from a less integrated form with which it remains in contact (*Fundierung*).

Let us briefly turn our attention to how Merleau-Ponty arrives at the general conclusions concerning symbolic behavior that are stated immediately above, for once again we will see that these arguments are relevant to his understanding of the relationship between body and mind, that is, the emergence of the later from the former, and how they cross into one another (*Fundierung*). Merleau-Ponty points out, as we have witnessed further above, that there is widespread agreement that just as the perceptual field must be considered as a gestalt structure that the perceiving organism must be considered as a gestalt structure as well. There is no isolated stimulus within the organism, since each is related to all the others in the formation of its intra-organic state. This means that the parts of the organism influence each other simultaneously and not just reciprocally. Merleau-Ponty proceeds to mention the widely accepted empirical claim that changes in the organism's humoral state dramatically influences its response to sensory excitations and that injuries to higher level brain functions can dramatically influence the humoral state, including blood pressure. Functions of the organism, then, must be understood to both influence one another simultaneously *and* up and down a hierarchical scale. (SB 17-18) In addition, and along the same lines, we now know that specific sensations experienced by the organism "undergo...a series of structurations which disassociate them from spatio-temporal context...and orders them according to the" the functioning of the organism as a whole, and we know this because studies of brain damage clearly reveal that lesions to certain regions of the brain disrupt certain specific functions but disrupt global functioning as well. Injuries to the occipital lobe, for example, primarily affect perception, but they also affect how perception is integrated with movement and even with language. Yet these studies reveal even more: they reveal that specific regions themselves are attuned to structure or rhythm. For example, certain patients with damage to specific regions of the brain known to influence linguistic function can still recognize the

meaning of particular words but cannot use them meaningfully in a sentence, in grammatical structure. More generally, and positively stated, this means that human behavior must be understood by appeals to general rhythms and structures, but also, negatively stated, this means that the brain cannot be considered merely as a mechanism that associates isolated data that travel along isolated linear pathways. The evidence indicates that the regions of the brain recognize structure and also that the brain integrates multiple stimuli into the general functioning of the organism as a whole. (SB 21, 65-74)

Merleau-Ponty subsequently argues, taking up the issue of mind/body parallelism, that mental states cannot be reduced to *specific* neurological excitations because they must be understood as integrated into the global functioning of the organism. Moreover, he says, since we must now understand the organism as a functioning whole, we should substitute “a functional or structural parallelism for this parallelism of elements or contents.” (SB 75) We see here, and have witnessed further above, that Merleau-Ponty has argued for the replacement of atomistic materialism with a more *structural understanding* of nature, animal species and the neurological functioning of the human brain. In this sense he is in complete agreement with the pronouncements of Gestalt psychology. However, he also believes that Gestalt psychology did not go far enough, since it maintained that the casual explanations of physics could still be accepted as long as perceptual structure replaced the notion of isolated data in the attempt to understand human experience. (SB 193) Yet, Merleau-Ponty argues, this can no longer be maintained, since, as we have witnessed above, perceptual structure possesses a *meaning*. We have already witnessed that the perception of the gestalt figure that can appear like a vase or two faces requires certain physical and neurological conditions, yet these conditions alone do not explain the different interpretations of the figure, since the conditions are the same in both cases.

Moreover, to deepen this point, Merleau-Ponty reports the following: “if I look steadily at an object in front of me, the psychologist will say that—external conditions remaining the same—the mental image of the object has remained the same.” “But,” he proceeds, “it would still be necessary to

analyze the act by which at each instant I recognize this image as identical in its meaning to that of the proceeding instant.” (SB 198) “The mental image of the psychologist is one thing; what the consciousness of that thing is must still be understood. The act of knowing is not of the order of events; it is a taking possession of events....” (SB 198-199); the act of knowing displays “both the intimacy of the objects to the subject and the presence in them of solid structures which distinguish them from appearances...” (SB 199) We see here an early use of the *Fundierung* relationship, even though the term is not used here. What we see taking shape in Merleau-Ponty’s thought is a more integrated taking possession of (a folding back upon) something more primary. This relationship will be developed and labeled “*Fundierung*” in *Phenomenology of Perception* (see above) and “chiasm” in *The Visible and the Invisible* (see VI 133-139). What we see here is that really existing objects are present to embodied human beings in human perception and that human beings have enough awareness of them to begin to take possession of their meaning. Moreover, and consequently, since we must now see the body as “an object for consciousness..., [we] can no longer speak of a psycho-physical parallelism”, for we can no longer speak of an independent physical body to which mental states would correspond point-by-point. Or, to state this more precisely within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, we can no longer speak of a physical body that is not the object of perception and to which perceptual consciousness would correspond point-by-point. (SB 204) (My bracket addition)

