Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of Inter-Corporeal Selfhood

An Encounter with:

Scott L. Marratto, *The Incorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on
Subjectivity*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2012, 254 pages.

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Scott Marratto's *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity* is an excellent study of the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly his *Phenomenology of Perception*. The focal argument of this text is that subjectivity emerges both within the sentient body and the cultural space of language as an *expressive transformation*. This transformation depends upon an inter-bodily past of expression and a shared inter-subjective domain of language, but each of these fields—nature and culture—need to be reconceived as matrices of difference, founding dimensions of intelligibility that can never take the form of already formed objects, natural laws, or ideal structures. To explain this, I will focus on Marratto's development of an ontological dynamics of temporality, a study of the "retrograde movement"¹ of truth in expression.

This is a remarkable book, both as a treatise on the nature of subjectivity, and as a study of Merleau-Ponty's place in contemporary continental philosophy. With subtle attention to the ontological implications of Merleau-Ponty's method, this book makes a compelling case that Merleau-Ponty's works are cohesive, and that the philosopher's earlier focus on consciousness and phenomenology was already the development of a post-metaphysical ontology. Indeed, Marratto not only demonstrates a way to rethink the mind-body relationship, and the

¹ For Bergson's discussion of the "retrograde movement" of truth, see *The Creative Mind* (22/14). Bergson argues that life must develop its own sense, rather than being caused by an exhaustively determinate cause or vital force. This entails that causality must unfold in time, as development, in order to effect a vital form. Merleau-Ponty takes up this insight in his philosophy to demonstrate that living bodies do not transform the past by projecting their own meaning upon the past. Rather, the past dynamically calls for the body to take it up performatively. The body expresses, rather than constructs, the past of nature. In our subjective life, however, we encounter this dynamic work of the body as already underway. This logic is fully worked out in Marratto's discussion of "tacit decision" in the second chapter, "Making Space."

difference between nature and culture, but he puts to rest claims that Merleau-Ponty's thinking is plagued by a "philosophy of consciousness." Marratto also responds carefully to cognitive science and enactivist approaches to consciousness, while also considering challenges from other contemporary ideas in phenomenology and deconstruction. With elegant prose and sound argumentation, Marratto develops a compelling, rigorous study of the genesis of meaning in human life.

Rather than review or summarize every part of the book, in the space afforded here I will present what I take to be Marratto's argument. I will do so in three sections, first, on learning and the way in which our sensibility is always a development of sense in motion. Second, I will take up this development of sense as a phenomenon of subjective expression. And third, I will present the author's argument that language is both a condition and realization of embodied selves. Marratto's philosophy allows for a robust account of subjectivity and language, but traces the ways in which the inter-bodily dimension of expressive sense continuously undergirds, disrupts and awakens new expression. I conclude by exploring some critical implications of Marratto's work, particularly issues of oppression and difference. I hope these questions will draw out implications of this powerful, original book.

Learning

In the first chapter, "Situation and the Embodied Mind," Marratto challenges the idea that sensations are physical events of the body. Sensations can be meaningful only in the context of other sensations. Sensations are not brute contents that we somehow process with our bodies and later understand. The distinction between sensation and understanding emerges from within perception, rather than founding it. Sensations are not individual representations, but a general sensibility of the body and the "style" of its world. We sense the world at one stroke, as a situation, but this sense then is always a matter of *experience*. Experience is not something we undergo as a merely empirical impression, because it presents itself as a discriminating act of perception, a hold on a situation. Our sensibility, then, reveals that we are always in a position of having *learned* what our situation is.

