Spirit and/or Flesh: Merleau-Ponty's Encounter with Hegel

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Merleau-Ponty's later work betrays a shift away from or, perhaps more correctly, beyond phenomenology and toward a more philosophically ambitious orientation. One clear indication of this shift is found in the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, in which the reverent and charitable treatment of Husserl laced throughout so much of his work subsides, and Merleau-Ponty finally breaks markedly from his predecessor's approach. His motivation for furnishing a new ontology is tied, in part, not to his rejection of the phenomenological method, but to the recognition of its "constitutional limits." Though the attempt to elaborate a new ontology beyond the parameters of phenomenology features in his later work, the kernel of that attempt is already present in the *Phenomenology of Perception* where Merleau-Ponty baldly states in the preface that "the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (xv). What Merleau-Ponty finds dissatisfying about Husserl's approach is not that he fails to broach the long muted subjects of brute or wild being, the logos of the aesthetic world, operative intentionality, etc.—for broach them he most certainly does—but that he is not compelled to mine them, that he remains hesitant to plumb the vague terrain of the "non-philosophical," and does not see it as grounds for elaborating an ontology.

By prioritizing operative intentionality—passive synthesis—Merleau-Ponty seized upon what in Husserl served to upset Kant's approach to consciousness, namely, the discovery that the

transcendental unity of apperception and the categories of the understanding are actually preceded and subtended by a more basic mode of intentionality native to what Merleau-Ponty calls variously and vaguely the “vertical world” or “brute being.” In short, Husserl’s analyses revealed the limitations of Kant’s approach to perception, the body and nature. Kant lacked an account of the genesis of the categories, of the pre-judicative moments of consciousness, of how perception builds toward and prepares the ground for logical judgments.¹

Such a genetic approach has obvious affinities with Hegel. Hence, it is not an accident that Husserl’s later work becomes preoccupied with Hegelian mainsprings: intersubjectivity, pre-reflective forms of consciousness, and the significance of history. Yet Husserl does not opt for an ontology as grandiose as Hegel’s. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, sees Hegel as a pregnant pivot, and appears convinced that the future of philosophy depends largely on elaborating an ontology along Hegelian lines. His affinity with Hegel is not merely a development of his later thought. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty praises Hegel for pointing out the essential connection between history and time on the one hand and perception on the other: “Rather than being a genuine history, perception ratifies and renews in us a ‘prehistory.’ And that ... is of the essence of time: there would be no present ... no sensible world with its thickness and inexhaustible richness, if perception, in Hegel’s words, did not retain a past in the depth of the present, and did not contract that past into that depth” (279). While Hegelian themes clearly influenced his early work, his later preoccupation with ontology, interest in nature, and shift away from phenomenology led to a deeper confrontation with Hegel.

In this paper, I aim to do four things. First, I attempt to pinpoint how and why Merleau-Ponty was driven to go beyond Husserlian phenomenology, and to show that he did so for what are largely Hegelian reasons. Second, I trace the parallels between Hegel’s “metaphysics of

Spirit” and Merleau-Ponty’s “ontology of the Flesh.”² In particular, I stress the two thinkers’ consensus about the nature of philosophical method: both of them recognize that method cannot be applied to content as though they were externally related, but must rather be of the very same “grain.” Third, I identify Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of Hegel’s approach, and assay his claim that Hegel’s system actually constitutes a lapse into a pre-critical, pre-Kantian, naïve metaphysics. Fourth, I examine how Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Hegel is tied to his investigation into the evolution of the concept of nature through the history of Western philosophy. My basic intention is to determine whether and to what extent Merleau-Ponty avoids the very charges he levies against Hegel, and my basic claim is that he does. In addition, I suggest how the tantalizing frame sketched in the fourth chapter and working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, combined with his *Nature* lectures, might be fleshed out to form a genuinely new ontology that both overcomes the methodological fragmentation and dispels the “taboo of metaphysics” that have plagued and paralyzed Western thought for the last half century. Like Heidegger, he appears to have thought that all pre-existing forms of *metaphysics* were in fact merely *physics* for the simple reason that they had failed to provide an adequate account of the being of *physis*, of nature. Thus Merleau-Ponty’s later investigations into the concept of nature and his attempt to furnish a new ontology are of a piece and, I suggest, have interesting and important affinities with the process philosophy of Whitehead.