Yet, we may ask at this point, given Merleau-Ponty’s analysis, does a psycho-physical parallelism still make sense if we take into account the organism’s global functioning? He offers the following answer. “No, if it is understood as the sum of the nerve events which are produced in each point of the cortex. This whole can be only the *condition of existence* of such and such a sensible scene; it accounts for the *fact that* I perceive but not for *that which* I perceive, not for the scene as such since this latter is presupposed in the complete definition of the nerve process.” (SB 206) There is a parallelism between the body’s functions and perceptual consciousness in the sense that these functions are required for the perception to occur, yet they do not fully explain the meaning of the

perceptual object as it appears to the perceiving subject. In fact, even the notion of form at the neurological level must be understood as perceptual, for it is grasped by way of perceptual consciousness and gestalt perceptual form. This is not a form of idealism, for, as we have just seen, structure for Merleau-Ponty is not merely an idea. It requires both a physical and neurological substrate. Signification is first and foremost perceptual. Perceptual signification involves, or even *is*, the meaningful recognition of a structure or form that is intimately connected with the matter of a specific situation. While it is true that human beings are capable of forming general concepts and abstractions, to be meaningful for human beings, these abstractions must at some point relate back to the perceived world in some way. In addition, since the formation of general concepts involves the integration of specifics at a higher level of abstraction, we should have some awareness of where these general concepts came from, of their prior perceptual contact with the world. Human consciousness, then, is always to some extent perceptual consciousness. It always involves some perceptual contact with the world, even though it can begin to take possession of it and use it to form abstract representations. As already mentioned, this relationship that has perception giving rise to certain interpretations that fold back upon it, that has perception giving rise to certain interpretations that are nevertheless required in order to express it, Merleau-Ponty labels a *Fundierung* relationship in *Phenomenology of Perception* and chiasm in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

The complete understanding of human beings must thus be approached from two sides, from the side of the body and its evolution *and* from the side of the aware perception, for each of these sides will help clarify the other. This of course means that the relationship between body and mind is more complex than can be explained by a simple parallelism, either atomistic or structural. We have seen that physical and neurological conditions are required to account for the act of perception, but we have also seen that these conditions are not enough, that they must be taken up, grasped and possessed. We have seen that they are organized as meaningful gestalt structures whose wholes are greater than a mere sum of parts in external relations. Matter and form thus conflate or fold or cross (*Fundierung*) or chiasm into one another, with the advantage given to matter, since it is experienced

as more primary and as preceding perception. Moreover, since matter and form, body and mind cross into one another in an intimate relationship that prioritizes matter, we must see them as relative to one another. We must adopt the language not of substance dualism but of emergent materialism, of quantitative changes that give rise to new qualities, of less integrated structures that give rise to more integrated structures, of parts that must be seen as serving a global whole. Using the word “soul” in an obviously more Aristotelian than Cartesian sense,²² Merleau-Ponty makes the following claim.

“The notions of the soul and body must be relativized: there is the body as mass of chemical components in interaction, the body as dialectic of living being and its biological milieu, and the body as dialectic of social subject and his group; even all our habits are an impalpable body for the ego of each moment. Each of these degrees is soul with respect to the preceding one, body with respect to the following one. The body in general is an ensemble of paths already traced, of powers already constituted; the body is the acquired dialectical soil upon which a higher ‘formation’ is accomplished, and the soul is the meaning which is then established.” (SB 210)

