Many scholars in the West have rightly turned away from the modernist world view of Descartes, with its isolated rational individual in full possession of both itself and one rational world. Many have also rightly turned away from the related modernist political view of bourgeois liberalism, with its isolated individual as the rational bearer of natural and even God-given rights. Yet, with the rather extreme pendulum swing by many toward postmodernism, with its counter claim that our rational world and the rational subject are more or less freely constituted by language, one is left with the impression that something of value has been lost: a patterned world with which the human person or subject is in contact.1

With respect to both the rational world and the human subject, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, as it does with respect to so many issues, comes between more extreme positions, in this case between modernism and postmodernism. He moves beyond both modernism’s pre-established rationality and the bourgeoisie’s isolated rational subject, but does so by re-interpreting and redefining each, not by attempting to eliminate them. Moreover, his grounding of both rationality and the sense of self in the body’s lived-through encounter with a really existing world escapes the foundationalism of modernism, since this encounter continues to unfold, and it escapes the arbitrariness of postmodernism, since this encounter is stable enough to make at least some non-arbitrary generalizations about both the world and the human experience of it. Given this last point, that human experiences, and thus more generally human nature, are stable enough to make at least some provisional generalizations about them, it seems plausible to maintain an at least modified (non-essentialist) theory of alienation, and that this theory may still be used to guide a politics—even in our so-called postmodern age. This, then, will be the focus of the present essay: it will present Merleau-Ponty’s theory of rationality and of the human subject as coming between modernism and postmodernism; it will present a non-essentialist theory of alienation; and it will attempt to make the case that this non-essentialist theory of alienation can still be used to guide politics.

Modernism

Before taking up Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, let us first turn to a brief characterization of how both the modernist and postmodernist treat the human subject, and, given their respective theories of the subject or of human nature, how each then addresses politics. The concept of rationality will be addressed further below.

As is well know, Descartes defines the modern subject as the indubitable and complete reflective awareness of oneself by oneself, as a complete awareness of oneself as a conscious, thinking entity, i.e., as a thinking substance, with a precise rational identity. This rational self, which is separate from the world, others, and even embodied emotions, can nonetheless rationally manipulate and control the world, others, and itself. With this sort of view of the subject more or less incorporated into Natural Law Theory, employed variously by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and even by Marx, as well as by many to follow, we find a precise human essence, given in nature or even by God, from which we may be alienated, that more or less absolutely dictates what its proper social and political environments should be.

Postmodernism

A variety of views regarding the postmodern subject is admirably revealed and summarized by Pauline Marie Rosenau in Post-Modernism and the Social Science.2

She states that postmodernists frequently propose a de-emphasizing of the personal subject and, generally, that they call “for less emphasis on the subject [considered] . . . as the ‘preconstituted centre of the experience of cul-
ture and history” 3 (PMSS 42). Of Nietzsche, as one of the most significant precursors of the postmodern rejection of the modern subject, Rosenau states the following: “Nietzsche questioned the . . . thinking, feeling subject who reasons logically and causally. He disputed the validity of the ‘fixed, substantial selfhood.’” 4 “He discussed the subject as self-deceptive, lacking in consciousness, willful, vengeful, and power-seeking” 5 and as manifesting a ‘repressed, nihilistic will to power’” 6 (PMSS 44). Perhaps more significantly, the structuralist movement in postwar France began to move away from subjects who were regarded as the creators of all social and historical meaning and toward a focus “on larger structures, on formal laws of a system’s functioning, on the linguistic construction of these structures, on the symbolic meaning they carry, and/or on change as manifest in the structural transformations” (PMSS 46). Within structuralist theories, “subjects became mere codes or the fleeting, illusory product of codes . . . the ‘effects produced by the semantic code through its naming of qualities, which are then given an appearance of individuality and reality through the attribution of a proper name’” 7 (PMSS 45). Within the context of this sort of structuralist position, human agents have nothing left to do, since they act in “large scale social structures that are not the products of anyone’s plan or intention” (PMSS 46). Structuralism, then, paves the way for postmodernism, since most postmodernists are in general agreement with these claims. 9 As Rosenau expresses it, “the most extreme of the skeptical post-modernists consider the subject to be a linguistic convention” (PMSS 43). 10 Overall, they “question the value of a unified, coherent subject,” 11 and they contend that subject “is fictitious, in the extreme a mere construction,” “only a mask, a role, a victim, at worst an ideological construct, at best a nostalgic effigy” (PMSS 42). 13

