

Merleau-Ponty's Criticism of *Phenomenology of Perception*

Douglas Low

Final published version appears in *International Studies in Philosophy* 34, no.1 (2002).

*Phenomenology of Perception*¹ is widely considered to be Merleau-Ponty's masterpiece and one of the most important philosophical publications of 20th Century continental philosophy. Yet, Merleau-Ponty's later work, specifically the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*,² expresses various critical concerns with the earlier text, particularly with its remnants of Cartesianism. The goal of this essay is to explicate Merleau-Ponty's concerns, mark-out some of the differences between the two texts, and to show how the later work attempts to solve the problems of the earlier one. Since some contention exists about the relationship between the two texts,³ the appropriate quotations will be provided to support the interpretation offered here.

Let us turn immediately to the pertinent passages that mark-out the fundamental difference between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. In the working notes of the later text Merleau-Ponty openly admits that some elements of his earlier analysis of the *cogito* were incorrect. The working notes first summarize the analysis he presented in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

“The *Cogito* of Descartes (reflection) is an operation on significations, a statement of relations between them (and the significations themselves sedimented in acts of expression). It therefore presupposes a prereflective contact of self with self (the non-thetic consciousness [of] self – Sartre) or a tacit *cogito* (being close to oneself)--this is how I reasoned in Ph.P.” (VI 170-171)

And here is the relevant passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*:

“Insofar as we believe that, through thought, we are in direct communication with a universe of truth in which we are at one with others..., it is because we take the process of expression for granted, because it figures among our acquisitions. The *cogito* at which we arrive by reading Descartes...is, then, a spoken *cogito*, put into words, and for this very reason not attaining its objective, since that part of our existence which is engaged in fixing our life in conceptual forms, and thinking of it as indubitable, is escaping focus and thought. Shall we therefore conclude that language envelops us, and that we are led by it...? This would be to forget half the truth...I should be unable even to read Descartes' book, were I not, before any speech can begin, in contact with my own life and thought,

and if the spoken *cogito* did not encounter within me a tacit *cogito*. This silent *cogito* was the one Descartes sought when writing his Meditations.” (Ph.P. 401-402)

These then are the claims regarding the *cogito* that Merleau-Ponty asserts in *Phenomenology of Perception*. These are the claims that *The Visible and the Invisible* challenges, as the following passage makes evident.

“Is this correct? What I call the tacit *cogito* is impossible. To have the idea of ‘thinking’ (in the sense of the ‘thought of seeing and of feeling’), to make the ‘reduction,’ to return to immanence and to the consciousness of...it is necessary to have words. It is by the combination of words (with their charge of sedimented significations, which are in principle capable of entering into other relations than the relations that have served to form them) that I *form* the transcendental attitude, that I *constitute* the constitutive consciousness.” (VI 171)

And yet, with insight gleaned from his later studies, he goes on to immediately say:

“The words do not refer to positive significations and finally to the flux of the *Erlebnisse* as *Selbstgegeben*. Mythology of a self-consciousness to which the word ‘consciousness’ would refer—There are only *differences* between significations.” (VI 171)

It is clear from the above that Merleau-Ponty is here, in the later work, giving more regard to the power of language and less to a consciousness outside the formative structure of language. Yet let us observe the passage carefully. Yes, language is needed to form the notion of the *cogito*, and the reason why we so often forget this is because language itself creates an illusion of words referring to positive significations beyond language, including to a singular stream of experience that appears to be self-given, i.e., the *cogito*. Merleau-Ponty has already pointed out in *Phenomenology of Perception* (see above quote, Ph.P. 401-402) that language has a tendency to forget itself, that “we take the process of expression for granted,” yet he admits in his later work that he himself was forgetful of the constitutive power of language in his earlier book. He has become more acutely aware of the constitutive role of language in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Yet, it is not that he here arrives at a radically new insight; he is taking the earlier insight further.

Perhaps the greatest difference between the earlier and the later text is the insight that Merleau-Ponty gained in the later work by reading the works of the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. This can be observed in the last few sentences of the above quote. “The words do not

refer to positive significations...” “There are only *differences* between significations.” Merleau-Ponty generally (though not completely, as we shall see) accepts Saussure’s claim that words and significations refer laterally to other words and significations, that isolated words do not refer to discrete perceptual objects, to concepts, or to a fully self-possessed ego—something he was more likely to accept in the earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*. Yet, unlike most Postmodernists, Merleau-Ponty does not completely abandon perceptual meaning for an all pervasive language, for a language that claims that it can refer to nothing outside the text at all. This is clear from the paragraph that immediately follows the paragraph just quoted above.

“Yet there is a world of silence, the perceived world, at least, is an order where there are non-language significations—yes, non-language significations, but they are not accordingly *positive*. There is for example no absolute flux of singular *Erlebnisse*; there are fields and a field of fields, with a *style* and a typicality” (VI 171)

Merleau-Ponty abandons the idea of a “thought of seeing or feeling,” of a tacit *cogito* that is self-given as a singular entity with a singular stream of isolatable meanings. He does not abandon the description of perceptual experience or the body’s perceptual awareness of the world, that, as we will see, is required to carry or support language. Saussure’s insight into language thus helps Merleau-Ponty gain greater insight into the gestalt structure of language *and* of perception.⁴ Just as language forms a system, with all words and significations interconnected, but which is never fully explicit and never fully present to a reflective consciousness, so perception forms a system, a field with implied background elements that are never fully grasped but that nevertheless help to articulate a more explicit foreground. This differential field of perception is then brought to greater expression by a differential language. As Merleau-Ponty says in the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*, “language realizes, by breaking the silence, what the silence wished and did not obtain.” (VI 176) Language therefore does not create our perceptual world or cut us off from it; it brings it to a more complete expression in a way that is motivated by the perceptual encounter itself. Perception remains primary in the perception/language relationship, a relationship that can be characterized as a non-reciprocal reversibility.⁵ Perception does not

cause but *motivates* certain expressions which in turn fold back upon the perception to help express it. Perception offers a certain style or stable meaning that must be taken up and articulated more completely. A variety of linguistic expressions are always possible, yet some express better than others the original “mute” perception, its significance, its meaningful organization, its style or manner of appearance. (All of these points will be documented below.)

After commenting in his notes that he must “describe the existentials that make up the armature of the transcendental field,” he adds, “which are always a relation between the agent (I can) and the sensorial or ideal field. The sensorial agent = the body—The ideal agent = speech.” (VI 171) Merleau-Ponty clearly has not abandoned the description of experience, referred to here as a transcendental field, that is, as the public field upon which the individual’s own experience opens and with which it partially blends, yet which ultimately outruns the subject. Nor has he abandoned the idea of an *I*, a self, an aware and active agent. In fact, experience is first formed where the aware, active body meets the patterned structures of the world. Merleau-Ponty seeks to describe this lattice structure, this gestalt field that forms in this interaction between the sensing body and the world and that comes to be expressed in language. With a now well-known term borrowed from Husserl, Merleau-Ponty refers to this lived through experience as the *Lebenswelt*. It is a lived through experience where all aspects of experience, perception, culture, language, etc., flow in on one another, yet where perception is still the primary term. It is a lived through field of meanings that can never be made fully present, since every presentation assumes it and relies upon it.

