Merleau-Ponty's primary argument against the rationalists, specifically Descartes, Kant, and at times even Husserl, is that they falsify experience by intellectually constructing it rather than by simply describing it as it is lived through. More specifically, he charges the rationalists with reducing the experience of seeing to a "thought of seeing," to a reflective, intellectual representation of seeing, which makes perception into an act or thing represented rather than lived through as a process. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty argues that reflection follows perception, that it comes second. By its very nature it re-reflects something more primary. Rationalist reflection therefore is disingenuous because it forgets that it begins with the prereflective. Moreover, even when it admits that it begins with the prereflective, it simply states that it is the ladder that is pulled up after it is climbed, that rational thought contains all it needs to account for all experience, including its own beginning (VI 34–35). Descartes, for example, begins with experience but moves toward the clear and distinct ideas grasped by an isolated rational consciousness. Likewise, Kant and Husserl begin with experience, but Kant moves to the formal conditions that make it possible, and Husserl moves toward its reflective and essential constitution. Merleau-Ponty claims that this intellectual constitution of experience is also disingenuous because the necessarily backward reflection on the constituted experience is not the same as its forward constitution (VI 33). The nature of the experiences are fundamentally different, and, of course, they are separated by time, for the prereflective temporally slips away from the reflective and cannot be fully grasped by it. This shows that the transcendental ego cannot constitute time, that it is subject to it, that it is caught in its flow. The present moment of lived through experience is not fully present to a constituting consciousness because it gradually shades into the past and towards a future. Husserl himself admits that there is always something left over that is actually living the present experience, that cannot be made an object of reflective concern or essential analysis. The reflective experience always experiences the prereflective as occurring prior to it. Therefore there can be no complete presence of self to self. Self-presence occurs only across an absence or delay. I am aware of my prereflective consciousness only as it slips ahead of me into the world. Moreover, if prereflective consciousness is primarily per-
ceptual, and the perceptual is primarily the body's openness upon the world, then it is lived through bodily perception that remains prior to reflection and that escapes being represented as an object in reflective intellectual consciousness. Lived through bodily perception always remains in front of or prior to the reflection, which subsequently cannot grasp the perception as an intellectual object without distorting it as a process that is lived through. Reflective intellectual consciousness does not contain all that it needs to account for experience. Nature and the embodied experience of nature are always richer than thought and always remain out in front of it. No intellectual system captures them exhaustively, and different interpretations always remain possible. Yet some interpretations are better than others, for some offer greater clarity, i.e., they make more sense of events and they offer greater ease of adaptation to the environment, and this is because something remains outside the interpretive measuring system to measure it, the horizon and transcendence of the natural world.

In addition to the argument for the prior existence of the world just presented above, Merleau-Ponty accepts the general intent of Kant's Refutation of Idealism argument—which I will recount here and embellish from the standpoint of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. The argument proceeds as follows. I am conscious of the unity of my experience over time. (This unity, for Merleau-Ponty, is not that of an identical rational self but of a self that is continuous over time, that recognizes aspects of itself in previous moments of experience.) Yet to unify the flow of inner experience, there must be something permanent in experience, something that remains the same through or over time, otherwise each experience would simply be a flash of instantaneous awareness with no connection to any others. Permanence cannot be provided by inner experience because it is the very condition of its unity, the thing that allows it to see the connection or similarity between its experiences. Therefore the unity of the self requires the permanence of a transcendent world.

Merleau-Ponty also states that the Cartesian doubt of the world's existence, that can supposedly be sure of the thought or perception of an existent thing but not of the existence of the thing itself, should not be accepted as readily as it generally is by philosophers and students of philosophy. For the existential modality of the perception and the perceived is the same (PhP 374). If, for example, I am sure of perceiving the keyboard now at my finger tips, then I am sure of the existence of the keyboard, for to perceive means to reach the existent thing. What it means to perceive the things around us is to be presented with these things as existent. We should not doubt this fundamental experience. We should certainly pause and reflect upon it, to consider what it means and how it comes about, but we should not first doubt it and then try to win it back by constructing it in some other way. The world is, and it is presented in human experience as such. This experience should be made sense of not eliminated or constructed intellectually or linguistically. Moreover, even in those rare moments of experience when doubt arises concerning the existence of the perceived, the original moment of perception is confirmed or denied only by another moment of perception. Skepticism with regard to one perceptual event should not be generalized to all perception, for it is only by another perception that the errant perception is recognized and corrected (VI 5–6, 40–41).