Ironically, even though these skeptical postmodernists seem to eliminate the subject, since the subject is now treated as a mere product of social institutions, including those of language, they proceed to introduce the concept of postmodern individual. This seeming contradiction offers the postmodernist the advantage of “retaining an individual perspective” (PMSS 53). Yet since the experience of the world for this postmodern individual is fragmented into bits that are a “fading signal from the past” (PMSS 55), 14 the postmodern individual has little sense of a stable and continuous world or of a stable sense of self with which to act in this world with any sort of consistency (PMSS 54–55). Obviously, given this view of the fragmented individual, of the individual’s fragmented nature, and, consequently, of the fragmentation of the social process, the political views of the skeptical postmodernists tend to deny the authenticity of universal or “global political projects,” projects that have previously been generated by rational individuals who were regarded as more or less the same, at least with respect to their rationality. Furthermore, these political views tend to regard both the political and the political subject as mere social, linguistic constructions (PMSS 47; 139). Within the context of these positions, then, it is not surprising that the lack of political involvement, i.e., the cultivation of “‘ironic detachment,’ 15 becomes a positive, progressive political stance” (PMSS 140), and that the discussion of alienation as a driving force of history has become virtually non-existent. Yet, ironically, even though this fragmented individual seems to be a mere product of social forces and institutions, including language, he or she, without restriction, also appears to possess the power to freely interpret these forces through a free play of language. As Rosenau expresses it, “if the skeptics appear to crush ‘the individual beneath the yoke of the tyranny of language,’ . . . then they empower the post-modern individual to turn this around and ‘to tyrannize language by freely interpreting words and making it what they will’” (PMSS 43n). 16 Rather than embrace this contradiction of being both a mere product of the social and its ultimate creator, we will see Merleau-Ponty more sensibly develops a dialectical position of reciprocal influence, of a chiasm or crisscrossing into one another of the social and the self.

**Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy**

For Merleau-Ponty, the sense of self has its origins in the ontology of the human body. He states explicitly in the lecture notes that came to be published under the title of *Nature* that
his primary reason for studying nature, animal biology, and human biology was to attempt to forge a better understanding of the human body and the human being—including the emergence of human awareness and self awareness. Human consciousness is not to be viewed as an extra-material substance but as an attribute emerging from within nature itself—as evolving in a process that we should be able to trace, at least in its general outline. In Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, the author clearly draws from these studies when he states that as the human body emerges from nature, that as quantitative mutations in the animal body evolve and give rise to new human qualities, the human body is able to be more fully aware, and is able to do so because of its more complex and unique natural reflexivity. The body can touch because it is an embodied being that is in the world, that is part of it, that participates in it with sensuous awareness, as this world impacts upon it. The body can touch because it is an embodied being that is capable of being touched from the outside by other embodied beings. The sense of self, then, is able to form because our touching is aware of being touched, because our seeing is aware of being seen, and because the terms of these couplets hinge back and forth and cross into one another. Thus, given the ontology of the human species, given that we are a two-dimensional being that can touch because we are aware that our bodies are being touched from the outside, given that we are a being whose touching and being touched cross into one another, human meaning generally and the individual’s personal identity more specifically are formed at the site of this intersection. Moreover, to stress this point, since this intersection is lived-through, since the body actively opens upon and orients itself toward the world as it simultaneously receives information from it, we must understand the meaning of experience as a simultaneous product of the active embodied subject and the imposing patterns of the world. It is not the case that we have an active mind and a passive body. What we have is an aware body that actively orients itself toward the world as it simultaneously receives information from this world. Most fundamentally, then, the meaning of experience is neither a projection of an abstract mind (or, for that matter, of a language trapped in a hermeneutic circle), nor the passive result of mechanistic material forces. Meaning is formed as an active, aware body palpates a world that impacts upon it, that conspires with it, but that ultimately runs beyond it. Meaning is formed, both in general and more specifically, with regard to the individual’s sense of self, as the aware human body actively meets and takes up (per-reflectively negotiates and interprets) the natural and social patterns that impact upon and cross into it.