“...we are making a philosophy of the *Lebenswelt*, our construction...makes us rediscover this world of silence.” (VI 170)

“...everything we said and say did and does involve it. It was there precisely as non-thematized *Lebenswelt*. In a sense it is still involved as non-thematized by the very statements that describe it: for the statements as such will in their turn be sedimented, “taken back” by the *Lebenswelt*, will be comprehended in it rather than comprehend it— are already comprehended in it insofar as they imply a whole *Selbstverständlichkeit*—” (VI 170)

Thus all statements occur in the *Lebenswelt*, in a framework or a horizon of implied and lived through meanings that have their origin in our silent perceptual encounter with the world and that help articulate a foreground, that allow a foreground appearance to make sense.

On the one hand, then, these claims set Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in stark contrast to the philosophy of most Postmodernists, who seek to make language far more independent of the body's perceptual encounter with the world. For Postmodernists the perceived world is a concept expressed in language, in a language which cannot recapture its original connection to perception. For Merleau-Ponty in order for language to make sense at all it must occur within and refer to a world that is really there and that we perceptually encounter at ever turn. It must take up the perceived world and refer back to it. Both perception and language are embodied phenomena. What we must therefore do is figure out how they flow into one another in the lived body, not separate them from one another, as Postmodernists tend to do. Yet, on the other hand, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Modern philosophy generally for not grasping perceptual experience as an open field of interconnected elements that can never be completely grasped by any act of intellection, and for reducing all experience to ready-made, discrete units that can be fully grasped by a categorial consciousness. Philosophy should now know better, especially dialectical philosophy, which is based on the idea of understanding concrete gestalt wholes and their interconnected parts--on a mode of understanding closely related to Merleau-Ponty's own.

“The failure of the dialectic as thesis or ‘dialectical philosophy’ is the discovery of this intersubjectivity [i.e., this lived through public field or *Lebenswelt*] which is not perspectival but vertical, which is, extended into the past, existential eternity...” (VI 175)

“The problem is to grasp *what*, across the successive and simultaneous community of subjects, *wishes*, *speaks*, and finally *thinks*. (VI 176; see also Ph.P. 433)

What must be grasped is a lived through experience that is public and unfolding, that is meaningful yet inexhaustible, that is patterned but not fixed.

Continuing the passage immediately above, Merleau-Ponty frankly admits that his earlier *Phenomenology of Perception* did not adequately describe this lived through field as it unfolds in time.

“The tacit *Cogito* does not, of course, solve these problems. In disclosing it as I do in Ph.P. I did not arrive at a solution (my chapter on the *Cogito* is not connected with the chapter on speech): on the contrary I posed a problem.” (VI 175-176)

When Merleau-Ponty comments that in *Phenomenology of Perception* he did not connect the chapter on the *cogito* with the chapter on speech, one of the most important aspects of the chapter on the *cogito* that is fully developed there and continued in *The Visible and the Invisible* is the blending of subjectivity and temporality. Thus part of what Merleau-Ponty is saying is that the earlier work did not fully connect temporality, the *cogito*, and language. We can get at this idea of temporality, and subsequently to its connection with the *cogito* and language, by briefly considering Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the relationship between embodied consciousness and the world. For Merleau-Ponty human beings can never grasp the pure in-itself, for the world always presents itself to human beings through the filtering avenues of the human body. The world presents itself to us as independent, yet does so in the wake of our experience, as a distance with which we thus remain in contact. This is what we have to describe: an in-itself-for-us, a contact with the world that runs beyond us. It is the same with time. It presents itself as running beyond us but it is only presented in the wake of our experience. Merleau-Ponty thus accepts a time independent of human beings, but he also asserts that it cannot be fully understood without reference to human subjectivity. Time cannot be understood as purely objective, for there would be no awareness of the passing of time, only an eternal now. Subjectivity is needed to be aware of the passing of time, yet time must transcend the subject, for if it was only presented to the subject, it would be spread out spatially before the subject and therefore would be fully present, fully constituted. Here also there would be no passing of time. The past and the future, as well as the elsewhere, stretch out from the present now and here and run beyond them.

There is a distance, a temporal and spatial moving away, with which I remain in contact. Thus, temporality is intimately connected to subjectivity, just as subjectivity is intimately connected to temporality.

“It is of the essence of time to be not only actual time, or time which flows, but also time which is aware of itself, for the explosion or dehiscence of the present towards a future is the archetype of the *relationship of self to self*, and it traces out an interiority or ipseity. Here a light burst forth, for here we are no longer concerned with a being which reposes within itself, but with a being the whole essence of which, like that of light, is *to make visible*.”

“Subjectivity is not motionless identity with itself: as with time, it is of its essence, in order to be genuine subjectivity, to open itself to an Other and to go forth from itself.” (Ph.P. 426)

Having thus characterized time and subjectivity as fusing together, *Phenomenology of Perception* proceeds to state that “...if the for-itself, the revelation of self to self, is merely a hollow in which time is formed and if the world ‘in-itself’ is simply the horizon of my present, then...” many philosophical problems can be solved. (Ph.P. 431) Merleau-Ponty’s intention here, of course, is to assert the antecedent of the pro-offered conditional statement. Let us look at this assertion: “...the for-itself, revelation of self to self, is merely the hollow in which time is formed...”

Consciousness/self-consciousness, awareness/self-awareness does not form a hole in being, a pure nothingness, a pure consciousness or mind outside the world, the body and temporality. Consciousness is the body’s awareness of and openness upon the world, upon the past, and upon a future. It is a hollow, a pause, a break in the density of being and the present, an awareness, a light, a light emanating from nature itself, from the natural structure of the human body. My present is not opaque, not closed in on itself, as a precisely delineated unit. It is aware of the other; it opens to the other as world, as past and as future—an other that remains other but with which it remains in contact.

This *ekstase* (or active transcendence of itself toward the other) of time and subjectivity is what Merleau-Ponty takes up and thematizes in the later work. For in the later work he argues that it is the structure of the human body that allows this *ekstase* to occur. Or, more specifically,

it is the natural structure of the human body, its reflexivity, that allows this to occur, that opens this light within being, this light of corporeal awareness and *self-awareness*. As the body touches, it is aware that it is touched from the outside, that it has an outside, that it can be perceived from the outside. The touching and the touched, the perceiving and the perceived never coincide because they constantly slip away from one another, and they constantly slip away from one another because they are separated by the passing of time. There is self-contact, but there is also distance, a spread, a slipping away. Self-presence occurs in the context of difference, the foreground occurs in the context of a background, both spatial and temporal.

Merleau-Ponty's later *The Visible and the Invisible* expresses the appearance of self-presence this way: "The only 'place' where the negative would really be is the fold, the application of the inside and the outside to one another, the turning point..." (VI 263-264) The self, which is not a positive thing or discrete entity, is not a pure mental or spiritual nothingness either. It appears as a gap where the body as perceiver and the perceived split apart yet also where the inside and the outside of the body cross into one another. This reversibility or crossing into one another of the inside and the outside, of perceiving and perceived is never fully accomplished, as we have just seen above and as is confirmed immediately below.

