

merleau-ponty's

CRITIQUE

OF

REASON

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suppositionless and critical may pile reduction upon reduction and still remain the victim of the commonsense viewpoint it has worked so hard to neutralize.

Hegel's criticism of Kant already implied that a philosophy can be genuinely critical and transcendental—in the sense of considering what appears precisely in terms of the consciousness' bringing its object into being—and still assume everyday commonsense convictions, thus making presuppositions about the nature of experience instead of radically questioning its significance. As Hegel sees it, Kant's every affirmation of the phenomenon-noumenon distinction is an uncritical giving in to the commonsense conviction that there really are things-in-themselves and that, even though we are unable to say just what they are, they make their reality felt.

Hegel, banishing the thing-in-itself, succeeds in being still more fundamental. Gone are the last traces of subject-object opposition; the matter is now authentically informed as the very sense of the dialectic is worked up out of the insufficiencies of each moment of signification, and the necessity (*Notwendigkeit*) of its forward movement receives its drive from the demonstrated need (*Not*) of each figure for another, often apparently contrary one to fulfill its sense. An index of the fundamental importance of Hegelian analysis can be found in its ability to integrate human phenomena of many levels, from basic epistemological-logical formations to the most specific artistic and literary creations, into one scheme of explanation, in which the voluntary and the intellectual, the temporal and the eternal, the natural and the cultural are intimately intertwined.

Yet Hegel himself—without whose fundamental ontology the later phenomenology would be unthinkable—did not succeed in reducing all commonsense convictions to neutrality. He left unexamined the conviction that being must make sense. For him what is became simply what is known; he always sought the logos of the phenomena in total explanation. Hegel constantly tends to dissipate the opaqueness of Being, to turn away from the resistant, the paradoxical, the impenetrable, and to affirm an ideal world, a universe of intelligible order that is a totally human production.

The proto-existentialists were able to offer in opposition to Hegel's apotheosis of reason as Being itself only their feeling that somehow

things do not in fact actually make as much sense as Hegel supposed they ought to; and they expressed in dramatic terms their conviction that men are not so much Spirit in general as individual persons, not just Reason but reasoning beings; that each individual is a concrete ego, with its personal history, its lacunae, its point of view, its peculiar destiny—a partly opaque reality not to be absorbed in the whole, but resisting reflective grasp, the way things themselves appear to resist total penetration by consciousness. Thus, there is actually a whole critique of reason to be found in the works of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; but, being unsystematic and frenetic, it was destined to remain poorly understood until phenomenology had more methodically prepared the ground.<sup>1</sup>

Even in the heyday of German idealism, nineteenth-century rationalism remained a force behind the rapid developments in science. The scientist proceeded, like the commonsense man, as though he were concerned with an unequivocal reality lying there objectively before him, waiting to be known exactly as it is in itself. What was not yet known could, in principle, come to be so; in any event, nothing was considered worthy of serious attention until it had been grasped clearly, unequivocally—that is, until one encountered something which revealed itself to be exactly what it is. Since the twentieth-century revolution in physics, it is difficult even in the most objective scientific sphere, to be quite that naïve. In the areas that touch man and his knowledge, above all psychology, it ought to be simply impossible.

Nevertheless, there are still psychologists today who proceed to reflect on phenomena of the human psyche as though they had to do with objects, with things-in-themselves, analyzable into data, absolutely intelligible nodules which can be recomposed into the original experience according to some perfectly intelligible plan. I am

1. Today we can afford to admit that Hegel sought to integrate an element of otherness, concreteness, individuality, passivity into his philosophy—but, of course, without compromising the transcendental viewpoint. The proto-existentialists were impressed only by his apparent idealism and hence mounted an extensive counterattack against an opponent more unequivocally idealist than the author of *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* in fact is. This is why, too, they prefer to attack the *Logic* rather than the *Phenomenology*.

From Husserl, then, Merleau-Ponty learned both the meaning of radical and methodical exploration of our experience from the transcendental viewpoint and the ultimate danger of an intellectualization that renders the founding term insubstantial. The Gestalt psychologists offered a suggestion he was to develop into a possible corrective of the Husserlian form of the classical Cartesian difficulty. This was their notion that the synthesizing forms of our experience are not ideas but corporeal a prioris. These givens of the body, physiological forms which establish the general horizons of the world of our experience, prepare the possibility of intellectual knowledge but are effective prior to it and as its ground; they are themselves moments of Being.

The Gestalt psychologists did not sufficiently explore the philosophical implications of their discovery, to their own detriment. Merleau-Ponty, aided by Husserl to see the intentional nature of the Gestaltist discovery, attempted to. Inspired particularly by Kurt Goldstein's *Der Aufbau des Organismus*, Merleau-Ponty, in his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, utilizes the Gestaltist notion of the figure-background (figure-fond) dialectic in his effort to keep his explanation of experience from crystallizing into fixed concepts. Greatly oversimplified, his interpretation is that the background is formed of the sedimented general results of all the body's previous dialogues with Being; its articulations are differentiations achieved by Being in its own mass. The figure stands at the center of the perceptive space opened by the body—an opening hollowed by Being itself, the "sides," "horizons," or "fond" of which are the whole of Being. The implications as well as the sense of this view of the central Gestaltist notion will occupy our attention throughout the present study. By way of introduction it should be sufficient to remark that for Merleau-Ponty, as he himself declared in a note written only months before his death, "the Gestalt holds the key to the problem of the spirit."

Drawing heavily on Gestaltist evidence that human comportment, while maintaining a properly organic unity, also manifests certain dialectically interrelated levels, *The Structure of Behavior*—in accord with the Husserlian conviction that before we can hope to disengage the sense of the ultimate unity of the spirit's total life, we must attend to the many essences of the different regions within incarnated existence—explores an organization supple enough to look "down"

commonsense experience toward clear consciousness tends to polarize our attention, noetically, toward the most willful active principle—the subjective Ego as doer, grasped as intellect and will—and, noematically, toward the most structured object—the finished product of our praxis-centered daily concerns, the intellectually fixed, objectivized thing. While both the voluntary ego and objective thing implicitly depend on the actual body's living in the world and making an experience possible in the first place, the bodily synthesis nevertheless goes about its task so silently, so fundamentally, that its transcendental contribution is no more noticed than the light which illumines and thus makes possible every visible spectacle. Only unusual experiences revealing a fissure in the otherwise unrelieved atmosphere of already constructed world—the hallucination, the illusion, anything which causes the smooth unfolding of the world suddenly not to be taken so much for granted—can provide the epoché needed to suspend the practical experience's attention-absorbing hold on us.<sup>3</sup>

Even after we have recognized its existence, we still face a major problem in describing this world-founding action of the *corps propre*. Because of the noesis' absorption in the noema—or, to reverse the reciprocal relation, because the world must itself find that possibility of body which noetically animates it—because "*le corps propre* is in the world like the heart in the organism, animating it and nourishing it interiorally, forming with it a system (*PP*, p. 235), any description of it that maintains the desired reciprocity between the two principles must avoid suggesting that the intentional synthesis acts centrifugally and forces a sense on indifferent matter. The wonder of intentionality's noesis-noema relationship lies precisely in the fact that this *Sinngebung* is centrifugal and centripetal at the same time. This will explain what might otherwise seem an inconsistency in Merleau-Ponty's work. This sentence, for example, found in *Signs*—"the signification animates the word as the world animates my body" (*S*, p. 112)—might seem to contradict directly *The Phenomenology of Perception's* "the body animates the world." The key to the apparent paradox lies in

3. *Epoché* is Husserl's term for the act of suspending the normal, habitual movement of common sense out into the world of its daily practical concerns, in order to make it possible to reflect on the very possibility of there being such a world for us in the first place.

altered by changes either in the objective or in the subjective pole of the perception experience. If a piece of white paper is introduced into the beam of an arc light focused on a disk, the beam, which until then was confounded with the disk on which it was falling to form a unified luminous cone, is now dissociated from the disk and stands out for the first time as illumination (*PP*, p. 360). The introduction of a new value disaggregates the old unity and calls for reorganization of the sense of the whole lived spectacle. Similarly, when a package of typewriter paper is spread across my desk so that some of the pieces lie in deep shadow and others directly under the lamp, I can, by deliberately suspending my unreflecting spontaneous movement into the spectacle, be brought to admit that the white values of the deeply shaded and those of the brightly lit pieces are not objectively the same. I spontaneously live all the pieces of paper as equivalent in color value, but my reflective act can alter the spectacle's presentation.

The same unstable equilibrium is evident on a higher plane, in a widely different sphere of intentional activity: language. The general sense of the words I use in discourse—their ability to fit into an infinity of contexts—receives its particular determination by the position the words assume in the present context. The relationship of the context to the particular words is general, but the generality of each word (the wide range of possible meanings of its constellation of sounds) is brought down to a particular meaning by its place in the context, and it is the particularity-generality of the words that establishes the context. The sense in which the particular meaning is a deviation from a norm—the general range of possible sense the words, thanks to their sedimented history, bring with them—is here fairly palpable.

The dialectical tension between moment and background stands out clearly in these examples: If the norm is altered, the sense of all the moments will be shifted; shift the moments and the change will be felt throughout the constellation of givens that are grouped within the horizons of a given lived configuration. Such descriptions from the transcendental viewpoint emphasize the lived nature—we might say the organic unity—of experience. We begin to realize that whatever sort of an initiative is introduced into such a scheme, whether an act

of initiative on the part of the active subject or a point of initiative introduced by a sensible given, it necessarily brings about alteration of the global scene; and the new element must struggle against all the resistances that were previously populating the field of experience.

One feels at once the limitless implications looming up when no moment within experience can be regarded as an isolated *en soi*, when every point of newness must achieve a place for itself by de-centering and recentering the dynamic unity of the field of experience, when the moment of experience—be it stimulus in a constellation of stimuli, thing in a landscape, word in a sentence, individual in a class, or institution in a nation—can exercise a leverage on the whole just as every alteration of the whole changes the sense of the moment. In such circumstances, the liberty exercised by any sort of initiative within a field must have its limits: every initiative must struggle against the generalized resistance of the whole and must derive its very sense from that resisting totality. All the traditional formulations of philosophy envisioning a relationship between a lower (concrete, sensible) and a higher (universal, intellectual) moment of experience must then be rethought in the more dynamic terms of this fundamental dialectic, and, consequently, the pretenses of reason to pronounce absolutely—i.e. to achieve a generality no longer subject to the moments' becoming—must be reconsidered in the light of the dialectic of our perceptual insertion in the world.

Now that the first outlines of the philosophy into which such considerations will lead us have begun to become apparent, there remains the question of where we can best begin to describe in detail the actual dialectic between general fond and particular figure that is the very development of experience and the source of the world's history. Let us follow Husserl's example, taking the course of a natural genetic.

THE FILLING UP OF EMPTY HORIZONS: ATTENTION Because I am born with the corps propre I am given an initial and fundamental opening-into-the-world. This is the original situation Heidegger describes as *Geworfenheit*, thrownness. Merleau-Ponty conceives this initial pact signed with the world "without my complicity"—that is, without experience-actualizing initiatives—as

"minimal"; it provides "only a sketchy outline of a veritable presence in the world" (*PP*, p. 193) and requires those conscious attentive acts in order to fill up (in the sense of the Husserlian *Erfüllung*)<sup>15</sup> with the articulated objects of adult perception. It is important to realize that we can discover in our experience here and now that natural fond, that *pré-histoire*, which provides the ultimate horizons and first ground for all our subsequent history, as a significant text makes clear:

Through the sensation I seize on the margin of my personal life and my own acts a *given* life of consciousness from which they emerge, the life of my eyes, of my hands, of my ears, which are so many natural "I's." Each time I experience a sensation, I experience that it interests not my own particular being, that for which I am responsible and about which I can decide, but another me which has already opted for the world, which has already opened itself up to certain of its aspects and synchronized itself with them. Between my sensation and me, there is always the thickness of a *primordial* acquisition which keeps my experience from being clear for itself (*PP*, p. 250).