Yet to more completely understand the formation of the sense of self in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy we must also consider his treatment of time. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he states that time is the model for subjectivity. Time is *ek-stasis*, is a reaching out of itself that maintains a contact with itself, since the present opens to a past and future that are away from it but that still remain in contact with it. The present must therefore be thought of as a gestalt field. The present is a foreground in the context of a past and future, in the natural dimension of time. In the same way, the subject experiences itself as a leaping out of itself toward the other, while, nevertheless, remaining in contact with itself. The subject experiences itself as leaping out of itself toward the other, toward the past and future, toward other people, and toward the world. In fact, it is because the subject opens to the other, to the world, and to time as a dimension of the world, that the subject’s experiences can be synthesized. Since the moments of time, with which the subject’s experiences blend, are not experienced as discrete, as sharply breaking off from one another, but as gradually shading into or overlapping with one another, there is no need to speak of reflective synthesis on the part of the subject. True, the subject’s experience is needed to more fully be aware of this blending of moments, but it is an overlapping that is a part of nature itself. Or, more accurately, the synthesis of the subject’s experience occurs because the subject’s lived-through experience opens to and partially blends with a dimension of the world (time) that nevertheless runs beyond it. The subject’s awareness is needed to articulate this more precisely, but the blending would not occur without temporality as a stable dimension of the world. Without the stable
world and the stable dimension of temporality that is a part of it, the subject’s “moments” of experience would simply appear as flashes of awareness with no connection to one another.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, and in opposition to the modernist notion of a transcendental ego in full possession of itself, of an ego that somehow remains independent of the world, of time, and even of its own embodiment, the continuity of the subject’s experience can be accounted for by the embodied subject’s openness upon a stable world and a time that is a stable dimension of it. Thus, it is not abstract concepts, formed in isolation by a reflective transcendental ego, that create time and the unity of experience. Rather, it is the cohesion of the moments of time themselves, and the subject’s parasitic blending with them, that helps us account for the formation of abstract concepts and essences. In addition, the use of abstract concepts, with the assistance of the language that is necessarily a part of this use, requires this continuity of experience over time. This is how Merleau-Ponty expresses the point in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “the true act of counting requires of the subject that his operations, as they develop and cease to occupy the center of his consciousness, shall not cease to be there for him and shall constitute, for subsequent operations, a ground on which they may be established” (PhP 134). And this is how he expresses it in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

Every ideation, because it is an ideation, is formed in a space of existence, under the guarantee of my duration, which must turn back into itself in order to find there again the same idea I thought an instant ago and must pass into the others in order to rejoin it also in them. Every ideation is borne of this tree of my duration and other durations, this unknown sap nourishes the transparency of the idea; behind the idea, there is the unity, the simultaneity of the real and possible durations, the cohesion of one sole Being from one end to the other. (VI 111)

Here again we see that it is the stable, natural dimension of time (with which the subject’s experience blends but upon which it rests) that helps account for the continuity of experience over time and even the possibility of a consistent development of ideas and their stable expression in language. Language must rest upon this continuity, otherwise there would be nothing to connect one expression to another—including even the deferring of one expression to another, since the deferring must occur in time, and must occur in a time that we are aware of and live.

We should also point out here that empirical evidence also supports this view of a unified, albeit continuously unfolding, sense of experience. We know, for instance, that injuries to specific regions of the brain also affect global brain functioning. This demonstrates that local excitations “undergo . . . a series of structurations which disassociate them from spatio-temporal context . . . and orders them according to the original dimensions of organic and human activity.” Moreover, this also indicates that the fragmented subject is not a normal, healthy subject. The healthy subject is able integrate individual experiences into his or her general life, and does so without ever completely leaving specifics behind. In fact, for the subject to function normally the specifics of experience must not be erased but must be integrated into the individual’s general life experience, otherwise one’s general life would have no connection to the multitude of actual experiences, and we would subsequently learn nothing from them, or the subject’s experience would possess no continuity at all, since our concrete experiences would simply be moments, or even seconds, of disconnected awareness.

Given what we have just witnessed above, postmodernism must fail because temporality and the continuity of experience cannot be understood as a mere product of language, since Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated that even the simple act of counting, which, it is true, requires language, even more deeply requires the natural continuity of lived-through experience. Counting and language must rest upon this continuity of experience, otherwise they would not be possible, otherwise, as we have seen, they would be just instantaneous blips of expressive awareness with no connection to one another, not even a deferring one. Yet, as we have also witnessed above, since the subject is a temporal being, since human experience unfolds in time, even though the touching and touched cross into one another and overlap, they slip away from each other and di-

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verge. Even though experiencing and being experienced cross into one another and overlap they never completely coincide, since they are never fully simultaneous (VI 249). Moreover, since this is the case, we can never fully capture or represent the experiencing subject with our reflective intellectual gaze, as modernists have maintained. The temporal lived-through touching, seeing, experiencing continues to unfold and remains primary, and can never be fully represented in fixed categories. Thus the sense of self forms as the experiencing and being experience cross back and forth into one another, yet the sense of self continues to unfold and change, even while maintaining some sense of continuity over time. Temporality, then, in a way that escapes the postmodernist, since it is not just the product of a constantly deferring language, helps us understand the continuity of the self over time, since the aspects of time (past, present, and future, and the subject’s experience that blends with them) naturally overlap. And, contrarily, temporality helps us understand that the subject is not a fixed (Cartesian or modernist) identity, since the subject’s experience continues to unfold in time, always slips away from the reflective act, and, consequently, never fully coincides with a reflective representation of it. The sense of self that is presented here, by way of Merleau-Ponty’s work, is thus not postmodernist, but neither is it modernist.