"It is that *reversibility* is not an actual *identity* of the touching and the touched. It is their identity by principle (always abortive)--Yet it is not ideality, for the body is not simply a *de facto* visible among the visibles, it is visible-seeing, or look. In other words, the fabric of possibilities that closes the exterior visible in upon the seeing body maintains between them a certain *divergence* (*ecart*). But this divergence is not a *void*. It is filled precisely by the flesh as the place of emergence of a vision, a passivity that bears an activity—and so also the divergence between the exterior visible and the body which forms the upholstery (*capitonnage*) of the world." (VI 272)

In *The Visible and the Invisible* the human body is characterized as a splitting open or dehiscence that folds back on itself, a separation that crosses or chiasms back to form a reconnection. The body as perceiver and the body as perceived are qualitatively different experiences, but they are experiences that fold in upon one another. In fact, the hand can touch from the inside because it is touched from the outside. The hand opens out to and partially blends with something that runs

beyond it. The blend cannot be complete; there must be a pause or a gap, otherwise the body as touching and as touched, as perceiving and as perceived would totally merge, rendering experience impossible. The human body as experiencer opens to an outside, to an *other* that folds back upon it, making experience possible. There is *contact* at a *distance*, a *holding together* that keeps *apart*. The world, the other, the past and future run beyond me but also appear in the wake of my experience. They are given in my experience as transcendent to me. This is the fundamental structure of experience and the fundamental structure of the corporeal self, which fuses with time. (See VI 213)

Commenting on Husserl and the comprehension of time within his philosophy, Merleau-Ponty argues that Husserl's philosophy falls short of understanding temporality because it remains a phenomenology of acts, of abstract descriptions of discrete acts reflected upon as singular events or things. It is a more Modernist phenomenology of categorial acts--which assumes a singular consciousness to which past, present, and future events appear as present. Rather than focusing on a phenomenology of categorial acts, Merleau-Ponty focuses more completely on a prereflective corporeal being-at, on an operative intentionality that occurs within the body, within being. Consciousness is here better understood as a corporeal openness upon a perceptual field that cannot appear as fully present. Bodily experience opens upon, stretches out to and partially blends with a perceptual field, which extends to infinity both spatially and temporally. The present foreground of awareness is intimately connected to implied spatial and temporal backgrounds, to horizons that run beyond it yet with which it remains in contact. (See VI 243-244, and also 201)

Merleau-Ponty makes similar comments with respect to Descartes' "thought of seeing", that it focuses on thoughts already formed as positive entities—which "are 'figures' of thought and the 'ground' or 'horizon' has not been taken into account—The 'ground' or horizon is accessible only if one begins by analysis of the *Sehen*—Like the *Sehen*, the *Denken* is not identity, but non-

difference...” (VI 273) Rather than beginning with units of experience that are neatly defined and fully possessed by categorial thought, as Modernists tend to do, Merleau-Ponty begins with embodied prereflective perception, with perception as a corporeal aiming at a world that presents itself as an open, differential field that cannot be fully possessed. This corporeal aiming at or openness upon the world is simultaneously an openness upon the past and the future. My present opens to, stretches out to a spatial horizon and to a past and a future that run beyond it yet with which it remains in contact. “To be conscious = to have a figure on a ground—one cannot go back any further.” (VI 191)

Furthermore, just as perceptual consciousness is to be understood in this relational *gestalt fashion*, so also is the *awareness* of perception or self-consciousness.⁶ Just as in Phenomenology of Perception, so also here in the later work, self-awareness must occur with all experience, yet here in the later work self-awareness is not understood as the Modernist “thought of thought”; it is grasped in the same *gestalt* fashion just discussed above.

“...the for-itself is an incontestable, but derived, characteristic: it is the culmination of separation (*ecart*) in differentiation—Self-presence *is* presence to a differential world.” (VI 191)

Self-presence is a perception of a perception that continually slips away, that cannot be fully possessed, since it slips away through time. Perception can perceive itself only across this temporal divide, this spread of time. The awareness of perception therefore can never be fully coincident with the original lived through act of perception. Self-presence is the awareness of the body as it is aware of or escapes out into the world. Self-presence is only present to itself as it is present to the prereflective differential world. In this sense, then, self-presence is not a reflective “thought of seeing,” which would make the lived act of seeing into a discrete thing, a unitary object reflected upon, conceived and fully possessed by a unitary and timeless subject. Self-presence can never be fully articulated because it always temporally slips away from itself.

The Visible and the Invisible characterizes self-perception this way:

“...the reflexivity of the body, the fact that it touches itself touching, sees itself seeing, does not consist in surprising a connecting activity behind the connected, in reinstalling oneself in this constitutive activity; the self-perception...or perception of perception does not convert what it apprehends into an object and does not coincide with a constitutive source of perception: in fact I do not entirely succeed in touching myself touching, in seeing myself seeing, the experience I have of myself perceiving does not go beyond a sort of *imminence*, it terminates in the invisible, simply this invisible is *its* invisible, i.e. it gives me a *Nicht Urprasentierbar* (a non-visible, myself), but this it gives me through an *Urprasentierbar* (my tactile or visible appearance) in transparency (i.e. as a latency)-- My invisibility for myself does not result from my being a *positive* mind, a *positive* ‘consciousness,’ a *positive* spirituality, an existence as conscious (i.e. as a pure *appearing to self*)...” (VI 249-250; see also 147-148 and 254)

We can see from this statement of the self as an original presentation of an absence that Merleau-Ponty has now distanced himself from his early Phenomenology of Perception, from his more Cartesian statement on the nature of the *cogito*. Many of the above points are already present in the earlier work, but they are now taken further and made more thematic. Self-perception as it is first formed by the reflexivity of the body is not a “thought of seeing,” which requires language. It is a mute or yet to be articulated awareness of a lived through openness upon a gestalt perceptual field, a field that runs beyond the perceiver both spatially and temporally but with which the perceiver remains in contact. And not only is the prereflective perception a lived through gestalt field, but the perception of perception is likewise now characterized in the same way, as occurring across a field, a spread, a gap. This gap between the prereflective perception and the perception of perception is formed by the reflexivity of the body and the spread of time. Self-perception can never make the perception, the prereflective perceiver, into an object. Self-perception can never make the lived through act of perception into an object. The prereflective, lived through act of perception cannot be fully possessed because the reflection shifts its mode of existence from lived through act to object reflected upon. Insofar as the lived through act is reflected upon, it is no longer lived through. Thus the original lived through character temporally slips away from the reflective act. And even if by some miracle the prereflective and reflective perception could occur together, which, as we have seen, the structure of temporality makes impossible, they are still different modes of human existence. Prereflective perception does not

remain a lived through act when it is being reflected upon. Thus the original lived through act cannot be fully captured or represented. Moreover, even if the prereflective perceptual act *could* be captured as an object by a reflective awareness, this reflective awareness itself remains a lived through act that cannot be simultaneously captured as an object. Whether in the prereflective or the reflective mode, the lived character of awareness always escapes full representation as an object. Something not yet fully possessed and defined always remains behind or within the act that lives it.