A philosophy, then, must account for the transcendence of the world, must describe it accurately as human beings actually experience it. Of course, different interpretations are always possible but some interpretations, as was already mentioned, are better than others because they describe experience with greater clarity. They make more sense of what is really experienced in our perceptual encounter with the world. If we begin to doubt this experiential perceptual evidence, and if we begin to doubt the difference be-
tween the perceptual, which presents the existence of the world with relative positivity, and the linguistic and imagined, which do not (VI 39 f, 214), then we remove from human experience an operative evidence that cannot be won back or constructed in any other way. Moreover, the consequence of our doubt leaves us in a far worse condition, with no knowledge at all. Of course, the experiential evidence that Merleau-Ponty refers to here is never absolute. It is concrete and open, a perceptual gestalt, and must be reflectively checked against past and future experiences and the perceptions experienced by others, . . . but it is experienced.

There is a sense in which Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of the reflective philosophies can be applied to Derrida’s philosophy of Deconstruction as well, in the sense that just as reflective philosophies tend to diminish the importance of the transcendent world and collapse all meaningful experience into the immanence of intellectual consciousness, Derrida’s philosophy tends to ignore the transcendent world and collapse all meaning into the immanence of language. For Merleau-Ponty language refers to a transcendent world that is experienced through the avenues of the human body and of language but that also runs beyond them. For him there is perceptual contact with the world but also distance from it. Presence presents itself as also absent. The present presents itself, but also refers beyond itself. Moreover, this is not just the structure of perception but of Being itself, for the very structure of the real is a presence that is dimensional, that is spread out over space and time. Language to a certain extent mirrors this structure, for it refers to the perceptually present, but also refers laterally to that which is not fully present, to the field of significations and signs within which it occurs. New meanings are created by language, but by a language that remains in contact with perception, that sublates it. New meanings can be created by the lateral references of language, but language is not created out of nothing. Without its perceptual encounter of the world, without the perceptual world to which it continually refers, language would have nothing to say. (These points will be demonstrated below.) For Derrida, on the other hand, perceptual presence is only absence. Presence, in fact, is created by a language that really only refers elsewhere. For Derrida signs refer only to other signs and do not connect us with the world or with our perceptual openness upon it. Derrida explicitly challenges the notion that signs refer to things or even to concepts.

The sign is usually said to be put in place of the thing itself, the present thing, ‘thing’ here standing equally for meaning or referent.4

Presence, then, far from being, as is commonly thought, what the sign signifies, what the trace refers to, presence, then, is the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace.9

The trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site—erasure belongs to its structure.10

What the trace refers to, presence, then is the trace1 of the trace2, the trace1 of the erasure of the trace2.11

Derrida’s theory therefore explicitly states that language has no transcendental referent, that it does not refer to a meaning, taken either as a concept or thing. Trace, or language refers to trace, or a perception which erases itself, and trace, erases itself because it is nothing but a reference to the past, a future or elsewhere. As Derrida says, “each so-called present element” refers to something else, “thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element.” “An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself.” “This interval is what might be called spac-
ing . . . And it is the constitution of the present that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-time, or difféance." Difféance is a play of signs that refers only to other signs and that is "without a determined and invariable substance." The key term for Derrida's philosophy of Deconstruction, then, is difféance, for it produces all differences, or at least differences among signs, and is without origin. 12