I. Overcoming Husserl on the Way to Hegel

As is likely clear from my introduction, I see a certain analogy between Hegel’s relationship to Kant and Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Husserl. In this section I aim to show

that the latter relationship is properly seen within the context of Merleau-Ponty's confrontation with and attraction to Hegel, which is simultaneously a quarrel with Kant.³

Near the close of the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, "Reflection and Interrogation," Merleau-Ponty expresses what he feels to be the limitations of Husserlian phenomenology:

To reflect is not to coincide with the flux from its source unto its last ramifications; it is to disengage from the things, perceptions, world, and perception of the world, by submitting them to a systematic variation, the intelligible nuclei that resist, and to proceed from one intelligible nucleus to the next in a way that is not belied by experience but gives us only its universal contours. It therefore by principle leaves untouched the two-fold problem of the genesis of the existent world and of the genesis of the idealization performed by reflection and finally evokes and requires as its foundation a hyper-reflection where the ultimate problems would be taken seriously. (45-6)

"Reflection" is parasitic on a totality that enables it.⁴ Merleau-Ponty refers to this totality variously as the "opening upon the world," the "lifeworld," the "vertical world," etc. By these terms he is referring to pre-reflective, pre-theoretical experience. Merleau-Ponty's main point in the passage quoted above is that reflection cannot account for its own emergence. It always refers back to a totality with which it can never seamlessly coincide. He explains:

I was able to appeal from the world and the others to myself and take the route of reflection, only because first I was outside of myself, in the world, among the others, and constantly this experience feeds my reflection. Such is the total situation that a philosophy must account for. It will do so only by admitting the double polarity of reflection and by admitting that, as Hegel said, to retire into oneself is also to leave oneself. (49)

This double polarity of reflection, which Merleau-Ponty tries to elaborate as "reversibility" and "hyper-reflection," is what he finds lacking—or at least under-emphasized—in Husserl's phenomenology. Husserl places a premium on sense-bestowing acts of consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, the problem is not that Husserl fails to acknowledge that there are, e.g.,

kinesthetic and intersubjective dimensions at work in all constitutive acts—he does not. The problem is that these dimensions are derived from and interpreted within the horizon of the cognition of objects. This is likely why Merleau-Ponty asserts, in a footnote, that “reflection suppresses the intersubjectivity” (48). That is, it suppresses the “deeper” notion of intersubjectivity that Merleau-Ponty tries to render as “intercorporeity,” a condition prior to the differentiation of self, others, and world, which is not—or at least not merely—a transcendental condition for the cognition of objects. This robust notion of intersubjectivity echoes Hegel’s principle of “Spirit,” the I that is we and the we that is I, which resides behind the back and over the head of an individual subject’s cognition of objects and itself.⁵

The “horizon of the cognition of objects” is also a horizon of constitutive acts. As Merleau-Ponty notes,

A philosophy of reflection, as methodic doubt and as a reduction of the openness of the world to “spiritual acts,” to intrinsic relations between the idea and *its* ideate, is thrice untrue to what it means to elucidate: untrue to the visible world, to him who sees it, and to his relations with the other visionaries. (39)

The correlation of noesis and noema, of intentional act and the object as intended, idea and ideate, is what Merleau-Ponty is attempting to “under-ride.” He says that in trying to account for the totality “we are catching sight of the necessity of another operation besides the conversion to reflection, more fundamental than it, of a sort of *hyper-reflection* that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account” (38). Such an “operation” could clearly not be another constitutive act performed by the knowing subject precisely because such acts (or a reconstruction of such acts on the basis of evidence) cannot account for the changes they introduce into the content whose intelligible features they are trying to elucidate.

The key here is that this is a distinctively Hegelian point, namely, that any object apprehended by a subject changes in and through the very act of apprehension. As such, the very notion of an *act* of apprehension is upset, and gives way, instead, to the notion of a *process* of apprehension. That Husserl sees this in terms of an ever further and finer determination of objects that is in principle incapable of completion—the teleology of consciousness toward its world—does not, for Merleau-Ponty, solve the problem, but merely prolongs it to infinity. Moreover, it “presupposes the reduction of Nature to immanent unities” (49). It stops short of a fundamental shift in our regard for ourselves, others, objects and their world. What Merleau-Ponty seems to find lacking in Husserl’s approach is just such a Hegelian “reversal,” in which the “organic,” “pre-logical” bond between the self, others and the world is not only not sundered, but is imbued with positive significance. Again, my claim is not that Merleau-Ponty overtly rejects Husserl’s approach. Rather, the significant attraction to Hegelian themes in Merleau-Ponty’s final works helps us to see how and why he tried both to place phenomenology within a broader ontological context and to frame the reduction as the reception, culmination and continuation of a process of Being—i.e., “interrogation”—rather than simply as an action performed by human consciousness on itself. To that end, I now turn to the major parallels between the later Merleau-Ponty and Hegel.

II. Interrogation, Dialectic, Hyper-dialectic

I see at least three important affinities between the approaches of Hegel and the later Merleau-Ponty: 1) a concern to re-invest the non-philosophical with ontological significance (developmental unfolding of the stages of consciousness; dimensions/leaves of the flesh); 2) a conviction that philosophical method must be patterned on the very grain of reality itself, not

after a mental operation has abstracted the subject from the whole of which it is a part (dialectic; interrogation); 3) an attempt to furnish a *nondualistic ontology* (Spirit; Flesh). There is not space here to comprehensively unpack each of these parallels, all of which are tightly intertwined, but I will briefly sketch them in order.