Yet there is self-awareness, an awareness of an *experiencer*, even though this experiencer can never be fully possessed.

“*What* it does not see it does not see for reasons of principle, it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. *What* it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest (as the retina is blind at the point where the fibers that will permit the vision spread out into it). *What* it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the *object* is born.” (VI 248)

There is an awareness of the opening of what sees, but one does not see the opening as one sees a thing, for, as we have seen, the opening is itself nothing but an opening, a lived awareness of the world, that which allows the world to appear yet which is not fully visible itself. Moreover, this openness is not a nothingness, a spiritual wisp occurring outside the body and nature. It occurs precisely where the human body, a bit of nature, folds back upon itself. This “light” of awareness occurs precisely in the body, as a natural light, as a bit of nature reflecting nature back to itself. But awareness and self-awareness *do* occur. They are not just created by language, for language would have nothing to say without the awareness that opens upon the world. And while it is true, as many Postmodernists claim, that history, culture, and language to some extent influence how the self is conceived and framed, history, culture, and language would mean nothing without the aware embodied subjects that take them up and live them.

Even though Merleau-Ponty does not completely jettison self-awareness, he certainly distinguishes himself from Modernist such as Descartes and especially Kant by claiming that

self-awareness does not originate in a categorial self that somehow provides or grasps the abstract categories that are the necessary conditions for all of experience. Merleau-Ponty does not seek an absolute ground for experience and truth, especially in the form of first principles from which all else would be derived (or, for that matter, in the form of a nature purely in-itself, within which all truth would simply appear).

“The progress of inquiry toward the *center* is not the movement from the conditioned unto the condition, from the founded unto the *Grund* ...” (VI 250)

Merleau-Ponty does not seek the Modernist *Grund* for experience. He does not seek the Cartesian or Kantian retreat into a fully self-possessed intellectual ego, as can be observed above, but neither does he seek the relativism of the Postmodernists and their apparent abandonment of all rootedness, as can be observed below.

“... the so-called *Grund* is *abgrund*. But the abyss one thus discovers is not such by *lack of ground*, it is upsurge of a *Hoheit* which supports from above..., that is, of the negativity that *comes to the world*.” (VI 250)

For Merleau-Ponty, then, experience is “grounded” in the embodied perceiver that is not a complete abyss or nothingness but is a tenuous openness of the body upon the world.⁷ This is expressed in the following working note.

“The negative here is not a *positive that is elsewhere* (a transcendent)--It is a true negative, i.e. an *Unverborgenheit* of the *Verborgenheit*, an *Urpräsentation* of the *Nichturpräsentierbar*, in other word, an original of the *elsewhere*, a *Selbst* that is an Other, Hollow—Hence no sense in saying: touched-touching junction is made by Thought or Consciousness: Thought or Consciousness is *Offenheit* of a corporeity to ...World or Being.” (VI 254)

So what we have here is a grounding that is not fully possessed. We have self awareness appearing as the original presentation of an absence, as a hiddenness revealed. We have a corporeal hiddenness that is an openness upon a fluid yet patterned field, a field that transcends the perceiver yet with which the perceiver remains in contact and, in fact, with which the perceiver partially blends.

We have seen that the primary reason why the perceiving cannot be fully grasped as perceived is that the perceiving temporally slips away from the awareness that attempts to perceive it. In addition, Merleau-Ponty's later work makes more explicit the *movement* that perception requires. Since the body is actively engaged in the world, since perception actively interrogates the world, perception involves movement, the movement of the eyes to focus and see, the movement of the hand to feel, and so on. Yet, here again, perception cannot fully grasp itself in the act, for the *perception* of perception likewise requires movement. Even though I cannot fully perceive my own perception, my own active movement, or fully grasp my own touching movement, bodily "movement is entirely woven out of contact with me," is entirely dependent upon the touching of itself, the awareness of itself. Touching and touching oneself are two sides of the same process. Touching and being touched from the outside thus fold in upon one another. The flesh of the body is thus prolonged to include the flesh of the world, and even though the world in-itself is not self-touching, its flesh, its *embodiment*, prolongs into that of the human body. The human body and the world blend or gear into one another in such a way that a sensible in general is produced.

"The flesh of the world (the 'quale') is indivision of this sensible Being that I am and all the rest which feels itself in me, pleasure-reality indivision." (VI 255)

"The flesh is a mirror phenomenon and the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body." (VI 255)

This reflecting back to one another or non-mechanical gearing into one another extends an analysis already undertaken in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty's later work therefore does not break with embodied perception as the primordial source of meaning, does not burden linguistic and social institutions with the creation of all meaning, though, as we shall see, the affective power of language and social institutions will be given due respect. Let us first turn to *Phenomenology of Perception* to make this case, then to *The Visible and the Invisible*.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty argues that meaning and truth are first formed in the body's active encounter with the world. There is a sort of symbiosis here: the perceived thing needs my body's attention to more fully articulate it, and my body needs the thing to focus and unite itself. My vision and my touch need to "grab" the world to perceive it clearly, yet my vision and touch are simultaneously "held" by a certain style or manner of being.

"...so perception presupposes in us an apparatus capable of responding to the promptings of light in accordance with their sense... This apparatus is the gaze, in other words the natural correlation between appearances and our own kinaesthetic unfoldings, something not known through a law, but experienced as the involvement of our body in the typical structures of the world." (Ph.P. 310)

The human body, which is a part of the world, is prepared or primed to respond to the typical patterns of nature. The body and the world gear into one another. This gearing into one another not only presents me with the perceived thing, but also with the world itself.

"What I call experience of the thing or of reality—not merely a reality-for-sight or for-touch, but an absolute reality—is my full co-existence with the phenomenon, at the moment when it is in every way at its maximum articulation, and the 'data of the different senses' are directed towards this one pole..." (Ph.P. 318)

This non-mechanical gearing of the body into a world that nevertheless runs beyond the body is confirmed several pages later.

"To have senses, sight, for example, is to possess that general apparatus...with the help of which we are able to take up any given visual grouping. To have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding...A thing is, therefore, not actually *given* in perception, it is internally taken up by us, reconstructed and experienced by us insofar as it is bound up with a world, the basic structure of which we carry with us, and of which it is merely one of my possible concrete forms. Although part of our living experience, it is nevertheless transcendent in relation to our life because the human body...has running through it a movement towards the world itself." (Ph.P. 326)

And finally,

"...my body is geared into the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. This maximum of sharpness of perception and action points clearly to a perceptual ground, a basis of my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world." (Ph.P. 250)

Meaning and truth, then, are formed in the body's active engagement with a world that runs beyond it. The human body as a natural thing is evolutionarily prepared with certain functions that allow it to respond to the world's promptings, that allow it to gear into the world to articulate it more clearly and bring it to greater self-awareness. Obviously, no single perception captures reality, which is inexhaustible, yet some adjustments are better than others because they help accomplish greater clarity of presentation, and greater adaptation to the environment and others.