The insight that sensation involves an activity of meaningful organization, Marratto contests, does not entail that there is an already operational cognition in play. Such an explanation fails to account for the act of learning. The author shows how this is the fundamental insight animating the sensori-motor theory of Kevin O'Regan and Alva Noë. In this account, perception is enacted through a practical "know-how" that discerns regularities within its active exploration of the world. In Chapter Three, "Subjectivity and the Style of the World," Marratto points to a

subtle fallacy in the conclusions reached in the sensori-motor view. This attempt to naturalize phenomenology proceeds by way of the dogmatic assumption that laws precede and ground the creative movements that generate them. This conclusion involves circular reasoning, and Marratto shows this by demonstrating that the exploratory contact the body has with the world, as pre-reflective, cannot take the form of a “law,” even tacitly, because the exploratory movement of the body does not yet have an explicit sense. The body is a general “style.” Style is neither a fact nor a concept, neither information nor its organization, but a tacit, practical and holistic grasp of an environment.

At this turn, Marratto appeals to the ecological psychology of J.J. Gibson, who develops the concept of sensibility as “affordance.” Rather than moving the organism as by reflex, an affordance summons the organism to act. For Gibson, however, this is the solicitation to take a hold on features of a real environment, an objective world. Gibson thereby posits the object of perception as somehow preceding the act that accomplishes it. The author then cites the careful work of Evan Thompson, who connects the idea of an awareness of the world to that of a tacit awareness of selfhood, insofar as sensibility is not an objective call of the world but a subjective *motivation*. Marratto introduces one further consideration. The moment of pre-reflective self-awareness is never given as a determinate motive given in self-presence, but only occurs as absence, as a belated call that the body has already tacitly answered. To move the body to *do something*, this call must in some sense be indeterminate. The call moves us as a general provocation that we can only encounter in the movement that takes it up. Explorative bodily movement accomplishes this differentiation, this stylizing of our situation, and in so doing it announces itself as having been moved to do so. As perceivers we have always made a tacit “decision” to take the world up in a certain way, but this decision only appears post-factually, in the perceived: “What motivates the tacit decision only appears in what it motivates. And what it motivates is a certain sensori-motor know-how, a *form* of responsive movement” (37). In this way, Marratto calls this synthetic movement of learning oxymorically as a “repetition without original,” pointing to the aporetic character of this synthesis whereby pre-reflective awareness “decides” for us, without there being a subjective “decider.” This animation or, as Marratto sometimes has it “inspiration,” is something that we can only encounter through the very activity it invites: our own conscious experience. The phenomenon of learning has revealed to us behind the perceived present an already passed over, imperceptible moment of sensation that *will have had invited* perception. Learning is an ongoing transformation of situation, but it is one that is ballasted within and “haunted” by this original-yet-absent past of sensation.

Learning is a generative phenomenon, because it marks the movement from non-sense to sense, even if this originary non-sense is always passed over within the sense of perception. Marratto identifies Edmund Husserl's logic of *Fundierung*, or transformative synthesis, as the core of an ontology of being already at work in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This expressive synthesis appears as having done its work behind the back of perceptual consciousness. Even if we can retroactively *analyze* the constitutive material parts and stages that chronologically preceded an act of learning, these parts and stages only appear as the past of the already-enacted present. Thus the true past of learning is not a prior now that is retained, but a formative past that is contracted into the present as its dimension of its sense. This past paradoxically unfolds from the present, but it does so because it accomplishes something there.

In the second chapter, "Making Space," the theme of a generative past is insightfully connected with the idea of a radical conception of spatial depth. Following Anthony Steinbock's reading of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Marratto posits an extra-mundane depth. Beyond mundane depth which empirically hides behind things is an ontological or "spectral" depth that is the condition for things to be revealed in space at all. This depth allows for the prominence and latency of forms. This depth cannot be accounted for in objective terms and does not appear as such, but structures appearance from within. Depth, then, must be understood at the level of affectivity, of a non-objectifying awareness that is not yet subjective or objective. Like the absent past that is nevertheless the "true" past of this present, this ontological depth marks the absence through which our spatial sense educatively expresses itself in new habitual articulations of the world.