The suggestion that subsequent cultural experience is grounded in the primordial acquisition, the cultural-historical in the natural world, will help to situate all "mythic" spaces in relation to "real" intellectual space by reference to the given natural fond which shows through in the analysis of the child's or the primitive's experience as "the canvas shows through the painting." Moreover, it throws light on psychopathology by partially explaining how the disturbed person's cultural world can disintegrate without necessarily destroying his entire hold on the natural space, which nevertheless, is clearly not normally filled up. But more important than either of these significant aspects is the suggestion that the very reality of our liberty lies in whatever may be the possibilities of dialogue between these levels and between the moments within the backgrounds these levels provide.<sup>16</sup>

15. *Ideen* I, para. 138b, 140, 141, 145b.

16. The later essays make clearer than the *Phenomenology* the extent to which the distinction between "natural" and "cultural-historical" must, in a

horizons into figures (*PP*, p. 38<sup>17</sup>). Attention is "the active constitution of a new object which explicates and thematizes what was offered until then only as indeterminate horizons" (*PP*, p. 39). The object presents itself as still indeterminate possibility; it motivates the consciousness to take up what is still only ambiguous; with the help of the generalized resources of his sedimented experience of the world, the subject is able to determine the amorphous given into his object. Correlatively, prior to the act of attention, the indetermination, the generality of the subject's horizons offer a range of possibility—Merleau-Ponty speaks in this context of a "liberty of indetermination"—which he must momentarily alienate in responding as he does to the ambiguous solicitations of the object; for when the subject gives himself an actual determined object, he directs and engages himself, forming its own personal history. This bipolar liberty of indetermination, man's capacity to direct the course of the determination, implies a certain *recul* vis-à-vis the sensible givens. "This passage from the indetermined to the determined, this *reprise* at every instant of its own history in the unity of a new sense, this is thought itself" (*PP*, p. 39). Merleau-Ponty cites Valéry: "The work of the spirit exists only in act."<sup>18</sup>

Envisioned here is a given which is not an absolutely determined en soi but a solicitation within a range of possibility, just as a particular word can be considered an invitation to a certain range of possible expressive compartments. Such an empty intention is empty but not nothing; it is *un creux* (a depression) *dans l'être*, not a *trou* (a hole) but a *vide déterminé*. It invites filling up, but the act of taking it up is not the act of an absolute Ego, capable of anything and of making anything out of anything. Rather, the attending subject acts as an existent possessed of a generalized history, founded in the natural horizons provided by the body's original givenness, and further empowered by the sedimented, habitual, generalized horizons of interpretation accumulated during his personal history, "the cultural body." When I listen to a discourse, the words do not determine my act of comprehension absolutely (if that were so, all the auditors would understand in the same fashion) but rather solicit

17. Merleau-Ponty cites Koffka.

18. *Introduction à la poétique*, p. 40.

the deployment of my general possibilities of interpretation. If the listener cannot speak the speaker's language, if a child is listening to a theologian's discourse, or if a Barthian is listening to a Dominican, the response to the solicitation may fall far short of actualizing the best potentialities that are held out by the pronounced words. It must be noted, however, that no absolute understanding of discourse is possible, least of all by the speaker himself, for the words drag with them endless general worlds. Thus the criticism of a piece of literature is never ended, the implications of a statement are never exhausted.

Similarly, because the infant cannot respond to the solicitation of the colors, no shades of color as the adult experiences them appear in his phenomenal field. Only when the corps propre is physiologically prepared to deploy a new a priori does the finer articulation become possible. The difference between the corps propre's deployment of a priori and the subject's giving of a sense out of the resources of his personal history lies in the greater range, the flexibility, the greater degree of willful initiative the corps propre is able, in the last case, to exercise over the instruments provided by the full human comportment.

### *The Command of Space-Time as Ground of Our Liberty*

CONTRAST WITH HIGHER ANIMALS A brief sketch of Merleau-Ponty's contrast of human comportment with the less flexible possibilities of the higher animals, as developed in *The Structure of Behavior*, may serve to emphasize this last, important point. At the same time, it will provide a wider perspective on the concept that freedom is bound up with the power to meet the givens of one's situation with a maximum of interpretative range.

When Wilhelm Koehler set up some rather natural problems for bright chimpanzees to solve by using evermore complicated instruments, he reached one conclusion easily: the ape structures his milieu much more exclusively than the human being in terms of lines of force that stretch rather rigidly out from his body. When an ape sought to reach outside of his cage for bananas using proffered pieces of bamboo that could be fitted together to form a pole, he arrived quickly at the solution if the pieces were laid in a straight

line stretching along his line of vision toward the fruit. When the sticks were placed at random, the solution was usually discovered by accident, when the animal happened to bring the sticks into line after trying every sort of possibility and configuration. Similarly, when several boxes could be piled on top of one another to reach bananas hanging from the top of the cage, the ape showed no immediate grasp of a possible relationship between the scattered boxes or of the importance of the relative size of the boxes. His first tendency was to pick up a box and wave it vaguely toward the fruit or to push any object in that general direction (including, on one occasion, the hapless keeper). When he had finally groped to the correct solution, he scrambled up his pile and, with incredible acrobatics, reached for the fruit. Koehler remarks that the pile of boxes, instead of being conceived of as a stable platform, was apparently seen as an extension of the ape's own body, as though he felt the lines of force passing through the teetering mass which he managed to keep in precarious equilibrium just long enough to solve his problem.

One thing then is apparent: The ape shows little talent for imagining the situation from the thing's point of view, from "over there." When, in a now classic experiment, the bananas were placed in a three-sided box outside but up against the cage with the open side away from the bars, the solution was obvious—to any adult human being: reach out with a stick, push the fruit away so that it will slide out of the box, and then pull it back through the bars. But the ape, it seems, had great trouble projecting himself, so to speak, into the fruit's point of view. He kept trying to pull the fruit to himself immediately until he finally solved the problem more or less by accident, a wild blow of the stick having sent the bananas flying out of the box. The same ape who had been able to project himself rapidly and unflinching through a complicated maze to get at the sighted object could barely learn to push the fruit itself through even the simplest maze. Apparently, only with great difficulty could he disengage himself from his real spatial position and identify himself with the thing to be maneuvered.

The suggestion that human superiority consists in greater freedom to survey the structure within the perceptual field and thus command much more creatively the range of time and space it opens reinforces

Merleau-Ponty's main point. If our properly human capabilities are rooted in that liberty of indifference, which offers us a certain leeway in focusing attention and thus in structuring the phenomenal field, the time-space relations with which we are bound up are not those rigid ones of the animal; to the inevitable flow of events we can oppose more than instinct. Our attentive acts, says Merleau-Ponty, borrowing Husserl's language once again, permit us *überzuschauen*—to dominate—the situation. Deeper-lying natural time and space show through our more creative superimpositions, as we shall shortly learn, but the human existent, as ego, is able to transcend the originally given structures and thus to gather up moments and assemble worlds through the power termed "symbolization." A sense-giver who actualizes, instead of the rigid instinctive forms of the animal, the generalized possibility of the cultural body—of a history; who is able to build upon nature a creative human world structured with signs is an existent; he is able to live the paradox of a finite freedom. It is the nature of his superior comportment—the existential-space-opening act of an ego capable of transcending the nature in which it is rooted—that we must seek to describe.

NOT SPACE BUT SPACES, FOLLOWING THE DIFFERENT MODES OF OUR "FIXATION DANS LE MONDE" Because the animal's body is different, his space is not like the human's. Even within human space, as we have suggested, there is reason to distinguish the more fundamental natural space (that given with *pré-histoire* as the very frame of our *Geworfenheit*, the initial being-in-the-world which comes with our bodily endowment) and other spaces, more particular *paysages*, such as those distinguishing the child's from the adult's world. The notion of comportmental space can obviously englobe every sort of relation with an object (the space of traditional geometry being merely one sort, which itself of course has to be related to the others). The essential problem is how man can enjoy any distance at all from objects of various sorts—not only sensible things but mythical entities, artistic worlds, the landscape of discourse, etc.—that distance which is necessary to make possible their standing "over there" in opposition to me. Such space-opening, as the previous experiments suggested, is the very ground of tran-

scendence both of the object in its otherness and of the ego as center of initiative not so absorbed by the experience that it is incapable of dominating it in some way.

The study of this primordial space-opening which keeps the objects at just the distance necessary for our normal handling of them, i.e. neither so far as to leave us untouched, nor so close as to obsess us, is normally hampered by our absorption in the results of all our constitutive activity, that is, by the things with which our practical projects deal. Once again, we must cast about for an unusual experience that will provide a glimpse of the activity at work precisely when its fully, we might say properly, constituted objects are not there.

In the darkest of nights, the world of clear and articulated objects is abolished, but our perceptive being, although "amputated" from its world, nevertheless goes on opening a space without things. The night itself is no object standing over against me; rather "it envelops me, penetrating all the sense, suffocating my memory, almost effacing my personal identity." I am no longer confined to the perceptive post from which I customarily see the profiles of things file by at a distance, for the dark has no profiles. It touches me immediately and enjoys an almost mystical unity.<sup>19</sup> Even a cry or a distant light populate it only vaguely, seem to animate it all at once; it is a pure depth without planes, without surfaces, without distance between me and it. At the opposite pole from geometric space, which seems borne up and tied together by thought and which itself seems to be working from no particular place, nocturnal space appears to radiate from me as its center. Anguish lurks in the night because experiencing the night is experiencing the primordial space-opening act; it brings us face to face with our contingency, the gratuitous and untiring movement by which we seek to anchor ourselves in and transcend toward fixed, definite things, without any guarantee of always finding them there (*PP*, p. 328).

19. Merleau-Ponty is describing here the primordial encounter, the oneness of body and world, before the objectivizing acts fix and *étalent* their objects. In *S*, an effort will be made to make us aware that this primordial closeness remains underneath the distances established by the *ek-sistential* acts; in those pages we shall see for instance that the other person and I "haunt" the same space.

The location and nature of the phenomenon in the dream or the myth depend on the directions of our desires, on what we fear, on what we feel our lives dependent upon. When the primitive man finds his campsite inhabited by friendly gods, the forest by menacing demons, and the raindrops by fertile spirits, his infantile myth is not radically different from the affectivity that structures my own existential geography. While on vacation, I may easily come to share the local farmers' anxiety about the exceptional drought, but if I open the paper and learn that war is menacing, I suddenly feel exiled in this village, far from the center of things. Most ordinary space is thus neither fully real nor fully imaginary; it is filled with affective content. When, as in mental illness, it loses much of that content, things appear as empty shells, mere vestiges of what they were.

The lived distance between a person and things holds the measure at each moment of the amplitude and normalcy of his life. Ordinarily, space permits our accustomed domination of things and thus keeps them at the right distance for the customary practical dealings we, as plain, sophisticated adults, are used to carrying out with them. In normal space, we are neither indifferent to things nor unduly possessed by any of them. The surge of mythical space is then able to compose smoothly with the natural space intersubjectively inhabited by all the other existents. What is past, for instance, usually slips away into general sedimentation; in contrast, the disturbed person's complex is a moment that has failed to move along with the usual flow of a human history and that now obstructs the present by structuring the phenomenal field abnormally, shifting all values.

Disturbance becomes intense when private space takes over, when the subject becomes incapable of the normal automatic insertion into our common natural space. A schizophrenic, for example, may be fascinated by a given sight, such as a mountain landscape, for example. Suddenly, he feels a foreign force snatch the landscape from him; he sees a second sky, black and limitless, penetrate the blue evening. This empty, invisible, terrifying sky is for a moment only part of the autumnal landscape, but then the earth itself seems absorbed by it. All the time, declares the sick man, "a permanent question is being asked me, like an order to go get some rest or to die or to go

has been altered; insufficient room has been left between the perceiver and the perceived, thus impeding the customary smooth existential flow of properly related spatial layers.