In addition, just as certain bodily adjustments help "bring to light," help make the visible more clearly focused, so also certain lived acts of speech help bring the lived perceptual sense to greater expression, greater clarity, greater sense.

"The words meaning ... is first and foremost the aspect taken on by the object in human experience, for example my wonder in the face of these hard, then friable, then melting pellets falling from the sky. Here we have a meeting of the human and the non-human and, as it were, a piece of the world's behavior, a certain version of its style, and the generality of its meaning as well as that of the vocable is not the generality of the concept, but the world as typical. (Ph.P. 403)

"If I consider only the conceptual and delimiting meaning of words, it is true that their form... appears arbitrary. But it would no longer appear so if we took into account the emotional content of the word, which we have called above its 'gestural' sense, which is all important in poetry, for example. It would then be found that the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of 'singing' the world, and that their function is to represent things not, as the naive onomatopoeic theory had it, by reason of an objective resemblance, but because they extract, and literally express their emotional essence. [Different languages represent] several ways for the human body to sing the world's praises and in the last resort to live it." (Ph.P. 187; see also 404)

The lived meaning, style or rhythm of perception, its sense and direction are expressed more fully in lived through speech, by a certain behavioral style. Perceptual meaning, which is formed in our active interaction with the world, slips into acts of speech in ways that cannot be fully *analyzed* but that must be *lived through*, and may be lived through in ways that more completely express it.

Merleau-Ponty expresses much the same thing in *The Visible and the Invisible*, that is, he continues to express the importance of the incorporation of the seer and the seen into one another, *and* continues to express the sublation of this encounter in lived through acts of speech.

The following series of quotations makes evident the first point, the mutual incorporation of body and world.

“...the look is itself incorporation of the seer onto the visible...My body model of the things and the things model of my body...” (VI 131n)

“The look, we said, envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relation of preestablished harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them...” (VI 133)

“Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship...” (VI 133)

And finally, perhaps Merleau-Ponty’s most articulate statement on the mutual incorporation of body and world.

“There is vision, touch, when a certain visible, a certain tangible, turns back upon the whole of the visible, the whole of the tangible, of which it is a part, ...or between it and them, and through their commerce, is formed a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact--as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them.” (VI 139)

Merleau-Ponty thus does not abandon the idea of the human body and the world gearing or flowing into one another. *The Visible and the Invisible* carries this symbiosis further, to the point where the union of the body and the world is more real than either alone.

Before moving on to discuss the relationship between perception and language, we must first briefly consider the relationship to other human beings, for this relationship is the basis of all communication, including that expressed through language. What Merleau-Ponty discovers is that the synergy or working together of all the parts of the human body, can also be found between human bodies. “[M]y two hands touch the same things because they are the hands of one same body,” because, he says approximately, there is a transitive working together of the parts which operate within the lived through body. (VI 141-142)

“Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly: this is possible as soon as we no longer make belongingness to one same ‘consciousness’

the primordial definition of sensibility, and as soon as we rather understand it as the return of the visible upon itself, a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient. For, as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own.” (VI 142)

Just as he does in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty here refers to the birth of consciousness, the natural light, that which sees or makes seeing the visible possible, as taking place in the human body. And just as he claimed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he also claims here that the structures and functions of the body are to a certain extent anonymous. My eyes, hands, etc., are bodily avenues that carry me into the world whether I want to or not. My individual life and choices rest upon these more general functions, functions that are shared by others, that connect me to them and to the world. Therefore I can to a certain extent experience another person’s experience, for our similar bodies open upon a shared world. I, in fact, experience my body as opening upon a public world, upon a world that is experienced by others. Commenting on how experience is formed by the mutual incorporation of the body and the world, Merleau-Ponty makes the following claim.

“It is through it alone that there is passage from the ‘For Itself’ to the For the Other--In reality there is neither me nor the other as positive, positive subjectivities. There are two caverns, two openesses, two stages where something will take place--and which both belong to the same world, to the stage of Being.” (VI 263)

Experience, then, is like a field that is approached from two sides. I experience the outside of the world from the inside of my body. I open upon and experience an outside that others also open upon and experience. One can thus solve the problem of recognizing the other, Merleau-Ponty claims, if one begins with the mutual incorporation of the seeing and the seen that produces the visible.

“If one starts from the visible and the vision, the sensible and the sensing, one acquires a wholly new idea of ‘subjectivity’: there are no longer ‘syntheses,’ there is contact with being through its modulations, or its reliefs.” (VI 269)

There is no longer a need for intellectual, categorial synthesis accomplished by isolated Cartesian or Kantian (i.e., Modernist) individuals, for there is a mutual “contact with being through it

modulations or its reliefs.” Each human body, each sensing/sensed is an openness upon one sole world, yet each body subject is a “coherent deformation” of this world, each body subject to a certain extent is able to individuate, though never completely, from this common world. Thus, since human beings have similar though not identical bodies, since they tend to live and gesture in the world in similar ways, it is possible for human beings to catch at least a glimpse of each other experience. And since I experience my body as a lived through action or gesturing in the world, I am able to couple onto and partially grasp the meaning of the gestures of others, just as they are capable of partially grasping the meaning of mine.

It is this awareness of other human beings and their gestures that opens us to the world of language and abstract thought.

“At the frontier of the mute and solipsist world where, in the presence of other seers, my visible is confirmed as an exemplar of a universal visibility, we reach a second or figurative meaning of vision, which will be the *intuitus mentis* or idea, a sublimation of the flesh, which will be mind or thought. But the factual presence of other bodies could not produce thought or the idea if its seeds were not in my own body..” (VI 145)

The appearance of the other to a stone or to a snail does not produce self-awareness in either. Yet the appearance of the other to human beings, because of the reflexive structure of the human body, because it can turn back on itself in a highly specific way, helps complete and articulate this reflexion, helps complete the awareness that one’s own experience opens to a common world, that one’s own experience is one among many.

“Thought is a relationship with oneself and with the world as well as a relationship with the other; hence it is established in the three dimensions at the same time. And it must be brought to appear directly in the infrastructure of vision. Brought to appear, we say, and not brought to birth...” (VI 145)

“...and if we make thought appear upon an infrastructure of vision, this is only in virtue of the uncontested evidence that one must see or feel in some way in order to think, that every thought known to us occurs to a flesh.” (VI 146)

Abstract thought is not accomplished without language, and we have seen above that thought, and consequently language, is “brought to appear directly in the infrastructure of vision.” As we will see below, the structure of lived through perception, which is a perceptual gestalt or “idea”,

will be sublimated in the structure of lived through speech, just as it was in Phenomenology of Perception.