Expression

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* has drawn criticism, recently from Renaud Barbaras, for privileging consciousness. On this view, the body is already a tacit consciousness, a synthesis whose unity is presupposed by consciousness. In this way, the so called phenomenology of the body is really the imputation of concepts of presence, representation, and self-consciousness onto the so called pre-conscious, affective body. This criticism is often coupled with the charge that Merleau-Ponty abandoned this early philosophy of consciousness by turning to an ontological method. Marratto rightly disagrees with this view, finding in it a dualism between phenomenology and ontology, and correlatively mind and being. *The Intercorporeal Self* is premised on the idea that consciousness is an achievement within the discriminating, sense-making movement of the body, such that perception is not knowledge but "a movement which [is] *discriminatingly allowing itself to*

be moved” (84). This being-moved is something out of which awareness emerges, and therefore announces a spectral depth, a generative origin, within consciousness beyond the “metaphysics of presence.” This is a paradoxical logic of expression, where the expressed exceeds its grounds of expression, transforming them and only then showing them up as grounds.

Reflection, as an act of self-consciously taking up the unreflective past as *my explicit past*, is itself a mode of expression. Self-conscious reflection only attains itself by taking up a past, but this past was never “there” in the terms of self-consciousness. This transformative activity *expresses* the new meaning of self-consciousness, but it occludes the ontological difference in kind, the “non-sense” of the past out of which it was enacted. The non-intentional past of inter-corporeal life is now taken up as an explicit object. It is in this movement of becoming sensible of its own sense that a sense of “interiority” develops, but this interiority is haunted by its “other” inter-bodily past. The “interior” sense of consciousness then is neither complete nor self-effectuating—it is an emergence of coherent sense from non-sense, an emergence which is always open to resistance and the threat of dissolution, but also further expressive transformation.

The “self” of self-awareness, Marratto argues, emerges as a retroactive determination of its original past:

The “past” of reflective consciousness is not *simply* an implicit consciousness. Reflective consciousness, as presence, determines its past on the basis of the “essential structures” of the present and thus takes itself to be the explicit form of what was already implicit—but this retroactive determination never quite succeeds in overcoming the facticity of the “unreflective fund of experience.” (115)

Perception depends upon an emergence of sense in movement. Merleau-Ponty thus moves beyond the idea that phenomenology is a representationalist philosophy of consciousness.

Marratto consistently sees consciousness not as founded in object-cognition, but in affective intentionality. It is out of this situated-indeterminacy that structures of motor-value, sense, and self-reflexive sense can emerge. And so the emergence of self-conscious awareness, rather than being a pure presence of self-to-self, is what Marratto calls an originary “trauma,” because the originary “event” behind our perception is a violent severance with the natural past. In Chapter Four, “Auto-Affection and Alterity,” Marratto maintains that the differences between my body and things, between my body and other bodies, are inherited from past intercorporeal expression. Merleau-Ponty has been accused, particularly by Emmanuel Levinas, of grounding consciousness in a shared

inter-bodily life and thereby effacing the difference between self-conscious beings. We are not originally aware of the self-other distinction as such, Marratto argues, but there is a non-intentional “syncretic” awareness, whereby an elementary communication between bodies is possible and where a sense of self and other can be *instituted*:

The concept of intercorporeity must be distinguished from the concept of intersubjectivity, which would concern a relation between (conscious) *subjects*. The point here is that my body is already bound up with the other’s body before there can be any relation between conscious subjects. But this mutual involvement of bodies does not overcome the *difference* between *conscious* subjects. It simply asserts that this difference must be watched over; it is a matter of responsibilities and decisions, decisions, that did not begin as conscious decisions, but that must be assumed by a consciousness. (144)

Indeed, our very sense of what demarcates our “selfhood” is a function of being moved with and perceived by other bodies: “I (*as a consciousness*) do not need to *constitute* the other’s sentient body; my body has already responded, even *participated* in the self-exteriorization of the other’s sentient body...” (145). Against the accounts of Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, Marratto argues that this original pre-reflective inter-bodily awareness is not first-personal awareness. Through coming to consciousness of itself, the sentient body also attests to a non-consciousness, to an original otherness at the root of experience. We experience this non-presence explicitly in our comportment to other selves.