A further question now arises: which is the true space—our natural, clear, objective space or the anthropological spaces discovered in myths, dreams, and hallucinations? The intellectualist philosopher (like the average adult, the civilized, commonsense man) simply writes off such odd experiences as psychological curiosities. By regarding them as devoid of any important philosophical significance, he is left free to deduct a single space that is suitable for a world where all things can be thought and where the truth must be both univocal and omnipresent. As we have seen, however, even our normally lived natural space has little in common with the unequivocal ideal of Euclidean geometry. Moreover, to dismiss myths and hallucinations is to overlook the significant fact that the primitive and the child really believe their myths (just as I really believe that there is a big flat rock in my path until I draw closer and only then realize that it is just a bright patch of sunlight). Now the final test of any theory of truth must be its ability to account for all phenomena, especially the phenomenon of error. If such breaches can somehow be opened in the normal world, it must contain "layers" that can slide apart to permit the illusion, the dream, the myth to enter the clear structure of natural space. Such an approach expresses the problem noematically, but we already confronted the same issue noetically when we asked how our existence could surge ahead of what the world solicits. The importance of the question, of course, lies in the fact that our liberty, as we suggested earlier, consists in the initiatives we are able to take in moving about in our existential spaces.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SPACES PRESUPPOSE THE CONSTITUTION OF NATURAL SPACE Natural space is often invaded by anthropological space, "haunted," as Merleau-Ponty once put it, by hallucination and myth. This expression suggests the precedence of natural space over all others. Anthropological spaces are constructed on natural space (the nonobjectivizing acts on the objectivizing ones, as Husserl would say) (*PP*, p. 340<sup>23</sup>). The schizophrenic

23. Merleau-Ponty cites the fifth *Logische Untersuchungen*, pp. 387ff.

knows that the brush is indeed "over there" in natural space, even though he doesn't consider it to be the real brush, the one he can feel. The precedence of natural space is what leads to the common error of conceiving it to be an object of thought devoid of all ambivalence, like geometric space. It must, however, be recognized for what it is: a horizon of possible objectivizations and compartments, a call to be in the world in a certain way. The primitive constructs his mythical space against a background (*fond*) of natural space that is clearly enough articulated to make possible such acts of everyday life as fishing, hunting, and even relations with civilized men. His mythical space, no matter how diffuse, is a variation on that basic structure; it organizes his world further and calls him to certain attitudes about that world. The sacredness of the campground expresses a relationship between that one place and all other locations; the presence of the god in the rain establishes a rapport with his nonpresence elsewhere.

The mythical consciousness does not objectivize as the familiar consciousness of the thing we explicitly think about. Subjectively, it is always in flux, never becoming very aware of itself; objectively, the object it crystallizes is not defined in clear terms by a certain number of neatly articulated properties. Yet if mythical consciousness were not an effort to structure the world, it would not be consciousness of anything at all. Such a consciousness certainly does not stand at what would be considered a normal distance from its noema, but unless it attempted at least a rudimentary movement of objectivization, it would not crystallize itself in myths at all (*PP*, p. 338). The interpenetration of spaces—indeed, their very multiplicity—by forcing us to seek the rapports between these spaces, strikingly brings out their ontological significance: it reveals them to be moments of experience that are structured by the existent's form of being-in-the-world, of which they are but the noematic correlates. The primordial space, our natural space, is the original corporeal structure that makes being-in-the-world at all possible. All the others are variations on this basic theme.

Just as the mythical consciousness must build about some nuclei of signification which it takes from its own natural world, so must the dream and the hallucination contain elements of the natural

world. The space of the dream may be cut off from the clear space of the waking world, but it makes free use of all its articulations; "The world obsesses us even in sleep; it is on and about the world (*sur le monde*) that we dream" (*PP*, p. 339). Even folly gravitates about the world. This is obvious in the case of morbid reveries which try to fabricate a private domain out of the debris of the world; even in the most severe cases of depression—those in which the sick person, as it were, installs his dwelling place in death—the being of the world is still utilized, for the individual borrows what he needs to structure his denial of it.

Less dramatically, in a familiar experience's fully natural world the anthropologic worlds we mingle with it often show through "as the canvas shows through the painting." If I am walking across the Place de la Concorde, with all of Paris as my field of action, and suddenly fasten my eyes on the stone wall that retains the parapet of the Tuileries, la Concorde (and with it all Paris as that familiar human agglomeration) will disappear. With nothing before me now but a historyless stone, I can restrict my attention still more, until there is only a gray, grainy surface, the play of light on an indefinite matter. While my total perception is of course made up of more than such analytic moments, it can always be dissolved into them. My body, through its habits, can assure my insertion into the cultural, human world, but it must first project me (thanks to the *acquis originaire*) into that natural world, which can thus always be seen to show through. Even perceptions of what is desired by desire, loved by love, or hated by hate always form about sensible nuclei, however scanty; it is in the primary sense data that they seek verification and find fullness.

In summary, although Merleau-Ponty attempted no systematic enumeration of all the possibilities for different kinds of spatiality, depending on the different ways an existent installs himself in the world, he insists that whatever sort of anthropological space there may prove to be is essentially dependent upon the natural space. All the more intellectual and fanciful acts presuppose the corps propre's given, fundamental world-opening. If existence as such is spatial, no human act is without its kind of spatiality, and, correlatively, no opening of a space can occur without employing as its core at least a

this kind of perceiver can have on this kind of thing. It thus becomes the principle of unity for the whole gamut of possible perceptions, the type, as it were, toward which all the other perspectives converge (*PP*, p. 348). Because of my knowledge of its type, as a thing goes farther away or comes closer, instead of perceiving primarily a change in size, I experience a kind of tension oscillating about the norm. If a thing is turned at an odd angle, perception of it is experienced as a disequilibrium, for its influences on me are unequally distributed. If I see a dot high in the sky, then later perceive that it has grown into an airplane, still later into a large transport, and finally into a C-130 turboprop military transport, the individual glimpses seem to be steps toward the grasp of the real plane in its objective size and shape. Perceptions themselves may thus be seen as so many moments in a single gesture leading to the optimal attitude. The unification is existential, and the result transcendent as it yields "the objective size and shape of the thing" (*PP*, pp. 349-50).

The sense in which a perception can be said to be optimal must be understood in the light of our earlier remarks about the teleology of perception. To speak of an equilibrium between the given *montage à l'égard du monde* with which the body opens onto the perceived world and the solicitations of the data inevitably suggests that the things perceived are making their demands, but we pointed out earlier that they must not be conceived as a reality en soi to which a comportment—itsself imagined as having no effect on the sense of the perception—simply must conform. The montage we now see determines the very conditions of the solicitation or at least the limits within which it can occur. Neither perceiver nor perceived is the preferred determiner, however, for both retain their identity within the transcendent dialectic. The perception is not foreign to the perceiver but is dependent upon him for its being (the supreme sign of this is that we are free to make something out of our world), but neither is the perceived thing simply swallowed up in the ideal world of an absolute transcendental ego. We might even say that the perceiver is for the sake of the perceived, since he is only insofar as he exists in a real world—i.e. as he responds to a milieu of resistances and solicitations which make demands on him that he go on perpetuating them in some form or other.

perception I actually enjoy because I am capable of gathering up the sparse sense that is offered and of fleshing it out with experience the corps propre is able to deploy according to that science of the world which is built into the *montage à l'égard du monde*.<sup>26</sup> The meaningful gaze (*le regard*) capable of grasping the sense of the spectacle is the result of the dialectical union, "the natural correlation of the appearance and our kinesthetic unwindings, not known in a law, but lived as the engagement of our body in the typical structures of a world," in other words, as I mentioned earlier, a kind of dance.

### *The Unity of the Substance and the Fullness of the World*

*The Phenomenology of Perception* analyzes and explains in detail phenomena of constancy for all the senses, but its major philosophical points have already been made clear. Constancy of color, shape, size, or any other quality is simply an abstract moment of the constancy of things which, in turn (like the constancy of every one of the moments), is founded in the total comportment of the body reaching out to found a world. The body is fundamentally intentional, since every moment of its life is striving to found a consistent world by seeking to harmonize that moment with every other moment. Husserl's *Urdoxa* can now be understood simply as the expression of the prime effect of that intentional body which we are given and which manifests itself, declares Merleau-Ponty, as a spontaneous *parti-pris en faveur de l'être*, a presumption of unity and consistency.

The kernel of Merleau-Ponty's ontology is contained in this notion, but before we explore its implications, let us note its cogency in the present context. As the existent strives to achieve the unity of the world by integrating all its perceptions into a total grasp of constant things, regulated as it is "by a logic which assigns each object its determinations in function of all the others," all aberrant givens—those that cannot be configured, as they will not integrate smoothly with the others—are simply "crossed out" as unreal (*PP*, p. 361). Similarly, when a phenomenon does not resist the corps propre suffi-

26. Recall that the schizoid's world is so empty because something is preventing his deploying with full energy all the body's resources, which leaves him with little more than what is actually sensibly imposing itself.

ciently to demand a configuration of its own, it becomes contaminated by the structures nearest it and can hardly be called "a thing." The sky, for example, is so thin and so distant at the horizon, so difficult to localize at the zenith, that I remain suspicious of the reality of this skittering reflection, a phenomenon which offers itself to only one sense and so vaguely that that sense cannot find sufficient support in it to call forth the perception of the whole body. When, on the other hand, a thing offers sufficient resistance to demand configuration, the entire phenomenal body, actual and possible, will contribute to that perception; I virtually see the tumbler I am holding in my hand, even though I am looking away.

The substantiality of the thing—its unity—is to be explained in no other way. This solves the dilemmas presented by the classical notions of substance. "The unity of the thing beyond its frozen properties is not a substrate, an empty X, a subject of inherence, but *that unique accent* which is rediscoverable in each [property], that unique manner of existing of which each property [considered by itself] is only a derived expression" (PP, p. 368). The fragility, rigidity, transparency, and crystalline sound of a tumbler translate a single way of being. Each quality invokes and unifies with the others because it is one of many holds the same perceiving body has on a moment of the world. For similar reasons, it is impossible to imagine a thing which is not either actually perceived or potentially perceptible. "The thing can never be separated from someone who perceives it, it can never be effectively *en soi* because its articulations are those of our existence and because it is posed at the term of a gaze or a sensorial exploration which bestows upon it a humanity" (PP, p. 370). Not surprisingly, Merleau-Ponty is here able to exploit to the full, though very much in passing, the advantages of the Berkeleian position that perception as such explains why our world is so "human." As we shall see later, however, he is also confronted with the Berkeleian problem of accounting for whatever objectivity, otherness, or *en soi* reality the perceived thing does obviously manifest.<sup>27</sup>

27. I have sought elsewhere to bring out the extent to which Berkeley anticipates this central development of transcendental philosophy. See "Berkeley," in Etienne Gilson and Thomas Langan, *Modern Philosophy* (New York, Random House, 1962).

"The whole of nature is the staging [*mise en scène*] of our own life or our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue" (PP, p. 370). The poetic language in which this declaration is couched (invoking theater and discourse) itself brings home strikingly the advantages of this aesthetic philosophy. If the thing is indeed the correlate of my body, if it is the corps propre which provides the very texture of the world, then, to begin with, the existence of anthropomorphic predicates is explained once and for all in a truly international sense. The "gay colors," for example, are now gay "out there" in the world, as real qualities of things themselves. This explains why the world, instead of seeming normally a hostile, foreign reality, presents itself first of all as so many projects for our praxis. It is a home, an intersubjective society, *accueillante* and viable, and only in rare moments can raw being be sensed as the ultimate indifference of the nature which has thrown up on its shores this *cariatide du vide* whose intentionality manages to carve out for itself a livable milieu. The obvious truth that our projects can insert themselves in the world while, at the same time, the world can motivate those projects no longer poses the least problem for the phenomenological philosopher.

Merleau-Ponty also masterfully capitalizes on the Berkeleian aspects of his position to explain the role of the implicit, the negative—the shadow as well as the light—all those "unities of value" that unquestionably enter into the lived constitution of our experimental fields and confuse the rationalist approach. Perception grasps, in the words of Max Scheler, not just the explicitly posed, "but everything whose existence *or inexistence*, whose nature *or alteration* count *practically* for me."<sup>28</sup> If someone has taken a painting out of a room I know well, I can perceive that there has been a change without

28. Max Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, p. 140, cited PP, p. 371. That a phenomenology oriented toward a theory of truth as praxis should have been influenced by Scheler is of course not surprising. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Merleau-Ponty's whole enterprise is a prolongation of the tradition advanced by Scheler of a phenomenology parallel to Husserl's and studiously avoiding his intellectualism. Unfortunately, however, Merleau-Ponty does not seem to have been struck by Scheler's criticism of the limits of praxis. Cf. the chapter on Scheler in Gilson, Langan, and Maurer, *Recent Philosophy*.

transcendental unity of apperception, now unequivocally grounded in the corporeal synthesis, is given with the first perception as the field of all fields, the horizon of the unique world experience, the *omnitudo realitatis*; and it will continue until death, underlying all subsequent perceptions and serving as ground of their presumed ability eventually to refer to and unite themselves with all other perceptions as moments of a single reality (*PP*, p. 380). My knowledge of individual things always remains open, and over a long period of time I may perceive that the style of a person or the style of a town has changed. But "the world remains the same world throughout my whole life precisely because it is the permanent being interior to which I carry out all the corrections of knowledge, which corrections do not touch it in its unity, and whose evidence polarizes my movement toward the truth across all appearances and error (*PP*, p. 378).