What is labeled “soul” is the emergent property that rests upon structures, material or behavioral, that preceded it, structures that it requires for its existence, yet that it is able to more fully integrate. The soul is what appears with this more complete integration. It is the sense that appears as a whole that is greater than a mere sum of its parts. It is Merleau-Ponty’s studies of the evolution of the human body and his subsequent expression of the ontology of the human body that allows us to grasp this.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, in summary, the enigma of the human body is that it is both a thing and the opening upon things. His way of attempting to deal with this enigma, he says, is not to appeal to two substances, to matter and mind, but to see the human body as possessing two sides or aspects that cross into one another (*Fundierung*). He has studied evolution, he says, to gain insight into the emergence of the human body and its dual aspects, to gain insight into the escape from animal life, to gain insight into the emergence of a sort of structural architecture, with its more complex and integrated relations built upon simpler ones. Quantitative or structural changes give rise to qualitative changes, to new properties and new ways of being. (Na 214) Human perception emerges with the development of the human body, rests upon its functions, but introduces a qualitatively new way to organize its field. Human perception therefore cannot be understood as a mechanical event in the physical world, for its qualitative evolution has left this behind. Nor can it be understood as a thought

of seeing, as it is in the Cartesian tradition, for it remains embedded in the body's lived-through acts as it opens upon a concrete world. This also means that we can only understand the human body as a perceiving, not mechanical, body, and that we can only understand nature as it is perceived through the nature of human perception, even though its existence is given to the perceiver as transcending the perceiver. Moreover, the understanding of the human being as an integrated composition of the physical and the mental, as their crossing or flowing into one another (*Fundierung*), begins to allow us to understand what preceded the human body (its evolution), just as the study of nature and animality helps clarify and verify the human being. (Na 214-215) It is this integration and evolution that the present essay has attempted to trace in the body of Merleau-Ponty's work.

In conclusion, let us turn briefly to a consideration of the implication of Merleau-Ponty's ontology for his political thought and his theory of history. As we have seen, according to his ontology, human behavior is not completely determined by physical conditions, as the reductionistic materialism claims, or by abstract concepts as idealists claim. Nor is human behavior best understood by means of a natural law theory, either in its materialist versions (Hobbes, Locke, et. el.) or its idealist versions (Aquinas, et. el.). To address natural law theory momentarily, for the sake of clarity, in the monotheism of Western philosophy, God is frequently regarded as fully rational, as representing reason itself, as creating the rational laws of nature, including those of human nature. Humans, who are blessed by God with reason, can observe and reflect upon these laws. These laws, then, with careful observation or reflection, can be understood as indubitable first principles from which the laws of nature and human nature can be logically derived. Moreover, the first principles from which they are derived are to be regarded as universal categorical propositions of the classical form, such as, for example, "All men are mortal." While the class terms of these propositions, in this case "men" and "mortal", are frequently treated as unvarying essential types, as expressing properties that are shared identically by all members of this type. Given human nature, then, all humans experience the impulse toward self-preservation (purportedly implanted by God) and are thus forbidden, given human conscience and the power of rational reflection, to harm themselves and

others. This natural law of self-preservation leads to the natural right of self-defense—and even to more. For example, and as is well known, in John Locke’s case, nature follows the laws of reason, which teach the following: “being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions.”²³

As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty’s research leads in another direction. He does not begin with abstract first principles or abstract categorical propositions. Rather, he begins with our active bodily perceptual openness upon the world. These perceptions are patterned and accommodate some generalization and classification, yet these classifications are tentative and lateral rather than eternal and univocal. The generalizations about human nature, for example, are expected to evolve and are meant to capture family resemblances and similarities in behavioral response. Human beings are similar enough for us to be able to place human functions and behavior within a certain range of predictable responses. True, there is no human essence shared by all; no two human beings are exactly the same; and the limit edges of this range may well fluctuate. Yet, since humans have similar bodies, the human response to events will tend to be similar, particularly with respect to more primitive biological functions. If, for example, human beings are deprived of food and water, they will perish within a fairly predictable time period. Cultural forms of behavior, it is true, display greater freedom and variety of response, but here too human beings are similar enough bodily to be able to at least capture a glimpse of each others experience, including the meaning of the linguistic gestures expressed by others.²⁴

Yet, when Merleau-Ponty discusses language, he does not adhere to the idea of natural linguistic sign, since he believes he has shown that the body is not pre-programmed to respond to specific stimuli in specific ways. There is no natural language. There are no circumstances within which certain stimuli trigger specific word responses, or within which specific emotions are expressed by a specific word. First of all, research has demonstrated that human emotions can be *framed* in different ways by different cultures. And secondly, even insofar as the emotions are the similar, different cultures sometimes express them differently. The Japanese, to offer one of Merleau-Ponty’s

examples, becomes more polite when angry, while the Westerner usually becomes more animated. Since, then, human beings experience a range of ambiguous but still meaningful emotions (and perceptions), it is language and culture that help articulate them more precisely, that folds back upon them to express them with greater articulation and precision. However, there is something there to express, an original meaning that suggests certain expressions. Again, a wide range of expressions is possible, and there is no definitively correct expression, yet some fit better than others. And since humans possess similar bodies, the gestural response of one individual to an event should be graspable by others.