The first parallel is concerned with displacing the notion that the two orders of consciousness and world, of concept and percept, of mind and body, are incommensurable. Merleau-Ponty's treatment of language exemplifies this move. As Mauro Carbone put it,

language is not configured as a second layer which translates a primordial layer (which, in turn, would be conceived as a positive 'original text' [i.e., the myth of the origin]). Instead, language is conceived as the "metamorphosis" of the primordial layer, a metamorphosis that renews the carnal configuration of the mute world, but in "another flesh." (40)

The idiom of leaves, which envelope and interpenetrate each other, displaces the idiom of layers. The latter are conceived as parallel yet incommensurable orders, planes, or regions, usually related hierarchically, as though they were "stacked on top of one another." This is basically the traditional notion of the "great chain of being." Merleau-Ponty alludes to this at the very start of the first *Nature* lecture, in the chapter on "The 'Finalist' Element in Aristotle and the Stoics": "The whole of Nature is here divided into qualitatively defined regions or places for certain natural phenomena; nature is the more or less successful realization of this qualitative destining of bodies" (7). Thus a natural being exists only to the extent that it conforms to the concept of which it is an instance, or adheres to the region in which it belongs.

There appears to be an element of "depth" and heterogeneity in "nature according to the great chain" that is destined to be flattened by Descartes and Newton. Yet this is partly an illusion. As Merleau-Ponty notes, "Nature [here] still remains narrowly construed in proportion to man" (7). The verticality of this "naïve realism" is just what Hegel tries to recapture in a

mature form with the dialectic. He tries to replace metaphysical planes, orders, or regions with developmental stages of consciousness, vertical moments in the unfolding of the Idea. He tries to transcend the naïveté of pre-critical metaphysics, yet include its intuition of verticality within and beyond natural experience. There are no “structures in themselves,” only “con-structures.”

Hence the first strong affinity between Merleau-Ponty and Hegel is that both endeavor, in different ways, to re-invest what is traditionally dismissed as the non-philosophical domain with ontological significance. Both are in some sense bent on reconstructing the traditional great chain of being. Hegel’s motivation for doing so is principally his conviction that every entity and every experience are pregnant with the absolute Idea or Concept (*Begriff*). Philosophy is concerned with penetrating through the transient show of existence (*Dasein*) in order to apprehend what is true, actual, and rational. Each stage of consciousness puts forth a claim to truth, realizes the emptiness of the claim, and then undergoes a kind of death, only to be resurrected at a higher, more inclusive level. This process culminates in the final stage of absolute knowledge, which is revealed as the ground, grain, and goal of the entire process, and consciousness comes to know itself precisely in and through its own self-diremption, and grasps its identity as identity-in-difference; all other forms of identity have been unmasked as partial, unstable and false.

For Hegel, as for Merleau-Ponty, nominalism does not pose the same threat as it does for Kant, because it is accepted that consciousness—or something like it—goes “all the way down.” The human way of knowing is shown to be only a continuation and deepening of the very grain of reality—and thus nature—itself. As both Hegel and Merleau-Ponty recognize, only a standpoint that has already abstracted itself from the totality of life would be able to regard human conceptual schemes as projections onto a pre-given, fixed, value-free nature “in itself.” Nominalism ceases to be a threat once the underlying interpretations of language, perception,

and nature on which it is based are overhauled and, indeed, revealed as interpretations. Structures of human understanding are no more “imposed” on some sort of chaotic “raw sense-data” than is a method for gaining the truth. This brings us to the second major affinity.

According to Merleau-Ponty, in *Ideen II* Husserl fails to adequately undertake such an overhaul, which also entails a revision of the very notions of reason and intelligibility.

“The idea of chiasm,” he asserts, “is on the contrary the idea that every analysis that disentangles renders unintelligible ... It is a question of creating a new type of intelligibility (intelligibility through the world and Being as they are—‘vertical’ and not horizontal)” (Carbone 70). For Merleau-Ponty, Husserl’s notion of the founding/founded, constituting/constituted relationship, is a right step in the direction of overcoming the Cartesian view of nature as pure material extension, since, by way of the reduction, nature is re-endowed with sense as the noematic correlate of sense-bestowing acts of consciousness. According to Merleau-Ponty, however, this notion cannot account for the movement out of the natural attitude in the first place. Thus the reduction is a great advance over Cartesian and Kantian approaches to nature, but it misses something regarding the relationship between the natural and transcendental attitudes.

What is missing, Merleau-Ponty seems to think, is the “tissue” connecting the natural and transcendental attitudes, a tissue that escapes the ambit of the founding/founded relationship because the latter attempts to clarify vertical being in terms of horizontal being; even the *Urdoxa* of the *Weltthesis* is characterized in terms of the projective, intentional register. This is why Husserl does not presume to furnish a phenomenological ontology with regard to the “region of pure consciousness” in *Ideen*; such a project would be a contradiction in terms. The concept of region demands the concept of horizon, and this demands a field of objects appearing for a

subject. A subject without an intended object is by definition a-regional, and thus an ontology, an account of the being of consciousness “itself,” is off base.