Merleau-Ponty recognizes as clearly as the rationalists the need to provide an explanation for the ground of Being's unity, but he rejects the commonsense presumption that what is most fundamental must possess the kind of clarity and empty unity of the logically constructed idea. He affirms that reality manifests itself in the opaque unity of a horizon that is spilling over with richness and not in the geometer's idea, which is clear because it has been carefully constructed and is virtually empty. The world-unity that he describes as ground of substance-unity is synthetic and intentional without being rational and transparent. In the *Second Meditation* Descartes declared that the unity of the substance lay in an "intuition of the mind," a clear and distinct idea that could serve as a principle of unity for the qualities of the thing, which, though clear, could never be distinct. As the *Meditations* unfold, it soon becomes evident that the same principle provides both the unity of particular substances and that of the whole world, but it is never made very manifest exactly how the clear and distinct idea unifies. One cannot escape the impression that it is superior, not because it brings together and preserves in unity the various aspects of the material thing, but rather because it reflectively discovers its superiority to consist in its not needing the confused ideas in order to exist itself. In fact, the subject seems best off without those ideas in the holy reign of its own self-possessing unity. Now if the rationalist prejudice is reversed and we begin to

rejoice with Merleau-Ponty in the "insurpassable plenitude" of the "resolutely silent Other," then a new principle of unity must be sought. This principle must respect the irreducible otherness revealed by the moments and, at the same time, keep the horizons of experience always open for the further revelations of that matter which alone legitimately motivates our intentions.

Merleau-Ponty clearly rejects the intellectualist conception of the cogito as an absolute self-possession and of Being as an Idea; for him, the Ego is the always partial conquest of a reflective self-grasp in the midst of an essentially dynamic, unsurpassably full, temporal experience in which every configuration is due to a separate perceptive act carried out against a background of world whose being—whose unity and consistency—is always only presumptive. This position obliges Merleau-Ponty to install at the very center of his ontology the principle of ambiguity: every configuration is a retensive-protensive gathering up of a structure from out of the flux of natural time. The anticipations of such structuring always exceed what is explicitly given (thus the perceptive object always has unplumbed horizons), and subsequent events can tend either to confirm or to weaken the initial engagement. I see a stone lying in my path, but when I come closer, I recognize it as a bright patch of sunlight. The "truer" second perception "corrects" the illusion because a richer hold on the givens has awakened the filling action of the entire corps propre more adequately. The sense of the data has become fuller because I have drawn into better range, because all my senses have been called into play, because I have been better motivated to attend. My initial perception must have presumed the presence of more data than was at any moment sensibly given. All perceptions do presume this, of course, for, according to Merleau-Ponty, what is sensibly given is never in itself as unequivocally and fully determined as the perceived thing built on the present data through the spontaneous contributions of the corps propre. Strictly speaking, every perception of its very nature can and will eventually stand corrected; we inevitably come to see the same matters not only more fully but also somewhat differently (*PP*, p. 396).

Thus, as was demonstrated in our earlier consideration of the experiences of night and dreams, the anticipatory structures of the

of a consciousness attaining to a real other in time. Merleau-Ponty has rejoined, through the Logic of Hegel, Book Lambda of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*—Hegel has now really been "turned upside down."

The philosophy of Being is phenomenology because the insertion through the body into the world is ambiguous, because *l'être au monde* means not only to be in the world, but to belong to a world which transcends any individual. Phenomenology does not set out to explain by reducing the many moments of an experience to the stable, clear and distinct structure of an idea. Rather, it seeks to describe, using intellectual (and therefore fixed) instruments to direct attention toward a reality that is essentially dynamic and open (i.e. toward the fond and the horizons that surround and support every temporary configuration and tie it to the living whole of the historical discourse). I am "in and of the world" through my body; thus my perception reveals an object whose transcendence keeps it from being mine: instead of belonging to that unique point of ego which is the consciousness' grasp of itself, it escapes my comprehension in every direction; it drags in with itself unexpected structures and horizons unfamiliar to me; it challenges me to conquests I never knew were in me. In a very real sense, it is not I who perceive: *on perçoit en moi*. This very generality of my perception moves my gaze toward those others who are implicated in it from their own points of view in time and space, revealing a central aspect of the mystery of our existence in the world, its intersubjectivity. This discovery is the climax of Merleau-Ponty's transcendental aesthetic.

#### THE COEXISTENCE OF EGOS IN AN INTERSUBJECTIVE WORLD

Merleau-Ponty's exploitation of the notion of a corporeally grounded generality as fond of every perceptual act so successfully eliminates the problem of intersubjectivity that, instead of finding himself faced with the difficulties confronting Husserl in the Fifth *Cartesian Meditation*, he has to take pains to show how in such a world the problem of solipsism could ever arise.

That solipsism is in fact a problem that genetically arises only in later stages of development has been established in psychological

all that it can encounter, to whom nothing is ever purely and simply given, because he has received the world as his lot (*en partage*) and therefore carries in himself the project of all possible beings, because he has once and for all been sealed into his field of experience" (PP, p. 411). The invocation of the anonymous generality of the body does not really by itself adequately explain how the indeclinable I can alienate himself for the sake of the other, since it is exactly offset by the other dimension of generality, that of my inalienable subjectivity. It was, after all, the fact that it is I who am always conscious that initially gave rise to constitutive idealisms.

Merleau-Ponty's answer to this paradox is summed up in a single formula, the proper understanding of which introduces us to his theory of liberty: "I am given to myself." To affirm that I am given is to state that the consciousness discovers itself already in the world, depends on the world for its motives, and is incapable of surviving the world. Merleau-Ponty speaks of this absolute dependence on what is Other as a *savor of mortality*. The historical necessity structured by my reprise of the worldly event is a necessity dependent on the contingent fact that I am the kind of comportment I happen to be; that is why the world presents itself to me as it does. This dependency of the Ego on what precedes and surrounds its act for the very material of the intention affirms that it is of the Ego's very essence to be turned toward that which is other than it.

But I am given to myself; I am not absolutely bound to any one of the intentions that the world proposes. The self retains a *faculté de recul* (PP, p. 413)—a capacity for backing up—for the personal dimension of the corps propre's generality arms me with the existential space-opening ability that permits a domination of the field, which (as *Phenomenology* and *Signs* both declare) is the very possibility of thinking. But this ability to command the field's structure by commanding the ways in which the horizons open toward the future is the antithesis of Absolute Ego's unmotivated constitution, and Merleau-Ponty offers for its limits a superb formula that clearly emphasizes both the "I am given" and the "to myself": "I can only get away from being by fleeing into being" (*Je ne puis fuir l'être que dans l'être*). "I flee from society into nature or from the real world into the imaginary which is made of the debris of the real" (PP,

sense of my acts is not revealed to me or that "I have a lot to learn about myself" (*PP*, p. 436); it is not even that the Cogito has no *chez lui*, no realm where it grasps something, if only just itself, utterly, totally, unequivocally, certainly. It is rather more positive: The Cogito exists in its acts, and these reveal it as engaged in a world. The Cogito's acts progressively achieve its active grasp of things and accomplish correlatively and progressively its realization and possession of itself as it expresses itself in the structuring of its world. A Cogito is present from the very beginning of any human experience, since everything that is happening is, after all, *my* experience, a "unique experience, inseparable from itself, a single 'cohesion of life' [Merleau-Ponty borrows the phrase *Zusammenhang des Lebens* from Heidegger], a single temporality which explicates itself from its birth on and confirms itself in each present moment" (*PP*, p. 466). The essential being of this Cogito is being-in-the-world, *In-der-Welt-sein*, and, therefore, temporality. Since it must operate from a point of view, it can never be absorbed totally by any one perception or rest in any one profile. It is destined to move out as a motricity to the encounter with the world. The key to understanding the kind of self-possession, of unity, that the finite perception-rooted Cogito actually lives—and, noematically, the ultimate sense of our pronouncements—lies in the study of the way in which the existent structures for himself a lived time.

The pretense of our ideas to pronounce eternally the truth of essences is the thorniest problem here, and Merleau-Ponty's notion of a finite, temporal Cogito demands nothing less than a new interpretation of the ground of rational necessity. In seeking to show that the understanding's "presumption of a truth for all times" is nothing but an extension of the perception's fixing of a thing—the encounter with a material essence which itself is a presumptive synthesis rooted in the very way the body opens for itself a space by means of temporal horizons—Merleau-Ponty lays the groundwork for his conception of a purely historical truth.

#### FORMAL THOUGHT LIVES OFF INTUITIVE THOUGHT

The idea of a triangle is one of those ideas which somehow seem to give us possession of the very essence of a reality that is not bound

to speak (*Pourtant il y a quelque chose et non pas rien!*), just as I am able to move about in the space I do not comprehend. Acquisitions of meaning have been sedimented in the words which I find—by using them—accessible to me; they open a range of possible expression and invite me, in taking them up again, to extend creatively their sense, the direction and dimensions they sketched, in order to encompass a new meaning. Sense is already there in the words because previous acts of expression actually achieved the structuring of a field, because every reprise of earlier configurations in this field is an extension of them which actualizes new possibilities latent in that field following a given direction, a sense. Each act of linguistic expression is an event, creative in a limited, dependent way, a creation that depends on espousing the lines of force of what preceded, of a tradition. Each such happening opens a moment of time for all eternity; it will always be true to say that at this moment something took place, an act made possible by Being (that is, what is initially given as ground of all possibilities) and for which Being had been waiting forever. Sense, meaning, is nothing but this insertion in the web of Being's self-discovery. "Each moment of time, by its essence, poses an existence against which the other moments of time can do nothing" (*PP*, p. 450).

Here indeed is the ultimate necessity. Each moment of time, each acquisition of sense is sedimented and generalized, structuring the field of future possibilities by contributing the horizons in the form of possible linguistic motivations; "*each* present which is produced penetrates into time like an edge and pretends to eternity."<sup>4</sup> This is true even of an error—an expression whose inadequacy future

4. "We have, in traversing the past, only to do with what is *present*; for philosophy, as occupying itself with the true, has to do with the *eternally present*. Nothing in the past is lost for it, for the Idea is ever present; Spirit is immortal; with it there is no past, no future, but an essential *now*." G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, Dover, 1956), p. 79. Merleau-Ponty removes any suggestion that Spirit preexists its finite acts. Most Hegel interpreters agree that such was his position, too. See, for instance, the recent commentary of J. N. Findlay, *Hegel Re-Examined* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1958), p. 40. Hegel, too, according to the more recent commentators, sees Spirit operative in intentional acts that are yet far from achieving the self-possession and unity of acts of the Understanding.

perception will reveal. When I see this inadequacy, I rectify my opinion but it will forever be true that I arrived at the present truth via the detour of that error, and hence the complexion of my present view will not be quite the same as if I had never passed that way.

One aspect of this notion of necessity is especially important to the task of the dialectica. Merleau-Ponty is here in effect pointing out that the so-called eternity of the Ideal Truth is totally grounded in the perceptive moment, which has as much necessity as the Idea. To put it the other way around, the Idea has no more necessity than the perception. "Eternity is not another order beyond time but is the very atmosphere of time." The lasting truth of an idea (as we shall see in the *Poetica*) results from its ability continually to absorb present moments of experience because that which it expresses is fundamental enough to remain relevant as dimension-structuring horizons of explanation. Every truth of fact enjoys some of the necessity of a truth of reason because it is a part of our experience, because it is inserted in the mesh of the corporeally grounded world. Thus every moment of experience has some eternal necessity and remains pertinent, like the Leibnizian monad, for every other moment; it is true for all times. Conversely, every truth of reason—i.e. every expression which particularly strikes us by its claim to enduring significance—requires incarnation in moments of experience and must continue to be taken up in individual moments of experience (*PP*, p. 451); Euclidian geometry came to be at a certain time because it was made possible by a certain cultural preparation. Should the culture which now supports it be destroyed, it would have to be reinvented. That it could be reinvented while Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, if it were forgotten by everyone and all scores were destroyed, could not be due to the fact that the one expresses something that is closer to the fundamental givens of the way our bodies are naturally in the world than what the other expresses.