It will be useful here to apply the *Fundierung* relationship, as it reveals itself in the relationship between perception and language, to the relationship between experiential values and ethical principles. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty regards the relationship between perception and language as a complex one. Language does not simply express what it finds fully formed in the perceptual field. There is indeed a perceptual sense, but this sense tends to be ambiguous and open. Perception suggests and even motivates certain linguistic expressions but still requires the linguistic expression to more fully articulate it. The linguistic expression, as we have seen, folds back on the motivating perception to help it say what it cannot fully say on its own. Truth, then, is not the simple correspondence of a (linguistic) statement and a static state of worldly affairs (or its representation). Truth involves a creative bringing forth,²⁵ a creative bringing to light, and it is the statement that most clarifies, that most brings into focus, that is regarded as most true, even though other interpretative statements always remain possible, and even though the definitively true statement will never be expressed. Some statements, though, remain more accurate than others, since they *are* more clarifying, and they are more clarifying because there is something there to clarify, there is something there to measure them, a relatively stable perceptual world.

Now, it is certainly plausible to also read Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the relationship between *theory* and *facts* as a *Fundierung* relationship, since he believes we should accept the theory that is suggested by concrete perceptual experience and that makes the most sense of it—that is both

the most comprehensible and comprehensive treatment of the perceptual world as we actually experience it.²⁶ Moreover, it is also plausible to read Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the relationship between *ethical principles* and *values*, as they are experienced by sentient human subjects, as a *Fundierung* relationship, since he generally believes that sentient experience suggests abstract principles. As we have just witnessed, Merleau-Ponty certainly does not accept the natural law argument of Modernism: that a human essence, derived from the laws of nature and ultimately from the rationality of Divine first principles, *determines* certain moral principles and inalienable rights: that, for example, the natural impulse to self-preservation indubitably determines the moral right to life. Yet, neither would he countenance the arbitrary conventions of Postmodernism: that moral principles are simply based on the merely conventional or arbitrary agreements of interlocutors. Since human beings are perceiving, sensing beings, since, more exactly, we are sentient creatures, we experience a world filled with joy and suffering, pleasure and pain. Moreover, just as certain theoretical and epistemological claims can be motivated or suggested by our perceptions, so also certain moral claims can be motivated or suggested by our sentient encounter with the world and others. The moral and political right to life and self defense may well be rooted in the survival instinct and the impulse to avoid pain and death, but these natural, biological impulses must certainly be expressed and framed by language and within the context of specific cultures. Ethical and political rights, after all, are essentially claims that we make to one another in the context of specific social and economic relationships. Certain impulses may well be given, but, like perception, they may be framed in a variety of ways. Moreover, even a cursory glance at human history, with its continuing mistreatment of humans by humans, informs us that we cannot claim that the history of human rights is natural or inevitable, that the development and future of certain rights is necessary. But neither can we claim that this development/future is entirely arbitrary or based on merely conventional agreements. We cannot doubt that human beings experience a range of various human pleasures and pains, and we cannot doubt that there is a general human tendency to encourage the former and discourage the latter, including with the use of protective ethical rules and principles. Yet how these

tendencies are expressed, framed and instituted, or even if they are instituted, since humans experience and reveal other tendencies as well, such as greed and aggression, remains an open question. There is not just one right (moral or ethical) way to organize human experience and human interaction. History has taught us what has not worked, and would not have done so if there was no human nature, yet it has not definitively prescribed what does or will work, since human nature remains malleable and open. True, what has worked points us in a certain direction, to a certain range of acceptable social organizations (the range of certain types of democracy, for example), yet how this is achieved, or even if it is achieved, remains open and uncertain. Democracies are not inevitable, but the tendency in human history toward them cannot be regarded as entirely arbitrary. Now, this interpretation perhaps pushes Merleau-Ponty a bit further than he himself expressed, but it is certainly an interpretation that is supported by his text, one that is more appropriate to our times. Against the backdrop of Modernism, which was predominate in Merleau-Ponty's life-time, he was primarily concerned with showing that history was not certain, that the future was not *logically* derivable from the present. Now, however, within a more predominant Postmodern context, it is appropriate to stress the other side of his argument, that history is not entirely arbitrary.