Yet for Merleau-Ponty, this simply indicates the methodological limits of phenomenology itself, and should drive us to set aside—but not wholly abandon—the philosophy of consciousness, the idiom of layers, and the priority of intentionality itself. The vertical dimension is not so much abandoned as it is rounded out by a lateral dimension. As he puts it in a working note in *The Visible and the Invisible*,

the lower and the higher gravitate around one another, as the high and the low (variants of the side-other side relation)—Fundamentally I bring the high-low distinction into the vortex where it rejoins the side-other side distinction, where the two distinctions are integrated into a *universal dimensionality* which is Being. (265)

In this way, Merleau Ponty seeks, as Carbone puts it,

to “resignify” the concept. On the one hand, he aims to reactivate the concept’s motivations in order to conserve its “rigor.” On the other hand, he aims to abandon, as Proust’s description of sensible ideas teaches, the pretense to the “intellectual possession of the world” that the concept seems always to exhibit. (41)

Below, I will address how this marks a departure from Hegel, but for now let us attend to how it dovetails with the latter’s understanding of Spirit as self-diremption (involution) and self-transcendence (evolution). For Hegel, it is Spirit that, through its capacity for self-transcendence and for overcoming its own fragmentation, provides the connecting link between different orders of being. In this way, Hegel attempts to overcome the opposition of binaries such as subject and substance, spirit and matter, eternity and history and, most importantly for our purposes, truth and method.

In his monograph on Hegel, Walter Kaufmann argues that in a certain sense there is no “method” called “dialectic” in Hegel’s philosophy:

There is a legend abroad that the student of Hegel must choose in the end between the system and the dialectic ... But I am by no means rejecting the dialectic in order to elect the system; I disbelieve both. And I am not so much rejecting the dialectic as I say: there is none. Look for it, by all means ... but you will not find any plain method that you could adopt even if you wanted to. (160)

Kaufmann suggests that the dialectic is best understood as “at most a method of exposition; it is not a method of discovery,” and a “vision of the world, of man, and of history which emphasizes development through conflict, the moving power of human passions, which produce wholly unintended results, and the irony of sudden reversals” (161). On this interpretation the Hegelian dialectic is but a name for the very warp and woof of the Idea, of actuality, of Spirit itself. Hegel himself distinguishes his approach from a method of discovery in the preface to the *Phenomenology*.

[T]he system of ideas concerning philosophical method is yet another set of current beliefs that belongs to a bygone culture ... [I]t is not difficult to see that the way of asserting a proposition, adducing reasons for it, and in the same way refuting its opposite by reasons, is not the form in which truth can appear. Truth is its own self-movement, whereas the method just described is the mode of cognition that remains external to its material. (28)

In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the flesh and interrogation strike a similar chord; they also reveal the connection between the second and third affinities with Hegel, namely, method and ontology. In a working note, he asserts that “[o]ne cannot make a direct ontology. My ‘indirect method’ (being in the beings) is alone conformed with being” (179). An example of a “direct method” would be precisely what Hegel described above: “a mode of cognition that remains external to its material.” In a related working note, Merleau-Ponty suggests that “Philosophy is the study of the *Vorhabe* of Being, a *Vorhabe* that is

not cognition, to be sure, that is wanting with regard to cognition, to operation, but that envelops them as Being envelops beings” (204). “Philosophy as interrogation,” he urges,

can consist only in showing how the world is articulated starting from a zero of being which is not nothingness, that is, in installing itself on the edge of being, neither in the for Itself, nor in the in Itself, at the joints, where the multiple entries of the world cross. (260)

Starting from the “zero of being”—the body-subject—is not arbitrary because “my body is to the greatest extent what *every* thing is: a *dimensional* this” (260). Interrogation is not, or is not merely, something I do; it is something I am, and something that is done to me. Hugh Silverman summarizes it this way:

Interrogation is not a new mode of knowing that sets itself apart from nature and the absolute. Interrogation goes directly to the nature and the absolute in order to bring out the visibility that is already there. Interrogation must therefore negate itself as a separate philosophy. (220)

Hence the three strands linking Merleau-Ponty and Hegel are woven together: the absolute conceived as appearance (the ontological rehabilitation of the sensible), the disarming of the opposition of truth and method, and the move to ontology.

In the fourth chapter of *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty tries to clarify the notion of an ontology of the flesh:

When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology, to describe a world covered over with all our own projections ... Rather, we mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves ... is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible. (136)

I now turn to how this ontology of the flesh departs from Hegel’s metaphysics of Spirit, and explore Merleau-Ponty’s misgivings over Hegel’s interpretation of experience.

