Bernard Waldenfels superb essay "Vérité à Faire: Merleau-Ponty’s Question Concerning Truth" permits us to conceive of Merleau-Ponty's theory of truth in a succinct and, I believe, accurate fashion. Merleau-Ponty’s works are notoriously complex, multifaceted, and even oblique, with various important insights often scattered over many pages and often even over several feature length works. Waldenfels therefore serves the scholarly community well by pulling together Merleau-Ponty’s frequently profound yet dispersed insights, in this case on truth. In this essay I hope to take full advantage of Waldenfels' analysis, yet I will also attempt to extend it by adding aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s insights into the nature of truth not mentioned by Waldenfels, particularly with respect to Merleau-Ponty’s account of reason, and I will attempt to extend it by showing how Merleau-Ponty’s theory of truth can be used to understand an ethical theory that lies dormant and only implied in Merleau-Ponty’s writings.

From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy generally, the correspondence theory of truth and the coherence theory of truth, as they are traditionally conceived, are both intellectual, abstract constructions that do not put us in contact with lived perceptual meaning. Correspondence places a representation in an external relationship to a thing. This representation and what it relates is true when it matches the things and their relationships to one another, false when it does not. Truth here involves an external relationship of thing (representation) to thing (thing in-itself). Truth as coherence, on the other hand, obtains when one concept is logically consistent with other concepts, false when it is not. Truth here involves an internal relationship of meaning or of ideas.

Notice here that the Western philosophical tradition has separated content or matter (discrete things or units in external relationships) and form or mind (ideas expressing internal relationships of meaning). In a life-long professional effort, Merleau-Ponty attempts to overcome this dichotomy (and many others) and here integrates form and content in the lived through perceptual event. As I perceive a physical structure drawn on a piece of paper before me (say the famous gestalt duck/rabbit), I actively organize the object as a duck or a rabbit. These different organizations occur at the level of perception and not at the level of abstract judgment, as they do in the traditional theories. Lived perception is thus already meaningful, and it is meaningful in a way that goes beyond the external relationships of the lines to one another. There is certainly something there for the embodied observer to relate, but these lines, which stand only in an external relationships to one another, are now related meaningfully, and in different ways by the perceiver, either as a duck or as a rabbit. Merleau-Ponty refers to this experience as a "sensible idea," where the parts of the perceptual field are related meaningfully, "going beyond" the merely physically given, yet they are related in a concrete way, in a way that cannot simply be derived from abstract ideas, that cannot simply be a manifestation of the internal relations of formal abstractions.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, lived through perceptual consciousness is embodied and actively engaged in the world. Embodied consciousness receives information from the world yet simultaneously organizes it. Where the active, interested body and the patterned world meet and intersect, there meaning is formed. This meaning is therefore born as a perceptual gestalt, as a perceptual pattern or variable norm, for the optimal perception delivers a balance of richness and clarity. There is thus a mute meaning at the perceptual level, a perceptual pattern that is meaningful but not yet spoken. Truth, then, will involve bringing this lived through perceptual sense to full ex-
pression in language. We will possess truth when a statement makes sense of the perceptual sense, when, as Waldenfels says, it “hits the point” or “hits the mark,” by bringing this sense to a full expression or meaning. As Waldenfels reminds us, for Merleau-Ponty linguistic expression is “paradoxical” in the sense that it reveals the original mute meaning of perception yet remains a translation. The expression is thus a creation, yet it is a creation that is motivated. This is what M. C. Dillon aptly calls a relationship of non-reciprocal reversibility, with perception as the more primary motivating term. Language helps clarify the meaning of the perceived, which is still open, changing, and multifarious, helps nevertheless to more fully articulate the stable patterns of perceptual sense, even if a number of articulations are possible. Language sublates the perceptual, takes it up and expresses it at a higher level of integration and abstraction, and can continue to do so. But there is still a perceptual meaning. True, perception and nature are inexhaustible, there is no final interpretation. And even though we may be able to eliminate some interpretations because they simply do not work, this does not authorize us to claim that there is one definitive interpretation. Different interpretations are always possible, but, again, some clarify and work better than others, since there is something there, a perceptual sense, to interpret.