This radical historicization of the Idea itself serves the positive purpose of rendering feasible a description of a finite liberty. It illumines the fact that the Ego is never perfectly one with any of its experiences, that the Cogito's unity is not the unity of the experience, even though they found each other's very possibility, and hence that the Cogito can hold itself apart from its experiences—can doubt.

This noncoincidence of the Cogito with the moment of experience leaves the existent free to overlook, to survey, and thus to influence the structure of the phenomenal field; this is the source of its ability to alter the world.

"Every fixing of an object, every apparition of a something presupposes a subject who ceases to interrogate himself at least in that particular connection (*PP*, p. 454). Even the positing of a hypothesis involves a certain halt in the flow of experience—a presumption, which, though motivated by what is happening within present phenomenal experience, nevertheless involves a certain "violence," the act of "backing-up into the future," which is that motivated anticipation itself. When I focus on something, I push everything else, including all other possible interrogations, to the margins of my experience because I presume that that upon which I am fixing my attention is more important. As I confine myself to my own act of fixing, trusting in the fecundity and significance of what is then going to appear, I exclude all else and, playing the game, let the invoked reality make its presentation; the cultural-perceptual synthesis then proceeds spontaneously, and I let it reveal what it will. "Only when I play the game, only when I engage myself, for instance, in a Euclidean space or a certain society, can the sense of that system begin to appear for me; only then can it become an evidence."

At no time do I have to play the game, however. I can withhold my commitment, and the motivations which are held out to me will not then receive the attention they are soliciting (much as in the case of illusion, when my anticipations are not filled up by the data I was expecting, but here reversed). But this withholding, this withdrawal from the potential evidences of a given field, is not the opposition of a *néant* to *l'être*; the Cogito is not a self-contained principle. Its very nature is to intend toward something; it is finite, sealed at birth into the world horizons. Consequently the withdrawal which its domination of the field permits is always a withdrawal from one moment of experience in favor of another. I can flee the social world by turning attention toward the natural, or I can flee the natural by turning to the imaginary, but even the imaginary reveals itself as world-relevant and world-grounded (*L'imaginaire est fait des débris du monde*). In every and any instance, the Cogito exists only in act

Thus I can withdraw, deny, doubt, solely by moving into a different world: "I can flee being only into being." When I turn resolutely away from politics, I must affirm some other value instead, such as the overriding importance of nature. This is similar to those moments when, because I wish not to be distracted by the buzzing confusion going on about me, I plunge myself into work capable of holding my attention or when, wishing to stop seeing black and white squares on the floor as a staircase pattern, I force them to organize themselves as stars or cubes.

This ambiguous but total motivating power of the world governs even the most personal decisions. Freud, who recognized the reality of our incarnation, saw this when he explained comportment as sexuality. He was seeking, not to lower the spirit, but to spiritualize the flesh; avoiding a mechanistic view of the soul, he saw the sense latent in our incarnation because he had discovered in the body "its symbolic and poetical charge."<sup>1</sup> When he describes the subconscious as latent Being waiting for more articulated realization, for expression in the individual personality ("*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*"); when he explains mental difficulties, complexes, and fixations as failures, through lack of energy, to open properly to this subconscious sea, to tear new reality out of it, to structure it and give it a sense in a personality; when he visualizes man not as an immanent ready-made natural being—a machine among machines—but as the *chantier* where preconstituted being matures in movement, Freud is incontestably Merleau-Ponty's direct predecessor. My freedom is thus motivated from the "inside" and the "outside" at the same time, through my body—this secretion of my whole history, where nature and second nature have become indiscernible, which is the channel of all external opposition as well as the means through which I keep expressing and incarnating myself. Only as incarnated in such a *corps propre* can human freedom be understood at all. In describing perception as the foundation of comportment, Merleau-Ponty often emphasizes that movement is the spontaneous maturation as well as the mode of vision; as the French phrase, *le corps se meut*, suggests, the body moves itself, spontaneously, without needing conscious

1. Hesnard, *L'Œuvre de Freud* (Paris, Payot, 1960), p. 7.

no more be separated from their organ—the sedimented self that wills them—than a gesture can be separated from the body which makes it and that body's space.

It is not difficult to understand, then, why a lucid and honest man finds it so difficult to explain when exactly and how he made an important decision. My noisiest moments of deliberation, which often conceal my bad conscience about the fact that my decision has actually already been made, must never be mistaken for the real process of deciding which has been going on silently throughout my entire personal history as my acts sedimented and formed the future general horizons whose solicitations are calling today for this given act. This is not to say that the Ego is without influence on the present moment, however, as another comparison with the attentive act will make clear. If an explosion occurs outside my window while I am writing this, the probability is slight that I shall be able to resist turning my attention toward the noise, smoke, and flames; but this is an extreme case. Normally I can focus (though never perfectly) on whichever given I choose. Similarly, an outburst of unleashed passion which dredges up a long and sordid history of questionable acts from the depths of my second nature can also destroy the delicate equilibrium within which the initiatives of the free Ego can exercise a pivotal influence. Usually, however, I am free in both kinds of situations to influence creatively the structuring of a field of decision. This freedom is founded on the "insurpassable generality of the Ego," its capacity for transcending the moment of any one experience, for "backing up into the future," and for guiding the process of reprise. Because of this ability, I can balance consideration against consideration and reign over the structuring of the deliberation. It should be remembered, however, that my freedom is finite. The world also makes its demands as it confronts me with its genuine otherness, in which the truth or the light have already been incarnated.

#### THE HUMAN NATURE OF THE WORLD'S DEMANDS

That I am motivated by the "Not I" without being determined by a foreign reality becomes still more comprehensible when the humanized quality of the givens with which we have to contend is

considered. Most fundamental, of course, is the principle of the corps propre's natural anonymity: not only is generality an essential mode of its intentionality (I am a man, i.e. my perception is grounded in a principle no more exclusively mine than an other's), but also, reciprocally, the constituted world I meet and know is the product of a synthesizing act of a body which I can, nonetheless, speak of as a piece of matter that is actually mine, the corner of reality interior to which I live. We can thus actually say of the world that "we carry its fundamental structures with us" (*PP*, p. 377).

If the world is already human in this fundamental, natural way, it is even more evidently so in its all-pervasive cultural reality. Most of the intentions which my act of reprise takes up are humanized ones. I reach things through symbols, especially through words, in which are gathered up the accumulated dealings of mankind; such symbols are natural nuclei about which sedimented intentions cluster. Most of the things I encounter are themselves molded by human intentions into cultural objects—cultivated fields, tools, passageways, roads in which compartments are inscribed. From my first meeting with most aspects of the world, I know how the human being is supposed to handle them; I am born into a world in which the roles I can play are written into institutions and held out to me in the very way people take care of me. "From the beginning of his life, the child proceeds by simply perceiving the kind of care that is given him and the utensils which surround him, to a deciphering of significations which inevitably generalize his personal drama into a drama of his culture" (*S*, p. 140).

In such a familiar world, each familiar role is known almost from the inside even before it is played; as in *Commedia dell'arte* each actor must express his personal genius within a traditionally structured framework, which his best inventions will in turn extend and transform for the generations to come. That man can and does succeed in expressing the individual, the strictly personal, aspects of his self is made possible precisely by the primordial humanity of the world's generalized intentions, structured for and by anonymous individuals. "Having first of all thought and lived according to what he thought good to do, and having perceived according to *l'imaginaire de sa culture* [the whole fund of generalized imagining power his culture

offers him], he succeeds finally in reversing the relationship so that he is able to slide into the significations of his conduct and his words—to convert into culture—even that which is most secret in his experience" (S, p. 141). This necessity first to espouse the significations offered in order to make them ours and then, through their reconstruction, to influence the culture from which they come—this *Sinngebung* that is simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal—must be understood in order to comprehend the full thrust of Merleau-Ponty's declaration that the interior of our existence which phenomenology illumines is not a private life but "an intersubjectivity which links us ever closer to the whole history" (S, p. 141).

It is thus clear that any search for the truth of our Self—any quest for a valid ethic—must inevitably struggle with sociology and the meaning of history: The study of our liberty must involve us essentially in a description of our ingestion in the social-historical coexistence which is the world because being-in-the-world—existence—is for Merleau-Ponty first and foremost simply what it states. "When I realize that the social is not only an object, but first of all my situation," he writes in the *Signs* article devoted to the relationship of philosophy and sociology from which we have just been quoting, "and when I arouse in myself the awareness of this social existence which is *mine*, it is my entire *synchronie* which becomes present; it is, through it, all the past which I become capable of thinking as the *synchronie* which it was in its time" (p. 141). Philosophy is of course an effort to grasp the inner sense of man's existence; but if "the interior to which it leads us is not a private life but *intersubjectivity* which more and more intimately links us to the whole of history," then "the proper dimension of philosophy is that of coexistence" (S, p. 141). The search in myself for the traces of history goes hand in hand with the search in history for the key to myself, who am but power to *repandre* and give sense to all my sedimented givens. The particular and the general must be played off against each other dialectically in the philosophical search for Being. It can only be found through the illuminating awareness of the individual's link and rapport with the whole of Being, that generality opened up by my existence, the only ground of universality.

This awareness has an existential end in the spirit of the classical

declaration that the truth will make you free. Just as a theory of perception was necessary to understand the essential distinction between hallucination and true perception and thus to found criteria for truth, so a theory of our insertion in the world must illumine the individual's rapports with the social, with history. Only on the basis of such a theory can I distinguish an act enjoying a legitimate social-historical sense from an act of folly—in short, found criteria for right and wrong.

The ontological importance of *Humanism and Terror* and *The Adventures of the Dialectic*—essays superficially mistakable for mere political commentary—cannot, against the background of these remarks, possibly be overlooked. From the war years until the end of his life, Merleau-Ponty struggled to interpret the central problem posed by Communism<sup>2</sup>—the sense in which the history of our time is incarnated in the dispossessed class—and to grasp the future-forming implications of the world-historical situation. In his efforts to define phenomenologically the concrete terms in which a contemporary practica must work itself out, Merleau-Ponty incarnates brilliantly the liberal conscience of contemporary Europe. "*Homme de gauche*," armed with aesthetic humanism, he is steeped in a philosophical tradition which, in various forms from Proust and Valéry to Heidegger and Thomas Mann, has guided many who seek to make sense out of a world that seems at one moment utterly senseless and at another fated to sink under the weight of mankind's collective insensitivity. In this regard Merleau-Ponty knows no superior for subtlety, complexity, and for the sincerity of a striving that, while passionate, is stabilized by a genuine philosophical calm.

But the real philosophical significance of this struggle might be missed in an overly clinical exposition. It is essential here to grasp the full measure of the pathos characterizing the struggle of Merleau-Ponty's hero. All creation is a molding of resistances: the artist must through his reprise decenter and recenter what is offered, and the poet, in forging a truly new expression, must espouse the proffered

2. The most informative short summary of the evolution of that struggle is to be found in the most fascinating article ever written on Merleau-Ponty: Sartre's memorial piece, "Merleau-Ponty Vivant," in the special issue of *Les Temps Modernes* (17 [1961], 304-76) devoted to our author.

sense sedimented in the language and struggle to turn its weight in the direction he wants it to move. What the painter is to perception and the poet to the verbal generality, the hero is to the social-political order: he risks the struggle against the more immediate, more apparent resistances because he sees farther, recognizing their dependence on something deeper.

Merleau-Ponty was finishing *The Phenomenology of Perception* at a time when the sound of S.S. firing squads had not died away, and the existence of the hero—the reality of individuals somehow justified in offering their lives for a society and a history that seemed senseless, opposing what appeared at the moment to be the trend of history in the light of values they considered more important than the facts—was itself a fact. Indeed, the *Phenomenology* ends by insisting that philosophy must leave the last word to the hero. The task of philosophy is to help us see things—and historic situations—better; it can lead us to them, but then it must fall silent. For what is true of the poet, of the hero, indeed of every perceiver, is true of the philosopher: he must “allow Being itself to speak through us” (*S*, p. 225).