III. Overcoming Hegel

Near the end of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer revisits Heidegger's appraisal of Hegel's concept of experience, the very same work that Merleau-Ponty examines in one of his final essays, "Philosophy and non-Philosophy since Hegel." Gadamer's criticism is launched from the perspective of a hermeneutical model of experience, but it bears an unmistakable resemblance to Merleau-Ponty's own qualms with Hegel's account of experience. For one, Gadamer aims to supplant the monological notion of experience that he attributes to Hegel with a dialogical one:

The primacy of dialogue, the relation of question and answer, can be seen in even so extreme a case as that of Hegel's dialectic as a philosophical method. To elaborate the totality of the determinations of thought, which was the aim of Hegel's logic, is as it were to attempt to comprehend within the great monologue of modern 'method' the continuum of meaning that is realized in every particular instance of dialogue ... Hegel's dialectic is a monologue of thinking that tries to *carry out in advance* what matures little by little in every genuine dialogue. (262-3)⁶

In a working note in *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty distances himself from Hegel's dialectical account of experience:

Position, negation, negation of the negation ... What do I bring to the problem of the same and the other? This: that the same be the other than the other, and identity difference of difference—this 1) does not realize a *surpassing*, a dialectic in the Hegelian sense; 2) is *realized on the spot*, by encroachment, thickness. (264)

Though the culmination of Hegel's dialectical account of experience is reversal—through which consciousness of subject and object is simultaneous—this is different from Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility. Merleau-Ponty appears to have received the inspiration for the idea of the vertical world from Hegel. As Carbone points out, he considered the notion of reversal (*Zweideutigkeit*) a "good ambiguity" and a great advance over previous systems of thought because it escapes the flat world of the philosophy of reflection/subject/consciousness (Carbone

19). Hegel's idea of reversal is vital to Merleau-Ponty's unfinished ontology because it is the inspiration for the notions of flesh, chiasm and reversibility.

For Hegel, however, experience must be comprehended. Carbone notes that "this reversal does not appear to be made spontaneously by consciousness thanks to its *zweideutige* structure ... This reversal represents precisely the contribution of the philosopher" (21). Merleau-Ponty objects to this because it judges and thus adds something to experience, which is precisely what Hegel claimed he was avoiding by adopting his dialectical approach. The philosopher thus accomplishes something by processing his experience, and in so doing he covers over the processional nature of experience. Philosophy and non-philosophy are thus deeply dissociated, and Merleau-Ponty declares this to be, as Carbone puts it, "the 'most violent dogmatism,' since the latter is masked precisely as recourse to the truth of experience" (21).

Reversal is not reversibility. The former—as Heidegger, Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty suggest—is a metaphysical position that is not founded on experiential evidence, while the latter indicates the thickness of experience, whose incompleteness and ambiguity we must ultimately encounter not as an obstacle confounding, but as a "formative medium" constituting, our knowledge of ourselves, others and the world. Reversibility, Merleau-Ponty asserts in *The Visible and Invisible*, is

always imminent and never realized in fact ... [T]he coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization ... But this incessant escaping, this impotency to superpose exactly upon one another the touching of things by my right hand and the touching of this same right hand by my left hand ... this is not a failure. (147-8)

For Hegel, the truth of experience can only be comprehended after the fact. In the larger context of Hegel's system this means that the Logic is opposed to the philosophy of Nature, and thus nature, as Merleau-Ponty notes, is but the "weakness of the Idea." In this vein, Silverman

suggests—correctly, I think—that Merleau-Ponty comes closer to Nietzsche than to Hegel: “The absolute is not beyond nature, it is nature appearing as a lived presence through the intentional experience of the individual. In suggesting a return to nature, Merleau-Ponty is closer to Nietzsche than to Hegel—who would propose a *surpassing*” (218). Hence, though Merleau-Ponty was convinced that certain aspects of Hegel’s approach needed to be retrieved, he ultimately concluded that Hegel’s ontology was a forced and fabricated nondualism, a pre-critical, rather than a trans-critical, metaphysical system. Carbone summarizes Merleau-Ponty’s view of Hegel:

In the final analysis, phenomenology is reappraised and ontology (for Hegel this means logic) is once more superimposed on it, instead of being sought out within it. Here is, finally, the temptation to fabricate, “in the name of knowledge,” “an illusory all-powerfulness—a negativity that is so total that it founds and digests everything and nothing.” (22-3)

IV. Hegel Overcome? Toward an Ontology of the Flesh

The goal in this final section is to see whether Merleau-Ponty merely recapitulates a version of Hegel’s pre-critical metaphysics—which is no easy task, since Merleau-Ponty was clearly aware of the problem and, as noted above, criticized Hegel for covering it up—or sketches the foundations for a genuinely trans-critical ontology. I will argue for the second position, but urge that Merleau-Ponty points us away from Heideggerian and/or post-structural approaches and towards something like a process philosophy of nature.