Now as M.C. Dillon reminds us, to have a spacing, which is fundamental to the archi-writing or difféance, to the play of signifiers, we have to have not only difference, a reference to the other, but we also have to have connection. "The interval," Dillon says, "that separates the present from what is not itself must also join or relate the presence to "something other than itself."" 13 A connection must occur, otherwise the present would not refer beyond itself to another. What I would like to add here is that to have a spacing we not only need difference and connection but we also need recognizable or identifiable terms to differentiate and connect. First of all, for Derrida’s "quasi present" sign to refer elsewhere it must be recognizable in some sense. And in so far as it is recognizable, it is present. Even though it is true that presence refers beyond itself, there is also something there to refer. The very structure of presence is presence within absence, of presence and absence together. Presence must occur, otherwise it could not refer elsewhere, and absence must occur, otherwise nature would be fully and completely present, which it is not. Thus, even though it is true that presence is also absence, that it opens to a differential field of past, future and elsewhere, that it does not stand alone, it is still identifiable as a term of experience, and must be identifiable to refer elsewhere. If a perceived thing, concept, or sign were not identifiable, then human experience would be total chaos and even impossible. If I did not recognize the thing, concept, sign or myself as at least somewhat the same over time, then human experience would not exist, or, as we saw above, it would exist only as instantaneous flashes of awareness with no connection to one another. Moreover, signs themselves must be perceived, and they must be perceived as the same or at least as similar over time, to be recognized from one moment to the next, from one person to the next. The meaning that the signs refer to must also be at least somewhat stable, otherwise a sign would refer to anything and everything all at once. This is clearly not the case. Of course language and perception are fluid and open, but they are also stable enough to refer to relatively consistent meanings. The fact that human beings can manipulate the transcendent material world with a great deal of success, and the fact that they can manipulate it together with a great deal of agreement, provides significant evidence that we are reaching the material world's actual structure. Of course, there is ambiguity and change, but there is at least some clarity and stability, a stability that is provided by a transcendent world.

Presence, then, as well as the laws of logic that it implies (identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle), are not arbitrary conventions or just a creation of language, as Derrida and many Postmodernists seem to imply, but neither are they absolute givens, as many Modernists have generally claimed. They should be treated as reasonable, though provisional, interpretive concepts. And they should be treated as such because they help clarify and make sense of the human experience of a transcendent nature. As we have already seen, many different interpretive systems are possible, and there is no definitive interpretive framework, for nature is inexhaustible. Any interpretive system will therefore be limited. Presence and the laws of logic, for example, are obviously limited by their relatively high level of abstraction. Things and our concrete experience of them are open, ambiguous and changing. A particular thing gets at least part of its identity by referring to those things around it, is not always clearly distinct from its surroundings,

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and changes over time. Yet experience is also stable, for it presents patterns that are recognizable over time, stable foregrounds within shifting but also stable backgrounds. Presence, identity, or a foreground occur within the context of absence, difference, and a background horizon, but they do occur. Experience offers certain open, changing, and even ambiguous structures that nevertheless also display stable structures that may be taken up and articulated more clearly, even if in a variety of ways. It is therefore best to say that experience motivates certain interpretive systems, rather than causes or logically requires them. Interpretive systems are more or less accurate guides to understanding the shifting yet stable structures of the world around us. They are neither necessary nor arbitrary.

Tangentially, Merleau-Ponty insists on not separating formal relations of ideas from matters of fact. He argues that form makes its first appearance as a concrete perceptual gestalt. Perception always presents itself as a gestalt field, as a meaningful figure against a less articulated background. Ideas then are first presented as the meaningful organization of concrete perceptions. These ideas are “invisible” in the sense that the horizon structure of perception is “invisible,” is not fully present, not fully focused upon, but nevertheless helps form the more articulate foreground. For Merleau-Ponty perception opens to a world that is both present and transcendent, that offers a present foreground against an implied background, that I am in contact with but that runs beyond me. How can the world be present to me and yet simultaneously run beyond me? It is because of the structure of the human body, because it is a two-dimensional being, because it experiences itself as opening upon an outside that reflexively turns back upon it. Yet this dimensional structure of the body, the body as lived through or phenomenal and the body as objective is nothing but an example of the dimensional structure of being, which, as we have already seen, presents itself as present but not completely so, as also referring elsewhere, as spread out over space and time. Thus our gestalt perceptual ideas are first formed in the body’s contact with a transcendent world, and, as we shall see, these ideas can be sublated in the more abstract expressions of language.