Thus, “It is true to say that [philosophy] realizes itself by destroying itself as separate philosophy” (*PP*, p. 520). Philosophy can tell us only of the general conditions of our insertion in the world, even its illumination of our concrete historical situation is abstract and therefore partial, stuck in a point of view untrue to the universal, dead, superstitious, and mystifying—unless the individual himself lives it. Only then can his natural and cultural body be able to go about its task of structuring a genuine field of action which alone can actually reveal in time, make present—actually make be—what is. Such a life is perforce paradoxical, inaccessible to description in rational, general terms. Indeed, in a sense it is impossible, while at the same time it is the only truly human vocation. It demands heroism, but heroism is the call of man, *caritative du vide*: on the one extreme, he is called to full engagement, synchrony, risking loss of self-sufficiency in total communion with the Other (*S*, p. 245) and sacrificing his freedom through involvement in the historical process of sedimentation; on the other, he must abandon all security as he assumes full control, projecting the yet unknown future and therefore dis-entangling himself from the Other that already is. No man can avoid

drinking to the dregs the loneliness resulting from the inescapable audacity that is the lot of the person who is, by birth, original. Nothing else could be expected of a being whose job it is to make sense out of the contingent, to incarnate truth in the present, to testify, as an individual, to the All. "But it is here that we must fall silent, for only the hero lives to the bitter end [*jusqu'au bout*] his relation to men and to the world; it is not proper that another speak in his name" (PP, p. 520). The last word of the *Phenomenology* is left to an authentic hero, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who, having literary gifts, also helped to clarify the nature of heroism:

Ton fils est pris dans l'incendie, tu le sauveras. . . . Tu vendrais, s'il est un obstacle, ton épaule contre un coup d'épaule. Tu loges dans ton acte même. Ton acte, c'est toi. . . . Tu t'échanges. . . . Ta signification se montre, éblouissante. C'est ton devoir, c'est ta haine, c'est ton amour, c'est ta fidélité, c'est ton invention. . . . L'homme n'est qu'un noeud de relations, les relations comptent seules pour l'homme.<sup>3</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's silence did not last long, however, for there was still much to be inquired into—in that general way in which philosophy inquires—concerning that *noeud de relations*. By what signs does one recognize the authentic hero? What distinguishes him from the merely foolhardy martyr or from the genuinely courageous and even circumspect man who has mistakenly opposed the right or the good? Indeed, more fundamentally, how can one distinguish a good from a bad politique, the statesman from the opportunist?

These questions, already anticipated in the last pages of the *Phenomenology*, burn passionately throughout the essays in political philosophy which absorbed much of the philosopher's attention after the war. Though the essays stretch in time of composition from 1947

3. "Your son is caught in a fire, you will save him . . . if there is an obstacle you would sell your own shoulder for help from another shoulder. You are absorbed absolutely in your act. You *are* your act . . . you trade yourself . . . your meaning reveals itself, overwhelming. It's your duty, it's your hate, it's your love, it's your faithfulness, it's your discovery . . . man is but a bundle of relations, only the relations count for man." A. de Saint-Exupéry, *Pilote de Guerre*, pp. 171, 174, cited PP, p. 520.

man"—and his assertion that in our time sense is particularly incarnated in the unfulfilled aspirations of the dispossessed class are all truths that, to become really fruitful, require for their ultimate grounding the very principles of the *Phenomenology* and, reciprocally, give it body. It would be far better to realize that Merleau-Ponty attempted the fullest existentialization of Marx's early philosophy than to talk of his Marxism.

In order to understand the sense Merleau-Ponty gives to the Marxist formulation of the alternatives confronting mankind—social revolution or chaos—we must understand his ontological analysis of the grounding of truth in social situations and, hence, must turn again to *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

Beginning at the beginning, let us recall what distinguishes a "good"—a valid—perception from a "bad" one. A good perception is grounded in the opening of the space demanded correlatively by the thing and by the nature of the corps propre in order for the corps propre to obtain the grasp of the thing that permits the fullest and surest cooperation of Ego-thing. The role of the perceiver is essentially active: he moves out to the encounter with the thing, and the nature of his project influences the way the object is going to be made to stand there for him. The intentions offered by the world are revealed as they whirl into the dance of the body; they are structured as emotions and are given different senses in different contexts (the mountain, to use Sartre's example, is a thing of beauty to the tourist looking out from his well-heated chalet but a menacing obstacle to the men preparing to scale it to save a stranded climber). The inadequate perception brings the individual too close or too far or functions at too inhabitual an angle to permit as clear a grasp of the thing as can be achieved in circumstances that make the cooperation, the emotion, the "dance" possible.

Hallucinations and illusions, of course, are not inadequate perceptions because of their aggressiveness, their "activism"; they are errors, not imperfect truths. In every perception, it is true, there is an element of anticipation. The thing is fixed in the light of the new expression, the new cooperation that is to come, and anticipated data are presumed to fulfill the protensive intention. But illusions and hallucinations arise only when the anticipatory project is not sufficiently motivated

that come from birth and will survive even personal death because they are the ground limits and englobing atmosphere of humanity itself.

On the social level, then, as in personal existence opening to the given Other, *prise de conscience* and rejection of idols are the keys to valid action and the exercise of true freedom. Merleau-Ponty illustrates these considerations with the example of the revolutionary proletarian's *prise de conscience* in the historical moment of the revolution. The very possibility of the revolution was obviously incarnated in some sense in the situation and in the class that revolted; indeed, some common material condition must have motivated the workers and the tenant farmers to act as a class. But understanding the mode of that incarnation as an objective, material reality, as the Communists do, leads to acceptance of their conception of the Party, which, as spokesman for what is, can obviously do no wrong—a position that became increasingly difficult for a critical person to maintain the longer the Stalin régime endured.<sup>4</sup> A profusion of significations ("infrastructures" [AD, p. 265]) does in fact install each proletarian in an intersubjective situation prior to any *prise de conscience*, but they become objective factors he can handle—even if only by revolt and destruction—only when an external factor motivates the structuring of the space necessary to perceive them as the reality latent in the situation. If, as has been often remarked, revolutions usually occur after some rather substantial social progress has been offered to a group of people, it is because, like the animal who is entangled in the world of instincts and needs and who therefore lacks the mental space necessary for humanized perception, the proletarian is so totally absorbed in the moment-to-moment struggle to keep alive that he lacks the social space (PP, p. 507) in which to form the project necessary to perceive his situation. He is so caught in the present that he cannot *reculer dans l'avenir*, hope enough to form a project, or obtain sufficient grasp of his own integrity to recognize that of others and hence their capacity to be handled and

4. "If one concentrates all the negativity and all the sense of history in an existing historic formation, the proletarian class, then one must give *carte blanche* to those who represent it in power, for *every thing else is enemy*." AD, p. 278.

cooperated with. Only when his social space becomes sufficiently structured to give him *du champ* can he ever be brought out of the direct condition of simply bearing his situation, "the thrust of a liberty without projects against unknown obstacles" (PP, p. 507). Not until projects are formed can obstacles be recognized as such. X

It is interesting to witness the processes by which a man passes from simply living as an inevitability the conditions of the labor market which victimize him—including joblessness, weekly pay, lack of effective citizenship, and absence from his family—to conceiving of this inevitability as a revealing obstacle, an *Anstoss*. The worker discovers his rights by witnessing in action the affirmation of the rights of others, as a child discovers language by hearing others speak. He notes that the employees of another factory who used to live the same situation as his own now have won a difficult strike and that as their wages went up, his tended to follow. His situation suddenly seems less fatal and isolated. His class begins to recognize itself as intersubjective reality—as different yet coexistent with other classes—and the situation becomes revolutionary when the connections that do in fact exist among the members of the proletariat and between them and the rest of society are finally "lived in the perception of an obstacle common to the existence of each" (PP, p. 508).

The proletariat's first awakening to his situation is as "dumb" as the corps propre's first perception of its world. No express representation—no idea—is necessary to call up this feeling of solidarity in the common conviction, *ça doit changer!* The extraordinary effect of the *mots d'ordre* (watchwords) coming from those who spontaneously present themselves as leaders of the movement can be explained only by the fact of their truth to the intersubjective world which is waiting to be structured, to be expressed. Because they "crystallize what is latent in the life of all the producers," they are instantly obeyed, as if "by preestablished harmony" (PP, p. 508). They simply make explicit the solicitations of the sedimented *petites perceptions* which lie in all of Merleau-Ponty's "monads," tying them through their anonymous generality into the same world, as absorbing and total as the Leibnizian universe.

The parallels between this connection of the nature and importance of preconscious public opinion and Merleau-Ponty's continuous re-

assertion on all levels of the necessity to return to the original pre-intellectual experience to found any truth, from the perceptual to the artistic, are obvious. Here again, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, sense can be tapped only if the primeval deposit of brute meaning is being struck. Like the true idea, like the worthy hypothesis, the proper decision which anticipatorily directs my action by crystallizing my field of attention should be modeled on the lesson of the revolutionary *mot d'ordre's* success. Both the true idea and the adequately deliberated decision espouse as fully as possible the sense immediately proffered by the world and give it focus in an expression that is adequate to handle one's present situation as it is synchronically lived by other subjects. I must "try to live naïvely what is offered me, without trying to trick the logic of the enterprise, without locking it up from the outset in the limits of a premeditated signification" (AD, p. 265). The key to the true and the good is that *Hören auf dem Sein*—Heidegger's virtue: listening to Being—in which Heidegger sees the very essence of authenticity. Building my Self through the expressive extension of the sense of my life is basically an act of *déchiffrement*—my expression must decipher the sense of the situation latent in the symbols through which it is represented to me and then must set about realizing that sense through further development of the symbols. The genuine poet neither creates language out of nothing nor repeats banally what has been always said. Similarly, the good politique, like the good decision, is the one which will structure the social field in a way that allows maximum play of all the soliciting intentions without allowing any of these intentions to impede actualization and sedimentation of all others. Such indeed, as the *Signs* essay on Machiavelli explains, is true humanist *vertu*: the Stoic expression must be understood in its deepest sense as advocating not passive acceptance of what must be borne but actualization of what must be, recognition of the latency of being, that which already really is potentially presented in experience. In the political realm, *vertu* is leading society to a realization of its potential self. It is opposed to a sterile moralism whose fixed and abstract formulas represent the horizons of an already crystallized past that has been lived by a highly determined class. Such morality, like psychological sickness, falsifies the effort to create a space for all the present pressures. The political

enterprise is one of risk and anticipation to be sure, "for the real is found only by going out ahead of it into the *imaginaire*" (S, p. 154). True *vertu* does not fear "dirty hands"; it is not above using trickery and honest hypocrisy in the interest of actualizing new structures, new institutions—figures whose capacity to crystallize the fond of the situation is still hypothetical and can be proven true and valid only if forced to come to be by a creative initiative. As all configurations, political institutions and political acts are of their essence ambiguous. Truths made of audacious guesses are destined to age soon into outworn clichés. And as is the case with all other expressive acts, the intersubjective political act—the establishment of new institutions—is a fumbling, awkward process: as the body's organs must learn gropingly to handle their objects, play their role, express themselves, under the Ego's leadership, so must the masses be brought to self-awareness—to world-awareness—by a process far from being angelic illumination. A certain amount of coaxing or forcing is inevitable; how much can be applied before the organ is destroyed is, of course, always the problem.

Political action is thus exceedingly dangerous, as is all decision, anticipation, stabilization, institutionalization, all cultivation of the individual, indeed all possession of whatever sort. "Whatever his good will may be, when man begins to act, he can never appreciate exactly the objective sense of his action; he constructs for himself an image of the future, justified only by probabilities; this image, guiding his actions, solicits the future on which very grounds it can be condemned, for the event itself once accomplished is not equivocal" (HT, p. 69). When I act, the field is structured, and the event as it occurs sediments immediately into a (partially) determining past. For that reason, it is easier to recognize an error retrospectively, in the light of the historically more structured situation, than it is to be certain prospectively that one is on the right course. I can never know my intention in acting until some time after the act, and sometimes I will never know. Merleau-Ponty has insisted on the inevitability of this "metaphysical hypocrisy": just as the presumption in perception renders the thing somewhat hallucinatory—its reality being tested only by its ability to withstand the pressure of the intersubjective world of action—so in moral life any assertion of inten-

tions, any decision, will be recognizable as valid only by its capacity to be repeated and assimilated as history ebbs and flows about it. If I declare and believe that I am unconditionally *quoi que ce soit*, I am ignoring the principle of metaphysical hypocrisy, expressive of the finitude of my insertion in the world. But since every action on my part inevitably forces me to take a stand, to behave, in order to confront the unequivocal event as though I also really were unequivocally this or that, metaphysical hypocrisy is indeed inevitable.