Not only is there a chiasm, a flowing into one another of the embodied perceivers and the world, and of perception and language, as we have just seen above, but there is also a chiasm between embodied perceivers. First of all, Merleau-Ponty describes consciousness as the human body’s openness upon a public world, as a “being-at” the world, as an embodied awareness directed toward the world with its entire being. The anonymous functions of my body, my eyes, ears, hands, etc. carry me into a world that runs beyond me, that includes me and other people. Contra Descartes, who claims we never know another consciousness, our individual consciousnesses can overlap because they meet at perceived objects and open upon one sole world, upon a perceptual life in general. Secondly, when I perceive another being like myself, since this being, like me, is intentionally engaged in the world through the human body, I am able to glimpse the meaning of the other’s intentional actions or gestures. This “postural coupling,” and our openness upon one sole world, allows humans to experience what Merleau-Ponty refers to as a “lateral universal.” That is to say, human beings can share experiences because as embodied consciousnesses we open upon a public world and gesture within this world in similar ways, in ways that can be glimpsed by others.

Perception is patterned and patterned in similar ways for similar beings. We know this because we report perceiving the world in common ways and because we manipulate it in common ways, because we can discuss it and manipulate it together with a great deal of success. Yet, since we are embodied, and to a certain extent individuated in our bodies (since I can move my body about in a way that only I can do), we perceive through individuated (as well as general) perspectives and interests. Thus interpretations may differ as well as overlap. In order to establish the truth, we must therefore listen to all voices and try to move toward what is shared. Agreement should be based upon an agreement of profiles. This agreement is in fact what Merleau-Ponty calls rationality. It is a critical agreement of profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those of others as we actively open upon the world together. These profiles are based in the interested body’s engagement in a public world. This engaged perceptual meaning, as we have seen, is itself a gesture, can overlap with the gestures of others, and can slip into the gesture called speech. Speech in fact is in all likelihood, at least at first, a vocalization of our lived emotional encounter with the world, say, for example, a sigh of relief or joy, or a shout of fear or anger. Speech is a singing of our perceptual encounter with the world, a singing or articulating of our engaged perceptual sense or profile. Thus agreement is reached by coordinating our actions in the world, so that we can adapt to nature successfully, and by coordinating our ideas in speech, so that we can adapt to one another successfully.

This linguistic expression becomes sedimented in culture and used as a frame to make sense of present experience. Merleau-Ponty calls these sedimented struc-
ters institutions. They are established ways of interpreting the world and of regulating behavior within it. As Waldenfels says, "if truth has a history . . . it is . . . in the sense of a chain of presents held together by transformations and deformations," by reformulation of these sedimented structures and institutions.

These institutions are true insofar as they continue to allow us to make sense of the world and adapt to it and each other successfully. These institutions must still work and make sense of the lived perceptual world. There is thus something beyond the measuring interpretive system that helps measure it. It is the perceptual sense. Moreover, these systems do not tell us definitively what is true, for the perceived world is inexhaustible. They help us determine what is false, what has not worked, but they do not determine the truth definitively. There is a sublation of past meaning structures. We take up past structures and theories, correct their mistakes and lift them to a higher level of integration, i.e., by correcting their contradictions, by adding what they leave out, by explaining what they failed to explain, we advance knowledge. Even when theories break with the past structures, they do so by explaining what the others cannot. There is sublation, never total separation.

To summarize, Merleau-Ponty's theory of truth involves using the appropriate language to help articulate and make sense of our lived through perceptual encounter with the world, of the meaningful gestalt patterns that are formed in this encounter. Truth involves three relationships, one between the embodied self and the world, one between perceptual sense and linguistic expression, and one between the embodied self and others. When we use language in a way that best allows us to make sense of our perceptual world together, then we have expressed at least a provisional truth. This truth must continue to help us make sense of our world and help us adapt to it and to each other with at least a degree of success and harmony. Differences will always remain, but hopefully they can be managed and mollified by universal inclusion in the decision making process. Without this inclusion, without taking into account the perspective of each person or group, truth remains narrowly partial and often under the control of one or more dominant groups. In a sense, then, truth is the best of all that has come before us, for each generation uses the interpreting and regulative institutions of the past and present to best make sense of its world and to regulate behavior within it. The institutions are true that do this well and that reduce disharmony by allowing greater and greater inclusion. As we will now see, these themes will play a role in understanding the basic concepts of Merleau-Ponty's ethics.

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Merleau-Ponty's ethics is based on the structure of the human body. It is motivated by the body's sentients, is based in part on empathy, and is to be worked out by means of highly specific conceptions of reason, the social contract, and language.