As M. C. Dillon has made clear, Derrida does not deny the existence of the world or of perceptual meaning, but he makes no effort to connect them or to connect them with language, producing a rather serious gap in his theory. We begin to close this gap and make this connection, as Merleau-Ponty has done, by first realizing that perception does not erase itself, that it does refer beyond itself, but that it also provides a stable meaning, that it is in contact with a stable world that runs beyond it. Perception therefore reaches the world, and it reaches the world through the human body. The human body is a thing like other things. It has thickness, weight, opacity, and it can be perceived as an object. Yet it is also a being that is aware of its own existence, that knows from the inside that it exists. It is also the thing that is aware of other things, that confronts them, that senses their existence through its own body because it is one of them (VI 133ff.). Being therefore phenomenalizes; it presents its existence to us through the perceptual avenues of the human body. Being is, and it is perceived as such. It presents itself as existent yet as also absent, as presenting aspects that appear but also that remain to be explored (VI 123–24). Lived through perception, which is active and needful, meets the stable structures of the world and a meaning is formed. Active embodied, prereflective perception meets the stable structures of the world and organizes them in various ways, as with the well known gestalt figure, either as a vase or as two faces (PhP 250, 310, 326; VI 131n, 133, 139). Lived through embodied perception is therefore already a “going beyond” the merely given and is already a form of ex-
pression. This lived through perceptual meaning can then be expressed in the vocalizations of speech, for language in all likelihood at first expresses this needful, emotional encounter with the world (PhP 187, 403–04). There is no hint here of a natural language, for Merleau-Ponty explicitly argues that emotional expressions themselves can be variable (PhP 188–89). Yet expressions can also be shared. This is possible because my perceptual life rests upon the structures and avenues of the my body, which are experienced as mine but simultaneously as anonymous, for the already existing functions of my body carry me into the world whether I will it or not (PhP 83, 440–41; VI 139, 142). My personal perception therefore opens to a public field that includes me and others. It includes others because I perceive (not conceive) that they also perceive the world, that they have a body similar to mine, a body that likewise opens to a public field in an anonymous way. We can to a certain extent (though never completely) experience each other’s experience because our bodies open upon a common world in similar ways, because our embodied consciousnesses meet and overlap at the object, like searchlights illuminating the same field, and because our bodily gestures can coalesce in fundamental ways. Since consciousness must now be understood as the body’s openness upon a public world, as the body’s active involvement in the world, when I see another human body actively gesturing into the world, I can couple onto it and catch a glimpse of its meaning, for I have a similar body that gestures into the world in similar ways (VI 141–42). We can thus share similar meanings because our bodies open upon and gesture within a public world in similar ways. And these shared meanings can be sublated in abstract language because every concrete or specific perception already contains a more general dimension (VI 149–52), and because abstract concepts travel along pathways already established by the sensing body (VI 152–53). When I perceive the gestalt figure that can appear as a vase or two faces, I am aware of its specificity, that I am perceiving this structure not something else, yet I am also aware of a more general meaning, vase or face. Or, when I perceive a line drawn on the artist’s canvas, I perceive its specificity but also a shape, a dimension. I perceive an orientation that can open a space through which other lines or figures can be perceived. Human perception, artistic or otherwise, does not passively experience discrete units, one after the other, that are somehow culled for a shared meaning by a purely active mind. Particular perceptions, already gestalt structures, are already experienced as meaningful. They have a specific existence and meaning, but they also contain a more general meaning or orientation. This capacity to grasp a general meaning can be carried further, it can be taken up and sublated to create more and more abstract yet integrated meanings, for, as we have just seen, perception itself is already a “going beyond,” perception itself already displays the human capacity to take up and integrate. The perceiving body therefore opens certain pathways that continue to be used, that continue to provide meaning for more abstract expressions. The abstract formulations of the geometry, for example, relay upon the body’s orientation toward the world, for the notions of angle, adjacent, and side would be meaningless without the body’s perceptual encounter with the world. Abstract formulas in fact symbolize that the body has a certain hold on the world (PhP 386). Language, then, has its roots in perception and to remain meaningful must constantly refer back to it. This, of course, limits the creativity of language, but does not eliminate it. Language cannot make the perceived world into anything it wishes. Mount Everest cannot be made into a molehill, at least not while one is trying to climb it. And while it is true that by convention we may call Everest anything we wish, the meaning that the word expresses is related to our embodied encounter with the world. Language does have the power to sub-
late, to carry further, to create new structures, but the origin of these structures remains the body's encounter with the world.

Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied perception and of perception's relationship to language remains one of the most balanced in the history of philosophy. He does not reduce any one aspect of experience to any other, to a thing in itself, to a consciousness for itself, or to an all deferring language. What he attempts with his theory of the lived body and the relative primacy of perception is to describe how all the aspect of experience cross or flow into one another. As we have seen, these intersections are not a jumble of chaos but form stable structures that allow us to make sense of our world together. Embodied perception opens upon the relatively stable structures of the world, structures that can be interpreted in a variety of ways but that often favor one interpretation over another because of its greater capacity to clarify. Perception and language thus exist in a relationship of reciprocity, whereby each folds in upon the other, but where perception remains the primary term (PhP 127, 394). The theories of Modernist philosophy, particularly in their rationalist forms, do not adequately describe experience because they remain abstract intellectual constructions of it. Moreover, they rely upon one form of rationality, on one rational nature, and often on the rational reflections of the isolated individual. On the other hand, the theories of Postmodernist philosophy, particularly Derrida's philosophy of Deconstruction, do not adequately describe experience because they ignore the stable structures of the perceived for a constantly deferring language. They do not integrate the structures of perception and language but radically emphasize the significance of the latter at the expense of the former. Merleau-Ponty embraces the significance of language, especially in his later works, but not at the cost of ignoring perception. His later works, in fact, have perhaps gone further than any other in their attempt to integrate perception and language. A theory must adequately describe all aspects of human experience and how these aspects fit together in a way that makes sense. Merleau-Ponty's theory attempts to show how other theories, both Modernist and Postmodernist, have failed in this effort and how his notion of lived embodiment begins to move us in the right direction.