A few brief closing comments can now be offered here regarding how the supposed break in Merleau-Ponty's thought influences his philosophy of history.

1.) Schmidt points out that for *Phenomenology of Perception* "history has some *sens* [both a meaning and direction], but there is no claim that there is a single history moving in one direction." "Yet Merleau-Ponty advances precisely this claim in *Humanism and Terror* when he elevates Marxism to the status of the philosophy of history." (DS 124, my bracket addition) What Schmidt says in the first sentence immediately above accurately represents Merleau-Ponty's thought, but the second proceeds to emphasize the negative aspect of the first sentence (that there is no single history moving in one direction) but to inaccurately de-emphasize the positive part of this assertion (that history does have a sense). Here is the passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*.

“We are not asserting that history from end to end has only one meaning, anymore 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 adventurer can be distinguished from the statesman, historical imposture from the truth of an epoch, with the result that our assessment of the past, though never arriving at absolute objectivity, is at the same time never entitled to be arbitrary.” (PhP 450)

Merleau-Ponty is claiming here in *Phenomenology of Perception* that even though we can look at and interpret the movement of history in a variety of ways, some of these interpretations make more sense than others, even though no single interpretation will ever be definitive. Moreover, we *can* make the claim that some interpretations make more sense than others because a certain sequence of historical events is not entirely arbitrary. Historical movement does have a *sens*; it does have a meaning and a direction that can be grasped. But this is also what we have seen him claim in *Humanism and Terror*—not that history has a single meaning and that Marxism is definitively correct. Marxism, he claims in *Humanism and Terror*, provides the best interpretation to date of the movement of history, and does so because all other interpretations tend to be articulated from the point view of those in power, i.e., from a biased point of view of those who seek to maintain their privileged social and economic positions. Marxism, as he says in a later text (*Signs*, 6), and he could have said just as consistently here, should be used as a *heuristic device*. It should be used as an interpretive system, not as an absolutely definitive expression of a history with one single meaning. For Merleau-Ponty Marx’s philosophy of history does have explanatory power, but he never regards its explanation as definitive or absolute, even in the earlier *Humanism and Terror*. (See HT 154-156) While it is true that Merleau-Ponty’s later works develop Marx’s dialectic in ways that he believes are more consistent with the more holistic views of the young Marx, even his earlier works (*Phenomenology of Perception* and *Humanism and Terror*) do not claim that there is a single meaning to human history.

2.) Schmidt also claims the following. “Merleau-Ponty promised that the *next* chapter [of *The Prose of the World*] would deal with ‘the nature of the relationship between the expressive operation and the thinker whom it presupposes and forms as well as the history which it continues and recreates.’” (DS 128) In other words, for Schmidt, this text would provide an analysis of the

relationship between the subject and history, which would then solve the problems raised in *Humanism and Terror* regarding the subject and history in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This text, Schmidt says, was supposed to provide “a new understanding of Marx’s attempt to place meaning in history” but offers only an analysis of language and expression. It “never explicitly comes to grips with the problem of history. *Adventures of the Dialectic* does—but the relevance of Saussure’s work for its discussion of Weber, Lukacs, Trotsky, and Sartre remains obscure.” (DS 129) Furthermore, Schmidt proceeds, even though we can see that Merleau-Ponty reads Weber’s philosophy of history through the framework of Saussure’s linguistics, this Saussure inspired reading tells us nothing about how to resolve the problem facing the account of history in *Humanism and Terror*. In fact, Schmidt maintains, the use of Saussure to interpret Weber in the later *Adventures of the Dialectic* is not consistent with what was stated in the earlier *Humanism and Terror*, particularly with its claim that history has a singular meaning and direction. “History for Weber ‘does not have a direction [*sens*] like a river’ but it does have ‘a meaning [*sens*]’ which, even though incapable of teaching us what truth is, can nevertheless show us what ‘errors to avoid.’” (DS 140, AD 28)