Sentients. Just as the human body experiences meaningful perceptual patterns in its interaction with the world, so it also experiences meaningful patterns of pleasure and pain, of value. In fact, to be a perceiving being is to be a sentient being, and to be a sentient being is to be a being that experiences pleasure and pain. Thus, just as language helps articulate the perceptual sense, so also it helps articulate the valuing sense, and it does so in the same way. We have seen that language in all likelihood is at first an expression of our embodied and needful encounter with the world. Language sings our encounter with the world, including our painful, pleasurable, fearful, and loving encounters with the world and others. Language will thus express moral truths when it "hits the mark," when it makes sense of and expresses our needful encounters with the world and others and when it does so in a way that reduces conflict and assists our adaptation to one another.

Empathy. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not primarily an introspective, reflective awareness of one's own thought, but rather is the body's pre-reflective openness upon a public world. Like a search light, my consciousness opens out to and reveals a field within which it comes to rest. Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty the human body is not primarily experienced as a sum of introspectively given sensations or, contrarily, as a construction of objective perspectives. Rather, it is pri-
marily experienced as a postural orientation toward the world, as a set of certain favored frameworks through which it projects itself into the world. By redefining consciousness and the body, Merleau-Ponty is now poised to redefine the relationship to others, no longer to be conceived by way of Descartes’ argument by analogy. Since consciousness is a bodily openness upon a public world, and since the body is an intentional projection into the world through certain anonymous or general functions, the intentional behavior of others is immediately recognized and quite often immediately understood—if only partially or imperfectly. This “sympathetic understanding” and “postural impregnation” is framed ethically as the “recognition of man by man,” as the recognition by each person of the humanity of all the others. Each recognizes that others are human like oneself. There is thus identity with the other, but difference as well. When perceiving sense objects, the thing appears at the end of my gaze, my touch, yet also appears to run beyond them. Likewise, when perceiving another human being, there is a unity, an empathy or sameness, yet there is also difference. These experiences are rooted in the structure of the body, which is a two-dimensional being. It sees and yet can be seen. It touches and yet can be touched. The hand feels from the inside because it is touched from the outside, because the outside folds back upon the sentient body and crosses into it. The human body is at one with what it feels and sees, yet because of its reflexivity it is separate from them as well. Thus, just as the possibility of perceiving the other is present in me, in the two-dimensional structure of the human body, since it experiences itself as the original elsewhere, as originally projected outside itself toward the other, so also the possibility of the other’s perception of me is present in me, in the two-dimensional structure of the body. For the inside of the body opens to an outside that folds back upon it. This reflexivity, this outside, is enhanced by the appearance of other human beings who perceive me.²⁷

Reason and the Social Contract. Reason must play a role in working out my relations to others, my similarity to and difference from others. I live my immediate experience, then pause, reflect, compare it to other experiences and to the experiences lived through by others. Here we work at a more critical move toward agreement, by reflectively comparing and contrasting our experiences to one another. Reason is thus an outcome. It is an agreement of profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those of others as we actively open upon the world together, arrived at through a process of open discussion and debate. There will be similarity (since our bodies are similar, and since they open upon the world in similar ways) but also difference, separation, and even conflict (since my body and its interests are individuated). These two experiences happen at the same time. There is a general aspect to experience that my individual experience flows into and vice versa.²⁸ Morally speaking, then, we should dialogue in a non-coercive manner with equals and try to move toward shared truths and values. Where we cannot do this, we should try to live with differences—differences limited by the principle of do no harm to others.²⁹

Language. It is here that language plays a role. As we have seen above, language is a sublation of our lived, interested, embodied perceptual encounter with the world and others. Through language we often try to gain recognition. We put forth our descriptions of experience and of our needs and want them recognized by others. We use social institutions by taking them up and trying to gain recognition within them, try to use them to get our own needs and interests fulfilled. We are in a chiasmatic relationship with these institutions. I express my life in social institutions (language, for example) that I alone do not create, that are an intersubjective milieu, that express themselves in me and help frame and articulate my experience.³⁰ Yet, as we have also seen above, these social institutions rest upon the more primary world of lived through perceptual experience. Whether expressing truth or values, language rests and folds back upon the body’s lived through encounter with the world and others. However, by seeking recognition using language in equitable social settings, I am also operating at the level of the social contract. Common rights must be socially agreed upon. Of course, even a hasty view of history quickly reveals that rights have often been es-
established by an imbalance of power and even by force—and therefore are not common. They have often been imposed. Nevertheless, the main point here remains the same: rights are established socially. They are not natural. Yet for Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, they are not entirely arbitrary conventions either, as they appear to be for many postmodernists.