By turning to the phenomenon of gesture, Marratto demonstrates how self-awareness emerges through relations with others. A gesture is a special kind of movement, because it accomplishes the communication of an inward sense through outward manifestation. The body succeeds in enacting a gesture when this meaning can be received by another communicating body. Furthermore, a gesture has an inaugurating function: it announces something new, enacts a new order of sense in the world. Gesture, then, far from being an instinctive physiological sign or a mere clothing of a mental idea, is the enactment of a communicating, a sharing of new sense. Qua inaugural, a gesture then belongs to “first-order” expression or what Marratto identifies as the order of “advent” (161). An advent institutes a new sense, not by exhaustively expressing it once and for all, but by furnishing tools, inviting styles of moving, that allow further sense to emerge. A gesture is a call to otherness, to a shared future that cannot be anticipated. The sense of *myself* as the agent of a gesture, then, is only sufficiently made explicit in being taken up by others. To become myself I must become recognized, and thereby must become other to the “I” who initiated the gesture of communication.

Language

The gestural “style” of our mutual embodiment commits us to language. It is language that allows for the terms of communication to be set. Just as the other must come after my gesture and interpret, respond to, and transform it, so too others must have come before me, in order to furnish the durable senses of my articulation:

To be a “consciousness,” I must be embodied in such a way as to find, in my present, a “constitutive emptiness,” an anticipation of a special order of sensible being (gesturing, expressive, perceptive bodies) that would somehow also motivate the inscription of *my* body in a culture and a history. It would have to be the case that, in being haunted by the phantoms of an original past, I am also thrust forward, beyond myself, into the order of advent, toward a certain survival in the orders of culture and truth. In short, my body, to be a conscious body, must be enabled to make the space across which it can meet up with itself as a recognizable “I,” recognizable for itself, as for others. But the power for making this space is not among the *natural* powers it would find within its silent being and, thus, the body attests to a power that is not natural, a power for transforming its nature. (162)

The transformative power of expression that I inherit in my own subjectivity is conditioned upon a history of intersubjective gesture, a history with stable dimensions. For my gesture to stand in a meaningful difference to other gestures, it must therefore already be a saying, the enactment of value in a context *recognizable as such to other selves*.

Throughout Chapter Five, “Ipseity and Language,” Marratto demonstrates, against interpreters who claim that Merleau-Ponty privileges the “silence” of bodily perception over language, that Merleau-Ponty offers a robust account of language. The body, as sense-making movement, is already meaningful gesture. Perception is pre-linguistic, but in order to win a reflective awareness of itself, to “account for the possibility of reflection, we must account for the possibility of movement that, in responding to the demands of the sensible, also responds to the demand to be a recognizably meaningful expression” (168). In order to apprehend a meaning as belonging to me, then, my sensible movement must turn back upon itself and take itself up through others: perception calls for speech. Perceptual movement, remember, is already inter-corporeal. In becoming inter-subjective this inter-corporeal movement “conceals “itself” as language, as the source of meaning that is able to appear as the expressed meaning of a subject” (168). Language is at once this familiarity with the terms of speech and a “forgetting” of the pre-reflective origins of speech.

There is an originary passivity prior to speech, our inscription within a language, that rather than determining the ultimate terms of our speech (as social constructivists might have it), *opens a field* in which we can speak *for ourselves*. This passivity is generative and not exhaustively determinative: it exists as a “call” to new meaning, but unlike the anarchic call of nature, this is the call of self-conscious others. We only encounter this “silent” motivation in the context of our own speaking, and thus pass it over, retroactively installing ourselves as the speakers. But there is a more profound way in which the “other” of language speaks through us in calling us to speak:

We must characterize these as silent because they impose upon consciousness the demand for expression without determining the manner in which they are to be expressed. This original past of consciousness “appears” as a silent consciousness only *for* a consciousness that first emerges in the movement of expression; consciousness emerges on the basis of movement that generates sense insofar as it articulates a difference between the act of expression and what calls for expression. There is, for consciousness, an *original* silence insofar as it is referred to retroactively by a consciousness that is already a certain saying.
(169)

This “silence” does not preexist speech in the mechanisms of the body, or in a pre-reflective unity of the self with itself, because it exists *within language*, as the diacritical element that “inheres in the lateral relations between signs and other signs that require us to keep saying the world anew, that keeps the world from devolving into a depthless totality of present objects...” (178). This lateral identity-through-difference between signs is equally made meaningful by a diacritical nexus of relationships between different speakers.