“We touch here the most difficult point, that is, the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals. No one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible, in describing an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth.” (VI 149)

The Visible and the Invisible thus proposes the conflation of fact and essence, proposes the understanding of perception as a gestalt structure that bears a meaning within it. Meaning or the perceptual idea is present in the structure of the concrete, lived through perception, in the foreground that is presented by the “invisible” lines of force that emanate from the background. This background or horizon field is always present but as implied or quasi absent, for if the framework or background is focused upon, it ceases to be lived through, becomes the object of perception, and is itself presented against a new, implied background.⁸

In a sense, then, perceptual ideas are more or less clearly given to us, meanings are formed in our perceptual encounter with the world, yet the perceptual “idea,” the “interior armature” or framework within which the foreground is presented, can never be made fully explicit, nor can it be constructed by a thought or language that lies outside the sensible.

“[These perceptual ‘ideas’] have their logic, their coherence, their points of intersection, their concordances, and here also the appearances are the disguise of unknown ‘forces’ and ‘laws’.” (VI 149)

“...the ideas we are speaking of would not be better known to us if we had no body and no sensibility; it is not that they would be inaccessible to us.” (VI 149)

“...they could not be given to us *as ideas* except in a carnal experience. It is not only that we would find in carnal experience the occasion to think them; it is that they owe their authority, their fascinating, indestructible power, precisely to the fact that they are in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart.” (VI 150)

Meaning is therefore born in our perceptual encounter with the world, in a perceptual encounter that entwines the human body and the world.

“There is a strict ideality in experiences that are experiences of the flesh: the moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field, adhere to one another with a coherence

without concept, which is of the same type as the cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of my body with the world. Is my body a thing, is it an idea? It is neither, being the measurant of things. We will therefore have to recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions.” (VI 152)

Where the needful, interested body meets the typical structures of the world, there meaning is formed. The perceived presents itself as gestalt structure because the relationship between the perceived and the embodied perception forms a gestalt field. It is within this gestalt field that the dimensions of experience are first formed. But we might now ask: how is it that these perceptual ideas, which are formed in the heart of the embodied encounter with the world, pass into the abstract ideas of the intelligence and culture?⁹

The Visible and the Invisible puts forth a provisional answer:

“But, however we are to understand it, the ‘pure’ ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of sensible things, and, however new it is, it slips through ways it has not traced, transfigures horizons it did not open, it derives from the fundamental mystery of those notions ‘without equivalent’, as Proust calls them, that lead their shadowy life in the night of the mind only because they have been divined at the junctures of the visible world.” (VI 152-153)

Merleau-Ponty further states in a working note that the perceptual ideas that can be understood only as they stream through the body are sublimated in speech and the abstract ideas of thought. (VI 207-208) Merleau-Ponty’s intent here is clear: meaning is born in our embodied encounter with the world and sublimated in language. This is a difficult relationship to understand, for it is not simply uni-directional but complex and reversible, as is the relationship between the body subject and the world, and because it is so briefly stated here. We get some help in understanding this complex relationship by referring elsewhere, back to *Phenomenology of Perception*, to *Themes from the Lectures*,¹⁰ written in the years just preceding the composition of *The Visible and the Invisible*, and to passages elsewhere in *The Visible and the Invisible* itself.

Investigating the character of reflective thought and how it does not quite master a complete possession of itself, *Phenomenology of Perception* considers the intellectual construction of the triangle as a geometric figure. While Merleau-Ponty certainly admits the role of thought in the

construction of a conclusion from already stated hypotheses, since the construction is not haphazard and does follow a rational design, this thought is not accomplished apart from or without the influence of the perceived geometrical figure. In fact, the abstract formulas of geometry would be meaningless without the intentional grip of the body on the gestalt figures of the perceived world.

“The construction [of the triangle] makes explicit the possibilities of the triangle, considered not in light of its definition and as a pure idea, but as a configuration and as the pole toward which my movements are directed. The conclusion follows of necessity from the hypothesis because, in the act of constructing, the geometer has already experienced the possibility of transition.” (Ph.P 386)

How has the geometer already experienced the possibility of transition? By making the transition with the aesthesiological body, with the sensing, moving body as it grips the world.

“I ‘consider’ the triangle, which for me is a set of lines with a certain orientation, and if words such as ‘angle’ or ‘direction’ have any meaning for me, it is insofar as I place myself at a point, and from it tend towards another point, insofar as the system of spatial positions provides me with a field of possible movements. Thus do I grasp the concrete essence of the triangle, which is not a collection of objective ‘characteristics’, but the formula of an attitude, a certain modality of my hold on the world, a structure, in short.” (Ph.P 386)

“[The construction of the triangle and its auxiliary hypotheses] express my power to make apparent the sensible symbols of a certain hold on things, which is my perception of the triangle’s structure.” (Ph.P 386)

It is the aesthesiological body that is thus at grips with the world, that senses the meaning and open direction of a figure that subsequently is able to sublimate this meaning in the more abstract symbols of language and mathematics. This sublation, as we have seen, is lived through and cannot be fully grasped by analytic reflection.

Yet the sublation of the body’s perceptual encounter with the world expresses only part of a more complex relationship between the perceived world and its expression in language and abstract thought—for the sublation is assisted by a language and thought that fold back upon it. I perceptually encounter the world, a perceived world that is patterned but still flowing and ambiguous. Language helps stabilize and even “set” the patterns in the flow of perception, yet

language and abstract thought are themselves motivated by this perception. This relationship, as we have already observed above, has been aptly called a non-reciprocal reversibility. Perception is considered the more primary term because it gives rise to language and thought, yet language and thought help bring perceptual meaning to a more complete expression. Merleau-Ponty clearly makes use of this complex relationship as early as Phenomenology of Perception, which the following passage makes evident.

“The relation of reason to fact, or eternity to time, like that of reflection to the unreflective, of thought to language or of thought to perception is this two-way relationship that phenomenology has called *Fundierung*: the founding term, or originator--time, 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 reabsorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.” (Ph.P. 394; see also 127)

We have just observed above that the analysis of geometric forms expresses the formation and sublation of ideas in the aesthesiological body. And we see from the quote immediately above that thought rest upon a perception that thought nevertheless helps to bring to more complete expression. *Themes from the Lectures* likewise gives profound expression to the same non-reciprocal reversibility of body and worlds and of perception and language. This text claims that perception is an open field, and what this means, first of all, is that the perceptual foreground is presented within the context of an implied not yet thematized background. The implied horizon always remains to be explored. Secondly, and tangentially, aspects of the perceived thing refer to other aspects not fully present. The front of a building, for example, refers to its interior, its sides, its back, etc., even though they are not fully present in this perspective. Here the front of the building acts like a “sign,” not that it refers to an already determined meaning or object, but like a milepost refers to what lies ahead, a series of unfolding expectations based on the present perception. (TFL 5-6) Here the meaning of the perceived object is intimately tied to the body and its mobility. I see the front of the building from my present position and at a certain angle. Its size is determined relative to other objects but also relative to my body, to my ability to negotiate

it with my movements and my gaze. The world and its objects thus influence my movement just as my movement within it and around them help determine their meaning for me. Or, to offer another example, if two fixed points of light are projected in quick succession onto a screen, observers report seeing a *single* back and forth movement of light. Here also aspects of the perceived event act as “signs” to suggest a meaning and direction, a meaning and direction that is taken up by the body and given unity by its own synergy. Thus, just as movement in the environment is projected into the body, so also the human body introjects its own synergy into the perceived field. Merleau-Ponty explicitly cites this experience of movement as an example of the reversibility phenomenon, for certain perceived movements suggest certain interpretations, and certain interpretations help unify and clarify the perception. (TFL 4-6) Moreover, just as the perceived world and body gear into one another, so also do perceptual gestures and linguistic gestures.