We cannot avoid dangerous choices by declaring, like the Parisian concierge "*Je ne fais pas de politique.*" No man can be apolitical. "Whatever the surprises of the event, we can no more do without prediction and consciousness than without our body" (S, p. 276). The ontological sense of Pascal's "*Nous sommes embarqués*" is the same as that of Merleau-Ponty's discovery that the only way of resolving the paradox of existence is simply to exist—Achilles needs only to run in order to catch up with the tortoise. Only by ever-renewed essays at social restructuring, by risking the projection of new social forms, can the politician make possible a valid politics, for it is only when a stand is taken, and thus a field is structured, that the dumb, latent forces can stand out, articulate themselves one upon another, and explicitly take up a sense.

It is all very well to declare the need for risk, of course, but one must be able somehow to distinguish the necessary, justifiable risk from imprudent foolhardiness. It is not enough to reply that the leader, in taking the risk of action, must be guided by the givens of the situation, for, considering the inevitable ambiguity of the givens, he must still be able to distinguish a policy of superficial opportunism from action that really moves in function of the most inclusive and profound (i.e. respectful of the most primordial, most general sedimentations of our humanity) reading of the tension, resistances, solicitations, and possibilities that can be obtained. Merleau-Ponty, contemplating the life of Machiavelli, delivers a judgment that suggests what is needed to direct a fruitful *politique*: Despite his remarkable anticipation of humanism's true needs, Machiavelli lacked a *fil conducteur*—an Ariadne's thread—"which would have permitted him to recognize, between various powers, the one of whom there was something to be hoped, and to elevate without question *vertu* above

Party up in itself. The result is *mépris*—the master's *méconnaissance* of the Other and hence of himself (*S*, pp. 275, 276). The road back to communication is from then on a very dangerous one. When de-Stalinization unleashes the powers of criticism against the stability of the régime, it leaves an open wound in the side of the body politic, but a wound that cannot, must not, be avoided. "The dictatorship is asked to call itself into question [*se contester*] and to let itself become eliminated; the proletariat is asked to liberate itself and to reject the control of the dictatorship. This is difficult, almost impossible. The world has only the choice between that way and chaos" (*S*, p. 378).

Thus, even though the generality of the mass is a source of political possibility, it introduces an element of danger into every actualization of that possibility on the part of the leadership. To command this mass, the leader has only a few gestures and words, which come as the pronouncements of an almost legendary figure to his "mute spectators caught up in the vertigo of a life à plusieurs" (*S*, p. 275). The leader's geste is like a flame that is picked up by a million mirrors, each reflecting each other, until it becomes a brilliant aura scarcely resembling the initial point. Reflected and dispersed through many monads, it is stripped of all idealistic guarantee of exactness.

Given this reality, the leader's objectives must be as clear as the means for accomplishing them are obscure: "Through his domination of his relations with the Other, the man in power overcomes the obstacles between man and man and puts some transparence in our relations—it is as though men can be close only in a sort of distance" (*S*, p. 275). In short, he must carry out the disposition of social space (*l'aménagement de l'espace social*). The acts of the leader are like the expressive act's *recul dans le néant* in that they differentiate the great general mass by polarizing and structuring in order to create the distance, *le pli dans l'être*, the wave on the surface of the great ocean of Being, that permits Being to become aware of itself. If the leader allows his acts to become lost in the all-reflecting maze, as an aura that brings no glance of self-recognition to either the individuals who make up the field's points of resistance or the leader himself, if he fails to dramatize a project in which the vast majority can find definite roles while he retains his own freedom and lucidity in the process, then the great forces that are really but ambiguously present

in the society will either go undirected or be falsely forced, will remain amorphous or be repressed. The *force de l'âme* of Machiavelli's Prince is the resoluteness, directed by a veritable *Hören auf dem Sein* necessary to bring such a field-structuring into being. "It is a question—between the will to please and defiance, between self-complacent goodness ('a soft way of ignoring the Other and therefore *de le mépriser*') and cruelty—of conceiving a historical enterprise in which all can join." Again, truth is expression, and expression cooperation—"the dance in common."

There is no eternal solution to the political problem of creating social forms that will keep communication open through self-expression (any more than there can be a book to end all books, a painting that says all that painting has to say, or a final science). The dialogue must go on forever as oppositions renew themselves and differentiations and syntheses continue to well up in the dynamic continuity of tradition; such is the law of expression, of all structuring of a field; such is the nature of sense, temporal direction. That continuity is made possible by both the given historical necessity of the human situation and the resoluteness of the virtuous hero who recognizes its demands and acts consistently in view of it.

Is Merleau-Ponty's description of the *fil conducteur* itself sufficiently strong to serve as "the word" which can structure our fields of action? Is it real enough to structure a resoluteness against false alternatives, steadfastly clear enough to hold fast the hero even unto death? When he rejects the notion of a human nature conceived as a fixed unequivocal idea in favor of a historical becoming without predetermined goal, the signs of which, at a given moment in history, are acts tending to improve and express communion between men, his philosophy certainly gains in flexibility (hence political realism) what it loses in rigor, which is extremely attractive. But the guideposts to authenticity may be so unstructured that they cannot contain or sufficiently restrain the calculated tricks, the necessary "hard" acts to which all leaders must apparently have recourse. Merleau-Ponty condemns torture (*S*, p. 408) and holds the lie to be the sign par excellence of the beginning of political failure (*PP*, p. 372); such acts certainly do manifest, on the part of those who commit them, a *mépris* which is nothing but a *méconnaissance* of what

find the means of proving its worth and getting accepted as valid (*se faire valoir* [ambiguous here]) perishes in time, not that the one which takes its place then becomes venerable and holy, but that the new system constitutes from then on the fond of beliefs incontestated by the majority that only the hero dares contest. (*HT*, p. xxxi)

The undesirable ambiguity of this declaration is painfully obvious. Indeed, the whole of *The Adventures of the Dialectic* and the political essays collected in the last section of *Signs* are devoted to developing the sense of the fil conducteur—the realization of humanity—beyond this confusion until it becomes capable of operating as a proper guide. Has the effort been successful? The suggestion that we need to re-examine, as expression of possible complexes, glib assertions of "individualism," "personality," "race," "high society," is valid, like the point that it is meaningless to assert that humanity can become permanently inhuman (what, then, does "human" mean?); but it is unfortunate that nothing in the notion of humanity that Merleau-Ponty's historical existentialism describes can really handle the question of success which the preface to *Humanism and Terror* so pertinently raises (not to mention the greater problem of the individual's practical and concrete relationship with the régime). The theoretical demarcations are not unequivocal enough to forestall the possibility of a wily, flexible, unscrupulous régime's compromising with the deeper exigencies of the corps propre by espousing them just enough to stall off—perpetually—the need for open revolt, while it continually sediments into the general soul a base culture deliberately designed to deaden the urge to develop what is most personal and most human in the individual.

Merleau-Ponty's last word on this question is that success is no accident but an *avènement*, an accession; there is, for him, no fatum—no necessary destiny—but neither does he see the contingency of history as senseless. Rather, the spirit of history is *Fortuna*, and since "Fortune is a woman," seduction is, with her, the only mode of true coexistence; such coexistence, as conceived in terms of his rethought Freudianism, is the standard of success. The man who has not grown from the extreme master-slave relationship characteristic of child-

hood to the mature acceptances of the adult can hardly be said to be living. Mature sexuality, born of the respectful and creative cooperation of an authentic couple in constant evolution, alone allows each pole of the relationship to find full identity, full self-expression, in the common adventure. Such sexuality based on seduction is the age-old symbol of man's relation to the world and, singularly, of the hero's relation to his country, to the masses he must help inform in the creation of the new institutions that will bind them to himself in common self-expression. In the political world, as in the sexual world, terror is the failure of seduction; hence it is doomed. Only the politics that respect and bring out into expression what is deepest in the incarnated situation—that appeal to the social world sexually in this truly human sense—can succeed. Such politics alone allow both leader and masses really to come to be in harmonious consciousness, in moments of truth where each becomes and loses himself in true rapport.

The problem is, however, that, if the woman is riddled with complexes, the kind of seduction that appeals to her will often seem to be practically the most successful one; similarly, sedimentation of a bad history can prepare a country to respond to abominable solicitations on the part of the astute demagogue. When wooing either, how can one ever be sure of what one is appealing to and whether the response—or, worse, the lack of it—is due to the inauthenticity of the appeal or to that of the body that is answering?

In any case, Sartre, in *Situations, IV*, leaves little doubt that Merleau-Ponty personally became deeply disenchanted with his own capacity to seduce the history of France in the postwar years. This portrait (*TM*, pp. 332ff.) helps us realize the full significance of Merleau-Ponty's silence on political matters and his return to inquiry into the mute forms of expression.

One of his last descriptions of the evolution of human structures, in an article commenting on the new social anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (*S*, pp. 143–57), suggests a certain dissatisfaction with the enduring forms the humanization of man has taken. The remarks center about that most fundamental coexistential relation, marriage: where primitive man tended, through incest prohibitions, simply to go against nature in his effort to liberate himself from the immediacy of

its demands, the societies that have achieved the enterprise of modern history have transformed it by guile, have composed with it, achieving, through their reprise of it, "a series of mediations in which the structure never emerges altogether as pure universal." The development of evermore flexible symbolic systems, inviting "each man to define his own system of exchange," may indeed offer much more efficacious possibilities, but such systems are less beautiful, less hieratic, than earlier forms of expression. Merleau-Ponty echoes Heidegger's regret at the "desacrilization" (one of his rare but important references to the *Heilige*), and his objections to "the altogether profane usage of life, accompanied indeed by little compensatory myths without depth" (*S*, pp. 154-57) recall Heidegger's attack on *Kultur*.<sup>5</sup>

Much more unmistakable is the condemnation in "L'Œil et l'esprit"—Merleau-Ponty's last published article—of activism, which is presented as virtually the central form of modern life. It certainly seems to have succeeded very well—in the sense of having "become accepted, taken over, and lived": wherever we turn rises the specter of the United States, inhuman to be sure (as in all leftist French literature) and universally imitated, so that even Russia itself is beginning to resemble it like a brother. Everywhere, activism—the fascination with a strange kind of creativity, of practical violence, of senseless change, with such slogans and watchwords as "what will work," "how can it be made to work?" and "nothing succeeds like success"—challenges the philosopher to call man back to an awareness of "the true and the false," to the "primordial givens of his situation." He must point to the humanity which has made history possible, to the *historicité primordiale*, even to the prestructured, not yet artificial Being. This is a grave, difficult task, especially when the philosopher has previously denied the reality of a human nature and of the corresponding ethical necessities and has affirmed in their stead an inexpressible unconscious, betting on humanity's Fortuna as standard bearer. It is disturbing to find the philosopher of intersubjectivity and total engagement turning with nostalgia to the painter's silent, solitary experiments as closer to the real than anything he or anyone else can say.

5. Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt/Main, Klostermann, 1950), pp. 93-94.

ence) and to reveal the lived nature of our experiences of them, thus inviting us always to seek, beyond the visible, the incomprehensible fond, the invisible, the brute Being that is revealing itself to us through its myriad faces (VI, p. 300). Since he realizes that his terms must express the lived nature of the intentional process even as they deal with moments within this lived All that present themselves as discrete, temporally limited, and in some sense necessary, he must search for new expressions capable of describing a kind of dynamic structure but unburdened with the en soi feeling of traditional notions. For example, in a working note dated December 1959, Merleau-Ponty writes: "A world = an organized ensemble, which is *clos*, but which, strangely, is representative of all the rest, possesses symbols, its own equivalences for all that is not it. Painting is this way for space, for instance. . . . Replace the notions of concept, idea, spirit, representation by the notions of *dimensions* [Merleau-Ponty's italics], articulation, *niveau*, hinges (*charnières*), pivots, configuration" (VI, p. 277). The text goes on to indicate that the principal starting point is a critique of the usual conception of the thing and its properties and of all positive signification, which should be replaced by the notion of signification *comme écart*, as deviation from a norm. Thus the question becomes, To what extent is the "passage to a superior dimension" prepared in the "given structure"?