Merleau-Ponty is not just asserting that the body has its own transcendence, or is transcendence, but that even the object cannot be framed from the outset as purely given, as simply here or there. That is why Merleau-Ponty is after a nondualistic ontology anchored in the notion of flesh. In *The Visible and Invisible* he argues: “It is that the thickness of flesh between

the seer and the thing is as constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication” (135). Merleau-Ponty cannot be using the term communication here in a purely metaphorical way. He appears to be trying to overthrow the monological conception of the subject-object relation, according to which there is an assumed asymmetry between the determining and the determinable; the sense of objects and the world is here conceived of as posited and projected by and for a knowing consciousness. This view of the relationship between seer and seen is prefigured in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”:

As far as language is concerned, it is the lateral relation of one sign to another which makes each of them significant, so that the sense appears only at the intersection of and as it were in the interval between words ... There is thus an opacity of language. Nowhere does it stop and leave a place for pure sense; it is always limited only by more language, and the sense appears within it only set into the words. (243-4)

The “opacity of language” is much like the “thickness of flesh” that Merleau-Ponty thinks we should see not as an impediment to intelligibility but as the condition of any intelligibility.

In *The Visible and Invisible* after giving a description of color in terms of his new notion of flesh, Merleau-Ponty insists that, though the flesh cannot be directly perceived, is not strictly determinable through an eidetic variation, and should not be understood as a transcendental condition of the cognition of possible objects, “it is no analogy or vague comparison and must be taken literally” (133). He describes flesh as follows: “Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things” (133). The flesh, then, is not simply given. Nor can it really be called a condition for what is given, since Merleau-Ponty is unseating the two-tiered relationship of condition/conditioned, constituting/constituted. Yet all

this indicates is that the conceptions of objectivity, experience and facticity on which the latter rest must be overhauled.

We do not better determine the structure of experience through reduction and imaginative variation of its contents, but by entering into it more attentively and receptively—more laterally, as Merleau-Ponty would put it. He applies this to the case of vision:

The look envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them ... one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command. What is this prepossession of the visible, this *art of interrogating* it according to its own wishes, this inspired exegesis? (133)

There are several things to note about this passage. First, through the notion of perception as an art of interrogation that subtends all cognition, Merleau-Ponty is undermining the Kantian interpretations of knowledge and aesthetic judgment. His opposition to Kant is already prominent in the *Phenomenology of Perception*; he explains Kant's attempted synthesis of sensibility and the understanding in the third critique only to conclude that it is misbegotten due to the untenable account of perception on which it is based:

[the subject] discovers his own nature as spontaneously in harmony with the law of the understanding. But if the subject has a nature, then the hidden art of the imagination must condition the categorical activity. *It is no longer merely aesthetic judgment, but knowledge too which rests upon this art*, an art which forms the basis of the unity of consciousness and of world. (xix)

This art is, it would appear, the very same art of interrogation described above. All perception itself is a creative response that brings forth and is brought forth by phenomena. As Carbone notes, “Merleau-Ponty's approach seems to extend, *to the entire sensible domain*, Kant's characterization of the limited domain of the beautiful” (42). So when perception is understood as creative, responsive, and imbued with its own kind of activity and intelligibility, the problems

of “integrating” concepts and percepts, mind and body, universal and particular, etc., appear very different.

The second noteworthy feature of the above passage is what it spells for Merleau-Ponty’s later theory of the concept. Carbone notes that in its Latin form, the word “concept”

had a certain semantic halo whose traces one can discern in the “a-philosophical” thinking toward which Merleau-Ponty tends ... [The Latin] *conceptus* differs from [the German] *Begriff* in the following way: while the ... latter refers to grasping ... the former refers to an entity that is concave, and that, being concave, can function as a basin. This feature of meaning underlies not only the use of the verb *concipio* when it means ‘to be pregnant,’ but also the use that indicates “receiving something into one’s spirit, one’s thought, one’s sense.” (47)

So as we can see, in the later work perception is granted a creative valence, while conception is rounded out with a moment of passivity. Ideation is conceived of as a temporal-historical process of the flesh’s own interrogation of itself. The subject’s role in this process is primarily one of compliance with objects, and only derivatively one of positing them before and for itself, insofar, of course, as these terms are still applicable.

Third, Merleau-Ponty asserts that there is an irreducible ambiguity over who or what “has the lead” in perception, over precisely who or what is thinking, perceiving, seeing, etc. He makes similar remarks elsewhere in *The Visible and Invisible*: “One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that *we are the world that thinks itself*—or that the world is at the heart of our flesh” (135). Merleau-Ponty’s concession of some ground to the object—to “sacrifice some of the power” of transcendental subjectivity, and furnish a more “multi-lateral” account of perception—is compelling, though in doing so his expressions are admittedly enigmatic. This is borne out by his comments about the “fundamental narcissism of all vision.” Unpacking newly coined terms such as “Visibility in itself,” and “Tangibility in itself,” he says that

since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision. And thus, for the same reason, the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity ... [T]he seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh. (139)

Through these difficult formulations, Merleau-Ponty is climbing a slippery slope: laudably trying to overcome what Derrida would later term the “metaphysics of presence,” he risks lapsing into a kind of “metaphysics of absence,” in which notions such as Flesh, Visibility, and Tangibility all come to serve as secretly reified “anti-Absolutes” that give the philosopher an excuse to continue speaking after the admission of global indeterminacy.