“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 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.” (TFL 4)

Phenomenology of Perception and *Themes from the Lectures* thus both express the flowing into one another (non-reciprocal reversibility) of the body and the world and of perception and the abstract thought expressed in language. Yet it is the late *The Visible and the Invisible* that fully thematizes these relationships. In fact, in *The Visible and the Invisible* this crisscrossing relationship or chiasm is used to develop and characterize a series of fundamental relationships: between the perceived and the perceiver, between perceptual gesture and the gesture called speech, between speech and the sublated meanings of abstract thought. Each of these couplets is characterized by a relationship of non-reciprocal reversibility, with the first term as the more primary. Moreover, the relationship between the couplets can also be characterized as a relationship of non-reciprocal reversibility, with the first couplet as the more primary for the

second and third, and the second as the more primary for the third. In the life-world, all these relationships fold in upon one another. There is slippage, leakage, and new creations, yet these occur within the context of a more primary perceived world. The perceived world is sublated into *new* structures, but these must continue to *make sense* of the perceived world and must continue to allow us to adapt to it and each other successfully. Language and all cultural creations are built upon the more primary perceptual encounter with the world and others. For language to “ring true,” it must continue to make sense of this perceptual encounter.

“... to understand is to translate into disposable significations a meaning first held captive in the thing and in the world itself. But this translation aims to convey the text; or rather the visible and philosophical explication of the visible are not side by side as two sets of signs, as a text and its version in another tongue. If it were a text, it would be a strange text, which is directly given to us all...” (VI 36)

We see here Merleau-Ponty claiming, contrary to Postmodernist philosophies, that there is something outside the text. He is quite explicit in fact about his disagreement with philosophies that are only about language, and the error of what he calls semantic philosophies is to close language off from the perceived world. (VI 126)

“But 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 does not transform it into something said, it does not install itself in the order of the said or the written as does the logician in the proposition, the poet in the word, or the musician in the music. It is the things themselves, from the depths of their silence, that it wishes to bring to expression.” (VI 4)

“The philosopher therefore suspends the brute vision only in order to make it pass into the order of the expressed: that vision remains his model or measure, and it is upon that vision that the network of significations which philosophy organizes in order to reconquer it must open.” (VI 36)

“And it is this unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us. (VI 11)

Judging from the above quotations, there can be little doubt that Merleau-Ponty’s final work still finds a central place for perception in his later philosophy. Yet there can also be little doubt this later philosophy makes greater room for language, which helps form the abstract thought of reflection.

“It is a question not of putting the perceptual faith in place of reflection, but on the contrary of taking into account the total situation, which involves reference from the one to the other. What is given is not a massive and opaque world, or a universe of adequate thought; it is a reflection that turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, but which, coming second, reflects back to it only its own light.” (VI 35)

The closing passage of The Visible and the Invisible continues this line of thought when it claims that there is no dialectical reversal from perception to language, that they are not discrete parts of a system that have to be synthesized, but that they already form a whole. This does not mean, as we have just seen, that perception is not the more primary term, for the origin of meaning is in the body’s active involvement in the world, the body’s gearing into and blending with the world. The very appearance of ideas is at first the appearance of the perceptual idea—which occurs in the perceptual horizon structure that helps present a perceptual foreground. This lived act passes into another lived act called speech, which opens a field of sublated meanings. These meanings and the language that supports them can open new forms of expression and can generate new meaningful relationships. Yet they travel along pathways already established by the aesthesiological body and its encounter with a patterned perceptual world. Moreover, the lived through acts of speech may be thematized, transformed into “objective structures,” and may be used to articulate future expressions. Thus perception gives rise to speech and to the more abstract meanings of the culture, yet these more abstract expressions of language fold back upon the perceived world in order to bring it more fully to expression.

What Merleau-Ponty is attempting to do in his later work is describe the intersubjective, or, more accurately, the intercorporeal field that is the homeland of all experience, that *is* experience, and not only in the present but across time. We have seen that time and subjectivity fuse, that both “split open” and “stretch out” to a beyond and a past, both connect or touch something that runs beyond them, including the past. This of course means that the past is still in contact with the present. Certain gestures, certain forms of behavior, certain expressions, if they

make sense and clarify our world, are repeated and become habitual. These habitual forms of past behavior we carry into our present and future. Merleau-Ponty calls them institutions.

“Thus what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of experiences will acquire meaning, not as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future.” (TFL 40-41)

It is these intercorporeal institutions that make human history possible. We have observed above that consciousness is *ekstase*, it is a bodily openness to a world that runs beyond it. This bodily openness is experienced in part as anonymous, for the body possesses various organic functions that are shared, though never exactly, by other members of the same species (and some even by other species). Thus my embodied experience crosses into the world, as it crosses into me; my embodied experience crosses into the embodied experience of others, which also crosses into me, and my embodied experience crosses into various habitualized and institutionalized forms of behavior, including language, which also cross into me. Merleau-Ponty says explicitly that we no longer need to separate the inside from the outside, the personal from the social, for they open upon and flow into one another.

“Living language is precisely that togetherness of thinking and thing which causes the difficulty. In the act of speaking, the subject, in his tone and his style, bears witness to his autonomy, since nothing is more proper to him, and yet at the same moment, and without contradiction, he is turned toward the linguistic community and is dependent on his language. The will to speak is one and the same as the will to be understood. The presence of the individual in the institution and of the institution in the individual is evident in the case of linguistic change.” (IPP 54-55)¹¹

Obviously, linguistic institutions are but one form of social institution. More generally speaking, the existence of individuals in social institutions and of social institutions in individuals, their crossing into one another, is what allows human history to form.

“The reciprocal relations between the will to express and the means of expression correspond to those between the productive forces and the forms of production, and more generally, between historical forces and institutions. Just as language is a system of signs which have meaning only in relation to one another...so each institution is a symbolic system that the subject takes over and incorporates as a style of functioning, as a global configuration, without having any need to conceive it at all. When equilibrium is destroyed, the reorganizations which take place comprise, like those of language, an

internal logic even though it may not be clearly thought out by anyone. They are polarized by the fact that, as participants in a system of symbols, we exist in the eyes of one another, with one another in such a way that changes in language are due to our will to speak and be understood.” (IPP 55-56)

As individuals seek recognition within the context of social institutions, as all individuals take them up and use them, seek various forms of recognition within them, these institutions change and a human history is formed.