While Schmidt is correct that Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly mention Saussure in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, it is clear that many of the insights that he gains by reading Saussure are used in his development of a philosophy of history. a.) The Saussurean insight that words form a system and that a word’s meaning is, in part, dependent on its place within the system is used by Merleau-Ponty to develop a non-reductive view of history. The different aspects of society, its economy, religion, culture, language, etc., form a system and are what they are, at least in part, because of their place with this whole. b.) The Saussurean insight that language is an *open system*, that it is a system in the making, is used by Merleau-Ponty to understand history as an open system, as a system in the making. c.) The Saussurean insight that thought is dependent on language not only for its expression but for its very formation is used by Merleau-Ponty to understand that there is no pre-existent historical rationality. If thought and reason are dependent on language, and language is dependent on the body’s perceptual openness to the world, then thought and reason are tied to the

contingency of experience and history. There is no pre-given, *a priori* thought separate from history that drives or determines it, as the natural law theory of Modernism claims. History, for Merleau-Ponty, certainly does not proceed like a formal argument, with future events simply derived from the present as a conclusion is derived from a given premise. In fact, we witness in *The Prose of the World*, contrary to Schmidt's claim that the text does not deal significantly with these issues, that thought is not independent of language, and that formal arguments themselves must be creatively constructed. True, we construct the conclusion by looking back at the premise, and, true, the conclusion may be suggested by the premise, by a configuration of certain meanings expressed in the premise, but we must nevertheless construct the conclusion using these meanings, meanings that suggest a multitude of other possibilities as well. Schmidt is therefore correct to point out that for Merleau-Ponty "history does not have a direction, like a river," that the future is not simply derived from the present as its only possibility, but he is wrong to claim that history has no direction at all for Merleau-Ponty, that it can only be read retrospectively. What Merleau-Ponty agrees with in Weber's work is the rejection of the Modernist idea of a definitive future, is the idea that a future can be derived from the present as if it is already fully present and already defined within it. He does not say, as Schmidt claims, that the present outlines no future at all. Even in Merleau-Ponty's discussion of Weber, Merleau-Ponty speaks of "social affinities" (such as the cultural, religious, and economic affinities that help weave a social system together) that escaped Weber, and he proceeds to speak of the politician that can sense these affinities and the historical direction they imply. This direction still must be expressed to be fully brought into existence; it is not already written in the historical present; but it is not nothing, either. The direction of history is neither entirely certain nor entirely arbitrary. (See AD 28-29, and also 18)

What we have witnessed above is that there is no significant break in the body of Merleau-Ponty's work. There is certainly growth, development and refinement, but is refinement occurs around recurrent themes. We have seen, for instance, that the *Fundierung* relationship is found in each of the author's three major philosophical works. We have seen that this relationship is used to

describe the connection between perception and language in the earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*, in his later studies of language, and in the author's posthumously published *The Visible and Invisible*. Yet, it is Merleau-Ponty's remarkable ontological studies, specifically those regarding the evolution of the *human body*, that allow us to see how this relationship is possible, that even allow us to grasp the possibility of human history. What we have witnessed above is a significant and remarkable attempt to develop an integrated philosophy, one that sees human experience as an integrated whole, one that refuses to reduce human experience to any single aspect of it. Much can still be learned from this attempt.

¹ What follows is a chronology of key Merleau-Ponty texts. Complete citations are given in the appropriate endnote below. All citations will refer to the English translations of Merleau-Ponty's texts.

La Structure du comportement, 1942 (*The Structure of Behavior*, 1963) and *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945 (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962) are frequently regarded as Merleau-Ponty's early works, since both articulate a philosophy of perception.

"Le Doute de Cézanne", 1945 ("Cezanne's Doubt", 1964) and *Humanisme et terreur*, 1947 (*Humanism and Terror*, 1969) are usually thought to belong to this early period. *Humanism and Terror* represents Merleau-Ponty's first attempt to articulate a philosophy of politics and history.

La Prose du monde, written in 1951, published posthumously in 1969 (*The Prose of the World*, 1973), "Sur la phénoménologie du langage", 1952 ("On the Phenomenology of Language" in *Signs*, 1964), "Le langage indirect et les voix du silence", 1952 ("Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", in *Signs*, 1964) begin to mark out Merleau-Ponty's later works and the supposed dramatic shift away from perception and toward language. Both these 1952 essays were re-published by Merleau-Ponty in *Signes* in 1960, thus demonstrating that he still accepted their content at this later date.