By conceiving of language as institution, Merleau-Ponty threads the needle between accounts which derive speech from either the living individual or an already established cultural structure. Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure, who focuses on the way languages exhibit a structural regularity through dynamic differentiation, Merleau-Ponty locates the subject at the heart the structures of language. The subject is first humble in the face of language: we “read” before we speak. But in reading, we take language up our own way, we begin to “institute” it for ourselves, such that: “The inscription of the body within the system of expression is also the disruption of that system, the irruption of an irreducible element of non-sense within the order of linguistic sense. The act of expression inscribes the expressive body within a system of expression and, at the same time, resists its complete enclosure within that system.” (178) While we have a role in shaping language, this activity is never pure and its results are never final. We neither constitute language nor are constituted

by it. We are instituted-instituting subjects, both passive and active, where our activity is always the violent resumption of a past of which we were not the author, but for which we must assume the creative responsibility of speaking. Implicit in language then, is the imperative of responsibility.

It is in language that our singular perspective must measure up to the demands of others. It is only in this inter-subjective context that an objective norm between perspectives can emerge. As language, this is a norm that arises historically, and thus despite any pretenses of a universal ideality, there is always a trace of contingency in the expression of objectivity, and thus a demand for its future rearticulation. In this way, the seemingly universal character of objectivity is imminently undermined by the finite, embodied speakers who animate it. Phenomenology, as a *logos* of experience, is uniquely situated between the sense-making movement of the body and its maturation into speech, ideality, and responsibility. As Marratto puts it at the close of his excellent work of philosophy, phenomenology alone reveals to us the contingent developments that both enable and menace thinking (202). Phenomenology entails a dialectical ontology of meaning.

Further Considerations: The Problem of Oppression and the Question of Difference

Marratto's work offers a consistent, carefully worked out phenomenological method and its ontological implications. In the opening chapters of the book, we see how the development of the moving body is the articulation of nascent sense. In the pivotal third and fourth chapters, we see how this self-articulating movement in fact begins ambiguously, in an "unreflective fund" or field of hetero-affection. Marratto explains how the self emerges as an articulation from this field, even as it appears to itself as its own incomparable sense of singular interiority. The phenomenology at work here in rooting out the "hauntings" and spectrality of the original past of selfhood is meticulous. The author demonstrates how Merleau-Ponty's studies of motor behavior provide correctives to contemporary sensori-motor accounts of bodily movement as well as ecological psychology. Impressively, though, Marratto goes on to make the case that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is ontologically akin to the philosophy of deconstruction, taking on the detailed criticisms of Jacques Derrida. The account of "silence" as an originary difference in language is excellent, and its lucid exploration of the themes of creativity and answerability is ethically provocative. As a work of philosophy this is a sound, groundbreaking study. As a commentary on the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we find here a refreshing, sensitive alternative to interpreters who impute metaphysical categories of consciousness, causality, and difference to his texts. Marratto's work demonstrates the

continuity of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the ongoing commitment to think of bodies, selves, and being in their *development*. I conclude with a couple of open ended questions for Scott Marratto and readers of his superb book.

Oppression

What is the ultimate status of subjectivity? On the one hand, we see that subjectivity is an accomplishment out of an inter-bodily past, but on the other, this emergence shows itself to have transcendental conditions of possibility (language, for one). This presents a tension between a historicist and transcendental account of selfhood. Conceptually, I think Marratto handily answers this problem in the argument that subjectivity is an "institution" in Merleau-Ponty's technical sense of the term, an historical development that nevertheless inaugurates its own irreducible dimensions of sense. These dimensions are not ideal structures, but ongoing enactments in motion, haunted by the contingency of their past and always faced with the possibility of dissolution. I want to push this question a bit further, though, because it would seem that this threat of dissolution is only there for an *already achieved* subject.