We can observe from the above that Merleau-Ponty’s later works have achieved a remarkable balance between self and body, embodied self and world, self and others, self and language. He does not jettison any of these elements of experience for the sake of any of the others but manages to account for them all. For Merleau-Ponty they form a gestalt whole, with all the elements crossing into one another, yet with perception as the more primary term. However, which element at a particular time and place in history, which element, if any, will come to the fore as predominate in the movement of history, is left to the intuitions of the participants as they confront the actual events.

Postmodernist authors¹² often leave the impression that social institutions (especially language) create everything, including the self, self-consciousness, and even perceptual consciousness of the world. There is nothing outside the text, they claim, for linguistic expressions simply refer to other linguistic expressions and so on *ad infinitum*.¹³ Moreover, all *personal* involvement in the creation and construction of meaning is precluded by the structure of language itself. It is the linguistic system that creates meaning (or constantly defers it), not isolated individuals. While it is true that Merleau-Ponty’s later work seeks to jettison the notion of consciousness, he does so because of its connection to Cartesianism in the Western philosophical tradition (i.e., Modernism), and because of the many problems associated with this position, with the complete self-givenness of a discrete, reflective, intellectual self, and with one set of absolutely certain rational structures that is taken to represent *the* structure of reality. Merleau-Ponty’s later work seeks to jettison a highly specific conception of self-consciousness

and its abstract intellectual construction of reality. He does not seek the absurdity of removing all awareness from human experience or the absurdity that language alone creates self-awareness and constructs our perceptual world. Certainly Postmodernists are right about the formative influence of social structures, including language, on one's conception of oneself and even of our view of reality. Yet these structures, including language, would have no influence at all if human beings were not already *aware*, if the reflexive structure of the human body did not open out to an already familiar and patterned perceptual world, which includes others, with its natural light. Perceptual awareness, self-awareness, the open and changing patterns of nature, and social institutions cannot be reduced to one another. They cross into one another, yet in a way that still manages to privilege the perceptual world. This is what must be conceived. This is what Merleau-Ponty's last work attempts to do, and, to a certain extent succeeds in doing, at least better than any other theory to date.

Abbreviations of frequently cited Merleau-Ponty texts:

- IPP *In Praise of Philosophy*, 1963. *Eloge de la philosophie*, 1953.
Ph.P. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962; sixth printing, 1974, which includes translation corrections. *Phenomenologie de la perception*, 1945.
SNS *Sense and Nonsense*, 1964. *Sens et non-sens*, 1948.
TFL *Themes from the Lectures at the College de France, 1952-1960*, 1970. *Resumes des cours, College de France, 1952-1960*, 1968.
VI *The Visible and the Invisible*, 1968. *Le Visible et l'invisible*, 1964

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

³ See James Schmidt *Merleau-Ponty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 9. Schmidt, who makes no claim to be exhaustive, finds at least eight different accounts of the "shift" that Merleau-Ponty makes in his later work.

⁴ "The Saussurean analysis of the relations between signifiers and the relations between the signifier to signified and between the significations (as difference between significations) confirms and rediscovers the idea of perception as a *divergence (ecart)* by relation to a level..." (VI 201)

⁵ M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1988), pp. 194ff, and pp. 208ff.

⁶ “The *touching itself, feeling itself* of the body is itself to be understood in terms of what we said of the seeing and the visible, the touching and the touchable. I.e. it is not an act, it is a being at (*etre a*). To touch *oneself*, to see *oneself*, accordingly, is not to apprehend oneself as an object, it is to be open to oneself, destined to oneself (narcissism)—Nor, therefore, is it to reach *oneself*, it is on the contrary to escape *oneself*, to be ignorant of *oneself*, the self in question is by divergence (*d’ecart*), is *Unverborgenheit of the Verborgen* as such, which consequently does not cease to be hidden or latent.”

“The feeling that one feels, the seeing that one sees, is not a thought of seeing or of feeling, but a vision, feeling, mute experience of a mute meaning.” (VI 249)

⁷ “My invisibility for myself does not result from my being a *positive* mind, a *positive* ‘consciousness,’ a *positive* spirituality, an existence as consciousness (i.e., as pure *appearing to self*), it comes from the fact that I am he who: 1) has a visible world, i.e. a dimensional body, and open to participation; 2) i.e. a body visible for itself; 3) and therefore, finally, a self-presence that is an absence from self.” (VI 250)

“My position in the problem of the ‘return to the immediate’ to be defined: the perceptual in the sense of the non-projective, vertical world—is always given with sense experience (*le sentir*), with the phenomenal, with the silent transcendence. And yet someone like Piaget ignores this absolutely, has totally converted his perception into a cultural-Euclidean perception. What right have I therefore to call immediate this original that can be forgotten to such an extent?”

“Describe very precisely the way perception masks itself to itself, make itself Euclidean. Show that the pregnancy of the geometrical forms is grounded intrinsically (not culturally) in that they, better than others, allow an ontogenesis (they stabilize being. What Piaget expresses—badly—in saying that in them the ‘deformations’ annul one another), but that this intrinsic pregnancy, in order to retain all its meaning, must be maintained within the zone of transcendence, within the context of pre-Being, of the *Offenheit* of the *Umwelt*, and not dogmatically considered self-evident—the Euclidean perception has a privilege, but it is not an absolute privilege, and it is contested as absolute by the transcendence—which demands the Euclidean world as one of its aspects.” (VI 212-213)

⁸ “Meaning is *invisible*, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the invisible itself has an invisible inner framework (*membrure*), and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it, it is the *Nichturprasentierbar* which is presented to me as such within the world—one cannot see it there and every effort to *see it there* makes it disappear, but it is *in the line* of the visible, it is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it (in filigree)” (VI 215)

⁹ “...if finally...the actual, empirical, ontic visible...exhibits a visibility, a possibility that is not the shadow of the actual but is its principle, that is not the proper contribution of a ‘thought’ but is its condition, a style,...then...there is to be sure a question as to how the ‘ideas of the intelligence’ are initiated over and beyond, how from the ideality of the horizon one passes to the ‘pure’ ideality, and in particular by what miracle a created generality, a culture, a

knowledge come to add to and capture and rectify the natural generality of my body and of the world.” (VI 152)

- ¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the College de France*, trans. J. O’Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
- ¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, trans. J. Wild and J. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963)
- ¹² See, for example, the popularization of Postmodernism by Glenn Ward entitled appropriately enough *Postmodernism* (London: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Company, 1997), especially pp. 97ff.
- ¹³ Jacques Derrida, “Différance” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago University Press, 1982), p. 13 and p. 24. See also “*Ousia and Gramme: Note on a note from Being and Time*” in *Margins*, p.66. Derrida argues that trace1 (language) erases trace2 (perception) because trace2 erases itself, that it is only a reference to the past, future, or elsewhere. Dialecticians have known since Hegel that presence doesn’t stand alone, that it refers elsewhere, but this doesn’t completely erase the original presence, for if it did, there would be nothing there to refer. For Merleau-Ponty presence occurs within difference, a perceptual foreground always refers to an implied background or horizon, and if this foreground presents a stable structure that doesn’t disappear simply by referring to the past, future, or elsewhere, then language has something to express, has something to refer to.