Les Aventures de la dialectic, 1955 (*Adventures of the Dialectic*, 1973) and *Le Visible et l'invisible suivi de notes de travail*, 1961 (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 1969) comprise what is thought of as the author's late work. *Adventures of the Dialectic* represents Merleau-Ponty's second expression of his philosophy of politics and history. In 1959 Merleau-Ponty began work on the text that came to be published posthumously as *The Visible and The Invisible*. He worked on the text until his death in 1961.

La Nature: Notes, cours du Collège de France, 1995 (*Nature: Course Notes from the College de France*, 2003), drawn from his lectures delivered from 1956-1960, return to themes and issues first addressed in the early *The Structure of Behavior*, treats them in a similar manner, and, arguably, connects the later works to the earlier ones.

² James Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), pp. 149, 163. Following Schmidt on this point, Kerry Whiteside also makes a similar claim. See Kerry Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 264, 275. Schmidt's work will be referred in the text as JS.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fischer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). Originally published as *La Structure du comportement*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1942). Referred to as SB. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, sixth printing, trans. Colin Smith with corrections by Forrest Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). Originally published as *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). Referred to as PhP. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by the Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Originally published as *Le Visible et l'invisible: suivi de notes de travail*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). Referred to as VI.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, compiler Dominique Seglard, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003). Originally published as *La Nature: Notes, cours du Collège de France* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1995). Referred to in the text as Na.

⁵ Both “*Fundierung*” and “chiasm” will be discussed below. “*Ineinander*” appears in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960* trans. J. O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), See p. 128. The German term can be translated as “in one another.” Originally published as *Résumés de Cours, Collège de France 1952-1960*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

⁶ As will be argued below, the *Fundierung* or chiasm or crisscrossing relationship can be found in *The Structure of Behavior*, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *The Visible and the Invisible*. It is explicitly discussed with respect to the relationship between perception and language in *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. See full citations above.

⁷ See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures*, op. cit., p. 4, where the author states the following: “There is truly a reversal when one passes from the sensible world, in which we are caught, to a world of expression, where we seek to capture significations to serve our purpose, although this reversal and the ‘retrogressive movement’ of the truth are solicited by a perceptual anticipation. Properly speaking, the expression which language makes possible resumes and amplifies another expression which is revealed in the ‘archaeology’ of the perceived world.” See also “Phenomenology and the Science of Man” in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 68, where Merleau-Ponty states the following of Husserl. “Husserl often says that to see an essence one must begin by having a perception, which serves as the base...” “The relation between perception and *Wesenschau* is one of founding [*Fundierung*]; perception, that is, serves as the ground, or pedestal, on which an insight into essence is formed. Thus insight into essence is an intellectual taking over, a making explicit and clarifying of something concretely experienced, and a recognition that it comes after something else, from which it starts, is essential to its nature. It also knows itself to be retrospective. The idea that it succeeds a more direct contact with the thing itself is enclosed within its very meaning.” (Merleau-Ponty's bracket addition.)

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *A Prospectus of His Work*,” trans. Arleen Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston: Northwestern

University Press, 1964). See especially pp. 6-7.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). Originally published as *La Prose du Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Referred to as PW.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" in *Signs*, trans. R. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Originally published as *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). Referred to as *Signs*.

¹¹ See James Phillips, "Lacan and Merleau-Ponty: The Confrontation of Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology", p 84-85, in *Disseminating Lacan*, David Pettirew, Francois Raffoul, Editors (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)

¹² Here I return to an earlier essay-length treatment of *The Structure of Behavior*, utilizing and summarizing some of the same passages but now relating these texts to Merleau-Ponty's *Nature*. See Douglas Low, "The Continuing Relevance of *The Structure of Behavior*," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, September 2004, pp.411-420.