This question can be complicated further in light of Karl Marx's, and the later Frankfurt School's, examination of alienation. In a capitalist economy, the worker is moved to precisely not notice her subjectivity, to take up her expressive agency through the false surrogate of a wage. The slavery here is spiritual, because the very "call" of subjectivity is culturally warped into the call to produce things. Where Marx posits an implicit consciousness of freedom within subjectivity in the worker, thinkers like Theodor Adorno call this into question. Moreover, philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon demonstrate that in the formation of oppressed subjects, there is an inherent experience of oneself as "inessential." For the oppressed, there is a broken, schizophrenic trauma in the face of the social contradiction of selfhood. Rather than being characterized by unity and coherence, these "selves" are enslaved, broken, and perhaps unable to consistently recognize themselves. I think Marratto's account has the resources, particularly in his analysis of space as the field not only of the I-can and ability, but also of restriction and an "I-cannot," to develop an explanation of how this alienation occurs. Marratto's work focuses on what it is like to become a subject, on the "Grace" that animates a state of subjective health. Yet it is possible, I think, within the method of this thinking to fully develop the ethical and ontological implications of an individuality, or even society, where the possibility of selfhood is oppressively manipulated, or even foreclosed.

Difference

Is there is an antinomy that arises in articulating the generative past of sense? Consciousness is at an ontological distance from the natural past, and yet transformatively expresses the past in time. Consciousness is a “repetition without original,” on the one hand. Yet within consciousness lies the trace of a transformation of this natural past. In this way, the movement of expression can be understood as a “coherent deformation” of sense. So, on the one hand, there is a radical passivity that is a pure possibility of sense, an origin that is beyond being, beyond consciousness. Yet, on the other hand, we conceive this possibility as conditioned by real expressive movements in space and time. With the former alternative, sense is seen as owing its possibility to an extra-mundane, groundless-ground, an inspiration or “Grace” which, inexplicable in itself and prior to any sense at all, affords us the possibility of a coherent life. Yet, on the other hand, we can see the manifestation of our consciousness as an ongoing, hard-won (and often lost) evolutionary development and historical praxis. Is consciousness, the “repetition without original,” a “coherent deformation” of the past or a radical break from it?

I think that the logic of retroactive becoming that Marratto has worked out in *The Intercorporeal Self* allows us to resolve this antinomy. Conceived of chronologically, we can't decide between the absolute otherness of our natural past and its manifestation in history. Though, the author reminds us that time is not an already established horizon, that there is a *verticality*, an ontological depth that haunts time. In the end of developmental movement, the beginning will come to have inherited its sense. This sense inheres in living movement, in its particular “style” and its bodily contingency. The future anterior of meaning, its retroactivity, shows us that self-conscious time itself *takes time* to unfold its own sense, and that this unfolding establishes new relationships to its own history. Against Henri Bergson's earlier thinking, Marratto argues that we cannot derive memory from remembered states, constructing the evolved out of the movement of evolution. With Bergson's later concept of the “retrograde movement” of truth, though, we can see that time only *makes sense* in and through qualitative transformations. In his 1954-5 lectures on *Institution and Passivity*, Merleau-Ponty argues for just such a concept to explain the transformation inherent in life, and its subsequent explosive developments into new, unrecognized domains of meaning: animality, emotion, sexuality, art, culture, truth, and history. This spectrality, as Marratto has shown, cannot be reduced to the terms of our world, selves, or bodies, yet it is only in those domains that it transformatively manifests itself. It is these moments of transformation—movement, expression, speech—that we live out of the natural, spectral power (*puissance*, rather than *pouvoir*) that carries us toward and haunts us within our own agency.

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