Despite his eccentric vocabulary, I submit that Merleau-Ponty does not, in fact, succumb to this—which is, incidentally, the great danger of confronting the region of the “non-philosophical” or “pre-objective” resolved to re-enchant the world—but that he does provide grounds for elaborating what we might call a “constructive” postmodern, post-metaphysical approach to ontology that, when all is said and done, bears a striking resemblance to the process philosophy of Whitehead. My brief invocation of Whitehead is intended to show how Merleau-Ponty does not commit the very mistake for which he criticizes Hegel and to shed some light on Merleau-Ponty’s fledgling ontology. In order to show this, I turn to several telling passages from the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible* and the chapter on Whitehead from the first *Nature* course in order to show how the vertical or hierarchical, and horizontal or heterarchical dimensions of being and becoming can be incorporated in such a way that the notion of flesh is not simply a blind, purely indeterminate flux, not just the play of difference, but should instead be understood as an open-ended, developmental process of differentiation and integration, transcendence and inclusion, and self-overcoming. This, I contend, is what Merleau-Ponty thinks

it means to “renew Hegel” after, and in light of, the crucial insights not merely of Husserlian phenomenology, but also of modern physics and biology.

In this way, dimensionality means not only the “depth” of operative intentionality and the aesthetic world, which is more akin to magical and associative states of awareness, but also the “height” of the flesh’s own creative response to itself, by which humanity’s sheer ability to undertake something like an “ontological rehabilitation of the sensible” is understood as itself a positive achievement, a restoration and inclusion that is at once an emergence and transcendence. This is consonant with Merleau-Ponty’s conviction that there has been a “mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being” taking place in the present age.

The “ontological rehabilitation of the sensible” cannot simply be the concession of sense to a region of being that was previously dismissed as a-logical, as though the barony of philosophy were giving back lands it had once unduly seized by force from an innocent wilderness. This cannot be so because Merleau-Ponty does not subscribe to the myth of the origin, of the beginning, of there being an *a priori* formal archetype to which various sensible contents conform more or less adequately. In a refreshing and reassuring passage he dispels the notion that an ontology of flesh would be bogged down in the any kind of primitivism:

The search for the “wild” view of the world nowise limits itself to a *return* to precomprehension or to prescience. “Primitivism” is only the counterpart of scientism, and is still scientism ... [T]he pre-scientific is only an invitation to *comprehend the meta-scientific*, and this last is not non-scientific. (182)

Merleau-Ponty’s interest in Whitehead’s account of nature is neither incidental nor casual. In the first course on *Nature*, he baldly states that it “remains to elaborate, starting from the critiques of causality, space and time, a new vision of Nature. We will ask it of Whitehead” (112). Jan van der Veken sees a connection between Merleau-Ponty’s shift away from

phenomenology and turn to nature, and suggests that the new approach is akin to Whitehead's method of "descriptive generalization." He notes that Whitehead's point of departure is germane to phenomenology:

Whitehead sides with the basic insight of phenomenology: "to be is to be given in an experience." Or, in phenomenological terminology, the structure subject-object can never be undone. There is no *Hinterwelt*, no world behind the phenomena. This is his way to take his distance from the "bifurcation of nature": the split introduced between a purely objective world and a purely subjective experience. (327)

However, through his notion of "prehension," Whitehead expands this notion beyond the realm of human perception to the sphere of being as such. Van der Veken likens this strategy to Merleau-Ponty's:

The method that Merleau-Ponty is following is in fact that of descriptive generalization: he starts from a thorough description of the body, and then he generalizes this description, by stretching the meaning of the words, so that the basic categories which have an intuitive meaning when applied to the body have a trans-lated or meta-phorical sense when applied to natural things. (326)

Both thinkers reject a view of nature as an object, a being in-itself, or a correlate of consciousness.

In the *Nature* lectures, Merleau-Ponty notes how Whitehead rejects the "bifurcation of nature" that is posited through the opposition of abstraction and perception and instead offers the notion of "process":

The mind must not be considered as an impartial observer of Nature: "its awareness takes part in the process of Nature" ... which assures the interiority of events in relation to one another, our inherence in the Whole, links observers together ... [It is] represented here as making progress, as being annexed to the body of subjects ... There is a sort of reciprocity between Nature and me as a sensing being. I am a part of nature and function as any event of Nature. (117)

The key here is that, as Merleau-Ponty realizes, the process account of nature “makes us understand the ontological value of perception. What I perceive is both for me and in the things” (117). Perception is not to be construed as the subjective coloring-in of an otherwise meaningless and senseless world, but as the continuation of a process already at work in, and as, the things themselves.