**Modernism vs. Postmodernism.** Natural law has its origin in the works of Plato and Aristotle, certainly in Aquinas, and is expressed more recently by Hobbes and Locke.31 The positions are varied but often express some or all of the following characteristics.

(1) God represents order, structure, goodness and harmony—and is sometimes even regarded as a first principle from which all natural and human order are deductively derived.
(2) Typically natural law positions assume that there is one form of rationality, and (3) that this rationality manifests itself in the stable, fixed, and even eternal laws of nature and human nature. (4) Species natures or types are to be conceived as abstract essences with certain necessary properties. And finally, (5) human reason is thought to be able intuitively to grasp the principles of nature and the properties of human nature as essentially rational. The natural impulses to life, liberty, and property are therefore grasped as leading to natural and even God given rights, existing prior to communities and social relations and immediately intuited by all rational minds.

I believe Merleau-Ponty’s theory can best be conceived as coming between this modernist, natural law position and what is currently being labeled postmodernism. The latter, as is well known, has moved away from modernist views that there is one human rationality, and that this rationality matches one rationally structured reality. This view usually claims that both truth and ethical values are to be established by linguistic convention, by agreements reached freely in open dialogue and expressed by an ever deferring language, a language that never reaches any sort of reality beyond language itself.

Below I will number Merleau-Ponty’s response to the above five points in the same consecutive order and, where appropriate, I will subdivide this response into a and b comments, with the (a) comments referring to the modernist, natural law position, and the (b) comments referring to what I believe Merleau-Ponty’s position would say to postmodernist philosophies.

(1) God as Order. Even if God as an infinitely rational mind does exist, there is no generally accepted philosophical evidence that human minds have any direct access to it, at least to its omniscience.

(2) One Rationality. (a) Merleau-Ponty has argued that there are multiple forms of rationality, since rationality does not exist without language, and since language itself exists in multiple forms. (b) Yet he has argued that certain rational and linguistic systems are not entirely arbitrary. Certain rational and linguistic systems are privileged because they make the most sense (“hit the mark”) and allow humans to manipulate their environment together with a great deal of success.32

(3) One Rationality Manifest in the Laws of Nature and Human Nature. (a) Again, we have seen that for Merleau-Ponty nature is amenable to a number of interpretive systems. Nature is always richer than any single representational system. (b) Yet, as we have also just seen, some interpretations are better than others. There is no definitively correct interpretation, yet some “hit the mark” better than others.

(4) Species Natures as Essential Types. (a) Merleau-Ponty has argued throughout his works that there is no one fixed human essence. Human nature continues to unfold and it is malleable enough to be open to numerous interpretations. (b) Yet humans are similar to one another. We open upon the world in similar, if not identical, ways, and experience the wide range of human pleasures and pains in similar, though not identical, ways. Since humans are similarly embodied beings, we can at least get a glimpse of each other’s experience, of each other’s pleasure and pain. We can form provisional generalization about probable human experiences.33

(5) One Human Reason Grasps the Immutable Laws of Nature, Human Nature, and Natural Rights. (a) As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty has argued that there are multiple forms of rationality. Moreover, many have argued, and Merleau-Ponty would surely agree, that humans experience many different “natural” impulses: lust, greed, and aggression; care,
empathy, and love. Yet how these are framed linguistically and socially is open to great variety. As Merleau-Ponty says, everything in humans is natural, yet also created, articulated, and socially framed. Which impulses lead to which rights is therefore something that must be established by communities, by individuals in social relationships making claims upon one another. (b) Yet there is still something there to be framed or articulated, the human bodily needs and impulses. Rights are therefore framed/articulated by communities but they are not totally arbitrary conventions. The articulated rights are motivated, though not determined, by the sentient human body. Pain and alienation, for example, are generally regarded as bad, while pleasure and meaningful fulfillment are generally regarded as good.

Moreover, if we admit these motivated rights, we must be certain that the intuitions of scholars or politicians alone do not establish them before open, public debate. Rights should not be seen as universal before the process of open, inclusive discussion. We must actually listen to all voices and attempt to move toward common values. Perhaps something like the impulse to life/survival will be registered as universal. Yet how this is framed or articulated as a right by all people and within certain historical communities is another story and remains to be seen.

Thus, even though rights and moral claims of right and wrong are rooted in the body and its structure, in the full range of human needs and capacities, the human body does not cause these rights. Merleau-Ponty is not a reductionist. Yet the human body may well motivate certain forms of behavior, and it may well motivate a hierarchy of human behaviors.