¹³ This is the thesis with which Merleau-Ponty begins his second book *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3ff. More recent research confirms the gestalt nature of perception, especially in humans. See, for instance, Robert Sekuler, Randolph Blake, *Perception* 2nd edition (New York: Mc-Graw Hill Publishing, 1990), pp. 61, 64, 78. Blake reports that we now know that the ganglion cells of the eye have certain receptive fields, usually represented as a circle with a smaller circle placed in its center. Different ganglion cells display different light activated areas and light inhibited areas, with some cells activated in the center circle and some inhibited in the outer ring, and others inhibited in the center. This neurophysiological structure allows the human eye to be very sensitive to even the slightest differences in light and shade and subsequently to the shapes and boundaries of surfaces and objects. Totally uniform surfaces mean next to nothing to the perceiving organism, and it is thus the differences in light and shade that allow the eye to recognize shapes, and structures. To confirm even more that perception depends on contrasts, consider the following figure.



The so-called brightness illusion represented by the squares demonstrates how much contrast can influence and even determine perception. The brightness illusion demonstrates that the two inner squares, which possess the same brightness, appear to display different degrees of brightness, with the right inner square appearing darker than its counterpart on the left, because of their contrasting surroundings. Thus, even relatively simple perceptions are determined by and rely upon contrasts for their appearance and cannot be regarded as a simple sum or aggregate of discrete units. The parts of the perceptual field here cannot be treated as isolated units because it is the dynamic *relationship* between the parts that determines their appearance. Thus even a relatively simple perception is attuned to structure and form and therefore reveals the primarily gestalt nature of perception. Moreover, the fact that the Gestalt principles of perceptual organization are now so widely accepted that they approach the status of theoretical laws certainly lends authoritative support to this claim. Perception responds to perceptual patterns and rhythms not to isolated units of data.

¹⁴ Marjorie Grene, "Merleau-Ponty and the Renewal of Ontology," *The Review of Metaphysics* 29, June 1976, pp. 605-625.

¹⁵ Our perceptual participation is needed for the patterns to appear as they do, but what does appear is more primarily rooted in nature, in the world. See the relationship between perception and interpretation discussed above. Just as perception and interpretation cross into one another, with perception as the more primary term, so also perception and nature cross into one another, with nature as the more primary term.

¹⁶ Again, these *norms* are observed because they occur more frequently. Or, to say this in a slightly different way, the norms are defined by their statistical frequency.

¹⁷ G. E. Coghill, *Anatomy and the Problem of Behavior* (New York & London: Mcmillian, 1929). See Merleau-Ponty's *Nature*, pp. 140ff.

¹⁸ E.S. Russell, *The Directedness of Organic Activities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946). See Merleau-Ponty's *Nature*, pp. 178ff.

¹⁹ Jakob von Uexkull, *Umwelt und Innerwelt der Tiere* (Berlin: Springer, 1909); *Streifzuge Durch die Umwelten von Tiern und Menschen-Ein Bilderbach unsichtbarer Welten* (Berlin: Springer, 1932). See Merleau-Ponty's *Nature*, pp. 167ff.

²⁰ Adolf Portmann, *Die Tiergestalt, Studien uber die Bedeutung der Tierschen Erscheinung*, 2nd edition (Basel: Reinhardt, 1960; English translation, *Animal Forms and Patterns: A Study of Appearances of Animals*, trans. H. Czech (New York: Schocken Books, 1967). See Merleau-Ponty's *Nature*, pp. 186ff.

²¹ Konrad Lorenz, *Les animaux, les inconnus* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1953).

²² Within the context of Aristotle's form/matter framework, the soul is the form or structure that matter takes on when it is alive. Soul and matter are not treated as separate substances by Aristotle, as they are by Descartes.

²³ See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Second Treatise, Book II, Chapter II Of the State of Nature, Section 6.

²⁴ As should be evident from the exposition of Merleau-Ponty's work provided above, his theory of human nature reveals a certain affinity to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Consider, in addition, Merleau-Ponty's statement. "The body is a general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the action necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means: it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world." (PhP, p. 146) Cf. Maslow's *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nos Reinhold, 1968).

²⁵ See Bernard Waldenfels, “Vérité à Faire: Merleau-Ponty’s Question Concerning Truth”, *Philosophy Today*, Summer, 1991, pp. 185-194. See also Douglas Low, “Merleau-Ponty on Truth, Language, and Value”, *Philosophy Today*, Spring 2001, pp. 69-76.

²⁶ See Douglas Low, “Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy: Method and Ground: A Comprehensive Overview”, *Phenomenological Inquiry*, Vol. 31, 2007, see especially the section entitled “Method”.