Moreover, Whitehead departs from Hegel’s approach in a way that is crucial for Merleau-Ponty, as he notes in the *Nature* lectures: “According to Whitehead, Nature is a species of activity which is exercised without being comparable to the activity of a consciousness or mind” (118). By process of Nature, Whitehead *does* have in mind “process in the sense of *Aufhebung*,” but this does not issue in a totalizing logic, as with Hegel: “If Whitehead says that Nature is not accidental, he does not mean thereby that it is necessary: it does not have internal necessity. What he means in speaking of the ‘subject-object’ is that Nature ‘communes with itself’” (119-20). More generally, Whitehead’s “category of the ultimate”—creativity, emergence, novelty—would clearly eschew a comprehensive logic such as Hegel’s. For Whitehead, the universe is an unfinished story. This notion is consonant with Merleau-Ponty’s suspicion that a mutation in the relationship between man and Being was taking place around his own time.

Lastly, Merleau-Ponty seems to have been intrigued by Whitehead’s notion of “conrescence,” which appears to have found its way into several of the sketches in the *The Visible and the Invisible*. Indeed, in the *Nature* lectures, the conclusion to the chapter on Whitehead reads like a primer for the new ontology:

The task of a philosophy of Nature would be to describe all the modes of process, without grouping them under certain headings borrowed from substantialist thinking [as Hegel does]. The human is a mode just as much as are animal cells. There is no limit to the abundance of categories, but there are types of “conrescence” that pass by degradation of each other. (122)

This notion of concrescence, I suggest, could serve as the material for reconstructing the great chain of being. It maintains an element of relative determinacy in nature despite the erosion of substance metaphysics hastened by Heidegger and post-structuralism. Moreover, this seems to be just what Merleau-Ponty was after in forging a new ontology: a way to articulate a non-materialist view of nature in which human beings belong. Each mode of being, human or nonhuman, is a mode of flesh, a relatively stable configuration, hollow, coherent deformation, relief—by any other word, concrescence—and all modes are, in the terms of *The Visible and the Invisible*, “differentiations of one sole and massive adhesion to Being which is the flesh (eventually as ‘lacework’) ... [T]here is no hierarchy of orders or layers or planes ... [T]here is dimensionality of every fact and facticity of every dimension” (270).

Notes

¹ In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes: “What distinguishes intentionality from the Kantian relation to a possible object is that the unity of the world, before being posited by knowledge in a specific act of identification, is ‘lived’ as ready-made or already there ... This is why Husserl distinguishes intentionality of act, which is that of our judgments and of those occasions when we voluntarily take up a position—the only intentionality discussed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*—and operative intentionality, or that which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and our life” (xix-xx).

² For the sake of clarity, when I use the term “metaphysics,” I am referring to a philosophy that attempts to solve *aporias* by postulating entities, objects, planes or principles that are not given or grounded in experience, or that cannot be established as transcendental conditions of experience. Metaphysics, in other words, means assertions without evidence, and evidence of a phenomenological kind. “Ontology,” on the other hand, will refer to any attempt to give an account of the real that takes Kant’s critical approach to heart, and tries to find a middle way between “metaphysics” and the “philosophy of consciousness.”

³ The quarrel with Kant is, in a sense, over the “order” of the three critiques. The first deals with the possibility of knowledge, and is quietly guided by the premise that experience *par excellence*

is concerned with the cognition of and reflective judgments about objects. The third occupies a subordinate position; aesthetic judgment is regarded as a subset, a particular and exceptional case of judgment. Hence, in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes, “Kant himself shows in the *Critique of Judgment* that there exists a unity of the imagination and the understanding and a unity of subjects before the object, and that, in experiencing the beautiful, for example, I am aware of a harmony between sensation and concept, between myself and others, which is itself without any concept” (xix).

⁴ This term, used frequently throughout the first chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*, seems to apply variously to Descartes, Kant and Husserl, though how frequently and to what extent the term canvasses Husserl is disputable.

⁵ Whether Hegel’s principle is a metaphysical one—i.e., an unwarranted assertion—is an issue to which I will return, as well as the ways in which Hegel remains prisoner to the philosophy of consciousness, and hence Kant.

⁶ Though Gadamer’s approach is focused squarely on intersubjectivity and interpretation, and harbors neither the ontological ambitions nor the concern for resignifying nature that Merleau-Ponty does in his later work, this indictment of Hegel clearly dovetails with the latter’s espousal of the method of “interrogation” in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Hegel’s attempt to “carry out in advance,” and hence explain, what develops only in and through experience itself, is a function of his theory of experience. As Gadamer notes, “applying Hegel’s dialectic to history, insofar as he regarded it as part of the absolute self-consciousness of philosophy, does not do justice to hermeneutical consciousness. The nature of experience is conceived in terms of something that surpasses it; for experience itself can never be science” (349). Gadamer’s suggested replacement is telling: “The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself” (350). This, in turn, sounds very much like Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “openness upon Being,” his revision of perception as “complying with,” the supra-cognitive disposition of interrogation, etc.

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