To understand this formation of the sense of self more completely, to understand how, for Merleau-Ponty, terms cross into one another, reciprocally influence each other, yet with one term still remaining more primary, we must understand his use of phenomenology’s Fundierung relationship (PhP 127, 394). Within the context of this relationship, lived-through perceptual awareness finds and focuses on various (gestalt) perceptual patterns in the perceptual world. Since these patterns are really given in our active encounter with the world, they can be understood as neither a modernist projection of rational essences, including abstract geometrical forms, nor a mere postmodernist free play of language. True, they are patterns that are given in our embodied perceptual experience, to an experiencer who cannot be eliminated, but they are patterns that are experienced as generated from the world itself. Now, even though these perceptual patterns are frequently given as ambiguous, they are still able to motivate (not cause or logically require) certain interpretations of them. These interpretations are expressed by a language that, in turn, folds back upon them to help articulate them more precisely and meaningfully. Lived-through perceptual experience (the subject’s experience as it opens upon a public field) thus needs language to help articulate and express it more clearly, yet language rests upon the more primary lived-through perceptual experience, is sustained by it, and would mean little or nothing without it. Of course, this doesn’t mean that language cannot say something new, since human beings have the power to sublimate perceptual experience, to generalize from it, and to interpret and synthesize it in different ways, as it continues to unfold. Yet it does mean that language cannot be meaningfully severed from perceptual life and that if language doesn’t refer back to human life as it is lived, if it completely erases its connection to the world as it is perceptually lived, it will render itself meaningless. Again, different linguistic interpretations are always possible, and there is no definitively correct interpretation. Yet some interpretations are better or more clarifying than others, and this is because there is something there to interpret. There is something there to “measure” the interpretation, to measure the measurant (VI 152). With respect to the sense of self, then, it is still formed primarily in the subject’s lived-through encounter with a temporal and spatial world, since it is the body’s active involvement with the world that is most primary. True, this encounter must be taken up by a language that folds back upon it in order to express it more precisely, yet there is always something already there that remains more primary. Thus, contra-postmodernism, language alone does not and cannot create a sense of self, nor is it the most primary factor in this creation. It certainly helps articulate it, and is even necessary for this articulation, but it doesn’t create it out of nothing and it cannot create anything that it wants. Yet, again, contra-modernism, these more primary experiences must not be thought to be fully present to themselves, apart from their relationship to the world, to time, to others, or to language.

Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, then, the sense of self is formed as we
actively experience our natural and social world, as we actively test our natural powers within it, and as we actively test our powers within it over time with others. The sense of self is formed most primordially through the body’s active, lived-through encounter with the world, time, and others, as the latter fold back into and blend with this experience. We are able to form a stable sense of self over time because our embodied experience opens upon and blends with a stable world whose moments of time hold together as they nevertheless slide apart. Now, given this view of human nature, given the two-dimensional nature of human ontology, i.e., the perceiving that is perceived, and given this view of a subject whose experiences hold together as they continue to unfold in a temporal world, can we speak of economic, social, political environments that would be alien to this nature, and, subsequently, can we speak of an economic, social, political environment that must be present to fulfill it? We will need to address other aspects of human nature to answer these questions adequately, and it is thus to these aspects and questions that we should now turn.

We have seen briefly above that the modernist view of human nature features a fixed and abstract species essence. Here, rational individuals, who are identical with respect to their rationality, seek to control a world of things that manifest already existing rational essences and yet also seek to fully develop and actualize their own unique or individual capacities. The social, political state that does not allow for this rational control and self-actualization sets up an environment that is alienating for the individuals within it. Consequently, only the social, political state that allows for the complete actualization of this human nature will be a just or moral state. On the other hand, we have seen that the postmodern view of human nature features no species essence at all. Here both human nature (including the personal subject) and nature itself (including the nature of societies) are perceived to be more or less freely constructed by language. Here it is difficult to discuss alienation at all, since there is really no human nature from which we might be alienated, and here it is subsequently difficult to reach any judgment at all about which form of the social, political state might be the most just. Finally, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy falls between these two extremes. His view of human nature features, rather than a fixed abstract essence or none at all, a sort of bell curve of the species. Since human beings are similarly embodied, members of the species will tend to organize and respond to the world in similar, though not identical, ways. Since human beings are similarly embodied, human behavior will tend to fall within predictable ranges or norms, and since human individuals tend to form a stable and even habitual sense of self over time, their behavior will tend to be habitual and thus predictable. Moreover, and however, since human beings are members of the species that possesses more complex and integrated forms of awareness and self awareness—because of the reflexive nature of our unique two-dimensional ontology—humans possess at least a modicum of freedom and are thus able to respond differently to the same or similar stimuli over time. We can thus never indubitably state that humans will respond in just one way. We can never indubitably predict human behavior or a human future. Here, though, we may still reasonably speak of tentative predictions regarding most human behavior and even of a probable alienation from human nature itself. The social, political state that does not allow for the aware, active, and free development of the human person in a relatively stable environment is a state that will produce alienated individuals. Contrarily, and subsequently, the social, political state (democracy) that allows for the relatively free fulfillment or actualization of this nature will be the most just or moral state. Yet, again, since human nature, in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, cannot be represented as an abstract essence, with all individuals at least in some sense exactly the same, since human responses tend to be variable over time, we cannot definitively state which specific state will be best. Let us now turn to a more detailed treatment of these issues as they appear in Merleau-Ponty’s political works.