When we survey some of the terms Merleau-Ponty has used to describe the thing, we must admit that they do succeed in expressing the experienced fact that each thing has a certain weight of its own but is nevertheless interpretable precisely as an experienced aspect belonging to a broader world than that outlined solely by its own gestalt. For instance, we are told that the thing, once the spell of familiar usage has been broken, becomes a "center of resistance" and "hostile," that one thing is impossible with another (PP, p. 374), and that any thing contrasts to the product of the imagination—whether *Kunstwerk* or hallucination—by its richness and inexhaustibility (S, p. 228). In the same spirit, we are reminded that all aspects of a thing, no matter how they are reported, are synonymous (PP, p. 374) and that as they unfold in time, they reveal a unity of style. The remark, "The definition of the thing requires the whole subject" (PP, p. 373), suggests again the object's inexhaustibility as well as con-

sistency, while the warning, "Its sense is indistinguishable from the total appearance," indicates that its density, its opaqueness, cannot be captured in any of the many clear ideas that can be formed by fixing its aspects. Finally, the feeling of the thing's reality is communicated by describing it as having an activity of its own: it radiates; it is likened to a comportment; its characteristics are presented as living and as anthropomorphic; we are told that it speaks a language of its own, that it has a rhythm of its own (*PP*, p. 373), and, last but not least, that it *écorce notre regard* (*PP*, p. 99)—scratches our attention.

Many descriptions of the thing, however, emphasize more frankly the perceptive activity in their constitution. "The thing and the world exist only as lived by me, or by subjects like me, as they are the chain of our perspectives, but they transcend all the perspectives because the chain is temporal and unfinished. It seems to me that the world lives outside of me, the way absent landscapes continue to live beyond my visual field and the way my past was lived formerly *en deçà de mon présent*" (*S*, p. 228). Again, "A thing is not effectively *given* in the perception, it is *reprise* interiorly by us, reconstituted, lived by us insofar as it is bound to a world the fundamental structures of which we carry with us and of which the thing is only one of the possible concretions" (*PP*, p. 385). Those structures of the world we carry with us are recognizably *le montage universel*, given with the corps propre itself, "*une typique* [the general schema as perceived in a typical example] of all the perceptive developments and all the intersensorial correspondences beyond the segment of world which we are effectively perceiving" (*PP*, p. 377).

Once one grasps the sense of the innovation which consists in replacing the transcendental Ego by the corps propre, the ease with which most of the more objective-sounding descriptions can be interpreted transcendently is the measure of their success as expressions capable of leading one past the structures to that of which they are structures, the fond, "brute Being" as lived by the body. The thing is then seen as hostile and resisting to the willful initiatives of the individual Ego, but what is this hostility and resistance if not the adversity of the weight of past sedimentations in the corps propre? By this realistic-sounding affirmation, Merleau-Ponty is thus merely restating, in the noematic mode, that every genuinely creative project

"univocal forms and emplacements" (S, p. 228), radiating sets of stimuli which receive their consistency from the source, his philosophy systematically tends to present the moment as part of a living whole, to see the figure as supported by a lived fond, to consider the thing as a correlate of the general *montages du corps propre* as *typique de l'Etre*, rather than to seek out its atypical qualities. The idea of Renoir looking at the sea to discover the stream in "*Les Lavandières*" elates Merleau-Ponty: the artist is indifferent to what may be peculiar to this stream, as he seeks instead *la typique de l'eau*, indeed an imaged fond expressing Being itself, much in the spirit of the images gathered by G. Bachelard in *L'Eau et le rêve*. Not the absolute otherness—the *Selbstständigkeit*—of the individual and of the particular structure but the thing in general is always presented as what is really interesting (PP, p. 373). It is as though all figures that succeed in winning for themselves a certain space and sufficient endurance to make recuperation of Being possible were equivalent instances of a whole, and the possibility of polarizing that whole were the only interesting problem. Projected on the moral plane, this partially explains the sense of helplessness that creeps into certain passages of the "Practica"—a feeling reinforced by Merleau-Ponty's own silence on political matters during his last years.<sup>4</sup>

Sartre's claim that Merleau-Ponty came to feel acutely the impossibility of moving the massive weight of history through the fragile word might have resulted from the invitation, presented throughout his philosophy, to direct his regard past the individual, past even the class, directly to the whole of social being itself. This view of things as elements in a field—surely a permanent feature of all future transcendental philosophies—invites the movement to the largest possible horizons, those of experience itself, i.e. *de l'Etre*, in the sense in which it figures in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. If, however, nothing halted the transcendental movement of the regard, if our champ, most authentically attended to, had only the whole of history, the global situation, and humanity as such as its fond, if every action had to be considered for its eternal reverberations, and if the

4. The indifference never reaches the point of hostility, as in Hegel, but then Hegel, in characterizing the *begrifflose blinde Mannigfaltigkeit der Natur* as Nature's *Ohnmacht*, is perhaps only being more *Konsequent*. Cf. *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Lasson), 2, 247. D. 01

carriage du vide had to bear with its every act the whole of Being on its shoulders, action would indeed be paralyzed. But this obvious overstatement reveals merely the tendency or underlying tension within transcendental philosophy, for existence is possible, after all. Merleau-Ponty repeatedly reminds us that there is something rather than nothing, provided only that we manage in fact to take our life in hand and go ahead and live it. The corps propre, despite the fact that it itself has no ends to offer (and that is a problem), will, when directed by practical intentions discovered in real lived situations, continue to furnish manageable configurations. It is only when the things which appear in the course of daily living are reflected upon, turned into ideas, making of their engaged configurations disengaged eternal possessions of the truth—explanations, as "*L'Homme et l'adversité*" disapprovingly puts it—that the antinomies of the *dialectica* confront us and the reality of the things tends to slip through our fingers.

But there is good reason to think that even practical existence is not that spontaneous. Action itself requires some reflection; we are always under pressure to stake out a future reaching farther than the spontaneous synthesis "worked in immediate presence of the thing" under the guidance of the practical projects of the shortest range. The situation itself pushes men to seek in things some unequivocal objective guides as they attempt to base their actions on real structures which reveal an already-engaged and intelligible future, manifesting sufficient distinctness to be comprehensible and hence dependable and sufficient clarity to provide a limited element of absoluteness, at least to the extent of a modest, circumscribed something which is what it is.

Can such necessity, finite in comprehension but absolute within its limits, be discovered within our experience? Or is Merleau-Ponty correct in assuming that the most elementary grasp of the field theory of perception suffices to inform common sense that *der Traum* of objectivity *ist ausgeträumt*, that we must awaken from the dream of objectivity?

Leibniz's declaration that the only sure way to refute a theory in philosophy is to replace it is applicable here, but to confront the problems raised by Merleau-Ponty's version of transcendental philosophy and then to seek to integrate the evidence of "constitution,"

But is the problem one of recognizing that sedimentation has taken place, that a sense has been accumulated, that the figure-structuring acts of men have woven themselves into the very perceptual fabric of our world? Or is it rather that there could be any sense to sediment in the first place? Even if the philosopher places the *Urstiftung* far back in an archaic period, buried under thick layers of cultural sediment and so metamorphized by the intervening events as to be indistinguishable from all but the most recent, the most individual acts, thus relieving us from wondering about the initial encounter, the primordial *débiscence de l'Être*, how can we help asking what it was that was perceived in that first bending back of one moment of Being upon another; i.e. how that perceived facet—the Otherness within Being—presented itself to the perceiving part; in short, in what that Otherness consisted phenomenally?

The last notes reveal the philosopher repeatedly trying to imagine this *Urstiftung*. Clearly he sees that even in the present moment the phenomenon of the opening of the world is being lived and that in the present act of perception the whole mystery is again intact; in my body, in your body, in our body is lived at each instant the mystery of the *écart*, of the separation within Being which permits a space for reflection, the perceptive grasp of a part of Being which is other than the perceiving organ itself (VI, pp. 309, 241). The facts that I feel a front and a back to my body, that it has an inside and an outside, that I can touch my hand while it in turn is touching something else, are *Urphänomene*. How then in these primordial experiences of the *percipi* which is Being does the Other element, the perceived, the resisting, the impenetrable present itself? Is it enough to describe the threading of this fundamental givenness in all its fine articulation through all our cultural acts merely as "nervures," as "arêtes," as "épures," as the "structure" of Being? This is the central aspect of *le problème fondamental: la sédimentation*.

The words "essence," "*Wesen*," and "structure" appear frequently in these last notes, and once even approvingly, in the form of Heidegger's notion, *Es west* (VI, pp. 228, 260, 280, 309). Often, the remarks are merely criticisms aimed at the pretensions of ideas to "eternal truth," recapitulating points made in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, rather than detailed descriptions of how the phenomenon of

essence ought to be interpreted authentically. We are reminded again that only so long as language, in which the aspects of Being get fixed, remains in living contact with brute Being can the word undergo the constant renewal which alone keeps it from freezing into a dead substitute for Being. "Nominalism is right: significations are only *defined separations (écarts définis)*" (VI, p. 291). More positively, we are told that instead of concepts, significations, ideas, we must see structure at work in the self-revelation of Being. "*Décrire la structure, tout est là*, and the integration of structures in the *Sein*, sense as investment (the sense of the word I say to someone crashes upon him, takes a hold of him before he has understood it and snatches an answer from him)" (VI, p. 290).

From this it is apparent that the problem of structure is inseparable from the problem of the existence of a world within which there are many consciousnesses, but we recall that in the *Phenomenology* both the problem of the unity of the one world for my many acts of cogito and the problem of its oneness for the many cogitos of other people were solved by exactly the same principle, "generality." Without generality there would be no field; without a field there would be no generality. "There is no longer any problem of the concept, of generality, of the idea once one has understood that the sensible itself is invisible, that yellow is able to set itself up as level or horizon" (VI, pp. 273, 290). In other words, even the least sensibilium is not really seen, i.e. grasped en soi independent of the whole sensory system, without implication, simply as that which it is; rather, each moment stands out from the system and thereby implies it, and the very possibility of this standing out is inherent in the system and hence is repeatable to infinity, i.e. general. Each perceived being is "a structure or a system of equivalences about which it arranges itself and of which the flexuous line of the painter or the sweep of his brush is the peremptory evocation. It is a question of this *logos* which silently speaks in each sensible thing, to the extent it varies round about a certain type of message, of which we can get an idea only by carnal participation in its sense, by espousing with our body its manner of signifying." This *logos* manifests itself, of course, as gestalt pregnant with an always partly invisible sense—that is "the *Etwas* of which the parceled phenomena would be a manifestation" (VI, pp. 258, 261).

In this vision the otherness of the thing or even of the *quale* is reduced to such a minimum that one might wonder if it is still objective enough for anything to be said of it. To this objection Merleau-Ponty offers a blunt answer (backed up by the eloquent proof of his own writing): "The *quale* seems opaque, indecipherable, just as life does not inspire the man who is not a writer to say anything. But, on the contrary, the sensible, like life itself, is, for the philosopher (that is to say, the writer), a treasure chest of things to be said. And just as everyone finds true and rediscovers in himself what the writer said about life and its sentiments, so too the phenomenologists are understood and used by those who say philosophy is impossible" (VI, pp. 305-06). This note is significantly headed, "Philosophy of the sensible as literature."

Whether one accepts this (in the deepest sense) aesthetic philosophy or not, the challenge it poses has to be met, and it imposes on proponent and opponent alike a very similar task. The proponent's challenge is to carry forward a work Merleau-Ponty was hardly able to begin: From the heights of the transcendental formula of *In-der-Welt-Sein* as *Charnière de l'Être*, he must descend to the more pedestrian but very difficult business of making sense, one by one, out of the particular appearances of essence, the various strata of nature, the individual *typiques de l'être* which choke the world of daily experience—the varieties of things, the multitude of structures of every and all sorts which furnish the world of busy existence. There is indeed a great deal for philosophy to focus upon, and the whole series of levels Merleau-Ponty passed over in silence are perhaps as eloquent as those for which he sought to offer some description. For every problem to which he made a precious contribution, like that of body-soul, there are inevitably others, like that of the *Selbstständigkeit*—the relative independence—of particular material structures, of otherness, or of objective necessity which are not adequately accounted for either in terms of the sedimentation of a prodigiously long history or merely as dimensions of Being.

On the other hand, one can scarcely object against such a philosophy without accomplishing in one's own way virtually the whole task the proponents of this phenomenology take upon themselves. A replacement for it would entail phenomenological descriptions as far-reaching

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41 Thinking

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