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance; this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body’s natural means; it must then build itself an instru-

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There is no fixed human essence or nature here, and subsequently no fixed and essentially determined human rights. Humans are similar and have similar human needs, but these needs must be brought to expression, articulated and framed, and they may be framed in different ways and at different levels, for there is individualization, difference, and a hierarchy of human capacities. Language must therefore be used to help express human needs, human pleasures and pains, and must be used to clarify similarities and differences with respect to moral claims. We must listen to all voices, which express the range of felt human needs, but expresses them differently and creatively through language. We should try to move toward common values, and then try to live with difference—at least with differences that do not directly harm others.

We have seen above that perception motivates language which is required to bring it to full expression. We now see that the full range of human needs motivates moral rules which more fully articulate them. The full range of human needs and human empathy motivate moral rules—which get worked out, or should get worked out, through non-coercive dialogue. Language takes up the body’s senses (perception, pleasure, pain, empathy, etc.) and helps articulate them. Language is motivated by the body’s senses, but language can take them up and express them in various ways. There is no natural language, no natural rights, no natural ethics. Yet as humans we are similar enough for us to glimpse the meaning of another’s gesture, for us to glimpse the other’s humanness. Empathy or sympathetic understanding motivates rationality, as the taking up of the other’s perspective. We have seen that rationality is defined as an agreement of profiles. As an embodied being, I perceive the world around me. I can then pause and reflect, compare and contrast moments of experience to one another, then compare my perceptions to those experienced by others. The agreement of profiles within me allows me to structure and pattern my experiences, to form partial and open ended identities and differences. I can then check my perceptions against those expe-
rienced by others and form partial and open ended public identities and differences. Language takes up these perceptual profiles and helps structure them, articulate them, yet the perceptual profiles themselves help motivate the language. It is for these reasons that human values are not entirely arbitrary for Merleau-Ponty. They are not just a matter of a social contract. Human beings are embodied beings. Humans have needs, interests, desires, and these needs, interests, and desires motivate human values (avoid pain, boredom, and rejection; seek pleasure, fulfillment, and recognition), yet do not completely determine them. Humans do not possess a fixed essence interpreted as the same for all. Human nature is unfolding in history and it is malleable enough and multifarious enough to live with a variety of moral rules and social constraints.

To summarize, we have seen that for Merleau-Ponty the recognition of the other is given in the structure of the human species—at least there is a potential for it in the reflexivity of the human body. We touch and see, and are touched and seen from the outside. Embodied consciousness opens to a public space, to an outside that runs beyond it. Therefore my individual life crosses into general and public life. I can partially experience the other person's experience because embodied perceptual consciousnesses meet at the world and are capable of coupling onto the intentional gestures of others. Reason then helps establish values, not through some abstract intuition of pregiven principles or essences, but by trying to find the common element in engaged, embodied experience, of mine within me as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those of others as we actively open upon the world together. Kant’s claim that a good will is one that follows duty, i.e., duty to a moral principle that can be universalized without logical contradiction, is re-conceived by Merleau-Ponty as a concrete duty to others, to provisional principles worked out in an on-going dialogue with humans like oneself. Reason helps establish values and is, as we have seen, an agreement of profiles. Yet this agreement remains to be established. We have truth when reason and language “hit the mark” in perception and in the full range of human pleasures, pains, and needs. We see here that there is an ethical dimension to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the foundation of ethics, for this foundation is not provided by one reason or one essence already given and conceived. It is provided by empathy and an engaged reason that is or should be the outcome of all voices, that is not already determined by the supposedly rational few, and that is not simply the result of an arbitrary contract.

ENDNOTES


5. See Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, pp. 146, 153, and 318.


7. See Waldenfels “Vérité,” pp. 190 and 192. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception, ed. by James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern Univer-

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sity Press, 1964) pp. 69ff. See also The Visible and the Invisible, pp. 39–42.
11. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Structure of Behavior, trans. Alden Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 175. where he says that we can continue to create new structures. See also Phenomenology of Perception, p. 383–86, where he discusses the sublation of perceptual consciousness by the geometrical idea. See also The Visible and the Invisible, pp. 149–55 where he claims that language, in all likelihood, travels along pathways already established by the aesthesiological body.
13. See Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, pp. 77–89.
15. See also Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, pp. 11, 41, 110, and 139.
17. Merleau-Ponty, Signs, p. 120.
20. Ibid., pp. xix–xxi.
33. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, see p. 442 where Merleau-Ponty discusses probable human responses.
34. Ibid., p. 189.

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