Merleau-Ponty on Politics, History, and Human Nature (Ontology)

Merleau-Ponty’s early political treatise, Humanism and Terror, interprets the later Marx along modernist lines, as understanding
history as a movement towards the fulfillment of human nature, towards "a condition considered human by all men, namely, the condition of the proletariat." Since, according to Marx, the proletariat is the most numerous or even the "universal" class, it is the class that is the driving force of history. It is the class that will finally achieve the fulfillment of human nature and, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it here, a universal "recognition of man by man." Merleau-Ponty does not fully explicate what this latter phrase means, but there is enough textual context to suggest that it means something close to the so-called "liberal principles" that developed in the liberal tradition of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, etc. Both Marx and Merleau-Ponty accept the liberal principles of democracy, of freedom of conscience, of the rule of law, etc., but neither accepts that they have already been established in capitalist societies. Implicit and explicit in this tradition is the recognition of the right of the self-actualization of each. The basic spirit of the liberal principle is to allow each person to act and to freely develop his or her personality and character as he or she wishes—as long as in doing so no harm is brought to another. Again, this has not been established in capitalist societies because they tend toward the concentration of wealth and power and thus toward non-democratic political and economic control. And, of course, within capitalist societies there is a stark absence of any sort of real democratic control of the workplace. A just society, then, would presumably be a society that, beyond capitalism, and even beyond providing the conditions for a decent standard of living, lets each person freely develop his or her personality and character as he or she wishes—and even helps provide the enabling conditions for this—such as quality education, with a variety of educational tracts and choices, and a variety of employment choices, particularly those that allow at least some democratic self-determination with others. Since self-determination occurs, and must occur, in a social milieu, personal self-determination is linked to social/political self-determination. Or, to state this more clearly, personal self-determination and social/political self-determination are intimately linked and require one another. The greatest opportunity for personal self-determination, at least for the greatest number of people, occurs in democratic societies, and the greatest opportunity for social/political self-determination, if we mean by this the free development of the social institutions inhabited by the majority of the population, occurs with the free development of this society's individuals. Thus, self-actualization is not merely personal but is inter-subjective, economic and political as well, since, as we have seen in the preceding section, personal self-actualization largely occurs by actively participating (or laboring) in the world with others, and, we should now add, by doing so democratically.

It is well known that Merleau-Ponty's later political treatise, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, abandons this more modernist idea that the proletariat is destined to achieve a classless democratic society that will foster the self-actualization of each through the mutual recognition of all. He does not abandon the idea that the proletariat may be involved in such a movement, and he urges a continued support for the working class and this movement. It is also clear that he does not abandon his support for democratic societies, within which each can more or less freely and actively develop himself or herself. In fact, as we have seen above, Merleau-Ponty does develop a theory of human nature/ontology and he does discuss the political and social situation with this theory in mind. Or, to state this differently, given his view of human nature, two related ideas are being abandoned by Merleau-Ponty, the idea of a natural (or essential or necessary or modernist) unfolding of history, as it has been articulated by either capitalists or communists, and the idea of a human nature that is so fixed and determine that only a highly specific social/political structure will match it or allow for its fulfillment. Merleau-Ponty does not accept the idea of a fixed human essence from which we could derive a highly specific social or political structure that will then be projected into the future and toward which history will and must move. He does maintain a theory of human nature/ontology, but now stresses, in this context, human freedom, as well as a stable and therefore probable human future. This means that we can predict, by looking at an at least somewhat stable human ontology and human history, by looking at what did not work in the past, what will not work in the future (AD 77). Again, given human freedom and the possibility of variable responses to circumstances, we