In closing, I would like to draw attention to the political consequences of Merleau-Ponty's thought, for many of Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of the theoretical generalizations of Modernism and Postmodernism can be applied to their more specific political theses as well. The Modernist's natural law position, with its ontology of the isolated rational individual and one rational nature, quite often gave rise to natural rights that were supposedly grasped by all. And the Postmodernist's position of linguistic relativism, with its elimination of the ontology of one rational nature and the construction of the individual by social and linguistic institutions, quite often gives rise to conventional rights arbitrarily agreed upon. Against the Modernists, we have seen Merleau-Ponty argue that there is no hermetically sealed rational self that is fully present to itself, that the self escapes being fully captured by reflection because it is primarily a prior prereflective openness upon the world and others. We have also seen that Merleau-Ponty argues that there are multiple systems of interpretation, not just one, but that some interpretive systems are better than others because they more completely make sense of our world and assist adaptation to it. Moreover, if this is the case, then moral principles and political rights are by no means written beforehand in one human essence or in one rational nature, as is often claimed by natural law positions. For Merleau-Ponty the members of the human species share a similar (not identical) body, a body whose structure continues to develop and unfold and that is
open to a wide variety of interpretive systems, social forms, and political institutions. Yet, human beings do possess a body, or, in a fundamental way, are their bodies, bodies that open upon and behave within the world in stable and predictable ways. People, for example, will usually eat when they are hungry, sleep when they are tired, seek shelter in a storm and survival when threatened. These stable and predictable ways of experiencing and being-in the world may well motivate certain rules for human behavior (such as: value human life and do not harm others), yet exactly what these rules are and how they are negotiated, how they get worked out and articulated, hopefully by non-coercive debate, remains variable and must continually be revisited. History often teaches us what does not work, but it does not definitively determine what does or will work. Against the Postmodernists, on the other hand, Merleau-Ponty argues that moral values and political rights are not just a result of arbitrary convention and the free play of language. As we have just observed above, they are motivated by the body. Moreover, the sense of self is not just the result of social conventions but has its origin in the reflexivity of the body. As the human body touches and sees, it is aware that it is touched and seen from the outside. The touching and the touched never coincide because the prereflective touching temporally slips away from the reflective touch. It is here in the pivoting back and forth of the seeing and being seen, of the touching and being touched, that the sense of self is first formed. Language helps articulate this experience, and may do so in a variety of ways, but there is something there to articulate, a mute awareness of a perception that silently opens upon the world. If this mute sentience were not present, if the body was not aware of the full range of distinctly human pleasures and pains, language and morality would have nothing or little to say. The perceived world and embodied self-awareness are not just a creation of linguistic and social institutions. The aware embodied self takes up the patterns of the natural and social world, uses them to express its concerns and interests, and may well carry them forward by expressing something new.

Merleau-Ponty’s theory thus comes between Modernism, with its intellectual construction of the self and the world according to one rationality, and Postmodernism, with its arbitrary linguistic conventions. For Merleau-Ponty the lived body opens upon structures, structures that shift and flow but that also remain stable over time, that provide the bases for sublimated linguistic expressions. Merleau-Ponty was not unaware of the political consequences of his thought, for he spent a great amount of time and energy devoted to social political concerns, to concerns, in fact, that informed his thought. For him a theory must embrace all aspects of experience and must attempt to adequately describe how these aspects interact with one another. Theories that do not do this, or that do it poorly, should be studied for the contributions that they do make, but their inadequacies should be left behind. The theory that does this best should be embraced.

ENDNOTES

1. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” in Signs, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 81, where Merleau-Ponty states: “Yet try as each word may (as Saussure explains) to extract its meaning from all the others, the fact remains that at the moment it occurs the task of expressing is no longer differentiated and referred to other words—it is accomplished, and we understand something. Saussure may show that each act of expression becomes significant only as a modulation of a general system of expression and only

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insofar as it is differentiated from other linguistic gestures. The marvel is that before Saussure we did not know anything about this, and that we forget it again each time we speak. . . . This proves that each partial act of expression . . . is not limited to expending an expressive power accumulated in the language, but recreates both the power and the language by making us verify . . . the power that the speaking subject has of going beyond signs toward their meaning. Signs do not simply evoke other signs for us and so on without end, and language is not like a prison we are locked into or a guide we must blindly follow;” See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 4, henceforth referred to as VI in my text, for the following claim: “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 transforms it into something said. . . . It is the things themselves, from the depths of their silence, that it wishes to bring to expression.” See also p. 126 for the following statement: “It is the error of the semantic philosophies to close up language as if it spoke only of itself: language lives only from silence; everything we cast to others has germinated in this great mute land which we never leave.” Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly identify the semantic philosophies that he is referring to here, but it is clear from what he has to say that he disapproves of a philosophy within which language does not refer beyond itself to the world, as is the case with Postmodernist philosophies. It is not unreasonable to claim that as these philosophies developed in the years following his death, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of these philosophies, had he lived, would have likewise developed.

2. See Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible. For a discussion of Descartes, see p. 273. For a discussion of Kant, see p. 33n, and for a discussion of Husserl, see pp. 243-44.


sion of the comparative virtues of traditional and dialectical logic.