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cannot definitively predict what will work, yet
given the stability of human nature and the sta­
(bility (or inertia) of various social and eco­
nomic forms and structures, we can make
some reasonable claims about the probable de­
velopment and direction of human history.
However, this also means, as was just indi­
cated, that, given that human nature allows for
some freedom and variability of response, we
cannot predict this future with any sort of cer­
tainty, since humans can respond in new ways
and can create new conditions. This is un­
doubtedly why Merleau-Ponty takes up the
view that he does in Adventures of the Dialec­
tic, why he takes up the view that the best
means then (mid-twentieth century) available
to fulfill human nature were the democratic in­
itutions in place. As flawed as they are within
capitalist societies (and, he insists, we must
continually point out these flaws), these demo­
cratic institution are still, at least to date, the
best means yet devised by humans to allow hu­
mans to govern and fulfill themselves, and this
is because democracies allow for at least a mo­
dicum of the free or spontaneous development
of both the individual and the species. Democ­
racies allow for at least a measure of the free
development of human history. They do not (or
should not) try to definitively determine hu­
mans history beforehand, based on some highly
specific current view of a fixed human essence.
We could make the argument, though, based
on Merleau-Ponty’s theory of human nature/
onontology, and his claim that we know from hu­
mans history that certain societies fit this na­
ture/ontology better than others, that democra­
cies themselves are not an arbitrary political
institution, that they are not based merely on
the arbitrary agreements of interlocutors who
have erased past and present connections to
lived-through embodied perceptual
experience. We could argue, for example, that
democracy is better than slavery, since the
former suits human ontology better than the
latter, allows for greater expression and
fulfillment of our nature, as it currently exists,
and does so more than the latter.

To be clear, even granted this ontological
dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s theory, he does
not adhere to modernism’s Natural Law the­
ory, which states that rights are given with hu­
mans reason’s grasp of our natural and even
God-given human essence. For Merleau-

Ponty, rights aren’t pre-given by God, in a ra­
tional nature, in an immutable and singular
human essence, or to isolated individuals for
whom reason is identical in each. True, given
our nature, given that we are members of the
same species, and given that we are similar
though not identical, we can still make some
predictions about how most humans will re­
spont within some specific set of circum­
stances. We can predict, for example, that,
given the natural human impulse to survive,
humans will seek food, shelter, and a means to
defend themselves if threatened. But how this
impulse to life is framed or expressed as a right
is left to the participants in various societies,
and, ideally (which, as we know, is frequently
not the case), should be worked out by all par­
ticipants in open democratic dialog and de­
bate. Moreover, this impulse may well be
framed in various ways with various results,
and, in addition, most certainly must be dis­
cussed and framed within the context of other,
even conflicting, impulses, such as greed and
aggression. Thus, just as perception is pat­
terned yet still open and ambiguous, and just as
language is needed to help articulate it more
precisely, so also human instinct is patterned
yet still open and ambiguous, and so also lan­
guage is needed to help articulate it and frame
it more precisely. Now, with respect to both
perception and instinct there is no definitively
correct expression, since a variety of expres­
sions are always possible and make sense, and
yet some expressions appear better than oth­
ers, since they are the most clarifying, and they
are the most clarifying because there is
something there, the lived-through perceptual
experience of a really existing world, that
measures them.

Moreover, as we have just seen, given our
nature, and our past, we know that certain so­
cial/political solutions did not work, and thus,
in all probability, will not work in the future.
Since we have a relatively stable nature, we
have some idea of what does not work, and yet
because our nature is not fixed, because human
nature can respond to circumstances with
some freedom and variety, we cannot make
any definitive prediction about what new
structures will work in the future. Humans can
always respond to a situation in a new way,
even in a variety of ways, and there is no defini­
tively correct way to respond. We know, then,
given our nature and our past, that there is no automatic or guaranteed history. However, we also know that one of the best social/political solutions in the past that did work was democracy —where each is allowed to actively develop his or her own character and personality and where each recognizes all the others as fully human like oneself. We must therefore attempt to continue this tradition by trying to continue and nurture the social/political institutions within which each is afforded the opportunity to actively develop his or her own character and where each democratically recognizes the humanness of all the others. We must listen to all voices—in the sense that we have seen developed in the preceding section: as these voices fold back upon and articulate the lived-through experience of each individual, as this experience opens to a public world—and try to find the common elements acceptable to all in democratic debate. Moreover, we must also attempt to recognize and live with differences, since we know that human beings are not identical to one another. Societies that don’t allow for or foster this democratic expression are more likely to produce alienated individuals, to produce individuals who are not in touch with their own actively formed experience or who have not had the opportunity to form these experiences at all. We have seen above that human beings are not just passive receptacles for language, nor are we merely passively constructed by it or other social institutions, since language and other social institutions would not exist without the aware social subjects that live them. We have also seen that human beings are not isolated rational interiors in full possession of themselves. We are active embodied beings who define ourselves actively by trying and testing our natural powers in actual natural and social situations. We are active beings who attempt to express our experiences using a language that is intersubjectively available to others, and we are active beings who seek confirmation in this linguistic exchange. This social/political confirmation or rationality in Merleau-Ponty’s political work clearly relates back to his philosophical/ontological treatment of it, to his treatment of it as the agreement of embodied perceptual experiences or profiles, of mine as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those lived-through by others as we actively open upon the world together. Moreover, as we have seen briefly above, it should be clear that this treatment of reason links subjectivity and intersubjectivity, links the individual and the social, and does so by simultaneously linking them, as embodied beings, to the natural world. Reason, then, is not already established, as modernists claim, but remains to be established as an agreement of perceptual profiles, of profiles that are formed actively in experience and that are sublimated by a language that helps articulate and confirm them by folding back upon them in open discussion and debate. Moreover, the postmodern philosophy that claims that language is separate from perception and the body’s lived-through experiences is alienated philosophy, since this language is not grounded in the body’s most primordial lived-through encounters with the world and others. If, as some postmodernists have maintained, language completely erases its origins, its perceptual contact with the world, then it becomes a form of linguistic idealism and loses contact with the world and those who act within it. Moreover, in an age that is dominated by mass media, with its fleeting images and fragmented world view, we must redouble our efforts to situate truth, first, in our active embodied perceptual encounter with the world, and, second, in our rational (in Merleau-Ponty’s sense) discussion and debate about this encounter.

Now, the postmodern view can certainly trace its origins to nineteenth century criticisms of capitalism’s bourgeois individualism and absolutist rationality, and to the actual decline of this stage of capitalism. Moreover, an equally compelling case could be made that the postmodern view now simply represents or reflects capitalism in its advanced stages, with its fragmented world view particularly evident in certain social/economic sectors, such as the mass media and the advertising industry. Thus, certainly, we must consider the material conditions that help engender this world view, such as the decline of one form of capitalism and the rise of another, yet we must also take seriously the idea that some theories or world views make more sense than others. True, our ideas are conditioned by the material conditions of history, but, as we have seen, our ideas can fold back on events to frame and express them in...
different ways. Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, it is the theory that most clarifies events that we should accept. With this in mind, and liberally interpreting the two-hemisphere theory of brain function (more on this below), with most logical and linguistic processing occurring in the left hemisphere, and most of the intuitive and artistic sensitivity occurring in the right, we could perhaps make the case that the workplace, and training for it, primarily engages the left brain, while television, film and computer entertainment primarily stimulate right brain activity—with little creative play in the former and almost no critical reflection in the latter. Broadly speaking, individuals within capitalist societies would be less alienated from their work if it were more integrated with the right brain (if more play and creativity were democratically allowed), and they would be less alienated from the entertainment media (or less manipulated by it) if they viewed it with more critical rational reflection. Given Merleau-Ponty’s theory of human nature, which is not just a product of certain economic conditions, we must face human societies as whole, integrated, active persons, and we must attempt to face and regulate societies democratically, since this is the best way to attempt to control the social structures and institutions that control (and sometimes alienate) us.

It will be worthwhile to conclude by more speculatively pointing out a few points of contact between Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and Michel Foucault’s, and, via Foucault’s, between Merleau-Ponty’s and that of Nietzsche and the Greeks. As Best and Kellner have pointed out, Foucault moves away from the postmodern “technologies of domination, where the subjects are dominated and objectified by others through discourse and practices, to technologies of the self, where individuals create their own identities through ethics and forms of self-constitution.” These “technologies of the self” are defined as individual and social practices that allow individuals to transform themselves in an effort to make their lives happier (PT 61). Foucault uses his understanding of Ancient Greek and Roman cultures, especially their admiration of an individual’s effort to transform his or her life into a work of art through the moderation (not suppression) of desires and passions, as a model for his own ethics of self-mastery. This model, hopefully, would allow individuals to control and develop their lives without adhering to the “coercive normalizing institutions of modernity” (PT 61–63). This does not mean that Foucault simply moves from a theory that stresses social domination of the individual to one that stress the individual’s freedom. What Foucault’s later works now appear to offer, according to Best and Kellner, “is a dialectic between an active and creative agent and a constraining field.” The active agent can sometimes even use the social practices of the constraining fields to transform his or her life, even though the individual does not create them (PT 65).

Foucault’s later view is similar to Merleau-Ponty’s (which Foucault had studied) and the two views may thus be regarded as complimentary. They are similar in at least two respects: (1) Merleau-Ponty, like Foucault, speaks of the body, the incarnate basis of the sense of self, as work of art, and (2) he also speaks of the chiasm or dialectic of the self and the social. It is useful to speak of the first point by referring to Nietzsche’s treatment of the Greeks, which, it appears, may well have influenced both Foucault and Merleau-Ponty. Frederick Copleston conveniently summarizes Nietzsche’s view as follows. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche reminds us that the Greeks were fully aware that human life could be tragic. Yet the Greeks did not shrink in the presence of this fate. Instead, they fully confronted life’s terrors, and tried to transform them in either of two ways, by using either of the Greek gods Dionysus or Apollo as their model. The first passionately engages with all the terror that life has to offer and attempts to transmute it through art, music, and the tragedies of theatre, while the second attempts to transform it more dispassionately with the scientific and philosophical use of careful judgment and precise categorization. Nietzsche believes that the West has become increasingly Apollonian and, as a result, has become increasingly unwilling to face the terrors of human life. Yet he does not suggest that we abandon the Apollonian for the Dionysian but rather attempt to integrate them. Now, it could certainly be argued that the entire body of Merleau-Ponty’s work attempts this integration, or, if you will, in more contemporary lan-
guage, the integration of the right and left brain, with the right roughly correlative to the Dionysian and the left to the Apollonian. 32 We see, for instance, that his treatment of the gestalt figure pulls together sensuousness and structured meaning, since he reminds us that a specific perceptual figure (a gestalt form) is always already pregnant with meaning, is always already structured. We see also that his work attempts to integrate specific perceptual (or even sensual) experiences into the general life of the individual, which, in turn, is integrated into the general (and rational) life of the individual’s culture. We see that his works thus attempt to integrate the individual and social as well as the aesthetic and rational structure. We see that his logos is a perceptual or even sensual logos. Moreover, as we have seen above, given that the sense of self is formed actively by engaging in, taking up, and interpreting the natural and social world with others, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the formation of the sense of self is comparable to Foucault’s claim that we must attempt to integrate the “technologies of the self” with the “technologies of domination.” Now, with respect to the second point above, the point regarding the dialectic of the self and the social, we can re-state what has just been said, since Merleau-Ponty’s primordial logos always also pulls together self and other. 33 As we have already seen, reason finds its origin in the agreement of embodied perceptual profiles, of mine as I actively open upon and interact with the world, and of mine with those lived-through by others as we actively open upon the world together. This brings together not only the embodied subject with the world but also embodied subjects with one another, since they act into the natural world together, and since their social world is largely a linguistic sublimation of this action. This embodied perceiver pulls together and integrates self and world, self and other, perception and reason, and perception and language. This integration, however, does not eliminate differences, since in this case all difference would conflate into one, rendering experience impossible. As we have seen above, human individuals are able to form a sense of self because of the reflexivity of the human body, because touching and being touched, seeing and being seen, cross into one another, yet do so without complete assimilation, because of the spread of time. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, i.e., the crossing into one another of self and other, but also their holding apart, lends itself to both a commonality and a plurality of perspectives. As we have see above, since humans are similarly embodied, and since our bodies open upon the world in similar though not identical ways, our experiences will be similar, though not identical. Politically speaking, this means that as active subjects we should attempt to move toward common values and rights through open discussion and debate. Where we cannot find agreement, we should attempt to live with differences. This also means that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy lends itself to a minimalist view of the state, that the state should protect basic common or general rights (such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, political equality, one person, one vote, etc.) and provide to all basic enabling conditions (such as decent basic education, a living wage, affordable housing, etc.), but also recognize differences (such as pregnancy leave for women or reparations for specific minority groups)—as long as these differences do not violate the basic rights common to all. The just society, then, is the one that actually, and not just formally, nurtures human relations that respect the complete humanity of each personal subject and that allows each to develop his or her humanity as fully as possible, again, as long as this development doesn’t violate the basic rights common to all. Moreover, this society should not be regarded as based on a fixed human essence or merely on arbitrary linguistic agreement but on a stable human nature that continues to unfold with the help of language and open debate.

ENDNOTES

1. In the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy the term “subject,” as will become clear below, is used as synonymous with experience, as a singularly embodied being that is aware of his/her experience as continuous through time, as it opens upon a public world within which it acts and rests. The term “self”...
is taken to include a stable sense of personal identity over time.


22. See ibid., xxiiif., 111–12, 130, and 147.

23. Merleau-Ponty’s later political works, discussed immediately below, call into question the claim that this democratic control of the workplace had been achieved in the Soviet Union’s 1950s brand of communism. More recently, the possibility of democratic control of the workplace has been discussed and documented by David Schweickart. The goal here is not to discuss this in detail but to mention that it has ex-
isted, that they continue to exist, and that if they are expanded in the future that they will lessen alienation and increase the possibility of self-determination and self-actualization. See David Schweickart, Against Capitalism (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 224–41.


25. I’m speaking generally here, since Merleau-Ponty does not develop a specific theory of rights.


27. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations (New York: Guilford Press, 1991), 60–61. Referred to in inline as PT.

28. See Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, where he states: “The parts of the body “are not spread out side by side, but envelop each other.” “I am in undivided possession of it.” “The body is to be compared not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art . . . [because] . . . it is the nexus of living meanings” (105, 151).


31. This modifies the postmodernist characterization of Nietzsche referred to above.

32. I am not claiming that there is any sort of precise parallelism between Nietzsche’s characterization of the Apollonian and Dionysian and the more contemporary theory of right and left brain function, although I am claiming that they are comparable in a general sense.

33. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Signs, 115. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, In Praise of Philosophy, trans. John Wild and James Edie (Evanston: